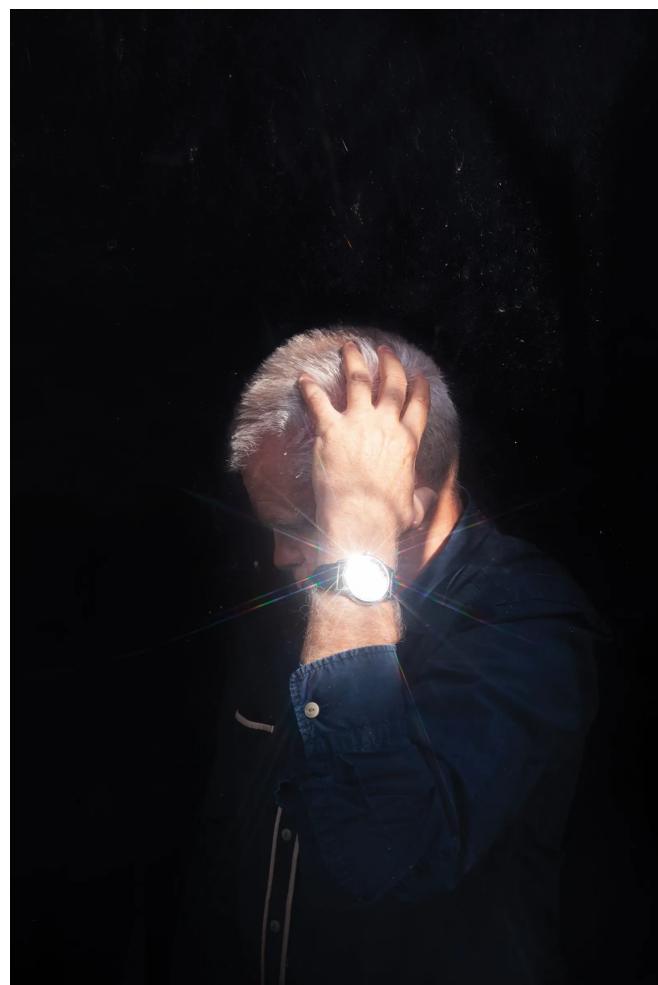


FICTION JULY 12 & 19, 2021 ISSUE

# SATELLITES

By **Rebecca Curtis**

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Photograph by Sophie Gabrielle for The New Yorker



*Audio:* Rebecca Curtis reads.

## PRANK CALL

One day last July, my husband’s friend Tony Tarantino—a tall, good-looking, rib-eye-and-Scotch-loving, thrice-divorced, AB-negative Trump enthusiast—drove up from Virginia Beach to the Jersey shore to visit my husband, a retired banker, at his hulking nine-bedroom, eight-bath Tudor in the town of Coda-by-the-Sea, and after we’d all been chatting, sans masks, on the porch for a while, right after Tony enjoyed an organic, grass-fed “marrow burger” I’d picked up for him from Cavé, the excellent local paleo restaurant, his cell phone rang. He said, Hello . . . ?, then frowned and hung up. He blushed as he placed his phone on the table next to his mai tai.

My husband said, Auto warranty about to expire?

Tony shook his head. A woman who called him an asshole, he said. Though, he added, he got the auto-warranty call a lot, too.

My husband asked whether Tony knew who the woman was.

Tony held his hands out, palms up. She hung up before he could ask, he said.

Did she sound young or old?

Not young, Tony told us, but not middle-aged.

I asked whether the caller could be Tony’s wife.

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Rebecca Curtis on cops and bankers.

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Tony’s wife was in Virginia, in the house he had bought for her. She was new—his fourth—a curvy Irish redhead, twenty years his junior, named Sinead. A paramedic. They’d lived together for a

number of years, and Sinead had been pushing for marriage and babies. To please her, Tony had reluctantly consented to marriage. He loved her. More important, he said, they agreed philosophically, talked endlessly, and had fun in bed. She hadn't come to Coda because she was shy. She couldn't visit us, she'd said, because she'd never met us.

She's my wife! Tony said. She likes me. Most of the time.

Who, my husband asked, was the caller, then? A random prankster?

Tony looked beyond the porch's brick wall and the manicured lawn to the bright sidewalk, where families lugged carts loaded with snacks, towels, and folding chairs toward the beach. He fiddled with his wedding ring.

No, he said. Probably someone who thinks I'm an asshole.

I carried lunch plates into the dark house, past the mahogany gargoyles, one male, one female, that leered from either side of the living-room fireplace, past the Arts and Crafts grandfather clock and the bookshelf stuffed with immense, taupe-colored Kelmscott Press classics printed on vellum, into the kitchen, where the wall behind the copper bar was covered with framed ink drawings by F. R. Gruger—the illustrator who'd built and worked in the house—of men and women ruined by lust, kneeling in thrall to ghosts, demons, and succubi. Tony followed me into the kitchen and offered to help do the dishes. I refused, because I planned to sneak off to the beach.

The truth was that I was the asshole. I'd been lonely during quarantine, and had asked my husband, Conor, to invite guests. My friends—mostly journalists, novelists, and teachers—were too busy homeschooling toddlers to travel. Also, too scared of COVID-19. We paid babysitters to watch our toddler, theoretically so that I could write novels, but all I'd written were short stories about slutty cat-women, which my agent told me to delete from my computer, and my husband had decided that, to help my career, he'd invite Tony, who'd been a cop for twenty years, and ask Tony to tell me cop stories, which I could turn into movie-ready cop sagas. But I hated cop stories. I'd wanted Conor to invite his liberal friends. They drove electric cars, used silicone drinking straws, and had voted for Hillary Clinton. Tony had voted for Trump, and was—like my husband—a jerk.

