

“Dissipating Clouds”

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Timothy was three hours late in opening the text message from his mother.

*The separatists aren't stopping. The Feds are evacuating Cape Cod. I'm forwarding you money.*

Timothy automatically discerned what was being said between the lines.

*The separatists aren't stopping.* [Your childhood home is now officially gone.] *The Feds are evacuating Cape Cod.* [The rest of the family is coming to you.] *I'm forwarding you money.* [You have no say in the matter.]

He knew he wasn't going to be able to ignore the message because the next notification was a Venmo for two thousand dollars into the joint account he shared with his wife, Cammie. Timothy had to smile at his mother's thoroughness. He swiped out of his notifications and shifted over to a news app so he could doom scroll the continuing separatist offensive in New England, just like everyone else on this scuzzy New York subway car. Although Timothy's feet were murdering him, he didn't sit. If he did, he wouldn't be able to get up again after working a double at the restaurant.

The population of New York had swelled in the last four years as a consequence of violent separatist movements that had sprung up in the wake of The Adjustment, the Federal crash program dedicated to belatedly addressing climate change. To say The Adjustment hadn't gone well was an understatement. Rural areas got left out and fell even more behind. Eventually the people in the hinterland chose to remind the cities who grew their food and generated the electricity that powered their electronics. When cutting those off in protest didn't make the cities listen, the hinterlands rose up to take what they needed by force. Timothy's hometown of Boston was just the latest fruit to be picked.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

An unusually bitter wind was blowing off the Hudson as he exited the subway at 157th Street, forcing Timothy to zip his sweater all the way up to his chin. He walked up Broadway, debating. There was a bar at the corner of Fort Washington Ave where he could always delay the inevitable discussion he was going to have with Cammie. Instead, he entered the supermarket.

He still wasn't used to the metal detector inside the doorway or the locker he had to put his bag into before perusing the aisles, but his annoyance was mitigated by logic. Grocery stores operated at razor thin margins. With the city bursting at the seams with desperate, hungry people from up north, stores couldn't act like they didn't exist. Theft could bankrupt them. Timothy loaded up his cart with as much pasta as he was allotted, same with soups and canned meats. Since he had no way of knowing when the family was arriving he couldn't afford to buy anything fresh. Retrieving his bag from the locker, he loaded it up and headed back into the evening chill.

The refugee couple who had been camping on the stoop of his building that morning were gone. All that remained were two empty cans of ravioli and a plastic bag that smelled of shit.

*Least they put it in a bag, he thought. I'm sure that made the building super happy.*

Cammie was vaping on the couch. Her loosely belted robe exposed a deep vee of skin down to her navel. Timothy smiled. Cammie stretched as she stood, enjoying the feel of his eyes. Timothy set his bag down hard enough so she would hear the tin cans clunk. Cammie wrapped her arms around Timothy's neck.

“Got Mama Laura's text, I see,” she said.

Timothy's hands rested on her hips, gripping tightly in fatigued need.

“She didn't give me much choice, did she.”

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Cammie hummed in agreement. “She was just making sure she left you no option but the right one.”

Timothy grunted. He pecked a kiss on her lips and went to the kitchen, hefting his pack like a bowling ball. “How the hell are we gonna accommodate five people here?”

Cammie crossed her arms over her chest, recognizing the signs that Timothy was about to go on a rant. She didn’t know if his outrage was performance or genuine. Probably a mix, judging by Timothy’s increasingly acerbic rhetorical questions: how long would the family be staying? Would they try to convince he and Cammie to go to Texas with them? Wasn’t it their fault they stayed in Boston to the bitter end? His mom was sending the money to ensure he didn’t turn them out when they showed up, didn’t she? Cammie didn’t bother to answer. She took deep draws from her vape pen, using the smoke to cloud his face and words until a pot appeared on the stove filled with rice to make risotto.

