

## **Icemaker**

*Three dimensional.* When he stood before Jackie's mirror, George Huffman felt his roundedness. In youth, his reflection had stood in the glass in simpering angles, but somehow punchless. Now, in the morning light, his thick legs and middle bunched into a pointing belly that remained despite the workouts and cutting back on ginger snaps. His chest offered a bouquet of grey hair.

He walked about Jackie's apartment on cool feet. Her taste was plain, but everything was clean and neat. His blue boxer shorts were good quality, but frayed at the waistband.

It was the third time he'd come to Jackie's apartment while she was out. The building had a refurbished fitness room with elliptical machines with televisions, and rather than go home to shower he did it here. He liked to work at the Starbucks near the church, and sometimes Jackie would lunch with him there. She always had Starbucks gift cards—Lord knows where she got them—and insisted on using them for their lunches.

He pipped a NutriBar from the pantry, pulled on his slacks and shirt, and went onto the front balcony overlooking the parking lot. The balcony was the type you see in old motels, a long concrete slab with an iron railing and access to all the apartments on the floor. There were five apartments, and then a steep concrete stairwell that wound two flights

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down to the parking lot.

At the other end of the balcony, away from the stairwell, the icemaker turned on with a thundering noise. It was branded ‘Ice-o-Matic,’ and it seemed anachronous, with a closet to itself and a considerable motor.

Jackie’s neighbor, a thirty-something blonde woman, came out of her apartment in the midst of lighting a cigarette. She looked embarrassed to be caught smoking. George greeted her, though he could not remember her name. The widow. With two adorable Asian girls. She’d moved in a few months before.

She smiled at his greeting and they settled into looking out over the balcony, out to the highway with its steady traffic heading east into the city. The sun sat high above the road.

“Amazing,” George said. “The traffic this late in the morning.” The widow smiled.

“Are you heading into it?”

“No, just going to work close to here.”

He sensed he gave the impression that he had an office nearby, but decided not to correct her.

“You have two girls?”

“Yes—one’s out at her friends’ party and the other one is napping.”

“She sounded upset about the party.” George had heard her through the wall, screaming about not being invited — ‘I wanna go.’ Over and over.

“Tough to be the younger one. Do you think any of the drivers notice us?”

“Some, probably. We’re a couple of blue dots.”

There was an identical building not far from where his house with Bethany had been. It used to be one of their jokes—the sad sap motel for divorced dads. He used to say, “that’s where I’ll go when you kick me out.” For years he peered at it every time he passed in his car, to see if anyone was visible. This building had been converted a number of years ago. The façade was weathered around the shapes of the letters and logo of the old extended-stay motel.

It was funny how these things happened. The next time George worked out at Jackie’s apartment, the scene was repeated almost exactly. While George was showering, he heard the little girl screaming over and over, “don’t wanna nap. No! No!” She enunciated her consonants with fervor. Once he was dressed, he went out onto the balcony and found the widow there, smoking. George and the widow smiled at the familiarity of meeting at this time and place again. They lingered and George, who normally only smoked his cigar on the back patio of his apartment a few miles west, lit his and puffed on it in solidarity. It was quite a nice cigar, one of the luxuries he held on to.

“Did she fall asleep this time?”

“I think so — I’m listening for her.” She nodded back at her door, which she’d left partly open.

Coincidentally, at that moment the younger one—four?—came out of the widow's apartment and pulled the door to behind her. George flashed a smile and she clung shyly to her mother's leg.

"Well, Miss Rosie," she said. "Can you greet Mr. George?" The girl said nothing. "Did you sleep at all, peanut?" The girl shook her head.

"OK. Well, honey," the widow said. "Guess what? Mommy doesn't have her key. Let's walk over to the office and see if the man with the keys is around."

George realized he could invite the widow to call the office from Jackie's apartment, and as he was about to offer an idea came to him. "Wait just a moment."

Flush with mischief, he went through Jackie's apartment to the back balcony, where he sometimes left his gym clothes to dry. He carefully put his leg over the railing and around the divider onto the widow's back balcony. With a neat pivot, and only just jostling one of the widow's heavy pots, he was onto her balcony, through the dark and lavender scent of the widow's apartment, and opening her door to let her and the child in.

"Ta da!" He said.

The girl went wide-eyed and clapped her hands to her mouth. George did not register the widow's look, for the girl was suddenly jumping up and down in front of him, shouting Again! Again! Again!"

"I think once is enough," the widow said.

George had always been good with kids. “I’m George,” he said.  
“What’s your name?”

