

Bear No Relation

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Jane's husband, Beau, asks her to join him at a meet-and-greet. The candidate is a family man, he tells her. Beau, a campaign attorney, is angling for a contract. Jane has kept to herself for a year now. These days he asks for so little from her. Yes, she will go.

The shortest route there would take them past their son's house. "You don't have to go the long way," Jane says as they approach Monarch Boulevard. Beau goes the long way and they drive the rest of the way in silence.

On the front steps, she presses the wrinkles from the front of her evening gown. The organdy traces her figure: the women judge her for not having become skin and bones. When her son died, no one knew for two weeks, not even Jane living two rights and a left away. Then came the whispers. Was he impaired? How long did he lie dying at the bottom of his basement steps? Where was his mother?

Beau nudges her elbow with his. "Go ahead."

"What?"

"The bell, it's on your side."

She presses the button. While they wait, the rattle of cicadas draws Jane's gaze to the tall ponderosas and the white stockade fence. An early cold sweetens the stillness. At least her gown is dark purple, almost black. But why should she care? The rattle grows louder until her husband says, "I'm not going to drink too many tonight." He squeezes her hand and eyes the welcome mat.

"You can," she tells him.

Beau holds his breath. Jane senses the void. "I'll have just one, maybe two," she agrees.

The door opens to their host, Robert Bay, in an argyle sweater vest. Jane once heard him refer to horses as *mounts*. Only the thought of him as a modern-day Tom Buchanan saves her from shrinking.

Robert studies her, then proclaims, "You look wonderful, Jane."

In her purse is a book. To keep steady, she brushes its soft cover through the fabric.

Robert introduces them to the candidate, an exceedingly lanky man with a nose like the hook on a coatrack. "Charlie, Beau Doplick, campaign attorney, as surely you know. Mrs. Doplick, who pretty much keeps the public library in business." Either the candidate's or her own hand is clammy. She assumes it's hers and pulls away too quickly. "We were discussing the district's Latinos," the candidate tells Beau.

Alice, Robert's wife, leans close to Jane. Her perfume like wilted flowers. "Jane, how have you been?"

"They have strong families," Beau says to the candidate. "Why can't we appeal to that?"

Though Alice has smiled close lipped, Jane shows her teeth. The effort causes an ache in her cheeks. "I'm well," she replies. "How is your daughter?"

"Yes, but they've gotten used to big government in their home countries. Paternalism," the candidate explains.

A serving tray appears at the edge of their circle. Her husband takes a stuffed mushroom on a toothpick and orders a scotch on the rocks. When she orders a vodka tonic, he doesn't shoot her a look.

Beau, in the parlor with the men, pairs off with the candidate. Watching them, Jane swirls the ice in her nearly empty highball. She resists sucking the

lemon wheel on the rim of her glass. Her mother taught her the etiquette of Emily Post.

In front of the fireplace, Maryellen, Alice, and Paige form a small triangle. The mirror above the mantle registers Jane's presence before they do. The pastor once told her that living in Castle Pines made them all neighbors, though not always neighborly. Gas logs sputter in the fireplace, warming Jane's legs with the same dry heat as a vacuum cleaner.

"He was at the *Times*," Maryellen answers a question Jane didn't hear, "but now he does communications for Chuck Schumer."

"Really?" Alice asks.

"My son has his own ideas."

Spotting Jane, Paige clears her throat. The women sip their drinks. Ice chinks. Maryellen wipes the corner of her mouth with a napkin. The smear of lipstick on the white paper, is it crimson? Cardinal? The red of shame or shamelessness? Jane's mouth is dry. A server appears and she orders a second vodka tonic.

"Have you read any good books lately, Jane?" Paige asks. She sounds earnest, even motherly, though Paige has no children. A doughy pit forms at the base of Jane's ribs: sympathy, for another. It's unsettling and strange.

"Lots," Jane replies dully. In the past year, speech has become less of a reflex, more of an exercise; she has learned to listen to her words, to measure them. Maryellen and Alice have drifted into a separate orbit. With Paige, Jane wants to exude warmth: "Actually, I just read a book I think you'd like. Have you—"

Robert taps a spoon against a glass. The clinking mixes with the voices in the room before displacing them. "Ladies and gentlemen."