“So you’re tellin’ me that you’d turn out your father, Mama Erika, your sisters, and Harrison after the shit they been through up there?” she said.

A frown tugged at the corner of Timothy’s mouth. “We don’t know what they went through up there. It could’ve been nothing.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Cammie said. “Whatever it was, I bet it ain’t good.”

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Before the Fall of Boston, Timothy had not seen, talked to, or answered his parents texts for over six years. At first it had been easy to ignore the lassoes of connection that Mama Laura, Mama Erika, and his father had sent. Life in New York required his full attention - culinary school, Cammie, trying to furnish the apartment with the money they could scrape up, dealing with the monstrosity and speed native to the metropolis. Eventually Laura switched tactics. He

## “Dissipating Clouds”

began to hear what was happening within his polyamorous family after Laura began texting Cammie - who answered them.

“Mom was always a bulldog,” Timothy said.

He first encountered that part of his mother when he got caught vaping at school. He’d been lured into the photography studio’s dark room by Cammie. The chemical smell would hide them, she reasoned. Both were freshman and still trying to find their way in the upper school, Timothy more so than Cammie given the notoriety of his family’s structure.

The photography teacher never locked her door during her lunch break, wanting to give students a space to decompress from the pressure of the school day. Timothy followed Cammie into the darkroom through the ratchety spinning door. Freshly developed pictures dangled and dripped from clothes lines. Timothy’s eyes swept the room, as if anticipating a spook hiding under a table. Cammie laughed.

“What? Scared your brothers are gonna kick your ass?” she teased.

Timothy smirked. Cammie ignited the vape; as the vapor curled out of her mouth Timothy was struck by how it danced in front of her round eyes and curly hair. He tried not to cough on his first inhale, and failed. Cammie didn’t make fun of him. Her hand moved gracefully to his shoulder.

“Take the smoke into your mouth first, then a little deeper on the next puff. Get used to it,” she said.

Timothy, transfixed, did as she bade. His body began to hum from the nicotine; warmth spread through his limbs, mellow energy following. They were both so enraptured by the moment that they didn’t hear the darkroom door turning.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

He took the rap for ownership of the vape pen and earned himself a ten day suspension. He'd prayed that Mama Erika would be the one to pick him up from school. No such luck. However, Laura did not blow up on him, as he'd expected or perhaps hoped. Instead her questions focused on understanding his line of thinking and her empathy for the situation. Timothy responded as lamely as a 14-year old could, saying, “you wouldn't get it.” To add insult to injury, for the next two weeks he was watched by either Mama Laura, his father Tom, or Mama Erika as he did his schoolwork online in the cavernous, lonely dining room. After his suspension was over, he tried to draw the line when they searched his bag every morning for illicit materials.

“You can't search my private property,” he said, voice choked with petulance.

Tom stared him down. “You mothers and I bought this stuff for you; you are under 18. We can and will make sure you don't make the same mistake twice.”

Only Cammie seemed to take his side. Although, like him, her bag was now searched daily by her parents.

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Timothy's phone went off in his pocket while he was at work in the restaurant. It was Cammie letting him know that his family was in his apartment. Timothy removed his apron and went straight to his locker. The shift manager appeared at the head of the alcove.

“They here, chef?” she asked.

Timothy nodded. “I'll pick up a double when they're gone to make up the time I'll miss.”

The shift manager frowned. “Don't bother. It's your family.”

Timothy zipped up his sweater and shouldered his bag.

“Dock my pay or give me the double,” he said.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” the shift manager said.

Timothy didn’t answer. He was already on his way out the door, speed walking to the subway.

His mother called as he was turning onto 162nd Street. His reflex was to let it go straight to voicemail. Instead, breathed in deep and put the phone to his ear.

“What,” he said.

“You got everything you need?” Laura’s voice sounded uncharacteristically small.

“Yes.”

“Don’t be like that, Tater Tot,” Laura said.

Timothy cringed. He hated that nickname.

