

# THE WEEK

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*Monday*

She looks for herself. The evening's rain has skinned the pavement with a reflection. Stalactites of yellow streetlight and neon, deep violet sky between black buildings, the dim green clouds of treetops in the park across the street. She used to watch Eric's reflection in mirrors and puddles. Now she only looks for herself.

The skirl of tires on wet pavement startles her up. Without quite realizing it she'd knelt, then crouched, then leaned out over the curb to study the pavement. She shakes her head, brushes grit from her jeans. The bus lurches on without stopping. The next one won't come for a half hour. She looks at her bare wrist, force of habit, and frowns. Where did she leave her watch?

'If you knew where you left it, it wouldn't be lost,' she says, and tucks her hair behind her ears. 'No, go ahead, talk to yourself at the bus stop. It's totally normal. Bring a shopping cart full of tin cans next time.'

When the next bus finally comes the display over the windshield is dark. She asks the driver if it's her route and takes his silence as a yes.

She has a love hate relationship with buses. Maybe other people do too. She supposes everyone might but she's never asked anyone. Of all the small talk on the bus—aside from inane cell phone monologues—she most hates small talk about the bus itself.

She sits at the very back and now does not seek her reflection in the windows. Her face pale as a skull, hollow-eyed, in state over the world rolling by outside. As if she'd come back from the dead to haunt

herself. Instead she lets her gaze rove half-focused around the bus. Dirty and sterile all at once. Scratched metal, ballpoint graffiti and cigarette burns, all glaring and sickly. Wounds under review in a florescent morgue.

On the short walk from her stop to her apartment she checks her wrist again, frowns again, opens her mouth to talk to herself again but does not. At least until she's in the narrow front hall of her building.

'Empty,' she mutters into her mail slot. 'Surprise, surprise.'

This late at night she climbs delicately up the sagging old stairs. No one in the building sleeps, but no one's exactly awake. The tenants occupy a mental Bermuda triangle between TV, disability cheques, and grocery delivery services. They never poke their heads out the door to complain, either. If she misses a sweet spot on one of the stairs its creak will be answered from deep within the nearest apartment. A fist pounding on a table or wall, a half comprehensible shout burped up from a pot-thickened throat, the TV volume cranked for a second or two. Each tenant complains in his or her own special language.

Just as each tenant leaves his or her trail.

'Constellations of old gum,' she says, cataloguing as usual the stairwell debris she's careful not to step on. 'New gum and gum wrapper. Cigarette butts. Stick. Crushed beetle. Oh, please be a beetle, we can't have roaches again already. Human hair. Newspaper pages wiped in grease. No, smells worse. Maybe iodine? Note for 502, signed 402. Crushed beer can. Home sweet home.'

She doesn't turn on the light in her apartment. Along a skewed column of lamplight from the street she threads like a gymnast on her beam, hanging her clothes over a chair and dismounting onto the couch where she's been sleeping since Eric left. He altered the whole place. He's been gone a week now but it's still his. It would stay his. The bed especially.

A week of no apartment. A week of no bed. A week of no dreams and waking seven times in the night, or

not waking but dreaming of it seven times. Either way she's become used to it.

'Who wants to be used to this?' she asks the ceiling. 'Not I, said the cat. To herself. In the dark apartment. Damn it, let someone else do the talking for a while.'

She fishes through piles of magazines and dirty dishes on the coffee table for the remote and switches on the TV.

At first she thinks it hasn't worked, that the battery is dead. The screen warms ever so slowly. The sound never comes, no matter how high she turns the volume or how many times she hits the mute button. She sits up for a proper look at the screen. For a minute she thinks it's only her reflection. But it's an old TV with a convex screen that could never reflect her so faithfully. It looks like a girl just sitting there, maybe four or five feet from the camera. Staring into it.

Her eyes aren't adjusting well. She leans over the arm of the couch and flips the wall switch for the standing lamp in the corner.

'What?'

