Mercredi’s

by Tricia Warren (January 2023)

Girl in Front of a Window, Suzanne Valadon, 1930

Lila was busy, maybe not like when the kids were little, but less encumbered now and more alert, she was apt to conjure notions, forthwith, from any shiny object, thus fancying herself busier than she was. Today, for example, a mere headline evoked junior year three decades ago, when switching majors from English to History of Science, she'd rejected doom. In her view, doom was archaic, a figment from nineteenth-century English Lit class pertaining to financial ruin, apostasy, or ill-chosen romance, not leafy greens. Yet there in her passenger's seat lurked doom now, curtsying inside the aforementioned headline promoting chard, kale, lab tests, etc., atop a mail pile swollen to unreasonable proportions ever since her biopsy six days ago. According to the subheading, romaine—her longtime staple—wasn't sufficiently leafy to thwart colds, much less cancer.

Petrified as she was to get her results, she'd devised a solution for the waiting period: Days her daughters were out, she'd do errands she'd postponed forever, working as a history museum curator until two weeks before last. Her plan was as follows: While intermittently, calmly checking for the lab report, she'd buzz around DC, nobly foregoing Instacart and Uber Eats. But the reality wasn't so placid as that; her checking, as it turned out, was compulsive, her car trips mad forays from the city's musky heart to its blander sublime, and the forays were punctuated with Starbucks detours, which could well be a cause of the cancer. Or, according to other lists, a panacea. Who knew? Given potholes, her coffee spilling, lids flying off, and discarded cups piling up not unlike the traffic, her mind often pinwheeled.

Today marked twenty-four hours since the results were due. Yet if the wait maddened, her list transported her; rarely, at least in recent years, had life's panorama unfurled with such beauty. A newfound connoisseur of her fellow motorists' horn-honking, then a meek, if ephemeral, neighbor to colossal SUVs

whose drivers basked in high altitudes, she reveled in surprises, epitomized by a concrete mixer, its red-and-white-striped cab, starry blue mixer, rumbling up beside her anon. What might have seemed kitschy just days ago struck now with comic—nay, even cosmic—significance: With a press of the button, her window open, she serenaded the mixer—the world, even! —blasting Vivaldi's "Concerto for Two Trumpets in C Major."

But the mixer zoomed forward, the horizon cleared and, with a flourish, a gaunt pedestrian balanced a food basket upon his head. Barely missing a Nissan SUV's bumper, Lila cut and swerved, treating its driver to her most beguiling wave and grin—who, engrossed in his phone, didn't care for her grins—to lurch diagonally, causing the mail pile, catalogs mostly, to topple. And voilà: Just as she'd hoped, the basket fellow, having proceeded only a bit farther down the sidewalk, was etched against a glowy sky like a revelation, exuding grandeur and a heroic toleration for his load.

But seconds later, her car uncannily flashed BRAKE as a blue veil streaked with silvery iridescent thread flitted by, sideswiping her engine, and Basket Fellow vanished from her mind. Rather blithely the woman swooped across the road and swung on to a Metro bus. How Lila also yearned to rush about in silvery-blue gauze, to lose herself in a spot where death wasn't prowling! But as one hardly could avoid physicality, much less death, she at last opened the article, featuring a glossy photo of kale, then chard, preening tippy-top on a pyramid, lording it over a plethora of other veggies—carrots, cabbage, string beans, et cetera—at the stoplight.

Almost as quickly, envisioning a queue of cappuccinos she'd snuck whenever she foisted carrot juice on her older daughter, Kyra, a preschooler then, she tossed the magazine aside. During her second pregnancy she'd thrown up carrots, and afterward, notwithstanding the arbitrariness, recoiled from all things orange: marmalade, traffic cones, the swim trunks

worn by a stranger who flashed Kyra, even Broncos' T-shirts. (Nothing against the Denver Broncos—she and her husband, Brooks, were old Peyton fans—but even post-wash, Brooks's ancient jersey reeked now.) And what about Agent Orange? When she was twenty-five, her condo neighbor suffered from that.

Her own demeanor as he brooded outside, his silhouette withering into the landscape while he mouthed hello to passersby, baffled her now. Whereas back then he'd been the object of generous greetings, proof of her own kindness (rather callow, the way she'd imagined youthful good wishes bestowing wondrous health upon others), now she pictured him clearly. He was dying. Yet after she'd begun dating Brooks and moved, hearing only later the man also had AIDS, she never bothered to return or see if he needed help. In sum her orange list, albeit a slew of non sequiturs, nonetheless evoked a chain of associations that confounded the magazine's orderly universe premised not so much on doom after all but rational veggies or, in other words, an oxymoron.

"Let the process play itself out, Lila," Brooks had said the last few days whenever she chafed. Yesterday he'd said it while scanning emails; this morning eating yogurt and muffins. A lawyer often managing client imbroglios, talking smooth when disaster threatened was his forte.

Yet several medical websites indicated that endometrial cancer, ovarian cancer, hadn't any discernible cause. So where was the "process" in that? Really there was no one to query, not even Brooks, her usual confidante. "Random plastics," a few rogue websites ventured in omniscient yet hushed tones the further she'd plunged into the Internet's whirlpool, fretting that her milieu itself could be poisonous. And yet as a foundation upon which to pin one's demise, randomness felt so displeasing.

No sooner had she headed down a ramp, moreover, than randomness flared everywhere as she landed on an unfamiliar

street. In an effort to be positive, or at least methodical, she reviewed her situation. Returning from the National Arboretum, she'd taken the wrong exit. Now easing into a space, her tires sizzling on warmish pavement (further evidence, given the mid- October afternoon, of her poisonous milieu?), she crushed two hamburger boxes, then lit up her GPS, which instantly obliged, except that a rickety, possibly abandoned McDonald's, a bedraggled post office, belied its certitudes. According to the GPS, a church should be there.

