Standard Loneliness Package


Root canal is one fifty, give or take, depending on who’s doing it to you. A migraine is two hundred.

Not that I get the money. The company gets it. What I get is twelve dollars an hour, plus reimbursement for pain-killers. Not that they work.

I feel pain for money. Other people’s pain. Physical, emotional, you name it.

Pain is an illusion, I know, and so is time, I know, I know. I know. The shift manager never stops reminding us. Doesn’t help, actually. Doesn’t help when you are on your third broken leg of the day.

I get to work three minutes late and already there are nine tickets in my inbox. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, open the first ticket of the morning:

I’m at a funeral.

Feeling grief.

Someone else’s grief. Like wearing a stranger’s coat, still warm with heat from another body.

I’m feeling a mixture of things.
Sorry Please Thank You

Grief, mostly, but also I detect some guilt in there. There usually is.

I hear crying.


Our services aren't cheap. As the shift manager is always reminding us. Need I remind you? That is his favorite phrase these days. He is always walking up and down the aisle tilting his head into our cubicles and saying it. Need I remind you, he says, of where we are on the spectrum? In terms of low-end high-end? We are solidly toward the highish end. So the faces are usually pretty, the clothes are usually nice. The people are usually nice, too. Although I imagine it's not such a big deal to be nice when you're that rich and that pretty.

There's a place in Hyderabad doing what we're doing, but a little more toward the budget end of things. Precision Living Solutions, it's called. And of course there are hundreds of emotional engineering firms here in Bangalore, springing up everywhere you look. The other day I read in the paper that a new call center opens once every three weeks. Workers follow the work, and the work is here: All of us ready to feel, to suffer. We're in a growth industry.

Okay. The body is going into the ground now. The crying is getting more serious.

Here it comes.

I am feeling that feeling. The one that these people get a lot, near the end of a funeral service. These sad and pretty people. It's a big feeling. Different operators have different ways to describe it. For me, it feels something like a huge boot. Huge, like it fills up the whole sky, the whole galaxy, all of space. Some kind of infinite foot. And it's stepping on me. The infinite foot is stepping on my chest.

The funeral ends, and the foot is still on me, and it is hard to breathe. People are getting into black town cars. I also appear to have a town car. I get in. The foot, the foot. So heavy. Here we go, yes, this is familiar, the foot, yes, the foot. It doesn't hurt, exactly. It's not what I would call comfortable, but it's not pain, either. More like pressure. Deepak, who used to be in the next cubicle, once told me that this feeling I call the infinite foot—to him it felt more like a knee—is actually the American experience of the Christian God.

"Are you sure it is the Christian God?" I asked him. "I always thought God was Jewish."

"You're an idiot," he said. "It's the same guy. Duh. The Judeo-Christian God."

"Are you sure?" I said.

He just shook his head at me. We'd had this conversation before. I figured he was probably right, but I didn't want to admit it. Deepak was the smartest guy in our cube-cluster, as he would kindly remind me several times a day.

I endure a few more minutes of the foot, and then, right before the hour is up, right when the grief and guilt are almost too much and I wonder if I am going to have to hit the safety button, there it is, it's usually there at the end of a funeral, no matter how awful, no matter how hard I
am crying, no matter how much guilt my client has saved up for me to feel. You wouldn’t expect it—I didn’t—but anyone who has done this job for long enough knows what I’m talking about, and even though you know it’s coming, even though you are, in fact, waiting for it, when it comes, it is always still a shock.

Relief.

Death of a cousin is five hundred. Death of a sibling is twelve fifty. Parents are two thousand apiece, but depending on the situation people will pay all kinds of money, for all kinds of reasons, for bad reasons, for no reason at all.

The company started off in run-of-the-mill corporate services, basic stuff: ethical qualm transference, plausible deniability. The sort of things that generated good cash flow, cash flow that was fed right back into R&D, year after year, turning the little shop into a bit player, and then a not-so-bit player, and then, eventually, into a leader in a specialized market. In those early days, this place was known as Conscience Incorporated. The company had cornered the early market in guilt.

