

## Vaguely Familiar

*Where, in the lord's name, is old—whatshername and what is her pile of sausage patties still doing there, rotting away on the kitchen counter? This is why we have flies! I swear this could be the first ever stink to stink, quite literally, to high heaven. I ought'a throw those meat blocks in the trash. It'd serve her right for wasting food... and also for not cleaning up after herself... and also for wasting food.*

Gertie bravely lowers her nose over the Corning Ware dish, failing to correlate the sausage's softly putrified, nitrate-preserved tang to the kitchen's pervading death fumes.

*That's not it. Must be more of those dirty, little animals, dying behind the walls. It's a bit early in the year for them yet, even if it is mid-October; mid-sixties today, at least that's what that weatherman said recently. Cam—something? It hardly matters. That half wit has no idea what he's talking about. The way he lets his mouth hang open, like some idiot hound dog, at the end of his segments. Terrible thing to say, but he kinda reminds me of my Jerry. When's the last time he's called? Too busy with his new trophy wife, running around in— Pittsburgh, is it? I wish I'd had a daughter. They take care of you.*

*The weather... wasn't it supposed to be warm today? It's actually quite drafty in here. Well there's the problem right there. Whatshername left the downstairs door wide open! Someone coulda' broken their neck! Where is she, anyway? Sometimes, it's like living with a teenager; a teenager that barely speaks English. Rosie? Rosa? Yes, that sounds right. When's Jerry getting home from school?*

Gertie's left arm flails in front of her face like a nunchaku, defending her olfactory sense of propriety from the unseen odors, as she lumbers across the kitchen's great expanse, using the arched chair back of the dinette set for support. She swings the basement door shut and a burst of spoiling meat funk wafts into her sinus cavities. She rubs her face as she bids her retreat, knocking over one of the chairs on the way out. The sausage mound patiently awaits her return.

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Jerry hates these backwoods roads, all interwinding and impossible to map out in your head. He shouldn't be lost. It's his job to know where things are. He'd recently read the first forty-odd pages of a book about navigating without a map or compass, which dismissed the idea of an innate 'sense of direction', which he claimed to possess. Unfortunately, he hadn't made it past the chapter on early Polynesian oceanic exploration, so the book is currently of no use to him.

According to his phone's GPS, Jerry's in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, traveling west towards Halifax. In actuality, he's somewhere in Dutchess County, New York; a netherworld of endless strip malls and tamed wilderness. The last discernible town center he passed through was Pawling, a quaint little hamlet with free two-hour street parking and an old-timey general store. He bought a shitty panini there for eleven dollars then spent about four minutes pleading

with the aging hippie proprietor for a receipt that he could submit to his accounting department for reimbursement.

Half the panini is still encased in its foil wrapper, amidst a pile of scattered flyers on the passenger-side floor. Twenty-three flyers posted so far and not one appointment yet. A typical response rate is close to one appointment for every three-and-a-half houses flyered (at least in NYC), which should yield around six appointments. The homeowners up here aren't used to this sort of thing, though. They'll probably sit on the flyers for days, calling a family meeting to discuss what an exciting opportunity this might be, though it could be a scam and maybe their bathrooms aren't clean enough to be photographed. Also, Christmas is only a couple months away and who wants to be bothered around the holidays? Jerry expects to receive a dozen useless phone calls from this area in February, having already moved onto another job. People are the worst.

So far, Jerry has received only one phone call. It was from a shrill-sounding woman, asking him to prove who he really was. He asked how he might sufficiently achieve that, to her liking, over the phone. She threatened to call the police on him. He offered to provide her with ample identification in person. If she was satisfied with it, maybe he could then take a few photos of her home? She responded with a verbal takedown of the new, liberal mayor, Jimmy Bernstein. This used to be a nice, peaceful place to live, but he now this Bernstein was really mucking things up. She placed a snarling emphasis on the last syllable, the 'stein'. Jerry asked if by liberal, she meant Jewish. She hung up, bringing an abrupt close to his day's lone social interaction.

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Gertie finds herself in the downstairs wash closet (as she likes to call it) with the sink running. She can't find any of her disposable, plastic dental picks. In their stead, she's found an old, stainless steel one under the sink, behind the can of Ajax. The tip is a bit rusted, but it should do the trick. She can't help but notice that her teeth don't feel right. There must be something big stuck between them.

