

Two Not Touch

(3,338 words)

Trina was looking forward to this party being behind her. She had not slept in two days. She was wired. There was also Cal obviously. She would lay awake waiting for his next text. The one that came today said *I hope your party is going well, Mrs. Howell, and that the caterers aren't being impudent.*

She met him on a Zoom during the worst of it when everyone looked vaguely like plane crash survivors. She had made small efforts to arrange things to seem as though her home had not become a bunker. She put photos in nice frames of Mike and the boys behind her. She tied back some of the visible drapes with some ribbon. She moved a Phalaenopsis into view.

His was the face second from the right on the bottom row and he wasn't paying attention. He wore a grey hoodie and he needed a haircut. His eyes and hands darted around and he shifted in his chair. She thought he gave off the same restless turmoil as the boys in Andy's kindergarten class who couldn't sit still.

He side-chatted her.

— We all look like fucking hobos, he wrote.

She wasn't on mute and when she bellylaughed, everything stopped.

— Well, *some* thing's funny, a woman in the top row said.

That was when Trina realized she was the only one he had texted.

— You kind of suck, she wrote.

— Not kind of. Full suck, he typed back.

— Where are you?

— Baltimore office. You?

— Chicago. Rolling Meadows office. Didn't know we had a Baltimore office.

— I mean, we do, he wrote. I mean, I'm not LYING to you.

She expelled another burst of laughter, but on mute this time so no one else could hear.

She learned his name was Calvin — Cal. On the call he used phrases like *if you put a gun to my head* and *to be perfectly clear* and *well and truly boned*. The last one seemed to her to be riding the edge of good sense and, in any case, an unnecessary hedge against the word *fucked* which, she felt, would have landed stronger and been less, not more, obscene. She wondered if that was the point. He used it again:

Later she emailed him: *That was pretty awesome, going double all-in on 'boned'* and he emailed back that he was going to ride *boned* all the way to the top of the company. She laughed again at her desk when she saw it and covered her mouth as if she didn't want anyone to see.

Two days later, he surprised her by inviting her for a drink, by which he meant they would drink together on Zoom. She said yes, but when the time came, she couldn't decide what to have. She asked,

— What if I want wine?

— What if you do?

— It's not in the liquor cabinet.

— Ok, so do you want wine? he asked back

— No, she said.

— So are you somehow brain damaged in some way?

In the end, she walked to the liquor cabinet and pointed her phone at it.

— Is this Kanye’s house? Are you, like, Kim?

She told him to shut up and felt exposed. She spent a good deal of effort not to let her coworkers know that she and Mike were wealthy. She learned he was married and had twin daughters to whom he shouted happy scoldings from time to time over his shoulder while they talked and sipped their drinks. He told her his wife was an ICU nurse and was pulling double and triple shifts at a hospital named for a saint she had never heard of. He showed her a photo in full PPE.

— Her name is June, he told her.

— Is she pretty, Trina asked?

— What kind of a question is that?

* * *

When she saw the folded newspaper on his desk, she taunted him.

— There are ways to get your news that don’t make your fingers inky. You know that, don’t you?

— I do the puzzles. Anyway, I like the inky.

— You know that’s your new nickname now, right? Inky.

— I’ve had worse.

He held the paper up to the cam and showed her, on the puzzle page, “Two Not Touch,” above the KenKen and next to the crossword. Each was a ten-by-ten grid of boxes with randomly shaped areas inside of various configurations. The idea was to put stars in the boxes so that every row, column and random shape had exactly two non-touching stars within it. There was only one way to distribute the stars so that no two of them touched.

They started making a competition of it. At first it was all Cal. He had been doing them since they began appearing in April. But there were only a few blowouts. By the fourth time, she would have beat him but for her slow, meticulous star-drawing and, on the seventh time, she drew ugly stars and won outright. She squealed like a child when it happened.

— Eat it, Inky, she said.

— Your stars look like shit.

