This Guy We Used to Party With Died

Dan blinked at the information feeds streaming in on the screen. Disastrous events dominated. He scanned the news and culture headlines. Bands he enjoyed announced tour dates, movies he wanted to see streamed trailers, but the words and images slid across his vision without triggering the desire to engage. He remained rooted in seeing. The only action he took was to switch incoming feeds. He checked the tech review blogs he followed, but they defeated him in their dismissively dry assessments of the products he craved. He switched back to the social feed, checking status updates from his past and posts from his present. He Liked an article posted by a colleague, but regretted it immediately. What if the posting had been ironic? Well, he could always say he had Liked it ironically. He scrolled on, consuming content.

Liz was out with her friends for dinner. He found he could enjoy these Thursday nights at home, not quite watching over the baby who wasn't a baby anymore. The little girl slept through the night whenever Liz was out as if she knew Daddy wasn't really into helping her with the toilet or a glass of water or a reassuring return to bed. He had been so relieved when they learned they were having a girl. Less would be expected of him in general and he wouldn't be counted on to guide anyone to manhood.

His phone vibrated on the desk. He saw the text message bloom green on the locked screen.

Danno! Come out to play!☺

He and Sean had been at Ithaca together. American history, 20th century British lit, film production. They'd shot two shorts together when they both seemed to realize without telling the other that they wouldn't do it again. Either they weren't cut out for partnerships or they were no

longer interested in filmmaking. Sean became an economics major who focused on markets and women who were applying to B school. Dan wrote culture pieces for *The Ithacan*, scoring free beers for being the guy who'd written that review of *Reservoir Dogs*.

The cell phone, which at first had seemed like such a private and personal device to which he could restrict access to only his most intimate circle, was now a gateway for all. His texts were almost exclusively from work colleagues or back-and-forths with Liz, triangulating meetings on street corners and at hard-to-find restaurants. He'd had the same phone number for years and occasionally someone who had only been a voice person in the past would shock him with a text, announcing themselves from an unknown number, shoving him roughly into reunion.

He had read an article somewhere that said connecting had become how we defined ourselves, crowd-sourcing our identities by who was in our digital networks and the way we behaved with them, what we posted, what we watched, what we commented on. This analysis had seemed too existential for him, too big about something so small. What all this connecting really felt like was a self-inflicted invasion of privacy.

Before he could respond to Sean another text arrived. *Pls check email adding a morning meeting at 930☺*

He extracted his work laptop from his bag and powered it up. He carried two mobile devices at the office, one personal and one for work. He resisted occasional spasms of self-ridicule, insisting that if he didn't merge his calendars or email he could still hold himself at a remove from the fifty-hour-a-week time suck that the media agency now required. He carried the two devices and when he got home he shut off the work Blackberry and kept the personal iPhone on.

He logged onto his work email, feeling this would finish the workday with more finality than if he had just thumbed through the flimsy Blackberry which lay on the coffee table. He found four new emails and the meeting invite that had arrived since he had last checked, on the homeward bound subway platform. He left the office each night, but he didn't leave work. The connections simply stretched all the way from the office to the apartment—and they did not break.

The information from the work emails made him feel he was up to speed with whatever would transpire the next day. He found relief in knowing that simple information lightened the load of anxiety that dragged him down from within each time he had to perform in the work space—write a PowerPoint deck, speak in a meeting, publically appear to understand and agree with a colleague's comment. Knowledge accumulation seemed to be the only skill his job actually required. He replied to all the new emails—*yes absolutely*, *sure makes sense*, *Jack has slides on that from last year*, *not sure but looks okay*—and accepted the meeting invite.

He shut down the laptop, put all the work devices and papers into his bag, zipped it shut and placed it by the front door. Done.

He thought about responding to Sean's text, but he dreaded how the back-and-forth would flood him with frustration and doubt. How could he ensure he was receiving the intended tone? How could he ensure he matched that tone with his own? How many emoticons would be tolerated? Sean always seemed to have his shit massively together. He spoke in sentences that contained words and numbers, evidence and data, sentences with actual ends, not the meandering mode that Dan operated in outside the office. And while both Sean's starter wife and current live-in were toxic and trying females, they made Sean seem like the kind of independent and uncompromised dude that Dan was at once intimidated by and sought guidance from.