"I ain't got my damn password!" a woman screamed into her phone nearby. To focus, Lila checked her list. On today's expedition she'd collected samples for Nell's Colonial America herb garden school project. (Check.) With Kyra announcing her engagement, she didn't want Nell, her younger daughter, to conclude that a wedding was all one needed to accomplish. (Comfortably married herself, Lila romanticized self-reliance and individual achievement, at least in principle.) Onto her lap she pulled the plant box, gingerly touching the dirt with her forefinger, savoring the aromas of lavender, artemisia, rosemary, parsley. But her reverie lasted only so long before, unable to resist, assured all medical records were private, she confirmed her password in the sea-green box, which dissolved into another bureaucratic phrase: *No new record.* Beholding the accompanying photo of two couples jogging, she dreaded feigning cheerfulness, composure, at tonight's dinner at Mercredi's, where she and Brooks were to meet the fiancé's parents.

"Hi," he said in his generic work voice just after she tapped his number.

"Who is this Charles fellow anyway?" Instantly the eeriness of background office silence accosted her, whereas other versions—the placid silences of the unassuming monks at her nephew's school in northeast DC, for instance—appealed more and more.

“Uh, young grad student, mechanical engineering. Hopes to marry Kyra.”

“Remember Alisha?”

“Historic preservationist?”

“No. That’s Julie. My college roommate Alisha married an engineer, divorced him, then married a photographer. Said engineers are cold.”

“Buddy’s an engineer.”

“Your college suitemate? The guy who howls and bows down when he sees you? Who’s obsessed with dating ‘models’? Refers to them as if they’re not individuals?”

“What are you doing?” Still the neutral voice. Granted, he sometimes slanted his vowels, carrying traces of Atlanta therein. They’d both grown up there—he in the city, she in the burbs—but never encountered each other. He’d gone north to school, probably in search of whatever he was still seeking now.

“Errands.”

“Sometimes I think I should quit my job and read Thucydides with you.”

“You said that twenty years ago. You said you majored in math and Classics, that we could get by on the stock market. We bickered about translations, but agreed on Pericles and Cleon.”

“Actually, before math it was electrical engineering.”

“Really?”

Tiny droplets of sweat spread over her arms and neck, as she flipped her door open, closed, and, pressing “lock,” awaited a beep. Their old arguments, mostly about who did what for whom

when, had shriveled into occasional insincere, though amiable, reciprocal half-compliments or jokes. New revelations like the aforementioned were rare. Instead, like a skyscraping Lego tower he once built with the girls, Brooks's salary had soared above hers, leaving her with extra duties. Inevitably, life happened; for example, pedestrians meandering, improvising nearby, cars stopping willy-nilly in the street, as if music was playing although it wasn't, drew her attention to ambient hubbub.

"I'm going in for stamps," she said before ringing off.

"Can you help?" asked a crouching woman, as if she'd rung off for her sake.

"'Scuse me? I—"

"Someone stole my Social Security card. While I was sleeping."

"You were—sleeping? Where?"

"Outside. I stay at my cousins', after my man start beating on me. But they was mean. So now I sleep over there."

Her finger directed the eye to a concrete slab bordering a grassy, weedy area, flanked by a mural of a giant eye and several people holding hands, the latter depicted with thick, wavy outlines. Nearby a basketball hoop's net dangled precariously. Beneath that a garbage can overflowed with pizza boxes, party remnants perhaps, leaving a flurry of bugs to enjoy the crumbs. Here, in contrast with her former workplace, the ossified museum, Lila practically congratulated herself, was real life.

"Umm. I gotta run in here. My mother likes thank-you notes, but I couldn't find stamps. After pressing my daughters to write the notes!"

Mortified by her own babble, she approached the post office, situated beneath a purple store called Purp whose neon sign

glared at the midafternoon sky. Whereas the sign's bohemian charm, with its implicit assurances that she was far from home and life wasn't ordinary, might have delighted her at Kyra's age, its haggardness stood out now. While she'd spent countless lunch hours jogging on the Mall, first between the Capitol and Lincoln, then eventually U-turning at Washington, either way maintaining a trim physique, she no longer felt indomitable, nor marmoreal in the manner of DC's worthies. With her own habitual vanity she nonetheless checked a reflective window to seek comfort in her pretty eyes, the wise aspect age bestowed on good days.

"My mother's in jail," the woman said.

"I'm sorry. Is she—I'll just be right out."

"She on drugs. One time she said she couldn't believe I was her daughter because I never been in jail."

"Well, sounds like she was mixed-up! I'm so sorry."

Inside Lila stood in line, recoiling from her own banalities. Yet ever since a fellow appeared on her doorstep last month in his first post-prison job (just days after she'd left her own job), selling gift bags, cracking jokes better than *Late Night* (imparting jail patois, like the definition of *honeybun,* which signaled amorous feelings toward a guard), thereby charming her into a $1,100 purchase, the profit going mostly to his boss, she'd grown wary. Even Brooks, ordinarily generous in a pro bono, institutional sort of fashion, bristled upon hearing the story later.

Again she tapped her phone screen. And yet again her fellow health care members beamed photogenically, this time pumping bikes dappled by a bright yellow sun. No new messages, the box chirped as they pedaled down an immaculate road, seemingly untainted by life's vicissitudes, much less mortality, per se.

If it wasn't for the biopsy, she too would be outside,

possibly training for their summer hiking trip through France, a post-wedding treat, and Nell's first trip to Paris. Half hoping the woman would wander away, she glanced complacently outside. Of course, drab neighborhoods encircled Paris as well (though she'd never describe either as such aloud); one day years ago, she'd ridden the Métro in search of Helene Cixous, who taught on its outskirts. Through a bedraggled college's forgotten halls she'd clambered upstairs and down, never finding Cixous, but on her return a sudden euphony, classical flute music winding into blues, played by two men swaying in the Métro aisles, knees dipping with the rhythm, had beguiled as she'd headed back toward the Musée d'Orsay.

Recalling youth and perfect health and her insouciance about those blessings while family tensions, a recent breakup, hovered like shadows, stunned her now. Inexplicably the word *penumbra* orbited her thoughts. Perhaps no definition was valid, and only inane good health discerned meanings in words? (Recently, her friend Zawadi had implied she was prone to ruminative excess.)

