

In Sri Lanka

Celia can hear the party starting, distant voices rising on the wave of an arrival then fading into a low buzz. She focuses on the tray of deviled eggs in front of her, removing an overly messy egg and laying the skin of saran wrap over them. In the bedroom, Jasmine yelps and Celia sighs, realizing her error. She doesn't know how she'll carry Jasmine and the tray without one disrupting the other.

Strapping on the front carrier, Celia enters the bedroom, hands out in an effort to ward off the inevitable. It is difficult to have a baby who wakes with drapes of sorrow that need to be constantly pushed back.

“Sweet Jasmine tea,” she coos. “We’re going to a party.”

Jasmine’s face is spotted with what an outsider would label sleep, but Celia knows it’s something darker. Hair like silk worms, eyes deep earth, Jasmine is nothing like Celia physically. This dissimilarity bothersome to some, it is not to her. When people ask if Jasmine looks like her father, Celia’s smile is coy, a bit on the sad side. *The jury is out on that one.*

Celia becomes alert to a different sound and she spots it through the blinds. The Kissells have rented one of those plastic castles, kids already cramming into it. Celia sighs again and straps Jasmine into the carrier. Before leaving the bedroom she feels for the tea tag in her pocket. Without taking it out, she can feel the words; words she first believed meant for Gary but now understands them to be someone else’s.

She grabs the eggs, stiffening her arms to avoid Jasmine’s hands and steps outside. Passing the mailbox, Celia cannot resist the urge. Balancing the tray precariously, she opens the door and peers in.

“Nothing yet,” she says brightly to Jasmine, in case anyone is listening. “The mail hasn’t come yet.”

Across the street, Celia’s attention is drawn to the For Sale sign. It is there she wants to go, disappear into the space waiting to be named. But on the Kissells’ front lawn, Eileen spots her and waves, the desperation reminding Celia of hailing a cab in a downpour.

“Cece!” Eileen jitters. “Get over here and get the party started.”

Celia has never been a fan of nicknames, of shortening people into cute packages. Yet she doesn’t have the energy to fend off Eileen, who shrieks of buoyancy and all things light. Eileen grabs the eggs and Celia feels a stab of disappointment. She had wanted to present them to Anthony, to have that moment of exchange to look forward to.

“You shouldn’t have,” Eileen rambles. “You have your hands full. I don’t know how you do it, Celia. I remember when the kids were that age, it was all I could do not to throw them out the window. And that was with a husband.”

“I have a husband,” Celia keeps her face even.

“Of course you do, sweetie,” Eileen’s face twists in sympathy. “I didn’t mean it that way. Only that I’m in awe of how you’re handling this. If Anthony just up and left when I was pregnant, I might have thrown myself out the window.”

“It’s a good thing none of us have second floors, I guess.”

Eileen laughs as she steers Celia inside. Jasmine’s babysitter, Melia, is planted on the couch. She spreads out her massive arms toward them.

“Bring me my rose!” Even Melia’s voice is obese and Celia ponders what Melia will do when Jasmine starts walking. But like other bigger things, she lets the thought pass undecided. Celia hesitates in handing Jasmine to Melia; she doesn’t want people to think her daughter

prefers Melia over her. She's not sure—and this thought makes her uncomfortable—if she cares whether Jasmine actually does.

The sight of Anthony on the back porch, talking to Dean Nuzzo, makes her decision. Unstrapping Jasmine she drops her into Melia's arms and steps out, the tea tag a sudden hot presence in her pocket. Anthony nods in greeting, Nuzzo unaffected by her arrival.

“Of course it's a conflict of interest to sell in your own neighborhood,” Nuzzo is fired up, his face the color of the Bloody Mary in his hand.

“I don't think conflict of interest is the phrase you're looking for,” Anthony's voice is flat, but not in an unpleasant way. To Celia it's like wood, solid, something you want to place your belongings on. “It's in our best interest to sell the house to someone we like.”

“So you're admitting to bias.”

“Bias to what?”

“To who you want to live in the house,” Nuzzo's getting more excited. “That's not fair to the rest of us. You're going to hand pick who you want to buy it. Conflict of interest!”

Anthony smiles neutrally and Celia is distracted by his teeth, which are not perfect but shells of something promising. Eileen's voice startles her.

