“Hey Honey?”

I sat in my brown leather, near the TV next to the window that covered me in a low light, an orange light, an orange, low light that told me the sun was setting. The living room walls were a light blue, robins egg blue? No that’s Crayola, I forgot that paint colors were painfully adult, St. Lucia Skies, or Sapphire Waves, or some other equally mundane and gray flannel suit, business-man shit. I just finished watching a documentary about edible-non-edibles, about, like, the skin that covers sausages and salamis, and the stickers on fruit. It was called, “What the Fuck is That Shit You’re Eating, and How Is it Made?” I rather enjoyed it, not often do public broadcasting documentaries peak my interest, but hey, that one got me laughing right in the beginning. The narrator asked, “Do you know how much shit you eat in a day?” I dunno, “well you’re eating pounds of shit a day, literally pounds of it. You walk to work, hummin to yourself, ‘I’m so goddam smart’ well you’re not because you eat shit you shit eating fuck.” By the end of it I was literally thinking, “I fucking love you PBS” and then I wondered if I was any different than my dad, and didn’t he do this? and if he did this when he was my age and now I’m doing it when I am his age then aren’t I him and am I destined to be him and won’t my kids hate me? So I turned off the television and called Veronica.

“Hey Honey, let’s go stargazing!”
A younger me would be proud of the place I got for myself: Tiny TV that symbolically screams to guests that I don’t give a shit about TV even though I probably watch at least 2 hours of it every day, bookshelf full of books I’ve read and about half full of books I haven’t read yet and sometimes people ask me what I thought about those ones, and I say that they were fine, but I didn’t like the ending, it was a bit romantic, and I didn’t find it realistic, and thus it wasn’t as cathartic as I would have liked it to be, but I’ve read it, I’ve definitely read it, the books aren’t just there as a crutch, and by the way, they don’t look anything like a blanket.

“Stargazing? Ok, Dan, sure, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Veronica and I got a house with two stories because we needed space for our presumptive kids, but we’ve never talked about that part of it, and it makes me wonder if we ever will. I’ve often thought, “If we don’t talk about it now, then when” and “if I’m thinking that now, then isn’t that the time to talk about it?” but I guess I didn’t want to be the first one to bring it up. I mean, I want kids, I just don’t want to seem like I’m forcing it on her, not that suggesting it would seem like I was forcing it on her, but, I dunno, honestly, I guess I just don’t know why I didn’t bring it up.

She’s coming down the stairs.
Then I guess I better get my jacket. I walk out of the room in my house that has a TV in it, but it definitely isn’t the living room, because we already have one of those, and I guess I would call this room a lounge, but it doesn’t feel very loungy, so is it a lounge? I guess so, then, I guess I got up out of my lounge and went to get my jacket from the kitchen. My jacket is a muted brown, old-leather-shoe-brown. It looks like something my grandfather would wear. But Veronica got it for me, and it’s all I have, so I put it on.

There she is, she’s all kinds of beautiful, but lately she hasn’t really been showing it, I guess I haven’t either. She doesn’t wear the tight clothing she used to, and I sure as hell don’t make my hair look cool like it used to or shave much or dress very well like I used to. Has marriage made us both ugly?

“So what made you want to go stargazing”

“I dunno, we just used to do it all the time, remember that?”

“Yea, it was fun, but didn’t we just use that as an excuse to get high?”

“Well, yea, but I know that I definitely used to look at the stars, we can go on that hill in the park down the street. This time of night it should be quiet”

We walked down the street behind this mother and her son. The kid had down-syndrome and the mom was walking him on one of those ambiguously humane child-leashes, but he
kept finding a way to get away, like she’d tie it real tight and he could still find a way to slip out of it. And I just thought to myself how if any other kid did that people would be saying that the kid would grow up to be a genius or something, with all that problem solving skill being put to use at such a young age, but with him, this poor kid would never get that compliment. His achievements would be written up as instinctual response. That sucks, I thought.

Right before we reached the park, the kid slipped away again, but this time the mom couldn’t take it and she grabbed his shoulder and spun him about-face, eyes locked right on the mom’s. And she starts pointing her finger. She scolds him, barks at him, says things and in her voice I hear how sad she is, how hard it is to take care of him all the time and watch him and make sure he’s safe, cause she’s his mother and she’s gotta care for him just based on instinct, and she can’t help the way she cares for him, and I heard all that in her voice, and hidden right in the back of the sound was something that said that she wanted so badly not to care about her son, because he’ll always need to be watched, nursed, and nannied, and for the love of God, why was it her that had to be that person?