Ahead of her in line, a man whistling an ancient Earth, Wind & Fire tune called "Fantasy" offered another mode for self-orientation. When the song was popular, Jimmy Carter was president, and she was seven, as was, by all appearances, the whistler. Or had the song been remade? How she enjoyed startling her daughters, knowing lyrics to songs they thought were new. Besides, hip-hop didn't always exist, she'd explain, but Derek Walcott did; Miles Davis did. "Prehistoric," they'd say, hilariously rolling their eyes. Now she squinted at the linoleum floors, which rolled too, but her occasional dizziness had elicited a doctor's shrug, a hint that like any creature she was subject to decay. To herself she'd whispered a futile rebuttal, hoping to bypass his reserve with a dash of mysticism, or a few bars of music shared with her daughters.

When the music faded, she often became wistful, or inquisitive about their plans. Whereas Kyra was emerging as a fiancée,

organized yet passionate, Nell was aiming for premed, college brochures strewn about her room. After querying one or the other with limited success Lila would take an afternoon nap, entangled in French pima sheets, a luxury item she actually prized. Yet when she'd quit—or been phased out at work, she wasn't sure which (maybe after quibbling over that "Democracy in America" exhibit, with its superficial Tocqueville bio and moralistic timelines belaboring one technological/ business feat after another without a shred of Tocquevillian wit or skepticism about mass culture)—she'd imagined finding "authenticity" or a kind of amplitude, especially in her daughters' company.

Most recently she and Brooks had accompanied Nell to an "early acceptance college visit," perhaps seeking authenticity in a college town. Delighted to wander among elms, oaks, and hollies; encounter tree swings, libraries, and playing fields; they were mesmerized until the opening lecture, when it seemed they'd entered the wrong auditorium because the college president belabored politics without mentioning math, philosophy, physics, or subjects at all. Nor did a glum young man, with blond, curly hair, sitting slumped in his chair, who asked the first Q in the Q&A, "What's your administration doing to confront the college's history?" as if he were pristine and historically exempt, an effortless saint, notwithstanding his Internet-saturated obtuseness and clothes manufactured in Cambodian sweatshops. Afterward Nell declared him a dreamboat.

"What about that fellow you dated last year who went off to Tech? The guy building a robot that'll collect chicken eggs?" Brooks had asked, with respect and curiosity.

Again she felt dizzy, imagining Nell away at college, nibbling eggs cooked by a robot. A chasm opened, the post office wobbled, and a gaping precipice appeared at her feet until the floor solidified and closed like a wink. Glancing at her list, then out the soiled window, through fingerprints and splotches

that evoked a Kandinsky, she saw the woman, very pretty, with soft shoulders and round hips, wearing lipstick now, waiting. Her graciousness was lovely, really.

Turning away, Lila considered her former boss Holly, always zapping documentation of her and the museum's awards, also beautifully lipsticked. Given Holly's personal affect, her firm though not effusive smile, erect physique, and tendency to conform, she presided because no issue was too sacred for compromise; she'd "partner with" whomever if the partner was important or very rich. Yet the question Holly's unctuous husband asked Lila at her retirement party still rankled: "What will you do all day?" If Holly was the museum's empress, Lila had become its fool. One day in the museum, she'd heard an elderly Frenchman call the place "antiseptic." How true! "Hardly anyone entertains a free flow of ideas anymore, but don't you remember Grand-mère lamenting dull Americans?" one of his companions chortled. Yet this made Lila feel like an apparition, and what could an apparition do about that woman outside?

"Can you stop that, please?" Pause. "Hel-*lo*? Can you *stop*?"

Several of Lila's fellow patrons, caught in their own reveries, if not their phones, looked up. Everyone scrutinized the woman speaking, tapping her foot, three people ahead of Lila. Two buttons were missing from her maroon cotton jacket.

The man to whom the buttonless woman spoke—the whistler—stopped whistling. "Me?"

Apparently relieved she wasn't addressing them, everyone else relaxed. Heads swung between the two as if to choose sides.

"If someone's whistling, in perfect tune, you get upset," the man, whose T-shirt said *Mr. Incredible*, scoffed, his shoulders flexing.

Satisfied, the crowd bent his way (Of course! How ridiculous

to be offended!) but awaited a rejoinder. Perhaps sensing his momentum, Mr. Incredible snorted again.

“Mm-hmm, it bothers me,” the woman said, reaching for her pocket.

Although Lila regretted losing her rhythm, failing her list, the silence did not feel benign. Ahead of her, besides the disputants, were a young woman whose shirt said *Royalty,* a man eating noisy granola, plus a woman scanning Korean news. Should something happen, as occasionally she feared it might anywhere—“it” meaning a gunshot, mask dispute, or other contemporary non sequitur—perhaps one would be heroic?

“That is really—” Mr. Incredible said.

“It’s the repetition!” the lady snarled as the granola man reached for his belt.

BAM! Lila slammed the door. She wasn’t sticking around for whatever might transpire; stamps could wait. Her earlier dash of goodwill, of blasting Vivaldi skyward, felt frivolous now. Yet dodging a ripped piece of paper held between two shaking fingers, extended toward her navel, felt impossible.

“Here’s my Social Security and cell.”

Were homeless people, like many others, merely businesslike now? “Okay, good. So I’ll call them on Monday; really sorry that happened.” Given the ready supply of soothing phrases with which her mind was stocked, she spoke with poise, even apparent concern.

“Other things got in the way,” the woman continued without much lucidity, though her inflections sounded meaningful. “My baby in foster care now.”

“I’m really, really sorry,” Lila repeated, more sincerely this time. Only, she might have cancer, and didn’t she nurture her daughters, plus Brooks’s competitive sister, Jen, who lived

with them last year after her accident? For seven months. At all times Jen had wanted pomegranate juice, standing by the fridge in her bathrobe, hands on hips, just to make clear. But that wasn't this woman's fault.

"I'm Lila. What's your name?"

"Joy."

