

Futures

The wicked brand of storm we sometimes got in summer had been brewing since dusk, but then the drapes fell suddenly limp, and the stagnant tyranny of August returned without a single drop of rain. As I pulled her shirt up over her head, I could smell a sweet rankness which might've been the ripening cornfields coming through my living room window. Her face re-emerged wearing tears, and she began to explain what I already suspected: that she wasn't divorced at all. When the phone rang in the kitchen I left her on my couch—her shirt off and the front of her jeans splayed open—weeping about the complexities of married life.

It was my son-in-law calling to explain that my daughter had taken off all her clothes at a dinner party. It didn't seem like the kind of emergency to be calling about so late at night, but Hartley explained that this was a nearly unforgiveable thing for her to have done. The other guests at the party were important business colleagues, brokers and traders, people like my son-in-law who worked in pits in downtown Chicago turning the dials of the Midwestern economy.

Hartley worked in farm futures at the mercantile exchange, hustling soybeans and frozen pork bellies and whatever else. He'd once tried to explain it all to me by stating that if he could simply predict September's price of corn in August, it would make him very rich. Otherwise, Hartley clung to the notion that he and I weren't so different, insisting occasionally that I must've known things about the farm-end of his business, living as I did, "downstate."

Covering the phone, I whispered to the woman on my couch that I needed to take this call, adding, when she didn't get up right away, that it might take a rather long time.

"She's very drunk, sir," said Hartley. "So drunk this week I don't know what to do with her."

"It's difficult to put clothing back on a drunk woman," I explained. From the kitchen I heard my date shutting the front door. "Can you get something big, like a sheet or a tarp maybe?"

"We're already home," Hartley explained. "She's asleep in the foyer now. I'm calling to ask if you could come up here and help me confront her." He paused, perhaps waiting for me to agree. "I was thinking," he finally added, "of staging an intervention."

I walked back through the living room, listening to Hartley go on. The woman's silk blouse lay on the arm of my couch. At the window, I looked out and saw her sitting in her car, in her bra, still sobbing.

I'd only met Hartley one time when, years ago, they'd driven down from Chicago to tell me they were planning to elope. JoLynn didn't seem to care either way, but Hartley needed to ask my permission. Something about the blue in his blood or the formality of the suburban house he'd grown up in made him do it. There wasn't much suspense in it—they'd already bought the plane tickets to Las Vegas—but I ended up liking him for the gesture anyway. He sat at my dinner table and described to me exactly how authentic and calming he found my downstate surroundings, and later, when the two of us stepped outside to smoke the cigars he'd brought, he promised me he'd give JoLynn a big house in the suburbs. I wasn't really worried about that, but I appreciated his

overtures, and in a way I must've already felt bad that he was entering a life from which I'd only recently escaped.

By that point, JoLynn's mother and I weren't technically divorced, but I doubted she'd ever appear in my life again. Last I'd heard, Sylvia was living in a yurt in New Mexico with a woman who painted leather belts and kept a peyote garden. She called once from a gas station to explain that the desert suited her, constructing some ill-conceived metaphor about how tough the creatures must be to survive there. Not long ago I had a dream that Sylvia died of a snake bite, and for days afterward I answered the phone expecting that kind of news.

As the train sped north the next morning—Saturday—I made my way to the lounge car where there were bigger windows and booths to stretch out in. The corn rushed by as if on a conveyor belt. Despite the assumptions of people like Hartley, I knew nothing about farming. I spent my days at a sales desk for a company that made foundation sealant. The product was a bright golden liquid that turned gray as it dried. People used it to keep water out of their basements, but it didn't work at all. My office had a window that looked out onto a parking lot. Beyond that was a state highway, then another lot, a Home Depot, and then a strip of green along the horizon which I'd always assumed was corn but may not have been.

In Chicago, I boarded a local commuter service that made a fast trip out of the city into the northern suburbs where Hartley had been raised. I stepped off the platform into a quaint downtown intersection with banks on three of its corners. Hartley had given me walking directions to their house, but before I could get the paper out of my pocket, a silver sedan rolled up to the curb with my son-in-law's face in the window.