Then the technology improved. Some genius in Delhi had figured out a transfer protocol to standardize and packetize all different kinds of experiences. Overnight, everything changed. An industry was born. The business of bad feeling. For the right price, almost any part of life could be avoided.

Across the street from work is a lunch place I go to sometimes. Not much, really, a hot and crowded little room, a bunch of stools in front of a greasy counter. I come here mostly for the small television, up on a shelf, above the cash register. They have a satellite feed.

Today they have it switched to American television, and I am watching a commercial for our company’s services.

It shows a rich executive-looking type sitting and rubbing his temples, making the universal television face for I Am an Executive in a Highly Stressful Situation. There are wavy lines on either side of his temples to indicate that the Executive is really stressed! Then he places a call to his broker and in the next scene, the Executive is lying on a beach, drinking golden beer from a bottle and looking at the bluest ocean I have ever seen.

Next to me is a woman and her daughter. The girl, maybe four or five, is scooping rice and peas into her mouth a little at a time. She is watching the commercial in silence. When she sees the water, she turns to her mother and asks her, softly, what the blue liquid is. I am thinking about how sad it is that she has never seen water that color in real life until I realize that I am thirty-nine years old and hey, you know what? Neither have I.

And then the commercial ends with one of our slogans.

*Don’t feel like having a bad day?
*Let someone else have it for you.*
That someone else they are talking about in the commercial is me. And the other six hundred terminal operators in Building D, Cubicle Block 4. Don’t feel like having a bad day? Let me have it for you.

It’s okay for me. It’s a good job. I didn’t do that well in school, after all. It was tougher for Deep. He did three semesters at technical college. He was always saying he deserved better. Better than this, anyway. I would nod and agree with him, but I never told him what I wanted to tell him, which was, hey, Deepak, when you say that you deserve better, even if I agree with you, you are kind of also implying that I don’t deserve better, which, maybe I don’t, maybe this is about where I belong in the grand scheme of things, in terms of high-end low-end for me as a person, but I wish you wouldn’t say it because whenever you do, it makes me feel a sharp bit of sadness and then, for the rest of the day, a kind of low-grade crumminess.

Whenever Deep and I used to go to lunch, he would try to explain to me how it works.

“Okay, so, the clients,” he would say, “they call in to their account reps and book the time.”

He liked to start sentences with okay, so. It was a habit he had picked up from the engineers. He thought it made him sound smarter, thought it made him sound like them, those code jockeys, standing by the coffee machine, talking faster than he could think, talking not so much in sentences as in data structures, dense clumps of logic with the occasional inside joke. He liked to stand near them, pretending to stir sugar into his coffee, listening in on them as if they were speaking a different language. A language of knowing something, a language of being an expert at something. A language of being something more than an hourly unit.

Okay, so, Deepak said, so this is how it works. The client, he books the time, and then at the appointed hour, a switch in the implant chip kicks on and starts transferring his consciousness over. Perceptions, sensory data, all of it. It goes first to an intermediate server where it gets bundled with other jobs, and then a huge block of the stuff gets zapped over here, downloaded onto our servers, and then dumped into our queue management system, which parcels out the individual jobs to all of us in the cubicle farm.

Okay, so, it’s all based on some kind of efficiency algorithm—our historical performance, our current emotional load. Sensors in our head assembly unit measure our stress levels, sweat composition, to see what we can handle. Okay? he would say, when he was done. Like a professor. He wanted so badly to be an expert at something.

I always appreciated Deepak trying to help me understand. But it’s just a job, I would say. I never really understood why Deep thought so much of those programmers, either. In the end, we’re all brains for hire. Mental space for rent, moments as a commodity. They have gotten it down to a science. How much a human being can take in a given twelve-hour shift. Grief, embarrassment, humiliation, all
different, of course, so they calibrate our schedules, mix it up, the timing and the order, and the end result is you leave work every day right about at your exact breaking point. I used to smoke to take the edge off, but I quit twelve years ago, so sometimes when I get home, I'm still shaking for a little bit. I sit on my couch and drink a beer and let it subside. Then I heat up some bread and lentils and read a newspaper or, if it's too hot to stay in, go down to the street and eat my dinner standing there, watching people walking down the block, wondering where they are headed, wondering if anyone is waiting for them to come home.

