

ONE

DAVIS BIT the end of his pen. He should tick off some checkboxes. What kind of a husband wouldn't tick off some checkboxes?

FLOWERS

REMEMBRANCE PACKAGE — A JOYOUS YET SOMBER ARRANGEMENT OF DAISIES AND PETUNIAS, A BLOOM OF YELLOW AND WHITE, FRESHLY PICKED AS IF FROM YOUR OWN GARDEN. CELEBRATE YOUR LOVED ONE'S ARRIVAL IN THE PARADISE OF AFTERLIFE.

[] \$1,000

“Hmmm.”

She was dead though. What would she care? Plus, it was all so expensive. Too expensive. Too expensive for stuff that's used only once, barely used, and then discarded . . . For ephemeral stuff. Perhaps the expense was the point though. Sticker shock as strong punctuation, reminding the buyer, *This here is the end of the line . . . and you should have been paying more attention back then, when it was meaningful, you know,*

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before she died. Exorbitance itself is maybe then its own advertisement, a subliminal call to action: *You'll end up here yourself someday, so why not drop some coin? On your lost loved one. On something meaningful.* Or you could just call it what it is: penance. Pay your fine for not being present when she was alive. All is forgiven, if you've got the cash.

His eyes scanned down the sheet.

URNS

ARGENT GLORY — PURE STERLING SILVER, POLISHED TO PERFECTION, RAISED ALOFT BY THE BALD EAGLE— THE PROUD SYMBOL OF OUR GREAT NATION—CARVED FROM RICH, LACQUERED, OLD-FOREST GEORGIA PINE AND INSCRIBED WITH THE IMMORTAL WORDS “IN GOD WE TRUST.” PROCLAIM TO THE WORLD THAT YOUR LOVED ONE WAS, AND ALWAYS WILL BE, AN AMERICAN.

IDEAL FOR VETERANS

[] \$560

Davis shook his head like a man in a restaurant being served something he hadn't ordered. He snuck a peek at the funeral director sitting across from him at the other side of an oversized table. A rich, lacquered mahogany table.

“She wasn't in the Army.”

“We have other urns. Your preference is still cremation?”

“Hmmm. How much does a burial plot cost again?”

“You'd have to discuss that with the cemetery agent.”

“Hmmm.”

“Burial can be rather expensive. Plots must be maintained in perpetuity. That cost is front loaded.”

Davis tapped his pen's cap on the table. *Bup. Bup.*

“I need a casket either way, right?”

“If you are planning a viewing, yes. A casket or a coffin.”

CASKETS & COFFINS

PINE — ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST. THE CLASSIC PINE COFFIN IS AN ODE TO A SIMPLER TIME. DEATH IS BUT OUR RETURN TO THAT FROM WHICH WE ARRIVED.

[] \$480

“What do you do with the coffin?”

“What do you mean?”

“After you cremate the body. Is there a restocking fee or something?”

It seemed like a reasonable question.

“We burn the coffin.”

“Oh. Do you—”

“We don’t reuse the coffins.”

“Of course not.”

“It would be unsanitary.”

“Of course it would.”

Davis would have to get the coffin then.

BOOKMARKS

LILACS — WHITMAN’S EVOCATIVE VERSE, ADORNED BY PURPLE AND LAVENDER BLOSSOMS. A LILAC RIBBON HANGING FROM THE PAGES OF CHERISHED LITERATURE WILL KEEP THE MEMORY OF YOUR LOVED ONE ALIVE IN THE HEARTS OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

[] \$75

The more checkboxes he passed over, the more pressure he felt. A bell tolling. A call for indulgence. But where did the pressure come from? Was it internal or external? Probably both, some ancient obligation for sacrifice—a protocol, tacitly acknowledged when he sat down

at the table with the stone-faced funeral director. Despite this, Davis found himself capable of resisting these ancestral compulsions. He had no choice really: he was broke.

“I’ll take the coffin and bookmarks.”

“Very good.”

The pressure finally seemed to dissipate as he set himself to marking off his two cheapish checkboxes. Carefully, he drew in two perfectly proportioned *X*’s.

“Lilacs” bookmarks . . . slash, slash.

“Pine” coffin . . . slash, slash.