— Do they?

She sniffed the screenshot printout.

— They don't smell like shit. They smell like *victory*!

They laughed a little, then couldn't think of anything more to say. They tried staring at each other with glazy smiles, but it was all out of alignment. A direct look at the other's Zoom window produced a faraway gaze as if they were each trying to make out a caravan of Mongols on the horizon. Trina touched her cheek with two fingers.

One of his daughters appeared in the camera's field of vision. She was perhaps six and was wearing a miniature seafoam green version of the hoodie that was Cal's preferred getup. Together they looked like an ad for health insurance or breakfast cereal. She jumped into his lap and he gave out a little grunt and smile as she landed.

— Who's that? she asked.

— That's someone I work with. That's Trina. She's in Chicago.

— Trina, this is Cassie. You are Cassie, right?

— Hi Cassie. Nice to meet you. How are you?

She saw Two Not Touch on her father's desk and asked:

— Is she helping you with your puzzles, daddy?

Trina laughed a little. Cal answered:

— No. I don't need any help, sweetie. I'm really good at them without any help from anyone.

Trina laughed again.

— Your dad has been teaching me how to do them, Trina said.

* * *

The Zooms stayed mostly lighthearted and playful, the drinks and the Two Not Touch contests continued. On an afternoon in early June he told her he was going to log off and go lay down and asked if she would like to join him.

— You mean a nap? she asked and snorted. I wish. I could fucking use a nap, amigo.

— Ok, a nap. Anyway, I'm going to turn off the stupid cam for a while. Do you want to go lay down for a bit?

— What?

— You can just say no, Trina. No foul.

— You mean keep talking but, like, on the phone?

— Yes, right. You could just call or whatever. On Mr. Bell's newfangled telephonogram machine I've heard so much about.

They began slowly and innocently like two children. But soon they let everything happen that could happen, shedding every pretense, burrowing without guile into every wish and want and question and revelation until the rhythm of their breathing and their speech became like the strange and ancient percussion instrument of a people lost to history and Trina felt her the muscles in her hips and her abdomen roil and her eyes glaze to the rhythms of a man and his body and voice for the first time in longer than she could remember with the ineffable alertness to the flood of his, but mostly her own, secrets and avowals and confessions and appetite.

* * *

Trina had volunteered to host a party for the kindergartners in Andy's class, who hadn't seen each other, except on video, since the lockdown. She told Cal she wouldn't be able to manage if he distracted her too much. She couldn't make him understand how pulling together a kindergarten party could be so stressful. She knew he was envisioning something homespun and small. He called her "Mrs. Howell" and agreed to keep the distractions to a minimum in exchange for at least one photo of her in her party dress, specifying *a hard PG-13 tending toward R*.

Their sweeping lawn was framed by large round tables around the perimeter, leading to their stretch of Lake Michigan beach. She had taken every precaution she could think of, with caterers dispensing items of food and drink cautiously, one by one, like doses of antivenom. But there were lapses and exposures everywhere. Children in masks around their chins sharing cake with their fingers. A mom of one of the girls from Andy's class sneezed onto a tray of canapés that had to be carried away cautiously like a container of toxic waste. A friend of Mike's laughed at something and sprayed his drink in a mist out his nose and mouth, the droplets drifting like fog in all directions in the gentle breeze.

She was so sleepy and it fed her sense that the careful order she had created was coming unstitched in dozens of ways all around her. She knew the buzzes in her pocket were an avalanche of texts from Cal. *Fucker is breaking our deal. No cleavage for him*, she thought.

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When she finally looked at her phone, there was a long string of messages, more than she could count at one glance. They crawled up her screen in blue bubbles. She began reading from the most recent ones at the bottom backward. The last one said,

I'll catch up with you in a bit.

The one before that.

The Andromeda Strain extras are about to take away my phone.