When I get to work the next morning, there's a woman sitting in the cubicle across from mine. She's young, at least a couple of years younger than me, looks right out of school. She has the new-employee setup kit laid out in front of her and is reading the trainee handbook. I think about saying hi but who am I kidding, I am still me, so instead I just say nothing.

My first ticket of the day is a deathbed. Deathbeds are not so common. They are hard to schedule—we require at least twenty-four hours' advance booking, and usually clients don't know far enough in advance when the ailing loved one is going to go. But this isn't regular deathbed. It's pull-the-plug.

They are pulling the plug on Grandpa this morning.
I open the ticket.
I am holding Grandpa's hand.

I cry.
He squeezes my hand, one last burst of strength. It hurts. Then his hand goes limp.

I cry, and also, I really cry. Meaning, not just as my client, but I start crying, too. Sometimes it happens. I don't know why, exactly. Maybe because he was somebody's grandpa. And he looked like a nice one, a nice man. Maybe something about the way his arm fell against the guard-rail on the hospital bed, nothing dramatic or poignant. Just a part of his body going thunk against metal. Maybe because I could sort of tell, when Grandpa was looking at his grandson for the last time, looking into his eyes, looking around in there trying to find him, he didn't find him, he found me instead, and he knew what had happened, and he didn't even look mad. Just hurt.

I am at a funeral.
I am in a dentist's chair.
I am lying next to someone's husband in a motel bed, feeling guilty.

I am quitting my job. This is a popular one. Clients like to avoid the awkwardness of quitting their jobs, so they set an appointment and walk into their bosses' offices and tell them where they can stick this effing job, and right before the boss starts to reply, the switch kicks in and I get yelled at.

I am in a hospital.
My lungs burn.
My heart aches.
I'm on a bridge.
My heart aches on a bridge.
My heart aches on a cruise ship.
My heart aches on an airplane, taking off at night.
Some people think it's not so great that we can do this.
Personally, I don't really see the problem. Press one to clear your conscience. Press two for fear of death. Consciousness is like anything else. I'm sure when someone figures out how to sell time itself, they'll have infomercials for that, too.
I am at a funeral.
I am losing someone to cancer.
I am coping with something vague.
I am at a funeral.
I am at a funeral.
I am at a funeral.
Seventeen tickets today in twelve hours. Ten half hours and seven full.
On my way out, I can hear someone wailing and gnashing his teeth in his cubicle. He is near the edge. Deepak was always like that, too. I always told him, hey man, you have to let go a little. Just a little. Don't let it get to you so much.
I peek my head to see if I can steal a glance at the new woman, but she is in the middle of a ticket. She appears to be suffering. She catches me looking at her. I look at my feet and keep shuffling past.

It used to be that the job wasn't all pain. Rich American man outsources the nasty bits of his life. He's required to book by the hour or the day or some other time unit, but in almost any crappy day, there are always going to be some parts of it that are not so bad. Maybe just boring. Maybe even more okay than not. Like if a guy books his colonoscopy and he hires us for two hours, but for the first eight minutes, he's just sitting there in the waiting room, reading a magazine, enjoying the air-conditioning, admiring someone's legs. Or something. Anyway, it used to be that we would get the whole thing, so part of my job here could be boring or neutral or even sometimes kind of interesting.

But then the technology improved again and the packing software was refined to filter out those intervals and collect them. Those bits, the extras, the leftover slices of life were lopped off by the algorithm and smushed all together into a kind of reconstituted life slab, a life-loaf. Lunch meat made out of bits of boredom. They take the slabs and process them and sell them as prepackaged lives.

