

From *Fleishman Is in Trouble* by Taffy Brodesser-Akner

IN THE MORNING, he made the kids pancakes with mix left over from last summer, but Hannah didn't want to eat. She just wanted to see her friends.

"But none of your friends are even up yet," he said.

She walked off to her room.

Toby went into the library room, or what was sold to them as the library room, though Rachel had never put a book inside it, just an ugly green leather couch and a TV, and he sat down to call Rachel's assistant, Simone, on her cell. The phone rang once, then went to voicemail. He stared at the phone for a minute. He was nervous. God, what was he scared of? Fuck you, you fucking pussy, he said to himself. He called again. Again it rang and went to voicemail. He decided to text.

*It's an emergency, pick up.*

He stared at the phone. Nothing. He was about to walk out of the library room when the phone rang.

"Hi, Toby," Simone said. She sounded defeated.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"You said there was an emergency?"

"Is she there?" He began to consider the possibilities. "Can you have her call me back? She's days late and I have a hard case at the hospital and—and it's her turn. It's her agreed-upon turn. She can fuck with me, but she can't fuck with the kids."

"If there's no emergency, then—"

"Simone. My kids are waiting for her. Where is she?"

"I'll leave word."

Simone hung up. How Rachel abused her. She'd been on Rachel's desk for four years. Usually it was just two, but Rachel told him Simone was a good assistant but too timid and nice to be set loose and made into a junior agent.

"So you're just going to let her believe she's going to get promoted someday?" Toby had asked.

"It's not like I've lied to her," Rachel had answered.

Hannah had arranged to meet up with Lexi Leffer, mousy little Beckett Hayes, and Skylar something or other, whose mother used to audition her for commercials. They pulled up in front of the café. Hannah informed him that he would. not. be. walking. her. in. and she would need sixty dollars (not his sad twenty dollars) and that other kids got a hundred dollars and sure she would let him know when it was time to pick her up but how could she do that when she was the only person on the planet with no phone. Hannah had not yet opened the door to the café when a group of boys the same age as Hannah called her name. Hannah turned around, and her face became pretty and light. Rachel could do that, too.

"I didn't know there were gonna be boys there," Toby said to no one.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Solly said. He was reading his facts about the universe book.

Toby sat in the car for a minute, just staring ahead.

"Dad, Dad, are you okay?"

Toby looked in the rearview mirror at Solly for a few long seconds before hearing the question. He put the car into gear and began driving. "Yes, no, sure I am. Just figuring out dinner."

"Dad, what's the block universe?"

"Block universe theory? Where did you hear about the block universe theory?"

"It's in my book."

"Gosh, it's pretty complicated. Okay, you ready? It's a physics theory. It's the theory that there are infinite universes in infinite dimensions, all going on at once. Like no matter what's going on, that moment still exists forever. Time isn't forward. It's all happening at the same time. Does that make sense? I mean, it doesn't, but does it?"

"So that means that right now whatever happened on this spot in the past is still happening?"

"Yes. And in the future. Or what we think of as the future."

"Then how come we can't see it?"

"Well, we can only see our own dimensions. Our brain can barely even grasp it."

"How do we know which dimension we're in?"

"We're in all of them, according to the theory."

Solly leaned back and closed his eyes, his bottom teeth biting his upper lip.

"You okay, buddy?"

"It's stressing me out."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's all happening all the time. It's so *busy*."

"I know. But you're only responsible for right now."

"But it's all right now!"

"But you can't control it except for right now."

"But all the me's need to control their right now."

"But they can all handle it." He turned around. "It's just a theory. It's probably not true."

Toby couldn't bear to talk about the block universe anymore. He didn't want to talk about any theory of life in which the thing you were dealing with wasn't absolute reality. He couldn't bear the scope of regret and other chances and other choices that might verily crush him if he considered them. He'd chosen to live without regret. He'd chosen to believe he had nothing to regret. He'd had opportunities, but he also had values. His whole marriage, he was repeatedly punished for honoring his values, for not getting sucked into the vortex of want with the people around him. He didn't want to think about possibility anymore. Possibility was a trap.