“She’s at the salon right now,” he reported as I got into the car. The seatbelt had turned up the collar of his raincoat making him look like some kind of private eye.

“It’s nice to see you again, Hartley.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s good to see you too.” He pulled through town, narrating as it seemed appropriate—*She fell asleep in this park... She made quite a scene at that restaurant... These people, in the blue house, are no longer our friends.* We turned down a street full of cafes and furniture shops, pulled over at a frosted window with scissors painted on the glass. “She’s in there right now.” Hartley glanced at the dashboard clock. “She’ll be done any minute. Just watch. She’ll stumble out and get in her car. She drives drunk everywhere. We can follow her and you’ll see how bad it is.”

“I can imagine,” I told him. We sat in the car, watching the storefront, the suburban ladies occasionally emerging with their too-new hair. “Is there a place to get a sandwich?” I finally asked. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

Hartley stared at the salon window for another moment, then drove us a few blocks down to a café with French art on the walls and butcher paper tablecloths. When he didn’t order anything for himself, I got us two BLTs.

“Jo’s told me about her mom,” said Hartley. “She says it was much worse with your wife.”

I took a drink of water, watching his face distort through the bottom of the glass. “I’d bet it’s about the same.”

Hartley talked more about the intervention, describing what he figured the event might achieve, for us and also for JoLynn. Eventually, the sandwiches showed up and we were able to be quiet for a few minutes. You could talk yourself in circles with that kind

of thing, make guarantees and give ultimatums, but it was all just words, promises you couldn't be in charge of keeping.

“How are the markets treating you?” I asked him.

Hartley pushed his fries around his plate. “It would help if you could tell me exactly how the September corn looks down your way.”

“It's still August corn right now, isn't it?”

A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth.

“My office looks over a cornfield,” I said. “I'll give you a report on Monday.”

Hartley eyed the window. “Don't you think this'll take longer than that?”

“A lot longer, I'm sure.”

As we drove back across town, he explained that JoLynn would be out all afternoon shopping and beautifying for what she expected would be a catered dinner at the house with her college roommate, but would really be the intervention, with their minister and JoLynn's doctor and a woman from New Horizons Sobriety Clinic. “And us too, of course,” Hartley added. “The others will be more like mediators, while you and I state grievances.”

As we pulled into the shadow of their house, my mind tried on architecture terms from college: Georgian Colonial or Gothic Revival; there was probably a word for the way pillars held up the entryway. Hartley led me through the foyer, again narrating JoLynn's troubles—*She spent a whole night on this hardwood... She fell down these steps*—walking me through a series of sitting rooms and up a grand wooden staircase, until we'd come to my guest room. “Tonight it ends,” he said, chopping the edge of one hand against his open palm. “Before she becomes some kind of tragedy.”

With Sylvia, I'd intervened occasionally and occasionally she'd backed off the bottle, but never for very long. It went like that for a decade until one day I came upon her car on the side of the road, the front end smashed against a concrete pylon beneath the highway overpass. The doors were crammed shut, so all I could do was stand and look through the window at my wife drowsing against the steering wheel, my baby daughter squawking fussily in the car seat behind. The impact had torn open the seams of Sylvia's shirt, and as I watched the bruising rise to the surface of her exposed torso, all I could think was that I must've been as much her fool as she was my drunk. A man pulled over to help. With his crowbar we wrenched open a rear door and I drove JoLynn to the hospital. And when the doctors said she was fine, I put her back in my car and we kept driving. The highway made a straight line to the horizon and the fields of corn and soy spread out on both sides, limitless. We'd start over on our own, in the next county or someplace upstate, maybe go all the way to Chicago. But of course we ended up back home. I still had years more of Sylvia to put up with, another decade of her, another generation.

Downstairs, I found the reverend picking deviled eggs off the edge of a cold-food platter. We discussed addiction as he led me into the library, where JoLynn's doctor and the liaison from the sobriety clinic sat on wingback chairs sipping coffee. In turn, they each made note of their knowing about Sylvia.

"A double burden," said the liaison in her soft clinical voice.

