

Will Rodgers

Jack, the toddler, slept in his stroller. George, the adult, pushed it. The wheels hummed over the carpeting in the hallway.

At the condominium's door, George came around the stroller and knelt in front of Jack. His cheek was pressed against his shoulder and a strand of saliva fell to his chest. The saliva stretched and wavered for a moment, vibrating with his quiet breath until it fell to his shirt. His tiny Spiderman shoes were caked with dust and there was a cut on his ankle. There had been a band-aid there earlier.

It crossed George's mind to rustle Jack awake before going inside. He would have enjoyed one more high-five or joke— especially in front of Amy, the mother.

He stood there a moment in the hallway and softly knocked on the door.

Amy opened the door and held it open for George to push the stroller inside. Her dark hair curled down against her shoulders, framing her pale, smooth face.

“How'd it go?”

“Great. Really great.”

She knelt and stroked Jack's head and then sat at the table by the big window, and typed out a few more words before closing her laptop. Los Angeles' downtown stood in the distance behind her. It was a clear day.

“Did anyone recognize him?”

“No. We went to Will Rodgers. Looked at the horses.”

“I told you to go farther away.”

“He wanted to see the horses.”

She sighed and went to the kitchen, and he stood in the living room with his arms at his sides until she came back and handed him a glass of water. Jack's little chest rose and fell with each little breath. She knelt and removed her son's shoes, then dusted them off and set them outside the front door in the hall.

"Jenny and Rhonna run up at Will Rodgers. The Turner's too," she said.

"I don't know them."

"They know Jack, though."

"Let's put him down and we can talk."

"It's late," she said, and took her son into the other room. George removed his shoes and put them by the door.

She had gotten so cold, George thought, although he knew it was reasonable to say it was partly his fault. It had all gotten so cold. Walls had been raised. They had been apart now just about as long as they had ever been together.

Seconds before, George had been looking forward to detailing the day, maybe with a beer in his hand. Jack would cry awake from his room and then they'd all be in the kitchen, and they would make jokes and eye contact that would take her back East a couple years. It did not appear that it would unfold that way, but he did not want to leave.

He walked around the living room. It was pristine. There was an African neck ornament on one wall, its beads bright oranges, blues, and yellows. Probably from the trip they took before Jack was born, George thought. He'd seen pictures on Facebook—Masai ceremonies, selfies with beaming village children. The ornament looked too clean and bright on the wall to be real. The beads had probably been made in Asia and assembled in a Nairobi warehouse, he thought. This was her life.

There were four framed sand dollars on the next wall, set in a row atop an off-white background, each one with a label beneath it in perfect cursive. “El Matador,” “Nauset” “Santa Monica,” “Stinson” they said. He looked at the one labeled “Nauset” and sifted through his memory for Facebook pictures of Amy and her family in Cape Cod. He would have seen them. Nauset Light Beach. Right out in the open, right there in the light.

He thought, without looking away from the sand dollar, of when they’d driven down to Barnstable and stayed until the midnight release of the last Harry Potter book, and agreed once it was in hand that their childhoods were officially over, and gone back to the apartment and read it together all night with a flashlight until he looked over and she was asleep.

Nauset Light Beach. He couldn’t look away. Where they’d first been aware of each other and then known each other and fallen in love. They had proclaimed it “theirs,” just as they had named “Someday” by the Strokes their song and Shot Tower on 6th street their restaurant. The clench of bitterness associated with those memories had loosened over time and he was thankful for all of that now. He remembered their first kiss—how nervous he’d been. The moon was full and it was on the beach, and the clichéd nature of the moment made him apprehensive, and when he finally mustered the courage to move in he exhaled audibly from his nose, like a descending iron releasing steam over a sleeve. They’d kissed a few seconds and laughed about it and then kissed again, for longer.

George could concede that it made sense for her to have taken her husband to Nauset—her family hadn’t sold their house there as far as he knew— but whatever nostalgia or disparate sensitivity that had led to her spare George the pain of scrolling

through a Facebook album of vacation photos had not been strong enough to keep that sand dollar off of her wall. George told himself that he did not require certainty on such things, although he knew this was only a prideful reaction to the sense he had that Amy was not prepared to explain herself. What a day it had been with Jack.

George willfully ignored the framed photographs on the walls and shelves. There were books, mostly coffee table books or contemporary novels. A few issues of National Geographic and the Economist. He stood with his hands at his sides and watched a helicopter touch down atop a Wilshire high rise.

He walked into the bedroom. The walls were the same off-beige, the bed made taught and wrinkleless. The tops of each matching bedside table were spotless save the Pandora audio unit on one and the receiver of a baby monitor receiver on the other. The baby monitor didn't seem necessary, George thought, remembering the way Jack filled the ravine with hollers of "I win! I win!" before tumbling, laughing, onto the grass after a footrace earlier. The bedside tables had outlets embedded in the sides. Each had a white chords, chargers, hanging from them like willow branches.