“Yes...Mom.”

Timothy could hear his mother’s eye roll. “You get that phone I forwarded the cash for?” she said.

“Yes. It’s active and ready to go so Dad and Mama Erika can call you as much as you like,” Timothy said.

“Thank you.”

The sincerity in Laura’s voice caught Timothy off guard. He stopped at the door to his building. For the first time since receiving news of the Fall of Boston, he wondered what his mother was feeling.

“You okay, Mom?”

There was a deep exhale on the other side of the line.

“I am now that they’re with you. It’s not here with me but they’re finally safe,” Laura said.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Timothy looked up, eyes zeroing onto the ninth floor. “Do you know what happened up there at all, in Boston?”

“No. They only got five minutes on a satellite phone when they landed in Plymouth and then another five minutes when they were told Cape Cod was evacuating.”

“Guess we’ll find out together, huh?” Timothy said.

“Have them call me as soon as you can, okay, Tater Tot?”

“Got it.”

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The last time Timothy had seen his father Tom was the day Timothy and Cammie left for New York. It was supposed to be a day when secrets would end. He and Cammie had finally graduated high school and the two of them were on their way to the Big Apple for college. Both families were in a celebratory mood. Timothy had not expected to run into uniform opposition when he announced his intention to marry Cammie.

Even Timothy had to admit it was a truly ugly scene. Cammie later said that she had no idea why he thought springing everything on their parents all at once might work.

“Well, your mom is Mama Laura’s oldest friend,” Timothy said. “I figured she might help.”

“Oh, and then they’d both team up on our dads?” Cammie taunted.

Timothy had no answer to that. After all, Laura herself had laid down the rules for college: no children, no spouses until graduation. When she reiterated her rules after he broke the news, Timothy had exploded.

“How? When you three live the way you do,” he’d shouted. “How can you deny us our happiness?”

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Laura had tried to tell Timothy that they were not saying no, just that they needed to wait.

“Your father waited until we graduated from college to ask me the first time, Tater Tot,” Laura said. “Even then I wasn’t ready.”

They had to be patient, Laura repeated. Timothy, whose birth had been a week early, had never been patient.

And now here was his father in the apartment Timothy shared with the woman he’d married against the family’s will. Tom stood in the doorway to the kitchen wearing filthy hiking pants and a grungy flannel shirt. His beard was longer than normal, his eyes hollowed out. Sitting on the couch were Mama Erika, thin and elvish, and his sister Gabby, willowy and reticent. Timothy blinked.

“Where are Tori Beth and Harrison?” he asked.

He heard a snuffle from his armchair. Cammie held a crumpled tissue under her chin. Tom swallowed.

“There’s something I need to tell ya kid,” he murmured.

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Tori Beth and Gabby were born a day apart to Laura and Erika, respectively. Tori Beth was a force to be reckoned with from the get go, taking charge and dragging along people behind her. The person she was usually dragging was Gabby, painfully shy and never sure of her place. As a general rule, Timothy tried to avoid his sister’s adventures. As a kid this had been easy. All he needed to do was latch onto his older brothers, the twins Michael and Matthew. If Tori Beth wanted to join them Timothy claimed it was a boys only activity.

Tom would have none of it.



## “Dissipating Clouds”

“There are no boys only or girls only games in this house,” he said. “You can’t use that reason.”

“But I don’t want her tagging along!” Timothy yelled.

“That has nothing to do with her being a girl, does it?” Tom said.

Timothy didn’t care. Never did - even when Tori Beth kept his secrets.

Tori Beth had been the first one to figure that Timothy and Cammie were dating. Even though the vaping incident was two years in the past, there was no way in hell that Timothy was going to tell his parents about his relationship with Cammie - especially since he and Cammie had begun smoking weed every chance they got. It was at these parties, when it was just himself and Cammie amongst a select group of friends, that Timothy felt most comfortable. No family to answer to, no one to tie him to something to which he hadn’t consented. His sarcastic wit needled with rapier-like precision against the guys who joked around with him, and Cammie indulgently served him up queues that he would spike with a punchline.