Let me do the dishes, Tony said. I like doing dishes.

You're a guest, I told him. Go sit with Conor. He's lonely.

Tony waved a finger. He smiled and his dimples winked. O.K., he said. We'll wait on the porch for you. . . . I think Conor wants to hear some cop stories. So come back soon!

I liked them both, but when two guys who've known each other since age thirteen get together they yap, and I wanted to lie on the beach and absorb negative ions from the surf before the latest hurricane landed, that afternoon. I was COVID-sad, though I'd suffered no COVID tragedies. Also, I didn't want to hear racist cop stories. My husband and Tony were anxiety-ridden workaholics who'd focussed, from a young age, on earning cash. Tony wanted enough for a good life; Conor, enough to feel safe. They were fifty-six years old, though Conor looked forty-five and Tony thirty-five. They were meticulous, but owing to oversights they'd each had five kids by four women. They were two nerds from New Hampshire.

My husband was short, broad-shouldered, and muscular, with a handsome, olive-tinted oval face, a huge nose like an ice scoop, and black eyes. Genetically, he was sixty per cent Irish, twenty per cent Syrian, two per cent Jewish, and eighteen per cent English, but he identified as Dutch-New Netherlandish. His ancestors, he told me, had founded America. He'd started working at age twelve, as a farmhand, and eventually acquired a Ph.D. in quantum physics from Harvard, then served for decades as the "head quant" at a world-renowned investment bank. But he wasn't smart enough to be skeptical when go-go dancers said, Don't worry, I'm on the pill.

Tony was tall, tan, and broad-shouldered, with a shaved head, dimpled cheeks, a straight nose, and huge, long-lashed brown eyes. He was half Jamaican and half Italian, but he identified—lately—as Italian. Ever since he'd arrived at Piscataqua High School, in coastal New Hampshire, in the nineteen-seventies, stick-skinny with an Afro, and sat at the "nerd table" with my husband during lunch, females had asked to sit by him. The bakery girls who worked at DeMoulas Super Market, where Tony and Conor stocked dairy products, always offered Tony free hot cross buns. Tony and Conor co-captained the Piscataqua High chess club (four members) and the debate team (six) and played D. & D. weekly. Tony was opinionated but a people-pleaser, and both he and Conor were hedonists. They were too nerdy to have sex, and they eschewed alcohol and drugs, but they worked forty hours a week at DeMoulas Super Market to earn money and then travelled to Asia, a grand structure with a blue pagoda in Rye, and gorged themselves on "Oriental feasts." That was the

greatest pleasure they could imagine back then—riding bikes to Asia together, and glutting upon Polynesian and Cantonese delights. After high school, Tony turned down a scholarship to the University of New Hampshire. He wanted to work. He did active duty in the Marines for eight years, then served in the Air National Guard for twenty while working as a cop. Now he collected his police pension and, for fun, drove a delivery truck.

I cleaned the kitchen, then peeked onto the porch. Conor had fetched his high-school yearbook, and was showing Tony the girls who, he contended, had wanted to bang Tony. Tony denied that anyone had wanted to bang him. They read the back-page letter that Tony had written, which said why Tony admired Conor, and that they'd always be friends. Soon, they started lauding President Trump's fiscal policies. Then his foreign ones. My husband didn't vote for Trump—unqualified, nuts—but he approved of his policies. He and Tony could chat for days about Trump's great economic policies.

Tony was a good friend. He visited because he liked Conor. Unlike Conor's relatives, he never asked for favors, and he gave good advice. Over the years, he'd taught Conor: how to dress well, how to get laid at closing time, how to order sushi, how to play better chess, and how to program computers. When Tony married Sinead, Conor advised him to buy their house as tenants-in-entirety, not tenants-in-common. That way, Conor explained, when the people Tony's wife secretly owed money to came around and tried to claim the house, they'd fail. Tony had welcomed this information.

I went upstairs, put on a bikini, and threw a towel in a bag. I devised exit lines: "last beach day before Hurricane Jenny," "my deep COVID depression," and "solidarity with nature during COVID." I returned to the porch. The air was golden, lemony, salty, thick. The leaves of the mosquito plants shimmered in the breeze. I sat, preparing my speech. Tony and Conor were discussing food their mothers made in the seventies, such as "glop"—rice with red sauce on top, sometimes meat bits—and boiled hot dogs. Boiled frozen vegetables. Liver. Tony reminded Conor of the year that Conor's mother made ten pet cats disappear, one after the other, and Conor reminded Tony of the time that Tony's father broke Tony's leg with a shovel. My husband asked Tony if he'd have kids with his new wife, and Tony pointed at his pants and said he'd got snipped. No more kids, he said. *Absolutely* not. But what if, I asked, his wife wanted babies and he changed his mind? He *couldn't* change his mind, Tony replied. He'd got snipped! He glanced at his phone. It sat, quietly, by his champagne cocktail. Couldn't surgeons reverse the snip? I asked. Tony shook his head. But doctors could *do* things, I suggested;

they could "go in there." Easy-peasy. No way, Tony said. He slugged his cocktail. He'd made his wife sign contracts, he said. She'd sworn not to gain weight, and not to beg for kids.