Beau squeezes her elbow. "Are you OK?" His rheumy breath in her ear. He notices her empty hands. "Would you like some orange juice? I can get you—"

"You're not helping."

"Four score and seven years ago." The candidate flashes a chummy smile, eliciting laughter. It does not distract Jane from his nose. She once read that, in a competitive election between unknowns, the better-looking candidate will almost always win. But this calculus doesn't apply to even the beastliest of incumbents. People grow used to ugliness, to ugly men.

“If you’d asked me a year ago if I’d ever run for Congress, I would’ve said, ‘Not in a million years.’”

Given his nose, Jane is unsure of his prospects.

“But then my wife gave birth to two baby girls.”

“Hear, hear, Charlie,” a man blurts.

“One year ago, I became a father.” The candidate pauses, his face droops, a look of great solemnity. Jane suppresses a laugh until the effort causes a tear to well up. She feels the room’s eyes on this tear, and her amusement vanishes. “Twins,” he goes on and nods ever so slightly. “And today, you have to understand, I can barely let my girls out of my sight.”

Jane hopes he loses. How much money has her husband already given in both their names? Let the candidate hire Beau. That won’t change the fact: where there’s sheep’s clothing, there’s a wolf.

A man with an unfamiliar face hands Jane a glass of red. “My wife ordered it and then disappeared.” He removes his glasses, to rub his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose. Jane wants to describe him as *swarthy*, in the spirit of the Harlequin romances she loves, but *swarthy* is no longer polite. Is *ethnic* any better? The man returns the glasses to his face the color of parchment, smiles sheepishly. “I’m Kirk Ruffo.”

She should eat something, it occurs to her. She looks left and right for the hors d’oeuvres before her senses register the awkward silence. “Jane Doplick,” she says quickly.

“Good to meet you. I’m guessing you’re a supporter.”

“That’s a safe guess. And you?”

“An assistant professor of sociology at Regis. I write on local politics.” When she tilts her head, he adds, “I’m here studying candidate interactions.”

“You’re watching us?”

“I guess you could say that,” he says with a grin. “I’m mostly harmless, though.”

“That was rude of me.”

“Not at all.”

Jane stares at the surface of her wine. “Anyway,” she says, “it seems we’re all in the public eye these days.”

“Yes, I think I know what you mean, though some invite it.” Kirk gestures

in the vicinity of the candidate, who has his hand on Beau's shoulder. Photos of the Bay family decorate the wall behind them. In one, an impish boy wraps his arm around his kid sister. Dispatched to their grandparents' for the evening? At boarding school, more likely. They come home to have their pictures taken.

A sip of wine and Jane's cheeks tingle pleasantly. Wealthy Italians will pay for strangers to wail at the funerals of their loved ones, or so she's read. Either the wine or the name Ruffò reminds her of this. "Can I ask you a somewhat taboo question?"

"Shoot."

"Do you think people like us"—Jane turns her palm up—"you know, society types, do you think we're more judgmental?"

His face tenses.

"Do you know what I mean? Do we demand more, more polish, not of everyone, not necessarily, but of each other? Do you know—are we stricter with the script?"

Kirk averts his gaze to a point over Jane's shoulder. A woman skirts her. An ant column of freckles marches up and over the bridge of this woman's nose. She rests her fingertips ever so lightly on the empty wineglass Kirk's holding. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"It's my union break."

They look into each other's eyes a moment longer than their reunion requires. Jane watches them, watches Kirk's wife. Was there a time when older women gazed longingly at her and Beau? If so, she hadn't noticed. How sad that the death of their only child didn't bring them closer. Of course, no one would know. She and Beau keep the curtains closed, now more than ever.

Jane finishes the glass of wine and slips away. Where is Beau? She should put her arm around him in front of the candidate.

In the powder room, Jane sits on the closed lid of the toilet reading a Mrs. Brown section of *The Hours*. Laura Brown, alone except for her three-year-old son who knows the number four, is kneeling in the kitchen. She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself, Laura wants to believe.

Jane's cellphone rings, jolting her. The screen reads, "Lorize."

