Tickleneck

Esophageal cancer is the worst way to go. Most people my age aren't even aware of their esophagus—just that we have a system of pipes inside us and all we have to do is make sure air and food pass through the correct ones—until the circuitry of swallowing doesn't work. My father was sixty when he learned what a hiatal hernia is. It's when the stomach pokes through the diaphragm and up into the chest, something akin to a kink in the hose. He spat up blood a few times. His stool had gone the color of char. When doctors took a closer look, they found the hernia, sure, but they also found the reason he'd withered off thirty-three pounds from his one-hundred-and-seventy-five. By the time he went into hospice, he was down to one-fifteen. Stage four. Now swallowing his own saliva makes him wince. I shouldn't make light of anyone else's suffering; maybe there are worse ways to go. But this man was a New York City firefighter; a single mother trapped on 9/11 still sends him Christmas cards from Great Neck because my father had the muscle to drag her out of ash and steel. And this is how he dies. Like a permanent fixture of furniture, nailed to the ground. I spend many of these mornings the same way, counting wall tiles, tapping jazz rhythms into the linoleum floor, wondering whether there is a single molecule of mercy in the world.

This morning, I take a long walk from my father's hospice room until I encounter a pale blue clock hanging on the wall. Its plastic edges curve into a silhouette of a silly-grinning hippopotamus. Baby-blue, two-tooth smile. We're on the same floor as the children's ward where you tend to catch these little glimpses of levity. Balloons, for one—there are always balloons moored somewhere. People leave cupcakes with rainbow-colored frosting on the nurse's counters. But I wonder about that clock. I don't see the appeal. Does a grinning hippo really do anything to cheer a child with metastatic bone cancer?

My phone buzzes in my pocket. A text from my editor, Jane Lemore. How's he doing, hope you're well. "But if you can get away," the next bubble says, "I have an exclusive."

Don't know how much time my father has, I text. Can I have another personal day?

Is he conscious? Do you need to be there?

No and—technically—no.

Then you won't want to miss this one, Jane says. Then she tells me who's giving us the exclusive.

An hour later, I am driving through Elmsford on my way to see him.

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No one has seen Thaddeus Harles in public for thirty years, but everyone agrees on one fact: he is alive. If he is as old as Jane thinks, he was born on January 31, 1897, making him the only human alive who has touched the 19th century. Conspiracy wackos think he's already dead, and

every so often I find myself agreeing with the message boards, but then the odd donation comes in with Harles' signature on it—a new wing at Sloan Kettering needing fresh letters to decorate its doors—and as if nourishing himself on every groundbreaking ceremony that thanks Thaddeus Harles, who couldn't be with us today, he lives another ten years. At least on paper.

On the way up through Westchester, I mentally sift through the five Ws. The Who: Thaddeus Harles III. The What: Jane came across an old photograph of Thaddeus' Harles' grandfather, Thaddeus the First, shaking the hand of Al Capone, and now Harles' estate is so alarmed by the revelation that they invited a journalist to help clear the air. The Where: Harles' sprawling estate in Tickleneck, New York, a town on the east bank of the Hudson and not far from Sleepy Hollow. The When: Modern Day, and maybe Prohibition, and maybe the year Harles was born. If I can find out that much, Jane gets her headline. As to The Why? That gives me something to ask. A good journalist is half a beggar—needy and drinking too much, always prodding for just-a-little-help to get them through their day.

I stop at the gate, tell the intercom my name, and pull up a half-crescent driveway filled with black sedans. Harles' personal secretary, Drake Dobson, greets me under the portico. He is slight and narrow-shouldered with a handshake like a wet towel, but his eyes bear into me with the strength a man gets from deep-gutted contempt. As a journalist I am used to this. Dobson leads me to the great hall, where I'm to stay put while he checks on Mr. Harles. To my surprise, Dobson walks past the bifurcated staircase that dominates the room and simply slides through a first-floor entryway. I imagined Harles laying up in a bedroom, dungeoned in the labyrinth of hoses that keep him alive.

When Dobson returns, he is wearing a surgical mask. "I'm afraid Mr. Harles is very tired at the moment. Perhaps you can come back another day."

"You invited me. I came up specifically for today. On a personal day."

"You understand. At Mr. Harles' age—"

"I left my father on his deathbed to be here."

This is obviously not the right thing to say; Dobson peels off the surgical mask and leans within spitting distance. "Anything for a story, you people. Your own father. And you know you have all the time in the world with Mr. Harles."