"Every family has one," I told them, trying to sound jolly about it. "I got two."

Hartley rushed in on us. "Someone's pulling into the driveway." He made a quick count of chairs. "Everybody be quiet, and I'll call her in." A minute passed, then

another. No doors opened. Finally, Hartley chugged out of the room, returning to explain that it had only been the neighbor. “That’s okay,” he said. “It’ll give us time to go over our roles again.”

“Maybe you should sit down,” said the doctor.

Hartley palmed the back of his designated chair, seeming to agree with the idea, then shaking it off. “No, I’ve got to stay on my feet for this. Can I get anything for anyone? More coffee?” His eyes cased the room, finding each of us in turn. “It’s funny,” he added, putting on a wounded smile. “I could really use a drink right now.”

The sun dropped into the stained glass window and it became difficult to talk to each other with our faces wearing all those cut-up colors. Had JoLynn walked in then, we might’ve looked to her exactly as strange as we all felt. The room dimmed as night came on and the conversation picked up easier topics—baseball and the terrible heat, the way doors stuck in such humidity.

“I heard something,” Hartley insisted. “A car door. Did anyone else hear that?” But by the glances moving around the room I could tell none of the rest of us had heard anything. The reverend was the first to give up, glancing at his watch, announcing that he had Sunday services in the morning. Then the doctor left, and the woman from New Horizons. I watched them under the flood light in the driveway, shaking their heads as they got in their cars. I brought the cold-platter into the kitchen, where Hartley sat on a stool. We ate spinach dip and cheese and crackers. For dessert, we cut the big chocolate-dipped strawberry in half and ate that too, and this seemed to signify our giving up as well. We watched the final innings of a baseball game, and even drank some beer. When Hartley nodded off during the postgame show, I sent him to bed.

I've always liked being alone at night in strange houses. It feels like I'm living through some great old book where remarkable people live in each other's homes and never sleep. During such moments, with a little alcohol in my system and no one around, I've been able to believe I was a person to whom more of the world was owed.

Hours later, still in my dreams, I woke on the couch to JoLynn softening her hand against the stubble on my cheek. As she leaned over, her long straight hair fell toward me, making a dim tunnel around her face, her big dark pupils pink around the edges, the eyelids slumping low, her blouse hanging inelegantly on her frame. For a moment, I felt relieved: This is not my daughter, I thought. This is someone else.

"We've been waiting for you," I told her, trying to sit up. I glanced into the next room. The mostly-eaten cold-platter and empty beer bottles erased that we were ever trying to do anything of value there.

JoLynn pushed me back down, dragging a quilt off the arm of the couch and covering me with it. Then she was gone again, and I could only hear the *tick-ticking* of her fingers killing the house's lamps.

I fell back into a shallow half-conscious sleep where logic kept chasing away the beginnings of new dreams. At dawn, I packed my things quietly and followed Hartley's directions to the train station, heading back through the city, then downstate. I moved back into my house, opening all the windows again, stripping the beds, throwing the sheets into a pile on the laundry room floor. I fell asleep on the couch, spent the night fighting through dozens of curt abortive dreams of people I barely knew—the stained-glass faces from the intervention, women I'd gone on dates with, family members.

At work on Monday, I stared at my computer, at my phone, out my window. The sky turned green. There were birds everywhere and then no birds. Rain and then hail. A piece of ductwork lifted off the Home Depot and rose up into the clouds. Everyone in the office rushed down to the basement, but I stayed behind and listened to the sound a window makes when it curves. When the storm passed, I was the first person in the whole county to walk out into the ensuing calm. Everything still wet shone in the sun like a kind of gold that wouldn't last.

I crossed the parking lot and the state highway, found myself a quarter-mile into that field of corn—September's crop in August. I put my hands in the dirt, on the stalks, pulled down one particular ear, shucked it, and let the breeze carry away the silk. I tried to discern how the crop was faring, tried to imagine whether prices might rise or fall. I put my ear to it, listening for a hint of the future. The naked corn felt like that hand on my cheek, waking me again to the truth that people with so little control of their own lives could have so much power over ours.