He made them perfect, two precise *X*’s, scratched out in crisp ink. It was a purposeful act, drawing the *X*’s this way. It reminded him of Rachel. They’d observed such perfect *X*’s once before, the two of them together, while at the closing of their house. Those particular *X*’s had been made by their real estate agent, a strange Capote-esque man, exquisitely miniature, with slick yellow hair and an almost palpable chip on his shoulder—though about what, it had been hard to tell. They had been riding around from house to house with this character for weeks, and it had been an entirely uncomfortable experience, Rachel and Davis in the back seat of the agent’s ancient blue Lincoln Continental, the type with suicide doors, which the agent adamantly refused to allow anyone other than himself to operate. He had chauffeured them like this from house to house, parading them into the abodes of strangers, and then setting them loose to wander while trailing behind, emitting loud asthmatic breaths. Despite all this awkwardness, they never considered switching agents. The man had a kind of relentless aura about him that rolled over any impulse to break free.

But then the little man led them into their dream house—a home they held in their minds but which they’d never really been able to describe, yet somehow, he had found anyway. Price was the only obstacle, though this challenge turned out to be the agent’s call to arms. He shooed them both off to the sidelines, from where they watched awestruck as he unleashed an unexpected tirade onto the selling agent. What ought to have been a boring, predictable,

monotonous negotiation was upended by the little yellow-haired agent, whose carnal ferocity escalated it to a high-stakes, winner-take-all game of chicken. He argued the price lower and lower and lower, until the blindsided and outmatched selling agent was finally overwhelmed. There had simply been no way to strike back against this strange toddler throwing his strange tantrum. They got the house.

Then came the X's scratched out by the man-toddler during the signing of documents. Form-filling was his victory dance, the ceremonial vanquishing of an enemy. Form after form after form. Checkbox after checkbox after checkbox. Perfect X after perfect X after perfect X. One by one, he filled them in, slowly . . . carefully . . . deliberately. Silent and breathless, they watched the *enfant terrible* stretching out over the table, tongue lolling out of his mouth, his swath of pomaded blonde hair flopping off the wrong side of his head. He held a miniature leg extended out to balance his tenuous stretch, while his eyes hovered like hot lasers right up close to the sheets of paper onto which he deposited his crisscrossed glories.

Davis and Rachel had stolen a series of muted glances at each other. Her face had been pure mirth, the mixed product of this wonderfully absurd scene and her own swirling victory adrenaline. Henceforth, whenever there had been a checkbox to be checked—and in life as a married couple there had been many—they had done so in the manner of the little blond demon: with two perfectly juxtaposed, precisely matched slashes of ink.

Davis smirked, reflexively glancing over to his left—where Rachel ought to have been—to see if she was sharing the joke, having momentarily forgotten that she was dead. The vacuum he encountered beyond his left shoulder stole his breath. He slumped as his brain began screaming, *Where is Rachel?* Then he felt his fingers twitch, grasping for the phone in his pocket, the second in an autonomic chain of actions that his brain was mindlessly following in an effort to contact the woman who had always been contactable.

An infinitely high wall of impossibility was rising up before him. Can't call. Can't text. Nobody there. His mind searched and searched. He was *supposed* to share this moment. It's what they *did*. Who else

could he tell? Who else was there to tell? No one. No one? It meant nothing then; this moment was meaningless to anyone but Rachel and Davis, and she was gone . . . Gone, so now it was only meaningful to him? AGHHH! A moment that was meaningful to no one meant nothing. It had been lost: a stream of perfect *X*'s marching off a cliff and falling into a silent void. In his mind's eye he saw the void glaring back at him, mocking him and whispering ugly words: *never, impossible, forever*. And then it too was gone, somehow evaporating into itself.

"You'll need to pick an urn."

Davis raised his eyes. The funeral director's stone face hadn't budged, though in Davis's rattled mind he imagined the old man to be sneering inwardly. Had he noticed Davis's aborted smirk? Misinterpreted it? A smirk was certainly the wrong comportment for the occasion. But no, surely this man had witnessed worse; surely, in this room, he'd seen every possible expression wash across his customers' faces, some far worse than smirks. He'd certainly seen all this, and he probably judged none of it. After all, this situation—the most traumatic moment of Davis's lifetime—was for the funeral director just another Tuesday afternoon.