I've met personal secretaries like him before and I think I know what delusions he's suffering. It's a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. His whole world, his status and his livelihood, is Thaddeus Harles. It's not that he doesn't believe Harles will die one day; it's that he's never given the matter any thought.

"I just mean I can't drive back yet," I say. "Not without speaking to Harles. Or, if you like, we can run a half-assed story later today and tell the public what we already know without any of your input. I'm here because Jane wants to be courteous to you. I think you should extend the same."

A bluff. Jane told me no such thing. But I see it register in Dobson with a click in his jaw. He loops the surgical mask around his ear, a slow and procrastinating movement, like a scuba diver putting on oxygen before plunging into the deep. When he returns, he nods the go-ahead and hands me a clean mask.

“Since now you know our secret, I trust that you’ll be prepared for what you see.”

This comment strikes me as odd—having a grandfather who knew Al Capone should not have a physical manifestation, a leprosy you can see—but before I even load a reply in my chamber, Dobson turns and leads me through the entryway.

*

The Harles library is a womb of books and comfort. There are lamps on the end tables, but they remain unlit; a funereal, late-October gloom brings the only source of light through the windows. Rhythmic ocean sounds pump from a bluetooth speaker in the corner. And like a womb, there is no furniture lining the walls; there is only the person in the middle. I can’t see Harles behind the aide who keeps dipping into a jar of coconut oil, rubbing it into the back of a withered hand. An IV drip hangs above him. But there is nothing else like a hospital—no heart rate monitor, no doctor in the corner, frowning over his stethoscope. There is one machine, but Harles’ free hand isn’t hooked to it; he only holds a black signal device. “Mr. Harles,” Dobson calls. “The reporter.”

I’m prepared for an old voice, something like the creaking sighs of a 19th-century whaling vessel, but there is only clicking. A screen by his hip shows Harles cycling through autosuggested words. He works through it with practiced speed. Then a voice stutters out of the machine, fast and synthetic, the same lifeless murmurs that read websites for the deaf.

Offer him drink.

“Anything?” Dobson leans in and, knowing how much Harles can and cannot hear, he doesn’t bother to whisper. “His mind works, but he can’t speak.”

“Nothing, thank you.” Then, loudly: “Mr. Harles. I’m Ken Thurgood. Jane Lemore sent me about the picture. Is this still a good time for an interview?”

Click, click-click, tap, clickety-tap. Leave us alone. You too, Gail.

At first, I assume this is meant for me. But the nurse who must be Gail stands and leaves, giving me a full view of Harles. It takes conscious effort to keep my lips connected. There was once an Indonesian man named Mbah Gotho who claimed to be a hundred and forty-five; I remember because his face was so pruny and suffocated and molten with age, you were startled enough to believe him. When reporters asked him what he wanted for his hundred and forty-fifth birthday, he said he wanted to die.

Harles looks like that. The skin around his eyes puckers in bruisy lines, so vacuumed-in you think there must not be eyes in there but lemons. His ears are saucer-sized, gray and flat and wrinkled like medallions of pork. This morning, I thought 124 years old was a stretch. But looking at him now, I gauge that as the minimum.

He tries to sit up but winces. Every movement is obvious agony.

“Let me help you,” Dobson says.

A quick click of the repeat button. Leave us alone.

Dobson throws a sour-lipped look at me as he leaves. He has already decided who I am. A reporter, an enemy, a Manhattan Jew—which wouldn’t be a bad guess, though my mother’s family is specifically Ashkenazi, sons and daughters of gypsies of Yiddishkeit who wrote nothing down. But I write everything down. Perhaps that is what Dobson hates, because when I pull out a recorder and tap it to Harles’ desk, he gives the door a slam.

“Is it all right if I record this?” I ask. “For my notes.”

Tap-click. No video, no pictures.

“No. Just audio.” I beep the recorder awake. The key is to do this before the warm-up; people are more comfortable with a blinking red dot if you firmly establish it as a presence in the room. “It’s a really nice library. Must have been a lot of work.”

Click-click. Not throwing books away? Done harder work than that.

“What line of business were you in?”

None.