And what, I asked, did Tony promise *her*?

Tony's phone rang. Eventually, he hit Decline.

To be himself, he said. He twisted his ring. He worked, he said, and bought her a house. He cooked and did laundry. Conor volunteered that he'd *never* do laundry. He'd worked twenty years at a bank so he wouldn't have to. Tony didn't mind cooking and cleaning, he said. It was meditative. They sipped their cocktails. Neither of them liked going to the beach.

Conor told the joke about the bear and the rabbit who are doing their business, side by side in the woods, their forelegs propped on a big log, and the bear says, Can I ask you something personal? The rabbit replies, Sure, and the bear asks, Do you ever have trouble with shit sticking to your fur? The rabbit replies, Nope; the bear says, Great!, and grabs the rabbit and wipes his ass with it. They laughed, drank. Tony told the one about the armless, legless man who tells the Buddha that, for his one wish, he just wants to be fucked, and the Buddha throws him in the ocean and says, Now you're fucked. Conor told the one about the lady walking her goat, and the one about nuns lined up to enter Heaven.

Conor asked Tony if he'd spoken to his daughter lately. No, Tony said; she was still dealing drugs; she sold heroin and Molly. She was thirty and made twice what Tony did with a pension and a day job. Tony had offered to pay for rehab, but she didn't want rehab. She wanted to sell dope. If she stopped selling drugs, he would talk with her all day long, he said. Tony asked Conor how his oldest son was, the one from his ex-fiancée; Conor answered that he hadn't seen that son, now seventeen, in years, because the ex-fiancée wouldn't honor Conor's visitation rights. Conor asked Tony how his twin sons from the Swedish television actress were doing. Tony's lip curled. Well, he replied, they were on welfare. Ha, Conor said. He'd offered to get them jobs, Tony said. Then he asked Conor how his daughter from the stripper was faring. Wasn't she in London? Did Conor ever see her? Conor's face tinged. Yes, Conor nodded, London; no, he didn't see her. He pointed to our daughter, who was four, drawing with chalk on the bricks nearby. Owing to complicated issues, Conor said, and lawyers' advice, she knew about only some of her siblings. He sipped his drink.

He did not mention that, though he'd provided the stripper with a London town house and—through his lawyers—sent her ten thousand dollars a month in child support, the stripper would not permit Conor visits with their seven-year-old. She desired mistress status, and she'd recently texted Conor that she'd fly to America with his daughter if he'd send his wife—me—away, and let them and a nanny live with him for a month. He'd declined. But I feared that the stripper—a super-sexy Turkish bisexual in her mid-thirties whom my husband had seen sporadically during his first, loveless marriage—would show up on our doorstep in a see-through dress with daughter in tow. Conor wouldn't be able to send his daughter away. He'd put them up in our house, if the stripper insisted. I suspected that the stripper would take fertility drugs and arrive with thirty ripe eggs in her ovaries. My husband was "easy" when drinking. He was often drinking. I was awkward, over forty, a Caucasian mutt, and incapable of doing a striptease. In a stripping battle, I'd lose. Just the word "stripper" terrified me.

I cleared my throat and announced that, although I greatly enjoyed Conor and Tony's company, I needed to visit the beach before Hurricane Jenny arrived.

Conor glared at me.

Sit, he said. Tony's about to tell cop stories!

Tony, Conor said. You're one of the hardest-working people I know. How is it that you have *two* sons on welfare?

Tony shrugged. His long legs swung in and out slightly as he sat. He didn't know, he said; he hadn't raised them that way.

I pitied Tony then; he appeared pained. My husband's candor can seem cruel. I reminded him that his two teen-age sons refused to get jobs, do chores, clean their rooms, or go *near* the trash can, and that, whenever they visited us, no matter how nicely I asked them to throw trash away, candy wrappers, yogurt containers, melted Frappuccinos, and empty chip bags littered the house. When hungry, they yelled, Daaaaaaddy, I want Starbucks!, or Daaaaaaddy, order pizza! At Christmas, they opened thirty presents each without glancing at the tags; afterward, they abandoned them without comment or thanks. I said that they'd never be on welfare, but only because they both had ten-million-dollar trust funds.

My husband nodded, and I regretted my words. Every time I insulted his sons, I vowed never to do it again. I was wretched, envious. For years, we'd tried to conceive a second child, and we—or just I—had failed. These were the kids Conor *had*, and he loved them.

Regression toward the mean, Conor said.

Isn't it *Kieran*? I said, naming the boys' mother.

Conor shook his head. He sipped his drink. Tony and I, he said, are two obsessive, detail-oriented, workaholic assholes who like making money. His hand waved in the air. But inside us live our ancestors. As you know, Conor said, looking at me with limpid black eyes, I come from a long line of Irish drunks who sat on the couch all day, beat their wives, lived on the dole, and committed suicide. He shrugged. All people everywhere are lazy, he said. Tony and I are weirdos, but our ancestors' genes—from the first *Homo sapiens* forward—breathe inside us, so children tend to move toward the mean. And fathers—his hand swung again—have few rights. In this country, children belong to their *mothers*. So, as for raising children, there's little that fathers can do. When married to his ex-wife, he said, he'd worked a hundred and twenty hours a week, and his ex-wife, a homemaker with two live-in servants, taught the boys to be rude and slothlike. Now he paid millions annually and attended court regularly just to see the boys four days a month, and that brief access did not provide a platform for lessons in manners. In addition, he couldn't sway his kids' minds about much, because their mother told them daily that their father was a selfish miser and a godforsaken liar, alcoholic, and adulterer.