*I thought I asked Rosa to buy me more of those picks last week. Guess she was too busy jabbering into the phone in Mexican with—whatshisname. She'd better be using those phone cards. When Pop gets home from work, I'm gonna ask him to let her go for once and for all. I'd do it myself, but I won't be able follow her upstairs to make sure she doesn't steal anything. Not with this balky hip. Besides, Jerry's too old for a nanny. He's already married and living in Ohio.*

Using her tongue as a probe, she can feel some kind of food, maybe a seed, stuck between her top right canine and first bicuspid. She forces the pick between the narrow gap, but can't tell whether the seed's been jarred loose, or not. She continues to run the pick along the fronts of her upper teeth, then the backs, then along the gum line. The sensation is, well, sensation-less. It's as though she's prodding around in someone else's mouth. Exploring higher up, she discovers a ridge line, running high along her gums, which she believe to be some kind of dental retainer.

Gertie hooks the pick under the ridge, and begins to pry it softly downwards. There is no pain, no blood, no feeling of any kind. She pulls down at the artificial ridge, but it's stuck on something. Gripping with both hands, she yanks with all her might. She feels her gums begin swish and slide in small increments before popping out of her head with the sound and sensation of a suction cup being pulled from wet tile. The dentures ricochet off of the bathroom mirror and land in the sink. She reaches for them in mid-air but misses, pulling down a sheer piece of fabric that has been taped over the vanity mirror. The sight of her reflection is a shock. The shaky geriatric hand, the wrinkle-strewn face. It is all unrecognizable to her.

*What is that, a trick mirror? This must be somebody else's face and teeth. They're certainly not mine. It looks like my mother, only with bits of my face. Is that what I'll look like as an old woman? I don't like tricks! Losing teeth in a dream means death is near for someone close to you. Last time I dreamt that I was pulling teeth out of my head, I woke to discover Jerry's hamster, Fozzie, had been killed by the cat.*

Gertie tries to call for Pop, but the words get stuck in her head on their way out. She takes this as further proof her of her dream state. She grabs at the antique door knob and pushes, but it doesn't budge. Someone's locked her in. She screams, but has to think long and hard before producing the sounds. She turns the knob again, this time pulling instead of pushing, and the door flies inwards, stubbing her slippered toe. Gertie is incredulous that even her own muscle memory could fail her at a time like this.

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Typically, a lower anticipated response rate can be countered by distributing a higher volume of flyers, but most of the houses up here are the sort of generic tract homes that sit right up on the road, hardly the rustic country estates he's seeking. It's already almost four. At best, Jerry'll get a couple of appointments scheduled for between five and six. By that point, the low light levels will cast an underexposed grain on his photos, which might not be so bad for this assignment.

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*What is that stench? Jerry needs to do the dishes and take out the trash when he gets home from school. What is that on the counter, breakfast sausage? He should know better than to eat a meal like that before dinner. That smell, it's just overwhelming, like someone died. I can't wait on Jerry. For all I know, he might have wrestling practice. I'll guess I'll have to throw those sausages in the trash and take it to the cans myself...*

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The post office looked very familiar. Jerry's almost certain that he turned right at it about an hour ago. That road continued, mostly straight, for several miles, before veering sharply a couple of times, eventually leading back to the very same post office. It couldn't possibly be a different one, could it? This time, he turned left. That must've been three miles back.

The peach split-level ranch he just passed, with all the wind chimes, also looked familiar; though he doesn't recall seeing a giant cord of wood stacked outside of it earlier. Jerry wonders whether a cord is precise measurement or a colloquial one, like a more polite version of a 'butt ton' or an 'assload'. He approaches another intersection and comes to a complete stop to survey his options. Nothing looks promising, just lines of trees stretching into the horizon, sporadically broken up by domiciles of the most uninspiring sort. This neighborhood is an Ouroboros.

Jerry turns on the radio. According to the news, not many good things are happening anywhere, unless a debt ceiling could be considered good. He doesn't have an opinion one way or the other. Instead of numbers, the AM band should read "comforting" on one end and "anxiety-inducing" on the other, that way he could dial it straight into his mood. It wouldn't sell, but not all inventions need to be practical. He listens for the traffic and weather "on the nines" then shut it off to ride in silence. A cold front will be moving in this evening.

Jerry estimates that he's lost between twelve and fifteen *f*-stops of light in the past twenty minutes, casting most of the wooded neighborhood in crepuscular shade. The trees still wear their autumn coats, maybe autumnal shawl is more appropriate. Occasionally the sun will poke through, it's light filtering softly through the Earth-toned leaves. This has a temporary calming effect. Jerry starts to consider the compensatory camera adjustments necessary to take photos in this rapidly diminishing light. Calculations are calming, at least distracting. He estimates that he'll need to boost his ISO rating as high as 2000 and lower his shutter speed to as slow as a twentieth of a second. This will require a steady hand.

