

SESSION 6

Readings: Benjamin Franklin, “The Whistle”
Antón Chekhov, “The Head of the Family”
Ana María Matute, “The Boys”
Philip K. Dick, “The Eyes Have It”
John Chu, “The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere”
Ray Bradbury, “The Last Night of the World”

Benjamin Franklin, “The Whistle”

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), the noted statesman and one of the Founding Fathers, is known to all Americans.

Franklin reminisces when he was a small boy and paid too much for a whistle. He sure did learn how to strike a bargain, though. His letter was excerpted from a collection published in 1914, The Oxford Collection of American Essays.

TO MADAME BRILLON

I RECEIVED my dear friend’s two letters, one for Wednesday and one for Saturday. This is again Wednesday. I do not deserve one for to-day, because I have not answered the former. But, indolent as I am, and averse to writing, the fear of having no more of your pleasing epistles, if I do not contribute to the correspondence, obliges me to take up my pen; and as Mr. B. has kindly sent me word that he sets out to-morrow to see you, instead of spending this Wednesday evening, as I have done its namesakes, in your delightful company, I sit down to spend it in thinking of you, in writing to you, and in reading over and over again your letters.

I am charmed with your description of Paradise, and with your plan of living there; and I approve much of your conclusion, that, in the meantime, we should draw all the good we can from this world. In my opinion we might all draw more good from it than we do, and suffer less evil, if we would take care not to give too much for whistles. For to me it seems that most of the unhappy people we meet with are become so by neglect of that caution. You ask what I mean? You love stories, and will excuse my telling one of myself.

When I was a child of seven years old, my friends, on a holiday, filled my pocket with coppers. I went directly to a shop where they sold toys for children; and being charmed with the sound of a whistle, that I met by the way in the hands of another boy, I voluntarily offered and gave all my money for one. I then came home, and went whistling all over the house, much pleased with my whistle, but disturbing all the family. My brothers, and sisters, and cousins, understanding the bargain I had made, told me I had given four times as much for it as it was worth; put me in mind what good things I might have bought with the rest of the money; and laughed at me so much for my folly, that I cried with vexation; and the reflection gave me more chagrin than the whistle gave me pleasure.

This, however, was afterwards of use to me, the impression continuing on my mind; so that often, when I was tempted to buy some unnecessary thing, I said to myself, Don't give too much for the whistle; and I saved my money.

As I grew up, came into the world, and observed the actions of men, I thought I met with many, very many, who gave too much for the whistle. When I saw one too ambitious of court favor, sacrificing his time in attendance on levees, his repose, his liberty, his virtue, and perhaps his friends, to attain it, I have said to myself. This man gives too much for his whistle.

When I saw another fond of popularity, constantly employing himself in political bustles, neglecting his own affairs, and ruining them by that neglect, He pays, indeed, said I, too much for his whistle.

If I knew a miser, who gave up every kind of comfortable living, all the pleasure of doing good to others, all the esteem of his fellow-citizens, and the joys of benevolent friendship, for the sake of accumulating wealth, Poor man, said I, you pay too much for your whistle. When I met with a man of pleasure, sacrificing every laudable improvement of the mind, or of his fortune, to mere corporeal sensations, and ruining his health in their pursuit, Mistaken man, said I, you are providing pain for yourself, instead of pleasure; you give too much for your

whistle. If I see one fond of appearance, or fine clothes, fine houses, fine furniture, fine equipages, all above his fortune, for which he contracts debts, and ends his career in a prison. Alas! say I, he has paid dear, very dear, for his whistle.

When I see a beautiful sweet-tempered girl married to an ill-natured brute of a husband, What a pity, say I, that she should pay so much for a whistle! In short, I conceive that great part of the miseries of mankind are brought upon them by the false estimates they have made of the value of things, and by their giving too much for their whistles.

Yet I ought to have charity for these unhappy people, when I consider that, with all this wisdom of which I am boasting, there are certain things in the world so tempting, for example, the apples of King John [hard to explain; considered a humorous touch], which happily are not to be bought; for if they were put to sale by auction, I might very easily be led to ruin myself in the purchase, and find that I had once more given too much for the whistle. Adieu, my dear friend, and believe me ever yours very sincerely and with unalterable affection.

To consider:

1. What is the significance of the whistle in this story?
2. How can one describe the language of the story?
3. How important is it that the author of the story is Benjamin Franklin?

Antón Chekhov, “The Head of the Family”

Anton Chekhov (1850-1904) is an internationally renowned Russian playwright (*The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, The Cherry Orchard, Three Sisters*) and short story writer.

It is, as a rule, after losing heavily at cards or after a drinking-bout when an attack of dyspepsia is setting in that Stepan Stepanitch Zhilin wakes up in an exceptionally gloomy frame of mind. He looks sour, rumped, and dishevelled;

there is an expression of displeasure on his grey face, as though he were offended or disgusted by something. He dresses slowly, sips his Vichy water deliberately, and begins walking about the rooms.

"I should like to know what b-b-beast comes in here and does not shut the door!" he grumbles angrily, wrapping his dressing-gown about him and spitting loudly. "Take away that paper! Why is it lying about here? We keep twenty servants, and the place is more untidy than a pot-house [small tavern or pub]. Who was that ringing? Who the devil is that?"

"That's Anfissa, the midwife who brought our Fedya into the world," answers his wife.

"Always hanging about ... these cadging [freeloading] toadies!"

"There's no making you out, Stepan Stepanitch. You asked her yourself, and now you scold."

"I am not scolding; I am speaking. You might find something to do, my dear, instead of sitting with your hands in your lap trying to pick a quarrel. Upon my word, women are beyond my comprehension! Beyond my comprehension! How can they waste whole days doing nothing? A man works like an ox, like a b-beast, while his wife, the partner of his life, sits like a pretty doll, sits and does nothing but watch for an opportunity to quarrel with her husband by way of diversion. It's time to drop these schoolgirlish ways, my dear. You are not a schoolgirl, not a young lady; you are a wife and mother! You turn away? Aha! It's not agreeable to listen to the bitter truth!"

"It's strange that you only speak the bitter truth when your liver is out of order."

"That's right; get up a scene."

"Have you been out late? Or playing cards?"

"What if I have? Is that anybody's business? Am I obliged to give an account of my doings to anyone? It's my own money I lose, I suppose? What I spend as well as what is spent in this house belongs to me—me. Do you hear? To me!"

And so on, all in the same style. But at no other time is Stepan Stepanitch so reasonable, virtuous, stern or just as at dinner, when all his household are sitting about him. It usually begins with the soup. After swallowing the first spoonful

Zhilin suddenly frowns and puts down his spoon.

"Damn it all!" he mutters; "I shall have to dine at a restaurant, I suppose."

"What's wrong?" asks his wife anxiously. "Isn't the soup good?"

"One must have the taste of a pig to eat hogwash like that! There's too much salt in it; it smells of dirty rags ... more like bugs than onions.... It's simply revolting, Anfissa Ivanovna," he says, addressing the midwife. "Every day I give no end of money for housekeeping.... I deny myself everything, and this is what they provide for my dinner! I suppose they want me to give up the office and go into the kitchen to do the cooking myself."

"The soup is very good to-day," the governess ventures timidly.

"Oh, you think so?" says Zhilin, looking at her angrily from under his eyelids. "Everyone to his taste, of course. It must be confessed our tastes are very different, Varvara Vassilyevna. You, for instance, are satisfied with the behaviour of this boy" (Zhilin with a tragic gesture points to his son Fedya); "you are delighted with him, while I ... I am disgusted. Yes!"

Fedya, a boy of seven with a pale, sickly face, leaves off eating and drops his eyes. His face grows paler still.