The girl resumed her shy clinging to her mother’s leg. “Ok, but I’m going to figure it out!” George said. The girl looked terrified and delighted.

“Well, we’d better see about a snack for this one,” the widow said.  
“Thank you. Can I offer you anything?”

George held up his NutriBar. “I’m all set. Glad to be of help.”

At Starbucks he attacked the Grommell project energetically, floating on the feeling of his good deed, and the bit of athleticism and danger it entailed. He smiled to himself. Amazing how simple. Why didn’t we all just do that, all the time?

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George liked getting ready for church, wearing your ‘Sunday best.’ We should all put our best faces on for one another. As a child he had liked a local judge and his clerk, who worked with his mother. Supremely confident men, who spoke with authority that must be derived from deep knowledge, long experience, and some indescribable source of power or wisdom. He knew many judges and had been a confident judicial clerk himself.

But the men he knew as an adult wore their confidence as a borrowed coat. He did not believe it. Especially the men he’d meet with after the service in the men’s bible study group in Jackie’s congregation.

Jackie's church was the wrong side of the recent split, in his mind. He relished coming to them as a friendly, disruptive force. A close reader and an asker of provocative questions, capped with a certain flourish: "I don't pretend to know more than the next man. But surely we must ask?" He laid that out there, as a stone securing the edge of his question as it billowed and pulsed like a sheet in a strong breeze. The other men, he sensed, knew exactly: it meant doubt. Doubt was not necessary. It was an adornment, or private, for the priest. Bible group was for applying well understood lessons to the contingencies of life.

The men's unwillingness to engage his doubt enraged and amused him and led him to engage Jackie's church more deeply. Which pleased her.

Jackie did not traffic in doubt or not doubt. This was what men did. She complimented how he looked. "My prepster," she said to him, using his word. There was affection, but it was that of a person who has lucked in to something, which he disliked. And he disliked how she said 'prepster.'

While he waited on the balcony for her, the widow and her girls came out. "Hello," she said in a friendly manner. "Do you and Jackie go to the same church?" the widow asked. She held her cross before letting it fall back to her sweater. The girls looked like dolls in their church dresses and patent leather shoes. They were aware of the attention they attracted. They clung shyly to their mother while she greeted George,

then scattered after a ball that caromed into the stairwell.

George was glad for the quiet so he could show his interest in the girls.

“Where did you get them?” He said suddenly. The widow looked puzzled, then looked up as the icemaker switched on behind her and released a new sheet. She smiled. “More ice!” Then, intimately, “I have a stash of Nutribars.” George pulled out his pockets to show he was out.

She smiled and handed him a mixed berry. An advantage of Nutribars was their slim profile. They could rest invisible in your pocket. After the widow had left he thought about his false tooth, whiter than the others, and the dark spot that bloomed slightly left of the bottom of his zipper. He recalled a glimpse of a wedding picture on the widows living room wall. The widow with her husband, a moon-faced man with thin black hair and bulging blue eyes.

As the widow and her girls made their way across the parking lot, Jackie emerged ready for church. “Poor thing,” Jackie said, smoothing her Western style jacket and leaning in for a kiss on the cheek. “She moved in a few months ago. Her husband had cancer. And those girls, without their papa!”

Jackie began to cry but wiped her face as though beating it back. She cried easily, but felt it was not seemly, like if one’s bosom showed through a blouse, or if others could smell your feminine odors. George looked vaguely irritated, but stayed there watching her. He had a fleeting thought: *He did not sign up for this kind of thing.* But he dismissed it just

as quickly.

George's Volvo SUV was immaculate. He'd bought it from a Mrs. Gamble in one of the toney suburbs 3 years ago, and the brakes were old and the chassis was heavy. He could not stop short, so he began braking well before stop signs and lights. On the back left floor mat there was a dried out muddy outline of his son Augie's right boot from the day before.

It had been pouring rain when he picked Augie and Gregory up after their trip to 'Cabo.'

They were tanned, all in linens, smashed with rain and laughing when George pulled up. He had a glimpse of Augie's old devoted look at his mother when she called his bluffs.

Augie and Gregory had a mock-heated exchange as George pressed the remote for the trunk, which ended with Gregory sitting "with the grownups" and Augie just behind George in the rear seat. Gregory put on a loud cd and hardly talked to George while making eyes at Augie in the back seat. What was Augie doing?

Gregory made pursing smiles at him. When he dropped them off in the city there was neither an invitation in nor a plan for the next visit. Augie did turn to him for a moment. "Thanks, pa. We're tired, but let's talk soon." And he disappeared into the warehouse with the bright beams and wires and brick and big windows.

