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## Little Deals

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She met him at the candy store, and didn't find out till weeks later that it was the only time either of them had ever been in it. She'd gone to Honeymilk Mall to start thinking about Christmas shopping and had walked in idly, to make sure little sugar hearts still existed in their pastel colours and still carried two-word messages. He'd been on his way to Barnes and Noble to fulfill his resolution to read the Sunday *New York Times* every week, and had stopped in to see if the store had gummy worms, his own favourite.

Neither would have said a word to the other, but while they stood in the single aisle of the little store, a mother and son—three or four—had a minor showdown over sugar and naps, and the boy, bundled to twice his bulk against the weather and his face collapsing toward tears at his mother's tone, stepped back and into a spindly-legged display of tiny bags of jelly beans of every flavour. The little bags came down off their little pegs and onto the floor. The boy and the mother both cried, the lady running the store said there was no harm done, and the two other customers

stepped in to help re-hang the jellybeans, a process that involved matching colours, names, and numbers to their appropriate pegs. Mother and son both apologized and departed, leaving the remaining three to comment to each other as they worked.

“What’s the difference between anise and licorice?” the young man asked the shop owner, who said she couldn’t find any difference in taste—just that some people felt better asking for one over the other or liked one word better.

Susan wanted to say something but had nothing except what had occurred to her as she’d listened to the woman. “Hardly any rhymes for licorice except maybe ticklish,” she heard herself say and then quickly moved to cover it: “Pear is my absolute favourite in a jelly bean flavor.”

At the door on his way out, the young man turned back to the shopkeeper. “These going to the FedEx box?” He pointed at a stack of three small FedEx-ready packages.

“They are,” the shopkeeper said.

“I’m on my way by it, if you want,” he said.

“Sure,” she said, her instant trust in him apparently built over the five minutes of candy re-racking and conversation.

He said goodbye to both of them and walked out into the mall.

Susan, more self-conscious now that she was alone with the shopkeeper, watched the departing young man with no gummy bears and then opened her purse to look for the letter she wished she really had written to her mother’s sister—the only

person in the family she came even close to really talking to. But you didn't FedEx a letter anyway. And writing it in the first place would be a good thing. She told the shopkeeper goodbye and started out, hoping to catch up with the young man.

It would turn out that he had gone to the same university as she had—but in a different program and two years ahead. They'd both been out almost five years, they discovered next; he was twenty-eight, and she, twenty-seven. She swam; he was a sometime runner. Good discoveries all on a walk to the far end of the mall, where he inserted the packages into the FedEx box, and she asked him whether you could get stamps in the mall.

What she hated second-most about herself was her name. What new mother, twenty-seven years ago, with a world full of beautiful and unusual names before her and her husband leaning onto the bed to look in the baby's squinchy little face, would say, with a straight, non-squinchy face, "She looks like a Susan to me." And what father would not say, "Wait a sec, why don't we just name her Standard Issue American Girl?"

There was a worse aspect to the name Susan, which she resisted thinking about as best she could.

There were more current failings to her parents as well. Their favourite topic of conversation in Susan's presence was that she "hadn't, quite frankly, quite yet lived up to our hopes and dreams."

So her resource for someone to talk to was the aunt. She certainly couldn't turn to either of her sisters, who shared a basic disdain for life as an approach, glomming, as they did, to their parents' overall sick world view. And how, by the way, did the older one get to be named Savine, and the younger one, Celeste? If that wasn't a conspiracy, what was?

And so, four weeks and three meetings into her relationship with the young man she had accompanied to the FedEx box at Honeymilk Mall, she found herself tempted to talk to him—to get it done before the eight-weeks-tops that she ever got from a boyfriend. The temptation was spurred by his having mentioned, on his own, that he couldn't believe his parents had named him John, and that they still insisted on calling him Johnny. And she noticed small oddities that might have kinship to her own. After he locked his apartment door, he pulled at it four times to test the lock. There was just enough play in the door to create a little thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk percussion concert before he could walk away. He had a need to open the back driver's side door of his car every time he got out. How else could it be that every single time you got out, you forgot something, or had to check on something back there?

And so, early on, she came close, but not quite, to telling him.

