

## SIMULACRUMS

Jane returned home from work sweaty and numb.

The 4-train proving extra crowded during rush hour. An armpit to the face, tang of urine used as deodorant. Her bra sopping and digging into her skin. A run in her stocking, pale leg seeping through. Hadn't she just returned from a family vacation in the Bahamas? Tommy and Eloise's footprints on the beach. Sandcastles and starfish. Her husband Kirk with a suntanned nose in a Science Fiction tome. Bob Marley on her earbuds. It felt like a dream she'd been told by someone trying to make her jealous.

Back in Brooklyn on her quaint, tree-lined street in Carroll Gardens. The restaurants opened for the night with outdoor seating even though the sidewalks boiled. A dog turd frying into the pavement she had to dodge. A day at work that had fried her too. Her boss Theo, a regal woman in all black. Cheekbones like sharp stones, hair slick and always looking wet, five years her junior. Theo was unhappy with the campaign for their pencil skirt client, complaining that it read "too junior". And everyone nodding like they completely knew this, but had decided on a juvenile campaign simply so the boss could negate. Hadn't Jane mentioned that to her colleague Russell, who picked his nose throughout the meeting with the tip of his pen, or Marsha, the only employee older than Jane, who had Resting Nonplussed Face and was too afraid of having an original thought? They listened with their placating nods—Russell even took his pen from out of his nose to pretend to write something down—but once Theo entered the conference room, they sacrificed Jane at the altar. They swore their allegiance to each other and let Theo feast on her

entrails. Jane had been the one with the original spark of an idea. Every variation it mutated into was entirely her fault.

When she opened the front door to their first-floor apartment in a brownstone replete with a pretty stoop from another century and a basement for Kirk and Tommy's drum practicing, she was hit with a slap of steaming air that hadn't seen air conditioning since yesterday when it broke down. This either meant that the super had never shown, or had been unable to fix.

"We're in here," Kirk called out, his voice coming from the dining room, a windowless wedge off the kitchen that the former tenants used as a home office.

She wanted a bath, a trip to the Arctic honestly, where she could be buried under a film of ice forever. But she didn't want to be rude. Kirk chided her for disappearing into a bathtub when she would get home from work and not emerge sometimes until an hour later, the children starving and chewing at their own limbs while she stewed in bubbles.

She peered into the dining room, her family sitting around the table, not in their usual spots. Kirk always planted himself at the end of the table, farthest from the kitchen and facing the painting on the wall of a man with his shadow slipping away, one she hated. The twins, Tommy and Eloise, sat facing each other. Tommy looking directly at the hallway that led to their bedrooms with Eloise left to stare at a blank wall with art to be determined. Except today, Kirk faced the blank wall, Tommy the shadow painting, and Eloise the hallway.

"Coffee?" Kirk asked, holding out a steaming cup.

In fact, the entire family sipped from mugs with smoke curling, sweat plopping from their foreheads into the mugs.

"The super couldn't fix the central air?" Jane asked.

The family looked at one another and laughed.

“We hadn’t even noticed,” Kirk said, and Tommy and Eloise agreed.

“Are they drinking coffee too?” Jane asked, inspecting their mugs, a wafting hazelnut aroma circling into her nostrils.

Tommy and Eloise had recently turned eleven, not entirely outlandish to be drinking coffee, but still, odd. She pictured them groggy in the mornings, thrusting out their mugs for refills, tucking newspapers under their arms as they’d head to school.

“They’re growing up,” was all Kirk said as a reply.

“Yeah,” Tommy said. “We’re not your babies anymore.”

“We don’t need your milk,” Eloise added.

“My milk...what?” Jane asked.

The family laughed, not even a normal laugh, but a demonic chortle as if they were in on a diabolical secret and she was the fool left out.

“Join us,” Kirk said. He got up to pull out her chair, which faced the wall clock, her spot the same as always. He even dusted off the seat. His blue diamond eyes were twinkling, the twins’ were as well. Jane was the only one with brown eyes, plain like a lot about her. Plain Jane, they used to call her in school, circling around her and hurling tiny stones, forcing her to run home in tears so she could rub her wounds with salve. The square peg who never fit in.

||

The bathtub became a wise escape. She confessed to her family how much her weary bones needed to soak in oils: lavender and eucalyptus. Surrounding her on the walls hung pictures of her brood. Tommy and Eloise as wide-eyed babies, Eloise bald as a thumb while

Lee Matthew Goldberg

Tommy already with his signature blond curls. Both of them years later on a banister in the house they rented in East Hampton before Eloise broke her tooth. A selfie of all of them in Central Park earlier this summer. Kirk hidden by sunglasses, Tommy and Eloise making faces, Jane serious as ever staring into the camera as if she was searching for her soul.

