

The phone rings, Leah answers. “Hello? ...Hello?” Shrugs and hangs up.

The phone rings again, Leah answers again.

“Hello! Can you hear me? ... Is anyone there? ... What number are you calling?
... Hello??” The ancient cordless gets placed in its cradle.

The phone rings again, Leah answers and nothing, she begins feel annoyed and a little afraid.

The phone rings again, Leah immediately hangs up without saying anything.

The phone rings again, Leah lets it ring until it goes to her voicemail. After the prescribed time to record a voice mail message has elapsed, the phone rings.

Leah contacts her phone company; she learns that she cannot be given the name or number of the caller without a police report verifying that a harassment claim has been filed by her. Leah does not contact the police because she feels small, silly, scared of displeasing the police officer by wasting their important time.

The phone rings after she hangs up with the phone company; Leah disconnects the phone from its jack. Seven hours later, Leah reconnects her phone. It rings again.

Leah finds a blank postcard-size piece of white paperboard in the mailbox. It is a spotless rectangle except one sooty fingerprint on the upper left corner; it is not addressed, stamped, or postmarked. She thinks about this paper less than a minute and throws it away. When a similarly fingerprinted postcard is found in the mail on the next day, Leah weighs its potential meaning for several hours, devising harmless situations,

devising hope: some scrap paper smirched by the mail carrier with blackened fingers from handling newspaper type got mixed in with a victim's mail. The twice, though? Maybe index cards are used for dividing individual household's mail and two days in a row the carrier grabbed his divider along with her mail accidentally. The next instance of the fingerprinted postcard is alarming, reminding a Leah of another repetitive nuisance experienced in the near past, causing her to become distracted, to pace, to feel angry and throaty with ignorance, to become physically anxious, unable to form a fearless or mundane thought until she takes action to resolve this irrational circumstance. She takes the postcard to the local police station. A fingerprint analysis takes ten days. The lone fingerprint on the postcard is Leah's.

Leah feels like a victim; she hesitates, balks. She is dishonest about the emotions she is experiencing after the phone calls and the fingerprints when she reveals them to her husband of several years. She does not know how to tell him how scared she is. She wishes she could connect the dots for him, but she doesn't know who's to confront, who's to fight, who's targeting her or why. She pretends to be calmer than she is, she pretends that right now she can't see it, but there is a logical and mundane explanation to all of it. It oddly feels too self-centered of a thing to be going through and that it might be unattractive to admit it to anyone. But in a small category of the reasons why she formed the words the way she did, moved her body the way she did when she talked, was because she feared he would steal this from her. He thought it was compassionate to do a tit for tat offering where his experience was *just like* hers. It happens in conversations

about job interviews and sport injuries and dentist appointments. Here she predicted him saying that his experiences with the mysterious and evil underbelly of humanity were just like hers.

This time, though, he took her cues and reacted with muted concern, bewilderment. She did not know it but, he was fiercely panicking too.

There have been countless of the following incident with dozens of household objects or daily routines: *I thought I put that glass in the sink. I thought I put my keys in the basket. Huh! I thought I folded that already. I could've sworn...I must have forgotten to lock it. Where did my nametag go? I always leave it right here... This is empty already!?! I am losing my mind, why would I put that there or did he?* Leah assumed preoccupation was the cause of her absentmindedness, but her killer actually lived in her house for two weeks, moving things, emptying things, unlocking things, learning things. While his physical presence went undetected, his well crafted mischief did not.

He remarked routines where they existed; one reliability was all that was needed. Husband's Friday night out with the guys. There were generous swaths of time no one was home; there were places in the house no one used. It was enlightening and almost enough.

The year Leah got married, her killer got divorced. His wife had become anxious and sad having stared at him staring at something else for four years. She was offended at first, hurt, jealous of the computer game, the TV program, the magazine, the book that

was getting more attention than she was. Then of course, she became angry. Invitations to interact, pleas to attend, indictments of high neglect, all met with a kind of mild disinterest. He didn't fight with his wife, he wasn't cruel or defensive. He didn't seem to register the complaint, or even make a token effort to meet his wife's eyes and try to make her happy. She begrudgingly had sex with him, though it felt wrong, like she was trying to paste them together somehow, connect at least here for these brief moments. But eventually, she started to refuse him; it was too much self sacrifice for being ignored. Then her anger turned a corner toward fear. She started staring at him staring at something else and felt like she was turning into him, staring, staring, stagnating, seeing what captured his eye, and it began to unsettle her, make her nervous, she noticed what made him turn to her aroused, none of it had anything to do with her. She went into counseling, built strength from shaking, and filed for a divorce, finalized November 4, 2000.

