

Word Count: 3,460

THE OPPOSITE

A short story

“The world is ending.” He poured coffee into a mug. “Who needs an oil change?”

Mark’s nihilism had been ramping up in recent weeks, Joni noticed. It was like everything he did was accented with a shrug, an apathetic and listless “who gives a fuck?” He hadn’t been running, like he always did, and had taken to watching Seinfeld, a show he’d already seen a dozen times, kind of a lot. Coming home to catch Mark watching Seinfeld used to be an indicator of a bad day, and when Joni would see this, she’d suggest they get take out or go for a walk to get some ice cream. But now it was everyday, so that when she opened the door and placed her keys on the table and hung her coat, she could expect to hear the familiar din of the theme song, finding Mark placid and staring, even unlaughing, at the antics of Jerry and friends.

“I mean, yeah, but we like, still need to drive and stuff,” Joni said. She realized Mark hadn’t poured her any coffee, so she reached for a mug and poured it herself. “We’ll need to take it in this week if we want to use it to drive to my parents this weekend.”

“Are we still doing that this weekend?”

“Uh, yeah, aren’t we?” Joni stammered. “Yeah we’re still doing that this weekend—why—why wouldn’t we be doing that this weekend?”

Mark shrugged. Joni pressed. “Can you bring it in this week or what?”

“I mean, whatever,” said Mark and he left the room.

“‘Whatever’ like ‘yeah?’ Or ‘whatever’ like ‘no?’” Joni called out after him, but she got no response.

Mark was tired. He was thirty-five, which was too young to be this tired, and felt aimless because he was: he had no aim. He didn't know what he wanted to do with his last remaining years on Earth and according to the news and Twitter and Leonardo DiCaprio those days were increasingly numbered anyway, so whenever Mark thought he might know what he wanted to do, his ambition was swiftly replaced with apathy: who fucking cares? Once Mark thought of becoming a therapist—he knew he was an excellent listener, Joni always said so—but when he looked up the path to becoming a therapist he saw it took one to two years in a graduate program, and an additional one year of internship after that. Plus it would take some time to generate a clientele. Mark got a news alert on his phone: GRETA THURNBERG GIVES ROUSING SPEECH TO WORLD LEADERS; DEMANDS ACTION TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE. There just wasn't any time.

So for now, for money, Mark worked as a copywriter from home. Despite being a freelancer his work was surprisingly consistent, more-so than that of his colleagues, because Mark was so diligent, eagle-eyed. His attention to detail was second to none and he cranked out projects as if he were a factory. Mark didn't go to school with the intention of becoming a freelance copywriter (he got his degree in Art History, but to be a curator for high level museums usually required a PhD while the average yearly income was only \$50k; who has time for that?) but it was precisely because he didn't care that made him so good at his job. He'd take a look at pitches, craft five scripts in an afternoon, proof-read them in less than an hour, and send his invoice before Joni even got home. Meanwhile, his

colleagues would pour over the pitches, sleep on it to generate ideas, and send over three scripts, two of which might actually work and only one of those two would even be good. Mark, who had nothing invested in the process and therefore had nothing to lose, would crank out five just to give the client options.

Joni was a professor in Creative Writing at the university. She had done everything right: she went to a prestigious boarding school as a teenager, got into Yale (early admission; no legacy connections), then Columbia. She had been published a handful of times and of that handful in some very serious publications—*The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*—but something about her work had turned. It had gone from “ambitious, innovative, charming” to “stale and unimaginative.” Her agent replied to her emails in increasing delays. First one week, then two and now she hadn’t heard from Caroline in almost three months. In her office, Joni pulled up the last email she sent to Caroline: an invitation to coffee that had gone unanswered for exactly twenty days.

Joni hovered her fingers over the keys, wondering if three weeks was long enough to wait to try for a follow up email to your own agent, when an iMessage from Alison, another professor, who had the office next to hers, appeared on her screen.

Tom just sold again

Six figures

Fuck are you kidding me?

I didn't even know he was working on anything

Joni pushed away from her desk and slumped back in her chair.

