



# 1

---

**AUGUST 2019**

HAZEL'S SEVENTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD FATHER HAD BOUGHT A DOLL. A life-size woman doll. The kind designed to provide a sexual experience that came as close as possible to having sex with a living (or maybe, Hazel thought, a more apt analogy was a very-very-recently deceased) female. Its arrival crate bore an uncanny resemblance to a no-frills pine coffin. It made Hazel recall the passage from *Dracula* where he ships himself overseas via boat.

The ravaged crate now sat in the middle of his living room, surrounded by an array of tools, both legitimate and makeshift. One of the items on the floor was a can opener. Getting the doll out by himself had required tenacity. There were small pieces of chipped wood everywhere. They made it seem like the crate had harbored an animal that had escaped and was prowling the house.

The mechanical crawl of her father's Rascal mobility scooter announced his arrival behind her, but Hazel's eyes had locked upon the crate. It was big enough for her to climb inside. She could sleep

in it. Now that Hazel was technically homeless, she was looking for “available bed” potential in everything she saw.

*So could I sleep inside that, or upon it?* suddenly seemed like a great question to ask about everything in sight. Maybe the crate would bring the best sleep of her life? It might feel nice to sleep without any extra space, especially after years of trying to sleep with the most space possible between her and the other person in her bed, who was always Byron. In the box there’d be no room to fidget around. No trying to attempt the best position since only one position would be possible. Maybe she’d be able to just lie down and shut off. Recharge like one of the thousand electronic devices Byron owned.

“Owned” was a simplification. He’d also invented them. Byron had founded and built a technologies empire. His wealth and power were a terrifying glimpse of the infinite.

She’d left Byron for good that morning, along with all forms of available funds or identification. Hazel understood that things were not going to end well for her.

Her father would let her stay with him, wouldn’t he? It was selfish to ask for asylum—there was nothing harmless about Byron—but she liked to feel she had no other choice. Marriage to an eccentric tech multimillionaire had been kind of isolating.

Her best option was not to think about how she was putting her father’s life at risk. But she didn’t want to think about the current situation in her father’s living room either. There was actually nothing she wanted to think about, so she decided to administer a series of firm bites to her bottom lip and really try to focus on the pain.

“Hazel!” Her father’s voice was a celebratory roar void of embarrassment. “How the hell are you! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I let myself in,” Hazel said. Walking up his driveway, Hazel

had felt presumptuous entering her father's home with a suitcase, but now, seeing the sizable detritus his newest guest had brought with her, she found some comfort in the fact that she wasn't putting him out luggagewise, even if her presence might be endangering his life. She hadn't come with a giant casket, for instance!

Instead of greeting him, Hazel went to the window and peeked out of the blinds to make sure she hadn't been mistaken. "I didn't see your car parked anywhere so I figured you weren't home."

"Sold it!" her father barked. "I'm not going to need to leave the house much anymore. I'm entering a sort of honeymoon phase with Diane here."

"You sold the station wagon to buy a sex doll?"

Her father cleared his throat over the low purr of the Rascal's motor. The throat clear had been a signal between them for as long as Hazel could remember, a reprimand. It meant she'd used improper terminology and offended someone. For example, Shady Place, the retirement community where her father lived, was a trailer park for adults over fifty-five. Except calling them trailers was frowned upon. Hazel had made the mistake of using the word "trailer" just once when talking to Mrs. Fennigan, her father's garden-obsessed neighbor. *Your flowers are like supermodels! Hazel had said. Except in only good ways that aren't entangled with the violent forces of sexism! When I look at the front of your trailer, I feel like I'm watching an action film starring colors instead of people. The cones and rods in my eyes are starting to ache a little, actually*—and the woman had immediately stopped pruning, turned around toward Hazel with the clippers, and started taking tiny steps in Hazel's direction while opening and closing the clippers in a deliberate way, as if they were the jaws of a giant insect. Her father had conspicuously coughed, grabbed Hazel's arm, waved to the neighbor, and pulled Hazel away. *Manu-*

*factured homes*, he'd whispered sharply, *you call them manufactured homes, what the hell were you thinking, who the hell raised you?*

"Not a doll. This is *Diane*, Hazel," her father said. "I'm going to have to ask you to acknowledge her personhood. Come on, turn around and say hello. Don't be shy."