And inside of me I felt this balloon fill up, and I knew it wouldn’t burst into a cry, but the balloon filled and I felt that pressure right down in the pit of me. I was responding to how sad that mom was and how I felt bad for the son for having to grow up with that mom, and how I never ever wanted to be that kind of parent.
“Dan, are you coming into the park or are you just going to stand there”

“Hmm? Oh, yea, I’m coming, sorry bout that”

Veronica and I held hands and walked through the park. It reminded me of the first few times we went out together back when I was a grad student. We did a lot of walking because we were busy people and sometimes walking was the only activity either of us had time for, but we loved each other, and we’d always let each other know with a kiss or a body, firmly pressed to the other, or a whisper in an ear that said,

“I’ll follow you anywhere”.

I into Veronica now with her baggy windbreaker and her hair in a ponytail coming out the back of a baseball cap, how long after we said, “I Do” did it take her to start dressing like she couldn’t give fewer shits? What does she do all day anyway? Is she even looking for jobs? I can’t pay this mortgage alone, is she really banking on me knocking her up so she can be a stay at home mom?

Why is it so quiet now, what happened to the times when we would talk to each other? Not that we don’t talk, it’s just, what’s there to talk about? We don’t go out much, we don’t have friends in the way that we used to, I mean, we have friends, it’s just, they’re all the same friends, and, I guess, we see each other all the time and do the same fucking bullshit every day.
How long after we said, “I Do” did it take for us to disregard spontaneity? Now Veronica resents when I break routine. I get up at six, get breakfast, get in my car, get coffee, shoot the shit with Christina, the barista, go to work, go to the gym, get back from the gym at around 6:30, eat the dinner Veronica prepared, watch TV with her, then she goes upstairs to read, and then, after I watch a little more TV, I join her. And if I don’t do it exactly like that Veronica won’t stop badgering about why I didn’t do this at that time, or why I was late, or why I ate without her? No, her cooking was fine, it was just that I haven’t seen Jeff in eons and I wanted to see him because, I don’t know, I just needed to. And no, I don’t need space. Honey I’m sorry, Honey come back. Please come back. I love you, you know that honey? I love you, don’t worry, Jeff just really needed to see me, and I’m sorry I fucked up baby.

I can’t live without you.

“It’s cold”

“What’s that? Oh, do you want my jacket? I didn’t even notice”

We were sitting in the grass and my back was getting wet from the dew. I could smell it underneath me, and it smelled soft like Sundays back home in the summer time even
though it was 45 degrees and early April. And I thought that if we had married in early April, wouldn’t this be fall? And I thought of how similar spring looked to fall, the only difference was that soon it would be winter.

“Thanks for coming out with me honey, this is fun, I’m having a lot of fun just being out here with you”

“I’m still cold, it’s freezing Dan, can we go back soon?”

“sure thing, Vicky”

I got up, and then reached for Veronica’s hand to help her up. Her hand was dry and kind of rough.

“Is your skin dry again?”

“Yea, I’ve been moisturizing like crazy lately. I dunno, this usually only happens in December. The things I do to stay beautiful… it’s almost a full time job” She joked.

Almost.
We went to sleep not too long after we got back. I was tired and I brushed my teeth, took off my clothes, all but my undershirt and boxers, and rolled into bed. I spread out my arms and legs and felt the cool bed beneath me. I love when you first climb into bed and it’s cold from you not being there and the covers are kind of chilly but slowly release a warmth on you, but it’s slow and it’s gentle and it’s like all things when they start fresh, all slow and gradual. I stretched out my arm and it brushed against Veronica.

How did you sneak in there? You sneaky little minx. She laughed, she rolled on her back, and she looked at me, looked at me with her head lowered, lower down like saying, you know, you can kiss me if you like. And I did and I pressed my body against her. Pressed my skin against hers. She didn’t recoil with that mix of surprise and pleasure characteristic of the honeymoon phase, but instead she kinda knew what I was gonna do. Like I’d already done it a thousand times before every night for the past three years.

And that night we fucked, but I wasn’t really into it.

The next morning I woke up and made myself some breakfast. Extra protein cheerios with almond milk. How come I had to workout and stay in shape but Veronica doesn’t have to. I guess that’s because every night I tell her I love her just the way she is and that
I’m happy as long as she’s happy, and I guess I’m ok lying to the people I love. Or is that a lie? I finish my breakfast and get my grandpa jacket and keys.

“Bye honey, love you!”

I yelled to her and closed the door. Entered my car and drove to work. What in the last three years has changed anyway? I’m still an untenured professor teaching introductory level courses to students who don’t give a flying fuck, I’m still working with the same research groups trying to match the neural pathways to the same algorithms. I’m still running the same numbers. It’s funny how easy I can list the stuff that has changed: Well first off, I met Christina, the barista of Christina’s Café shortly after Veronica and got married and moved here, and I guess something that changed was that Christina went from being the no-name coffee-grabber-girl to being the Christina who owned the café to being Christina, the owner of the café who has a cat, who plays guitar and is in a band and likes to read Russian literature. And I guess the math department did get that new modeling software, and, let me tell you, that doesn’t sound like a big change, but it’s made my powerpoints a thousand times clearer.