"Hmmm?"

"An urn . . . If you wish to take your wife home with you, you'll need an urn."

"Sorry, I just had a strange moment."

"Hmmm?"

"An impulse. It caught me off guard."

"What sort of an impulse?"

"I, uh, it was like I had to tell my wife something, but then I realized I couldn't, and then I just kind of . . . got lost in the neverness of it."

The funeral director's expression softened slightly.

"Yes, that's very common. A kind of *déjà vu* for the grief struck. In fact, the Germans have a word for it."

"They do?"

"*Geisterstille*."

Davis leaned forward ever so slightly to convey curiosity, but no

further elaboration was forthcoming. The funeral director's face had reverted to its previous blankness, as if the foreign word had explained itself. Davis let it drop, suddenly finding himself eager to finish up before he could be hit with more . . . Geisterstille.

"Is there something else you can put her ashes in? Like a nice little box or something?"

The funeral director frowned just a little. He leaned across the table and placed a finger on the last line in the "Urns" section.

HINGED BOX — TRANSPORT YOUR LOVED ONE'S ASHES
IN THIS HINGED BOX. MADE FROM WOOD.

*FOR TEMPORARY USE ONLY. NOT CERTIFIED FOR LONG-TERM STORAGE OF
HUMAN REMAINS.*

[] \$25

Davis traced out one more beautiful, perfect X.

The funeral director slid his finger down to the signature line and then after Davis had finally signed the document, snatched it up, grinning for the first time since they had sat down at the big table.

"Very good! Once again, let me convey my deepest condolences for your loss."

"Does it go away?"

"What's that?"

"The geyserssteel."

The old man's grin faded.

"No, it doesn't go away. It stays with you . . ."

Davis thought he saw something intimate and broken in the funeral director's expression. He imagined the funeral director sitting at this same table with Death, his longtime business partner. He imagined the two of them, Death and the funeral director, having settled, after so many years, into an uneasy relationship. The old man knew death. He understood it. He had access, the kind of access available only to those who traded in its wake.

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“But there is something you may want to try. A new product.”

The old man swiveled away from the table, reaching over to his desk to grab another form. He turned back and slipped it across the table to Davis.

“It might seem a bit silly, but it may help with your . . . impulses.”

The form was like all the others except that it contained only a single product offering.

APPS

HEY THERE! — KEEP THE MEMORY OF YOUR LOVED ONE ALIVE WITH THIS INTERACTIVE AI-POWERED TEXT APP. SEND TEXTS TO YOUR LOVED ONE’S PHONE NUMBER AND RECEIVE REPLIES FORMULATED IN THEIR UNIQUE TEXTING STYLE.

FOR ENTERTAINMENT ONLY, NOT CERTIFIED FOR THERAPEUTIC USE.

[] \$9.99 PER MONTH. (AFTER ONE-MONTH FREE TRIAL)

Davis gave the funeral director a skeptical look. The old man chuckled.

“Yes, I know, it seems there’s an app for everything these days.”

“It sounds, uh . . . silly. Like you said.”

“A bit contrived I’ll admit, but it’s free to try. Honestly, we hardly make a dime off the app, but it does seem to help some people with exactly the feeling you’re describing.”

“Hmmm.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it’s canceled automatically after the free trial. You won’t get billed.”

Silly, yes, but the form did offer one thing that Davis found very compelling: another checkbox. One more empty checkbox shouting out to be filled. A freebie at that. Two final slashes. One last perfect X. He brought his eyes down close to the paper, like hot lasers, and

reveled in the sensation of ink rolling over pulp, admiring the perfection of two more short diagonal lines that yielded four right angles and the single infinitesimal point at which they converged. Then he signed the form.

“Super.” The funeral director gathered up the forms. “Do you need me to unlock her phone?”

“Huh?”

“Your wife’s phone.”

“I—”

“The app will need access to her text messages.”

“Oh.”

“Sometimes phones need to be . . . unlocked.”