"Yes, you are delighted, and I am disgusted. Which of us is right, I cannot say, but I venture to think as his father, I know my own son better than you do. Look how he is sitting! Is that the way decently brought up children sit? Sit properly."

Fedya tilts his chin up, cranes his neck, and fancies that he is holding himself better. Tears come into his eyes.

"Eat your dinner! Hold your spoon properly! You wait. I'll show you, you horrid boy! Don't dare to whimper! Look straight at me!"

Fedya tries to look straight at him, but his face is quivering and his eyes fill with tears.

"A-ah!... you cry? You are naughty and then you cry? Go and stand in the corner, you beast!"

"But ... let him have his dinner first," his wife intervenes.

"No dinner for him! Such bla ... such rascals don't deserve dinner!"

Fedya, wincing and quivering all over, creeps down from his chair and goes into the corner.

"You won't get off with that!" his parent persists. "If nobody else cares to look after your bringing up, so be it; I must begin.... I won't let you be naughty and cry at dinner, my lad! Idiot! You must do your duty! Do you understand? Do your duty! Your father works and you must work, too! No one must eat the bread of idleness! You must be a man! A m-man!"

"For God's sake, leave off," says his wife in French. "Don't nag at us before outsiders, at least.... The old woman is all ears; and now, thanks to her, all the town will hear of it."

"I am not afraid of outsiders," answers Zhilin in Russian. "Anfissa Ivanovna sees that I am speaking the truth. Why, do you think I ought to be pleased with the boy? Do you know what he costs me? Do you know, you nasty boy, what you cost me? Or do you imagine that I coin money, that I get it for nothing? Don't howl! Hold your tongue! Do you hear what I say? Do you want me to whip you, you young ruffian?"

Fedya wails aloud and begins to sob.

"This is insufferable," says his mother, getting up from the table and flinging down her dinner-napkin. "You never let us have dinner in peace! Your bread sticks in my throat."

And putting her handkerchief to her eyes, she walks out of the dining-room.

"Now she is offended," grumbles Zhilin, with a forced smile. "She's been spoilt.... That's how it is, Anfissa Ivanovna; no one likes to hear the truth nowadays.... It's all my fault, it seems."

Several minutes of silence follow. Zhilin looks round at the plates, and noticing that no one has yet touched their soup, heaves a deep sigh, and stares at the flushed and uneasy face of the governess.

"Why don't you eat, Varvara Vassilyevna?" he asks. "Offended, I suppose? I see.... You don't like to be told the truth. You must forgive me, it's my nature; I can't be a hypocrite.... I always blurt out the plain truth" (a sigh). "But I notice that my

presence is unwelcome. No one can eat or talk while I am here.... Well, you should have told me, and I would have gone away.... I will go."

Zhilin gets up and walks with dignity to the door. As he passes the weeping Fedya he stops.

"After all that has passed here, you are free," he says to Fedya, throwing back his head with dignity. "I won't meddle in your bringing up again. I wash my hands of it! I humbly apologise that as a father, from a sincere desire for your welfare, I have disturbed you and your mentors. At the same time, once for all I disclaim all responsibility for your future...."

Fedya wails and sobs more loudly than ever. Zhilin turns with dignity to the door and departs to his bedroom.

When he wakes from his after-dinner nap he begins to feel the stings of conscience. He is ashamed to face his wife, his son, Anfissa Ivanovna, and even feels very wretched when he recalls the scene at dinner, but his amour-propre is too much for him; he has not the manliness to be frank, and he goes on sulking and grumbling.

Waking up next morning, he feels in excellent spirits, and whistles gaily as he washes. Going into the dining-room to breakfast, he finds there Fedya, who, at the sight of his father, gets up and looks at him helplessly.

"Well, young man?" Zhilin greets him good-humouredly, sitting down to the table. "What have you got to tell me, young man? Are you all right? Well, come, chubby; give your father a kiss."

With a pale, grave face Fedya goes up to his father and touches his cheek with his quivering lips, then walks away and sits down in his place without a word.

To consider:

1. Who are the characters in the story?
2. How does Chekhov handle characterization?
3. What are the themes and messages of the story?
4. Does the story have a universal quality?

Ana Maria Matute, “The Boys” (“Los chicos”)

Ana María (1925-2014) was a Spanish novelist and short story writer. She is known for capturing the psychology and personality of young people./

There were only five or six, but like that, in a group, coming along the road, they appeared to us like fifteen or twenty. They arrived almost always in the late hours of the afternoon, when the sun fell the full length against the dust and the gravel of the old road, where no cars or trucks, nor vehicles of any kind, had begun to circulate. They arrived in a cloud of dust, which they raised with their feet, like the hooves of horses. We saw them, and our hearts barked at us to hurry. Someone, in a low voice, said: “The boys are coming...!” In general, we hid ourselves to throw rocks or we fled. Because we feared the boys like the devil.

In reality, they were one of the thousand forms of the devil, to our understanding. The boys, ragged and evil, with dark eyes that shone like the heads of black pins. The boys, barefoot and calloused, who threw rocks with a large reach, with great aim, with blows sharper and stronger than ours. Those who spoke a difficult, unknown language of words like the cracks of a whip, whose laughter was like the spattering of mud. At home we had been completely prohibited from establishing any relationships with those boys. Actually, we were prohibited from leaving the meadow under any circumstances. (Although there was nothing as tempting, to our eyes, as jumping the wall of stones and going down to the river, that, on the other side, bled green and gold, between the rushes and black poplars.) Farther over there, past the old road, where they arrived almost always those distinct, prohibited boys.

The boys lived in the surroundings of the penitentiary. They were the sons of the prisoners of the penitentiary, who redeemed their pains in the work of the marsh. Between their mothers and them, they had constructed a strange village of shacks and caves, back-to-back with the rocks, because they could not pay the lodging in the village, where, besides, they were unwanted. “Riffraff, thieves, assassins...” said the people of the place. No one would have rented them a room. And they had to be there. Those women and those children followed their prisoners, because in that manner they lived off the wages that the sufferers earned for their work.

To us, the boys were terror. They insulted us, they stoned us, undid our stone gardens and our toys, if they pillaged by hand. We saw them as beings of another race, half monkeys, and half devils. Just seeing them a great shudder came to us, although we hoped to disguise it.

The oldest son of the administrator was a kid of some thirteen years, tall and robust, that studied in secondary school in the city. That summer he returned home for vacation, and after the first day he captained our games. His name was Efrén and he had red fists, heavy like war clubs that produced great respect. Since he was much older than us, audacious and a braggart, we followed him wherever he wanted to go.

The first day that they appeared, the boys of the shacks, in a mad rush, with their cloud of dust, Efrén was surprised that we threw ourselves to running and jumping the wall in search of refuge.

“You are cowards,” he told us. “They are small!”

There was no way to convince him that they were another thing: that they were something like the spirit of evil.

“Foolishness,” he said. And he smiled in a twisted and particular manner that filled us with admiration.

The next day, when it was the time of the siesta, Efrén hid himself among the rushes of the river. We waited, hidden behind the wall, with our hearts in our throats. Something was in the air that filled us with terror. (I remember that I bit the chain of my medal and that my tongue felt a rare, cold pleasure of metal and that I heard the crisp song of the cicadas among the grass of the meadow.) Thrown on the ground, my heart beat against the earth.

When they arrived, the boys scrutinized the river, to see if we were searching for frogs, as we used to. And to provoke us they began to whistle and laugh the way they always did, haughty and humiliating. That was their game: call us, knowing that we would not appear. We remained hidden and silent. At last, the boys abandoned their idea and returned to the road, climbing the embankment above. We were gasping and surprised, but we didn't know what Efrén wanted to do.