“But you have so much money—”

The clicks come fast, but he’s patient to get every sentence in correctly, like he has all the time in the world. First job, I was boy. Collecting leeches for doctor. I’d hike up my trousers. Stream by the schoolhouse. Pick them off my legs. Good money. People always leeched then. My favorite job was lamplighting. That was before the bulb. Bulb did away with us. I inherited some money after that and I invested it. Smartest thing I ever did. Compound interest.

“That’s a lot of compound interest.”

Lot of time.

I laugh, though he doesn’t. Perhaps he’s self-conscious of the age jokes. Leeches. The bulb. Even he wouldn’t remember when the bulb was newfangled technology. My grandpa used to make jokes like that, saying of course, back then—in the Bible days—we all wore sandals. He loved Mel Brooks’s old tapes, The Two Thousand Year Old Man, and stole all his jokes from it.

“So I like to start these things with a confession of my own, if it helps,” I say. “I’m an alcoholic. Recovering, eighteen months sober. I was married once—her name was Lauren—and she said if

I didn't go to rehab, she'd divorce me. I went to rehab and she divorced me anyway. Maybe I deserved it." It is an old journalist's trick, sure, but I always thought there is something inherently commercial about giving up a secret to get one. Usually I would stop here, but Harles doesn't raise his fingers to reply, and something in his obvious mortality makes him seem like the ideal confidant. "I would never hit a woman. But I said some things to her back before rehab. Just to argue, I guess, because if you argue the point, then that's the sign that some part of you is still healthy. But I went too far. Some of the things I said were probably worse than if I slapped her. She was right to divorce me."

Harles clicks a few times. Tell her that.

He is still clicking.

Thing about getting old. No one alive can forgive you. All dead. You know that poem. Water, but not a drop to drink. That's me. Harles sucks in air, winding himself like a trebuchet. Secrets. 1936. Berlin games going on. Thought Hitler was all right. Didn't know who he was. But there are letters. Wrote some awful things. A man judges himself harshly. Imagine living so long you get to see what history thinks of you.

"There you go. A recovering alcoholic and a Nazi sympathizer. Nice pair we make." The way Harles laughs—leaning over and hacking up so dry I expect there to be blood, and then of course there is some blood, flecks at first but eventually something more resembling a spray. He doesn't seem alarmed by the rust-colored stains on his wrist, doesn't even wipe himself off.

"I'm sorry. Should I get the nurse?"

Hurts to laugh. Everything hurts. This hurts better.

I would hate to see what hurts worse—this I leave unsaid. The ocean sounds wash between us as he waits, the white noise of gulls and foam. I imagine this unseen tide at its apogee, about to turn, mimicking us.

Click-click. So. You know.

"About Al Capone? Yes. But we don't know the context. We were curious if you had a reaction or any explanation."

Didn't know him.

"Al Capone? Or your grandfather?"

Capone. Gangster. One photo and everyone thinks you're in cathouse.

I stare at the text on his screen for a minute. "You mean cahoots?"

Machine tries to spell for me.

Was this man the Harles in the picture? Thaddeus the Third, the man in front of me? In the 1920s he would have been a young man; the picture was in some Chicago speakeasy, a crowd of people

in zoot suits around them, all slick with body heat and moonshine. He could have been anyone. But the photograph shows an old Harles.

“How did your grandfather earn his money? You mentioned inheritance.”

A cobbler. London. It was him came over.

“Cobbler? Well, he did well for a former cobbler.”

Penniless. Died before I was born.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand. That’s him in the picture, isn’t it? Thaddeus Harles the First. Unless we have that wrong. Is that Thaddeus the Second? Your father, maybe?”

You don’t know?

He turns away. The tap of a button on his nightstand rings a chime, which brings in Dobson, who carries in the same stormcloud face, the same desire to end the interview prematurely. I might as well ask it.

“Mr. Harles,” I say. “What year were you born?”

And then Dobson is in the room, rushing to bedside, clicking off my recorder, flicking it my way, attending to Harles with a hand to his forehead and holding the IV drip up to the dim light of the windows to see its level. Morphine? I don’t know what morphine drips look like, let alone if they make a man believe he met Al Capone as an old man.

Dementia, then. Dementia—making this interview useless, the trip up to Tickleneck nothing but time away from my father.

“I’ll escort you to the great hall, Mr. Thurgood,” Dobson says. And then he does. All the while I am rewinding through the words I had with Harles, the picture, the date, curious why I didn’t study harder in basic arithmetic. Of course it was impossible that Harles was that old. Of course it was. No one had ever been that old, unless you ask my mother, who takes Methusaleh’s nine-hundred-and-sixty-nine years in Genesis as literal. Even Mbah Gotho had claimed to be half a century younger than Harles would have to be.