“Oh Dean, you're being ridiculous,” she squawks. “Number one, Anthony is not involved in my business, and secondly, no one has even looked at the house. And when they do, I can't turn someone down because I don't like them. Real estate is always about price.”

“Well you should,” Celia says.

“Should what?” Eileen asks.

“Turn them down if you don't like them.” Celia isn't joking but they all laugh. She wants to slip Anthony the tag now but can't do it in front of Eileen.

“Maybe an available man will buy it,” Eileen winks. “Two available neighbors could equal one happy couple.”

“I’m not exactly available,” she doesn’t meet anyone’s eye.

“Have you heard anything from Gary?” It is Nuzzo and she’s surprised. Celia understands the need to gossip, but can’t imagine someone like Nuzzo caring enough to contemplate her situation. Celia shakes her head with what she hopes is portrayed as woe.

“Besides, it’s not a good idea for neighbors to date.” It’s Anthony this time.

“Why not?” Nuzzo asks.

“If it doesn’t work out, the boundaries are gone.” Anthony isn’t looking at her, or any of them.

“That’s what fences are for,” Eileen laughs, the sound to Celia artificial and huge.

“I think I saw something over there the other night,” she blurts.

“Over where?”

Celia nods toward the house next door. “I didn’t want to say anything. I thought maybe I was seeing things and it sounds a little crazy.”

“What was it?” Eileen’s eyes are wide and Celia feels a moment of guilt before proceeding.

“Have you heard of grease devils?”

“Grease what?” Nuzzo scratches his teeth with a beef stick.

“Grease devils. It’s a Sri Lanka thing, but I swear I saw one over there. It scared the daylight out of me.” As soon as the expression leaves her mouth, Celia feels like her mother.

“What are they?” Eileen’s eyes have shrunk to slits now.

“Criminals who cover themselves with grease paint so they don’t get caught.”

“So they’re naked?” Nuzzo guffaws.

“No they wear underwear.”

“Just a pair of underwear?” Eileen is agog.

“They caught one wearing twenty pairs of underwear just last week in Sri Lanka,” Celia is accusing before realizing how silly it sounds. “It’s a real problem over there. The crimes are all against women. The superstitious people believe they’re out to get women’s blood.”

“To do what with?” Nuzzo asks.

“I don’t know,” she sighs. “Sacrifice, probably.”

“How do you know so much about Sri Lanka?” Anthony asks.

“This could be a real problem!” Eileen interrupts before she can answer. “This can’t get out or it could be an issue selling the house.”

“I’d say a creep in multiple pairs of underwear is more of a safety problem than a selling problem,” notes Nuzzo.

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?” Eileen asks. “I remember, how crazy you can feel with the sleep deprivation, the hallucinations.”

“You had hallucinations?” Anthony asks. “You never told me that.”

Celia breaks into the thread. “I definitely was awake. There was a face, a body, all too white to be just skin. I saw it…him.”

“Maybe it was a ghost,” Nuzzo jokes.

“Well, that would be even more of a problem,” Eileen says. “Do you know how hard it is to sell a house that people think is haunted?”

“People don’t really believe that crap, do they?” Nuzzo asks.

“They don’t need to believe for it to affect a sale,” Eileen says.

Celia's hand is itching toward her pocket, wanting to reveal the tag just to stop the conversation.

"It was real," she states and they all turn at her strong tone.

It's not exactly a lie, what she had seen. In her dream, the man had been white with paint and eyes more cat than human. His underwear, she remembers distinctly, had been form fitting but not intimate. Celia had woken in a panic, his name out before she could stop it. *Gary!* Jasmine had squawked in her crib then fussed before settling. When Celia was certain she was asleep, she rose and went to the window, the eyes of the empty house as black as the taste in her mouth.

"I'm going to check on Jasmine," she says now, heading back inside. She wants Anthony to follow, but he doesn't.

Jasmine is lost in the folds of Melia and they don't notice her entrance. Out the front window Celia can see a bustle followed by a scream.

"The bouncy house is collapsing!"

Mothers swarm like bees but Celia can only wander out toward it curiously. Although she knows her child is safe, she worries she may lack this gene overall; that maternal panic that drives women into burning buildings and in front of trucks. One such mother now dives into the sagging mess, her rear showing itself before she disappears. By the front stoop is a cooler and Celia reaches in for a beer. Just as she cracks it, someone speaks behind her.

"There's a problem with your grease monkey story."