I've had my eye on one for a while, at a secondhand shop that's on my way home. Not ideal, but it's something to work for.

So now, what's left over is pretty much just pure undiluted badness. The only thing left to look forward to is when, once in a while, in the middle of an awful day, there is something not-so-awful mixed in there. Like the relief in the middle of a funeral, or sometimes when you get someone who is really religious, not just religious, but a person of true faith, then mixed in with the sadness and loss you get something extra, you get to try different flavors, depending
on the believer. You get the big foot on your chest, or you get the back of your head on fire, a cold fire, it tickles. You get to know what it is like to know that your dead lover, your dead mother, father, brother, sister, that they are all standing in front of you, tall as the universe, and they have huge, infinite feet, and their heads are all ablaze with this brilliant, frozen fire. You get the feeling of being inside of a room and at the same time, the room being inside of you, and the room is the world, and so are you.

The next day is more of the same. Eleven tickets. The low-light of the day is when I get to confess to my husband that I have been sleeping with my trainer for the last year. The first year of our marriage. I get to see his face, watch him try to keep it together. Of all the types of tickets, this is the worst. Heartbreak. When I first started at this job, I thought physical pain would be hardest. But it’s not. This is the hardest. To be inside here, looking at this man’s face, at the lowest moment of his life, watching him try to keep it together. To be inside here, feeling what this woman is feeling, having done this to him. And then the world blinks twice and my field of vision goes blue and I’m a guy sitting in front of a computer screen and the sandwich cart is in front of my cubicle.

So I have lunch.
he put me down when we got inside. There was dark wood everywhere, and also bright flowers and classical music. We were shown to a desk, and a woman in an immaculate pantsuit asked if we would like anything to drink. My father didn’t say anything, just looked off at the far wall. I remember my mother asked for a cup of tea for my father.


I ask around about Kirthi. People are talking. The guys are talking. Especially the married guys. They do the most talking.

I pass her in the hall again, and again she doesn’t look at me. No surprise there. Women never look at me. I am not handsome or tall. But I am nice.

I think it is actually that which causes the not-looking at me. The niceness, I mean, not the lack of handsomeness or tallness. They can see the niceness and it is the kind of niceness that, in a man, you instinctively ignore. What is nice? What good is a nice man? No good to women. No good to other men.

She doesn’t look at me, but I feel, or maybe I wish or I imagine, that something in the way she does not look at me is not quite the same. She is not-looking at me in a way that feels like she is consciously not-looking at me. And from the way she is not-looking at me, I can tell she knows I am trying to not-look at her. We are both not-looking at each other. And yet, there is something in the way she is not-looking at me. For the first time in a long while, I have hope.

I am at a funeral. Again.

I’m flipped to green.

You can be flipped to green, or flipped to red.

You can be there, or can just feel the feeling.

This is the one improvement they have made that actually benefits us workers. There’s a toggle switch on the headset. Flip it to green and you get a rendering of the client’s visual field. You see what he sees. Flip it to red and you still feel all of the feelings, but you see what you see.

You can do whatever you want, so long as you don’t leave your cubicle. Some people just stare at the cube-divider wall. Some play computer solitaire. Some even chat with neighbors, although that is strongly discouraged.

I was hesitant at first, but more and more these days I am usually flipped to red. Except for funerals. Funerals, I like to be there, just out of some kind of respect thing.

This morning’s first ticket: sixtyish rich guy, heart attack in the home office, millions in the bank, five kids from three marriages, all hate him.

Client is one of those kids, trust-fund baby, paid extra for amnesia. No feeling, no pre-feeling, no hangover, no residue, no chance of actually having any part of it, long
enough to ensure that he will be halfway in the bag before any of the day’s events start nibbling at the corners of his awareness.

I see the fresh, open plot. A little rain falls on the funeral procession as they get out of the cars, but there’s a break in the clouds so that it’s raining and the sun is shining at the same time.