Hazel took a deep breath and told herself to be a good sport—she was about to ask him if she could move into his house, after all—but when her eyes took in the entirety of the situation she couldn't stop a petite scream from leaving her mouth. *Diane* was "riding" on her father's lap; the weight of the doll's torso had tipped it forward against the *Rascal's* handlebars and the two of them were positioned in such a way that he could very realistically be enjoying her right then. They were both wearing bathrobes. She recognized the faded fleece butterfly print on *Diane's*; the robe had belonged to Hazel's dead mother.

Hazel knew her father couldn't be expected to pick up on the desperate nature of her drop-in visit, but still. She was finished with pretending objects were human. Byron treated his electronics like lesser wives.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'd prefer to opt out of this particular delusion."

He chuckled, setting his red flesh in motion. Her father was short and ruddy and his complexion was so fraught with broken capillaries that in a certain light his cheeks seemed sculpted from venison. He had a convincing air of physical exhaustion about him at all times, though slightly less so now that he used a scooter due to a botched knee replacement. Pre-scooter, complete strangers often approached him to offer him bottles of water. *You look thirsty!* they'd say.

He was also covered with bright white body hair, which gave a wrongful impression of cuddliness. It reminded Hazel of a type

of cactus named “old man cactus,” a metaphor gifted from nature. The plant had an inviting, shaggy white coat of fuzz, but the hairs were radial spines concealing a painful layer of central needles below the surface. “I told you she was a firecracker.”

It took a moment to realize that her father was talking to Diane, not to her. She sighed. Mostly out of disappointment that she wasn’t in a better position to be judgmental. Showing up at her father’s home and putting him at risk was indecent. She had no idea what Byron would do when she failed to return that night.

Hazel stared at the gaudy clip-on earrings her father had applied to Diane’s earlobes. What was that line Byron quoted when he allowed himself to have a tiny amount of alcohol and his dialogue began to sound lifted from a community-theater rendition of Plato? *Man’s greatest desire is simply to bring things to life?* “Christ, Dad,” Hazel said, which surprised her. “Jesus” and its synonyms weren’t her usual exclamatory go-to’s. But if this wasn’t a time for a quasi-swear invoking the religious vocabulary of resurrection, when? “Okay. Fine. Thank you both for having me. How’s that?”

“You haven’t gotten old yet, Hazel,” her father said. “You have to find happiness wherever you can get it.”

“So should I call her Diane or Di or Mom?”

“Hazel! She’s not trying to be your mother. Play nice already. Will you have a drink with us? I feel like celebrating.”

Before she could answer, he’d reversed and begun accelerating toward the kitchen. The Rascal’s top speed was just fast enough to make Diane’s long red hair flow back in the breeze.

“I feel like celebrating too,” Hazel called out, “in the sense that I’d like to completely withdraw from the realities of life.” She wasn’t sure if her father could hear her or not, over the sounds of the Rascal and the hum of the open refrigerator door; she supposed it didn’t

matter. “I’ve never been addicted to drugs or alcohol, so it wouldn’t be a relapse . . . is there a name for the first time that a person gets really high on a lot of things, dangerously and possibly fatally high, in one’s early thirties? I certainly feel like doing that, though I won’t, because I’m afraid of an accident—not dying so much as managing to live but severely damaging my brain. Imagine the Frankensteinian attachments and implants Byron would attempt with me smiling and drooling the whole time. That’s probably his greatest fantasy—me as part computer, part vagina, part breasts. I’ve got to speed up this divorce paperwork! Just kidding. It’s pointless for me to file anything; there’s no way I could possibly protect myself from Byron in a court of law. Wow, do I wish there were. If I somehow managed to half-kill myself, it would be a real purgatory to have Byron helming my power-of-attorney wheel.”

“We can’t hear you!” her father called out from the kitchen. “One second!” As the headlamp of the Rascal grew brighter, easing toward the living room through the dark tunnel of the hallway, Hazel thought she spied her father give Diane’s earlobe a playful bite.

The basket of the scooter held a six-pack of domestic beer and a box of Ritz crackers. Hazel walked over and opened a can, opened another can for her father. “Is Diane a drinker, Dad?”

He gave her a wink with a glistening eye; he seemed to be on the brink of happy tears. “I drink for the both of us.”

“Cheers, Pops.” Hazel lifted her can and her father did the same. Somehow they formed an awareness that neither was stopping; they both chugged to the bottom and didn’t lower their cans until both were empty. He opened another, accelerated just enough to reach it over to Hazel.