But he seemed so lucid. Even Dobson said his mind still worked.

Before Dobson can shove me out the door, I click the recorder on and plant myself in a seat against the wall, fortifying myself, making myself un-shoveable. “Why does this man believe he’s over two hundred years old?”

“Nevermind what you heard.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll run with the story as-is. Harles has lost it.”

I expect Dobson to point at the door and say get out.

Instead, he answers the question.

*

The afternoon at Harles' Tickleneck house is familiar territory. Sitting against that wall and playing 8-Ball on my phone, I might as well be back at New York Presbyterian, waiting for a moment or two of my father's consciousness to bring light to the sensory deprivation chamber of my life. At least Dobson was amusing, as insulting as his story was. After he finished his run of cliches—eastern Europe, Budapest or Bucharest or one of those, Harles wishing for immortality from a gypsy's mother straight out of an Edgar Allen Poe short—I decided to indulge him and ask for a birth certificate as proof. Of course a midwife in 1809 wouldn't know what a birth certificate was, Dobson replied, but he showed me a record of the christening. Thaddeus Jefferson Harles, Baptized this Day the First of August, In the Year of Our Lord 1809, Reformed Church of the Tarrytowns.

If it was a story, at least they hadn't improvised it.

Dobson retreated back to Harles, where he is now, and they are undoubtedly discussing me. My feet bob up and down, heels tapping the floor. I want a chance to speak with Harles, if only to see what he thinks is true; that Thaddeus Harles is succumbing to dementia is a story in its own right.

Dobson opens the door. "There won't be a third chance."

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As I tap the recorder, Dobson brings in lunch. Celery broth and boiled carrots for Mr. Harles, whose stomach has gotten too sour for onions and garlic, and a bright, raisiny chicken salad sandwich for me. Looking at Harles as Dobson spoons tiny spittles of broth to his mouth, I'm not sure how I could have been so wrong to imagine Harles could be as young as a hundred and twenty-four. He is plainly older than that. How much, I don't know. But older. Even in the places where there should be no wrinkles, Harles' skin is a lacework of canyons and gorges, ancient like the forgotten waterways of Mars. It's as if Harles has aged eighty years between sessions. I know that change comes from me, not him. I find myself thinking of those videos I had to watch in Psych 101: even when we hear identical sounds, if we're presented with videos of mouths making different noises, we will hear the sound our eyes tell us to hear. Bah becomes fah, and vice versa. It must work the other way: we see what our ears tell us to see. We think we can trust our senses, but we cannot. Human beings are not clear-headed creatures with the occasional blind spot; we are cave bats, always groping through the oceans of our blindness, numb to entire universes around us.

Thought I was story of the millennium, Harles says when Dobson is gone. The eternal man.

Let me determine that. This I don't say.

Thought you knew. You had the photo.

“I thought I was here for the skeleton in the Harles family closet. Now you’re telling me there is no Harles family. Every Harles has always been you. The man in the photo—also you.”

That why we asked you here. Don’t tell anyone.

“I’m not even sure I can. My editor might not go for it. Sounds like something for supermarket tabloids. The President impregnated me with an alien baby, that sort of thing. Thaddeus Harles immortal! Whatever you say will probably die with us in this room.”

Good. Nothing else does.

His chest falls. My answer eased him. Something like hunger pangs ring inside me—my journalist’s instinct, desperate to speed him along to the secrets he must carry, even if he is a man without any speed. But talking is a mistake. Silence is a vacuum into which people must pour themselves. It is better to fight instinct, dig my fingernails into my palms, clench my sphincter, let the blood pressure inflate my insides before I blink first.

It feels like fifteen minutes before Harles starts clicking again. You don’t believe me.

“I looked it up before I came here. Before you, the oldest human on record was Jeanne Calment. A French woman. A hundred and twenty-two. Born in 1875, died over twenty years ago. Dobson told me you were born in 1809.”

Click-clack. Yes. No believe?

“I believe you believe that.”

Good. Why not leave?