My older brother got up to move through the rocks and we copied him. We then saw then Efrén slithering through the rushes like a giant snake. Stealthily he

climbed up the embankment, where the last of the boys went up, and he threw himself on top.

With surprise, the boy was left trapped. The others had already arrived at the road and grabbed rocks, yelling. I felt a great trembling in my knees and I bit hard on the medal. But Efrén was not intimidated. He was much older and stronger than that dark, little devil that he restrained in his arms, and he began to run, dragging his prisoner to the refuge of the meadow, where we waited. The stones fell around him. But Efrén jumped agilely over the stepping stones, and dragging the boy, Efrén furiously opened the fence and entered with him into the meadow. Seeing him lost, the boys of the road turned halfway and began to run, like young rabbits, to their shacks.

Only thinking that Efrén brought one of those furies, I was sure that my brothers felt the same terror as I did. We got close to the wall, with our backs stuck to it, and a great coldness rose to our throats.

Efrén dragged the boy some meters, in front of us. The boy struggled desperately and tried to bite the legs, but Efrén raised his enormous, red fist and began to hit the face, the head, and the back. Time and time again, Efrén's fist fell, with a dull sound. The sun shone thick and big, over the grass and the earth. There was a great silence. We only heard the panting of the boy, the blows of Efrén and the sound of the river, sweet and fresh, indifferent to our backs. The song of the cicadas seemed to have stopped. Like all the voices.

Efrén passed much time hitting the boy with his great fist. The boy, bit by bit, was giving in. At last, he fell to the floor on his knees, with his hands supported in the grass. He had dark skin, the color of a dirty floor, and very long hair, of mixed blonde with black veins, as if burn by the sun. He said nothing, and stayed there on his knees. Later, he fell against the grass, but lifted his head, to not completely faint. My older brother approached slowly, and later us.

It seemed a lie how small and thin he was. "On the road they seemed much taller," I thought. Efrén was on his feet by the boy's side, with his large, solid feet separated, feet covered with thick boots of suede. How enormous and brutal Efrén seemed in that moment!

"Have you had enough?" He said in a very low voice, smiling. His teeth, with prominent eye teeth, shone in the sun. "Take this, take this..."

He gave him a kick in the back. My older brother retreated a step and was on top of me. But I couldn't move: I was like nailed to the ground. The boy raised his hand to his nose. He bled, I didn't know if it was from his mouth or where.

Efrén watched us.

“Let's go,” he said. “He has already gotten what he deserved.”

And he kicked him again.

“Get lost, you pig! Get lost now!”

Efrén turned, big and heavy, slowly, towards the house. Very sure that we would follow.

My brothers, as if reluctant, as if scared, obeyed him. Only I couldn't move, I couldn't, from the side of the boy. Suddenly, something rare occurred inside me. The boy was there, trying to get up, coughing. He did not cry. He had very intoxicated eyes, and his nose, wide and squashed, vibrated oddly. He was stained with blood. From his chin fell blood that soaked his rags and the grass. Suddenly he looked at me. And I saw the pupils of his eyes, which were not black but of a pale topaz color, transparent, and when the sun fell they became gold. I lowered my eyes, full of a painful shame.

The boy got on his feet, slowly. He had hurt a leg when Efrén dragged him, and he limped toward the embankment. I did not dare to watch his back, blackish and undressed between the rips. I wanted to cry, I did not know exactly why. I only knew to say to myself: “He was only a child. He was no more than a child, just like any other.”

To consider:

1. How can one describe the narrator of “The Boys”?
2. What is the message of the story?
3. How do form and content—plot and theme—function in the story?

Philip K. Dick, “The Eyes Have It”

Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) was an acclaimed American writer of science fiction, with some 44 novels and 120 short stories to his credit.

The Eyes Have It (1953) is Dick's clever sci-fi full of idioms and puns, featured in the collection titled 75 Short-Short Stories.

A little whimsy, now and then, makes for good balance. Theoretically, you could find this type of humor anywhere. But only a topflight science-fictionist, we thought, could have written this story, in just this way...

It was quite by accident I discovered this incredible invasion of Earth by lifeforms from another planet. As yet, I haven't done anything about it; I can't think of anything to do. I wrote to the Government, and they sent back a pamphlet on the repair and maintenance of frame houses. Anyhow, the whole thing is known; I'm not the first to discover it. Maybe it's even under control.

I was sitting in my easy-chair, idly turning the pages of a paperbacked book someone had left on the bus, when I came across the reference that first put me on the trail. For a moment I didn't respond. It took some time for the full import to sink in. After I'd comprehended, it seemed odd I hadn't noticed it right away.

The reference was clearly to a nonhuman species of incredible properties, not indigenous to Earth. A species, I hasten to point out, customarily masquerading as ordinary human beings. Their disguise, however, became transparent in the face of the following observations by the author. It was at once obvious the author knew everything. Knew everything--and was taking it in his stride. The line (and I tremble remembering it even now) read:

...his eyes slowly roved about the room.

Vague chills assailed me. I tried to picture the eyes. Did they roll like dimes? The passage indicated not; they seemed to move through the air, not over the surface. Rather rapidly, apparently. No one in the story was surprised. That's what tipped me off. No sign of amazement at such an outrageous thing. Later the matter was amplified.

...his eyes moved from person to person.

There it was in a nutshell. The eyes had clearly come apart from the rest of him and were on their own. My heart pounded and my breath choked in my windpipe. I had stumbled on an accidental mention of a totally unfamiliar race. Obviously non-Terrestrial. Yet, to the characters in the book, it was perfectly natural--which suggested they belonged to the same species.

And the author? A slow suspicion burned in my mind. The author was taking it rather *too easily* in his stride. Evidently, he felt this was quite a usual thing. He made absolutely no attempt to conceal this knowledge. The story continued:

...presently his eyes fastened on Julia.

Julia, being a lady, had at least the breeding to feel indignant. She is described as blushing and knitting her brows angrily. At this, I sighed with relief. They weren't *all* non-Terrestrials. The narrative continues:

...slowly, calmly, his eyes examined every inch of her.

Great Scott! But here the girl turned and stomped off and the matter ended. I lay back in my chair gasping with horror. My wife and family regarded me in wonder.

"What's wrong, dear?" my wife asked.

I couldn't tell her. Knowledge like this was too much for the ordinary run-of-the-mill person. I had to keep it to myself. "Nothing," I gasped. I leaped up, snatched the book, and hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

In the garage, I continued reading. There was more. Trembling, I read the next revealing passage:

...he put his arm around Julia. Presently she asked him if he would remove his arm. He immediately did so, with a smile.

It's not said what was done with the arm after the fellow had removed it. Maybe it was left standing upright in the corner. Maybe it was thrown away. I don't care. In any case, the full meaning was there, staring me right in the face.

Here was a race of creatures capable of removing portions of their anatomy at will. Eyes, arms--and maybe more. Without batting an eyelash. My knowledge of biology came in handy, at this point. Obviously they were simple beings, unicellular, some sort of primitive single-celled things. Beings no more developed than starfish. Starfish can do the same thing, you know.

I read on. And came to this incredible revelation, tossed off coolly by the author without the faintest tremor:

...outside the movie theater we split up. Part of us went inside, part over to the cafe for dinner.

Binary fission, obviously. Splitting in half and forming two entities. Probably each lower half went to the cafe, it being farther, and the upper halves to the movies. I read on, hands shaking. I had really stumbled onto something here. My mind reeled as I made out this passage:

...I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. Poor Bibney has lost his head again.

Which was followed by:

...and Bob says he has utterly no guts.

