

THE SURROGATE, short fiction (4,100 words)

They were among the first to enter the church that morning and, unlike other early parishioners, were keen to make their way to one of the forward pews. It's not that this couple wanted or needed to be prominent during the scheduled service but that Ben had been experiencing a bit of hearing loss—something else they never talked about—and Emma knew that, if her spouse had any chance of staying awake and alert throughout the service, they would need to sit fairly close.

It was no longer winter but not yet spring, and the town they lived in, once part of a thriving mill-workers' community but now just a sleepy suburb of Boston, was beginning to stir. Nurseries were thriving; the planting season had already begun. And few people were still wearing waterproof footwear, while trudging about on streets bearing thin traces of late-season snow.

The church that parishioners entered that morning had been built in the early 1800's and expanded at some point in the decades to follow. When a fire toppled its landmark steeple, not long after the Great War, a fund-raising effort was begun right away. Though some monies did trickle in, from a few preservation-minded citizens and a handful of loyal parishioners, there was hardly enough in church coffers to justify approving the repair work being contemplated.

"So we'll just do without—we can't take on any debt," insisted one tight-lipped church elder, and the town sighed collectively with relief. Though longtime residents

would continue to have something to talk about, for years—that great, punishing church fire—most seemed satisfied that, as their facility was otherwise still standing, it could function effectively without its steeple. They thought it non-essential ornamentation, totally alien to the more mechanized culture that had flourished for a time when the town bustled with newly arrived millworkers taking factory jobs, moving into modest homes, and raising their families in a reasonable degree of comfort.

Looking around the church that morning, Ben could see that other parishioners were beginning to trickle in, a disparate group of mostly older women, no doubt of his and Emma’s own generation but a few younger ones as well. Some men also took seats, separately and rather tentatively, as though unsure if any of them should actually be there but mindful that each had felt compelled to pay his respects—to a helpful neighbor, though perhaps not what any of them would have wanted to call a particularly close friend.

Ben noted that there were no smiles of recognition or whispered greetings among those entering and taking seats. It was, he concluded, a gathering of strangers. People sat silently, with folded hands, and looked straight ahead. It was the quietest time in church that he could recall, though, admittedly, he hadn’t been there much since Jocelyn, his and Emma’s oldest child, was married there, a few years earlier.

Reverend Hanson, a recently appointed pastor unknown to either Emma or Ben, began the service rather tentatively, sharing what little he had learned about the deceased, David Ainslee. Here was a man hardly more than thirty years old who

had died under mysterious circumstances and, indeed, may have taken his own life. That was the only aspect of the Ainslee story that had even been whispered about, in the days since his death became known. He and his mother—and also, at times, a younger sibling—had been living in modest circumstances on an unpaved road leading virtually nowhere, just outside the town. Did that household ever include a husband and father? No one was sure, and few would have felt it appropriate to ask. David Ainslee’s brother, Michael, had, years earlier, been remanded to some Western Massachusetts facility as a result of the learning and discipline challenges that came to light during his rather turbulent teen years.

With the arrival of a woman in black, doubtless the mother of the deceased—with a young man on her arm who took a seat in the pew behind her—the pastor paused in mid-sentence until she was settled and then continued to speak. His modest service ended with an announcement that internment plans were not yet completed, which assured the congregants that they could return to their homes and businesses without mouthing apologies for having failed to attend the burial rites. Later, Ben would recall that the church service had lasted little more than thirty minutes, and he suspected that everyone present was grateful for its brevity.

Of course the pastor had not even hinted at circumstances surrounding the young man’s passing or the business pursuit he had apparently sustained. There were comments, among a few of the neighbors, about how he had dutifully kept his

mother's house in such good repair and had recently re-roofed and repainted the place himself. That modest wood cottage had suffered the ravages of many a New England winter and the imprint of a succession of owners since its construction, at some point in the early years of the twentieth century.

Seated there, Ben recalled that his most recent church visit had been occasioned by a similarly spare funeral service, that one conducted for Eleanor Fenwick, a widow whom his wife had met, and known briefly, in their locally organized book group. Ben knew, of course, that it was Eleanor who had suggested—and rather boldly, he thought—that his wife consider meeting with young Mr. Ainslee, who, she insisted, had succeeded in lifting her spirits and changing the course of her life. Without elaborating further, or responding to any need to be explicit, Eleanor had told Emma that the young man's visits would be deeply satisfying and appreciated. "You won't be disappointed," she had insisted, poking into her handbag to extract a crisp business card that read "David Ainslee, Consultant" and included his personal email address but no phone number.