As usual, everyone is well dressed. A lot of the rich look mildly betrayed in the face of death, as if they are a little bit surprised that good style and a lot of money weren’t quite enough to protect them from the unpleasantness of it all. I’m standing next to what I am guessing is widow number two, late thirties, probably, with beautiful sand-colored hair. We make eye contact and she is staring at me and I am trying not to stare at her and then we both realize the same thing at the same time. Raj, I almost say, catching myself before I do, but something in my eyes must give it away anyway, because she smiles, or he smiles. I’m not quite sure which one smiles, Raj, or the person he is hiding inside of.

Rajiv usually works night shift now, so I haven’t seen him in a while. He must have picked up a day shift. We used to have a beer or two after work. A friend, I would call him. I want to call him that. One of the few I’ve had in this line of work.

The pastor talks about a full life lived, and the limits of earthly rewards, and everyone nods affirmatively, and then there is music as the body goes into the ground, I’ve heard it at a lot of funerals. Mozart, I think, but I am not sure. Sometimes I think that’s really what my job is. Nodding and crying and listening to Mozart. And I think, there are worse things. There are.

Death of an aunt is seven hundred. Death of an uncle is six.

Bad day in the markets is a thousand. Kid’s recital is one twenty-five an hour. Church is one fifty.

The only category that we will not quote a price on is death of a child. Death of a child is separately negotiated. Hardly anyone can afford it. And not all operators can handle it. We have to be specially trained to be eligible for those tickets. People go on sick leave, disability. Most people just physically cannot do it. There hasn’t been one booked the whole time I’ve been here, so most of us aren’t even sure what is true and what isn’t. The rumor is that if you do one, you are allowed to take the rest of the month off. Deep was always tempted. It’s not worth it, I would tell him. Okay, so, maybe not for you, Deep said. Okay, so, mind your own business, he would say.

The first time I talk to Kirthi is by the water fountain. I tell her we are neighbors, cubicle-wise. She says she knows. I feel a bit stupid.

The second time we talk, we are also by the water fountain, and I try to say something charming, we have to stop meeting like this or something terrible like that. I probably saw it on TV and it just came out. Stupid. She doesn’t laugh, but she doesn’t frown, either. She just kind of looks
at me, as if trying to figure out how I could have thought that was a good idea.

The third time we talk, I kiss her. By the microwave in the snack room. I don’t know what got into me. I am not an aggressive person. I am not physically strong. I weigh one hundred and forty-five pounds. She doesn’t laugh. She actually makes a face like disgust. But she doesn’t push me away, either. Not right away. She accepts the kiss, doesn’t kiss back, but after a couple of seconds, breaks it off and leans back and turns her head and says, under her breath, You shouldn’t have done that.

Still, I am happy. I’ve got three more tickets in the bucket before lunch, and then probably eight or nine before I go home, but the whole rest of the day, I am having an out-of-my-body experience. Even when I am in someone else’s body, I am still out of my body.

I weep.
I wail.
I gnash my teeth.
Underneath it all, I am smiling.

I am at a funeral. My client’s heart aches, and inside of it is my heart, not aching, the opposite, doing that, whatever it is. My heart is doing the opposite of aching.

Kirthi and I start dating. That’s what I call it. She calls it letting me walk her to the bus stop. She lets me buy her lunch. She tells me I should stop. She still never smiles at me.

I’m a heartbreak specialist, she says.

When I see her in the hallway, I walk up behind her and slip my arm around her waist.

She has not let me in yet. She won’t let me in.

Why won’t you let me in? I ask her.

You don’t want in, she says. You want around. You want near. You don’t want in.

There are two hundred forty-seven ways to have your heart broken, she says, and I have felt them all.

I am in a hospice.
I have been here before. A regular client.
I am holding a pen.
I have just written something on a notepad in front of me.

My husband is gone.
He died years ago.
Today is the tenth anniversary of his death.
I have Alzheimer’s, I think.
A memory of my husband surfaces, like a white-hot August afternoon, resurfacing in the cool water of November.