“Mommy?” a voice cooed, from outside the bathroom.

*Mommy? When was the last time she was called that and not just Mom?*

And the voice—Tommy’s. Tommy, her eleven-year-old who was already too cool to give her hugs--who sometimes even referred to her as Jane and would hold out his hand to shake.

“Can I come in?”

The doorknob turned before she could answer and he stepped inside. Had she not thought to lock it? She was sure she had, but after melting all day, her brain had oozed out of her ears along with any last bit of energy.

He stood before her in soccer shorts and his Berkley Carroll T-shirt, a private school that cost almost fifty thousand a year for each of them where they had a sushi chef at lunch and took up fencing and Mandarin.

“Can I have a hug?” he asked.

Now it was her turn to laugh. She covered her mouth so she wouldn’t embarrass him. His face turned, features dripping into what settled as a frown.

“I’m in the bath,” Jane said, giving a little splash.

“I’ll come in with you.”

Before she knew it, he had climbed in, pawing at her to get balanced. She quickly positioned herself to cover her breasts and twisted her body until her left side was floating. He pet her damp hair. Left a kiss on her forehead.

“Sweet mom,” he said, in the voice of an adult, a forty-year-old with a high-powered job and a marriage on the rocks.

“Well, I’m just pruning,” she said, splashing out of the tub, leaping for a towel, and spinning into its embrace. Tommy blinked in response.

“Tommy, give me a second to dry off.”

“Okay.”

He slouched out of the tub, creating a trail of thick water like a slug as he made his way to his bedroom. She watched him leave and then closed the door, and locked it this time. She toweled off her long black hair and stared into the mirror. The jowls had taken up a permanent residence. Her almond eyes had enough crow’s feet to start a murder. So pale she looked almost purple, all crisscrossing veins and knobby bones. Creeping up on half a century when she still sometimes felt like a child, that same one getting pelleted by pebbles, lying to her own parents about those wounds and pretending they were bug bites.

That she was so popular in the bug world, they couldn’t see fit to leave her alone.

||

When she came down from the bathroom, Kirk was waiting with the mug of coffee.

“I nuked it for you so it would be warm,” he said, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“Kirk, it’s like one hundred degrees in here, the last thing I want is hot coffee.”

“But I brewed it myself,” he said, and then went into a dissertation about beans that some bat crapped out, making them extra special.

“You’re batshit,” Jane said, and he laughed at that, his *ho ho ho* chuckle like he was Santa Claus. It was the first thing she noticed about him, at a mutual friend’s birthday party in a backyard in Bushwick, when Bushwick was still gentrifying. A keg brought in filled with Pabst Blue Ribbon. She was in her mid-thirties, making headway at a new advertising firm where she’d later plateau. Kirk, with his perfectly round head, his cartoonish sideburns, his thick glasses that he’d constantly shift on his nose, was telling a joke about a scientist who grows attached to his lab rat. It didn’t really have a punchline, but she laughed anyway. A man hadn’t made her laugh in a while. She had recently divorced and wasn’t looking for love, but that was when it found you. Her ex had been abusive, never physically, but mentally. He knew her weaknesses and poked and prodded. She’d taken to cutting little slices from tiny scissors across her body where she’d imagine his face. One time he cornered her with a barrage of taunts and she attacked, stabbing the tiny scissor into his leg and watching as a dollop of blood squirted out, licking her lips as red dots dribbled to the floor.

“Jane, you okay?” Kirk asked, and she found his sea-blue eyes. Kirk, who never taunted her, who laid out rose petals on the bed for their anniversaries, who had a mushy huggable body covered in fur, who spent hours alone in a lab and treated her like royalty when she got home, so excited to be with another person after being isolated.

“I’m just not myself,” Jane said, immediately wanting to take it back. Today hadn’t been a great day at work, but it was no worse than most, her commute was horrible like every other day. This was who she always was and always would be.

“You need a pick-me-up,” he said, handing over the coffee. Her first instinct to swat it away tired of his newfound aggressiveness. Kirk was usually such a shrinking violet that arguments never even surfaced.