Yet Bibney got around as well as the next person. The next person, however, was just as strange. He was soon described as:

...totally lacking in brains.

* * * * *

There was no doubt of the thing in the next passage. Julia, whom I had thought to be the one normal person, reveals herself as also being an alien life form, similar to the rest:

...quite deliberately, Julia had given her heart to the young man.

It didn't relate what the final disposition of the organ was, but I didn't really care. It was evident Julia had gone right on living in her usual manner, like all the others in the book. Without heart, arms, eyes, brains, viscera, dividing up in two when the occasion demanded. Without a qualm.

...thereupon she gave him her hand.

I sickened. The rascal now had her hand, as well as her heart. I shudder to think what he's done with them, by this time.

...he took her arm.

Not content to wait, he had to start dismantling her on his own. Flushing crimson, I slammed the book shut and leaped to my feet. But not in time to escape one last reference to those carefree bits of anatomy whose travels had originally thrown me on the track:

...her eyes followed him all the way down the road and across the meadow.

I rushed from the garage and back inside the warm house, as if the accursed things were following me. My wife and children were playing Monopoly in the kitchen. I joined them and played with frantic fervor, brow feverish, teeth chattering.

I had had enough of the thing. I want to hear no more about it. Let them come on. Let them invade Earth. I don't want to get mixed up in it.

I have absolutely no stomach for it.

To consider:

1. On what is the plot of the story based?
2. How can one describe the style of the story?
3. What is Philip K. Dick's particular take on science fiction here?

John Chu, “The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere”

John Chu is a Taiwanese microprocessor architect, literary translator, and writer of science fiction. This story won the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 2014.

In the near future water falls from the sky whenever someone lies (either a mist or a torrential flood depending on the intensity of the lie). This makes life difficult for Matt as he maneuvers the marriage question with his lover and how best to “come out” to his traditional Chinese parents.

The water that falls on you from nowhere when you lie is perfectly ordinary, but perfectly pure. True fact. I tested it myself when the water started falling a few weeks ago. Everyone on Earth did. Everyone with any sense of lab safety anyway. Never assume any liquid is just water. When you say “I always document my experiments as I go along,” enough water falls to test, but not so much that you have to mop up the lab. Which lie doesn’t matter. The liquid tests as distilled water every time.

Uttering “this sentence is false” or some other paradox leaves you with such a sense of angst, so filled with the sense of an impending doom, that most people don’t last five seconds before blurting something unequivocal. So, of course, holding out for as long as possible has become the latest craze among drunk frat boys and hard men who insist on root canals without an anesthetic. Psychologists are finding the longer you wait, the more unequivocal you need to be to ever find solace.

Gus is up to a minute now and I wish he’d blurt something unequivocal. He’s neither drunk, nor a frat boy. His shirt, soaked with sweat, clings to a body that has spent twenty-seven too many hours a week at the gym. His knees lock stiff, his jeans stretched across his tensed thighs. His face shrinks as if he were watching someone smash kittens with a hammer. It’s a stupid game. Maybe in a few more weeks the fad will pass.

I don't know why he asked me to watch him go through with it this time, and I don't know why I'm actually doing it. Watching him suffer is like being smashed to death with a hammer myself. At least Gus is asking for it. I know I'm supposed to be rooting for him to hold on for as long as possible, but I just want him to stop. He's hurting so much and I can't stand to watch anymore.

"I love you, Matt." Gus's smile is radiant. He tackles me on the couch and smothers me in a kiss, and at first, I kiss him back.

Not only does no water fall on him, but all the sweat evaporates from his body. His shirt is warm and dry. A light, spring breeze from nowhere covers us. He smells of flowers and ozone. This makes me uneasy than if he'd been treated to a torrent. That, at least, I'd understand. I'd be sad, but I'd understand.

He's unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans when my mind snaps back to the here and now. It's not that his body doesn't have more in common with Greek statues than actual humans. It's not that he can't explicate Socrates at lengths that leave my jaw unhinged. It's that not only did "I love you, Matt" pull him out of his angst, but it actually removed water.

Fundamental laws of physics do that. Profound theorems of mathematics do that. "I love you, Matt" doesn't count as a powerful statement that holds true for all time and space. Except when Gus says it, apparently.

"Wait." I let go of him. My hands reach down to slide to a sit.

Gus stops instantly. He's skittered back before my hands have even found the couch cushions. His head tilts up at me. This is the man who seconds ago risked going insane in order to feel soul-rending pain for fun. How can he suddenly look so vulnerable?

Oh, if there's anything Gus can do, it's put up a brave front. He does that stony-faced thing where his mouth is set in a grim, straight line better than anyone I know. But behind his hard, blue eyes, I can see the fear that's not there even when some paradox rips him apart.

Best to take the pain now. I'm half-convinced nothing can actually hurt him, even when he's afraid it might. It'd only hurt him more later.

"That's some display you just did there, Gus." I'm stalling. Stop that. "I don't love you, not as much as you obviously love me."

The water that falls on you from nowhere is freezing cold. I slip on the couch, but it just follows me. When it's this much water, it numbs you to the bone. I want to scream, "What the hell?" but if I even breathed, I'd drown. Gus tries to shield me, blocking my body with his, but not even he's fast enough. I try to push him out of the downpour. However, he's a mixed martial artist and I'm not. We share everything after the initial shock. The torrent lasts for seconds. We're both soaked and he's laughing so hard that he's fallen off the couch, doubled over on the wet floor, flopping like a fish.

I feel like I should be insulted, but his laughter is joyous. It's like the peal of giant bells, low booms that vibrate through you and make everything in the room rattle. I can't tell if those are tears on his face, or just the water from nowhere.

My body shakes so hard, I can't stand. The cushions squeak around me, keeping me bathed in ice cold water. Gus stands up. He's not even shivering. He picks me up, wraps me in his arms, then kisses me gently on the forehead.

"I'm sorry, Gus. I just ruined your couch." The floor is covered in rubber weight-lifting mats. I'll mop that up once I can move again.

This just sends him into another fit of laughter, more controlled this time. His hands are gentle around my waist. Without them, I'm pretty sure I'd crash onto the floor.

"You've just told me that you love me in I think the only way you can, and you're worried about the couch?"

Coming from anyone else, that sentence would make me feel too stupid to live. Still, he has a point. I fumble but can't find any words to answer.

"It'll dry off," Gus says. "Besides, you bought the couch for me."

Biotech engineers make more money than personal trainers, even the world's most overqualified ones. Who knew? Rather than actually moving in together, I've been slowly furnishing his apartment. Gus has patiently assumed that once the apartment no longer looks like a cross between a library and weight room, I'll move in. He's long offered to move in with me, but I don't want him to. My efficiency isn't worthy of him. It's just a body locker.

"I should clean up the mess I made." I pull away and Gus catches me before I fall. He literally sweeps me off my feet.

“Stop fretting. It’s okay.”

We get out of our wet clothes in the bathroom and huddle together under blankets in bed. It isn’t until he starts shivering that I realize he’s just as cold as I am. The mixed martial artist has just been more heroic, or stupid, about it.

“You know.” Gus’s voice is surprisingly steady given how his teeth chatter. “Now that we know how we feel about each other, how about we solemnize the relationship? Make it official.”

My brow furrows so tightly, it hurts. He’s serious. As lightly he tossed it off, he meant it.

“You risked permanent insanity just to ask me to marry you?” Honestly, there are less life threatening ways.

“No, that was just training.” He’s not joking. “I can’t imagine life without you. You can’t imagine life without me. Say yes?”

The air stays resolutely dry. He could have made it all one big question to avoid letting whatever makes the water fall have a say.