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*Bastard weatherman, always so full of shit. I'm gonna' catch my death out here. It's freezing! God forbid someone happens by while I'm shivering around in my house dress. Oh no, here comes someone up the drive now. Could it be Jerry? Is he driving yet? Pop? I didn't expect him back so soon, though he has been gone awhile. This has been one of his longer sales trips. I hope it was a successful one. We need to get this house fixed up, maybe hire a new maid. What happened to Rosa? It gets so hard picking up after everyone all the time. The strife-filled life of the wife of the traveling salesman, as Pop loves to kid. Loved to kid. He hasn't done it in awhile. Wait, that's not Pop's car, it's too new. I can see his old Buick right over there in the garage, rusting down to its bones. In that case, where's Pop? Did something happen to him? Oh my, he's not alive, is he? No no no no no no no no no...*

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The landscape opens up into a lush farm valley, filling Jerry with a desperate hope for the proverbial last second Hail Mary pass. Maybe if he solicits more aggressively than his shyness typically affords, knocking on doors and chatting up leave-raking homeowners rather than just taping up flyers outside their mailboxes and thinking wishfully, he'll improve his chances. The sky has turned a dusky cobalt.

Jerry slows as he approaches a dowdy, nineteenth-century homestead. The desired elements are all on display: ranch fencing, distressed white farmhouse, an untended garden and plural sheds in various states of disrepair. It's perfect.

A woman stands near the back gate, waving at him, beckoning him. He has no recollection of this house, but he must've put a flyer up on it earlier. The lady probably recognizes his car and decided that she'd love to have her home scouted. And what a coincidence, he just happened to be driving by. Why else would she be flagging him down? He pulls into the gravel driveway and parks. He takes a moment to gather himself before exiting the car.

The continued waving no longer appears friendly, but frantic. Was she welcoming him or waving him off? This might be a bad idea. This could be the lady he spoke to earlier, the anti-Semitic lunatic. Jerry shifts into auto-pilot, delivering the pitch as he's done hundreds of times before.

"Hi ma'am, I'm sorry to bother you. This is gonna sound weird, but my name is Jerry. Ha, that's not the weird part, I guess..." says Jerry.

Her house dress is translucent, likely threadbare from decades of line-drying. Unless she bought it that way, the old floozy.

"I'm driving around the area today, trying to scout some homes for a movie shoot..." says Jerry.

He notices the three middle buttons of the house dress are all undone, displaying the bottom half of a massive pair of low-slung breasts.

"It's an independent horror film, called '*Braden*'..." says Jerry.

Raising his eye level, Jerry realizes that this woman could be committed to an institution based solely on the state of her hair; it's slick and thorny on top, matted down on the sides like a baby bird's; it's unwashed and striated at the roots. More like a dead baby bird? Weird how he noticed her boobs first.

"Anyway, I don't know if you're interested— You're probably not— But if you are, maybe you wouldn't mind if I took a few photos of your home to show to my director?" asks Jerry.

The woman gestures with an open garbage bag in her left hand. It's contents have been spilt all over the backyard.

"There would be three days of filming. I'm not certain of the exact dates yet, but it would be sometime early next month. We'd also need a few days to prepare your home for the shoot and and a day, or two, to restore it to its original condition afterwards..." says Jerry.

Jerry notices how he's talking to this woman like she's a small child he found hiding beneath a department store display rack, separated from her parents. Is that rude? Where are her teeth?

"We'd pay you a pretty good amount of money. Not as much as one of the big Hollywood Studios, of course, but it'd still add up to several thousand dollars..." says Jerry.

Of course she has no teeth. That shouldn't keep her from talking, though; it'd just make her sound kind of goey. At least she probably won't ask if she can be in the movie, like nearly everyone else he interacts with. Actually, this lady would be awesome in a horror movie. She's

scaring the... Jerry notices tears dribbling down her trembling cheeks. She makes no effort to wipe them away.

“Ma’am, are you crying? Is everything alright? Are you injured?” asks Jerry.

Snot streams around the corners of her mouth. Her eyes are screaming at him.

“Did something happen to you? Is there someone here who can help you?” asks Jerry.

The woman nods and points down at the gate.

“Are you locked out of the house? Is that it?” asks Jerry.

Jerry reaches for the gate’s handle, noticing that it’s been padlocked shut, only from the outside. Is this woman being corralled here, like livestock?

“Ma’am, do you speak English?” asks Jerry.

“Jerry.”

“Yes, I’m Jerry,” says Jerry.

“...”

“Who locked this gate? Did you do that?” asks Jerry.

She shakes her head, gesturing again at the gate as though *it* has just asked her a question.

“I’m not sure what to do for you, ma’am. Do you want me to call an ambulance, or a locksmith?” asks Jerry.

“You... You’re not Jerry, are you?” Her speech is strained and heavily accented.

“Yes, my name is Jerry. Jerry Sumter, like the fort,” says Jerry.

“Oh...”

“...”

“Where’s Pop, Jerry?”

“I’m afraid you have me mixed up with someone else, ma’am. I don’t know who Pop is,” says Jerry.