Her voice trembled, as if she wasn't sure. Nor, come to think of it, was Lila. Why *wouldn't* she get cancer, she wondered, watching Joy's lipstick sparkle and curve into a philosophic smile. Regrettably, according to various websites, cancer patients were at "increased risk of severe disease" from COVID, whichever the variant du jour.

"Sometimes I think I'm having strokes all the time, dying a little, bits of me flying everywhere," Joy said, waving toward the pizza boxes. "Plus they stole my identity."

"Who?" Lila asked, genuinely curious, wondering if she too might be afflicted.

"Phone company."

"Okaaay." (A different affliction, apparently.) "So where will you go for the weekend?"

"Probably my cousins'. *And* they put secret charges on my bill."

"Your cousins?"

"Phone company."

"How about the shelter?"

"Ha! They steal whatever you got; woman I know had dentures stolen, and if you tell anyone, heaven help."

"Will your cousins' be okay?"

“For the weekend. As long as I unload the dishwasher, do laundry.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Joy. Bye for now.”

After slipping her a twenty, how easy to slip away! At the red light she bestowed another upon a man in a wheelchair.

It was a cheap way to feel better. Occasionally she’d volunteered at food banks with her college alumni group or the girls’ school, but chirpy email thanks and declarations of success had obfuscated all underlying woes. And now, with lavender suffusing the car, scenery improving, the episode—her day, really—dwindled into a nice, perfumed anecdote. Cozily she navigated the usual posh streets upon entering her neighborhood, admiring red maples, then commuters strolling home with briefcases. At her own house, weighed down with a bag of plants slung over one shoulder, groceries over another, she climbed her porch steps and glimpsed Brooks home early, opining effortlessly, white buds clipped snugly in his ears.

“It’s political. For years Treasury had gobs of people—an entire agency—working on money laundering, the Patriot Act. To put pressure on North Korea, the hardliners figured out they can use the banking system. But while there’s a big international bank taking North Korean deposits, it’s harder to pick on them. So they’ve nabbed this tiny Macau bank holding more limited North Korean funds; next they’ll rush over to Congress, call it money laundering, and that’s the story the press will tell.”

Dazed by his tale, flummoxed by the implied sleight of hand, she grew queasy. Dropping bags, keys, removing her slides, she lobbed into the bathroom mere moments before the spurt gushed multiple shades of red, from brownish to pinkish. Again she willed herself not to call the nurse, who had said “unless biopsy results indicate otherwise, bleeding is ambiguous.” Once more she checked for results, yielding nothing.

“Do you find yourself opening and closing your refrigerator repeatedly, to see if the light is on?” a commercial blared from the sunroom, near the back of the house. “If you can’t stop checking,” it continued, sending Lila to crack the door should the advice be helpful. Yanking at her tights, which were medieval in their way, sopping blood from the floor, she awaited an offer of hope or a parody of Schrödinger’s cat, but the voice faded.

“He’s a smart guy, nice guy. But freezing money causes the North Koreans to walk out of negotiations,” Brooks said. While highly accustomed to his tone, it occurred to Lila that after years of toiling, he’d achieved proficiency. All manner of clients and colleagues in a relentless, voracious city valued his judgment. Should she die he would grieve her loss, but afterward, live sensibly, even savor *demi canard* at their favorite Georgetown bistro on Fridays. In the meantime, aside from managing life’s minutiae in her case and being important in his, what were he and she working toward?

Her pettiness, begrudging whatever life remained for him, was enough to send her back to the porch, where her neighbor could be heard on the phone as well until a bus roared down the street and all dialogues faltered. On one occasion when they’d talked, the neighbor had relayed her own doctor’s quip: “Women used to die by your age, fifty or so.” Not that they ordinarily interacted much beyond a wave; it wasn’t like Lila could confide in her now.

Nor could she imagine burdening her friend Zawadi, a frenetic epidemiologist whose face congealed when friends cited ailments. Swaths of populations fascinated Zawadi, not meager souls. “What? No grad school in public health, or law school?” she’d inquired upon hearing of Kyra’s engagement. Given a city bus rumbling before her and a boy lugging his sister’s blue scooter nearby, Lila thus drew solace from a random redheaded woman wearing an ill-fitting, pink dress trudging behind him. No doubt the nanny, she was aimless, lumpy, the worst

nightmare of Zawadi as well as Lila's other acquaintances (really, were they actual friends?), who were hard surfaces in spandex, business clothes, or both. The light flickered, the woman ducked under a willow oak's shade, and her hair turned redder. Which was beautiful!

Perhaps carelessly, out of exhaustion—Lila remembered chasing kids, after all—the woman accepted the scooter as the boy thrust it her way, leaving him free to lunge toward the bus. And disappear. As the bus roared ahead, the world held its breath. Horror, silence, and dread clung to the nanny's frame. What swirled through Lila's mind were the boy's audacity, then colors—pink, blue, orange—dispersing everywhere, plus Brooks, her alleged cancer, and Robert Boyle, who almost discovered atoms, then John Dalton, who did. The moment wavered and oscillated; the universe hung on a hiccup. And she was being in the world, without a job, or guile, or Brooks, who might remarry, damn him.

Thanks to the bus driver's screeching, the boy was fine. Shivering with gratitude, Lila exhaled: for the boy, the late-afternoon shimmer, even the bus's health message: One in five Americans would catch something, but she didn't catch what. A gazillion hiccups occurred in every instant, phenomena could go either way, or in any event she was spinning inside that calculus presently, and, similar to Joy, didn't feel like anyone in particular.

What a relief to climb the stairs and disappear into the shower, with the aim of reemerging as mother of a bride! How old-fashioned, compared to the music of the post-modern shower stream, called "spray tech" by the man Brooks had dispatched to install it. Why they needed a new showerhead was unclear, except Charles's family manufactured them. If, somewhere on the planet, a heap of salvageable items—showerheads, batteries for outdoor versions, aluminum, copper, plus humans recycling them—probably languished (according to Nell, who kept them

apprised), she nonetheless savored the Magic® until Kyra began pacing outside the door.

"*Maman!*" she said, using an endearment she'd borrowed years ago from ninth-grade French, just as Lila emerged. "Don't be a snob tonight."