Tony shook his head. Man, he said. He was glad his ex-wives weren't that bad. But at least—he smiled winningly—Conor had done well now by marrying such a kind, hardworking woman. He pointed at me.

Conor smiled wanly.

Tony, he said, you were a cop for twenty years. Surely you've got good stories. My wife—he indicated me—is a writer! He leaned forward: Tell us your best cop story.

I hung my head. I put my beach bag down beside me.

Our daughter wandered over.

It's not "appropriate," Tony said.

Our daughter wandered away to draw again.

Tony hesitated. He'd never told this story, he said, because it was embarrassing. Were we sure we wanted to hear it?

## TONY'S BEST STORY, PART I

**T**ony looked upward, drawing details from the sky.

This story is from when I was a young artilleryman in the Marines, he said, stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I was nineteen years old.

My husband interjected that he'd requested a *cop* story.

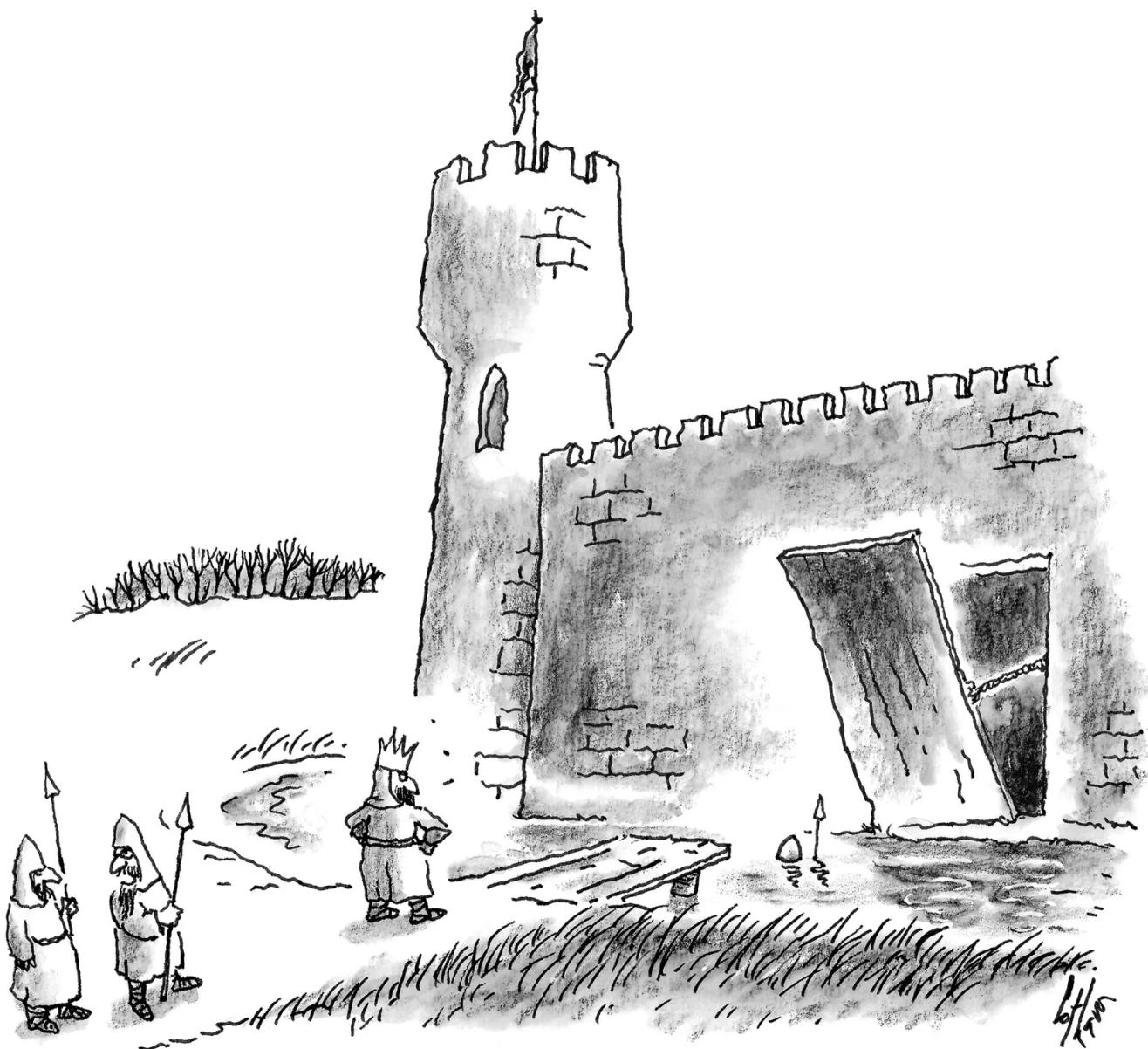
We'd requested his *best* story, Tony said.

Conor sighed.

He was broke, Tony continued, but loved music and liked to go downtown at night, see the sights and nurse beers until he had only enough cash for a cab back to base. One night, he didn't want to go home yet, so he stood outside the bars, people-watching, imbibing the warm summer evening and the songs—"Mr. Roboto," "Only the Lonely," "Heat of the Moment," "What a Feeling," "Abracadabra," "Let's Dance," "You Can Do Magic"—coming from the different joints.