“Cheers is right. I’m particularly giddy. It’s like a wedding day, but we skipped the boring part and got right to consummation.”

Hazel felt what she hoped was a belch rising. “Can I have another beer?”

“I’m serious, Hazel. I know how this must look, but I’m three years away from the average male life expectancy. What was that TV show where contestants had sixty seconds to run around a grocery store and shove as much crap into the cart as possible? That’s where I’m at, lifewise: if I don’t grab it off the shelves right now, I’ll never get to. There’s no more procrastinating. Here, let me show you something.”

And that’s when the bathrobe was lifted. With a quick flip of the wrist, her father relieved Diane of all modesty.

“Oh. Her breasts are huge.” Hazel realized she was whispering this with a tone of grievous acceptance, the way she’d report one friend’s cancer to another.

“The station wagon was practical,” her father acknowledged. “But I won’t be missing it.”

“How are they sloping upward like that?” Hazel asked. The doll’s breasts hung as though Diane were upside down doing a handstand. Her nipples literally pointed toward the ceiling.

“I could hypothesize, Hazel, but I’d have to get a little spiritual on you.”

An ambulance went by, its loud wailing pausing the conversation. It seemed to make her father recall a previously forgotten point. “That’s another thing,” he added. “Do you remember Reginald and his wife, Sherry?”

Yes, Hazel confirmed, she was not imagining it; there was an overall conical shape to Diane’s breasts that was aesthetically



energizing—she wondered if she could admit this while still continuing to loathe sex overall to spite Byron. When the trouble had first started, she'd thought it might be enough to just begin despising sex with *him*, but she soon saw that was just not going to cut it. Hazel knew that it would seem, to one who might be an amateur at marital rancor, that her masturbating while thinking about someone else would be a victory for her—pleasure, orgasm, the thrill of a mental affair—and a loss for Byron. Not so. She'd tried this for a while, and realized that she was becoming more in touch with her sexuality than ever: she was constantly thinking about sex, longing for sex; her body was turning into a Mardi Gras float except instead of throwing out beads it was tossing heavy vapors of pheromones to anyone close enough to smell, which often included Byron. He was delighted. It didn't even matter that they weren't having sex, because she was oozing it; Hazel had a glow and everyone who saw her, she was quite sure, attributed it to Byron fucking her with sovereign competence. That's when she realized: If one wanted to make a house inhospitable, closing off the vents to one room would not be enough. The power must be cut completely. So she shut everything down. And frankly, now, Hazel was a little disturbed by how the first thing in years to stir those embers was a hyperbolic set of plastic tits.

“Reginald?” her father barked. “You know, Sherry's husband. Navy man? Prominent teeth? They usually brought a quiche to the neighborhood potlucks.”

“Drawing a blank, Dad. Why?” Curiosity really seemed to want Hazel to reach out and give Diane's left hooter an inquiring squeeze. She wondered if it would feel like those memory-foam mattresses. If she pressed down firmly, would the shape of her fingertip linger?

“I know you kids don’t like to hear it, but people don’t stop having sex just because they get old.” Suddenly Hazel felt quite lucky that she didn’t remember what Reginald and Sherry looked like. She felt like she’d won something. “So Reginald and Sherry, you know, they’re both retired and fornicating around three in the afternoon on a Tuesday. Suddenly Reginald’s ticker gives out. Now you’ve got to understand the physics of this thing—Reginald’s barrel-chested and hearty. Sherry’s an osteoporotic twig. He collapses on top of her and she’s trapped beneath her husband’s corpse. Feels like she’s being suffocated, can’t move. It was like that for over a day. Finally, their son comes over. Because he’s a good son and calls every day and she wasn’t picking up the phone.”

“I’m not good on the phone, Dad!” Hazel interrupted. “And if you’re telling this story to inspire me to call more, I’m not sure this particular narrative’s prize of getting to be the one to roll your dead nude parent off your live nude parent is the penultimate carrot to dangle, in terms of incentive.” For the moment, she decided to refrain from adding that there would be no more calling at all now since she no longer owned a phone.

“It wasn’t an indictment. Though I do sometimes think of the many weeks my corpse would have to abide, should I die suddenly, before you’d get a whim to drop by again; just telling the story though. Anyhow, this kind of thing gets into your subconscious. Every date I went on that was there in my head—I’m thinking, ‘This lady is way too nice for me to die on top of. She doesn’t deserve that.’ But Diane here . . . I can die on top of Diane all I want.”