Later that day, George was still thinking about Jackie's comment.



Poor thing. The widow didn't dress poorly. In fact, her clothes looked expensive, if modest and a bit worn. The girls were dressed almost comically cutely. Her car was an economy American sedan with the sport package upgrade. She left the place with the girls at 9:30 most mornings, and usually returned after 2.

She had been quite friendly, quite joyous when she and the girls returned from church. Jackie and George were going for their walk before the football, and the widow came up the stairs with her girls shouting a song in unison. She looked at them both, beamed, and said hello. George was grateful she didn't strike up a conversation that might lead back to one of their earlier talks.

Jackie knew and she didn't know. That is, he had a key, and she encouraged him to use the exercise room. But she didn't know when he came, and he timed his visits for when she'd be out so as not to lose too much time in the workday. The Grommell project was a bear, and he had almost billed out past the retainer and would need income. So the visits, though sanctioned, weren't known. And for that reason they felt like a secret, and his talks with the widow felt like a secret.

He worried Jackie would take it the wrong way. Once last fall, for her birthday, he let himself in and set up dinner. He'd bought various foods from a gourmet grocery Jackie liked nearby, New Markets. When she came home and found him there she was quiet with apprehension, as though his flowers and his containers from New Markets caused her to

feel reservations. She excused herself to her room to tidy up. She sat on the edge of her chair and felt suddenly very tired, thinking of her departed husband, Frank. It was five minutes before she removed her earrings and came out to offer a chaste kiss, and sat down to their meal.

George had left early with assurances that Jackie was only a little tired. He would call her the next morning, and they would plan their day. His own place, ten minutes further from the city, was spare.

Later that Sunday he saw the widow on the balcony—Rosie’s nap time—as he left to pick up some food at New Markets. She wasn’t smoking, but was looking out over the nearly empty interstate. “My girls like you, Mr. Huffman. Were—are you—do you have children?”

“Yes I do. A boy—August” he said.

“Oh—that is a nice name.”

“He’s 28. He lives in the city and sometimes goes to lunch with his old man.” George smiled bemusedly, he hoped.

She looked carefully at him, as though understanding more than he had said.

“That’s not too far.”

“Yes, I am fortunate. I see him when I have meetings downtown.” This was not strictly true. He had seen him, maybe twice a year, on his visits. It used to be for dinner. Now, lunch.

“You are blessed.” The widow fingered her cross.

Truthfully, it was partly that he didn’t like Gregory, and vice versa.

Should he tell her that? The last dinner was Augie's birthday. 26 years old. Beautiful boy. The restaurant was breezy, white, open, and the drinks cost nearly what George was used to paying for his lunch in the new cafe in the grocery store.

He had thought only Augie and Gregory were coming to dinner, but it became a party of 11, and he worried about the bill.

The boys, as Gregory called them, were fit and active—friends from a biking group, Augie had said. George held off asking further. It wasn't the lifestyle. It was just the thought of men touching men that repulsed him. And their jokes—he couldn't keep up. It was like a secret language.

As dinner progressed, the hat he'd brought as a gift came to feel ridiculous. When Augie was eight he'd come home from the office with a similar hat—bright red with silver wings. The senior partner, Bradley, had given them to the workgroup—“lift up our minds!” Bradley. Christ. Not Brad, not Mr. Thompson. And those absurd suspenders. “My thing,” he used to say. But the hats. Those were good. Everyone liked them, George thought. Runners all over the city wore them for a summer, then they were discarded. Eight-year-old Augie loved the hat and insisted on wearing it everywhere that summer.

George had chuckled out loud when he'd found one online while he was designing Augie's e-card. How did the web site know he'd like this? He had left it tucked in his blazer pocket. Now it sat on his dresser

at home. The return postage made it hardly worth sending back.

When George headed out to New Markets, he saw the girls playing in the fenced-in park. The older one had made piles of rubber chips and was defending them from her sister. The little one—Rosie—ran through the pile of chips to and her sister shrieked in protest. A little Godzilla terrorizing Tokyo. They were playing close to a gap in the fence where some hoodlum had cut a few links and peeled it back.

The widow's door was propped open by the hinged safety latch. The shades were drawn. Inside, it was dark, and cool, and a sweet smell wafted out onto the shared balcony. "Who's there?" George heard. "Oh, oh. Just me," George said. "The girls." George sensed the widow's mass rising in the dark, then she was at the door. "The girls are ok. Just playing at the park." The widow looked puzzled. "I was napping." She looked faintly chagrined. "The meds they have me on. You could put down a horse with these." "Doctors, yes." George said. His feeling that he had nothing to say was upon him.