He noticed a wide-hipped brunette, maybe forty, wearing fish-nets and a strapless dress, studying him. She was at least six feet tall, and without thinking he said, You're a big girl.

She said, Do you like big girls?



*"Oh, great. The drawbridge is stuck and the moat has just been topped up."*

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Tony leaned toward us.

I didn't, he said. But I said I did.

She replied, Like to drink with me?

He explained that he'd love to, but he'd spent everything except his cab fare. The lady said that she was with her husband, and that if Tony came to their place they could all drink together, and they'd drive him back to base afterward—but not until morning.

He asked where they lived.

She smiled and said, Just beyond town.

I was young, Tony told us. I thought, What the heck?

We had drinks at my regular bar, Tony said. Her husband was a six-foot-five-inch Swede with a pale square head, blond spiky hair, and a pink button nose. We got in their car, and the husband drove onto this dark highway out of town. And he drove and drove. An hour passed. Whenever I asked how much farther, they always said, We're almost there. There was no moon. The sky was black. The roads became dirt lanes winding through wheat fields. There was nothing but wheat. And I realized I had no idea where we were—there were no phone booths, these people could do anything to me.

Picture it: I'm a young Black guy, they're both white, the guy's six feet five and hulking, the woman's huge, too, we're in rural Oklahoma, I have no idea where they're taking me.

My husband asked, Don't you identify as Italian?

Ah, Tony said, yes. But this was *before*.

He smiled.

I was a young Black man, he said.

Eventually, he said, we reached their place. It was in a trailer park. We sat in the living room. Soon, the wife went to change clothes. The husband asked how old I was, where I was from, what my hobbies were, whether I had genetic flaws, and when my birthday was. Then the wife returned in a negligee, and we had a three-way.

That's *it*? Conor said. That's your "best story"?

It's not about sex, Tony said. It's the *total situation*. I was nineteen, an inexperienced New Hampshire kid in the middle of Oklahoma.

I asked how the sex worked.

Tony said, Missionary.

Conor’s brow furrowed. He said, How’d *that* work?

Tony said that the wife lay on her back and gave her husband oral sex, while Tony had intercourse with her.

Sounds physically impossible, Conor said.

Tony explained that the husband sat behind his wife’s head, while Tony entered the wife semi-sideways, going in at an angle.

I stayed away from what was going on *up there*, Tony said.

I thought she might suck me after, he added sadly.

He sipped his drink.

Oh, he said. In the morning, a weird thing happened. They invited their neighbors over for coffee.

*Coffee?* we said.

Yeah, he said, their neighbors from the trailer park. Maybe thirty of them came over, around 7 A.M. The couple introduced me to everyone, very politely, and we all drank coffee. Then the husband drove me back to base.

Jesus, Tony, Conor said. I can’t believe that’s your “best story.”

Tony’s phone rang. He studied it warily.

I excused myself and walked to the beach.

## TONY CHOPS HIS PINKIE OFF

One summer, we had a dinner party. Everyone sat on the porch, drinking with Conor. I’d volunteered to grill steaks but didn’t actually know how. I was preparing everything myself, the guests were famished, I was embarrassed to ask for help. Tony offered. I asked him to chop carrots. But the knives were hungry biters, and I didn’t realize that Tony and Conor had, in the

previous hour, consumed a fifty-year-old bottle of Scotch—Conor's retirement gift from the cursed bank. Tony was singing. Soon, a knife bit his pinkie off. His hand gushed blood but he just gauze-wrapped it and wouldn't let anyone see. I goofed, he kept saying. We suggested the E.R., but he refused. Instead, he sliced peppers.

In the morning, he said quietly, Will you look at my finger?

As soon as he removed the bandage, blood gushed. His pinkie meat hung from the bone.

Tony, I said, you need the E.R. Now.

He stared at the finger. Frowned.

Maybe so, he said.

## NOMOPHOBIA

**T**hat evening, after the storm passed, we walked two miles to Forked Tongue Beach and dined at a steak house called Seared. We sat at a metal table on the blacktop outside. The air was pink above the shops of Main Street, violet higher up. Conor grabbed the placard near his napkin and aimed his phone at it. Tony flagged the waiter. Excuse me, he said. Could I get a menu, please?

The masked, pale older man frowned. *Menus carry germs*, he said. Use your phone to access our offerings via that QR code. He pointed at the placard.

Tony said that he'd forgotten his phone. Did the waiter perhaps have, he asked, a paper menu?

The waiter's shoulders straightened. No, he said coldly. To dine, Tony needed a phone.

Here, Conor said. Use mine. I know what I want.

Thanks, Tony said.

Later, Conor said, Tony, how could you *forget* your phone? He added that he checked to make sure he had his five times before leaving anywhere.

You *do*? Tony said.

Always, Conor said. He had nomophobia, he said. Of course, for decades he'd worked a job where anyone who didn't answer the phone—even at 3 A.M. or on vacation, even when screwing or using the toilet—was fired. But the point, Conor said, was that answering your phone when it rang was the *meaning of life*. What if someone were trying to call Tony right now?

Well. Tony speared a Brussels sprout. He wasn't at work, he said; his kids weren't young; his wife was an adult. The meaning of *his* life was to enjoy simple pleasures. Like now: he was enjoying a dinner with friends. Sometimes he *liked* to be phoneless. He felt content.