Hazel noticed the conversation was failing to lead into a natural segue about how she’d just ended her marriage. She opened another beer.

“All bets are off,” he continued. “I don’t have to hold back! Of

all the ways to go, isn't extinction via sex the best you can think of? Let me tell you something about monitoring your heart rate while you're trying to jerk off: it's for the birds."

"Are you saying you're trying to commit suicide using Diane?" she asked. Hazel began to look at the five-foot four-inch silicone princess a little differently now: *Penthouse* pet from the waist up, Dr. Kevorkian from the waist down. Although the robe had fallen to Diane's waist, her greater mysteries were not visible. "Do these things come with pubes?"

"None of your business," her father snapped. "But yes. And I'm not saying I'm intending to die via intercourse. I'm just saying that I'm going to die, and I'd like to have intercourse many, many, many times before I go, and if that happens to be my chariot out of the natural world, I think that would not be the worst ride to hitch."

"Okay, Dad." Hazel eyed the remaining beers.

"Go ahead, they're yours. I'm already high on simulated love-making. Diane exceeded my wildest expectations. I wasn't hoping that it would feel great; I just wanted it to not feel painful—I was worried there'd be, you know, an irritating seam maybe, or that her hair would have a strong manufactured plastic odor, to the point of it seeming like I was undergoing some kind of aversion therapy. Boy was I an idiot. She smells like a new car!"

"I guess that's fitting, seeing that you traded in your old one."

Hazel noticed her father eyeing her empties, his fingers going up into the air one by one, counting. "You're sure thirsty tonight, Haze. Have I noticed before how quickly you drink?"

Her father wasn't the type who liked to feel encroached upon; Hazel knew she needed to make it seem like her moving in was at least half his idea so that he'd feel okay about it. "Well, I'm glad you're set in terms of romantic love," she began. "Speaking of

people who might notice if you died though—as in someone who would be in a position to realize your passing on the very day that it occurred—do you ever think a roommate might be nice? Some supplemental human companionship for playing cards, conversing, shooting the breeze?”

Her father let out a hard laugh that caused Diane to plunge sharply forward. Hazel was shocked to find her own arms extending out with worry—she felt instinctually moved to catch the doll and make sure it didn't fall.

“Are you loony? Living alone is the greatest thing that ever happened to me! And now that I've got Diane, that takes it to a whole new level. We can have candlelight dinners naked. I can use her abdomen as a plate! That is something I've never done that I will not mind doing—eating a ham sandwich off the chest of a beautiful woman.” He stared once more at Diane's breasts, his brow crumpled with admiring scrutiny. “She's a goddamn miracle. What's the saying? ‘Today is the first day of the rest of my life.’”

“A miracle,” Hazel mused. In a way, the crate on the floor did resemble an opened tomb, Diane a modern-day Lazarus delivered from stasis to take her place amongst the living.

It was then that her father saw it. He twisted uncomfortably in the seat of his Rascal, his movement pushing Diane's extended arm slightly to the left and into the horn, which gave a resonant, protracted toot.

“Hazel?” he asked. “What's with the suitcase?”

# 2

---

"YOU'RE LEAVING BYRON?" HER FATHER HAD BEEN REPEATING THIS for over a minute. When outraged, his voice became a mythic roar, to the extent that it seemed odd he wasn't holding a trident. He suddenly looked naked without one. "But Byron's a genius! Every time I leave the house, all I see are Gogol products!" This statement was almost a whine, high-pitched, with a hysteria that made Hazel think of overzealous infomercial entrepreneurs. She remembered one disturbing commercial where a man with a machete was chopping up a mattress, or trying to, while screaming, *Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone!* But she couldn't recall if it was the knife being sold or the mattress. Was he cutting the bed to show how effective the knife was? Or the mattress's layers? Or was it a kind of guilt-inducing sales tactic: we won't stop harming beds until enough of you phone in an order?

“I understand it’s surprising news,” Hazel said. Her father had placed a protective arm around Diane’s waist and drawn her in close: his posture suggested that Hazel was not so much his daughter in an hour of need as a hopeful suitor who’d been flirting with his girlfriend at the bar and was being told to back off or agree to a fistfight.

“But, Hazel,” he continued, his voice finally lowering, “do you know how much money Byron has?”