I overheard him saying they're publishing an advance excerpt in the next NYer too

stfu

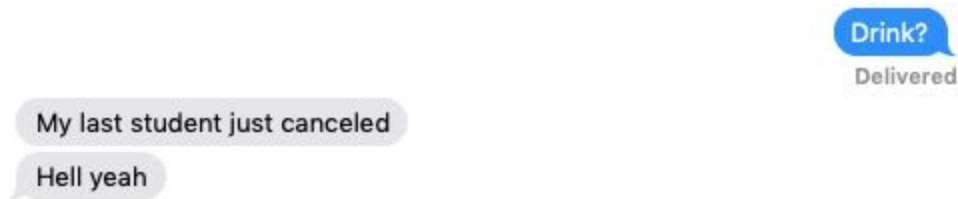
NYer doesn't even do that anymore

I know

Everything great in life only ever happened to Tom Mercer, Joni decided, a writer and Head of Fiction at her university. His office was three doors down from hers (and much larger, with lots of natural light) but he couldn't feel farther away. He was handsome, prolific, and most upsetting, incredibly talented. It would be easier to hate him if he didn't deserve his success, if Joni could blame his fortune on his being white and straight and good looking and a charmer, but the last time Joni had read his work—a short story published in *Granta*— she was so engrossed in it she missed her subway stop by two full stops. She read and reread the story on her way back home in the opposite direction, sometimes clutching her iPad to her chest in affection and adoration. Tom was good—fuck, he was very good—and the next time she saw him in the office she could hardly meet his gaze. She had met his wife, Philippa, only once and she looked exactly like someone whose name would be “Philippa.” She was impossibly beautiful and seemed to glide about the room, her skin glowing as if lit from within under even the harsh office lighting of the Faculty Holiday Party. Joni spent the rest of the night pining for her shoes and whatever hair product she used to get her hair so shiny.

Joni closed her email thread with Caroline and wondered if Caroline hadn't responded because she could sense Joni had nothing to say, nothing new to report, nothing of note because Joni wasn't writing. Joni wasn't writing. Joni wasn't anything.

Joni pulled up an early draft of a story and tried to get to work. She futzed with fonts and margins for four minutes before she messaged Alison again:



Mark was waiting on notes from a client—notes he likely wouldn't receive because the packet he'd turned in felt pretty solid—so he put on Seinfeld and decided to make a BLT.

Ooh, thought Mark, I love this one. It was Season 5, Episode 22 titled The Opposite. George speaks:

Why did it all turn out like this for me? I had so much promise. I was personable, I was bright. Oh, maybe not academically speaking, but... I was perceptive. I always know when someone's uncomfortable at a party. It became very clear to me sitting out there today, that every decision I've ever made, in my entire life, has been wrong. My life is the opposite of everything I want it to be. Every instinct I have, in every aspect of life, be it something to wear, something to eat... It's all been wrong.

Mark placed the mayonnaise-laden knife down and looked at the screen as the scene continued.

Waitress: Tuna on toast, coleslaw, cup of coffee?

George: Yeah. No, no, no, wait a minute, I always have tuna on toast.

Nothing's ever worked out for me with tuna on toast. I want the complete opposite of on toast. Chicken salad, on rye, untoasted... and a cup of tea.

Mark looked around, quickly, at his entire life: how he had ended up in a place he had never intended to be and yet, simultaneously, did not know where he would be if he could choose to be anywhere. It seemed as if George was right—every instinct Mark had had led him here and still, he had no idea how he got there. George was right: if every instinct he had ever had was wrong, The Opposite would have to be right. George was right, and Mark was going to do it. Moving forward, he, too, would do The Opposite.

Elaine: Well there's no telling what can happen with this.

Alison and Joni went to a place right by school that was mediocre in quality but still higher-priced than the local dive bars, providing some type of insurance against running into students catching them drinking at 4:30 in the afternoon. They ordered negronis and clinked their glasses sarcastically, Alison saying "To Tom" and Joni saying "To 'The Work.'"

The Work was somewhat of an inside joke. Inevitably, at every and any writers panel or interview or conference, Joni had noticed, someone will ask the seasoned professional “What advice do you give to young writers?” Invariably, despite the author or stage in his or her career or type of writing they produced, the answer was always the same:

“Do The Work. You just have to do The Work.”

It was possibly the most completely useless piece of advice anyone could give to anyone about anything, let alone writing. It was impossibly vague, yet strangely romantic and somehow it was an inescapable refrain. At faculty meetings, Alison and Joni spent hours doing impressions of different visiting authors, reciting this adage under their breath and suppressing giggles. Alison snort-laughed into her negroni at the mention of it.

“How do you think he does it?” Alison asked. “The guy is like Lance Armstrong. There’s got to be something wrong with him.”

Joni shrugged. “He’s a TB.”

Alison nodded woefully in agreement: a TB or “Tom Brady” was someone who had The Three. The Three was Looks, Wife (or Husband), and Career. Normal human people who were still excellent only had two of The Three. Having three of The Three made you a TB and T.M. was certainly a TB.

They ordered another round rather too quickly after downing their first. Joni could already feel the gin glassing over her eyes but Alison had started in about the last round of edits on her book of poetry that had taken so long to produce Joni had begun to wonder if it existed, so she swallowed her second negroni in half the time.