She stares at herself. On the couch in her undershirt and underwear, slack face fixed forward. After a minute she begins to sway from the asynchrony of breath and heartbeat. She rubs her eyes. The TV image of herself lowers its hands as she does. She looks above the TV, to the sides, at the wall behind it, all the while stealing glances at her TV self, who apparently does the same. They stand up in unison. They stand before the screen. They look in and under the DVD player. They sit back down together.

They sit for a few minutes staring, eyes flicking over the surface between them that might be a screen. Their eyes do not meet.

'How could it be me?' she says. 'It's not me.'

The TV image is talking too but the picture isn't sharp enough for her lips to be read. At once her face hardens, as does the other's, and she reaches for the remote, aims it and hesitates, as does the other.

'The blanket is different.'

They look up at each other again. Then at each other's blanket. Hers is spread over the cushions and she's draped it over her lap against the cool night. On TV it's bunched at one end of the couch, hanging off onto the floor.

On TV she wipes her forehead. On TV she is sweating. Their eyes finally, truly lock.

Then she's holding her face and crying and wrapping herself in the blanket and covering her mouth and looking around the room again at everything, at anything. On TV she rants, points, clears the coffee table, overturns it, claws at the screen, punches it, kicks it from what seems like within.

Together they reach for the dial and switch off the TV.

She throws off the blanket and paces around the room. Into the bathroom and out again without turning on the light. To the bedroom door. Back out to the kitchen. All the while nearly hyperventilating and blinking incessantly.

'It's the light,' she says, and jumps at her own voice.

She switches off the lamp and stands in the relative dark. Inside a minute she's shivering. She fetches her housecoat from a chair, turns on all the lights, turns down or takes down or covers up all the reflective surfaces in the living room, then switches off the lights again and lays on the couch until morning. Dreaming or not.

*Tuesday*

'Old gum. New gum and wrapper. Butts. Stick. Human hair. Newspaper. Note from 402. Beer can.'

When she gets in from work she leers at the TV a long time before she notices the light on the answering machine. There's a message from Eric.

'Hey, I, um, I want to see you. I want to talk. I think you want to see me too. I know you get off early today. I'll get us a corner table at the Nest. Sixish. Earlier if you can. Half a glass of Riesling to start, right? Maybe dinner if there's time. Anyway I'll be waiting.'

'Saturday,' she says. 'I leave early on Saturday. Shit.' She checks her naked wrist. 'Shit.' The kitchen clock reads a quarter to six. 'Shit!'

In a half hour she's flown out of her clothes and through the shower. Into the bedroom for a dress, shaking the whole time with her eyes fixed on the closet and nothing else.

On the front step waiting for a taxi she shivers even though it's turned warm. A phone rings in one of the apartments. She looks up without thinking. The light in her apartment is still on. Headlights swing across the lower floors. She looks up the street and runs to meet the taxi halfway.

It's past seven by the time she gets to the Swallow's Nest across town. She makes a circuit of the restaurant, her face a sour clash of anger and excitement. The booths are candlelit and all but one taken by couples leaning close over wine and entrées and in that one a flushed mother and father telling their pouting daughters just to finish already and we'll get back on the road.

She approaches the bar. 'Excuse me.'

The young bartender asks what she'll have. It's all over his face. There's no gentleman here since six waiting for a lady of her description. There maybe never was. The bartender knows it too and says with a wave that he himself showed up late, just got there a few minutes ago, in fact. One of the waitresses had to cover. It happens to everyone. He motions to a stool.

'No thanks,' she says. 'I'm sorry, I have to go.'

The taxi driver is still there, parked in the lot reading the paper. He turns the radio to a lite station while she sobs in the back. 'Hey, don't worry,' he says when they arrive back at her building and she fishes for money in her purse. 'I done all right tonight.'

She stands a while crying. Someone up in one of the apartments is crying too. There's a bitter smell outside but she doesn't go in until she's finished crying and dried her face.

'Beer can. Note from 402. Newspaper. Human hair. Stick. Butts. New gum and gum wrapper. Old gum.'

Before going to sleep she stands by the TV for almost half an hour. The second time she wakes in the night the clock on the DVD player blinks 6:00. She stares the TV down. It does not switch on.

'Idiot. Go back to sleep.'

Five more times she wakes, or dreams of it.