He saw the widow later in the parking lot as he returned from New Markets, white boxes in hand. "Sorry about earlier," she said. "Migraines." She made a wry face. "That playground is not the best place for children," he said. Her face grew cold. "I mean, the fence has openings, and the street is busy." She said nothing. George offered, "I know this must be very hard on you." At that, she thanked him briskly and went her way. George felt he had offended, but really the widow

should understand the dangers?

After that George noticed that he did not see the widow on the front balcony so often. George could hear a soft music, and sometimes the television, coming through the wall or door from her apartment. Once he smelled cigarette smoke when he was draping his workout clothes over the railing on the back patio, but he did not say anything to her, just a few feet away, obscured by frosted glass. Neither did she speak, though he heard the squeak of the patio furniture after little Rosie began pounding the glass with her fists.

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The following weekend they had dinner plans. Jackie wore an embroidered jacket with Western accents and had a cheese log ready for him, as well as a sparkling water. Their reservations weren't for an hour with Bill and Nancy, the couple from church. "Don't you look debonair," she said to him while he kissed her cheek. He had gotten the bow tie just right, and had affected a pocket square and loafers with no socks. He stood with the stiff soled shoes sinking into her plush carpet. He was urgently hungry, but had to wait.

Bill and Nancy were coming from their parked car across the parking lot. George watched from the balcony. A minute before, he'd wanted to cut the cheese log but Jackie had shooed him off. He liked and didn't like this.

Bill and Nancy were in real estate together. They had signs in

lawns all over, and even a billboard near the highway exit. Nancy, who was direct, gasped when she walked in – “oh my goodness, Jackie dear. I mean, don’t get me wrong, but isn’t all this stuff from the house with Frank?” Jackie looked uncomfortable. Bill grasped her arm and sat her down. “Jackie,” he said, “you know Frank wanted you to move on. Spend the money, redecorate. Do you need a new place?” George felt as though he was not there.

Bill spread a cracker with a half inch of cheese and handed it to Jackie. Nancy announced, “Bill brought us a bottle from his cellar. It’s special!” George doubted it, then didn’t. Anyways, he no longer drank. “You’re sure,” Bill asked, gesturing towards the bottle. George shook his head. “More for us then!”

At first, he had been glad for Bill’s presence in the Bible discussion group, for he wanted dialogue and Bill was a reasonable sparring partner. After their conversation about the rift, though, he had been rather standoffish. George felt that the folks who wrote the Bible surely didn’t conceive of homosexuality as love. It was just physical. But today it was love.

George had raised the issue to the group directly. He was searching for truth, and the church had split, with one side (this one) refusing to engage modern social issues, and the other developing a doctrinal position about the big issues of the day.

It came down, in George’s mind, to 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10: “Or do

you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” George had started his turn leading discussion dramatically with this passage. His hope was to read into 1 Corinthians 7, with all the material about marital sex as a concession, and so all sex is sinful because the body is God’s and the tension is between bodily desires and serving God, not really about homosexuality. At the time, homosexuality was used as an example of an obviously sinful sexual practice meant to connect to the listener of the time in order to make a bigger point about how people should see marriage. Surely so much in our reading of the Bible has shifted that we recognize moments when the Bible’s verses are rhetorically pitched to an ancient (and often listening) audience, and we adjust to consider how, were the rhetoric targeted towards US, it would be different — ultimately it was an exhortation from god to worship and to love in the proper spirit. That was the point.

Since the meeting, George thought of this as his soliloquy. He felt its nuance, and sensed how an engaged argument could be made against it. And he knew he didn’t have an example of other rhetorical situations to compare this too, which would be helpful. But the point was engagement, and he was met, after his soliloquy, with a stony silence.

There were so many other examples of this—comments about the

cursed children of Ham, and the genocidal exhortations, and all the finicky rules about dietary prohibitions. Surely we are always adapting the book to the way we live now? Jackie's side of the church didn't address any of this. It was silent, but that meant silent disapproval. The other side—the widow's—was active, almost evangelical, and focused on the gay issue and abortion. They offered free counseling services, a euphemism. But maybe not – it was counseling, after all.

Perhaps he erred by asking Bill, who was cutting into the cheese log, how he'd chosen this side of the church during the split. Bill's features tightened. "George, you seem a good sort. Let's leave that question aside. I'm happy to answer your questions about scripture. The way Bill said it bothered him, as though it were not a dialogue of equals, but something different. Bill made a show of doling out crackers slathered with soft, peppery cheese.