"I was just calling to check in," Lorize says. "I'm surprised you picked up."

"I'm taking," Jane pauses to clear her throat, "I'm taking a little breather."

Through the phone, Jane can hear two kids varooming in the background. What if one of them died? Jane would offer Lorize paid time off, but she would be back to work in a week, two at most. “No one would ever call her lazy,” Beau would say of their housekeeper, Jane’s friend.

“Where’s Mr. Doplick?”

“I don’t know. He’s with the men. Lorize, I hate parties.”

“It’s that bad?”

Jane observes her flushed face in the mirror. She fans herself with the paperback, still open to her page. It’s futile. “I was never a party person, even before. Wouldn’t that be enough reason to avoid them?”

“It can’t be that bad. How’s the food?”

“Emily Post says never to have more than two.” She puckers her entire face just to see what it looks like in the mirror. It looks ogre-ish, wretched, vivid.

“Jane . . . You said you wouldn’t.”

Her face relaxes. “You know the men, they don’t blame Beau, not at all. The women don’t either.”

“No one blames you.”

“They expect him to stay strong, me they expect . . . They expect me to grovel. But I should get off the phone. Someone can probably hear me in here.”

“Where are you?”

“The bathroom.”

“Jane.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Jane, sweetie, take it easy, OK?”

Jane reopens *The Hours*. The individual words swirl briefly and then come into focus.

She is going to produce a birthday cake—only a cake—but in her mind at this moment the cake is glossy and resplendent as any photograph in any magazine; it is better, even, than the photographs of cakes in magazines. She imagines making, out of the humblest materials, a cake with all the balance and authority of an urn or a house.

The passage gives her pause and, a second later, a poke of energy: Jane slaps the top of her thigh. The flesh jiggles. Twenty years younger, she would be considered voluptuous. Son or no son. But, with a dead son, no one considers you voluptuous at any age. Jane scans the page for her place. But as soon as she finds it—*Wasn’t a book like Mrs. Dalloway once just empty paper and a pot of ink?*

It's only a cake, she tells herself—a knock on the door sends her tucking the book away. Jane flushes the clear toilet water and washes her hands, smoothing her gown, streaking it a dark gray.

“Just a minute,” she calls, moving to fix her hair in the mirror. A droplet of condensation slides down the side of her glass onto the white marble sink. Forget the hair. The cold glass bites her hand. With a sip of the vodka tonic, she twists the doorknob, the lock button pops like a cap gun, and there’s Paige, so close that Jane senses her body heat. No, it’s Jane’s body, a hot flash.

“Are you all right?” Paige asks. She reaches out, toward Jane’s arm, Jane’s skin.

“Fine,” Jane says sharply. Paige’s hand recoils and Jane’s guts follow, bumping the inside wall of her abdomen. “That book I mentioned—” she tries to recover, but the book’s name escapes her. She shrugs her shoulders, bobs her drink.

Paige drops her eyes as she sidles into the bathroom.

Jane intends to order another vodka tonic, but, when she stops the waiter, the laugh lines at the corners of his mouth remind her of her son. “How old are you?” she asks.

In his grin, she sees either amusement or patience. “Twenty-three, ma’am.”

“And do you live in Castle Pines?”

He laughs and she realizes her mistake: a waiter couldn’t afford Castle Pines. “No, we’re based in Denver.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

He shifts his weight to his back foot, and moves the empty tray from under his right to under his left arm. “I’m actually married with a kid on the way. This is a second job for me, you know?”

“Oh, congratulations.”

The waiter nods and begins to turn away. For Jane, it’s as if something is tearing. She sputters, “It’s amazing how the servers—I mean, we hardly see you. You’re like mice.”

He looks at her askew.

“Excuse me,” she says, pressing and rubbing an eye. “You know, I’m sorry, it’s just my son—”

Jane startles as a hand clamps the back of her arm. Her husband appears

over her shoulder. He takes her empty glass and hands it to the waiter.

A server perhaps has left the basement door open and the lights on. Only Jane, wandering now, finds not a wine cellar but a library down there. Regal shades of green, blue, red. Leather bindings that will outlast their readers. Part of Robert's inheritance? She runs her fingers over the dense spines and her fingertips come away dusty. She frees one, *The Chemical History of a Candle*. Volume 30 of the Harvard Classics. And the candidate? She doubts he's read the Gettysburg Address.