*Wednesday*

The stairwell and corridors of her building have no windows, only a forty watt bulb each hanging naked from the stucco ceiling like the wilted luminescent fruit of angels. Even the front hall is dim. The inner door has a stained glass window but the thick windowless outer door has a spring hinge to keep it closed.

Day or night outside, neither within.

Work is slow. Or seems slow. Or she does. She makes her rounds, checks on the girls, writes and rewrites schedules, fills out orders, inventories new shipments. Business as usual except that the girls and the customers stream around her in time-lapse replay. Work is slow but it goes by quickly. The tortoise and the hare are one.

She leaves without saying hello to the evening manager or goodbye to the girls. She catches the early bus and gets home before dark. On the steps of her building she leans a minute over the railing. The leaves are starting to yellow despite the warm snap. When she gets sore of standing she sits. A few leaves have fallen from the tree next to the stoop. The bitter smell of the night before issues from this pile of leaves. A rotting apple core maybe. Some brown lump covered by the leaves and lacing the dusk with its stale poison.

She passes the evening in the kitchen with quarter glasses of wine. She reads a few pages of the latest papal conspiracy thriller. She puts it down for a while and stands over the answering machine. She reads again, puts it down again.

*Thursday*

'Beer can. Note from 402. Newspaper. Human hair. Stick. Butts. Old gum.'

'Gum. Butts. Stick. Hair. Is that blood? Dried blood. Note from 402, overturned. Beer can. Story of my life.'

*Friday*

The fourth time she wakes in the night she's convinced it's actual waking and not a dream. The DVD numbers read 4:00 and cast a sheen throughout the room as the phosphorescent soul of every object in it could blink its way free of surfaces and angles at that mean hour. The blanket has slipped off the couch. She's sweating. Summer hasn't handed over the keys just yet.

'It's still Thursday,' she says, covering her eyes. 'You've got all night still to sleep. Friday is still a day away. Plenty of time. Just go back to sleep.'

There's a tremendous thump from a lower floor that tugs a string hooked into every muscle in her body. She's up and ready in the dark, standing on the couch and watching the floor wide-eyed as it strobes black and spectral aquamarine. There comes another thump. Is it the third floor? Someone down there complains by banging an exposed pipe with a hammer, or so it sounds. No. This is louder by an order of magnitude. There comes another thump and then yelling. Between the fifth and the fourth floor, it must be. Not yelling like anyone does to complain about creaking stairs. Not an isolated grunt or holler. This is the voice of hysteria. Of police raids. Of war widows. Of the beating of a lifetime.

She puts on her housecoat on the way to the peephole. A draft beneath the door nips her toes and carries a clearer echo of the yelling into her apartment. She grabs her flip flops from the mat and puts them back and slips on her cross trainers instead and creeps into the corridor.

'Beer can.'

She pauses on the landing between seventh, hers, and sixth floors. In the forty watt indoor dusk it's easy to see the light from other peepholes intermittently blocked as others look out into the corridor. The argument goes on. It's between two men, shrill and catastrophic. Peter and Judas, maybe.

She descends the stairs at about one per minute. She goes half crouched with one hand on the sticky railing and the other holding closed her housecoat, wringing the hem. So poised she pauses on the landing between sixth and fifth floors. One of the arguers is here. It sounds like 502, first on the left. She

peers with just one eye into the corridor, her nose and shoulder brushing the frame. The near wall occluded by its own corner.

There's a crash and 502's door slams open, into view. She jumps back and flattens against the wall with her hands over her mouth and her knees together and the heat of urine instantly running down toward them. A huge flannelled and work-booted figure thunders around the corner and over the landing nearly brushing but not seeing her. It disappears down the stairs, trailing smoke as it were from a machine and not a cigarette. A door on the fourth floor slams and the yelling starts again even louder.

She throws up through her fingers. She whimpers through her nose and creeps back up the stairs, shaking too much to run.

Once she's double checked the deadbolt and the chain she stands in a lukewarm shower. Early warnings in her late twenties nakedness. Some time later she wakes up half standing, half kneeling on the rim of the tub. Her arms draped around the pipe between tap and showerhead. She turns off the shower and brushes her teeth in the tub and lays back to sleep.