“Listen,” Hazel begged. “I know you want to have a private sexual revolution with Diane and I am all for it. I have noise-canceling headphones.” This was a lie. She certainly used to have these and so many other gadgets, but she’d made a point of not packing a single product from Byron’s company.

It killed her to admit that the Serenity Combination Head Massager/Internet Browser did sound excellent right about now. The device, no bigger than a set of earmuffs, expertly rubbed users’ temples while a beam of light projected images of any search term spoken aloud. Back when Hazel was in college, there was a thin grocery-store-brand chocolate cookie that she’d gotten addicted to; the plasma donation center where she’d sometimes sell her fluids for drug and cheeseburger money gave them out as a post-session bonus. They tasted a little biscuity (Hazel’s dorm roommate refused to eat them, saying that the cookies seemed designed as treats for an imaginary species somewhere between “golden retriever” and “human toddler” on taxonomy charts). But there was something gratifying about the base simplicity of their flavor. And due to their exceptionally granular surface, they performed the bonus duty of polishing Hazel’s lips as she ate. When she wore the headphones, Hazel liked to zone out to close-up stills of this

cookie's exterior. She zoomed in on them hundreds of thousands of times until the pictures looked like photographs of some faraway planet's chocolate terrain.

"He made you sign a prenup, right? You walk away, you get a mere pittance?"

The question inspired Hazel to look down at her father's hand, then at Diane's, and yes—there were rings; they must have had an informal union of sorts that morning.

"It's super complicated and legal," Hazel replied. She figured this would shut him up. Complexity was like kryptonite to her father—there was no difference in his mind between "elaborate" and "convoluted." *Steer clear of fine print* was one of his favorite sayings, which Hazel supposed could be good advice, but he had a super-inclusive interpretation of fine print that made it hard for him to eat at restaurants. He also had a phobia of lawyers. Her mother used to exploit this; Hazel could always tell when her parents were fighting because there would be a courtroom drama loudly blaring on the TV.

And it was true; the prenup was exhaustive. It had caused her father's lawyer phobia to rub off a little on her too. She'd signed it in one of Gogol's conference rooms and still remembered when the legal fleet arrived with the document: they'd all appeared to be wearing the same suit and moved nearly in tandem, like synchronized swimmers. It was one of the only times she'd ever seen Byron not looking at a screen of some kind; he'd watched her sign each page. There'd been an interpreter of sorts seated next to her, telling her the essence of what each major paragraph was saying—mainly noncompete clauses so technology companies couldn't hire her and glean insider secrets—though the interpreter also worked for Gogol. Hazel had been welcome to bring her own attorney, but

since she wasn't entering the marriage with any money or assets of her own, she hadn't seen the point.

The settlement she was supposed to get in the event of a divorce would be a lot of money to most people, and had seemed like a lot to her at the time of signing. She actually hadn't paid much attention to the amount—was it just under a million?—or to anything else. Hazel remembered thinking this exact thought: *There is no way I can lose*. She'd come to realize that she could, and had. Byron would never allow a divorce.

"He's bad enough to give up the lifestyle you must be accustomed to now? How is that possible? I don't see any bruises on you!" Her father's anger momentarily caused him to hold Diane in a more precarious fashion, like she was a full grocery bag he was clutching while berating a small pack of children. Then he gripped the doll around her waist and locked his fingers together.

It was a little mesmerizing to Hazel, the way he maneuvered the doll against his body like a pair of skis or a similarly unwieldy piece of large sporting equipment. His current grip made Hazel remember a documentary about old-growth forests she'd watched with her father once—protesters were chaining their arms around trees to try to prevent them from being logged. *What's the problem?* he'd asked, pointing to the screen. *Saw right through their arms if they feel so strongly about it!* "It's a harsh economy out there, squirt. You've got zero job experience in the field of that degree you never finished. You're cute, I mean I think you are; your dad thinking you're cute is no uphill battle. But, Hazel. I've seen the TV office sitcoms—you're too old now to compete with 'intern cute.' Is he cheating on you? I'd imagine that's tough, but you might consider looking the other way. It seems worth it for a lifelong ride on the money train. What a voyage! Why interrupt it?"