Leah was married that year in October. After what conventionally seemed an appropriate amount of time spent eating out, renting movies, creating inside jokes, and sleeping together, her boyfriend, Hugh, proposed. She didn't accept tearfully, instead Leah asked for "time to think about this? But- wow! - thank you very much!" The last brave thing she did.

Leah had an entrenched people pleasing habit and an unwillingness to believe herself and her own thoughts and wishes. Say no. (Why don't I like myself enough?) She

didn't really want to get married and she didn't know how to explain why. She was very afraid of explaining why to him. Leah fretted so long and so exhaustively, she knew this wasn't a question she could “forget” he asked. Every day she did not issue a reply weighed on her. She felt Hugh's anticipation, expectancy growing, ballooning. It was tiresome, so hard. The easiest way out of this unmanageable situation was to accept. She was relieved when she did which gave her hope that everything would be okay and maybe she made a good decision.

Leah was tall despite what was small in her, with giant brown eyes, skinny light brown hair, and a semi-constant grimace which was really a frown of deep thought poised to smile should the necessity arise. She was a nurse's aide in an assisted living apartment complex, maybe because the chances were pretty good that someone somewhere in that situation would really appreciate her.

Leah's serial killer, like most, had a lot of advantages: he was average in appearance, conduct, and life circumstance. 6'1', 205 lbs., a noticeable paunch. Tidy, short hair that was once blond, blue grey eyes. Quiet, polite, responsible, one of several project managers at a small, but growing software company. Dispassionately divorced, no children. Modest house, drives a Toyota. One minor, though troublesome handicap: his head is notably round and small in relation to his other parts—small enough that he knows people feel off balance interacting with him, processing his misproportions.

The night he decided to become a serial killer, he was standing, facing his

bathroom mirror, he flung his white dental floss from his fingers into a small plastic wastebasket under the sink that was under the mirror. He was frustrated with the familiar acrid taste left in his mouth from his flossing--like wet pennies...like putrid tissue--and decided this circumstance required more elaborate scrutiny: this hadn't always happened when he flossed, though he couldn't remember when he noticed it first. All attempted remedies--flavored dental floss, tartar control toothpaste, baking soda & peroxide toothpaste, whitening toothpaste, multi-purposes toothpaste, toothpaste and mouthwash combos, whole mouth pastes, anti-plaque pre-rinses, antiseptic post-rinses--made no discernible improvement as if this problem was the result of an intractable corruption deep within his body. This night he admitted full consideration of an overlooked cause: .this rotten taste, smell, feeling of his mouth...it was an accompaniment of nearing middle age; an evaporating youth that promised temporary unpleasantness so well, one didn't first conclude age was the cause of any fracture in one's invincibility. A mouth once was cleaned totally with toothpaste and a tablespoon of mouthwash. Until, one aged and trusted their own mortality. A mouth will never be cleaned totally anymore. What will this taste be like in ten years? "It's time to escalate," Leah's killer thought to himself.

Leah became a victim because my serial killer honestly and without distraction contemplated his future. Yes, that he would die, and if it was typical, it would be preceded by decades of slow loss and deterioration of many useful faculties.

At the end of the summer 2000, Leah's wedding invitations were ready to be mailed. At the post office, her fiancé held one dainty envelope in the mouth of the mail

slot and looked at her so deliberately she felt guilty, dropped it in the mailbox with a grand gesture and joked, “Well, we *have* to get married now.” This new layer of reality, tangible data sent out into the universe--we're so in love there will be a public celebration on this date, at this place and time--it was harder and harder for Leah to imagine a reversal, a retraction, a turning back. Which made her nervous, unsure and even more inert about doing anything. Despite this inability to initiate participation in her own life, which she oddly thought was protecting her from conflict with her fiancé, they fought a considerable amount. He was angry and stressed out and admitted that he had been surviving the wedding planning by not relying on her for anything, that way he was never disappointed. And he told her this with the self satisfaction and excitement of discovering a solution to a sticky problem, it was a satisfying epiphany, a very handy tool he was pleased to have found only six weeks away from marrying her. After this was shared, Leah married him, just to prove this wrong, to rebut his argument. On her wedding night, in the nebulae of near sleep, she decided five years would be enough time to appear to have given it a shot and then divorce him.

After his divorce, Leah's killer stood in line behind a woman whose library card he just stole in the library. He noticed her, her desperate politeness, her self conscious friendliness; he wanted to frazzle her.