“My family . . .” I have no idea how to broach this. It’s totally possible for him to love me and still never want to see me again.

“They know about me, right?” I swear the man reads minds.

“Yes?” It’s not a lie, but it’s not the truth either. The air gets distinctly humid. My arm hairs stand on end, as if thunder were about to strike. I’m still shivering from my last lie. My mind is in tatters, torn between the cruel truth that will make him lose all respect for me and the blatant lie that will plunge me into fatal hypothermia. The pang that gnaws at my heart grows and spreads. It wrings me, twisting and squeezing the life out of me. I jerk my face into what I want to be a smile.

“Matt, this isn’t a root canal. Don’t stretch it out. Whatever you have to say, it’s okay.”

I take a deep breath. The release of saying something true though warms as if I were buried in Gus’s arms on a winter’s night and we were the only people in the world. No wonder all the cool kids suspend themselves between truth and lie.

However, rehearsing this speech for months in my head has not helped one bit. The words rush out so quickly, I'm not even sure what I'm saying.

“Mandarin doesn't have gender-specific third person pronouns. Well, the written language does, but it's a relatively recent invention and they all sound the same and no one really uses the female and neuter variants anyway. And it's not like there aren't words for 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' but I always refer to you as ‘愛人.’ It means 'sweetheart,' 'lover,' 'spouse.' And never using your name isn't all that unusual. Names are for friends and acquaintances. Members of your family you refer to by title—”

When Gus interrupts me, the only thought in my mind is “Did I just tell him that I call him my spouse to my parents?”

“Wait. Slow down.” Gus's intellect trains on me like a sharpshooter. “The way you talk about me to your family, we might as well be married?”

“Yes.” My stomach is in my throat. The world bobbles around me and I'm stumbling at a cliff's edge.

“But they don't know my name, or that I'm male.”

“Yes.” His bullet strikes my heart and I've just crashed on the rocky shore.

“Hmm.” He wears his “I'm going to fix this” face, but then it hardens into that grim, stony thing that breaks my heart. He nudges himself against me then holds me as if only I can fit in that gap between his arms and chest. “We can't marry until you're ready to come out to your family. I'll wait as long as you want.”

His skin transforms from cold and clammy to warm and dry. He uses declarative sentences. The truth of each one is obvious. No weasel words or qualifiers. Instead of being soaked in water though, Gus is soaked in disappointment. Normally, his smile glows and I melt in its heat. Right now, he's wearing a cheap copy. He's about as likely to admit that I've hurt him as he is to use anesthesia.

This isn't like him. I expected an argument. I mean, I should have come out to my family a decade ago. If they don't suspect anything, it's because I'm still years younger than Dad was when he married Mom. Instead, we behave as if I hadn't just said no to him, albeit tacitly.

Gus chatters on about Procopius's *Wars of Justinian*. He's just finished volume four, in the original Greek. I talk about stem cells and gene splicing. It's as if tonight were any other night I'm over, and we're just catching each other up on how our day went. His hands and his tone slowly ask if I'm interested even though he always interests me. I'm still cold and he covers me with his now warm body. The thoughtful smile, the affectionate way he holds me, nuzzles and kisses my neck, they try so hard to let me know that everything is fine between us, that he desires me as much as I desire him. He's not aggressive. We'll go as slowly as I want.

"Let's visit my family this Christmas. The two of us." My voice is louder than I'd expected. "Not the 'Christ is born' Christmas, but the 'get together with family and give presents to the nieces' Christmas. We stopped when my sister and I outgrew the whole Christmas present thing, but when she had kids, we started again. With the water falling now, I wanted to skip this year for my own sanity but—"

"Stop." He's on his side, his arm around me. He's not as happy as I want him to be. "Are you sure? I can wait years if that's what you want."

"I should have done this a long time ago. I don't think I'll ever be any more ready." If Gus realizes that I'm outing myself to my family for him, he'll probably refuse to go out of sheer principle. I'm not sure I can do it with him, but I know I can't do it without him.

Gus senses that all I want is to be held so that's all he does. The condoms stay in the drawer. He drifts off to sleep, and I lie next to him listening to the calm rhythm of his breath. I'm the only son. All I can think about is my parents' "you're responsible for carrying on the family name because when your sister marries she will become part of her husband's family" speech. It freaked me out even before I'd come out to myself.

The family gathers in the atrium of my sister's mansion as we stomp the Christmas Eve storm off our boots. The high vaulted ceiling has room for the sweeping staircase and the Christmas tree, big enough to dwarf Gus, that sits in the handrail's curve. Ornaments. Tinsel. Holly. Ivy. A copy of Michelangelo's God giving Adam life tacked taut on the atrium ceiling. We've entered Victorian Christmas Land. No half measures here.

The disappointment when the family sees that my friend is a man is palpable. It's like the adults were all my nieces' age and someone told them there was no Santa Claus. Mom asks me if we've eaten. According to the textbooks, it's a polite greeting, but she always means it literally. If I tell her I'm not hungry, she'll say, “不餓還需要吃啊。” (Even if you're not hungry, you still need to eat.) That must be true since that never causes the water to fall. Fortunately, rather than being forced to eat dinner again, this time I have Gus to derail the conversation.

I introduce him to my parents, my sister, Michele, her husband, Kevin, their kids, Tiffany and Amber, and, to my surprise, Kevin's parents. As I negotiate the simultaneous translation, a horrible thought hits me. Everyone in the room speaks at least two languages, but there isn't one language everyone speaks. Beside English, Gus speaks only dead languages. Kevin's parents speak Cantonese and Mandarin, but not English. My parents haven't needed English since they retired, not that theirs was good before. I've trapped Gus in a mansion where he can't speak to half the people. Repeatedly slamming my head against the handrail now would send the wrong message, so I don't.

The instant Gus crouches down and starts talking to the nieces, they stop being scared of him and start playing with him. All physically imposing people seem to be able to win over little kids in mere seconds. They head off to the living room. I start to join them when my sister marches me into her home office.

“How dare you?” She slams the door behind her and I remind myself that I'm bigger than her now and it'd be harder for her to beat me up. “Are you trying to kill Mom and Dad?”

Well, that was easier than I'd expected. She knows and I didn't even have to tell her. Also, I've broken my record. It usually takes an entire day before I make her angry. At this rate, I could be kicked out of the house and in a motel room by sunrise. I reserve one for every trip. She gets all offended if I don't stay with her at first.

“No.” Ideally, Mom and Dad accept it. That can happen. “I want everyone to meet the man I'm going to marry.”

The future's not fixed, but right now, Gus and I are headed toward marriage, so the air stays dry. She slaps me. My cheek stings. I'd slap her back but I need to out myself to our parents before she throws me out of the house.

“Mom and Dad always let you get away with being selfish, don’t they? I don’t do whatever I want.” She’s blocking the door. “Doesn’t it matter to you that you’re embarrassing Mom and Dad in front of 婆婆and 公公?”

Phrasing things in the form of a question. That and weasel words work as insurance against the water that falls from nowhere. They just make it extremely obvious that you’re hedging against the truth.

“Like I knew your husband’s parents were even coming.” Not that I’m embarrassing Mom and Dad. Well, not this time anyway.

“Your job,何德培”—my full name in Chinese including family name, just in case it isn’t clear she’s furious at me—“is to give our parents a grandson.”

We both already know this. She just enjoys showing me the dry air.

“I don’t think I can do that by myself.” I wish I hadn’t said that.

She slaps me again. My cheek hadn’t stopped stinging from last time.

“Do you love Mom and Dad? Dump that slab of beef. Find a Chinese woman to marry. Put your penis in her vagina and make Mom and Dad a grandson. Make them happy.”