Ultimately, not much has changed. Christina redecorates the café a lot so that’s something that’s always new. But other than that, it’s been same old car, same old new-house, same old job and wife and same old prescription of fluoxetine hcl to keep the hull of my boat from leaking.
It’s usually on my drive to work, when I’m listening to whatever I’ve been jamming lately, usually something jazz or funk or hiphop fusion that I think about how shitty my life is, and I always laugh and keep driving because it’s easiest to laugh when the sun just started shining and my brains not all tired because my brain just started thinking. That’s usually about when I pull into the parking lot of Christina’s. I suppose I’ve been coming here everyday before work for, what, could it be 2 and a half years now? I guess it took me a while after Veronica and I moved in for me to discover this place and even after I found it I didn’t know it was the best, so yea, I guess that sounds about right, 2 and a half years now. And after 2 and a half years you start to establish a routine and become a regular. Most people come in and get their coffee, medium black, small cream no sugar, large double sugar cream; nothing different nothing special. For me, Christina always has a table ready with my coffee, medium black, and a pastry, whatever she just finished baking, and then I usually sit there till I’m done, usually thirty minutes, but lately my stay at Christina’s has been taking about 45 minutes. Over the past 4 months, starting after Christina played the Wailing Souls in the café during one of my daily sojourns, we got talking about music and then got talking about life, and then just realized that we just loved talking to each other. We’re just like old friends and we don’t even know each other too well yet.

She’s just one of those friends that clicks immediately. Clicked in a way that only friends can, like we’re just so similar that we couldn’t be anything but friends. It’s crazy.
So this Monday morning, like all others, there’s Christina with a table ready for me, right
next to the window where the sun shines in, medium black coffee in a mug on a saucer,
pastry on a small serving plate. She’s sitting across from the empty chair, apron on,
brown curly hair falling down around her shoulders, big smile like she was looking
forward to this all weekend, her cheeks are so rounded, and on such a thin face like hers,
it just makes her smile pop.

I’m smiling like a smiling-fool too, because, well, Christina’s got on her infectious smile,
that one that just makes you want to smile, and with her sitting there in the sunlight it just
– well, it looks like the pastry’s really good and I can smell the coffee. When do I have to
be at work again? I check my watch but I can’t remember what time it was even though I
just checked.

“Hello, Christina, how are you on this fine morning? What kind of pastry did you get for
me today?”

Her eyes are really popping. The answer would have burst out of her if she weren’t being
so restrained.

“Buttercrunch muffin with a banana nutella center.” Her words were racing each other.

“Oh my god Dan you have to try it. I thought of you this weekend, well the recipe, and
then I thought of you, and I know you’d love it. Oh you’re gonna fucking love it I’m so
excited. OK I’m gonna shut up now and let you try it….”
Her eyes adhered to mine, she waited for me to try it. I bit into the muffin. Holy shit. This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten.

“Oh my god, Christina, this is insane, this is too good”

“You like it? Ok, awesome, I knew you would, but I was still worried. I figured I’d make you something crunchy because you’ll be crunching numbers all day”

She trailed off but was still looking at me intently with her mouth open a little. *I should say something.*

“So how was the rest of your weekend?”

“It was great actually, I got to go camping in the Shenandoah’s with some friends, it was beautiful. The weather was perfect, it was so warm.”

“I know, I was out last night and the weather was lovely, you can really tell spring is coming.” I had no idea she camped, I used to love camping, I guess I lost the time for it, but I used to love it.

“Christina, you’re a remarkable person, every time we talk I find out something else that simply fascinates me.”
“Well Doc, that was quite a formal way to flatter a girl.” She laughed. She blushed.

I shifted the subject away from compliments. But not too far away.

“I love camping too. It’s so peaceful. Sometimes I wish I didn’t have a house, it would be better to just live outside and travel where it’s warm”

“Mmm I know.”

I should have known Christina loves the outdoors. She’s always wore those flannels that hug her hips where her jeans fit tight around her great figure. She’s always got those long boots that run up her legs and she’s got that wild hair that has fun even when people tell her to be lame.

“Hey Christina”

“What’s up Doc?”

“Do you like stargazing?”

And she laughed and she blushed. And she whispered,
“Of course”

And she whispered along with the wind that hit me, cause she’s the wind, that wind that takes the biting winter cold and soothes it, rolls gently off the hills, crosses the knolls. She whispers winds that creep up my starboard, lofty whispers that luff my sails and move my hull.

“Would you, perhaps, like to go stargazing?”

She laughed. She blushed.

“Of course.”