He heard footsteps, and turned as Amy entered the room.

"What are you doing?"

As George turned to her he was stopped by a photograph next to her on the wall by the door, blown up and framed. There it was. Amy holding Jack, both of them engulfed in the big arms of Ed, the father, a tall, proud man with the same green eyes George had, but behind a well-fitting pair of glasses. He had the same black hair, too. They looked altogether happy, the three of them.

"What are you doing in here?" Amy repeated.

“He looks like me.”

“This again?”

“No.” George’s mouth curled into a rueful smile and pointed at the Ed’s face.

“Him.”

He’d seen Ed in Facebook albums, but he’d learned to blur him out of the photographs. In this photo on the wall he was inescapable. And George had never known just how much they resembled each other. And he knew he shouldn’t have mentioned it.

“George,” Amy said. Her phone buzzed from the dining room table. “I mean, Jesus.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“And I shouldn’t have let you take Jack.”

They walked from the bedroom.

“It was so great, though, A. It was great. He is the most beautiful kid.”

“I’m glad you had a good time,” she said quickly. She wasn’t looking at him. Did she not care to know how Jack had tripped and fallen and cried, but then so quickly and happily bounced back up (“Again! Again!” he’d yelled)? Or how he had danced in his car seat to the Strokes when he played them with the windows down and his hair blowing everywhere? Or how, when he saw that one of George’s tosses had landed fully and finally in the pocket of his little plastic baseball glove, he’d looked at the ball as if it were some miracle and his eyes had widened as he registered his own success and he’d raised both of his hands above his head and yelled? How sleep had been the only force strong enough to wipe the smile from his face?

It struck him that she didn't want to know all, or any, of that. Her phone buzzed again from the table.

"I'm calling Luz next time I need someone," she said.

"It shouldn't be like this. Today was really good."

"No, this is the problem, George. You stick your foot in front of the door, somehow, always. It can't be like this."

"I just like spending time with him."

She clenched her jaw and stood straight, and paused.

"Please, Amy."

"I'd like you to go now."

George looked back at the photograph of Amy, her son, and her husband.

Although he was younger in the photograph, Jack's wore the same brilliant smile for which he had felt solely responsible over the course of that afternoon, as if each smile was his creation, each at the same time happier than the last and happier than any to come. But there it was in that photograph, beaming out at him.

He walked towards the door, frantically wracking his mind for something to say.

"Fuck yourself," he could say. Reactionary, immature.

"I still love you," he could say. Generic. And he wasn't sure how true it was anymore.

"Please," he could say. Desperate. Broad. Aimless.

He said nothing and walked out, glancing in the direction of Jack's room as he opened the door. It was the first of these visits, brief and secret, that hadn't seen some quickly suppressed thaw of her eyes and a tiny flash of her bright smile.

The hallway was cold. He stood there a moment before Jack's Spiderman shoes caught his eye. They were brown with dust. He watched them, as if to test himself, as if the shoes would spur something in him. Some fight or certainty.

In the elevator he envisioned Ed standing in front of him as the doors opened, with his suit and rolling suitcase, and his glasses that fit his face so well, his teeth, just looking at him. He wasn't sure that Ed knew who he was. He wasn't sure if he wanted Ed knowing who he was.

George envisioned Ed passing him and moving through the lobby. He envisioned Ed ascending, smiling, Jack awakening instinctively at the sound of the front door unlocking, leaping from his room and greeting his father at the door with that same, brilliant smile.

Ed was not standing in front of the elevator doors as they opened. He moved through the lobby and to the Toyota across the street. It struck him, in the middle of the street: The Sand Dollar. He should have pointed to the Sand Dollar as he left. And asked her how she could walk past it back and forth all day without thinking of Nauset Light, together, when things were good. That might have worked, he thought.

He sat for a moment at the wheel, and looked back up at the shining black windows of the tower. He tried to count the floors, all the way to thirty-two, but couldn't be sure his eye hadn't skipped a floor. He sighed.

George knew Jack was too young to have any real memory of the day they'd had spent at the park, and probably any memory of him altogether. But there was a chance, maybe, that images of Will Rodgers Park, with its big lawn and polo fields, would flash

through Jack's little mind later, when it would first be called upon to supply him with a memory. A chance.

Gripping at the steering wheel, George thought of the way Jack would grow up there in that laminate, veneered condo—Mostly silent, reminding his friends to remove their shoes, driving two miles to the nearest place to play catch, glued to an Ipad shoved in front of him at dinnertime. Climbing nothing, falling off of nothing, scraping or spraining or breaking nothing. Texting his parents from his bedroom. Brand new bike every two years. New car at sixteen. He thought of Jack's brain growing, perfectly still, unperturbed and unchallenged. Corralled. He heard the white hum of the condo's air conditioner above Jack as he slept each night.

He realized that he had known Jack at the absolute pinnacle of his purity, and drove off.