Still damp behind her neck, aware of an earlier conversation in which she'd spoken bluntly, Lila feigned incredulousness, tying the knot on her yellow robe. "Snob? You think I'm a snob?" Given bathroom steam exchanging particles with the bedroom's drier air, bits of moisture trickling down her ears and neck, she felt too refreshed for a quarrel now.

"You're snobbish toward people like the Smiths. Like those characters in your paperbacks," Kyra gestured toward a bookshelf, "by Henry Whatever, Forster, about people listening to Beethoven. Or," she fingered an undergrad specimen, "this one's lit, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Whereas the Smiths employ people, feed people; they make things go!"

"Isn't that a line from one of your childhood books? *Cars and Trucks and Things that Go*? Same guy wrote *What Do People Do All Day?*" The line Holly's husband had paraphrased.

"What?"

"You don't remember?" Stranded amid precious memories of reading Richard Scarry, her daughters snuggled close wearing bunny pajamas, Lila rearranged her head towel, thick from dampness as it tumbled down her back.

Kyra shifted, pink toenails flashing. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Or maybe I sound—dusty."

"*You* married young," said Kyra, still responding to some earlier conversation in which she'd bemoaned Kyra's youth, plus her moving away, encountering Lord knows what influences

from her in-laws.

“But I would’ve been thrilled if people hadn’t expected me to marry young,” Lila said without conviction, pivoting to clutch a lipstick, à la Joy, à la Holly, from her dresser. Basically she’d resented her parents’ efforts to dominate her, she recalled, squinting indignantly, while veering that way herself.

“Maybe I don’t want to be so rational about everything. So ‘goal-oriented.’”

“‘Goal-oriented’?” asked Lila.

“Everyone’s so focused on high-status jobs, top schools, they can’t see anything else. It’s like there’s no quiddity!” Admittedly, given work, school, activities, and whatnot, “quiddity” had waned over the years. Although Brooks had been proud of her efforts. Always she’d checked for his satisfied expression; why?

Champagne said the lipstick she smeared on her lips with ease, but when she finished, a gash appeared where once there was a pretty bouquet. Lately others had noticed her age—there were dire warnings at the hair salon—plus a colleague she hadn’t seen in forever bellowed in a parking lot, “Well, Lila’s hair is turning gray—imagine that.”

Behind Lila, wearing not a scintilla of makeup, so vital in sweats and a T-shirt, Kyra was radiant, even in the antique mirror. If a stranger hadn’t witnessed her cavalier attitude toward her sister, he might’ve mistaken her keen eyes and balletic grace for sweetness of character. Meanwhile, as Lila hadn’t kept up with the upholstery offered to middle-aged women, the treatments designed to hurtle them backward through time, she wilted in comparison.

“Sweetie,” she said, then regretted it, knowing Kyra loathed that sobriquet, “you’re just so young! Why not postpone for a

year? You still can. Really!”

There was silence, until Kyra said in a scripted tone, “I’m over twenty-one, Mother; I can do as I please.” In her eyes there appeared to be resignation, that someone so jaded and middle-aged as her *maman* would never comprehend, plus resolve, that she’d be deciding from now on what was phony or not.

Happily, the restaurant Bitsy had chosen, with its chiaroscuro ambience, mahogany furniture, and chandeliers, flattered middle age. Vaguely entranced, Lila glanced at Brooks and discreetly past him at the glass wall in back separating the dining area from the kitchen, bleached whiter than a wedding dress and casting a homespun glow. *Locally sourced ingredients, globally inspired tasting menu,* a chalkboard beside the hostess’s stand declared.

“After the neighborhood I saw today, this place almost feels bizarre,” Lila said, possibly exaggerating her ambivalence. “Cruel world out there.”

“It’s easy to over-romanticize the street’s ‘authenticity,’” said Brooks, not sounding like himself, but there was no time to sift this. Not far away a trim man, perching up on tiptoes then down, like an ex-track star preparing to run another race, carefully tucked his phone into his pocket before approaching. “Cal Smith,” he said, offering his hand. Authority and impatience mingled in his eyes, then passed over his visage. His thick hair was short, straight, and matted down. Not unlike Brooks, whose hairline, in contrast, receded, he gave the impression of someone with multiple things to do, having mastered long ago the habits required to execute them. “We could’ve met at our club; usually we head over there when we’re visiting, but Bitsy’s friend Mona says this place is ‘divine.’”

Presumably Bitsy was the woman who slipped up beside him, all angles and quick eyes, in an understated black-and-pink print

dress, and they all introduced themselves, splintering into various narratives: Cal's centered on transportation, Brooks's on the kids, and Bitsy's the longest, unwinding a tale about her friend Mona living in DC during opera season, holding forth about cafés and neighborhoods.

"Where do you go to church?" she asked Brooks breathlessly as they sat down, a floral aroma suffusing the table. Lila was riveted, wondering how he might answer. If she was in fact dying, perhaps it would be wise to attend church?

"We're Episcopalian."

"Oh, wonderful; we're Bible Church," Bitsy said, without being asked. Yes, Lila almost said, my daughter accompanied your son and heard a screen preacher talk. But given the fluid conversation, with drink and appetizer orders filling the gaps, she managed to self-edit.

Soon enough, several plates arrived. "Charles says you're head of litigation. Also your firm's partnership committee?" Cal said, already sawing at his brie.

While Cal assessed Brooks, Lila rearranged the flouncy skirt she was wearing, a family eco-trip souvenir. Tonight it made her feel nimble, as if she might climb a tree, like Kyra at age ten. But two summers ago in Costa Rica, she'd given the blue-green flowery skirt to Kyra on her twenty-second birthday, after Charles left for Australia. The ensuing months now seemed an idyll. Vibrant and spontaneous, Kyra announced she was semi-vegan but slowly gained ten pounds eating pasta, no longer starving herself for Charles, and one day couldn't button the waistband. Not until Charles returned that fall did she diet, her age of exploration over. Rather heedlessly, she proclaimed the skirt no longer her style.

"Getting kicked upstairs, I guess."

