Family Games

Mel and Phil tell themselves they are doing this for the kids, that after weeks of tears and whisper-fights, normality is restored. Family game night is a way of staging "Look at how well Mom and Dad get along!" It's jazz hands.

The truth is more complicated. This truth is exposed when first Silas and then Cora retreat, yawning, to their respective bedrooms, Silas to his iPad, Cora to *A Wrinkle in Time*, and leave Mel and Phil by the fire, still duking it out.

This new game is a weird one. Phil bought it as a store called Marbles—"games for the brain." It's a bit like Chinese checkers, a bit like rubbing your stomach while patting your head. Mel can't quite get the hang of it, but the player tokens fascinate her. Such different sizes and shapes, they seem to have migrated from six entirely unrelated games. Phil's token, for instance, has octopus tentacles and is made of stretchy rubber. The thing has the wingspan of his forehead. Whereas Mel selected the smallest token, a spiky, mud-colored sphere the size of a gumdrop.

"What is this supposed to be?" Phil says, inspecting it.

"Prickly pear?" Mel speculates.

But privately she thinks it is a landmine, or a spiny rockfish, lying in wait for an unsuspecting foot.

"Time for bed?" Phil says.

But now that bed means separate rooms—Phil sprawled out, tentacles spread, on their California king, Mel whorled like a snail shell in the lumpy guest bed—neither of them is in any hurry to quit playing.

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They always liked games. Back in grad school, they first met at a get-to-know-each-other picnic for their cohort in Levy Park. The poets and fiction writers, all from elsewhere, were stunned and dopey in the Florida heat.

“Hydrate,” second-years told them, handing out beers, water bottles, plastic cups of lemonade. “You’ll get used to it.”

Mel never did. The Florida sun always felt like a padded mallet bonking her on the head, whack-a-mole style. Perhaps she would have curled up in the shade with the moaning poets, had it not been for Phil, glossy with sweat, loud and stubborn.

“Hey, does anyone want to play badminton?”

He had brought a badminton set to Tallahassee when Mel had brought barely anything at all. When she had packed as if for a lifeboat, limiting her decorations to a few moody postcards, a blue ashtray from Caviar Kaspia.

“Sure, I’ll play.” She helped him shake out and extend the net.

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To excel at Scrabble, you must be able to anagram: live, evil, vile.

For Pictionary, go for efficiency: the compact doodle. Don’t get distracted getting the details right, perfecting the curl of an antenna.

For Clue, you need a system. Mel keeps track when everyone passes. Her Clue sheets are columns of initials: S, C, and P have all passed on the Revolver. Phil has an entirely different system, inscrutable to her. After games, she looks at his sheets and puzzles over what the annotations mean.

Always, they stick with the classic versions. There is a new Clue that has incorporated unfamiliar weapons. Poison is one. A new Stratego reverses the power spectrum, so now the Marshall, instead of being #1, is #10. But #10 makes no sense! #1 is, intuitively, the most powerful, not #10. She and Phil shake their heads over this boneheaded revision. In stores, examine the boxes carefully. The most desirable Clue of all, though hard to find, has the Miss Scarlet she and Phil remember from their respective childhoods (Mel's in Fresno, California, Phil's in Des Moines): the one where Scarlet has dark, straight hair and hooded eyes, and wields a cigarette holder.

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When they were graduate students, Mel and Phil played a game they invented called "Four Letter Word Game."

"It's not what you think," they would tell their friends. Think of a four letter word where all letters are different, no duplication. The other person guesses the letters. It was like Hangman, but you contained the data in your head.

Lying on the guest bed, Mel remembers one time when she finally had Phil's four letters nailed down. "Is the word wolf?"

"No."

"Flow?"

He was giddy with delight. "No!"

"Fowl!"

"On the third try!" He was crowing, so pleased. Their poet and fiction friends, at the same bar table, though long since disengaged from this bizarre Phil and Mel game, laughed, because Phil's glee was infectious. It is his great talent, pleasure.

Mel was skeptical. “I bet you were cheating. I bet it was wolf.”

“I never cheat!” Phil said, shocked. Then he amended, making his Borscht belt comedian face: “I mean, I never cheat at games.”

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Mel knows Angie by sight from school drop-offs. Her hair, a fluffy nimbus, looks like a dandelion. Nonetheless, they have never been formally introduced. Mel feels like a seventh grader, trying to ratchet up nerve to approach some intriguing girl. She makes herself extend her hand.