I tear off the sheet of paper.
I read it to myself.
It is a suicide note.
I raise a glass to my mouth, swallow a pill. Catch a glance of my note to the world.

The fail-safe kicks on, the system overrides. I close the ticket. I’m out just in time, but as I leave this dying mind,
I feel the consciousness losing its structure. Not closing down. Opening. As it dies, I feel it opening up, like a box whose walls fall away, or a maybe a flowering plant, turning toward the sun.

Kirthi hasn't been to work for the past two days.

It's her father.

That's what Sunil tells me, one day over a beer.

Kirthi's father is still mortgaged, Sunil explains. Locked in. Sold his life. "Just like yours," Sunil says, "Right?"

I nod.

Sunil is in tech support, so he's seen all of the glitches. He knows what can go wrong in the mechanics of feeling transfers. Sunil has seen some strange things.

"There's no upper bound on weird," he says.

"This is going to end badly, man," he says. "You have to trust me on this. Kirthi is damaged. And she knows it."

Sunil means well, but what he doesn't know is that I am fine with damaged. I want damage. I've looked down the road I'm on and I see what's coming. A lot of nothing. No great loves lost. And yet, I feel like I lost something. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? How about this: I lost without the love. I've lost things I've never even had. A whole life.

But as the weeks go on, I begin to think Sunil might be right.

"Kirthi won't let me in," I tell him. "She tells me to get away from her, to run."

"She is doing you a favor, man. Take her advice."

I ask her about her father.

She doesn't talk to me for a week.

And then, on Friday night, after we walk for an hour in silence, before going into her apartment, she turns to me.

"It's awful," she says. "To see him."

"Like that," I say. She nods.

I wrap my hand around hers, but she slides away, escapes.

Why won't you just love me, I ask her.

She says it's not possible to make someone feel something.

Even yourself, she says.

Even if you want to feel it.

I tell her about the life I have my eye on.

"Show it to me," she says.

We walk down to the store where I'd seen it, but it's no longer in the window.

Inside the shop I motion to the clerk, ask about the life I'd been hoping for.

"Someone bought it," he says. "Day before yesterday."

Kirthi looks down at her shoes, feeling my disappointment for me.
I’ll find another one just like it, I tell her. A standard happiness package. Decent possibility. The chance of a kid. It wouldn’t be enough for us, not quite, but we could share it, take turns living the life. One works while the other one lives, maybe I work weekdays and she gives me a break on weekends.

She looks at me for a few long seconds, seems to be thinking about it, living the whole life out in her head, then without saying anything, she touches my cheek. It’s a start.

When Deep was happy, before it got bad and then worse and then even worse, he was always talking about how he knew a guy who knew a guy who knew a guy. He talked like that, he really did. He loved telling stories.

About a week before he cracked up, we were in the coffee room and he told me a story about a guy at Managed Life Solutions, a mental-anguish shop across town, who made arrangements with a prominent banker who wanted to kill his wife. The banker was going to do it, he’d made up his mind, but he didn’t want the guilt. Plus, he thought it might help with his alibi if he didn’t have any memory.

Bullshit, I said. That would never work.

No, really, Deep says. He tells me all about it, how they arranged it all while talking in public, at work in fact, but they talked in code, etc.

Could never happen, I say. There are twenty reasons why that wouldn’t work.

Why not, he said.

It’s just too much, I said.

Too much what? There is no upper bound on cruelty, he said.

The next Monday, I came to work, and they were pulling Deep out the door, two paramedics, each one with an arm hooked under Deep, dragging him out, two security guards trailing behind. As they dragged him past me, I tried to make eye contact, but as he turned toward me I got a good look and I saw it: there was no one left. Deepak wasn’t inside there anymore. He had gone somewhere else. He just kept saying, okay, so. Okay, so. Like a mantra. Like he was trying to convince himself. Okay. So.