She turns to leave but not two steps stomp by before she whips around. Coming out to Mom and Dad, she hasn’t ordered me not to do it yet.

“And you’re not coming out to Mom and Dad.” With that command, she leaves.

No water. She must mean it. She’ll never leave me alone with Mom or Dad.

I close my eyes and remind myself why I’m doing this. Right. Gus. He refuses to stop insisting it’s okay if I don’t come out to them. He’ll understand if I don’t. That just makes me want to do what he really wants, but won’t say out loud. Coming out would have hurt less a decade ago and it’ll hurt less now than a decade from now. Unless I just keep quiet and wait for my entire family to die off. Now there’s a cheery thought.

Christmas day. When I wake, Gus is most of the way through his forms, his movements silent and precise. I make an exaggerated show of sneaking out of the bedroom. His face cracks the tiniest smile when I look back at him from the door.

My sister pointedly ushered us to different rooms last night. I return to the den where I was supposed to sleep to get ready to join Dad for his daily early morning walk. It's awful. We'll plod in circles at some local mall while I try to get him to talk about himself and he answers in single syllables. At least this time, I'll actually have something to talk to him about. I guess I've had something to talk to him about for years. This time, though, I'm going to do it.

When I get downstairs, my sister insists on joining us. First time in . . . Actually, she's never done the morning-walk thing with Dad before.

"Great, sis." I start back up the stairs. "You go with Dad to the mall this time. See you two later."

I ignore her sputterings. If she wants Dad to keep thinking that she's their Good Child, she won't dare to do anything to me right now, and she'll go with Dad on the mall walk. I'll pay for this later, of course, but by the time she comes back, Mom will have woken up and I will have had a chat with her.

Or at least that was Plan B. The morning-walk ritual is supposed to be that, after the walk, he goes to have his sausage biscuit, luxuriates over a cup of coffee, two if you count the free refill. Only then do we come home. However, they're home too early. Mom's still asleep. My sister has apparently forced Dad to skip the fast food breakfast part of his morning ritual.

When I hear the garage door, I lean over the sweeping staircase's handrail. Dad's grumbling. My sister's chirping bright words about how the kitchen has something just as good. She glares at me as she rushes Dad past. Like it's my fault he's angry at her.

The rest of the day is like an extremely tedious game of basketball. My sister plays a tight defense, but legal. No contact while there are witnesses. Since I'm trying to get time alone with my parents, one of them is always a witness.

She's even helping Mom make tonight's feast. I'm kneading the dough for Mom's steamed, stuffed buns when my sister inserts herself into the process. After years of preparing meals for large gatherings together, Mom and I have a system. At some point, she stopped insisting that my wife would cook for me someday and started

teaching me to cook. Either she got sick of me nagging her, or she realized I kneaded dough more quickly than she did. Anyway, with some luck, dinner won't be too much later than if my sister had just left us alone.

Gus is doing his best imitation of an apartment mate who had nowhere else to go for Christmas. I wish he'd stop that. He spends time with my nieces, my brother-in-law, even my parents, but he only skirts the kitchen. I get that he doesn't want to out me for me, but I like his conversation too. It's stupid to be in the same house as him and still miss him so much. After my first few whacks at the duck with the cleaver, Mom takes the heavy knife away from me then tells me to go rehydrate mushrooms.

It doesn't take a solid day of cooking to make dinner, but my sister conveniently has questions about how to make the filling for the stuffed buns and how much sesame oil for the scallion pancakes. She leaves the kitchen occasionally, but never long enough for me to work up the nerve to tell Mom. Whenever I leave the kitchen, it isn't two minutes before she finds me, claiming she needs my help. I manage to say, "Yes, I think you're a terrible cook too" in front of her husband and her parents-in-law in our respective languages in common before she drags me back to the kitchen. Water doesn't fall when I say that. I have to take my pleasure where I can.

When the nieces pull Mom away to play with their Erector Set, she decides that my sister and I can finish dinner without her. My sister complains that she needs Mom's help. I agree wholeheartedly, but it's not enough. The two of us are stuck with each other.

"You do know why Gus doesn't come into the kitchen, don't you?" Despite her casual tone, we both know this is not idle chatter.

"Does it matter?" I'm slicing pickled radishes. "You're going to tell me anyway."

"Do you really think you can keep him?" She drops spinach into a skillet pooled with oil. The water coating the spinach hits the oil and splatters back at her. "He's spent more time with Kevin today than with you."

I force myself to slice slowly. Cutting my fingers off is a distraction I don't need right now. My heart pounds in my ears. I'm not sure who I'm more angry at, my sister or my lover.

“I have no idea what you mean, sis.” We immigrated here when she was a teenager and I was a little kid. There’s a good chance she’ll miss the sarcasm. The water gets it though and I stay dry.

“Kevin’s a good-looking guy, maybe . . .” The line would have more impact if she didn’t look scared of the spinach sautéing before her. She jabs the spatula as if it were a fencing foil.

Kevin’s not my type. I’m pretty sure he’s not Gus’s, but I guess I don’t know. It’s not like he didn’t date lots of men before me. It’s not as if they don’t all throw themselves at him. My mind spins for seconds before I realize she hasn’t actually accused Gus of anything. Kevin is stolidly straight, and if Gus has tried anything with Kevin, not that he would, she’d throw Gus and me out of the house, not taunt me with the possibility that Gus might be unfaithful.

“Maybe what?” Usually, I don’t have this much trouble arranging sliced radishes in a pretty pattern. Right now, they’re just a bunch of ugly yellow discs.

“You understand what I’m saying. I shouldn’t have to spell it out. You don’t trust your own sister?”

When I was eight, she convinced me that she was psychic, then foretold exactly how horrible my life would be if I didn’t do exactly as she said. It’s embarrassing how many years she got away with it. If the water had been falling back then, she’d have flooded the house.

“Only your family loves you enough to tell you this.” Listening to her is like being pelted by rocks. “What can he possibly see in you? Dump him and marry a nice Chinese woman instead. Stay with him and he’ll cheat on you or dump you.”

Three words into her last sentence, I know what she’ll say. I leap to pull her pan away as I shut off the burner. The water that falls from nowhere drenches her and the burner where the pan was. Had the water hit the pan, the steam and splattered oil would have burned her.

“Go get warm.” I plate the spinach onto a dish on the counter. “I’ll mop up the water.”

“People change, but maybe he’ll still love you, even as you shut him out like you have me, Mom, and Dad.” Her arms wrap around her body and her words come out between chatters. “We still do, but I wonder why we bother. You’ll break Mom

and Dad's hearts if you never pass their name and blood on. Are you really willing to abandon your family for that man?"

She stomps off before I can answer. Hiding so much of myself from my family, in retrospect, that totally counts as shutting them out. There was only so much of my life I could share with them. Once the water began falling I couldn't even lie to them. But I hid because I wanted to keep them, not abandon them.

Dinner is going well, too well. My sister is a gracious hostess, too gracious to complain when Gus and I sit next to each other. Instead, her eyes question my every action. Why is my right hand below the table? Why am I spooning tofu onto Gus's plate? What am I saying when I whisper into his ear?

Gus eats as if he has pig's ear and cow's tripe every Christmas. When we get home, the next time it's my turn to cook, he's getting pig's blood soup for dinner. I've wasted years afraid he'd hate my favorite foods.

My nieces love him. They stop dueling each other with chopsticks when he asks them to. To half the adults at the table, he may as well be speaking classical Greek, but they laugh at his jokes and listen with rapt attention as he talks about the time it thunderstormed as he and his brother were climbing the steep eastern face of Mount Whitney. My mom resuscitates stories of her childhood in 台南. Even my sister is sick of those stories. Gus, however, asks about raising chickens and about the grandmother I barely remember. Okay, I'm translating like mad, but the point is they enjoy Gus's company and Gus enjoys theirs. In the rapid fire exchange of words, my parents surprise me by asking about my research in biotech. I almost forget the impending doom hanging over me like an uttered paradox.