Conor sighed. Like my wife, he said.

I enjoyed being phoneless, I admitted. After all, I said, we'd grown up without the Internet. Now satellites had blanketed the whole Earth with unnatural electromagnetic frequencies. Now some people had headaches, and no one was ever truly alone.

They just looked at each other.

On the walk home, Conor pronounced his steak “chewy.” Tony said, diplomatically, that his was neither amazing nor awful. But the company—excellent.

Conor smiled. By the way, he said, had Tony ever done 23andMe or Ancestry.com?

Tony squinted. *Ancestry*. Sinead bought them kits for his birthday. Why?

Conor peered up at Jupiter, approaching Saturn for the great conjunction, and the murky dimmer stars. I studied shuttered restaurants. A few bars had created outdoor dining rooms and were busy; the 7-Eleven was dark, but the ever-glowing “Fortune Teller!” sign on the adjacent cottage was lit.

No reason, Conor said. Had Tony, he asked, opted into his family DNA tree, to see his matches who'd already done Ancestry? Or elected to receive text alerts whenever some new supposed relative signed on?

Tony walked swiftly. Nah, he said. He'd done Ancestry to make Sinead happy. He shrugged. She'd made their accounts, he said. She probably opted him in; he wasn't sure.

When we got home, Tony's phone had twenty missed calls.

See, Conor said, someone was trying to reach you! Call them back!

Can't, Tony said. It's blocked.

Don't worry, I said. It's probably just that your Social Security number has been compromised.

We offered Tony the carriage house, to prevent potential exposure to COVID, but Tony wasn't worried. My husband wasn't, either. They both thought that COVID was a Democrat scheme to make Republicans look bad. As soon as Democrats took the White House, my husband predicted, vaccines would appear and it'd be time to reopen the economy.

You see, my husband told me privately later, he *had* asked his socialist friends to visit, and offered the sanitized carriage house, but when the pandemic began they'd all driven to their mansions in the Hamptons, and they were too scared to leave. His socialist friend Achilles was in Manhattan, but was occupied hiring a twenty-thousand-dollar private jet to fly to Ohio to buy a Goldendoodle for his seven-year-old transgender daughter; the kid had just transitioned; this Goldendoodle in Ohio was the nephew of a Goldendoodle with a nice disposition—owned by Achilles's brother, Hector—which the daughter liked, and the daughter desired the nephew of Hector's Goldendoodle, not some strange, potentially bad-natured Goldendoodle; but, because of COVID, Achilles could not leave New York for more than twenty-four hours without quarantining upon return, which his job did not permit; and no commercial flight departed for Ohio, paused long enough to fetch the puppy, and returned within a day; so Achilles was busy booking the jet. I see, I said. I pointed out that a nephew of a good-natured dog is not always a good-natured dog. Conor said, Tell that to Achilles's daughter. Achilles's child's happiness, Conor told me, was the reason Achilles labored at a soul-killing job. Was it possible, I asked, that Achilles was *spoiling* his kid, ruining her chance to become a good person? Conor nodded. You know, he said, the *Times* runs many articles about how evil wealth disparity is. But its pages contain numerous ads for hundred-thousand-dollar watches and necklaces. Those ads cost money, so someone must be buying those items. But who? Only Marxists read the *Times*, so who buys those things?

Whatever, I said.

My husband did not own fancy watches. He bought his clothes from Sears and ate Cup Noodles for lunch. But he did own a near-complete collection of the elements, including thorium, numerous antique books and currency notes, several Old Master paintings, and many steel boxes of double eagles, which he collected for portability and also because, he claimed, gold held its value; he'd predicted that the coins' worth would skyrocket in 2021, when, he said, Democrats would retake the House, devalue everyone's money by printing out trillions of dollars, and reengage in numerous foreign wars. These possessions reduced the virtue of his not owning luxury watches. However, his fortune's sole purpose, it turned out, was to pay millions in child support, and millions more to thousand-dollar-an-hour divorce lawyers who'd compel some of his ex-wives, ex-fiancées, and ex-bartendresses to obey court-ordered custody agreements and let him see his kids. Of course, those women might not have *had* his babies if he'd owned zero gold. But so it goes. During his youth, my husband decided that only great wealth could allay his intense anxieties, and he'd found it, in a green sack on a hill under a tree.

You should really write cop stories, he told me. You could become a famous writer if you'd write cop stories. Also, he reminded me, I should make the banker characters evil and big-nosed. Readers enjoyed stories about unscrupulous big-nosed bankers.

O.K., I said.

By the way, my husband said. I like my liberal friends. But I prefer Tony's company.

## STORY OF CORINA

**T**he next day, I asked Tony why he'd never spoken to his firstborn.

Oh, well, he said.

Tony had grilled Conor, for the past hour, about his abandonment of *his* oldest child, a friendless boy who'd been homeschooled for eleven years by a psychopath with Munchausen-by-proxy syndrome. Conor explained that he had paid a million dollars in legal fees and attended a dozen court hearings—which hiked his blood pressure into heart-attack range—and finally persuaded a judge to order the son's mother to enroll the son at a normal high school. Furthermore, Conor said, he'd begged the ex-

fiancée to let him see his son, but she would not, despite the hundreds of thousands in child support he paid annually, and only more courts and judges could make her obey the law.