He wandered into the kitchen, not hungry or thirsty but obeying the clock. He stood in the open cool of the fridge, leaning heavily on the door. He reached in and pulled a bottle of beer from the cold and drank half of it down. He finished the beer with smaller sips, opened another and shut the door on the dinner options. Something incoming tweaked at his brain and he knew without knowing that his phone was vibrating in the other room.

He moved into the living room, his sneakers making him feel solid on the old wood floors. He stood for a moment by the couch. Why had he come in here? He noticed his phone blush and remembered.

It was a new voicemail from the past. It was a voice person who did not email or text or post. He stared at the number and the name and the Listen icon, but he didn't want to hear her voice or what she had to say. She came before Liz, back in the days he thought of as unanchored. Between college and not going back home and before coming to the city there had been a long year in another state where he didn't do much of anything except make hard love to this woman and get high. They had felt compelled to stay connected with phone numbers over the years the way other people check the weather to see if they need to take an umbrella—just in case.

His thumb was just about to hit Listen when he was rescued by a text from Liz that glared grey and insistent.

Having fun late-ish okay?♥

She would be drunk when she got home and would want what she called college sex. This translated into him fucking her and coming while she rode the arc of his effort and found release in his orgasm, not actually having one herself. She would want his fingers in the morning—if she didn't have a hangover—and then she would find her own release. But in the drunken night she would just simply want him to use her. He minded all of this.

He slipped the phone into his back pocket and walked softly down the short hallway to the little girl's room. The door was ajar and the fishbowl glow from her nightlight seeped out toward him, guiding him to the littlegirlland of her bedroom. He held the knob for balance and looked in. She slept the sleep of four-year-olds, immobile and lumpy, an inner furnace heating her, indicating there was work going on inside—the physiological toil of making this small person into a bigger person. He imagined a road sign above her, a figure breaking ground with a shovel: God at work.

The little girl looked as if Liz and his sister had made a baby. That is, she looked like his mother, dead since he was twenty, fading for years before that. Now she was back in the ever-changing cheeks and brow of his wife's child.

No twisted bed sheets threatened to strangle the four-year-old. No sharp objects had been left on the bed and she had not flung her head or limbs too close to the edges of the bedside table. This was one of those times he had to talk himself into touching her, always so worried he would hurt her, getting something else wrong.

He swallowed the hesitation and quickly shoved his arms under her torso and rearranged her in the bed. Head on pillow, sheets straightened and folded under arms, hair swept away from her shut eyes. He left her tidied in her bed with her gaping mouth. He was a mouth breather too. His child, after all.

He wondered if Sean was in a bar alone, hunched over his phone with great concentration. Or was he standing in a crowd, waiting to show Dan's text to his comrades, howling at the domesticated man? He strained with a physical need to be at Sean's end, instead of contemplating his phone's keyboard from his couch, ready to transmit half-lies, yearning to be out, in a fast, bouncing cab, or shouting in a bar.

He finally responded to Sean. Then he waited. No response.

His *Babysitting while powerpointing* hung unanswered.

He put the phone down, picked it up: nothing. Over the next fifteen seconds he checked the screen several more times, but his text balloon hovered without response. The party had moved on.

In their bedroom, he retrieved the small pink-ish nylon bag from inside a left leather boot in the back of the clothes closet. The bag had a logo on it, a souvenir from some make-up or perfume event Liz had attended.

The slow-motion walk to his favorite spot in the apartment telescoped away all the connections. He wanted only one incoming feed, one infusion that gave more than it took. He pulled the gear from the pink bag and laid it out neatly on the pale wash cloth: the needle, the silver packet of brown, the spoon. The display reminded him of surgeons' trays in movies, readied to heal. These tools would connect him to waking sleep, moment-less time that required no application of technology, only content without connection.

Dan made his preparations and then gave up his will to the plunging prick in his skin and the silken pull of going down.

He wondered for a moment where he had left his phone and then put the thought away. He could look for it later.