“你已經三十多歲了,” my sister's father-in-law says as I'm clearing the table after dinner. “你甚麼時候會給你的父母生孫子?”

No family meal is complete without the marriage question. Actually, it's always some variant of “You're over thirty. Where's the grandson?” Marriage is just the necessary precondition.

I think I'm smiling blandly, but Gus's eyes reach mine and I realize he sees the marriage question on my face. It's hard to believe the man doesn't read minds. My sister's glare is this pressure that squeezes my chest.

Telling everyone I haven't met the right woman might humidify air, but it won't cause the water to fall. It's true so I won't even feel any angst. Gus will understand and, for once, my sister will be happy with me. She and I can't be in the same room for ten minutes but we've always wanted the best for each other. But she doesn't need to tell me what that is anymore.

“我找到了我的對象。Gus。” I've come this far; I might as well go all the way. “他上月向我求婚。”

Providing a grandson can't be that important in the grand scheme of things. Kevin's parents still love him. Maybe mine will still love me. And they seem to like Gus as my friend. Now that they know he's proposed, maybe they'll also love him as their son-in-law.

My sister's fury explodes and overwhelms every other reaction in the room. Her words are clearly in English, but the only ones that make any sense are “Get out, and don't ever come back.” Kevin's trying to calm her down. Gus weaves around the family toward me. However, I'm upstairs in the bedroom before I realize I've moved.

Gus is extremely tidy. It's easy to repack his luggage. I never unpacked so I don't have to repack. He's such a generous soul. For all I know, he may still think we're not leaving. I shouldn't have left him downstairs. Maybe the nieces can translate for him.

“Matt, you're leaving out of spite.” The doorjamb neatly frames Gus. “Okay, your sister had a bad reaction, but poe poe and gohng gohng don't seem to be taking it badly.”

I blink and shake my head. It takes me a few seconds to realize that he's talking about my parents.

“Did you just call my parents 婆婆 and 公公?”

“Yeah, poe poe and gohng gohng.” He looks confused. “I tried to call them Mr. and Mrs. Ho this afternoon, but they both corrected me before I got past hello. Am I pronouncing it wrong?”

“We can work on that, but that's not my point.” I shut his suitcase. “‘婆婆’ means husband's mother and ‘公公’ means husband's father.”

That he can call them that without water falling on him . . .

“They’d already figured us out.” Gus steps into the room to make space for Mom, trying to burrow past him. “Hi, poe poe.”

“Lonely boy.” My mom looks at Gus, but points at me. “He always lonely boy.”

I really wish she’d just let me translate for her. In Chinese, she’s effortlessly witty and erudite. That’s the person I want Gus to know, not the inchoate stranger I knew until I’d spent a decade trying to get my Chinese up to snuff.

Gus takes her hands and doesn’t speak too loud or down to her. Metaphorically, that is. Literally, he’s about a foot taller than Mom.

“Not if I can help it, poo-oh poo-oh.” He’s trying too hard to imitate the way I said it and now he’s overpronouncing. “I’ll make sure he’s never lonely again.”

Mom turns to me. At first, I think she wants a translation, but she must have understood because she doesn’t give me a chance to speak.

“你是研究生物科技的。孫子能給我嗎？有你們兩個的基因的？” Ok, this isn’t an example of her being witty or erudite. My mom is also very practical and direct.

I hear my heart pound. Gus is looking at me for a translation. We don’t have a relationship if I filter what he hears.

“She said: You’re a biotech researcher. Can you give me a grandson? One with genes from both of you?” Gus must have really impressed her. “What were you two talking about this afternoon?”

“Not that.” He looks as surprised as I feel. We’ve never discussed kids. He turns back to her. “We need to talk about it.”

And I need to win a Nobel Prize if she’s dead set on a grandson with both our genes. Parents.

The clincher is that she leaves, trusting Gus to talk me back from the edge. Normally, she tells me that once Michele calms down, she’ll want me to stay. Michele’s only angry at me because she loves me. But now, it’s Gus’s job to keep me civil. Mom’s probably so happy about this, she doesn’t care that Gus is a guy. Gus isn’t any better at keeping me from the edge than Mom though.

The motel is a five minute drive from my sister's house, but it feels like another planet. For one thing, we've gone from Victorian Christmas Land to Operating Surgery Land. It still smells like pine, but the flat, medicinal one. For another, when I drop my suitcase and curl into a ball on the bed, it's as if I've held one of Gus's bizarre isometric exercises for weeks and I've finally let go. Just like the end of any other trip home except this time I'm still tethered to the world. Gus stands at the door. Snowflakes glisten off his hair and hooded sweatshirt.

"They're your only blood relatives in the country." Gus flicks on the light and clicks the door shut. When I turn away, his weight dents the bed. My body falls toward his. "Matt, don't freeze me out too."

Gus's words pummel me no matter how softly he tosses them. My own words scrape my throat. I taste salt and metal when I swallow. Lying then letting the water wash my throat and fill my lungs tempts me as much as pretending Gus isn't sitting on the bed. Every trip, I decide that I'll sort things out later. Then I go home and pretend the trip never happened. That won't work this time. Gus is, if nothing else, a witness and a reminder.

"Fine." I sit up and stare at the carpet. "Once, I gave Mom flowers for Mother's Day and Michele humiliated me because flowers wilt and how dare I send Mom something that would die. Michele accused me of ruining her birthday because one year I sent her a card with blue birds on it. Like I knew her parakeet had drowned itself in her toilet. One Christmas Eve, Michele asked me to shave for Christmas day. I didn't really have any stubble so I forgot. She couldn't understand why I would refuse to do something to make her happy, especially something so simple, so she ambushed me with a razor. I wish she had better aim. Shaving cream stings your eyes. For weeks people wondered why I had scars around my neck and on my face. Is that enough, or do you want more? Why should I have to keep putting up with her?"

I am so tired. My body won't stop shaking. Air won't stay in my lungs. Melted snow pools around my boots. I wish Gus weren't looming over me. I wish he were in his apartment, or visiting his own family.

Gus sits, mouth agape, for a moment, but if he expected water to fall on me, he's done a terrific job of not showing it. His arm straps across my shoulders and pulls me to him. He presses a finger under my chin and guides my head until I face him.

Part of me wants to bolt, get into the rental car and find somewhere else to stay for the night. The rest of me knows that'll hurt Gus and he'll be too much the hero to admit it. Like screwing up all of my relationships at the same time is a good idea.

“You shouldn't have to put up with her.” Gus unzips my jacket, then peels it off me. “But are you going to write your parents off too? Say we have a kid, and I'm not saying we should or shouldn't, don't you want the kid to know their grandparents?”

“So I'm right and she wins anyway?”

I rub my face. Telling me I'm right is a change. Once, Mom told me everything Michele does to me, she does because she loves me and wants the best for me. Why couldn't she just hate me instead, I asked. That talk didn't go well.

“What you mean by winning?” Gus shrugs. He hangs my jacket on the coatrack next to the door. “You broke today. It happens. Maybe some time away from her is a good thing. Tomorrow, we'll go back and we'll try it again, okay? If you want, I'll stick to you the whole day.”

I take a deep breath. It feels like the first time my lungs have expanded in hours. The pine and wet leather assault my nose. “Sure.”

I take off my boots. Melted snow has soaked through to my socks. My feet are cold and clammy. Gus is still standing at the door.