In the morning, in the whole day off from work, she leaves the apartment only once. To check the mail.

'Beer can. Rigatoni in a basil sauce thickened with shredded mozzarella, low heat on stovetop twenty minutes, partially digested. Jesus, the smell. Find some newspaper to cover it with. That'll be your piss, too, by the wall. Stick. Butts. Gum.'

From the mail slot in the hall wanders out onto the steps and stands in the sun for just a minute before the stale reek almost turns her stomach. She covers her mouth and leans over the railing. The leaves are strewn or blown away but their nucleus remains. Beneath the tree a miniscule skeleton wrapped in damp feathers and a few leaves yet. Eyeless paper skull. Beak hung open as if the bird's lyric had surpassed animal subjects and brought it knowledge of pain and deceit which struck its tiny heart dead. Or it had been singing when it died of natural causes.

'Gum. Butts. Stick. Piss, puke. Beer can.'

*Saturday*

She's late for work. The girls don't care and they say it. They wait out front sipping lattes in the sun. They also don't care when she leaves early.

All evening she walks around the apartment. Except, of course, the bedroom. She cringes at every occasional bump, every footstep and complaint that drifts muted up from the lower floors. Heels clatter outside on the step. She looks out the window. It isn't often she sees other tenants. There's no way to gauge their gender or age by their mode of complaint. The girl standing down on the step is a woman as much as a girl, frail under the moon. She considers calling down a hello but the phone rings and she jumps to answer it. Before she picks it up she hesitates. She looks at the answering machine. On the fifth ring she answers, her eyes drifting out of focus on the door, the deadbolt.

'Hello?'

'Oh,' comes the thin crackling voice. A man's. 'Hi.'

She stares at the deadbolt.

'Um. Are you there? Tricia?'

'Yes,' she says. 'This is she.'

'This is she? Are you okay? Where the hell are you?'

Her eyes drift and then snap to focus. She shakes her head. 'You've got some nerve calling me. Where do you think I am? At home. Just where the hell were you?'

'What? Look I just want to talk.'

'Oh!' She laughs. 'Is that a fact? You know I actually believed that the first time. I even showed up thinking it couldn't hurt to hear you out. I thought, stupid really, I thought you might actually tell me you're sorry. I know better now. I still don't know what you want but I know better.'

'Tricia, what in God's name are you talking about? When were you here? Didn't you get my message?'

'Oh, yeah. I got the message. I got the message when you didn't answer your phone at work. I got the message when you went out in the middle of the night thinking I was asleep. I got the message when you wouldn't answer the door because you were too busy fucking some other girl in my bed. My bed, Eric! I got the message loud and clear.'

'Tricia.'

'Don't you Tricia me. Don't. Don't. You just hang on to that message I left you. The one about the slammed door and your trunk of clothes, the one you refused to unpack in my house, that one, on the sidewalk. It was gone in the morning so I assume you got the message. I can't even go in there anymore, you know? I sleep on the couch. My own bed. Was she worth it? No, shut up, don't answer.'

The phone line rubs its katydid legs for a minute. Then, quietly, he says, 'I just want to talk.'

She slams the phone down and storms to the bedroom. For a while she only stands in the doorway with her hand on the light switch. Glaring into the dark. Then she switches on the light and throws everything that isn't nailed down into a box. She tears the sheets off the bed. Sweeps armloads of makeup, jewellery, books, candles, birthday cards and business cards off the dresser. Bundles up strewn clothes and stuffs

them into loose grocery bags. All these things she drags out into the corridor and throws down the garbage chute. She swears down after them and slams the chute door a few times. The peephole lights along the corridor wink out. To all the tenants on her floor in a single measured arc she gives the finger. The same hand she drums against her leg, afterward, as she sits on the edge of her bed crying but shedding no tears.

Each time she wakes in the night she gets up to check the deadbolt. The sixth time she screams at the DVD player and pulls it until the plug comes loose and then curses the 2:00 afterimage.