She put the mug to her lips and inhaled. A buttery aroma of hazelnut with a tinge of...what was that...feces, bat feces? Or simply her mind playing tricks? She was about to take a sip when Eloise appeared from hallway stalking toward them like a wraith. Jane startled and the mug fell to the floor, crashing and sending a thousand pieces across the living room, the coffee a triangular stain on their white rug like a darkened shadow.

“Jeez, Jane,” Kirk said, dropping to his knees and picking up bits of mug.

“She...scared me,” Jane said, longing to point at Eloise in defiance like they were in courtroom.

Eloise slinked over, dragging her feet. She had on make-up, but in the wrong places. Lipstick for rouge, eye shadow on her lips, a clown’s concoction.

“Eloise, did you look in the mirror?” Jane asked, inspecting the child’s face, her fingers digging into Eloise’s chin.

“This is how the mirror told me to do it,” Eloise said.

“What?”

“Let me make you another cup of coffee,” Kirk said, gathering up the pieces of mug and cradling them like a wounded animal.

“No, I don’t want another...”

Tommy now joined the rest of the family, his perfect curls gone, relegated to his fist. The shorn head of a concentration camp survivor staring back.

“Tommy, what did you do?” Jane asked, striking the boy.

Tommy doubled over, blond curls spread out across the floor. He held his throbbing cheek.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so...” Jane began, looking to Kirk for support.

“What is wrong with you, Jane?” Kirk asked, shaking his head in disappointment.

“I don’t know,” Jane said, as she felt one teardrop leave her eye and slide into her mouth, salty and unfulfilling.

||

Dinner proved to be an awkward affair. Kirk had made a delicious pasta in cream sauce, but she wasn’t hungry. In fact, she had barely eaten since the morning. This sometimes happened. A quick scone at lunch usually sufficed, but by evening she became ravenous. Now she nibbled on a roll dunked in the sauce.

“Tommy, what prompted you to shave your head?” she finally asked, after she couldn’t bear to look at his new self anymore.

“I was tired of my curls getting in my eyes.”

She went to respond, but he continued.

“Like during soccer, I can’t see for shit and then I trip over myself.”

She was about to scold him for cursing, but found herself not giving a shit.

“And you, Elo? What’s this new look?”

Eloise licked her top lip as she thought about it, and then placed down her fork and knife.

“I’m going for a whore look.”

Jane slammed her fist into the table.

“Go to your room, both of you,” she thundered, face beating red with rage, the veins popping.

Tommy and Eloise dabbed their lips with a napkin, pushed their chairs into the table, and left the room whispering to themselves.

“She’s trying to get under your skin, they both are,” Kirk said, sipping more coffee.

“Mission accomplished.” Jane pushed her plate away. “I’m not hungry.”

He sipped and sipped.

“You’re not irked at all by the way they are behaving?”

Kirk studied his wedding ring, simple silver. It seemed shinier than normal, like he’d given it a good buffing.

“There are bigger things in this world to worry about.”

“Oh, don’t get scientific on me, Kirk. I know the Big Bang was a bigger event than a child with clown make-up.”

“Do you?” He tapped his fingers against the table. “Because sometimes, I think you make mountains.”

“We all can’t be so *laissez-faire*.” Jane threw her hands up in the air to make her point stick home.

“Just today I was working with Ralph, that’s my newest lab rat—”

“I know, I know your new lab rat’s name.”

“I’m working on a formula that would allow Ralph to be in two places at once. Of course, it’s only theoretical. How can a body, a mass, exist in one place but also in the other?”

“Impossible,” Jane said, dunking a last piece of bread.

“Well, nothing is impossible. Right? Until it’s proven impossible. Which I haven’t been able to do either.”

“And you have funding for this?”

Lee Matthew Goldberg

“The company prefers when I’m not tethered to one project. So, the funding encapsulates many different trial and errors.”

“Hmmm.”

“And there I am, alone with Ralph all day in a windowless room like this room. There’s a picture of you and the kids on my desk, the one we took at Sea World with a whale twisting through the air in the background. So sometimes I’ll talk to you all as if you are there. Today, however, you were not on my thoughts. Not because I found you all distracting, simply because Ralph was my focus.”

Jane swallowed up the last bite of bread.

“And did you make any headway?”

“In proving or disproving my hypothesis?”

“Either.”

“Well, no. As I said, disproving is more impossible than proving. It’s the same with the idea of God. How do you disprove? People can see a sign of God in many things, an image of Jesus in your stick of butter, but the proof that He...or She...doesn’t exist, I would like to see that.”