“I dunno,” said Joni, interrupting Alison’s rant about “innovations of the page.” “Maybe you’re right. Maybe there is something weird about Tom. Maybe he drinks the blood of virgins or eats unicorn meat or something.”

“I’m telling you, it’s weird, right?” Alison moved in closer to Joni as if she were conspiring because she was. “The guy’s the head of the fiction section and he just cranks out work like that, like a machine? I’m telling you, we’re gonna go through his office one day and find some weird shit.”

Joni looked up at Alison with her glassy gin eyes. “Fuck yeah. We should go through his office.”

Mark threw away his BLT. Eating a BLT had gotten him nowhere in life. Fuck BLTs. Mark went to his office, grabbed a fresh legal pad and a pen and sat in front of the TV. He began to make organized lists with labels like CAREER and RELATIONSHIP. For CAREER, he wrote down things like:

- Copywriter → opposite → illustrator?

But Mark didn’t know how to draw. Maybe he could learn. He went to Google how long it would take to learn how to become an illustrator but stopped. Opposite, he reminded himself. Fight against these instincts. Then he added:

- Copywriter → opposite → illustrator? Graphic design?

That seemed much more likely. He made more opposites, dating back to his first job (Subway → opposite → Starbucks?) and what he studied in school (Art History → opposite → bureaucracy? Politics?) until he exhausted his professional career and moved onto his personal. Under RELATIONSHIP he wrote:

- Married → opposite → Divorce?

Joni loved the idea. Alison was on board. It was only 5:15 now, and they figured Tom probably left around six, so they'd have to wait until 6:30 at the earliest to try and sneak into his office. They decided to order more drinks to kill the time and summon the courage and while they downed negroni after negroni and eventually, a shot, they came up with a loose plan: they would first take a picture of the office, then Joni would go about opening drawers and cabinets and upending bookshelves, while Alison followed behind her putting things back in order. Then they would double check the office to match the picture, ensuring they didn't leave anything askew, and go.

Getting into the department itself wouldn't be a problem—they both had keys—but it was likely Tom locked his personal office door behind him. They decided they'd go up and then call Security, say one of them had left their phone in Tom's office, and they just needed to pop in for a moment. They didn't need the guard to stay, they could lock the door behind them, they'd explain.

Either the guard would leave them alone to “find the phone,” or they could get a general sweep done quickly between the two of them. Whatever Tom was using to make himself as Tom as possible couldn’t be hard to find.

By 6:30, they each had consumed four negronis and one shot of gin. They paid their bill, chugged a glass of water between them, peed, and then headed back to the university.

Mark stared at the word Divorce. He and Joni had never discussed it though he knew with great certainty they had both thought about it. Probably a lot, too. They didn’t exactly fight, but they also weren’t particularly happy. When was the last time they had sex? They hadn’t had sex in probably two months and that can’t be good, thought Mark. What would it mean to get a divorce? What did it even mean to be married?

Mark’s stomach grumbled. He realized he was starving. Why am I starving?, he thought. Oh yeah, I threw away that BLT.

It was nearly seven by the time they got back to the university and into the Creative Writing Department. There was a single office light on: Tom Mercer’s.

“What the fuck is he still doing here?” Alison groaned but Joni still felt determined, almost confrontational.

“C’mon, let’s go say hi.”

Alison ran her fingers through her hair and Joni wiped smeared eyeliner from under her eyes. They checked each other’s teeth and exhaled into their hands to make sure they didn’t reek of gin before walking to Tom’s ajar office door and knocking softly.

“Joni! Alison! What brings you here at this late hour?” Tom was warm and professorial. He wasn’t cerebral or aristocratic like the other authors and professors Joni had known, even though he had every right to be. His warmth disarmed her immediately. Drunk and suddenly filled with regret, she felt like she might cry.

“We grabbed a drink after student meetings, and I left my phone in Alison’s office, so we’re here now to get it,” Joni explained. Alison nodded along dumbly as Joni continued. “We heard about your new book, Tom. Congratulations. That’s really ... special,” Joni bit the inside of her cheek so hard she felt tears pool in the corner of her eyes.

“Ah well, thank you, Joni. Thank you, Alison. That’s very sweet of you to say,” Tom placed a hand over his heart. “None of this,” he motioned to his desk, his office, his life, “is easy.”