“Well, Dad. The train got a little inhospitable.” Had she just polished off the last of the beers? She had. Hazel knew she was drunk, but for the moment this was a secret her internal self was managing to keep hidden from the rest of the world. It had been such a long time since she’d gotten tipsy. Her speech and posture actually seemed to have forgotten how to be drunk. Was it possible to get drunk in your mind but not in your body? Byron had always refused to have beer in the house, which was Hazel’s drink of choice. There was a microharem of top-shelf spirits, carefully cultivated for guests, but she never partook. They seemed hexed to Hazel, like potent gentrification elixirs: She feared they’d begin eating away at her tacky proclivities the moment they touched her lips. Drinking them would make her less *her*, somehow, so she usually just abstained. That had been one of the central ironies of her marriage: She’d loved their courtship because it had made her feel like she was someone else, and that had been all she’d ever wanted. Until she married Byron and had to be someone else full-time. Then all she wanted was to go back to being herself and hating it again. “If only it were a simple case of infidelity.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “You’ve been together nearly a decade. Can’t you work this out with him? You know your mother and I loved each other, Hazel. In our way. But if we’d been concerned with joy and self-actualization and all that, we wouldn’t have made it. It’s all about excitement and thrills with your generation. If you’re not having fun, you want to throw in the towel. Have you even considered lowering your standards in terms of general happiness? Did you think about how lucky you are that he married you in the first place? You were a nobody!”

She felt her mouth curl into a defeated smile that would definitely creep her father out, and that was good; that was a smart

instinct on behalf of her face. Her father was the type who had to be a little creeped out before he'd shut up and listen. "It got really bad. You don't know the half of it."

This did quiet him. He glanced into Diane's eyes for support, shrugged. "Okay. Let's run with that. Maybe I don't. But look around you, kid. This is a long way to fall. There's one bathroom. A single bathroom. This week? I do my business at night. It's different all the time though. Wildly variable with little advance notice. If I get a heads-up forty-five seconds before showtime it's a good day."

Her father was a hard man to read. For example: there was a time in college, pre-Byron, when she'd decided to live rent free in an anarchy squatter house so she'd have more money to use for monthly minimums on credit cards and could buy more clothing at the mall. The toilet there was a white bucket that got knocked over constantly because most people who used the white-bucket toilet at the anarchy squatter house were not wickedly sober. Would telling him that she'd once used that toilet make him feel better about letting her live there with him now? Or worse?

"How long are we talking here, Hazel? What's your time frame to get back on your feet? I think you should swallow your pride and ask for a little bit more dough from the guy if need be, just to set yourself up."

"You don't understand; this is what I'm telling you. I'm not even taking the prenup money. I can't leave him and take his money at the same time, Dad. Money's a way to track me and know what I'm doing."

Hazel felt herself pretending to take a drink from her empty can; she wasn't sure why. But she went along with it and soon had the firm opinion that there was a drop left inside she could get to if she just tilted the can right. Then a little later came the realization

that she'd been trying to get the drop for several seconds, maybe longer. Maybe both of her hands were pawing at the can's bottom and she was handling the can a little roughly and her father knew that she was drunk now.

She came up for air and crumpled the aluminum can, hoping the sound would be cathartic, but it could not have made a more alarming noise. It was the sound of property damage occurring several yards away.

"Dad," she continued, "I haven't thought too far ahead. That's probably not a grand surprise." She'd meant to plan a little more, but she'd also come to the understanding that there was no point in planning because she had to leave Byron without taking anything. Plus she'd gotten pretty scared that morning. There had been blood, and that was that. "I guess I just figured on staying till I can make it on my own."

"I could die before that happens!"

"What about a year? Could you give me a year? That seems like a pretty modest ask in terms of length of time to start a completely new life, right?"

Hazel looked at her father and had to sit back down. She was expecting to see the cheeky sails of his rage-face puffed full, or maybe even what she and her childhood best friend used to term his "thermometer head," an Easter-egg-dye scarlet rash that moved from his forehead to his face to his neck to his chest in clear gradients and always told them, with sundial clarity, just how pissed he was and how in trouble she'd be.

Instead he was looking at her with soupy eyes that seemed to have burst. As if they'd tried to hold in all the pity he felt for her but had buckled under the weight.

"Dad . . ."

The moment she spoke his hand flew up in a sporting gesture, catching her thought and stopping all play. He leaned into Diane's robe and wiped his eyes, blew his nose a little too loudly. Was that a generational thing? Hazel wondered. She'd never felt entitled to blow her nose to the point where it made an unpleasant sound. Not even in front of family.