She continued tracing backward in time over the last several hours through his playfulness and tenderness as he apprised and reassured her, joking about the last Two Not Touch on Wednesday and then changing suddenly, earnestly, in shards of rhapsody about her voice and her breasts and her kindness and fierceness and the arch of her back and the aching depth of his desire. Every turn a gyre of openness, confessing everything he could say in every way he knew how. And backward further in time.

And anyway, I'm not starving anymore. Because you have appeared precisely when I needed you.

We are both essentially starving animals. Or have been.

They've taken off my hoodie! I always thought you'd be the one to do it and reveal my waxy veneer of filth.

I am well and truly boned.

I tested very negatively in one sense. I tested positively toward negative, right? So I tested not exactly perfectly. Meaning I tested negative. But that's a way of saying it: negatively toward the positive.

Ok, so I know this is breaking the rules but I have to tell you one thing.

I hope your party is going well, Mrs. Howell, and that the caterers aren't being impudent.

And that was the top of the list.

* * *

She panicked in a way she never had before, stock still rolling everything inward, her lack of sleep sending waves that felt like falling up her back. She was shaking and felt weak. Mike approached.

— You all right?

She tried to answer but heard her words were collapsing into nonsense, so she faded them out. She looked at him directly with anguished eyes.

— This is so bad.

— Not at all. Just a few hiccups. Everyone is having a good time.

— I'm sorry, ok?

— Sorry for what?

— I can't tell you.

— I'm pretty sure you can, Trina.

She told shards of it in a manic and ludicrous way, shading around the impenetrable center, creating a tangle of true but useless non-explanations. By the time she was done, she was panting. Mike stood still and quiet for a long moment. He inhaled and said,

— Your car needs new brakes. Take the other one. I'll clean it out. Go tell the boys something while I'm getting that done, ok?

* * *

On the highway she was exhausted and drifty, the start of the third day without sleep. She called the Baltimore office, keypadding through the phone tree that took her to his voicemail. She had planned just to listen, playing his voice over and over on her car speaker, turning the

volume up as high as it would go, listening to every breath and quaver. She recorded a message back to him.

— Hey Inky, it's me. I'm worried about you. Plus I just opened up a big old can of ugly stars and need to beat your ass. I haven't had time to get you that picture yet, but I will. *Den we'll see how good you can breathe, my friend. Bears!* Or maybe you'll have to bleach your eyes, right? *Injecting the Clorox*, right? I don't know. I don't do him as well as you do. Ugh. I'm rambling. Anyway, feel better, right? Much, much better. And I . . . will catch you later, ok?

As she hung up, Trina was crying. That was around Akron.

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The hospital signs directed her in curves spiraling into an enormous cement garage that echoed with the squeaks of her tires as she coiled upward. When she emerged and tried walking legs were rubbery as she knew they would be, but everything else was rubbery, too, her neck and shoulders and hips as she found her way to the elevator.

The information desk was near the opening into a large atrium alive with activity that seemed like a dream. Furniture and backpacks and laptops entangled in cords and children and bags of food and old cups were strewn chaotically. Staff in scrubs pushed bins and women rooted for things in purses and people wandered destinationless and everyone stared down grimly at phones. The masked woman at information told her Cal was in the med-surg ICU on the fourth floor but that she couldn't go there, handing her a flyer about restrictions. The atrium concourse had become a glowing blur of heaviness and lightness at once. She felt large, then tiny, then unable to move, then airy and blown about by currents of air.

On the other side of the atrium, she saw two little girls — twins — in masks and matching hoodies, one sea green and one sky blue. Near them was a tall woman in scrubs with a

frayed backpack, sipping from a large bottle of water, staring intently at her phone, swiping and tapping aggressively with her thumbs. Trina floated around them once pretending to be occupied with her own phone, close enough to see the name on the badge pinned to the tall woman's scrubs. On the second loop, she approached in slow-motion, nearly staggering.

— Are you June Remnick?

June looked up from behind her mask and with a confused expression said she was.