Ben also remembered the day his wife had informed him that she had finally arranged—discreetly, of course—for Mr. Ainslee to pay her a visit. Ben was scanning one of the local newspapers whose thinning pages had compelled him to become a faithful reader, when Emma entered their living room and commanded his attention. "That young man will be coming here—it's all arranged." she announced. "I know he can't possibly deal with *your* problem," she said, "but I've been assured that, somehow, he may be able to engage with mine. I've thought about this a lot,

dear, and decided to proceed. It may be our best solution. I hope you'll understand—and agree.”

Momentarily taken aback, Ben did not immediately grasp the scope of what lay ahead. Though he did seem puzzled, he nodded agreeably when Emma smiled and touched his hand, still unaware that he was being told something significant, largely unexpected, and possibly life changing. By then he had long been resigned to one dispiriting side effect of the surgical procedure he had endured years earlier. At the time, he was elated to learn that his troublesome prostate gland had not been harboring a malignancy and that, once again, urination could be a free-flowing experience. Thus the sad fact that his surgery had left him impotent had not been immediately processed. He was alive, after all, and the procedure had not turned up a death threat, only the absence of meaningful future contact with the woman who shared his life and had given him a daughter and son. He remembered nodding as Emma spoke, that morning, not yet comprehending that his acquiescence would make him a partner in a relationship he had never imagined embracing.

The day that David Ainslee was to make his first house call occasioned some scrupulous tidying-up on Emma's part. She had had her hair washed and set early in the day and made a point of changing the sheets on their bed practically the moment she and Ben had climbed out of it. After breakfast, he took his usual walk into town, collecting the mail from their postal box and purchasing his newspaper and fresh milk to go with the coffee he planned to make for the two of them later.

He returned home to find Emma dressed and ready, seated as though awaiting the arrival of a passing train or the start of a singular church program.

It was shortly before noon, a time when Ben would normally be checking the shelves of their fridge and pantry and pondering what he might rustle up, among the leftovers, for a plausible lunch for the two of them. This had been one of his daily chores since a pinched local economy had compelled him to shutter his village bookstore four years earlier.

A moment or so after recorded church bells had struck the midday hour, all over town, there was a forceful knock at their front door. Ben rose quickly to answer it, finding a slender young man on the stoop, in jeans and a windbreaker over a sweater that covered most of his untucked shirt. Seeing Ben, David Ainslee was momentarily hesitant but gamely extended his hand and introduced himself. Ben nodded but did not respond as he stood aside so the visitor could enter, bringing with him a rush of cold air and a dense cloud of pungent after-shave. It did not escape Ben's notice that, rather than the weathered boots still favored by a great many men in their town, David was wearing loafers, footwear that, presumably, he could step out of and back into rather quickly, Ben supposed.

"Shall we?" The young man said finally to Emma, taking a discreet glance at his watch, after the usual amenities had been exchanged and observed. Then, with no hesitation, he followed as Emma rather shyly led him into her bedroom, careful to leave the door open as they spoke. Ben couldn't hear the exact words being shared but finally surmised that his wife was explaining their "situation" and trying

to fathom if this man, who seemed even younger than their son, would have the wisdom and tact to deal with her sensitively. Inside, David continued to speak softly and intimately to Emma, pausing before quietly shutting the bedroom door. That barely audible click was like an unsubtle poke in the ribs, a flash of reality that Ben had obviously been trying to deny.

He shook his head as he entered the kitchen and immediately began making a sandwich for himself, with the cheese he had on hand and fresh bread from the deli that he carefully sliced and, as usual, left a slender portion for Emma, whenever she was hungry. Now he focused on the murmurs emanating from his bedroom. Eventually, they subsided, and no other sound was evident. Time passed, and despite his better instincts, he pressed his good ear to the door and grimaced, noting that all he could hear were the same murmurs as before, though they were now somewhat muted. He felt protective, of course, concerned that if Emma suddenly felt uncomfortable or in any way threatened or pressured, he would be alert and ready—to do what, he was not precisely sure.

After what seemed an inordinate passage of time but was hardly more than a scant half hour, he heard the bathroom shower running and looked up as their visitor, zipping up his jacket and pushing his glasses back on, was leaving the bedroom. David stood there a moment and smiled rather shyly. To break the silence, he said, “Your wife—she’s a lovely woman, sir.” Ben could only nod—no other response seemed prudent or apt. Then the visitor added, “I’ll be back, this time next week, unless something comes up or she changes her mind. And maybe you’ll join us

at some point—that could be helpful. Please think about it.” Then, with another diffident smile, he was gone.