She turns to find Chuck, his claim to neighborhood fame the self-made woodpiles that surround his house like a fortress. Eileen, in an effort to set them up, once referred to his production capacity as proof that he was a "Provider with a capital P."

“Devils, not monkeys,” she takes a long drink.

“That was a joke.”

“What’s the problem? Other than the fact you were eavesdropping.”

“Ouch, ssss! The problem is that grease devils paint themselves black, not white. The whole point is that they’re not seen in the dark.”

“What do you know about grease devils?” She meets Chuck’s gaze and is immediately sorry.

“More than you apparently,” he laughs.

Celia turns back to the deflated house to see the disheveled mother emerge. She raises her arms like she has scored a touchdown.

“All clear!” She shouts. Turning, her crack is once again exposed and instead of engendering laughter, it makes Celia want to cry.

It reminds her of another lie she’d just told. She has heard from Gary. Once. It’s how she knows he’s in Sri Lanka, of all places, on a tea plantation. *I needed to get as far away as I could think of*, is what he wrote. She had never even heard of the Sri Lanka, but now, just from the computer, it feels like somewhere Celia could live; the world suddenly flat from something as simple as the Internet.

“Hey, Celia, I was just kidding. No need to be so sensitive,” Chuck probes.

“I’m not sensitive,” she downs the rest of her beer. “That’s always been a problem.”

Chuck laughs and she wonders about these people, their desire to feel she’s being funny when it’s not the case. An engine of a different pattern attracts her attention and she turns to see the mail truck approaching. She follows its trek to her box. The disembodied hand opens, tosses, and closes.

Celia turns back to find she is alone again. The alcohol hasn't given her the bravado she hoped, instead buffering her plans. She can't give the words to Anthony; she's not sure they're meant for anyone.

"Did you make these?"

She turns to find Anthony, holding up a deviled egg. A simple picture, it is all it takes. Celia holds out the scrap of paper she's surprised to find crumpled in her palm already. He doesn't take it.

He lowers the egg. "What is it?"

"Please read it," her voice is pleading against her will.

He shakes his head, as if she's offering him poison.

"Jasmine is inside," she offers. "Did you look at her?"

Celia flattens the tag, holding it up to read aloud, understanding that each word is vital to the others.

"What we see depends mainly on what we look for."

Out loud the words have lost their strength and Celia feels something similar to the deflation of the house she had just witnessed.

"Have you heard from Gary?" Anthony asks. The name is meant to stop her and it does. She looks toward the mailbox.

"I wasn't lying about the grease devil."

"I don't want to know," his voice is abrupt. "It doesn't change what it is."

"Did you just call Jasmine an it?" She asks.

"I mean in general. Things," Anthony pushes on. "Knowing things doesn't change what they are."

“Things?”

What Celia wants to tell him then is the things she imagines: Gary receiving her letters, ripping them to miniscule pieces and placing them in a tea cup, ingesting them, letting them transfer without thought to his intestines. There they are absorbed, changed into what they need to be before they enter the world again.

Eileen’s voice behind her is like a pin popping a balloon.

“What the heck happened out here? I heard things!”

“Things?” Celia asks again, like a parrot unable to help itself.

“The house collapsed,” Anthony steps in.

“You know better than to speak to a realtor that way, sweetie.” Eileen’s laughter this time is hard, her peach-colored gaze directed at Celia.

The need to run to her mailbox is suddenly overwhelming, the itch so strong it makes Celia want to punch something.

“I better get this thing back up,” Anthony mutters, following the cord around the corner.

When he’s out of sight, Eileen steps down to Celia.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” her voice is serious.

“There are a lot of things floating around here,” Celia answers.

“Pardon?” Eileen regains some of her fluffiness with this word, but Celia is still nervous. She reaches into the cooler for another beer.

“So, I know that your stress level has been through the roof and don’t want to point any fingers,” Eileen perseveres. “But I don’t think people should use their circumstances to their advantage.”

“Advantage?”

“Well, Celia, here it is,” Eileen says. “I think sometimes you make things up to bring a little attention to yourself. And that’s OK if it’s not affecting anyone else, but in this case it is. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Not really,” she can’t get the bottle to her lips, even though she wants it desperately.

“Oh, Cece, I know it’s difficult sometimes to face who you are,” Eileen’s voice has softened. “But once you do, things look different.”