Because Thaddeus Harles believing he was born in 1809 is story enough. I don’t say this either. I am thinking of a time on the lower east side when I interviewed a pizzeria owner who won Best Pie in Manhattan. The man was at least seventy with exposed, hairy shoulders that reminded me of the strands in a well-worn sponge of steel wool. When he finally won the attention of a journalist, he didn’t want to talk about pizza. He’d been baking all his life, he said, the implication being now that he’d struck it big with a newsman, it was time to tell me all about how he had it on good authority that Nancy Pelosi was a lizard from Zeta Reticuli. This he said without any irony. I left with a better story—not Nancy Pelosi’s extraterrestrial origins, but how a pizza could be so good that customers would put up with the pizzeria's eccentric old man and his blathering about interstellar conspiracies.

In talking to the steel wool chef, I had never once questioned him. I learned long ago it is better to indulge a lunatic’s fantasies, to be agreeable and curious rather than judgmental. The sound bites are better that way.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t know what a two-hundred-year-old-man looks like.”

Like this.

“All right. Then let’s talk about what it’s like to be two hundred years old.”

For the first time I see him click a button that brings up numbers instead of letters.

Two-hundred and thirteen, the synthetic voice reads.

Perhaps his mind is not entirely gone.

*

Harles dances around my questions about the origin of his immortality as if it is the least interesting part of his story. When I press him—thrice—on what powers could possibly grant him immortality, he says he knows as little as I do. Then he sighs and works on the speech machine with more dedication than any other sentence yet.

Do you remember what you were doing in November in kindergarten?

“No,” I admit.

Most people remember one or two things only. How long ago?

“I’m thirty-seven. So thirty-odd years.”

What you’re asking about—150 years ago. Memories are shreds of shreds.

“But that day changed everything for you. Those sorts of memories should stick.”

Spirit willing. Flesh weak.

He makes sure I am watching, then taps a finger to his temple, drilling the point home.

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As we go on, Harles continually brings up potassium cyanide. In the golden age of the space program, he says, NASA would give their astronauts small capsules of potassium cyanide. He’d read up on cyanide poisoning, learned that cyanide’s mechanism was to interfere with respiration by binding to a hemoglobin precursor and simply inhibiting its action. If you can’t metabolize oxygen, your remaining years turn into remaining minutes.

Look it up, Harles says. Cyanide poisoning. See how fragile we really are.

I ask him if he ever thought about taking cyanide pills.

Those don’t work.

“Then you’ve tried killing yourself. That sounds awful.”

Have chocolate?

“Not on me, no. Sorry.”

No teeth now. Just remember liking how it felt on my tongue. Like silk and earth.

A wave of simulated sea-foam washes up in the white noise machine. There are no seams in the sound. It is not playing a tape on a loop; its sole function is the permanent heartbeat of sound. The heavy roll of the ocean, the sizzle of froth washing down the sand.

“You were born in Tickleneck?” I ask.

His answer is one of the pre-saved options on the screen. Yes.

“Seems strange.”

?

The artificial voice pronounces it in earnest: Question mark.

“I mean to be this old and end up back where you started. I can’t even imagine what Tickleneck looked like back then.”

Don’t remember.

“What do you remember? How far back?”

Mother told me how town got its name. They buried a man. Criminal. Rapist, maybe. Up to his neck. Tickled him for torture. Tortured him to death. That stayed with me. People making torture out of anything.

“I’ve never heard that.”

Imagine all you haven’t heard.

“Why don’t you have them cremate you? You can’t possibly survive that.”

Afraid what happens if I do.

“Then you’re still afraid of death.”

Worse. Afraid life keeps going in the ash.

“Everyone wants what you have.”

What do I have?

“Money. Immortality.”

Whatever he types, it takes a long time, but he does so with the inevitability of something he has thought long about. People want comfort. Not life. They don’t want to think about death. That’s all. What good is eternal youth? In a hundred years, everyone you loved—dead. In a billion. The world gone. In a trillion. A quintillion. Universe goes cold and dark. But there you are. Trapped

in the meat world. Floating. Can't breathe. But still no death. Eternity loneliness. Quintillion quintillion years. Still no scratch surface of forever. No know if afterlife. Where loved ones are. You trapped yourself here. Miserable meat world. Oh but your teeth are white. Smooth skin. That I give you.

"Don't you fear hell?"

Not after this. Would rather take my chances with God.

The inside of my mouth turns briny. I feel my lips smack. I am not in Tickleneck; I am a child again on the Garden State Parkway up from my mother's parents in Toms River, lulling myself into hypnosis by the pulse of passing streetlights. There only had to be one or two stars in the sky, but for city kids, they were enough to make the entire world seem lit. I would rest my head against the glass and think about Heaven. How could anyone enjoy eternity? Ten years old, I thought, seemed like a lifetime. What's that against ten thousand years?