"All right," he said and nodded. "Stay if you want. Slide all the way back down the ladder." The crushed beer can was lying on the floor by her foot; Hazel gave it what she thought was a small tap but it leaped theatrically into the air and landed inside the coffin like it had been trained to do so. "This is no longer the honeymoon evening I'd envisioned. I'll be honest about that. Could Diane and I have a little privacy first? Before we never have any again? Maybe there's a neighborhood bar you could walk to."

*Yeah, there probably is,* Hazel thought, *but I'd rather not amble about when Byron is so into the idea of killing me.* He was far more likely to have goons pull up in a van and abduct her from an alleyway than to bust down the door of her elderly father's home and cart her away in front of the neighbors. The conversation with her father seemed to be winding down, though, and Hazel knew this information was a pretty flammable log to throw on a dwindling fire. Better to approach it in a more generalist fashion. "So you'd like me to walk alone to a bar in the dark and then walk home even later at night when it's darker still and I'm more inebriated, all so you can scream sans guilt during conjugal play with a doll? If I'm following what you're saying."

"Don't be dramatic."

"It's not dramatic! Do you know how frequently women get assaulted?"

"Well, if that happens to you tonight, I'll really owe you one."

How could I make that up to you? Maybe by letting you stay in my house for a year for free?”

Hazel felt the back of her neck prick with warmth—she was flushing. She knew he thought she was spoiled. There were ways in which she was a coward, sure, and he knew those ways, and that’s why her father thought he was right about this. Well, so much for his comfort then. “Yeah? Stupid me for leaving him? He wanted to put a chip in my brain, Dad.”

With his right hand, her father revved the engine of his Rascal, as though to inject more horsepower into his head—he was thinking. Eventually he shuddered and buried his nose in Diane’s hair. When he looked back up, he said, “Chip? Like a tracking thing?”

“Sort of. Like a file-share thing. So I’d be wirelessly connected to a chip in his brain and he would be wirelessly connected to mine. We would meld. The first neural-networked couple in history.”

“Jesus. Is that what kids are up to nowadays? I’m glad I’m near the grand exit. Brain melds. Not for me. Your mother and I didn’t even trust French kissing.”

“No, Dad. It’s not what *anyone* is doing. It has never been done. He wanted me to offer up my still-living brain for research and development, essentially.” She hadn’t consented, but of course her consent wasn’t going to stand in his way. Nothing ever did. Plus, Hazel was convinced he was in the process of making her sick so that she’d go, of her own volition, to their private medical facility and check herself in, which would be the beginning of the end. For the past few weeks, she’d been having increasingly severe headaches; this morning she’d gotten a nosebleed in the shower. It was the first nosebleed of her lifetime. The blood had gone down the drain and was detected by their SmartFilter, which did in fact even know the blood was from her nose, which did in fact set off an alert,

which caused Byron's video-calling face to appear on the screen-wall of their bathroom. It was nearly a purr the way he said it, his stony-blue eyes radiant with cold power: *Hazel, don't you think you should go see the doctor?*

"Yikes," her father said. "Sounds like things took a turn. Did you at least get to spend a lot of his money?"

Yes and no, Hazel thought. Totally, yet not as much as most would. Plus, she'd increasingly stopped leaving the compound, or bringing things in. It was hard to explain, but buying something and taking it home, or having it shipped there, wasn't the same as encountering it in the actual world. It was like a King Midas situation, except instead of turning to gold everything that entered Byron's house became wildly uninteresting. "You know, when I realized I was going to leave eventually, I thought it might be fun to try overindulging on richness before I went out. Spend so much money I got sick of spending money. I figured I could order really strange things that would be funny to leave behind. Like hundreds of thousands of cans of soup? But I got so scared that I stopped caring about anything besides leaving as fast as I could." His house was intentionally in the middle of nowhere, as were Gogol's most important ancillary buildings and the microcity that served its worker elite. Without a job or an appointment, there was no reason to come across its perimeters. Most regular employees worked in one of its city branches, but cities made Byron paranoid. Nearly everything made Byron paranoid.

Hazel began rubbing her face in thorough circles with both of her hands. "And did I ever tell you he liked using the phrase 'global domination'? He did. Heavily. Who, besides crazed sociopathic dictators, comes home to his partner after a meeting and says, 'I love the taste of global domination! Want to taste it? Give me a kiss!'