— I noticed your badge. Hi. I'm Trina. I'm a friend of Cal's from work.

— I haven't called Cal's work? Did he call?

— He texted that he was coming in.

The girls looked up at Trina from the floor.

— Are you the puzzle lady? Cassie asked.

Trina was shocked to have been recognized and thought she might faint. At last she said,

— I am. Hi Cassie. I have a mask on now, just like you.

— Mine is tigers.

Trina squatted on her haunches near the girls.

— I see that. It's really pretty and fun.

— What is a puzzle lady? June asked.

— Oh, Cal and I do those newspaper puzzles sometimes. That's how I met Cassie on video. Right, Cassie?

The atrium seemed dizzying and unreal. Colors and smells combined into a whirl of madness that, mixing with the maelstrom of halftruths and deception she emitted to Cal's wife made her feel like she was about to throw up.

— I have someone here, too, Trina told June finally. Boyfriend.

When she saw June staring at her large engagement ring, she said

— Well, kind of fiancé.

— Where is your kind-of-fiancé?

Trina repeated with the information desk lady had told her.

— That's the CDC unit. That's where Cal is.

— So we can't even see them?

— Of course you can, June said. Just go. It's a total shitshow. They won't stop you.

Trina watched while June reached into the main pouch of the backpack and pulled out a clean set of blue scrubs. She reached in again and brought out a small box with Japanese writing and a second containing a new transparent faceshield. She told her to take them into the washroom and put them on. Trina stammered and felt drunk. She took the gear and walked toward the bathrooms. When she came back in the scrubs, June held open the bag without a word and Trina crammed her clothes in.

June unfastened her hospital badge and handed it to her. Trina tried to push it away. June wouldn't allow it.

— No, I'm serious. Put this on, too. There's one of those thingies that'll scan you in as a care worker. We're all in a system.

She looked up at Trina and said *Go* and when she didn't move, *Go!*

— What if I get caught? Trina asked

— Well, then we're both well and truly boned.

* * *

Everything is all at once now, past slow motion into a happening and having happened, the elevator doors opening and having opened onto a makeshift aluminum frame portal hung with thick green plastic sheeting, thick transparent plastic strips covering the entry, and a vinyl

sign with government logos on a navy blue background. Parting and having parted the strips she feels the whoosh of air inward, her ears popping as she opens her jaw to adjust, drawing inside her body the steady thump-whir of pumps and fans and the pervasive scent of industrial soaps and fluids until she is somehow now the whole unit itself, in it and encompassing it, while figures in identical gear move wordlessly in every direction, wordless except one, who snaps *Gown up!* and *What the fuck with this one?* and a second figure appears wraps her in a full-length sheath, grunting *Ok sweetheart, you know better* and she lifts her arms and allows him to cover her and tie the gown behind her.

Everything a now-and-forever, wandering and having wandered past doors with identical pink signs, each with icons representing precautions and restrictions, each door above a whistle of air, the hallway curving until a new circle appears within the wider circle, a station with more genderless forms, and within the smaller circle, the arc of a third circle, only partway around, with glassy and glowing screens, each a surveillance window on part of the ward, projecting it onto the curved halfmirrors of the faceshields, each at odd and changing angles in which she sees behind the doors with pink signs, men and women, some peaceful, some struggling in panic to breathe, some being tended to, some alone, some inside a tangle of tubes and cables, some entirely untouched in isolation, until she is inside, scanning for her beloved, but finding instead at first her boys at breakfast on one and on another the emergency lights of a car crash in the dark and on another the cottage in Michigan where she would go as a girl with her family and on another a cloudburst of ugly stars, each dropping perfectly into place on a grid stretching to the horizon, and, on the final screen, Cal with a nurse who removes her faceshield and gown and un.masks and unpins her hair and leans down to kiss him fully on the lips, kissing and having kissed, while Trina slumps into a wheeled chair that appears underneath her and lays her head on the console and falls finally asleep, falling and having fallen.