"That sounds like torture." I say it with inevitability. We are both attending a funeral for something already passed. "I'm sorry."

Only two hundred and thirteen years in. Still have body. Still have a face. Be sorry in five hundred years. Thousand. Oh but you can't. You will be gone. You are so lucky. All my wealth, to be you.

The ocean swishes, that seamless noise. I click the recorder off.

Whichever story I have—an immortal man or a deluded one—it is already in there.

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When I leave, the conga-line of black sedans has vanished, though I had never seen anyone else in the house except for Dobson and Harles and Gail. I don't ask about that. Dobson escorts me all the way to my car, a rented Honda Civic so old it still has a crank window. Before he lets me leave, Dobson waits outside, so I have to pump it down to hear him ask me for my card. He takes it and reads it with both hands, balancing it with the horizon as if he has to be the steadying force in my life.

"I'll watch your website," Dobson says. "If the story is not up by tomorrow evening, Mr. Harles would like to send you a check to express his gratitude."

"A check?"

"Would fifty thousand dollars suffice?"

Then he really believes it, too. I think of my father's estate, his shitty insurance, the expensive days in hospice. I've already seen the first bill. "There's a GoFundMe for my dad. Dale Thurgood. I'm sure he'd appreciate an anonymous donation."

Dobson allows a smile. "In that case, let us part on good terms, Mr. Thurgood."

“Once I see the donation.”

This gets a final frown out of him, but I have peeled off before he can speak.

I’m at a busy intersection in Yonkers when my phone buzzes. Lemore has always had a providential sense of timing.

What’s the story with Harles? she asks. Can she count on a thousand words by this evening?

It’s pouring outside now. Rain coils down the windshield. It makes me think of how rivers look on a long enough timeline—same antsy movements, bending around new corners when they’ve eaten enough earth, leaving oxbow loops where the old river had been. Wait long enough, and even those dry up.

It couldn’t have been dementia, I decide. He was so lucid. But I don’t know how else to explain it and I’m not going to write a National Enquirer story.

A bunch of bullshit, I type. Denial denial denial. And the guy’s so old he only talks nonsense. I think he has dementia. All we have is a picture of a handshake. I’m sorry.

Worth a shot, Lemore says. I’m sorry about taking you away from your father. I’ve filed a request for time-and-a-half.

Thank you. Sorry there wasn’t more.

Worth a shot, Lemore says again.

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Back in New York by evening, I pick up quesadillas from Ha-Ha Baja without thinking of why I got two servings—maybe my sister will be there tonight, she likes anything piled with pico de gallo—and forget I can’t bring food into this section of the hospital. I leave the styrofoam boxes with the nurse. I haven’t eaten since lunch, but I have no appetite. I wander the halls. The sounds of ocean and foam linger with me, bile-bitter, like the bite of overextracted coffee still under the tongue. I head for the swing doors of hospice when I see a familiar man in scrubs walking out. He looks startled to see me.

Mr. Thurgood, he says, I am so sorry. We tried to reach you.

He takes a breath and tells me my father passed that afternoon. Then a hand is on my shoulder and a few hugs from people I barely know pass under my armpits and my legs feel surprisingly good, since everyone knows that when your hero-father dies, your legs are supposed to flounder and give out and pull you to the floor or it means you didn’t care about the deceased, but I find myself trying to concentrate on what the nurse is saying, as if squinting at his lips will sharpen my hearing and tune me into all the details of death—what we will do with the body, who has been contacted, when I can see him. But I don’t go into the room to see my father. My father is not there.

Rudderless in the world, I start wandering, which brings me back to the children's ward. It's as if Harles' white noise machine is still in my head, submerging the real sounds, the mollified conversations, the gasping of respirators, the nurse intercoms paging Dr. Bhavsar. In a waiting area, a woman who must be a mother has worn a tissue down to a wrinkled mess. She wails like someone with an open wound. It's a sound I should be making. But a Hippopotamus above the hallway—baby-blue skin, two-tooth smile—ticks on. There is even a little tail wagging with each tock, a curly plastic tube I didn't see this morning. The fact that someone had to think of that and then fashion it out of plastic makes me laugh. What a gorgeous little mercy.

End