Joni burst into tears. It was easy. For Tom at least. Or at least he made it look easy. Tom was beautiful, his wife was beautiful, his work was beautiful, and Joni was ugly and dirty and sad. Standing under the white fluorescent light in Tom’s immaculate office made her feel disgusting and decrepit and wrong. She looked up expecting to see Tom disgusted with her, but he only looked concerned. He wasn’t even alarmed. He was ten years older than her, a marker Joni would often lean on for comfort — that she still had time to get where he was — but now she felt she could swim in those years between them: he was so much wiser, so self-assured. Tom Mercer was a person who knew who he was. Joni didn’t know who she was. Joni was hardly a person at all.

“Come, sit down. I’ll make us some tea and we can talk about what’s wrong.” Tom moved Joni softly by the shoulders, guiding her to a seat in his office. He left the room to go make tea. Joni sat down, as surprised as anyone that she was crying, and looked up at Alison, arms crossed and scowling.

“What is with you??” Alison hissed. “Pull your fucking shit together!”

But trying to stop crying only made Joni cry harder. Alison threw Joni a box of tissues and flitted around the office. Through tears Joni tried to abort the mission. “Alison, c’mon, knock it off.”

Alison yanked open Tom’s desk drawer. A prescription bottle of pills rolled down with the jerking motion, tingling like candy, and Alison snatched it.

“*I fucking told you,*” she said. “I fucking *told you* we’d find some shit.”

She tossed the pills to Joni who stared at the bottle but couldn’t recognize the name of the prescription. They heard Tom calling from the hall and Joni plunged the bottle into her pocket.

“I’m afraid we’re out of honey. What a bummer, right?” Tom appeared back at the door. “Chamomile,” he said and handed each woman a mug of tea. He turned his attention back to Joni. “Is everything all right, Joni? You seemed so upset.”

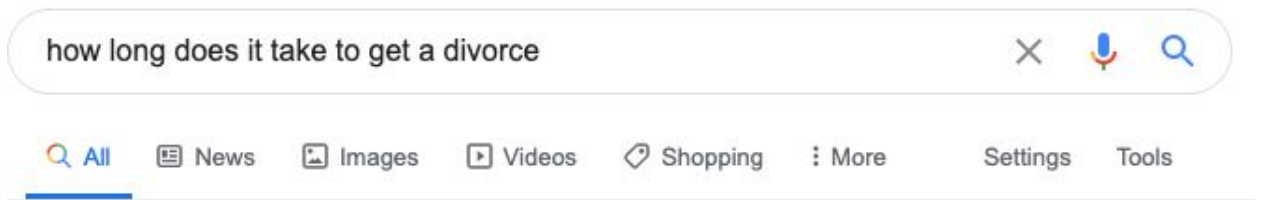
Joni had stopped crying. “Yeah, I guess. Just going through a lot, that’s all. I’m fine.”

Though of course, the opposite was true.

Mark got an email from his client.

Great work again, Mark! Thanks!

Mark whipped up an invoice, using a template of an old invoice and changing the dates, and sent it off. With his computer open, he couldn't resist: he opened a new tab and Googled.



Mark scanned the results, but the answers varied. Some headlines (he didn't click on the links) said "as early as six weeks!" while others said the average was "nine months." He stared at the screen for a moment but eventually closed the tab, closed the laptop, and wandered into the kitchen to make another BLT.

By this time, the gang was far from debating opposites and Elaine was on to The Big Salad. Mark crumpled the yellow sheet of paper that had, just moments before, held so much promise, and threw it away.

In the Uber home, Joni vaped CBD in the backseat and removed the bottle from her pocket. She studied the label and Googled it: ESCITALOPRAM.

Escitalopram is an antidepressant belonging to a group of drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). It affects chemicals in the brain that may be unbalanced in people with depression or anxiety.

Escitalopram is used to treat anxiety in adults. Mar 12, 2019



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Tom Mercer wasn't doping. He wasn't microdosing acid or recreationally taking Adderall to fuel his creative pursuits, like Joni had suspected. Tom Mercer was depressed. There was nothing special about Tom Mercer. In fact, he was more ordinary than Joni had even imagined.

And yet his life was beautiful. How depressing.

When Joni got home, Mark didn't ask why she was late and Jerry had just gotten a new couch. She went to throw Tom's pills away, deciding it was too dangerous to try and slip them back into his office unnoticed, but when she went to the garbage can she saw, hanging just above an untouched sandwich, a piece of yellow legal paper. The paper was crumpled but she could make out, in Mark's handwriting the word:

Divorce?

She looked back at the pills and, instead of throwing them away, took two.

Joni sat on the couch. "Ooh, I love this one," she said. She reached for the open bag of chips on the coffee table and popped a stale one in her mouth, letting it dissolve into mush on her tongue before chewing it down and swallowing hard. "Did you take the car in today?"

"What?"

"The oil change. I asked you this morning."

"No," he said. "I forgot."