Jane cannot find a slot in the shelves for her drink. She downs it, then sets the glass on the floor. After her son died, she thought to box up everything in his house, but what would she find on the closet's top shelf or in the medicine cabinet? A thirtysomething man has his reasons for living alone just blocks from his mother. The ceiling vent huffs and blows baked air down Jane's neck. The vodka infuses her muscles with wet heat. She pictures Robert as a young professional puzzling over home décor, installing a library in the living room. A library now relegated to the basement. Jane pulls books out at random and reinserts them with their fore-edges facing out. She reorders the numbered volumes as if reproducing a lottery drawing. She hired a so-called estate cleaner, instructed the company to exercise discretion. Her toe bumps the glass, upsetting it, snapping her to attention. She rushes to collect the melting cubes.

Her head swims as she teeters up the stairs. The last time she wore heels was at her son's funeral. The wives of her husband's partners, women from church and from gatherings like tonight's all came. They *attended*. The ice, it's rattling in her glass. The glass is slipping. She forgoes the handrail to carry it in two hands. Her ankle wavers; her hand shoots back to the rail. An instinct her son lacked. But she can't speak of that to anyone.

With a fresh drink, she spots Kirk scribbling in a small notebook, open to a page near the end. He leans against the mantle, his own drink by his elbow.

"Kirk," she interrupts his work.

"Hello, again."

"You never did answer my question. Do you think we're more judgmental?"

He scratches the side of his neck. He marks his page with his pen. "Judgmental how?"

Days after her son's funeral, a stylist was rinsing Jane's hair. In the mirrored ceiling, the women in the white-upholstered chairs defied gravity. Then Alice entered through the salon's plate glass door—at the sight of Jane, her head ticked left in surprise or horror. In the mirror, Jane read her lips. She heard Alice say, “Jane,” under her breath, an admonishment. How helpless Jane felt with her head hung back in the sink. “You know, without so much to lose,” she searches for the words to explain it to Kirk, “well, I wonder whether the less fortunate aren't freer to be themselves.”

His eyes drift over her shoulder.

“Your wife can't save you this time, Mr. Ruffo.”

“I'm afraid I wouldn't know,” Kirk replies dryly. “But I'm doubtful.”

His rebuke reminds her of Beau, her purpose here, and a shiver runs through her. “Yes, of course,” she stammers.

A server appears and slips a coaster under Kirk's glass. “Boss's orders,” he says, answering the professor's frown.

Kirk reopens his notebook. “Well, I'd better get back to it.”

Jane didn't defend herself to Alice. She left the salon with red highlights, a center part, curls. Her hair tickled the bare skin of her shoulders. Her hair like a countervailing weight. At the bakery, she ate chocolate cake at a sidewalk table, slowly, bite by delicate bite. Foot traffic, the same friends and neighbors who at the funeral clasped and patted her hands and said in sotto voce, “My condolences, Jane. My condolences,” now, spotting her out, their lips parted to ask how she was doing. But, is that a slice of cake on her plate? Doesn't her hair look like Madonna's? Their lips closed. Their brows, or at least those not benumbed by Botox, furrowed. They crossed the street, to the boutique there. They feigned incoming phone calls. Jane licked the fork clean of frosting—what does anyone know?—and at that moment withdrew from their society.

“Of course,” she says to Kirk. A snag in her voice, but Kirk doesn't look up from his notebook. She takes two steps backward and stops. Her husband is missing. Across the room, above the partygoers' heads, floats a tray of drinks on a white shirt cuff.

Jane stands alone by the buffet. She eats sharp cheese and stuffed mushrooms, black olives and prosciutto. She hopes Alice is watching. Maryellen, Robert, the candidate. Her role is to starve herself or read her dead son's books one by one

or undergo some other public act of grieving. She licks her fingers and reaches for seconds.