Later, when she had dried off and pulled her clothes back on, Emma reappeared, seating herself at the kitchen table where Ben was just finishing his lunch and opening the mail. “Well. . .” she began and then paused, shaking her head. “I wasn’t sure at first, you know, but finally felt that having made the commitment—and handed that young man some cash, which I must say he pocketed even before removing his shoes—I should listen to what he had to say and try to follow his lead. Of course, he did seem so very young, and young people—I know, I was one of them; so were you, Ben—well, they can be pretty self-absorbed. But from the moment David walked into that room and took my hand, I felt he was almost righteously focused . . .on *me*.”

Ben started to speak, but she silenced him quickly. “I’m not making comparisons. I just want you to know what happened and what I was feeling.”

“And. . .?” he asked. No other question took shape in his mind.

“Well, at first I kept telling myself that this was no substitute for the pleasures I’d once enjoyed with the man I married. Then it was clear that this would be a quite different experience—having relations with someone I didn’t know and, possibly, could never really care about—just a closed door away from the man I’d loved and lived with for nearly forty years. But I think he sensed what I was feeling—he wouldn’t let me become detached. He kept making me touch him, as he was



touching *me*. So by the time we were both undressed, we knew each other's bodies and I was feeling surprisingly relaxed—and responsive.”

Ben's eyes widened, though he continued to stay silent.

“Yes, dear,” she continued, “I let him touch me—everywhere—and felt reassured by his gentle nature and serious expression. He smiled as he pressed me down—yes, on what I've always considered our marriage bed—and I listened to the little commands he was whispering. I did try to do what he told me to, and the rewards really were amazing. He seemed to have great control, staying with me until he was sure I felt. . .fulfilled. And he proved he was only there to please *me*, not himself. That's what he was saying, and he kept asking, over and over, what I liked and what I wanted. I really couldn't give words to my feelings or wishes—I don't think I'd ever been asked such questions and didn't know what to ask *him*. I just let him take charge.”

“Did you. . .actually. . .?”

“Yes, dear, I did, though as usual it did take some time. But he seemed not to mind—he was so patient, so caring. I appreciated that. Though I can't say I felt I loved him, I have to confess that I did like being with him.” Ben nodded and bit his lip. Once again, he had no words to interject, no notion of what he might or should be saying. He had hoped this would be a singular experience, of course, one he and Emma might decide not to sift through again, later—or ever. Thus he was taken aback when she said, and a bit too casually, he thought, that David would be back in a week—a visit she'd already penciled onto their communal kitchen calendar.

No, they didn't speak about his scheduled return in the days ahead, but on the morning of the young man's next visit, Ben did ask Emma if he should really be present, right there in the house, during the time she and David would be spending together. "Yes, I think you ought to," she said. "It's your home, too, and of course I'd never want to feel abandoned." He started to say something, finally, but his voice cracked, and he merely shook his head and looked away. "Please understand," she added, suddenly taking his hand, "your being in the house, and in the very next room, made me feel—well—kind of protected. He was a stranger to me, after all, and in a way, he still is."

But he would be coming back—that seemed clear—and a stranger no more. She had just confirmed that. How will he feel then? Ben wondered.

He answered the door again and reflexively grasped David's hand as it was extended. Emma was right behind her husband as he was handed a jacket and cap and saw her discreetly press a wad of cash into the young man's grasp. She smiled, then, as she led David and his pungent cloud of after-shave into the bedroom, making a point of closing the door, herself, right away.

Ben quickly busied himself, hand-washing their breakfast dishes, scrubbing the kitchen's old wood countertops, and wiping off the worn enamel stove. Then, a bit later, he headed to the basement to collect some tools—there was a chore he'd been putting off which, at that particular moment, he couldn't exactly remember. But when he descended the creaky staircase and switched on the light, he was

stunned to realize that though no overhead voices were audible, he was aware of the soft, rhythmical creak of his and Emma's bed, which rested baldly on the aging pine floor directly above where he stood.

Hearing such sounds, he immediately snapped off the light and headed back up the stairs. Seating himself in his chair in the living room, he snapped on the TV, making it just loud enough to muffle any sounds that might be emanating from that other room. Finally, he heard the bathroom shower running and knew that his wife's midday rendezvous had ended and the young man would soon reappear. Which he did—smiling, as before, but now looking intently at Ben.

"Next time," he began, "I really think you should join us, and your wife agrees—since you're someone she's loved and been with more than half her life. We both feel you ought to be part of . . . one of her most fulfilling experiences. Please consider it." Then, pulling his cap back on, he nodded, smiled briefly, and let himself out the front door.

Nothing was said this time. There was no postmortem, no input from Emma to recall her experience, but Ben could see that she had added the young man's name to next week's calendar—same day, same time—without even consulting him. That would have been her usual practice, when events of interest to both of them were on tap to occur. How did he feel about that? And if he felt anything at all—puzzlement, shame, bottled-up rage, despair?—he was unshakably determined never to show it.