"You work on money laundering? Terrorism?"

“Terrorism can be a tricky word,” Brooks said in his polite voice that snapped with intelligence, a rare juxtaposition she’d spotted the first time she met him.

“Tricky’s a tricky word.”

“It’s subject to demagoguery, political manipulation,” Brooks clarified, listing an

uncontroversial example or two, as a balloon of political tension nonetheless rose over the table, threatening to pop.

“Ha! Well, if you’re including more recent events, I agree. But as for foreign affairs, an employee of mine—from Lebanon originally—says if the US doesn’t confront the world’s thugs, nobody will.” Rather keenly, Lila peered at Cal; sometimes this was *her* conflict with Brooks: his slowness at recognizing bullies. “And now his son’s a US Army captain, Afghanistan vet.”

“Very impressive,” Brooks nodded. Was this *her* husband, the politically liberal, near-pacifist?

“You know Senator Townsend? Pierce Townsend? He was in your law school class,” said Cal. “We’re big supporters.”

A euphemism for donations. “Given his support for manufacturing, I understand,” said Brooks, “although his support for the Iraq war troubles me still, while his Ukraine flip flop seems totally incongruous.”

Lila would’ve been less generous. If the senator was a fellow alum, he was also a prig, a sexual hypocrite: Brooks’s opposite. Could they not gauge the difference?

“Maybe with Ukraine he’s learned to be cautious,” said Cal.

As usual, Brooks demurred rather than bicker. Perhaps to the Smiths, he was a balding lawyer, slightly above average height, a man who’d inspire ennui. But his understated tone

belied a sparkle inside the seams of his phrases. A joke bounced through the occasional line, often delivered in a whisper. Unlike many, he wasn't confined to one hue. There were reasons she'd married him. Yet his quasi-foreign policy cases seemed daunting, even for him. She frowned, recalling Pierce as a law clerk, rarely inclined to offer more than a supercilious remark to colleagues, now making foreign policy in Congress.

"I like his predilection for finding people jobs, not freebies," Cal said. "Plus he wrangles with the other side. With *their* demagoguery. And Big Tech shenanigans." Just as she'd commenced smirking, he perused Lila's face. "I saw that," he quipped, his tight face breaking into a semi-smile.

"Good," she said, and they both laughed.

"He's a smart guy, though his environmental policies don't resonate," Brooks said tactfully. His bowl of mussels sat untouched; why was he so excited?

"How so? I mean, I'm not a dolt; I've been to China; I've gagged on the air, but the regs I gotta follow here, little details like flow restriction plates. And the lawyers!"

"Well, occasionally we're useful." Brooks chuckled with self-deprecation as Lila cast a glance his way. Was he impressed with these people and their pullulating faucets? Usually he'd share his perspective on the rule of law, how without it a country, not to mention its economy, looked unpredictable to investors. But a busboy from Tunisia filling their glasses nodded, essentially at Brooks, whose firm had staffed his asylum case pro bono, and she drank heartily, resigned to quenching her thirst while paying heed to their new relations.

"And with environmental groups devoted specifically to water, to monitoring action numbers for lead," Cal fumed, obviously quite knowledgeable about faucets, which, given his expansive (though calculating) tone, almost captivated. "Although

fortunately EPA's water efficiency labeling program has bolstered sales."

Almost as if that conversation wasn't happening, Bitsy poked her face toward Lila's. "Do you decorate?"

"Sometimes," Lila fibbed, dipping an artichoke leaf in agave-mustard. Among friends, family, she was notorious for an indifference to stuff. "You?"

"I don't want any more toys, y'know. Two houses already; I'm trying to simplify. We're just north of Pittsburgh. It's a historic five-thousand-foot home, 1920s. Friends of ours are moving to a townhome on a lake, two thousand square feet. I'm so-o-o getting there myself. But our living room is gorgeous; it's got the touches that they *DID* back then. During parties we go in there or the piano room. If we moved, I'd be *désolée!"*

While enjoying Bitsy's gush, upon hearing the word *gorgeous,* Lila felt a twinge, excused herself, and floated toward the bathroom past a blur of faces. Smiles, grimaces, and waiters' knuckles gripping trays, the restaurant's choreography, all made an impression before she struggled with the ornate door. Inside, a little girl blowing bubbles flashed iridescent colors toward the light as her mother yanked a paper towel from the holder, while the tiny colors evoked for Lila paint mixing in an art class she'd taken at sixteen. Probably because she couldn't fathom replicating the tedium around her (how strict and judgy she was then!), the grown-ups squeezed in suburban houses, she'd aspired briefly to be a painter. Yet, alas, no one lauded her work, her depth of soul. (Her fatuousness seemed preposterous now.) Then, one day, a teacher who looked tired, because everyone over thirty looked tired then, said offhand, "Okay, good, but use your whole canvas."

Beneath the teacher's bony finger was a white expanse Lila hadn't noticed, and her tone so stark, it was as if she'd

plucked the canvas from its wooden frame and tossed the sheet over Lila's face. Easily bamboozled, Lila had never returned. Shuffling outside next to an Indian grocery store, cumin and curry scents lacing the air, she'd decided there were more compelling goals to pursue, delicious curries to try, *inter alia,* as Brooks would say eventually.

She'd met him after college. Painting, having faded already, looked chimerical as they built careers. Since Brooks liked to feel artsy, or at least cultured, they had season tickets to theater, ballet, and dinner afterward, plus their names on office doors; hence the colors translating her thoughts into unfinished pictures hardly constituted an epiphany; she wasn't craving seismic change.

Plus, she was distracted easily by a message. Moving aside as a young woman, tottering in heels, a pink miniskirt, bent toward the mirror, thereby duplicating herself, Lila pressed her phone's tiny blue arrow. (Maybe her doctor's message?)

After a breath or two, a voice tinged with kindness and forced vivacity, said, "Aloha, Lila! Now that you're unemployed, and a target for every cause on earth like me, someone whose time people hijack for no pay, how about volunteering?" It was Chris Lomez, a mom from Nell's school. While not long ago, at a school basketball tournament she and Chris had worked together, mostly pushing name tags—hi, I'm Ellen, Jim, or LaKeesha—and muffins on sleep-deprived parents, Gatorade on sweaty players, she hadn't sensed the aforementioned dynamic. Or hadn't considered it anyway.