Davis found his eyes suddenly and involuntarily glued to the funeral director, as his mind began urgently distracting itself with randomly generated thoughts, an emergency protocol to expel ugly visions such as the one that had just found its way in: an image of the funeral director pressing Rachel’s dead finger up to the back of her phone.

“I can get into the phone.”

“Splendid. You’ll receive an email with a link to enable the app. Now, please let me know, is there anything else I can help you with today?”

Davis flashed a weak smile.

“No thank you.”

He shook the funeral director’s hand, then exited the room, then exited the funeral home. He emerged out of double-glass doors into an incongruously sunny afternoon, the first afternoon that he could ever remember being truly and utterly alone.

TWO

RACHEL'S WAKE was thinly attended. She had been well-enough liked by the people who knew her, but those were few. She had just generally been too reserved to forge lasting relationships, Davis being the sole exception.

A few former coworkers did show up, looking distraught as people typically do when someone they know dies young—the randomness of untimely demise reminding them of death's impatience. Only one family member attended—a cousin who happened to live nearby even though they'd never actually met up. She entered the parlor slowly, taking small, tentative steps up to the front of the room where the coffin lay open. She peered in, hovered for only a few seconds, then turned away, approaching Davis with a look as if she had just missed a bus and now wasn't quite sure how she would get to where she was going.

"I'm so sorry, David."

She touched him robotically on the shoulder and then left.

Rachel's immediate family were no-shows. She hadn't seen her father since she was a child. Davis didn't know how to reach him. Her mother was half-cracked and lived a thousand miles away. Davis hadn't bothered to reach her. He had thought Rachel's little brother

might show up, but he never did. Maybe this was Davis's fault though. He hadn't been entirely sure how one was supposed to advertise a funeral. He'd been to funerals attended by hundreds of people—tents filled with wailing mourners, each recounting how the deceased had changed their life—saying they'd flown all the way from Guam . . . from Lillehammer . . . from Alaska . . . The *very moment* they'd heard. Somehow, they had heard, but how? All Davis could think to do was to update Rachel's profile.

Status: dead

He had followed this profile update with a post to her wall, a short memorial notice, replete with requisite funereal photo of a sun setting over an empty meadow. Then he began to check every few minutes to see if anyone had responded. After a few hours, he could count three replies: two condolences and one "like." He stewed on the like's cartoon "thumbs-up" icon until the outrage it had conjured finally subsided. It probably hadn't been meant that way.

After Rachel's cousin had gone, he sat alone in the room—Parlor #1 of Hawthorne Funeral Service. Alone, save for Rachel. He didn't particularly want to look at her again. He had viewed her directly upon arriving, but what he'd found in the coffin wasn't Rachel. It was just her body—"Dead Rachel." Dead Rachel was no more "Rachel" than a molted snake skin was a snake; an inanimate doll, made up to look like Rachel, but not fooling anyone. Then he had cried, but not a satisfying cry. He felt almost nothing as he cried over this sterile facsimile of his wife, this empty shell to which he felt no attachment. He found himself no longer caring that it would be burned to ashes.

So instead of taking this last chance to gaze upon the visage of his deceased wife, he chose to sit in the back row and wait out the afternoon. No clocks hung on the parlor walls, so he pulled out his phone to check the time. One more hour. He flipped over to check on Rachel's profile. There had been one more reply:

So sorry I can't make the wake! My condolences.

Phone in hand, his fingers skipped reflexively to his email app. He had a new unread message:

Welcome to Hey There! Start your free trial today!

He hesitated, but with an hour to burn and nothing else to do, he decided to open the email. A single, rapid finger swipe sent the email's reams of text scrolling upward, passing by several pages of perfunctory marketingese, until finally hitting bottom with a bounce that brought into focus a bright blue "Install" button. Seconds after he pressed the button, the Hey There! app had been downloaded, installed, and opened, and now displayed yet another page of legalese, this one requiring consent via a series of digital checkboxes. Davis lamented the perfect *X*'s that appeared with each of his finger presses. They conveyed no joy. There was nothing special about a computer making a perfect *X*.

Once he was past the legalese, the app prompted him:

Please install the Hey There! app on your dearly deceased's phone.