The days ahead passed slowly, as the household's normal routine was unchanging. Then at precisely the appointed hour, there was the expected knock on the door, and in a moment young David was back in their midst, spruced up this time—as though for a special occasion—with a pressed shirt and a fresh pair of pin-striped pants. And, of course, with that pungent after-shave and his predictably placid grin. He made a point of leaving the door wide open after he and Emma entered the bedroom, and though they didn't actually whisper, the two of them did speak softly, clearly but intimately, as the minutes ticked by.

“Benjamin. . .” she called out finally, her voice loud enough for him to hear.

“Yes, sir, please join us now,” he heard the young man add. “This could be important.”

Ben braced himself. He'd never walked in on anyone, not even Jason, his randy college roommate, who'd made a practice of bringing nubile young women to the off-campus apartment the two of them once shared. He never knew what to expect, back then, after spending an afternoon poring over books in the library, but never succumbed to so much as a blink of surprise or dismay when he walked in and found Jason and a young woman in bed—usually under a sheet or at least one blanket, of course.

The shades were up, Ben noted when passing through the bedroom doorway. But not a single lamp had been turned on; the room was lit only by modest midday sunshine. What he saw there and did find momentarily startling were two nude bodies, inextricably intertwined, which, as he entered, were suddenly rotated

so that Emma's now lay beneath the young man who, by then, had achieved entry and a perceptible rhythm.

"Give me your hand, Ben," Emma whispered, finally, as she reached out and pulled him onto the edge of their bed. She grasped him firmly and pressed his palm to her breast, nudging him to fondle it, as he once would have done. Now, on impulse, he leaned in to kiss her, fervently, which would also have been his practice. A sudden shift of weight on the bed confirmed that David was no longer physically engaged there, though he did remain a presence, right at Ben's side. "Give me your hand now," he urged softly at one point and then directed Ben to its placement. "There. . .see? Then give it some pressure. . . just a bit. Now use your finger. . .Yes, that's it . . . a little more. . . lovely." And with that Ben heard Emma's soft cry of joy, which thrilled him so much he himself began to feel warm and realized he was becoming aroused—but, of course, only moderately so. For him, a more viable expression of passion was no longer possible.

When Emma's flushed face had resumed its natural tone, he kissed her neck and her belly, and, as he did so, became aware that David had finished dressing and was pulling on his loafers. "I think we've entered a new dimension. . .together," the young man intoned as he stood at the bedroom door. "I'm pleased for you both, for each of us, truly," he said, and then he was gone. Though his name was penciled in on next week's wall calendar, he didn't appear then and never phoned. Emma said nothing, but Ben sensed her keen disappointment and understandable despair. Two

weeks later, they learned the sad news of the young man's passing and its probable cause and felt that a chapter in their lives had just become history.

"How?" "Why?" "He was young, too—and so successful." "Look how he dealt with his mother's house!"

Words like those flashed throughout the town, and speculation reigned. It was only when the bogus chatter finally subsided that some measure of truth became evident. It seems that another young man—one who'd become a close friend and, some said, perhaps an intimate partner—had finally learned the source of David's fat income and the type of work he'd been covertly pursuing. Sharp words flashed, back and forth, and the relationship had ended abruptly. That other young man was, doubtless, the one who had accompanied David's mother to the funeral service.

Several days later, a rather weather-beaten greeting card arrived in Ben and Emma's mailbox, its postmark indicating that it had been dispatched at some out-of-town location. The card was tucked in an envelope hand-addressed to both of them, so Emma felt obliged to recite its message, while she and Ben were sharing a late lunch at their kitchen table. A hint of fragrance made clear the sender's identity. Inside the envelope, the printed words were mundane and predictable, but directly below them, in careful handwritten script, was a personal message:

"Knowing you both has been memorable, and being with you, unlike anything else I've experienced, has been life changing—not only for me but also for

you, I hope.” The card was unsigned, but its sender hardly needed identifying. And Ben felt certain it would find its way into that treasure chest of memories Emma had begun assembling years earlier, even before she’d met him. And he knew, too, without asking, that it would reside in a very special place where she could turn to it often.

Late that night, after the news on TV had concluded and all the lights in their house were clicked off, Emma called to Ben from their room and the quilt-covered bed they shared. Without pausing or feeling a blink of uncertainty, he carefully washed his hands and stepped into the room. He disrobed in almost a single gesture, smiling as he gazed fondly at Emma, her face glowing in moonlight through the room’s only window. Then he approached the bed and, at long last, knew exactly how their evening together would end.

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