Quickly she texted back, saying a speaker series on biodiversity loss sounded fun. Bleary from wine, fear, delusions of artistry, she elaborated. Once upon a time she'd seen her career as a solid thing, she typed intently, head bowed, but online reviews, faux accomplishments obscuring subtler, truer ones, not to mention the museum's imagery masquerading as good and evil clarity, baffled her. In the

legal biz, her husband Brooks was seeing nuanced reasoning yield to hype, or whichever side had leverage, she opined. After proofing, she added loyally that Chris's comic sensibility was too subtle for those who patronized her. Then, backtracked. Then deleted the whole thing.

Back at the table Bitsy was enumerating her own volunteer positions and friends collected over the years. Invariably the settings were beach houses, country clubs, museums, and the like, until Cal interjected with references to quarterly gains and board memberships; everyone was jolly indeed.

"Well, we love Washington," Bitsy declared, as if the city and everything therein were catalog brands. "We started visiting when Janey, our daughter, was at Georgetown. Now she's in Old Town, which is *so* quaint."

With the chatter escalating, Lila's glance alighted on one thing, then another: the bar, the waiters' fluidity, and the implacable night outside. But when Bitsy described Charles as he was in third grade, artsy and wild, and how he settled down in sixth, she found herself riveted. Brandishing her phone, Bitsy displayed a soulful pair of eyes Charles had drawn that appeared to see, and feel, their fellow diners, the waiters, bartenders, even the two couples. Not bad for an engineer! Kyra, Lila said, spoke clearly, each word a ringing bell, and oh! How adorable she was at seven, with her soft, brown bob and verbal precision, like a miniature Rosalind.

A breathlessness overtook her, plus childhood's lost enchantment, as their faces all convened in the silver goblets. While Brooks nibbled his crepe, she caressed the fine, soft tablecloth, which stopped just short of the table's end, then clutched a block of wood undergirding that end, hopefully fastening herself to earth as Brooks exchanged email addresses with Cal. "Is this table made from longleaf?" she almost gasped, a bit short of breath.

“Probably.”

“Aren’t longleaf pine forests extinct?”

“A few vendors have taken to reclaiming the wood; one company repurposes longleaf from old houses, train depots; fabulous pieces.” Bitsy’s eyes gleamed with light and dark, like sailboats reflected on the Potomac, not far from where they sat.

For its blessed solidity, Lila clung to the rich wood, while Cal alternately extolled and feared for the dollar’s status as global reserve currency. If he and Bitsy seemed vacuous, perhaps they knew things; and feared dying too. Perhaps surrounding themselves with all manner of objects made them forget what she’d forgotten, that mere oxygen enchanted above all.

Indeed, Bitsy and Cal, or at least their politics, might bewilder, but—yikes!—they also resembled everyone Lila knew. Ever since her kids started school, she’d received group emails addressing video game excesses, disaster relief, plastic lunchboxes, and those old standbys dyslexia and ADHD: Like acquisitive shoppers, she and her fellow parents exchanged one au courant craze for the next. More serious obstacles to the pursuit of security, money or clout, including addictions or other blemishes, were resolved by discrete professionals. Thanks to Brooks’s job and so on, she’d thought they had the inside scoop not only on current events, but life itself. If life might be richer than that, it was hard to think in the din; in fact, hard to think anywhere, as sifting the universe alone, with spontaneity, rarely occurred in her milieu. (“Odd” was the term one of Brooks’s colleagues employed, when anyone tried.) Appearances, validation, worked nicely. Well-placed donations? Even better. Certain that key institutions would continue to thrive, most people kept up with the pertinent websites, and naturally, their 401ks, confident not unlike passengers on a Six Flags

tilt-a-whirl they'd land safely in the end.

"The bigger your house, the more you collect," Bitsy said, her earrings shivering in the light. "Our basement is filled with handmade shelves, one just for Christmas plates. Every year Cal dresses up as Santa, the Easter Bunny; it's fun," she added, as the waiter slid Brooks's profiteroles onto the table. (How could he enjoy profiteroles right now?) If he was envisioning Cal as a potential client, she'd be *truly* annoyed.

Alongside their respective cheeks ran a mirror, which caught lights flickering across the room, tossed their reflections back and forth, then dangled shadows across an adjacent table bordering the café's open windows. Intermittently a roar of laughter erupted there. Even the chairs, pulled back in a ramshackle style, contrasted with their own four stiff, competitive backs.

All at once, Lila nearly giggled. While she still feared the sea-green box, she no longer expected any definitive answer. Messages, as it turned out, couldn't offer that. Nor could being in the loop. Sooner or later she and everyone else in Mercredi's would die. Maybe from cancer, maybe old age, maybe a virus or other disaster, whispered various eidolons—those of her grandparents, a conceited former beau, a talented colleague dead in a crash. That's why she couldn't reach a conclusion, even about the Smiths: Conclusions were flimsy, compared to whatever lay beyond. A dish slid onto the table of laughers, all speaking Italian, and the turmeric curry's fragrance—its molecular intimations—jolted her into another zone.

Yesterday Kyra had said to her, "If you want someone to study molecular biology so badly, why don't *you*?" A fair point, except for her, as for Kyra perhaps, reality's hints and traces meandered in all directions. Unlike Brooks or Nell, neither was inclined to stick with one subject or goal for very long.

Nonetheless, charmed by the laughing table, she found herself decompressing at last, even mulling a joke. “Ha!” she said when Cal finished a story about playing high school football. “Well, I heard a knock-knock joke yesterday.” Rather exuberantly, she glanced toward the convivial table as if they were longtime friends.

“Knock-knock,” she said, as her dinner companions gazed in disbelief.

“Who’s there?” Brooks asked lamely because no one else did. Under the table he was kneading his napkin.

“Wire.”

“Wire who?”

“Wire you asking me?”