What she came close to telling him was that she thought she might have walked into it of her own free will, in tenth grade or so, when she had trouble going to sleep, or getting back to sleep,

from worrying about exams in the advanced placement programs. The teachers had frightened her with: “Come mid-semester, there are going to be *college-level* exams coming at you.” And what does a high school kid know about what *college-level* really means? They could just as easily have been saying she would have to memorize a thousand poems in Chinese.

So, to go to sleep, she picked a word and tried to find its rhymes. She had the rhymes jump over the base word there, in a little bigger type size, like little word-sheep hopping into a soft bed made of the letters of the alphabet piled up like wood chips at the playground.

Which worked okay for a period of weeks—even helped her fall asleep sometimes. But over months, it began taking things over. You could be talking to her, say, about how your brother had a brain tumour and six weeks to live, and while Susan was patting your arm and saying all the right things and maybe crying—all sincerely—she was also seeing the sentences go along in front of her. They would be in a nice font reversed out to white on a black field, at a pace that didn’t change no matter your rate of speech. And then, completely out of her control, one word would present itself and jump up out of the line to stand alone.

While she continued to listen to you and talk to you, she was compelled to take that word and put it up there, to the upper right of her consciousness, and start finding its rhymes. She went through the alphabet from start to end, even when some of the obvious ones popped into her head be-

fore she got there. She could get bonus points for those, but after that she couldn't give the points to herself, because the orderly way to do it was from A to Z and then to check back through in the other direction.

Maybe "tumour," say, though the word was usually something dumb and peripheral; anything three syllables and over. She could go with just the last two, if needed.

*Tumour*: boomer, doomer (end-of worlder), fumer (angry guy, informal; smoker?), humour, pumer (JFK pronunciation for certain type of cat?), rumour, womber (slang for baby?), zoomer.

To miss a rhyme was to risk... well, she couldn't admit it even to herself.

She had no idea why she was in math. She had six years of French in middle school and high school and did well. And she spent a college semester in Paris—heiress (phonetic A), bares' (dropped T), caress (mispronunciation), Ferris (proper noun), Maris (Roger), raress (informal for female horse), spare us (Nashian), terrace—for God's sake, and loved it. She wondered if she'd be a better translator, all things being equal, than an accountant or CPA. Somewhere way back—eighth grade?—that's what the family had collectively picked out for her.

What brought her closest to talking to John was that he came close to admitting his own when she asked. He said, yeah, there were a few things he felt he had to do when he knew well and good that they were totally meaningless to the rest of

the world. And really, when you got down to it, to him.

“And I bet if you told me why you have to do them, you’d have to kill me, huh?” Susan said, and he laughed, maybe too loud.

“You could say that,” he said. And after a pause: “And how would you know that?”

With reading, she learned that his kind was far more common—touching, repeating, avoiding certain places or situations—and easier to see.

The thing she wanted to ask most was how it started getting in there. Basic anxiety, she knew, and a way to deal with it, manifested in making little deals with yourself. Before you knew it, your whole life revolved around four thousand little deals, along with how to make sure no one in the world could see the little deals, because they’d know you were nuts, and then you’d have even more anxiety and have to make a million more little deals.

She did try a shrink. Actually two. The first one in high school, when her parents decided she wasn’t concentrating. Susan shared nothing beyond the difficulty she and her parents had in getting along. Dr. Michaelson brought in her parents after the fourth session and told them all at the end of one hour that he really wasn’t in a position to do much, since both sides seemed pretty entrenched. Susan decided immediately it was a bold ploy—calling on blood to be thicker than \$95 an hour so things would be healed up right quickly. Her parents protested, almost in unison, that he hadn’t even heard their side. Dr. Michaelson

reached for another notebook and read the stuff they'd said about Susan when they'd first come in to talk about the problem—another futile attempt to get the family to run to each other's arms.

The second one she went to on her own. Dr. Frachescini was thin and blond and maybe thirty-five and enlightened-looking. Susan told her, after three sessions. And Dr. Frachescini told Susan plain and simple and straight-out: Just Stop It. Just stand up in front of me now and start talking or listening or whatever and when it presents itself do whatever you need to do—shove it aside, look the other way, concentrate on my mouth, set the word on fire, whatever you need to do. And do that every time—every single time—it happens until it doesn't happen anymore.

Susan could feel that her mouth was open a little.

“That's therapy?” she said.

“That's what you do,” Dr. Frachescini said.

“That's what anyone does with whatever set of behaviours presents itself. And the longer you wait, the better chance it has of being twice as bad, or triple—” (cripple, nipple, ripple, tipple, Whipple (Mr.) “—as bad as the problem it is now.”