Tony had also argued that Conor needed a job-job. Not "managing charities via Zoom" and "investing via the Internet." Conor was depressed, Tony contended, because he was a lazy, greedy, sedentary retired banker. If Conor got a job-job, he'd be happier.

Yes, Tony, Conor said now, why *don't* you speak to your firstborn?

Tony blunk.

Lit a cigar.

That's the story of Corina, he said.

He was an artilleryman, twenty-four years old, stationed in San Diego. He liked the California weather, and had a girlfriend named Corina, a secretary he'd met at a bar. Every weekend, he told us, he went to Corina's place, picked her up, and took her out. She was twenty-eight, slender and petite, with long black hair and a heart-shaped face. Very pretty. He wasn't in love, but he liked her. The problem was, Corina lived with a man named Geraldo. Geraldo was twenty-nine, a Mexican-American divorce attorney, and he resembled Tony. They were both six feet two, lithe, with tan skin, inward-tilted, long-lashed, huge gold-brown eyes, straight noses, dimples, wide cheekbones. They even had the same hair style. Everyone who saw them both thought they were twins. And every time Tony fetched Corina Geraldo was sitting in the living room, and he'd say nicely, How's it going, Tony, how've you been?, and Tony would say, Well, thanks, Geraldo, then he'd take Corina out. If Tony stayed over at Corina's, Geraldo would cook eggs the next morning, and say, Do you want some eggs, Tony? How're the Marines, Tony?, as pleasant as could be.

He didn't mind, I asked, that you were hooking up with Corina?

He *did*, Tony said. He was in love with her. But there was nothing that he could do, because she liked *me*.

He was just her roommate, Tony said.

He puffed his cigar.

But Geraldo never got mad. He was nice to me.

I took Corina out every week for months, and then suddenly I didn't hear from her for two weeks. Then three, four. She didn't answer calls. She ghosted me.

Tony's dimples winked.

He didn't think he'd offended her, he said. He thought Corina liked him. He pondered. He realized that she was pregnant.

So I caught her, Tony said. She had caller I.D., so I called her from a pay phone, and she answered, and I said, Cor . . . iiiiiinnnn . . . ahhhhh . . . it's me . . . Tooohny. . . .

She said, Ah, Tony.

I said, Are you pregnant?

He paused. She was.

Well, he said, she wanted to keep the baby.

Corina, I said. Here's what we'll do. I'll get a place near yours, I'll get stationed permanently, and we'll raise the baby together.

Silence.

No, Tony, Corina said.

She said, You don't *love* me, Tony.

Tony's fake Mexican falsetto became petulant.

You don't love me, Tony, she repeated. *Geraldo's* going to raise the baby.

Tony offered to send monthly checks. Corina declined. Geraldo had a job, she said. They were getting married. Geraldo was going to be the father.

And the guy *really* looked like me, Tony said.

So, I asked, the child would never realize that his dad wasn't his dad?

Tony puffed the cigar.

Corina didn't want him to, he said.

Men have no say in these things, Conor interjected. *Women* choose.

But months later, Tony told us, Corina called him, crying.

I said, She wanted money?

Tony's head shook. She wanted *me*.

Corina had realized, he said, what it meant to marry a man she didn't love. But she'd chosen. She married Geraldo.

Tony wasn't going to wreck a marriage. So, he told us, if his kid wanted to look him up, he could, but —Corina chose. She probably had other kids with Geraldo, Tony said. A family.

**A**ll afternoon they played chess. Conor won one game, Tony five. Of Conor's many friends, only Tony beat him at chess.

## TONY'S BEST STORY, PART II

**W**e were finishing dinner on the porch—Chinese food from a restaurant called Yummy Yummy—and drinking Scotch that Tony had brought. When Tony's phone rang, he answered without thinking, and a woman said, You're an irresponsible, worthless, no-good, shitty-ass, cunt-licking fifty-buck whore.

Tony stared at the phone. I'll admit to *one* of those things, he said.

He paused. Who are you, he said calmly, and what do you want?

The woman hung up.

It may be time for a new phone number, Conor said.

Tony sighed.

I asked Tony if he wanted dessert—ice cream or Key-lime pie.

He hung his head. I'm full.

Conor asked if he'd like a cocktail, and he said he'd have whatever Conor was having.

And one of these.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a little sack of hand-rolled cigars. I brought them for us, he said. I was saving them.

Ah, Conor said. Those look like the good ones.

Beyond the porch, the sky was darkening cerulean. The town was subdued. All our summer renters—mostly wedding parties—had cancelled, and the other houses that were often riotous in summer, capacious Victorians, sat dark. But, toward the ocean, voices chattered, and an acoustic guitar sounded chords on someone's porch.

When Conor had returned with drinks, and they'd lit cigars, Tony said that he'd remembered one more thing about the couple from the trailer park.

Conor asked what.

Well . . . Tony puffed his cigar. Just that I saw the husband one more time—about three months after the first night. My unit was one day from being relocated to Okinawa, Japan. I was downtown, on a Wednesday night, sitting at the same bar, nursing my beer, watching baseball on TV. It was the fiftieth-anniversary All-Star Game at Comiskey Park. Everyone was watching. The third inning was starting. Someone tapped my shoulder. It was the husband.

Hello, I said. I didn't especially want to see him, but to be polite I said, Can I buy you a beer?

He shook his head, and said he wanted to talk to me. But he said it angrily, the way my dad's voice used to get if I dented his car.

So I said, O.K.

He leaned in, and said, Listen. You had my wife. But that's done, and don't come around our place ever again.