And then the next day, there it was, in the newspaper. The whole story about the banker. Exactly how Deepak told it to me. There were rumors that he was the one the banker hired. He had been inside the body of a monster and the guilt had leaked through. Some things get through.

People are not perfectly sealed. The technology of feeling transfer may progress, but something will always get through.

Or maybe not a monster. Maybe that’s the point. Not a monster. Just an ordinary man, what a man is capable of.

Deep knew what was out there. There is no upper bound on sadness. There is no lower bound on decency. Deep saw it, he understood it, what was out there, and he let it seep in, and once it gets in, it gets all the way in, and it never comes out.
I open tickets. I do the work. I save up money.

Weeks go by. Kirthi opens up. Just a little.

She still refuses to look me in the eyes when we are kissing.

That's weird, she says. No one does that.

How am I supposed to know? I have not kissed many people. I have seen in American movies that people close their eyes, but I have also seen that sometimes one person or the other will sneak open an eye and take a peek at the other one. I think it makes sense. Otherwise, how would you know what the other person is feeling? That seems to me the only way to be sure, the only way to understand, through the look on her face, what she is feeling, to be able to feel what she feels for you. So we kiss, she with her eyes closed, me looking at her, trying to imagine what she is feeling. I hope she is feeling something.

I am at a funeral.

I am having a hernia.

I am having a hernia at a funeral.

I am in prison.

I'm at the dentist.

I'm at the prison dentist with a hernia.

I am in love.

I am in withdrawal.

I am in love with someone who doesn't love me back. I wish I had a hernia.

She takes me to see her father.

He has the look. I remember it. My own father looked this way.

He is living someone else's life. He's nothing more than a projection screen, a vessel, a unit of capacity for pain, like an external hard drive, a peripheral device for someone's convenience, a place to store frustration and guilt and unhappiness.

The thing hanging over us, the thing that's uncomfortable to talk about is that we could do it. We could get him out.

We stand there in silence for what seems like, for what is, way too long.

Finally, Kirthi can't take it.

He has only four years left on his mortgage, she tells me.

But, see, the way the market works, sellers like us, we never get full value on our time. It's like a pawnshop. You hock your pocket watch to put dinner on the table, you might get fifty bucks. Go get it a week later and you'll have to pay four times that to get it back.

Same principle here. I love Kirthi, I do. But I don't know if I could give sixteen years of my life to get her father out. I could do it if I knew she loved me, but I don't know it yet. I want to be a better man than this, I want to be more selfless. My life isn't so great as it is, but I just don't know if I could do it.

I am in surgery. For my hernia.

I am bleeding to death.

It doesn't hurt at all.
Things progress. We move in together. We avoid planning for the future. We hint at it. We talk around it.
I am being shot at.
I am being slapped in the face.
I go home.
I rest for a few hours.
I come back and do it again.

When I turned thirteen, my mother told me the story. She sat me down in the kitchen and explained.

"The day your father decided to sell his life," she said, "I wore my best dress, and he wore a suit. He combed his hair. He looked handsome. I remember he was so calm. You wore your only pair of long pants. We walked to the bank. You rode on his back."

"I remember that," I said.

"A man with excellent hair came out from some office in the back and sat down behind the desk."

I remember that, too, I told her.

You get, we got, forty thousand a year, she said.

My dad sold his life for a fixed annuity, indexed to inflation at three percent annually, and a seventy percent pension if he made it full term: forty years, age seventy, and he could stop, he could come back to us.

There were posters everywhere, my mother said, describing that day, the reunion day. The day when you've made it, you've done it, you're done.

There was a video screen showing a short film describing the benefits of mortgage, the glorious day of reunion. We would all drink lemonade in the hot summer air.

Just forty years, it said.

In the meantime, your family will be taken care of. You will have peace of mind.

"Time is money," the video said. "And money is time. Create value out of the most valuable asset you own."

Don't miss out on a chance of a lifetime.