Susan told her she'd work on it and never went back. The books, she found out afterwards, say that's exactly what the doctor is supposed to say. Just cut it the hell out. And then it's up to you to find a way to stop thinking the unthinkable things you do when you try. Find new things to focus on. Get some exercise.

Which was what she and John did best together—most often in the form of swimming. He

was more a runner, but was glad to do whatever she wanted. He was not a good swimmer, but liked that it got him so tired so fast. She had swum in middle school on the eighth grade team. So they were equal in the water, and at ease in the water, and less likely to be analytical in the water—just plain less likely to talk toward seriousness in the water.

One day, at ease as they were, having had wine with dinner and then decided to hit the water, she told him—of course, in a goofy, playful manner, so he would think it was a joke.

In fact, that's what she said: "This is a joke, John, a total joke. And also bloke, coke, choke, cloak, poke, soak, smoke, spoke, stoke, toke, woke, yoke."

"Mmmm," he said. "I see"—dragging out the word *see* to convey that he certainly did not see. They were treading water in the deep end and it felt good—good easy motion.

"You most certainly do not," she said.

"I see it starts with a joke and ends with a yoke," he said.

She dove under the water stop herself from taking that the way she wanted to—as his cryptic way of conveying total, instant understanding. She grabbed at his treading legs and spun him upside down.

He came up smiling. "So you're a little torn?"

"Born, corn, horn, morn, mourn, porn, scorn, torn, worn," she said.

"Starts with born, ends with worn," he said.

“Does it ever,” she said. How had she set him up two times in a row to touch her to the core? “Is that like you?” she said.

“Is what like me?”

“Born, torn, worn?” she said.

“Could be,” he said. He looked at her differently—more strongly—and ran a hand across one of his cheeks, letting it slide off with a little push that made it come across and hit his other shoulder. “Not that I’d ever necessarily talk about it in the next thirty thousand years.”

“How about five minutes?” she said.

He laughed, nervously. “Pretty close to the same time frame. What is it you’re seeing with me?”

She splashed him lightly as if to keep her nerve, and build his. “The apartment door, the car door, to name two.”

He blushed. The same hand went to his face, but this time skimmed the other way across the cheek and went just below and behind his ear to scratch while he looked down. He put the arm back under the water to smooth his treading.

“You know every rhyme there is, Susan?” he said.

*Susan.* That’s what she hated most about her name—that every single rhyme was negative: boozin’, cruisin’, floozin’, losin’, woozin’. Which of course long ago gave her the theory that she couldn’t shake: that this was why her parents picked the name—they knew what was coming for her and wanted her to experience it to the fullest.

“I know the ones I need to know when I need to know them,” she told John.

“I see,” he said.

She felt cold suddenly, or afraid. She looked around herself, as if to assess if the feeling were real. There were only two other people in the pool, standing at the shallow end, talking. The feeling, for just a fleeting moment, was that she and John were alone together in the world. Or maybe that she loved him. Or that he could understand her. Or that he was just the best water-treader there was. She didn’t know what it was and found no foundation from which to trust it. She shivered with it, treading a little harder.

“You cold?” he said.

“Well, we’ve gotten a little warmer,” she said.

He smiled. “You like the water?” he said.

“I need to be in it right now.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in it and you’re in it.” She wondered if that was the most intimate thing she’d ever said to anybody. She was ready, she guessed. If he’d have said love, she’d have said love. If he’d have said drowning pact, she’d have asked how they would do it.

Maybe he saw that in her eyes. “Do you know why I am?”

“In the water? I think I do,” she said.

He winced, and she worried that he thought she was fishing for the *because-you-are* right back.

He took a breath. “No walls in here,” he said. “No lines, no steps, no blocks. Just fluid.”

“I knew that,” she said, and she did. “And no doors.”

“No doors.”

Then, treading, watching, nearly crying, nearly exploding, she saw only a few words and said none—floors, gores, lores, pours, pores... —before he interrupted her, before she let herself be interrupted.

“But the deal is—the kill-you deal is—that once I’ve said that out loud, once you know that, then they will be—all of them—they’ll all be in the pool too—the same as they are everywhere else—lines will appear in the water, blocks on the bottom of the pool, steps up every wall.”

She confronted the word *wall*.

He swam away from her.

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