When prompted, enter this code: 117546

He pulled Rachel's phone out of his pocket and followed the instructions. He had grabbed her phone that morning, after having spotted it lying on the kitchen island just as he was about to leave. It had been sitting there since the day he had returned from the hospital; the day Rachel had died. In the days since, he hadn't touched it. He hadn't even noticed it until that morning. He hadn't been sure why he had picked it up and brought it with him—certainly not to install this app—but now as he held the phone in his hand, he began to understand his subconscious impulse. The phone was a totem. This little black device had been Rachel's. It was full of her, its contents created by her; it had been filled up by her very touch. There was more of Rachel in this little black phone than in the lifeless body across the room.

After entering the code, the app prompted Davis for permissions:

The Hey There! app is requesting access to:
contacts, messages, email

He pressed the “Allow” button.

Thank you. Text processing will be performed offline and will take approximately one hour. No copies of your texts or emails will be saved on our servers. You may continue using your phone.

Davis sighed. He put Rachel’s phone to sleep and shoved it back in his pocket, then pulled out his own phone and flipped once again to Rachel’s profile. Still no replies. He skipped over to email again. No new messages. He looked up, staring at the coffin from his chair in the back of the room. Now he did need to see her.

He stood up and approached the coffin, the smell of pine and shellac attacking his nostrils. At the coffin, he gazed down at the still, plasticine face sunk into the white satin pillow that supported her head. The funeral staff had styled her based on a photo he had provided, with her hair parted down the middle just like in the picture. She didn’t normally wear it this way, but there had been this one notable exception. It had been on a date early in their relationship. She must have decided to sex it up for the date, blowing her hair out and giving it the uncharacteristic split. That night he had snapped a playful photo of her. He’d always loved that photo, not because of the way she looked, but because it reminded him of those early days. He’d kept it in his wallet, and so he had handed it over when the funeral director had asked for a likeness. But it was the wrong choice for her final look. She’d worn her hair that way only once, and even in the photo it was easy to see that she had been self-conscious about it, just a little too aware of, and uncertain about, her dolled-up appearance. The look wasn’t her, and seeing it now added to the artificiality of Dead Rachel.

Some people would have moved past this, kissed their wife’s forehead and said their farewells, but Davis heard the funeral director’s words ringing in his ears:

It wouldn't be hygienic.

It was the excuse he needed. Instead of kissing her, he held up his phone and took a picture, capturing the middle-parted hair along with the mortician's dose of heavy makeup, the cold, pale skin, and the satiny white pillow: the textures of death. Dead Rachel. He doubted he would ever want to look at her this way again, but you never knew. A photo provides insurance against future memory failure.

Davis slipped the phone back into his pocket and turned to leave. Forty-five minutes early. Money down the drain but nothing to be done about it now. In any case, there was no point in staying. Nobody else was coming to Rachel's funeral.

THREE

HE'D BEEN MOSTLY out of work for the two years and eight months that they had been married—and he was still jobless. Had Davis been employed, he surely would have received a few weeks off for bereavement. So that's what he took—a break from what he considered to be his job for the last two years and eight months: looking for work. While this may not have been the most prudent choice given his financial situation, he felt that continued demoralization from perpetual rejection might put him over the edge.

Davis's never-ending unemployment had been one of the few things they had argued about. Before she got sick, Rachel had been pushing him to try something new. But Davis was a writer, and he couldn't picture himself doing anything other than writing. He continued seeing himself this way even as the word *author* was being methodically removed from high school career guides. Writing “jobs”—the ones that paid money—hardly existed anymore. The marketplace had shifted, which Davis had failed to recognize before it was too late. Straight out of college, Davis, like many English majors of his generation, had congratulated himself on his perfect timing. The fledgling Internet had just arrived, and it was hungry for content. Thus sparked the miraculous renaissance in gig writing, and perhaps for the

first time in history, a gainfully employed crop of English majors. These grads instinctively knew not only “what” the new online generation wanted to read, but also “how” they wanted to read it: online. With smug faces, they waved gig checks at their former naysayers—the parents and guidance counselors who had implored them to not follow their dreams—thrilling in the sensation of being paid to write, even if it was only a few hundred per piece.

