

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

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Our limbs are spread to resist the rub of body heat. It's too hot to touch. Beside me, Warren snores, leaving me behind, awake, beside him. In the heat, I can never sleep. I rise, walk outside and spy the moon.

Standing in the middle of the yard, I lift my arms to cool off, but no breeze runs by to tag my hand. The crickets have stopped their grassy operas. A man in white-linen pyjama pants walks barefoot down the middle of the street. No cars, no birds, nothing interrupts the sway of his step. Slowly I step backwards across the lawn, and consider returning indoors to sit in the kitchen and stare at the face of the clock, its moustache and droopy eyes. The man puts his hand up but doesn't wave.

'I'm not the only one still awake,' he says, walking to my curb past the somnambulant suburban lawns. Tall, with chin-length, layered blond hair sweeping outwards. A ledge-like jaw.

'You, me and the gnats,' I say.

'Company wanted? Or would you rather be alone?' His head tilts. Is my hair wild from pressing against the pillow-top? Can he see the shadows rounding my eyes?

'I wouldn't mind.' I uncross my arms but keep my fingers playing on the sides of the blue cotton nightdress that skims my knees.

'I walk when I can't sleep,' he says. 'I get anxious. It's warmer indoors.' His arms swish, as though he is looking for something to do. 'Care to step out into the street?'

He offers a hand. The air feels chilly and unlike summer. I feel as though we are about to dance. I haven't been invited for a dance since my wedding day, when Warren and I stepped slowly onto the dance-floor after the best man's toast. 'Endless Love' was played by a five-piece band in purple. The

whole time we held each other, Warren worried that he was going to roll over my feet, his big black leather shoes stomping on my white satin pumps. He didn't stop his worrying, not even when I wrapped my arms around his neck and gazed up smiling at my brand-new bow-tie-wrapped husband.

'Guy,' the man introduces himself, and I laugh because it suddenly sounds funny, like we are cavemen in greeting and he has pointed and named himself as he might a tree, a rock, a cloud.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Julianne.' It sounds like I'm apologising for myself.

'Two names in one.' He walks me to the curb, and we sit with our toes dipping into the street's black asphalt.

'Do you live in the neighbourhood?' I would not have forgotten his face, the long slope of nose, the slight checkmark scar beside his left eye. His shoulders are wide; they could easily support a tired cheek, a heavy head.

'Visiting my cousin. Leaving early tomorrow.' He smiles like he knows all of my secrets. 'You often stroll alone in the early morning?'

'Sometimes.' I get nervous pacing the bedroom, feeling like white tigers behind glass. 'My husband is one of the lucky few who can sleep easily.'

'It's not so unlucky not to sleep. You can be efficient about it. Learn Russian. Take up building model planes.' He floats one palm in an arc in the air, and we stare at the space, as though expecting some white smoke emission.

'Learn how to tattoo,' I say.

'Sure. Body art will never die.' Guy doodles on his skin with a scarred fingernail. For a second, I want to replace his finger with mine, skating over his arm.

'But I know this sleeplessness is going to catch up with me,' I say. 'Like I might start dreaming up lives and actually believe I'm living them.' I want to tell him how, as a child, I was Wonder Woman. I was a cowgirl and a surgeon and a marine biologist. I was everything.

'My dad went fishing every weekend for thirty years,' he says. 'And he believed he was a fisherman.' Guy leans back, forearms resting on concrete. 'Not a father, not a mailman, not a husband, but a fisherman. He was all of those things. But you put faith in what you want to.' He squints like a mystery-novel detective. Eyes like the last drop of water in an icy glass.

‘Priorities,’ I say. ‘Mine are oatmeal cookies, long swims and highlighters.’

‘It’s good to know what’s important.’

‘I think so.’ A sudden sting of guilt, of leaving things out, even in jest. ‘There’s my husband, too. He’s an editor. He gets to cut out the things he doesn’t like.’ Just like that, I cut off Warren’s edges and fit him cleanly into my mind.

Tonight I am frank and simplistic. At work, and even at home with Warren, everything is ornate and exhausting—all the politeness, asking about grocery lists and stock prices and mileage on the treadmill. It’s nice to step outside, to feel like nothing I say or do matters in the black box of night. The veins on Guy’s arms jut prominently. Who is this guy? I might be dreaming, but I refrain from pinching my forearm.

‘Lucky man.’ He stretches. Guy looks like someone who uses his hands, a builder. He might build boats, shape cedar, steaming planks to form the soft curves of a hull. He could take his skiff out on the ocean where, when he can’t sleep, he can lie down under the stars. I wonder if Guy would ask me to come with him. I wonder if I would go.

‘He’s a practical person,’ I label my husband, unable to think of a better description. ‘He’s very nice.’ My husband’s left eyebrow droops a little lower than his right one. He sometimes keeps company with a telescope in the attic. He makes us coffee in the morning and tea in the evening.

Guy glances back, brushing a fake mosquito away.

‘What?’ I say.

‘Sorry. Just sounds like you’re describing the nice boy down the street that no one could believe was a serial killer.’

‘No, I mean ...’ I look at my hands, which have started gesturing, palms out and fingers spread. But what gesture exists to describe that there is nothing electric between Warren and me any more—no shiver when his forefinger grazes my hip? Either I have forgotten how to make Warren smile, or he has forgotten how to be delighted with my words. His socks litter the floor, and I’ve taken to walking around with green cold-cream on my face, as if he were a good girlfriend and not a lover. ‘Warren’s a good person, and I’m lucky to have him. But I don’t come rushing home from

work to see him, or talk to him or touch him. I don’t come rushing home for anything.’

My arms. I shouldn’t be out here. I shouldn’t be talking this way.

‘Well, no one really rushes home, anyhow. And I’ve heard the traffic is bad around here.’ As if he knows I sit trapped in rush hour, pounding palms into the steering wheel.

Guy stands and walks to our mailbox. Taps a knuckle against the cold metal that belches a hollow sound.

I smile. ‘It is. But even so ...’ I look around for fireflies, but there are none. ‘I spend some days trying to find something interesting to discuss, some spark that will get us through dinner without our watching TV. But we work every day, eat, watch TV, sleep, and the cycle continues until I think I’ll never change from the person I was yesterday because she’s been running in a continuous loop.’

Every crack in the asphalt is ready to burst. ‘And I can’t believe there isn’t one scrap of news or wonder in my day that I can share.’ Life isn’t that staid, but somehow we are. I am, my husband is, and why am I rambling so much? Because I am confessing to a man who came from nowhere and who doesn’t know me. Because it is dark and warm and safe at night to forget the things you have said. When no one can see me blush, I can be honest.

‘Did you know that male, not female, seahorses become pregnant and give birth?’ says Guy.

‘No.’ I smile. Would Warren grow sweeter with a baby in our lives? Would he know how to coo?

‘A group of owls is called a parliament.’ Guy toys with the red mailbox flag, switching it back and forth between its standing and lying positions. One says you’re popular. The other says you’re Charlie Brown. ‘There’s your scrap of news for the day.’

‘I once told Warren that people are more likely to be killed by a champagne cork than by a poisonous spider. I read it in *Newsweek* or something.’ I imagined a roomful of webs and bottles and wayward corks springing up, rebounding off walls, catching innocuous partygoers unaware.

‘How would you die by champagne cork?’ says Guy.

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