When we went home, I remember, my father went to lie down. He slept for twelve hours, twice as long as normal, and in the morning, while I was still asleep, he rose from bed, washed and shaved his face, combed his hair. By the time I came down the stairs, he was just finishing up his breakfast, a piece of toast and a hard-boiled egg. I walked over to him and tried to hug him back, but I didn't have the strength. My arms were limp. So I just let him hug me, and then he went out the door and that was the last time I saw my father.

Things stop progressing with Kirthi.

Things go backward.

And then, one day, whatever it is we had, it's gone. It won't come back. We both know it.

Whatever it is she let me have, she has taken it away.
Whatever it is when two people agree to briefly occupy the same space, agree to allow their lives to overlap in some small area, some temporary region of the world, a region they create through love or convenience, or for us, something even more meager, whatever that was, it has collapsed, it has closed. She has collapsed our shared space. She has closed herself to me.

A week after Kirthi moves out, her father passes away.

My shift manager will not let me off to go to the funeral. I live through funerals all day, every day. Funerals for strangers, crying for other people, that's more or less what I do for a living. And the one time I want to go to an actual funeral, the one time it would be for someone I care about, I'll be here, in this cubicle, staring at a screen.

Kirthi doesn't even ask if I would like to go anyway.

I should go.
I will be fired if I go.

But I don't have her anymore. If I leave, I won't have a job, either. I'll never get her back if I don't have a job. I'm never getting her back anyway.

I don't even know if I want her back.

But maybe this is why I don't have her, could never, would never have had her. Maybe the problem isn't that I don't have a life. Maybe the problem is that I don't want a life.

I go to work.

I open tickets.
I close tickets.

When I get home my apartment seems empty. It's always empty, but today, more empty. The emptiness is now empty.

I call her. I don't know what to say. I breathe into the phone.

I call her again. I leave a message. I know a guy in the billing department, I say. We could get some extra capacity, no one would know, find an open line. I could feel it for you. Your grief. I could bury your father for you.

Three days later, when I get to work, there is a note on my desk, giving the time of the funeral service. Just the time and, underneath it, she scrawled, okay.

Okay.
I arrange for the hour. At the time, I open the ticket.
I am expecting a funeral.
I am not at a funeral.

I can't tell exactly where I am, but I am far away. In a place I don't recognize. She has moved to a place where I will never find her. Probably where no one will ever find her. A new city. A new life.

She paid for this time herself. She wanted to let me in. For once. Just once. She must have used up everything she had saved. The money was supposed to be for her father but now, no need.
She is walking along a road. The sun devastates, the world is made of dust, but the day is alive, she feels alive, I feel alive for her.

She is looking at a picture we took, the only picture we took together, in a photo booth in the drugstore. Our faces are smashed together and in the picture she is not smiling, as usual, and I am smiling, a genuine smile, or so I have always thought about myself, but now, looking at myself through her eyes, I see that she sees my own smile starting to decompose, like when you say a word over and over again, so many times, over and over, and you begin to feel silly, but you keep saying it, and then after a short while, something happens and the word stops being a word and it resolves into its constituent sounds, and then all of a sudden what used to be a word is not a word at all, it is now the strangest thing you have ever heard.

I am inside of her head.

I am a nice person, she is thinking. I deserve more. She wants to believe it. If only she could see herself through my eyes. If only she could see herself through my eyes looking through her eyes. I deserve to be loved, she thinks. She doesn't believe it. If only I could believe it for her. I want to believe in her, believe inside of her. Believe hard enough inside of her that it somehow seeps through. She turns up the road and the hill gets steeper. The air gets hotter. I feel her weight, the gravity on her grieving body with every step, and then, right near the top of the hill, just the faintest hint of it. She is remembering us. The few happy moments we had. Okay, so. I am standing on a hill. I am looking at a

color I have never seen before. Ocean. I am not at a funeral. I am thinking of someone I once loved. I don't know if I am her thinking of me, or if I am me thinking of her, her heart, my heart, aching, or its opposite, or if maybe, right at this moment, there is no difference. Okay, so. Okay, so. Okay.