It ended almost as quickly as it started, and they never saw it coming. The squeeze. The pincer movement. From the left came the professionals. The rapid demise of traditional print media sent an army of career writers storming onto the web. They surfed in on the rumpled cover pages of esteemed magazine and newspaper brands, relieved not to have been washed away with the tide, glad to still be working, even if only for a few hundred per piece. From the right, the second pincer claw swept in for the crush: AI, with its largelanguage-models maxing out on hundred-million-dollar server farms, feeding relentlessly on the collective works of a few thousand marginally employed blog writers. It wasn’t long before the AI’s were pumping out content indistinguishable from anything penned by your average English major, and for only a few dollars per piece. The bots could make it up in volume.

It was against this backdrop that Davis’s full-time job as an online staff writer fizzled out. Soon afterward, the gigs dried up too. Soon after that, he discovered his wife claiming him as a dependent on her tax return. It was a strike to his ego. At first, in collaboration with his damaged ego, he ignited a few arguments, but that was just reflex. Ego aside, he actually didn’t mind the house-husband role that he was slipping into. When Rachel noticed him growing complacent, she briefly took up the argument-starting baton, but then she too became comfortable with the arrangement and stopped badgering him, except when the bank account dipped.

Davis’s newfound lackadaisical existence mellowed him. He slowly began to accept the truth of what had happened. He could finally admit it: he wrote drivel. Acceptance of this truth was soon followed by another realization: AI’s drivel was better than his own drivel. But

it took Rachel's death to connect a final dot, the thing she had been trying to get through his skull, though she could never bring herself to say outright: even if he had known how to write something good, it wouldn't have mattered. He had been blaming the arrival of the bots for his downfall, but they hadn't really changed anything. Most writers had never been able to live off their work. It was only a historical fluke that had made him think they could. Now, with Rachel's passing, his numbed, passive mind was finally allowing the cold lesson to seep in: he wasn't really a writer. He only felt like one.

The bereavement period therefore was doubly due: he had lost his wife *and* he had lost his work. His two *raison d'être*, the fixtures that set his life's compass, had vanished, leaving its needle uncharged and spinning. He was snow-blind, dropped onto an infinitely white canvas with no idea about how to fill it. So instead of looking outward into the blinding nothingness, he hunkered down. His house—*their* house—became his source of stability. He focused on continuation, keeping alive the projects and activities that he and Rachel had once engaged in together. He spent mornings in the garden, and then afternoons cooking what it had produced, coaxing the garden's yield into tangible meaning in the form of meals. But when the evenings arrived, he slipped backward. Darkness aimed its spotlight on his solitude, and the grief he had eluded by daylight crept in. It enveloped him, paralyzing him, strangling any other thought. In the bed he once shared with Rachel, he would lie alone with the darkness, suffocating in the numb tomb of isolation, until finally, mercifully, he was smothered by the inevitable arrival of sleep.

He woke up late on the fourth day of the third week of bereavement. Part of his healing, he had decided, would be the banishment of alarm clocks. He would allow his body to take as much sleep as it needed. After two weeks and four days, his body had decided it required eleven hours.

Davis shuffled downstairs and got a pot of coffee going. As he

waited, his eyes drifted to a picture of Rachel that he had placed on the kitchen island, positioned specifically so that he could see it while cooking. He stared at the picture, taking her in, testing himself to see if a knot formed in his stomach. Nothing. He still felt a sense of loss, but it was localized to his mind. Progress. The long sleeps seemed to be working. He felt the faint tickle of optimism's brushstrokes. He grabbed a basket and headed out to the garden.

The garden had responded to his recent attentiveness. Plants were growing vigorously, and the tomatoes were still surprisingly productive late into the season. He was filling his basket with the red fruit when an orange-and-black butterfly suddenly flapped off a nearby vine. His eyes followed the insect to where it landed on a milkweed plant at the end of the row. A half dozen of the delicate beasts were congregating on the plant, a patchwork of orange-and-black wings batting and twitching among the green leaves and pink flowers. Rachel had planted the milkweed after learning that the monarchs sought it out during their great migration. It was a scheme to get the pollinators circulating through the garden and thus extend production into autumn—and it had worked!