“So, Ralph...”

He moved his fingers around the rim of his coffee mug, made it sing.

“Ah yes, of course. So, Ralph today was different than normal, less skittish, a bolder more rounded Ralph. Malleable. He let me hold him, stroke his white, white belly, let his whiskers touch my lips.”

“Seriously, Kirk?”

It was wine time. She got up to get a bottle from the cabinet and poured herself a glass of merlot, sucked it down.

“It behooves me to be as intimate with Ralph as possible. If there isn’t trust...”

“Okay, go on.”

Two more gulps and the glass of wine was already half empty.

“For a second I wondered aloud, Is this Ralph? Or does the Ralph I know, and love, exist somewhere else while this newfound rodent had taken his place?”

A chill began at the top of Jane’s spine and wormed its way down to the small of her back.

“You see, I kept Ralph in a new chamber I created last night. I won’t bore you with the particulars, but it’s full of energies.”

“Energies?”

“Yes, exactly, Jane. Special energies--almost like in a Xerox machine on a maximum level.”

“So, you duplicated Ralph?”

“Ho ho ho,” Kirk said, chuckling. He gave Jane a long wink and inched his seat closer to hers.

“How would I ever really know?” he asked.

She finished the wine in one final swig.

“Unless the other Ralph, wherever he may be, if there is another Ralph, managed to reappear?”

The wine had stained her lips red. They had cracked and the acid filtered its way inside, mixing with her blood, making her wince.

“But alas,” he said, and she breathed a sigh of relief, one she had been squelching since the conversation began. “All conjecture I’m afraid.”

She rubbed her head. An ache forming in her temples, ready to penetrate.

“Are you all right, Jane?”

He cocked his head to one side like a puppy, his face going in and out of focus, the borders hazy and undefined.

“I might lie down.”

She got up and pushed her chair into the table, wobbled a bit before regaining her balance.

“Lie away,” he said, finishing his coffee and massaging his belly, which extended over the lip of the table like a separate organism.

||

Jane got to work early, wanting to beat her colleagues and her boss Theo. She sat at the conference table prepared with notes for a new pencil skirt campaign, one she had stayed up all night to perfect. Before she made things worse with Tommy and Eloise, she retreated to a nook used as an office while Tommy and Kirk played drums downstairs in the basement and Eloise stomped around singing and dancing. She could hear their echo, a comforting bassline under her feet. Her wonderful family, who she would do anything for. But. And here was where her mind cracked. She couldn’t stop thinking about her discussion with Kirk about the two Ralphs. One that remained in the lab and the other...wandering around somewhere, searching for a sense of self. She pulled at memories: from times with Kirk and the kids, from her own childhood. The

dark and disturbing ones swam to the surface, along with times of pure bliss. But the ordinary ones? Where had they gone? She couldn't recall.

Russell and Marsha entered with Theo behind them, Theo in signature black leather like a character out of *The Matrix*. They took their places around the table and began a discussion about a new pencil skirt campaign as if they had dug into her mind and stolen the ideas as their own. They patted each other on the back, sang their own praises, and when they turned to Jane, she could only agree. They eyed each other like she was lazy and hadn't put in any work, only co-signing to cover her own ass.

"I'd be curious to hear what you came up with," Theo said, her voice cracking a whip that startled Jane.

"Well."

She went blank, not only from ideas about the campaign but all thoughts in general. Like her cranium had been opened and someone had taken her brain and batted it around like a hackysack. As she was about to respond with gibberish, the door opened and in walked three other people. Although upon closer inspection, they were actually the three people already in the conference room. They wore different clothes of course, but it was clearly Theo, Russell, and Marsha.

"What's going on?" Jane asked, her throat closing.

The new Theo, Russell, and Marsha whipped out serrated knives and slit the throats of the old Theo, Russell, and Marsha, the knives sawing through tendons. Jane clasped her own throat in response, as if in an attempt to keep her head on her body. The other heads rolled around on the floor like pinballs in a machine, and Jane let out a scream so dark and filled with terror that the windows shattered.

||

Jane woke on her couch, a drumming in her head she realized was coming from the basement along with Eloise singing Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night", the drums making it into more of a rock song. She grappled at her throat, remembering the beheading of her co-workers and boss that had been nothing more than a dream.

Swinging her legs over, she attempted to stand, going knocked-kneed and lunging for the coffee table, missing it entirely and collapsing to the floor with a hard thud.