Cammie. Glorious, gorgeous Cammie, who laughed at his jokes and smiled at him as if he were the only person in the world. He ached for the smell and the heat of her, to feel her draped across his lap - especially when he was floating in the relaxation weed provided.

Tori Beth found him in such a state at a party celebrating the school basketball team’s trip to the state semi-finals. Timothy was a bench player who came in during blowouts. Cammie’s brother Kameron was also on the team, giving excellent cover for why she was there. They were in a guest bedroom of an enormous house in the Boston suburbs. A lamp on a nightstand cast a noirish glow, hiding half of Cammie’s profile.

“Turn your head,” he whispered.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Cammie, smirking, did as he requested. Timothy watched the light wash over her face and then back again when her head returned to its normal position.

“It’s like watching a sunrise slide across your face,” he said.

Cammie laughed. “You are so high.”

Timothy grinned. “When you’re right, you’re right.”

A voice eerily like his mother’s cut through the fog.

“I’m sure our parents will have something to say about that.”

Timothy struggled to focus. A wave of panic crashed through him at the sight of long golden hair and a stern gaze. When he realized it was his little sister and not Laura, he made a dismissive gesture.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“Are you so stoned that you forgot Harrison’s also on the team, dipwad?” Tori Beth said.

Timothy shrugged his shoulders and kissed Cammie’s exposed neck. “Guess it slipped my mind.”

It was only when he saw Tori Beth’s wide green eyes that he remembered Cammie was in his lap. He paused, trying to think of something - anything - to say. His impulse was to deny, that she wasn’t seeing anything. However, he knew trying to gaslight his sister was a fool’s errand and Timothy did not feel like going through an interrogation.

“Don’t tell Mom and Dad,” was all he could muster.

“About the weed or about you and Cammie?”

“Yes,” Timothy said.

Tori Beth grunted a laugh. “Fine, I’ll keep your secrets. You are my brother after all. But don’t expect me to go to bat for you if you get in trouble. That’s on you.”

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Timothy raised his fist in agreement and Tori Beth tapped it with her own.

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Timothy sat at the tiny table shoved against the wall of his kitchen. Like most New York flats, it was a kitchen in all but name, with room only for a microwave, a range, a fridge, and the bare minimum of storage space. It made Timothy feel uncomfortably close to his father.

“So you don’t know if Tori Beth and Harrison are alive?” Timothy said.

“We don’t know if they’re dead either,” Tom replied. “Both were alive before we got separated.”

Timothy’s jaw clenched. Always the optimist, his father. He looked at Tom from under his brow.

“Does Mama Laura know?”

Tom held out his hand like a beggar. “As soon as I make the call.”

Timothy’s stomach split open. The sad, pleading look in his father’s eyes was unbearable.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell her when you landed in Plymouth weeks ago?”

Tom scowled. “You’re really going to get into semantics now?”

Timothy stood and walked out the kitchen. He ignored Cammie’s hail in the living room and almost succeeded in ignoring Mama Erika as he waited by the elevator in the hallway.

“Timothy Joseph, don’t you fucking ignore me.”

He grimaced. Even though Erika was not his birth mother, the middle name still bit. The elevator opened and he walked in. Erika followed. He was about to object when a finger was thrust into his face.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do: you’re gonna buy me a beer at that bar a couple of blocks down and then we’re gonna screw your head on straight,” Erika said.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Mama Erika had always been the one who could put things in a way that Timothy would accept. When he was in high school, he would sometimes pretend to not understand his father’s or mother’s reasoning or rules; more often than not, Erika’s sarcasm was what would break through his obstinance. She provided a relief valve during his tempests and he could often be found on her side of the house in front of the TV.