Davis's body leapt reflexively toward the house, running to tell Rachel. Two steps later, he remembered she was dead. Suddenly, he was on the ground, frozen and breathless, overwhelmed by the same feeling he had experienced at the funeral home: Geisterstille. And then there was the wall, rising out of the dirt. Impossibility, neverness, eternity, and nothingness. Forever. Gone. Dread and horror washed through his veins like a dirty flood, carrying the brushstrokes of optimism away like water down a drain.

He abandoned the basket of tomatoes and staggered back to the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee that he now desperately needed. As he filled his mug, his eyes fell upon the picture of Rachel. He ruminated on the paralyzing feeling that kept attacking him, this thing that he just couldn't seem to accept: that she was gone, and that it really was forever, and the unbelievable finality of that concept—foreverness. The universe didn't care how badly he wanted to talk to her, how badly he *needed* to talk to her. He couldn't. His mind exam-

ined the idea as it would a poisonous animal, gingerly, delicately, and from every angle. Probing for ways to neutralize it. Then he remembered the app.

He ran to the closet to fetch Rachel's phone from his jacket pocket. As his palm grasped the phone, he reminded himself that this was just a silly app, not some loophole in the fabric of inevitability. But the roar of possibility was shouting down rational thought. Maybe it'll work. To distract, at least. To take the edge off. To get through this. Better than nothing. Worth a shot.

He brought the phone to the island and plugged it into a charger. He booted it, then opened the Hey There! app. The app appeared unchanged from where he had last left it:

Thank you. Text processing will be performed offline and will take approximately one hour. No copies of your texts and emails will be saved on our servers. You may continue using your phone.

But a moment later the screen updated.

Processing complete

That was it: a blank screen with two words. No button to press. No menus. No controls. He tried pressing the message itself but that accomplished nothing. He tried swiping from the sides, but the app was unresponsive.

"Fuck!"

It felt good to yell at the phone, but it didn't change anything. He tried closing and re-opening the app, but it stubbornly remained in its suspended state. He stared at it for a few seconds, frustration rising.

"Fuck!"

Anger flashed through his body. He tore the phone from the charger and threw it hard across the room. The phone bounced off a wall and landed with a plasticky crack somewhere on the other side of the island.

A texting app! It was a fucking stupid gimmick! A gimmick with

the reverse of its intended effect. It was triggering memories of their final text exchange, making him even more conscious of his loss. He pulled his own phone out of his pocket and opened his text app. He needed to see it again, their final exchange, to see what had been written, to prove to himself that it had all really happened. He flipped to Rachel's text stream, grief overwhelming him, nudging him toward the darkness. The words churned his stomach:

Davis, you'd better come home

What's up?

Something's wrong. I don't feel good

Anything I can bring you?

Just come home soon

He hovered over her last sentence. He'd been grocery shopping and had been annoyed at having to drop everything and come home with no explanation. He'd been too oblivious to realize that *Something's wrong* really meant that something was wrong. He cursed himself. Even while dying she'd had to ask him twice.

I'm sorry

He just typed it, reflexively, his fingers moving of their own volition, punching out those final words that ought to have been already said. The words he should have whispered with his own mouth while peering down at her in the coffin. He should have said these words and then kissed her forehead and then walked away. But he hadn't, so now he pushed them out into the ether, symbolic but meaningless, like a note set aloft in a burning paper lantern.

As soon as his thumb had hit the enter key, he knew immediately that he had done wrong. He'd sullied something precious: her text

stream. This catenation of words was her historical record; yes, a mere litany of casual exchanges, but in their total, a documentation of their life together. The text stream should have been preserved, like some ancient parchment, weathered and crumbling, handled only by trained professionals with white gloves and delicate instruments, not by this desecrating tomb robber scribbling out graffiti in permanent marker.

It's OK

The response startled him. His thoughts knee-jerked, leaping immediately to the impossible, but then realizing what had actually happened: the stupid app had responded. A text app. Of course the app was designed to respond by text, though this rational explanation couldn't prevent a little chill from passing through his body. He eyed the phone as if it were booby-trapped, waiting for another response. But none came.