The drumming stopped.

With her ear against the wooden floor, she could hear whispering below. Intense and accusatorial. The words undefined but the tone sinister. And then her name. Not Mom. Jane. Like a hiss. The hiss of a snake culling her from below.

She managed to stand, listing, but remained upright and waddled to the door of the basement. The music started up again, wild and untamed, the drumbeats louder and more persistent. She grasped the doorknob, turned, and then changed her mind. Like she knew if she opened it, she'd have to come to terms with what existed below. Her family, or a variation of them, like in the dream of her officemates. She was sure of it.

She made a break for the kitchen and grabbed the biggest knife she could find. She looked at her reflection in the blade. Who stared back? She no longer recognized the image. She pressed the tip against her index finger to see if she could bleed. If she was still human. Sure enough, a dollop of blood appeared that she found herself licking up, the taste like copper, like a dull penny.

She went back to the door of the basement. The music swelled, rattling organs, a chaotic trance. And then she opened the door.

A hot darkness greeted her, the basement far from cool like normal, like a hell at the bottom of their house. She took a step, her bare feet squeaking against the wood from the shaky staircase. A dim light swung, a lone bulb outlining her brood: Kirk on bass, Tommy with his newly shorn hair on drums, and Eloise like a banshee in the middle screeching Sinatra.

The lightbulb swung and revealed a pinkish substance hanging from the ceiling, four pods made up of what look like innards, like the Bodies exhibit she once saw at the South Street Seaport. The pods breathed, expanding and contracting. The outline of a face peered through the translucent goo. It was Kirk, another Kirk, with his bushy eyebrows and mouth wide open in a silent scream that implored her to save him. And beside him in another pod, Tommy still with his golden locks of hair, and next to him Eloise with normal make-up, all of them with palms pressed against the inside of the pods searching for a way to escape. Her true family.

She dove at Eloise first, the other Eloise, the one with the face of a clown, and stabbed and stabbed, blood spraying her in the face until Eloise went slack in her arms. Next was Tommy, as she tripped over the drum kit to stab him in the eye, his deafening moans quaking her bones. Through the noise, she couldn't hear anything, only the sound of her heart terribly beating as she closed in on Kirk.

“Stop, you don't understand!” Kirk yelled, facing his palms outward, imploring her to calm down. She was upon him like a beast, thrashing and gutting him good, his organs in her hands.

“You don't understand,” he wheezed again, as a bubble of blood popped from his mouth and his eyes locked open forever.

She stepped over him and began cutting at the pods, sawing through and being careful not to hurt her true family. Eloise plunged from out of her pod, slick like a newborn, collapsing on the floor in sobs.

“Mom,” she cried.

“You’re okay, baby. You’re okay,” she said, cutting into Tommy’s sack until he slid from out of a hole in his pod, crying in tandem.

“You’re safe, you’re both safe,” she said, moving to Kirk now, his pod bigger and thicker than the other two. With all her might, she sawed and sawed until he spiraled out in her arms, soaked with goo and pink and white like a peppermint candy.

“I’m sorry,” he said, bathing her in kisses. “I didn’t know what would happen.”

“Clean up, get this gunk off of you,” she ordered at them, and they nodded, shell-shocked, retreating up the stairs.

When they were gone, the lone bulb swung from the sound of the door slamming. She looked up into the light to see the final pod and a woman swimming around in the sack. The woman’s face pressed up against the goo, a harried version of herself, the true Jane, although if that was the true Jane than who was she? She was someone. She had saved her family. And because both Janes could not exist at the same time, she knew what she had to do.

She sawed into the sack, the eyes of Other Jane pleading because they already knew the inevitable. New Jane would never sacrifice herself for a Jane she didn’t know, even if she wasn’t real and a copied version. She had lived in this body now and would be just as good as the old Jane, even better.

So instead of sawing a hole big enough for Other Jane to slide out, she thrust the knife into Other Jane’s body, a whimper ringing in her ears that she tried to ignore. She would hear it

Lee Matthew Goldberg

for the rest of her days because there had to be some sacrifice with this exchange. Other Jane's eyes pleaded no more, they accepted their fate, they told New Jane that she would be replacing her and she had to take good care of her family so Other Jane could go quietly into the good night without fear and worry.

And New Jane promised she would. She swore with all of her heart and plunged the knife in deeper until there wasn't a shred of soul left.

END