“Hi, I’m Mel Garrick. My kids are Cora in fifth grade and Silas in third.”

Angie nods. “Oh, right. I know who you are. The writer’s wife. You’re married to Phillip Garrick, right?”

Mel flinches, which makes Angie wince. “Sorry! What a terrible thing to say.”

“Well, actually,” says Mel, “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

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Another game, more compelling by far to Phil and Silas than to Mel or Cora: baseball. The boys sit in the stands watching the Giants, Silas marking his scorecard. K, Mel knows, stands for strikeout (knockout). Mel doesn’t like baseball, but she understands its rules, this one in particular: three strikes and you are out.

The three strikes in this case:

Sharon, whom Mel thinks of as “the acolyte.” Skin so pale she reminded Mel of a glass of bluish milk. She was one of Phil’s students. When Mel pictures her, she imagines that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where a lecture room of enamored girls watches Indiana Jones teach. One has “Love you” written on her eyelids.

Strike Two is Anna Atkiss, a writer whom Mel has read but never met. Before Phil had an affair with Anna, Mel loved her novel. She recommended it to Phil. “Not really your style, babe, but so good.” It had a starfish on the cover. When Phil met Anna at a conference, the first thing he said to her was, “My wife loves your book!” He told this to Mel on the phone that night, before he stopped talking about Anna, before Mel threw away her book.

Strike Three is Nadine.

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When Angie discovers the nature of what Mel wants to discuss, she upgrades their coffee plan to a drink. “Best canvassed over booze.”

It turns out that Mel is not the first wife to seek her out. Angie explains this over Manhattans. She has become something of a local celebrity at their school, the poster girl of the amicable divorce. “I should hand out business cards,” Angie says grimly, shaking the ice in her glass.

She tells Mel her story. Her husband fell in love with an associate at his firm. The thing that Angie finds retrospectively annoying is that she liked this woman. Well, she liked Martha’s boyfriend more. They had the couple over for dinner, several times.

“I actually wondered what the boyfriend, a dynamic, interesting guy, was doing with Martha. She seemed a little drab.”

“She wasn’t attractive?”

“Well. She has big eyes, short hair. She looks like an extraterrestrial. She’s attractive, I suppose, the way an extraterrestrial is attractive.”

Mel laughs so hard she spits out a mouthful of Manhattan. This is the moment she knows she and Angie will be friends. Years from now, she might elbow Angie and say, "That woman over there is attractive the way an extraterrestrial is attractive."

But this forecast also makes Mel's eyes tear. Because it used to be Phil that she would have these private, silly jokes with, not some stranger-friend who looks a little startled, then laughs.

Angie continues. Even though she clicked more with Stephen, the boyfriend, she considered Martha a friend. So when Angie found out about the affair, her initial reaction was rage. She talked to herself in the shower, and though she often addressed, in these monologues, her husband Bob, just as frequently she berated Martha.

"How could you?" Angie says. "That's what I kept saying to invisible phantom Martha. How could you?" She sighs. "So I don't mean this to sound all fluffy and Zen, because fuck that. But here's what I realized: hatred corrodes the vessel." She shrugs. "I know! I sound like a fortune cookie. But all this bitterness I contained, all this vitriol, was torqueing me into this sour, injured person. Of course it was also terrible for our kids. So I 'womaned up,' is the verb I use. Because let's face it, men have no capacity to do this shit. Even though Bob was squarely in the wrong, it took me saying, 'Okay, enough already, olive branch,' for us to normalize things. Only then could he stop being an asshole about money, because you know lawyers, the stinginess is structural. Only then could we make things less toxic for the kids."

Amicably divorced women are safe to admire, is Angie's theory, because it involves no envy. Everyone admired Mother Teresa, since no one wanted to be her.

"So tell me," Angie says. "What's it like to be married to a famous writer?"

“Barely married. Unmarrying.”

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Now they call it, Uncouples Therapy. Dr. Beckman has been with them for the haul, since Strike One. They have graduated and then slunk back to him more than once; “We’re recidivists,” Mel and Phil say.

But ever since Mel’s revelation that there is no getting over Nadine, that she simply cannot forgive (pretend to forgive) and forget (pretend to forget) one more time, it has been Uncouples Therapy. As such, it has ceased to be the Phil Garrick show, their status quo, even back in grad school when Phil was merely glittery with potential, but exponentially more so since his prizes. Even a venue that is structurally geared towards balance, like couples therapy, has historically been Phil’s show.

But now Mel directs the program. Ever since her announcement, “I don’t want to be married anymore, but I want to do this right.”