Given their history, her ordering him to take her to a bar wasn’t surprising and, if he was honest, he really needed a beer. Apparently she did as well. Erika, eyes closed, let out an inappropriately sensual moan after the first swallow. Timothy smiled.

“Jesus, I’ve missed that taste,” she said.

Timothy spun his glass on the sticky wooden table. He wondered how long the beer had lasted after the separatists locked Boston in a siege. Erika leveled her gaze on Timothy. Her blue eyes were accusatory, her wide mouth set in a withering frown. Timothy spun his glass faster.

“Okay, what’s your major malfunction, buster,” she said.

Timothy arched a brow. “Seriously?”

“Did you even try to give your Dad a chance to explain or did you storm out before he could say anything?” Erika said.

Timothy looked down at the table.

“That’s what I thought,” Erika said.

Timothy exhaled slowly like a teacher dealing with a recalcitrant pupil. He tried to impart how wrong it was that his father hadn’t informed Laura of Tori Beth’s disappearance, that it should’ve been done on the first phone call, that this was just another example of his father’s equivocality.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

“So, if Cammie was left behind during an evacuation while under artillery fire,” Erika said, “you’d tell her parents when you called them from a phone you only had five minutes with - in public, surrounded by dozens of people?”

Timothy blinked. It was Erika’s turn to sigh like a frustrated teacher.

“Think, Timothy,” she continued, “your father wants privacy for this call and so do I. It’s killing your Dad right now that he can’t tell your mother in person.”

“She’d literally murder him if he did,” Timothy said.

Erika did not smile. “She’d immediately resurrect him, and I would help her.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence. The bar grew louder as people began pouring in after work. With the bar’s low ceiling, there was no place for the conversations to go except back down on top of them. Timothy shook his head petulantly. Reaching into his back pocket, he dropped the phone he’d bought for Tom and Erika on the table with a thunk.

“Just have him make the call when I’m not there,” he said, tipping the beer to his lips.

Erika picked up the phone. The bright screen washed out her complexion and highlighted every line in her face. Timothy squinted over the top of his beer.

*When did she get so old?* he thought.

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The day of Boston’s conquest, Timothy was working prep at the restaurant. The head chef came out of her office and informed him the separatists were making their final assault on his home city.

“It’s not looking good,” she said. “Take the day if you need it.”

Timothy blinked, his knife poised over the carrots he was dicing.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

“No,” he said. “I’ll just change some settings on my phone, and if there’s a call, I’ll take it.”

The head chef nodded and went to give the news to the rest of the crew. Timothy rolled through his contacts list until he came to his mother’s number. His stomach fluttered as he unblocked it and clicked his phone off silent.

The call came just as the lunch rush was ending. Timothy nodded at the next cook on the line to take over his spot and walked into the alley behind the restaurant. Heart racing, he reached for his vape and took a few puffs before answering.

“Hey, Mom,” he said.

“Timothy.”

His mother’s voice dissipated on the third syllable, wrapping around him like a hug. He took another puff.

“Timothy,” she repeated.

“Hey,” he said, his own voice mellowing.

The line crackled.

“Where are you?” he said. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m in Texas, didn’t Cammie tell you?”

Timothy nodded to himself and puffed. “Right, I forgot. What about everyone else?”

More crackling, then a deep breath on the other end.

“I don’t know. I don’t know…”

Timothy nodded. “Cammie told me they had a plan. They’re probably safe. They’ll call when they can.”

“Yes. Yes, I know they will,” Laura said, voice quivering.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Timothy took another puff. His body was starting to sing from the nicotine.

“I’ve missed you, Timothy,” she said. “I’m sorry that things went so haywire.”

Timothy looked up at the skyscrapers surrounding the restaurant, mountains of cold steel and equally cold concrete that blotted out the warm spring sky.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I know why you had to go your own way. I know what love is.”

“Doubly so,” Timothy said.