“I'll be back in a few hours.” Gus holds a hand up to interrupt me when I ask him to stay. “You don't want me around and frankly, right now, you're too wiggled out to be good company. I know you're not angry at me, but it'll be better in the long run if I leave now while we're still on speaking terms.”

I'd protest but that would just make his point. Gus turns out the lights before he leaves. The comforter is wet from melted snow. It sticks to my skin when I fall into bed. I curl up into a ball and roll the comforter over me. Buried, I finally start to relax.

This time, I have left the world but it still doesn't feel right. The mattress ought to be sunk deeper. My arms should be around the hulk of a man who can't ever admit hurt or pain. I should be immersed in the warmth of his body as he is in mine.

“I love you, Gus.” Now, I just have to figure out how to say it while he’s in the room.

Snow evaporates off the comforter. I’m warm and dry. I wriggle my head out. Flowers and ozone replace the smell of pine. A spring breeze grazes me. I stare at the door in the dark, wishing it would open.

To consider:

1. How does the story fit into the category of science fiction?
2. How does John Chu put his signature on the category of science fiction?
3. What are the main themes of the story? (Is this particularly difficult to figure out?)
4. Is there an obvious fit between form and content?
5. What lasting impression might this story make on a reader?

Ray Bradbury, “The Last Night of the World”

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) was an author and screenwriter. One of the most celebrated 20th-century American writers, he worked in a variety of modes, including fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and realistic fiction. His novels include *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). This story was originally published in the February 1951 issue of *Esquire*.

"What would you do if you knew this was the last night of the world?"

"What would I do; you mean, seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"I don't know — I hadn't thought. She turned the handle of the silver coffeepot toward him and placed the two cups in their saucers.

He poured some coffee. In the background, the two small girls were playing blocks on the parlor rug in the light of the green hurricane lamps. There was an easy, clean aroma of brewed coffee in the evening air.

"Well, better start thinking about it," he said.

"You don't mean it?" said his wife.

He nodded.

"A war?"

He shook his head.

"Not the hydrogen or atom bomb?"

"No."

"Or germ warfare?"

"None of those at all," he said, stirring his coffee slowly and staring into its black depths. "But just the closing of a book, let's say."

"I don't think I understand."

"No, nor do I really. It's just a feeling; sometimes it frightens me, sometimes I'm not frightened at all — but peaceful." He glanced in at the girls and their yellow hair shining in the bright lamplight, and lowered his voice. "I didn't say anything to you. It first happened about four nights ago."

"What?"

"A dream I had. I dreamt that it was all going to be over and a voice said it was; not any kind of voice I can remember, but a voice anyway, and it said things would stop here on Earth. I didn't think too much about it when I awoke the next morning, but then I went to work and the feeling was with me all day. I caught Stan Willis looking out the window in the middle of the afternoon and I said, 'Penny for your thoughts, Stan,' and he said, 'I had a dream last night,' and before he even told me the dream, I knew what it was. I could have told him, but he told me and I listened to him."

"It was the same dream?"

"Yes. I told Stan I had dreamed it, too. He didn't seem surprised. He relaxed, in fact. Then we started walking through offices, for the hell of it. It wasn't planned. We didn't say, let's walk around. We just walked on our own, and everywhere we saw people looking at their desks or their hands or out the windows and not seeing what was in front of their eyes. I talked to a few of them; so did Stan."

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"And all of them had dreamed?"

"All of them. The same dream, with no difference."

"Do you believe in the dream?"

"Yes. I've never been more certain."

"And when will it stop? The world, I mean."

"Sometime during the night for us, and then, as the night goes on around the world, those advancing portions will go, too. It'll take twenty-four hours for it all to go."

They sat awhile not touching their coffee. Then they lifted it slowly and drank, looking at each other.

"Do we deserve this?" she said.

"It's not a matter of deserving, it's just that things didn't work out. I notice you didn't even argue about this. Why not?"

"I guess I have a reason," she said.

"The same reason everyone at the office had?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to say anything. It happened last night. And the women on the block are talking about it, just among themselves." She picked up the evening paper and held it toward him. "There's nothing in the news about it."

"No, everyone knows, so what's the need?" He took the paper and sat back in his chair, looking at the girls and then at her. "Are you afraid?"

"No. Not even for the children. I always thought I would be frightened to death, but I'm not."

"Where's that spirit of self-preservation the scientists talk about so much?"

"I don't know. You don't get too excited when you feel things are logical. This is logical. Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we've lived."

"We haven't been too bad, have we?"

"No, nor enormously good. I suppose that's the trouble. We haven't been very much of anything except us, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things."

The girls were laughing in the parlor as they waved their hands and tumbled down their house of blocks.

"I always imagined people would be screaming in the streets at a time like this."

"I guess not. You don't scream about the real thing."

"Do you know, I won't miss anything but you and the girls. I never liked cities or autos or factories or my work or anything except you three. I won't miss a thing except my family and perhaps the change in the weather and a glass of cool water when the weather's hot, or the luxury of sleeping. Just little things, really. How can we sit here and talk this way?"

"Because there's nothing else to do."

"That's it, of course, for if there were, we'd be doing it. I suppose this is the first time in the history of the world that everyone has really known just what they were going to be doing during the last night."

"I wonder what everyone else will do now, this evening, for the next few hours."

"Go to a show, listen to the radio, watch the TV, play cards, put the children to bed, get to bed themselves, like always."

"In a way that's something to be proud of — like always."

"We're not all bad."

They sat a moment and then he poured more coffee. "Why do you suppose it's tonight?"

"Because."

"Why not some night in the past ten years of in the last century, or five centuries ago or ten?"

"Maybe it's because it was never February 30, 1951, ever before in history, and now it is and that's it, because this date means more than any other date ever meant and because it's the year when things are as they are all over the world and that's why it's the end."

"There are bombers on their course both ways across the ocean tonight that'll never see land again."

"That's part of the reason why."

"Well," he said. "What shall it be? Wash the dishes?"

They washed the dishes carefully and stacked them away with especial neatness. At eight-thirty the girls were put to bed and kissed good night and the little lights by their beds turned on and the door left a trifle open.

"I wonder," said the husband, coming out and looking back, standing there with his pipe for a moment.

"What?"

"If the door should be shut all the way or if it should be left just a little ajar so we can hear them if they call."

"I wonder if the children know — if anyone mentioned anything to them?"

"No, of course not. They'd have asked us about it."

They sat and read the papers and talked and listened to some radio music and then sat together by the fireplace looking at the charcoal embers as the clock struck ten-thirty and eleven and eleven-thirty. They thought of all the other people in the world who had spent their evening, each in their own special way.

"Well," he said at last. He kissed his wife for a long time.

"We've been good for each other, anyway."

"Do you want to cry?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

They went through the house and turned out the lights and locked the doors, and went into the bedroom and stood in the night cool darkness undressing. She took the spread from the bed and folded it carefully over a chair, as always, and pushed back the covers. "The sheets are so cool and clean and nice," she said.

"I'm tired."

"We're both tired."

They got into bed and lay back.

"Wait a moment," she said.

He heard her get up and go out into the back of the house, and then he heard the soft shuffling of a swinging door. A moment later she was back. "I left the water running in the kitchen," she said. "I turned the faucet off."

Something about this was so funny that he had to laugh.

She laughed with him, knowing what it was that she had done that was so funny. They stopped laughing at last and lay in their cool night bed, their hands clasped, their heads together.

"Good night," he said, after a moment.

"Good night," she said, adding softly, "dear..."

To consider:

1. How is the story structured?
2. How can one describe the style of the narration?
3. Are there surprises in the story?

FIN