Civil. Kind. Supportive. But no awful, phony, Gwyneth Paltrow-esque “Conscious Uncoupling” shit.

Dr. Beckman praises Mel’s candor and generosity. But Mel gets Angie’s point about the admiration, about what makes Mel palatable: there is nothing to envy about her situation.

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San Francisco has become insane. At night, Phil snoring away in the giant king bed like the giant king he is, Mel looks through Craigslist and panics. She will need at the very least a two-bedroom for the kids—assuming she can force Cora and Silas to share a room. Phil likes to say Cora and Silas get along about as well as Republicans and

Democrats in Congress do. To this, the kids respond, like the Blue State children they are, “I don’t want to be the Republicans!” So Phil designates Republicanism as a penalty: “Last one to the car is the Republicans!”

Crappy two bedrooms in the Mission are going for five grand. She should have left Phil in 2008, after the real estate crash, after Strike One. Mel refreshes and refreshes, as if a new search will scrub away this Googlification of San Francisco.

Phil’s position with the house is like his stance on the master bedroom: she is very welcome to come back, he always says, when she complains about not sleeping well in the lumpy guest bed. This is her choice, not his. One morning, watching her sigh over Craigslist, he points to the 12-by-9 shed in the backyard.

“You could live there!”

Mel stares at him. He is obviously being serious, though when he absorbs her expression, he tries to rearrange his face to convey, instead, joking.

“Phil,” she says. “I am not a dog.”

“I was thinking of you more like a garden hose. Or a rake.”

“Dude,” she says, “You are the rake.”

Sometimes Mel thinks Phil hands her these lines, like they used to set up each other’s stories.

“You tell the next part.”

Stories for Mel and Phil, at least the good stories, were community property, something to refine collaboratively. They were a relay team. But the downside of being a couple who composes stories, is that the story supersedes the lived experience. At age thirty-nine, with Phil now for fifteen years, Mel remembers not so much how they met as

the retold story of how they met: unfurling the badminton net together like a scroll, trying to rally the faint, sun-stunned poets and writers: “Come and play!”

Then, no one would play with Phil but Mel. Now, there’s a line of volunteers.

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Mel once read a Facebook thread where a writer friend, a guy from their MFA program, posed this question: “Writers: when did you start identifying to strangers as a writer, instead of as whatever job actually pays your bills?”

The thread, by the time Mel came across it, was already mile-long. The upshot was that most writers did not (though as more than one pointed out, of course they all privately considered themselves such. Why else were they responding to Dave’s address to “writers”?). Officially, though, most introduced themselves as teachers, editors, sommeliers. Very few writers were in Phil’s position, with his prizes, his best-sellers, his tenure at Stanford.

Yet what stunned Mel about this thread was that she always identified as a writer, even though she hasn’t written anything in six or seven years. Anything, that is, but checks, and notes Silas demands for his lunchbox (“I’m so proud of you! Love you, Mom”). She’s like a fat person who doesn’t consider herself fat. While ninety percent of writers might suffer from crippling insecurity, she has historically been so confident that it shocks her to realize she is thirty-nine, virtually unpublished, and her husband keeps cheating on her. That even though she always thought they were a perfectly matched team, they are in fact on opposing sides, and she has lost this game.

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Back in grad school, they called themselves Philomel: the woman in Greek myth who was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. He cut out her tongue to keep her from telling on him. Stupid man to assume that communication could only happen vocally! Maimed Philomel wove her story into a tapestry for her sister, and the two sisters took revenge by killing his son and feeding him to Tereus. Afterwards, Philomel transformed into a nightingale, communicating through song instead of speech.

"That is a fucking creepy domain name," said their friend Dave, the same Dave of the Facebook query, when they told him the story. They took turns: Mel told the rape part, Phil the cannibal part.

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More about names: Mel never liked her given name Melanie (too cheerleader-ish), and as an eight-year-old chose Mel as both nickname and penname. Mel was jaunty; Mel was abbreviation for "mellow," "mellifluous." Now it seems to stand for grimmer things: melancholy, melanoma. She considers readopting Melanie, in the same way she considers other transformations (dying her hair dark blue, shaving her head).

Phil's name connotes plenitude. It lends itself to dirty jokes, sex talk ("Phil me," Mel used to say in bed). He had never much liked Phillip ("Fillip: it's a snap, it's a finger-flick"). And yet, for years, for his entire publishing life, he has been Phillip Garrick. People say, "Oh, you're the wife of Phillip Garrick!" and stare at Mel, as if she can tell them secrets.