Laura laughed. “Yes. I’ve missed your father and Mama Erika somethin’ awful, Tater Tot.”

Timothy smiled.

“I get it,” he said.

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It was one in the morning when he returned to his apartment. Cammie had been giving him updates all evening, urging him to come home. Timothy had stayed glued to his barstool watching the Yankees, trying to keep himself somewhere between drunk and buzzed. He didn’t want to be sober when he talked to his father.

Erika and his sister Gabby were asleep on the floor in sleeping bags. Cammie was not on the sofa or recliner and thus probably in bed. A flickering light vainly illuminated the kitchen; Timothy was drawn to it. A lit candle stood in the center of the little table in the kitchen. His father sat with his head in his hands and a blank notebook in front of him.

“You know we have electricity in this place, right,” Timothy said.

## “Dissipating Clouds”

Tom didn't move. Timothy sat in the chair opposite of his father. His buzz was wearing thin, replaced by the dull, heavy feeling of post-drinking sobriety. Tom was a statue. Timothy leaned forward, waving a hand in front of his father's face.

“You okay, old man?”

His father remained catatonic.

Then, against his own will, Timothy's hand slid across the table and gripped his father's forearm.

“Dad dude?”

Tom blinked. His eyes shifted up and he smiled.

“Hey, kid. Mama Erika said you'd be back late.”

Timothy swallowed. A stone was rapidly growing in size in his chest.

“Did the call go that badly?” he said.

Something more turbulent than a sigh escaped Tom's lips.

“Kid, I really hope you never have to make a call like that.” He craned his head to peek into the living room where Mama Erika and Gabby were. He opened his mouth to say more but found for once in his life that words failed him.

Timothy stood and went to the fridge, returning with a half empty bottle of chenin blanc that Cammie favored. He unscrewed the cap and filled two mugs, sliding one over to his father. Timothy raised his mug in toast. Tom, suddenly curious, mirrored his son's movements.

“To Tori Beth,” he said, referring to his lost sister. “She will be heard from again. She was never one to stay quiet long.”

Tom clinked his mug off Timothy's and they both drank the wine in one gulp. When they finished, Tom picked up a pen off the table and began to write.



## “Dissipating Clouds”

“I want you to know, kid, that I am going to do everything I can to hasten that day. Lord knows how much your mother needs it.”

Timothy poured himself the last of Cammie’s wine. “How bad was the call?”

Tom stopped writing. “Do you remember up to camp when you were little, the scary sound that rabbit made when an owl carried it off?”

Timothy nodded.

“You said it sounded like a demon was pulling someone’s soul from their body. That’s the sound your mother made when I told her Tori Beth was missing.”

Tom’s mouth twisted as if he were about to weep. Instead, he returned to writing, the pen scraping loud and heavy on the paper. Timothy tilted his mug towards himself, making a show of examining the bubbles in the wine.

“Did Mom make that sound when Cammie and I left?” Timothy asked.

The scratching of Tom’s pen stopped. “The three of us did,” he said. “The three of us still do a little when you don’t answer our texts and calls.”

Timothy downed the last of the wine and stood uneasily. “Guess that’s good to know.”

Tom got up and placed his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“You’re our son, Timothy. Nothing will ever change that. I know why you’re angry at me, at us. But please don’t cut us out.”

Timothy’s body weaved a bit. His eyes darted back and forth as gears tumbled in his brain. When they clicked to a stop, Timothy reached up and patted his father’s hand.

“Call whenever you like, old man,” he said. “I’ll pick up.”

Tom knew better than to hug his son. He wasn’t the hugging type, never had been. So he gave Timothy’s shoulder a hard pat and sat back down at the table. Timothy set the empty mug

“Dissipating Clouds”

and bottle of wine in the sink and turned left to the bedroom. As he climbed under the covers his thoughts drifted back to the family cabin. He held the sleeping Cammie hard against his chest as the dying rabbit’s scream echoed in his memory.