Behind them a huge hiss ensues and the walls of the inflatable begin to creep up. Although she knows Anthony is just around the corner, Celia cannot remember what he looks like. The light has changed since she arrived and this fact suddenly scares her, the incremental shift that is unseen in moments but drastic over time.

“I’m sorry.” Celia isn’t sure how she means the words, only that there’s nothing else that fits.

Walking away she ignores Eileen’s calling. Inside she extracts Jasmine from Melia, both of whom squawk at the separation. It’s only when Celia is back inside her home that she remembers the mailbox and what it possibly holds.

Waiting until the dark is complete, Celia pulls a black hoodie on and slinks to mailbox. At the Kissells, kids shriek in circles armed with glow sticks. When Celia sees the letter, she thinks for a moment it’s an illusion. In the window of the empty house, something catches her eyes, a flash that starts her stomach roiling. Yet looking straight on, there is nothing there. Turning back, she expects the letter to be gone, but it’s not. Celia fishes it out and goes inside.

In the kitchen she places it on the table and then fills a glass of water. She doesn’t look at it until she’s drained the cup. She sits then, hands in her lap. Outside the sounds slow without her awareness.

Celia jolts awake at the table, a ringing in her head. She has drooled on the letter. She had been dreaming of Sri Lanka, of herself as a woman she'd seen on the computer, fingers deft, face tanned, picking tea buds and tossing them into the bag on her back; all alone on the side of the mountain, an expert in something. The doorbell rings again, jarring her. Celia opens the door to Eileen.

"I'm the one who's sorry," Eileen's face is puffed with morning. She holds out the tray Celia had left behind.

"What?" Behind Eileen, the neighborhood looks unprepared for the arriving day, everything smaller in the clarity of day.

"I thought you made up that grease thingie, just to have something to talk about at the party. Because sometimes it's hard to talk about what's really going on," Eileen babbles. "But now I know you didn't, I feel badly."

"It's devil," Celia finally says. "Grease devil."

"What? Oh right, the devil you know, right. Anyway, they caught the guy last night. Of all the nerve, he was in there during our party, probably peeping at all of us." Eileen's eyes have resumed an unnatural width.

"There was really a grease devil?" Celia is stunned.

"Well, no. Just some creep, he wasn't in his underwear or anything. But I guess he's been sneaking in the house for who knows how long," Eileen says.

"There was a man in there?" Celia looks past Eileen's shoulder to the house.

"Well, it's not as bad as a ghost, or a flasher, although maybe that's exactly what he was...oh lord, do you think?" Eileen shudders. "Whatever he was, it could still be an issue for a

sale. No one likes to think of some lunatic in their house, whether it was theirs at the time or not.”

Celia has a moment where she feels Gary in the house, waiting, surrounding by nothing by walls. Then, in another instant, she sees herself, perhaps as others see her, and understands that Gary is not waiting for her. He is not across the street. He is not anywhere.

“I made a mistake,” Celia says to Eileen. There is an opening, miniscule in time, where Eileen almost lets it in. Then, too close, she chooses to let it pass.

“Well, details schmetails,” she chirps. “The important thing is the overall picture. That’s our motto in real estate, you know. A ceiling crack here, a little water damage there, they can be remedied if the frame is solid. If you really want it.”

“I really want it,” Celia says.

Eileen’s face contorts in confusion. “Want what, sweetie?”

Celia shakes her head. “I have to go.”

“Right, me too,” Eileen answers. “Well, thanks for saving the neighborhood!”

Eileen safely gone, Celia turns back to the letter, the saliva spot a tiny ghoulish face looking at her. She walks past it to the kettle and turns the burner on. At the first inkling of a shriek she pours the water into a mug, suddenly impatient. Grabbing the kitchen scissors, Celia lets the blade hover over the slit only for brief moment before they descend. Her rhythm is steady and purposeful and she doesn’t stop until the pieces resemble confetti.

Dropping them into the mug, she hopes they’ll dissolve yet knows the water isn’t hot enough. The first taste is thick and she has to choke it down. But then it becomes easy, this transfer of word to mouth. When she has finished, Celia sits and waits. Somewhere in Sri Lanka, another woman sits to her own tea, her work done for the day.

Just as the sun shows itself above the empty house, Jasmine calls out from the bedroom.
Celia stands, arms raised, ready to retrieve her daughter.