She hears him, these days, introduce himself as "Phillip Garrick," both names. She wonders, like the caterpillar with the hookah in the Alice story, Who are you?

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Another family game night, the kids long since gone to bed, Phil drops his token with the rubbery tentacles down Mel's shirt. She shrieks.

(Mel wonders what one's selection of a particular board game avatar says about a person. What does it mean that in Monopoly, Phil is the elongated car, while she is the thimble? What does that finger-armor signify?)

Watching Mel pluck the octopus from its clutch onto her bra, Phil laughs. When she extracts it and looks up, his face becomes more solemn.

"Is it okay to say?" he says. "I mean, to say I love you?"

"Not after five o'clock," says Mel. "It's the reverse of cocktail time. No declarations of affection after five."

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Their neighbors in the family housing complex in Tallahassee were a pair of PhD students in English literature, who got into screaming fights about Hegel. Mel and Phil would lie in bed and listen to them through the cardboard walls.

"I am not your Foucault warden!" shouted Ethel, the woman. "Don't stick me in your fucking Panopticon!"

I am not your Foucault warden.

She's attractive the way an extraterrestrial is attractive.

These scraps float in Mel's brain. She curates; she discards one, inserts one. She has never been good about clearing debris. If you haven't worn it in the last year, send it to Goodwill. But Mel can always imagine an occasion in the future where she might wear that striped jumpsuit. This is why she used to fail the written portion of her driver's test:

she treated the multiple choice questions as tricks. She thought of circumstances (walls of opaque fog) that might require that otherwise counterintuitive answer C.

But she is trying to get better about this, to treat letting go as a skill to develop.

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Even their wedding was a game. They threw a Halloween costume party the second year in Tallahassee, and dressed as a bride and groom. Well, vampire-victim bride and ghoul-groom: on Mel's neck, she painted puncture wounds, exuding a perfect teardrop of blood.

Towards midnight, Phil clinked a fork to his glass, and they rounded up their guests for a surprise ceremony. Only their officiant, Eliza, knew in advance.

Phil always tells the punchline of this story: "We were married by a gumball machine."

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Mel rubs her neck. "So tired. I hate that fucking bed."

"You can always come back," Phil says.

She wonders. Her resolve (Three strikes and you're out) has allowed Phil to claim his position: he wants to make things work. His door is literally open. This is the story he presents in Uncouples Therapy.

Sometimes Mel looks at Dr. Beckman and imagines herself as the star student, the one who shines, as she never shone in the MFA program (that was Phil). Though in her heart she knows, if Dr. Beckman brags about them to his wife, if he insinuates when he sees someone reading a particular book that he knows the author, that the star is Phillip Garrick.

Still, Beckman approves of Mel: her compassion, her humor about the bleak rental market. The rake in the garden shed story made him laugh: she and Phil are still performing their relay routine.

And Phil approves too. Mel has become, once again, the game girl he met fifteen years ago, with the tattoo of the fly on her collarbone.

How would either man react to some dissolve of will? To Mel in retreat?

It's a risk, and Risk is the one board game Mel hates (exhausting, the pounding of soldiers onto soldiers, the unthrilling goal of world domination).

If she says, "Okay, you're on," what then?

Would she call Phil's bluff? Force him to concede that the open door is only rhetoric. He doesn't really want her back after all, he's already casting his eyes down the line of volunteers, the starry girls with "Love you" painted on their eyelids?

Celebrities like to trumpet the value of old friends, the people who knew them when and before. These are the people they really trust, celebrities say, because their love is proven, it's authentic. These love the "real" person, not the construct.

But the obverse of knowing someone before fame is that the unfamous identity is always part of the composite picture. Mel knew Phil when he was a sweaty grad student with a unibrow, trying unsuccessfully to rally poets to play.

His first book, after the title page, reads, "To my Mel, this dedication for her dedication." At age thirty, Mel loved the double play: it seemed to forecast her own book in the future, to take it for granted. She could see her novel's spectral outline, calling back to him.

If she says “Honey, I’m home,” or “Okay, you win,” might he say, as their kids do, as she herself when a kid did, “No backsies”? Would his mask finally drop? And if it did, would Mel feel, at last, actually free? No longer on her thirty feet of bungee cord, tethered to the California king. She imagines she would stretch her nightingale wings, open her non-uttering but still vocalizing throat. She might, like Philomel, kick-start her flight away.