The younger couples have all left their children with babysitters, yet as Jane chews and swallows and sips water she imagines this house full of children. She imagines them exploring the cavern under the long, dark dining room table. They chase each other between the legs of guests. She can hear their squeals and giggles. They are fitted in little suits and little dresses, only the boys' hair, parted when they arrived, is now mussed, the girls' braids are frayed. Before the party, Jane applied foundation and blush, mascara and lipstick, but the faces of the children are unabashedly ruddy, and her own son, a boy in her memory, knocks the table leg. The glass vase colored like a peacock's plumage tips and rolls and it could've landed on the Oriental rug, but, no, it shatters on the hardwood. The glass burgeons like a firework into shards before the sound reaches her. Jane swallows and the bite finds a way around the lump in her throat. The hosts would never allow horseplay. They would never allow for breakage. She hates them, and feels in that lump that they will never again allow for her. Where is the waiter with the drinks?

They are leaving, apparently—Beau has started saying his goodbyes—when Jane spots the candidate alone across the living room. With his eyes closed, he stands holding a glass of Coke by its rim down by his thigh. There is a sheen to his eyelids, sweat or oil—it reminds Jane of slugs in moonlight. She experiences a throb of necessity: she will confront him. She polishes off her scotch, now mostly melted ice.

As Jane crosses the room, the candidate sucks his bottom lip between his front teeth and bites it, wriggles that hook of a nose as if he'd like to pick it. She will poke her finger into his chest. She will say, Do you know what you're signing your family up for? The public scrutiny? Your absence? And you use them as a pretext for your ambition . . . He opens his eyes, beams a smile before she's within arm's reach, and pipes, "Jane, right?"

Jane draws a breath.

"If I can win over the librarians," he begins—

"Do you—"

"Even if I lose everyone else, I'll be happy."

"Oh, I'm no librarian," she declares. "I just volunteer."

“Is that so? Well, that’s wonderful. I was one of those kids who brought a tote bag to the library.” The candidate half-laughs, half-sighs. His loose gray suit jiggles around his shoulders. “Whew, am I tired,” he says, rolling his neck.

They stand side by side looking out into the room, resting their eyes on the tableau of remaining faces.

“It must be hard,” Jane says, “having to keep up appearances.”

“That’s out of the question with this nose,” he jokes, but neither of them laughs.

“You know one of my girls is sick tonight,” he volunteers. “It’s hard to keep my mind off it. Makes me wonder, you know, about the campaign.”

Jane listens to the din, or to his breath. From somewhere, a murmur like from inside a conch shell. She asks, “If you had to, if you had to guess, would you guess that I’m a mother?”

The candidate looks long at Jane. “Yes,” he says. “A veteran, a veteran mother.”

“You’re right.” Jane chokes and clears her throat. “You know, my son was a steadfast Republican. He wanted to believe that we are all self-made.”

She spots her scowling husband coming toward them. In the moment she has left, she considers divulging that her son’s mail built up until the postman called the police, that with a closed casket you use your imagination, that her then-friends couldn’t understand why she didn’t fall apart or blame herself. What would Charlie say then? But her husband, now smiling jocularly, interrupts. “How was talking to the smartest woman in the room?” he asks the candidate.

The two men are shaking hands. Across the room, Jane sees Kirk Ruffo and his wife laughing. They are not watching her. The waiter who reminded her of her son is nowhere to be seen. No one is watching her. Is it just below the surface or all in her head?

She takes out *The Hours*—its cover can’t keep her out—and finds her place.

They are approaching Monarch Boulevard.

“You don’t have to go the long way,” Jane says to the windshield.

Beau doesn’t depress the turn signal.

“I mean it.”

The signal begins clicking and they turn right. The motor purrs in the chill of this late summer. Tomorrow Jane knows she will feel groggy, not remember

half of what she said. Her husband will drink syrupy coffee and read the Sunday *Denver Post* while he waits for the candidate to call. She will slip out to the library, where she will spend hours among stacks of books, their drama and containment.

Her husband says, “You had a good time tonight,” but Jane barely hears him. She is looking out the passenger-side window as her son’s house glides by. Gone is the for-sale sign: the house looks again like it did a year ago. She imagines his body, as she often does, lying broken at the bottom of the basement stairs. Inside are new owners, though tonight all the windows are dark.