Tony replied that he wouldn't, and that he respected them both.

He *did* respect them, Tony told us; he also had no desire to see them again, as the wife was a hulk, and Tony preferred petite women; he'd gone with them for the adventure, but the event had made him feel weird; plus, his company had a no-fight rule. The higher-ups didn't care who'd started it; any soldier involved in three fights received an "other than honorable" discharge. Tony had been in two.

So he wasn't fighting. Nor did he want to; he pitied the guy.

But he kept staring, Tony said.

So I repeated, No problem. I won't go near your wife.

Good, the man said.

For your contribution, the man said. And sign this.

He held out a fifty-dollar bill and a scrap of dirty paper.

No, thanks, Tony said.

The man shook the bill. This is for your *contribution*.

When Tony asked what he meant, the man just pushed the bill and paper toward him and told him to sign.

Tony read the paper. It said, I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree never to go near Yohan Van Housen or Bethany Van Housen, and anything that comes out of her is hers and not mine in any way.

Tony asked, Is she pregnant?

Van Housen stared at the TV. Jim Rice had just hit a home run.

Sign, he said.

Now Tony felt annoyed. He deserved to know, he felt, if he'd got a woman *pregnant*. He recalled that that night, in the trailer, he'd asked, Should I get something?, and that the woman had said in a sweet voice, No, honey. I want your skin.

Van Housen rubbed his pink nose. No, he said. She's not to you. Do you think you're Jesus, that you bang her once and she's popped? After twenty years we've been together and it never happened, and her being forty years old?

He pointed at the paper and yelled, Sign!

One hand was in his pocket, Tony noticed. The guy seemed crazy. He was shouting. People were watching them. It made Tony nervous.

I don't think that would make me Jesus, Tony said reasonably.

She's not pregnant by *you*, the man yelled.

So I signed, Tony said. The man said, Now take the money.

I refused, Tony said, but he kept shouting. So I took it, out of pity, and he left. I intended to give it away, but eventually I decided, money's money. I probably spent it on Chinese food.

My husband nodded. He spread his arms, in his striped robe, and said theatrically, Women control reproduction. Always women. Men don't even know they have a child, unless women tell them.

Women get all the choice.

Tony nodded.

I said they were being ridiculous. Men could choose to not have sex, or to use condoms.

Conor puffed his cigar. But that's their only *moment* of choice, he said. In the beginning. Women had choice up until the baby walked out of their vaginas! Men could only choose sex or abstinence, and, let's be honest, he said, if you had to use condoms, you might as well not bother.

So, what do you think? I asked Tony. Do you think she was pregnant?

Tony shrugged. How should I know? No one tells me anything.

My husband slugged his drink. He drank more when entertaining, and was tipsy. What happened was obvious, he said. Tony knocked the woman up, and she kept the baby. She didn't want Tony to be the father, so she told her husband to make sure he'd never come around. But the child—my husband paused—might be tanner than her parents. Maybe smarter, weirder. Eventually, the kid asked about her real dad. Conor sipped his drink. Then, Conor said, the mother *lied*. She told the kid that her biological father was a lazy, shiftless loser who, for fifty bucks, sold his parental rights. And the girl grew up hating Tony. Despising and missing him. Perhaps planning to locate and punish him. The perils of having children, Conor said. Fathers had no recourse. He recited a poem called "This Be the Verse," which he recited once a week.

The kid had a dad, I said.

Ah, Conor said. But humans don't walk around feeling gratitude for what they have. They agonize over what they lack. They obsess about all the things that they're owed—Conor waved a robed arm, observed me pointedly—that they didn't get.

Jesus, Tony said. That can't be true. It's crazy.

Tony's phone rang.

Don't answer, I said.

You can't void mishakes, Conor said. You mush face them.

Tony picked up his phone. He swiped Answer, and hit Speaker.

*Hi*, a woman said. I *miss* you. It was his wife. She asked how he was, then said that she'd found a surgeon in Charleston who reattached tubes. He used the highest-quality surgical microscopes and

micro-sutures. She *knew* Tony didn't want babies. Tony's face remained impassive. But, she said, she'd read a disturbing new study. A respected German institute had found that, after a vasectomy, the trapped sperm in the epididymis section of the testes eventually created pressure and ruptured it, which meant that millions of sperm wandered the man's bloodstream, chewing on things, which made the man produce anti-sperm antibodies and have autoimmune reactions, which led to prostate cancer, diabetes, and erectile dysfunction. She didn't want Tony to get erectile dysfunction. She wanted him to come home so they could *talk* about the possibility of having babies.

They could talk, Tony said gently. But the answer might still be no.

Conor, in his robe, watched Tony.

Conor said drunkenly, I see the future.

Tony smiled.

Down the street, toward the ocean, the acoustic guitar played the Dave Matthews Band's "Crash Into Me," the kind of yuppie ballad my husband hated.

Might be hard to refuse, Conor said.

No, it won't, Tony said. She signed a contract.

I don't think it works that way, Conor said. He peered into the now dark night. His voice grew dramatic. He said, I see a green-eyed son. He paused. He will beat you at chess. He added, The son will be a friend in your old age.

Doubtful, Tony said.

Which part? I asked.

Tony just looked up at Mars, near Jupiter and Saturn on their path toward the great conjunction, and the guitar hit a series of flat chords that repeated over and over and spiralled through the warm night toward the stars. ♦

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