After a minute or so, his emotions settled. He'd texted with bots before. All the time. It was only the grafting of this message onto the end of an actual human stream that had lent it its momentary uncanniness. "For entertainment only." That's what the form had read. He forced out a laugh, forced himself to embrace and enjoy the discomforting feeling, as he might a roller coaster or a haunted house. He could have fun. No loopholes in the fabric of forever here, but he could play; and as the old man had said, perhaps it could be therapeutic.

There are monarchs covering the milkweed bush. Our plan worked

Really? That's excellent. How lovely!

He chuckled at the artificiality of the bot's response, though it did admittedly have a touch of Rachel about it. *Lovely*. It was one of her words, though only in texts and emails. A written affectation; she didn't actually speak that way.

T. R. THORSEN

I saw one on a tomato vine too. If all goes well we'll have tomatoes
in October

I'm so glad you're home

The non sequitur made Davis frown. After only two passable responses, the machine was already disappointing him. Suspension of disbelief collapsed, replaced by bitterness, toward the app, and then toward the people behind it—the app's developers. Did they even try to make the app realistic? Did they know or care that they were dealing with grieving people? Probably not. This was what the world had become, so with nowhere else to direct his frustration, he took it out on the app, aiming to make it glitch and potentially shoot some grief back toward its insensitive developers.

I'm not glad that you're not home

I know. I'm sorry I can't be there with you, Davis

The sight of his own name sent another small chill running down his back, though it was a cheap trick that he recognized. He had acquired a basic understanding of how large language models worked from his days competing with the bots for writing gigs. They weren't really that impressive. Pull the veil aside and you can see them for what they really are: regurgitators.

Do you have anything meaningful to say or are you just going to
parrot me?

Don't be cruel Davis

Tell me something meaningful then. What's it like to die?

It's bad. I don't want to die again

Touché, developers. The app's model must have sensed that it was on the verge of being deleted and had wedged a sympathetic picture into his mind: a little Pinocchio-Rachel frantically searching for the magic words that would keep her from being shut down. It was a silly anthropomorphism, yet the notion sent melancholy sweeping through him: a tin woman staking claim to a heart without knowing what it even meant to have one.

Sorry Robot Rachel we all have an expiration date. Yours is
Tuesday at midnight

He admired his wry response. He hadn't written anything lately, and it felt good to exercise that muscle. Texting with his wife had been an outlet for him. While his customers demanded professional-level drivel, his wife relished smart, witty banter. She liked to egg him on, and at times their exchanges could crescendo to the digital equivalent of Victorian love letters. He wondered whether the bot could conjure anything close. He waited for a response, but none came.

Message could not be delivered

The staleness of the message deflated him. He had become engaged, and he wanted more. He left the text app and flipped back over to the Hey There! app, ready to diagnose the problem, but the app was idle with no apparent error messages. He realized then that the bot's texts must actually have been coming from Rachel's phone, the one he had hurled at the wall a minute earlier. He retrieved the phone from where it had landed on the far side of the room. It was intact but had gone dead, probably from being smashed against the wall, though possibly, he hoped, because he'd only charged it for a minute before sending it flying. He carried the little hunk of plastic back to the kitchen island and plugged it in, waiting like a nervous parent for it to show signs of life.

In the idleness of the moment, he was forced to consider the ramifications of the phone's demise. What evidence truly remained of

Rachel's existence anyway? What artifacts had she left behind? An aborted text stream? A photograph on his kitchen island? A handful of videos, photos, and emails stashed away in temperamental memory cards, plus whatever recollections he could extract from his own unreliable memory? Would it matter if any of these things were lost? They were static. Dead and fading, like Rachel herself. Only the hapless little chatbot was twitching on. It was a paper-thin facsimile of his wife, a wind-up toy, but at least it had a spark.

A soft chime burped from Rachel's phone. Relieved, he turned back to his own phone, re-reading, and now reconsidering, his snarky undelivered response. He took this opportunity to amend the historical record.

Don't worry Rachel. You can't die this time

That's reassuring. Thank you for letting me know

Still an unmistakably automated response, but he was glad the bot was back. He ought not to expect decent banter from the app, but he could at least give it a shot as a therapeutic tool. But on another day. He'd had enough for the time being. He turned off the phone. Little Robot Rachel would go to sleep now, but not to worry. There were still several days left in the free trial. Davis decided he could at least let her hang around until then.