### *Sunday*

'Beer can. Puke.' She spreads yesterday's classified section over the stain and steps on it in a few places to adhere it. 'Piss has dried and taken place as newest child in family of carpet discolorations. Stick. Butts. Gum.'

From the sidewalk she looks back up at the building.

'If I moved across town and got a new number I might never see him again. Could I move across town from me? Worth looking into. Shut up.'

She smiles at the sound of a bird chirping and whistling in the tree over the step. She crouches and brushes apart gathered leaves, then stands and shading her eyes against the early sun stares up into the branches. There's a nest. She lowers her eyes. A few tears slip out. She wipes them each away in turn.

The whole day she walks. It's her day off but she stops by work anyway to browse, to check on the girls and buy a skirt. All without saying a word. From work she walks on down the strip. Past churchyards and through the park. Out into neighbourhood grids and department store flats. Between factories on wide sunny dusty roads. To the river. Back along streets crowded with tenements like books in some ancient

oversized library. In a neighbourhood of old houses turned into patio restaurants she lingers, on the sidewalk in front of the Swallow's Nest until a waiter brings her out a dinner menu. She blushes and retreats to a restaurant patio across the street, where she watches the Nest over one appetizer and then another, then an entrée. A glass of water then a glass of wine.

On the way home she sits a while on a bench in red sunlight rubbing her calves. When a bus stops she gets on. She sits in the back. Rather than avoid her reflection she leans her head against it and watches the city cool and dim through her phantom eyes. Near the park the bus swerves away from the curb. Her skull buzzes against the window and her unfocused gaze passes over a figure crouched at the edge of the sidewalk. The bus driver swears and glances at the digital clock over the windshield and flicks on his headlights.

'Gum. Butts. Stick. Newspaper. Beer can.'

After dinner she has a cool shower and finishes her thriller. She lays on the couch flipping back and forth between chapters, reading aloud key discoveries and revelations, tracking the plotline through the air with her finger. She reads the final scene twice. She frowns.

'What am I missing? It doesn't add up.'

She lays the book open on her chest.

'Whatever.'

Each time she wakes in the night it's as if she'd just dozed off. She fumbles over her head for the table lamp, grumbles, lays the book open over her face. Each time the same. The seventh and last time she wakes from a dream of the thriller's sex scene but with Eric as the brooding professor and her as the beautiful detective. She wakes sweating, wringing its hem of her tank top with one hand and with the other touching herself in a crude untutored manner. She sighs and blushes.Laughs. Looks for the book,

can't find it. Sits up instead and scrounges for the remote and switches on the TV.

At first she thinks it hasn't worked, that the battery is dead. The screen warms ever so slowly. The sound never comes, no matter how high she turns the volume or how many times she hits the mute button. She sits up for a proper look at the screen. For a minute she thinks it's only her reflection. But it's an old TV with a convex screen that could never reflect her so faithfully. It looks like a girl just sitting there, maybe four or five feet from the camera. Staring into it.

The table lamp is a bright scar across the bowed screen. She switches it off and turns on the standing lamp.

'What?'

She's staring at herself on the screen. She rubs her eyes and glances around the room. The TV image follows suit. Together they sputter denials. Together they notice the blanket is different on either side of what might be a TV screen.

'You aren't me,' she shouts, and throws aside everything she can lay hands on. 'I don't know who the hell you are but it isn't me. Listen. Look at me, stop crying and look at me. You aren't me!'

Together they reach for the dial and switch off the TV.

She swears and kicks at the scattered magazines. Storms out of the apartment into the corridor growling more than exhaling through her teeth, blinking and wiping tears from her eyes as soon as they form. The other peephole lights blink out. She paces.

'Beer can. Beer can. Beer can. Hey, what the hell?'

She kneels to pick up her watch from where it sits on the landing. The face is cracked. The hands

stopped at one o'clock. She flicks it and the second hand starts ticking. For a long time she just listens.

When she finally goes back into the apartment she frowns at the TV, then at the couch. She walks down the hall to the bedroom. Flicks on the light. Eric on the bed rolls onto his back and squints and holds up his hand to block the light.

'So was there somebody at the door or not?'