From the silver goblets’ reflections, she noted three stricken faces registering the horror of a mundane, badly told joke. For Kyra’s sake, she kept dutifully quiet afterward. When cappuccinos arrived, creamy leaf images afloat in each cup, she followed the conversation along its predictable track, providing a chorus when summoned, eventually sampling golden-wrapped chocolates after they all speculated about shapes and nougats in tandem.

Later, after standing in the parking lot gazing wanly upon each other, appearing almost poetic in the fog, they parted with lilting farewells, hushed words that dissolved as soon as they were uttered. Then nighttime was a lull until, midway back to the car, she said to Brooks, “Remember Kyra’s old friend Tory—the one who visited the ashram? She’s studying astronomy now. I saw Eva yesterday.”

Through the haze they tilted their heads toward a few lonely stars. Which reminded her that she’d once proposed to Holly an exhibit about Polynesian explorers who traveled thousands of

miles, laid their children in the sand, and taught them to navigate using stars and ocean swells. The exhibit hadn't happened; there was no clear reason why.

If she wasn't brave enough to cross the Pacific in a double-hulled canoe, she could roam around, talking to strangers, *inter alia*, she counseled herself, sliding into the passenger seat of Brooks's car, which thanks to Kyra's air freshener smelled like "fresh-cut pine." Through the window a raccoon's eyes shone, while an automated lady decoding the car's interior and other aspects of the universe pledged to phone HQ should anything go awry.

"Astronomy," Brooks said with his old awe, as if he hadn't had the leisure to mull any such subject for decades. "Wonder why she and Tory grew apart," he added, as the car moved along the parkway, coppery beech leaves shimmering.

"Kyra said yesterday that relationships wear out, flip around, and mean the opposite of what they once meant. Today she said we lack quiddity. Does that mean what she thinks it means?"

For the first time in days, oxygen seemed to fill the air, no doubt courtesy of the cheeseburger she'd just eaten, with mayo, mustard, and ketchup, mostly for the hemoglobin; and more indirectly, courtesy of another set of trees, whose indigo depths, as Brooks navigated a darker street, enchanted no less than the coppery leaves. Plus she had an email: Her polyp was benign, blood test negative; all splendid, all okay. Which was way too late. Of course, relief trickled into her brain. Carbon dioxide flew from her nostrils to the elms rooted in a parking lot spinning by to phytoplankton in the sea miles away. Waves rose and fell; perhaps the entire planet breathed. But the wait had jostled her neurons. She'd wandered, inhaled aromas, seen colors anew. Yet inspired as she was by Boyle's, Dalton's dancing molecules, she'd forgotten how, as portrayed in a book she'd read once with the girls picturing a female bird devouring a snail for its

calcium carbonate, they intertwined life with death. How little she knew! Grappling with similar themes, a radio host questioned an epidemiologist and an arms control expert about COVID variants, food insecurity, and cyber threats as if blank canvas space awaited them all.

Ergo, how to proceed? While deciding, maybe tomorrow she'd rescue Joy's crumpled paper from her car's mail heap. Weather-beaten, susceptible to elements rather than AC, Joy, like the Smiths, knew some things. Not what one wished to know necessarily. But it would be easy enough to research "Social Security card replacement" and, cognizant of her cell number's visibility, call Joy anyway. Not that either of them would find a panacea. But finally she had a rejoinder for Holly, who once dismissed a colleague as a "brighten the corner where you are" type: "So what?" she now muttered to herself.

"In the medieval metaphysics sense, quiddity means whatness," Brooks was saying, a hint of fatigue in his voice. "Although in the gravedigger scene Hamlet's describing legal minutiae, yes?"

Long ago, just after their own wedding, she and Brooks had quarreled about minutiae, and she'd fled out the door, gone on a bike ride. But not like the ride pictured on her medical provider's website. Angry, her soul blistering, she'd pressed into the wind as if she was thereby made free, of marriage, of anyone else's constraints. Later she'd returned home, sullen, not contrite. Now she saw his profile through their years of subtly, deftly sandpapering each other, saw his face creased with time and care as their car lights pried into the darkness. She didn't want to think about the expression on his face as he and Cal exchanged emails while she'd felt faint and life became molecules. Nor as they passed the riverbanks, whose craggy tree roots and limbs enlivened the pitiless night, did she wish to consider the circulation of funds implicit in that dialogue.

For now, the echoing voices of the chat-show guests squabbling over doom and data, the wine on her tongue, and taciturn sky, all made her drowsy. Upon a frothy existence they all floated, generating sumptuous levels of carbon dioxide, burdening tree roots, glowing in the light and sending nutrients to the soil but eventually carbon upward; or did an obscure tingling between her hips and chest make it seem so?

Quickly, the tingling dissipated; the radio host and guests implied that perfection lay just around the corner. How often had she acquiesced to such recurring bells and shuffled along with the rest toward an ersatz future that everyone predicted and no one understood? More cognizant now of sycamore trees bristling beside a creek the girls once explored, of their lollygagging bodies and spirits, of a true woody aroma as she rolled down her window, she studied the dignified, jagged branches that would shelter passersby come daylight. Somewhere in a cluttered drawer at home were drawing pencils, yes?

Sketching, of course, might well be absurd, or just another foray. She hadn’t held a pencil in years. But again, so what? To elude a bureaucratic, labyrinthine world, cleverly packaged with sentiments and simulacra, she’d need yellow, blue, green; also fine motor skills and something ineffable, beyond cleverness. Meanwhile, before she could respond about *Hamlet,* or ask why the creek still had incidents of sewage overflow, Brooks said, possibly because when all else failed they amused themselves, sometimes at the expense of others, “Somehow I can’t escape the image of Cal cavorting as the Easter Bunny for our grandchildren.”

Table of Contents

Formerly a lawyer in Washington, DC, Tricia Warren eventually moved back to Atlanta, where she tries to stay out of her car.

In the meantime, her work has appeared in *The Furious Gazelle, Umbrella Factory Magazine, New English Review, Litbreak Magazine, ArLiJo* , and other publications.
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