Jerry begins to wonder if, maybe, the gate is locked for her own protection. Someone else must live with her in this giant house. She’s obviously in no condition to be looking after herself. Someone should be home soon, if they’re not already.

“Rosa fell. She fell down the stairs, I think.”

“Who’s Rosa? Was she your daughter?” asks Jerry.

“...”

“Ma’am, I really need to get going, but you should really go inside. It’s getting chilly out here. I heard there’s a cold front moving in,” says Jerry.

“It smells in there.”

She must’ve wandered off the property before, possibly more than once. She would’ve been missing for several hours. Eventually she turned up, probably back at that inescapable post office, covered in scratches and pine needles, the front of her house dress hanging open like it is now. Her mailman would’ve recognized her and driven her home in his truck, even though it was out of the way. Her family gave him a very generous holiday tip that year.

“Rosa.”

“Did you just say Rosa? Who’s Rosa? Does she live here with you? Do you have a husband or any children that are either inside or at work? Maybe a grandchild or housekeeper?” asks Jerry.

“...”

“Listen, don’t worry about the movie scouting. You probably don’t wanna’ be inconvenienced by that sort of thing anyway. The way it works is we come and take over your entire house for like two weeks, turning everything upside-down. You wouldn’t be able to stay here for that whole time, either. Plus, stuff always gets lost or broken by the crew. This is a non-union job so everyone’s just out of film school. They have no regard for other people’s things. Plus, the producers never have any money in their budget to replace the stuff they break. It can be a real mess,” says Jerry.

“Is that right?”

“It’s a great house, though. Exactly the kind of place I’m looking for. How long have you lived here?” asks Jerry.

“...”

“Anyway, you should go inside and wait for someone to come home. It’ll be okay... Okay?” says Jerry.

“...”

“Look, I’m sorry. I really am. I’d love to help you, I just don’t know how,” says Jerry.

“...”

“Go back inside, okay? I’m sure you’ll figure out a way how. You got out here, didn’t you?” asks Jerry.

“Jerry?”

“Here, let me give you one these flyers. It has a bunch of information about the movie on it, as well my contact information. If you can’t use a phone, please have someone call me to let me know you’re okay,” says Jerry.

She studies the flyer, pretending to read it with cataracted eyes. She smiles at him softly, painfully. The fog seems to be lifting. She understands the awkward predicament she’s put Jerry in. She understand everything. She wishes she could speak with greater coherence. She’d thank him for his concern and release him of any obligation to her.

“I should be getting back on the road. I have to get home and I don’t really know where I am. Is that alright with you?” he asks.

“Oh... Bye-bye, Jerry.”

“Bye-bye. Take care of yourself,” says Jerry.

Slowly, Jerry backtracks towards his car. He can see the woman waving at him as he reverses out of the driveway. She fades out of sight from his side-view mirror as he starts down the darkened road. He checks his phone’s navigation app. It tells him he’s in western West Virginia.

Jerry wonders who Rosa might be. Maybe she’s the woman’s daughter or her live-in nurse. Maybe she had a heart attack a few days ago and is lying dead at the bottom of the

basement stairs. That would explain the smell. The woman wouldn't be able to call anyone to report it. Whatever kind of dementia she has, it seems to be affecting her speech.

She might not have a child, either; or, if she does, they could be anywhere. They should've done more to help her, both himself and this illusory offspring of hers. Once his phone signal returns, he'll call the local police department. He won't dial 911, he'll just look up the station's number and call it an as a good samaritan. They'll check in on her, it'll be fine... Only he didn't write down the address, and doesn't know the name of the road she lives on.

He should turn back, but what if the woman is still out there? He'll just get her worked up again. Besides, if the cops show up and find her in that state, her breasts flopping all over the place, she'd be humiliated. Or worse, they'd have her committed to a psychiatric hospital until someone comes to claim her. Maybe no one will. It's impossible to know when you're doing too much or too little.

Jerry passes the post office again, tries to ascribe significance to it. He should call the movie's production designer to explain today's lack of productivity. He'll put a positive spin on it. He didn't get to scout any homes today, but he found a lot of great stuff. People will start to call in the next day or two. Things move slower when you leave the city. His thoughts continue to wander as he drives vaguely south, his car smelling of the sausage-and-pepper panini on the floorboard.

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*Jerry's really gotten lumpy since moving to the midwest. Probably to better suit that dairy-fed wife of his. At least he finally stopped in to visit his crippled, old mother. Still, he could've stuck around to have dinner and check on the state of things.*

*I should really go inside. There does seem to be a cold front moving in, at least Jerry got that right. He should be a T.V. weatherman. He's about as useful as one, anyway. Who am I kidding, the boy wasn't exactly blessed with charisma.*