"Fudge, I forgot to make ice," Jackie announced. She lifted her purse from the second hook by the door. "Never fear!" George called. He found the silver ice bucket in the high cabinet over the fridge and rinsed it out. "I'll be just a minute." He propped the door with the safety latch and eased it closed. Bill, behind him, said "Don't worry—we'll let you in" and closed the door with a click.

He thrust the scoop savagely into the ice, and struck a large object towards the back. "Probably a bolus," he thought. The machine was old—perhaps its motor sometimes conked out, or the fluid lines were



old and cracked and so, in this kind of weather, there was water which trickled over a ball of fused cubes and made something monstrous, or maybe just a lump. George's wrist hurt from the impact. When he turned back towards Jackie's, he sensed a small impediment on the balcony.

Rosie twined in and out of the railing that separated the balcony from the parking lot below. George felt chills run through him. When he was a teenager, his mother had a baby—Paul. George had had a recurring bad dream in which he dropped Paul over the stairwell onto a concrete floor below. The worst of the dreams was that dropping Paul was not accidental. He did it deliberately, and seized with regret as soon as Paul's body was out of reach.

Rosie was staring at George from behind an iron flower welded between two of the bars, her leg hooked around another. Her dress dangled over the parking lot, fifteen feet below. Carefully, George pulled his breath mints from his pocket and sat cross-legged on the widow's door mat. He put two mints on top of the box and pushed them towards her. She looked at them curiously for a moment, then back at George. Instinctively, he looked around for someone to take over. He tried grinning, and that with a look of sympathy, and whispered "come on, then. It's ok. *Tasty*." She perked up at the word. George said it again: "*Tasty*." And several more times, eventually modulating into a comical Chinese accent and wrinkling up his eyes "*Tasty tasty TASTY haha!*" He knew this was wrong, but she watched him while he did it, and that

might bring her towards him. He looked down to the parking lot, but no one was nearby enough for his voice.

The girl still leaned away from him, holding her small body out over the abyss with one hand gripping the railing. George felt the blood drain from his cheeks, and was mute with terror. He could not move. What if he startled the girl and she fell? He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked for missed calls, moving very slowly. Jackie had confirmed dinner with Bill and Nancy and he was cc'd. Nothing from Grommell. The delay was infuriating. Should he write him a stern electronic message?

From the corner of his vision he saw a hand take a TicTac and Rosie sitting opposite him. Relief washed through him. She scrunched up her face. "Tasty!", she said in a fake Chinese accent while she considered the little white pill. She popped it into her mouth and rolled it around for a moment before her face contorted and she spit it out and rubbed her tongue with her sleeve. "Too spicy!" She said. George laughed. "Too spicy," he said. She reached the TicTac box to him. "Tasty!" She said, wrinkling her face. She popped the mint into his mouth, jabbering "tasty tasty tasty" in a weird accent loudly. George said "spicy?" And Rosie was delighted. She shouted "SPICY SPICY SPICY," grabbing her belly and rolling on the concrete.

The widow's door opened and they both heard "Rosie!" in a hoarse whisper. All was dark inside. Rosie got up. Her pockets overflowed with

ice, like stolen diamonds. Dark wet patches bloomed down her legs. She fished a cube of ice out of her pocket and popped it into her mouth.

“Tasty! Spicy! Tasty! Spicy! Tasty spicy tasty spicy hahahahahahahah.”

The child would not stop its unworldly laugh. George forced a smile and turned to Jackie’s door. He stood silent for a moment. He tried Jackie’s door handle and it was locked. He had been gone a while—had they forgotten? He knocked tentatively. After a long minute, he heard the swing of the safety latch and the door opened. In the living room, Bill’s deep bass. He walked before the lit faces, intensely listening and announced, “I’ve got ice!”

Evidently they were in the middle of a new conversation. Nancy said to George: “We were just talking about your next-door neighbor, Brita. I know her from church, and we’re selling her house. Anyways, we were asking Jackie about something funny Brita said, that you’d moved in?”

George felt hot and ashamed. Jackie jumped in — “of course not, that’s silly. George comes by to work out sometimes. It’s right by his work, and we have the kind of elliptical trainers he prefers. Look at you though. It’s fine. I’m a grownup. She took George’s hand. We’re fine. My prepster is welcome.”

Bill and Nancy smiled, but George knew they were holding back. It was time to go to dinner. The cheese log had just an inch or two left. George knew he would surprise them all by paying the check, but he

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already worried about the cost.