She found an empty space in her wallet and said “That's bizarre, I thought I checked before I left.” She quickly stirred her purse's contents and muttered, “If it's not in my wallet, it's not in here,” and looking up trying to check her over-embarrassment,

smiled, and apologized egregiously and wondered “if it was at all possible to still check out these books without my card” hurriedly adding “If you can't, that's fine, too, I mean, I completely understand. It's my mistake, er, fault.” sigh “Or maybe my driver's license? Could you use that?”

“What's your last name?” the clerk smiled at her like a parent.

My serial killer drank in her name: Leah Moroz. She was a complete caricature, he wouldn't have believed her typecast behavior were it described to him, but he stood there and nearly predicted when she would slouch, when in her sentence she'd add a fretful headshaking, when her cloying voice would stumble over her words. He imagined taking a jeweler's hammer and blessing her forehead with it; her countless little bits would be as thin as a Christmas bulb ornament.

“Thank you *so* much. I really appreciate it. I really really do”

And she was listed in the phone book.

When he flossed his teeth that fateful night, he left his apartment to do what we all already know he is going to do.

Leah's husband moved into her apartment after they were married. He had never understood why they didn't do it earlier in their relationship. He asked her to move in with him once, she just said “Do you mind if I think about it for a while? Don't get me wrong – thank you for asking, really, that is so generous, so sweet.” But she never answered. He felt he watched something large and meaningful shrink and shrink, getting blurry and vague, like something sinking into deep and murky waters. Well, I planted the

seed, he thought hopefully and waited for her to answer him or maybe even ask him to move in with her. A considerable amount of time passed over which my victim's husband devised and embellished a theory that she was actually waiting for a marriage proposal, that she had some unspoken moral stance on cohabitation that he didn't share but could respect. All proposal scenarios he giddily contrived seemed only appropriate, not fitting, not "them." What are "we"? "They" ended up being a rushed, clumsy, unrehearsed yet sincere moment outside of her apartment building as a date, where no proper romantic moment incited his knee to bend, was ending. He felt strongly almost panicky that he didn't want to go up to her apartment without doing what he intended to do that night. A night just a few weeks shy of their third anniversary. She said she needed to think about it, he was sure, because he flubbed the delivery.

Living in the apartment was anticlimactic, thankfully. She worried it would be awful, but it was fairly neutral. All of his stuff had been integrated into the apartment over the last few months before the wedding. Pint glasses added to the kitchen cupboard. A dart board hung on the bathroom door. A collection of glass chemistry beakers and flasks that "could be cool decoration somehow." She penned her name onto the first pages of all her books, then added his to the bookshelves. Wedding money was used to buy a queen size mattress, frame, and bedding. She had never slept in bed so big before.

After several years, Leah and her husband bought a house. She could form no argument to the logic spewing from her husband, her parents, her in-laws, her friends, even some of the elderly she worked with, still mentally sharp and invested in their

youthful care tender's forward momentum in life. "Interest rates are so low!" "It's a buyer's market!" "There hasn't been a better time to purchase in ten years!"

The house was a wood sided colonial, painted an uncomfortable orange color with dingy white trim. When the real estate agent gushed that the house had "good bones," Leah took it to mean the value of the place was underneath it all and she instantly felt a little more at ease with the sticky plastic window blinds, the faded yet stained wall paper, the dark brown carpet in the bathroom.

When they moved in, she focused her attention on their bedroom and planned to work from that room out to the rest of the house. When she had free time she peeled the wall paper, cleaned and sanded the walls and ceiling, stripped the paint from the woodwork framing the windows and door revealing decently marbled oak. She stained and sealed the wood, it was gorgeous. She painted the walls a pale turquoise. She ripped up the beige carpet and began work on stripping the hardwood floors, she kept her tools and tarps and rags and brushes shoved in an unoccupied corner in the room. She thought about what she would do in the hallway outside of her bedroom and had no ideas. She showered and went to bed. Two and a half hours later, Leah's killer arrived.

It rained steadily as he made the four mile trek from his house to hers. The rain that is called a "soaker" by your grandfather, makes inches-deep mud, backs up sewer inlets, and depresses everyone with its soporific white noise. Maybe how taking lives after this first one will always feel.

The non physical torture my serial killer played on my victim prior to his attack

on her created a disadvantage to him that he did not foresee or even come to know. The mental study she exercised of her unique situation resulted in myriad scenarios from benign to depraved: agoraphobic secret admirer to lustful psychopath resulting, nothing ever happening to her, or abduction to hidden room being raped and tortured. Every noise that was unfamiliar in the house, 50% of which were psychosomatic, launched her imagination into how she would defend herself, how an attacker may proceed with the attack, where her vulnerabilities were, she slept with a putty knife under her pillow. When my serial killer did finally come, my victim wasn't instantly terrified. Her first fleeting emotion was the simple satisfaction of an expectancy being fulfilled. It made him feel that it was right for him to be there. Then she was terrified.

Since his gentle entrance, through his forceful manipulations, that first moment of pain and my victim's quick suck of air for endurance of the blade, until this moment he was comically like many of the sociopaths or home invaders she had seen on TV or read in a book or imagined in her panic of late: cold, emotionless, robotic, with an ease of an often repeated task, casual. Until that moment, just for a micro-moment, she saw an expression lighten his entire face that made her see him on a bike as a kid, maybe popping his first wheelie, or first taste of success with training wheels off, I'm really doing it thrill. He's really doing it. He took her wounded finger to his mouth and sucked out blood, swished it through his teeth, gargled and spit it out onto her. She stared intently at him throughout the entire disarticulation, winking when needing to moisten her eyes, not wanting to miss that child like face should it appear again. Even when he

suggested she cease her flirtations, despite the encouragement it gave him to slow down, she kept winking. She was going to try to clobber that boy if he ever reappeared.

The boy never reappeared and a weakness settled into Leah. She became still and quiet; though some moments of immeasurable pain caused a spasm or groan, it was quickly put into check by my killer.

The bedroom door opened. Leah's adrenaline soared at the noise, she couldn't see her husband, coming home early from his Friday night out with the guys, but he stopped once he saw his bed and started backing up the very few steps he had taken into the room bumping into the door jamb, alerting my killer to his intrusion.

My killer's momentary pause at the husband's arrival gave her the second she needed to grab the putty knife from under her pillow. Now she lunged and writhed as wildly as she could. She just needed a second to get her putty knife right beneath her pillow. Her surprise fit propelled him forward on top of her but it gave her just the moment she needed to grasp the knife's handle. First she started stabbing at him in the back while he was still on top of her, but the dull wide blade caused no damage. He sloppily tried to right himself, but his hands were slick with her blood, he couldn't regain control of his body, but she was still flailing, silver blade denting and piercing him. A lucky strike finally hit the delicate skin of his neck and he erupted. He didn't stop trying to reach her neck and squeeze her out maybe, but then his own self preservation ignited a frenzied attempted to stop the blood sliding out of his own neck, sitting up and dropping his own knife onto the bed. She thrust her hips forward to propel him off of her and she grabbed his knife from beside her in the folds of the sheets. She stabbed him repeatedly

beyond the point he was actually dead. “Oh my God!” she uttered, pondering the thoughts that immediately sprung forth when the reality of what just occurred hit her like the metallic odor of blood. She looked up and saw her husband. He had been facing the wall during her rally, believing the person being stabbed was Leah. When he heard her voice, he went to her and tried to scoop her up to take her out of the room, but she began stabbing him repeatedly too. Also beyond the point he actually died.

Leah didn't drink alcohol. She didn't like it; her boyfriend didn't feel strongly either way about consumption, though he drank heavily in college as many do, he mostly abstained because she did. One time though, during their engagement, they went to the wedding reception of one of her coworker's. Leah's boss brought champagne over for her whole table, mostly other aides and their plus ones. Leah dutifully sipped her gift and found she really liked the taste and feel of it in her mouth than down her throat and warm stomach. She drank more champagne without really paying attention to how much, she felt bold and somehow taller. And her thinking felt clearer. She admitted to her fiancé at a horribly romantic moment right after sex that night that she wasn't sure if she wanted to get married, she wasn't sure if she really loved him. “Sometimes I feel like I do, and sometimes I don't” was all she had by way of explanation. Sweet relief for a few seconds she breathed, the wedding is off, the wedding is off, the relationship is over. But he said, “I'm ok with that. I know I love you and I'll take whatever you can give me.”

“But...?”

He smiled at her like a soap star goaded on by his director to show unconditional acceptance, undying love.

“I don’t think we should get married.” She said.

He took her second iteration of doubt as a self sacrificing, if you love someone let them go type test, and he tried to reassure her that, it was all fine, he loved her even through her doubts and fears about the next big step.

He didn’t understand why she seemed so angry, that she felt like he had clamped his hand over her mouth and over his ears with a dopey lovesick grin and saccharin platitudes about love.

Leah felt hopeless, afraid, and angry.