Four years earlier, the Fleishmans had been invited to a New Year's party at the second home of Miriam and Sam Rothberg (though how do you decide which is your second home when you have four homes?). Solly was friendly with Jack Rothberg, and Rachel went to Pilates with Miriam, who was the object of all of Rachel's social-climbing ambitions. Miriam was a Rothberg, which made her rich and influential, but she was born a Sachsen, which made her someone with access to the wealth of two or three small European countries. Sachsen was the family that donated the most money to the school's building fund, which was why their

name appeared on it in at least five places and also on the school stationery, and also on the new annex at MoMA, which would be named for them.

The house was upstate, in Saratoga Springs, near the racetrack. How could Toby describe this house? It looked like Monticello—sprawling and colonial with two redundant staircases in the entry hall. Outside it was endless; inside it was endless. There were nine bedrooms, Rachel told him. Each invited family got their own bedroom, which turned out to be a suite of bedrooms—one for the parents, one smaller inset of a bedroom for the kids to share, one bathroom per family. There were more than twenty families invited, though, and the ones that didn't fit in the house Sam Rothberg himself put up at a charming historic hotel down the road.

"Why are we at the house and not at the hotel?" Toby wanted to know while they were driving up.

Rachel, at the wheel, shrugged. "Who knows?"

"I feel like it's strange that we merited house status."

"Probably so the kids could play? And, uh, some people like me, Toby."

Toby stared straight ahead. At least at a hotel he would get a break from these people. He could take Solly on a nature walk, or skip a meal with the crowd. Instead, they were put in a room with a canopy bed and cloth walls, all done up in a bland Queen Anne style. Toby put their bags down and thought how this weekend was going to be unrelenting.

The next morning, at breakfast, Sam asked Toby if he wanted to take the kids bowling in town. Toby briefly searched his mind for a way to say no, but he looked over at Rachel, whose eyebrows were pleading.

"Sure," he said.

At the bowling alley, Sam's giant hands selected a marbled red ball and flung it through the air so that it could land on the oiled alley like a swan and score him, yes, his third strike. Sam was tall even by regular standards and it looked like he had all his hair, but with blond guys you can't ever know for sure. He had what looked like a strong chin but he also had an underbite, which meant that his chin wasn't so strong and maybe even was weak. When he laughed, it was just his jaw making a parallel clapping motion, like a marionette. He sat down next to Toby while Jack got up to bowl his second strike. He said, "You still at the hospital? We're looking for someone to head up our marijuana program."

"Fendant is going into marijuana?"

Sam laughed loud. "Lord, no. We're looking for someone who could help lead up a new, important division. It would be dedicated to debunking myths about alternative therapies, reminding the world that medicine is best. There's a lot of misinformation out there. As I'm sure you know."

"I don't know," Toby said. "I see a lot of cancer patients benefit from pot and acupuncture—"

"Don't get me started on acupuncture," Sam said.

"—I mean, not cured. But relief, yes."

"Be that as it may. Isn't the best relief a cure?" Toby thought of Bartuck, whose face was [dollar sign eye emoji] and who was aggressive about grants and fundraising. It disgusted Toby, but what was he going to do? That kind of greed was essential to allowing Toby to do his job—there was no job without it. So there was something for everyone in medicine. He understood

that. But this was new. Bartuck at least had to pretend he was interested in healing patients; Bartuck at least at one time had actually done the healing work! What was new was to be in a room with someone who was so nakedly disinterested in healing people, and so nakedly interested in thwarting progress.

"I'm a doctor," Toby said. "I do best with patients." He hoped this would end the conversation before Sam mentioned a number, but hope is for idiots. Toby got up to bowl. He took one pin off the edge in a glorified gutter ball.

"It's the head of a big division, Toby. You'd be bringing in a mil before bonuses. You'd manage an entire team. Great hours. The works."

Toby tried to imagine what it would be like to be on such intimate terms with money that you could abbreviate it into nicknames. "That's really nice, but it's just not what I do."

"Rachel said you would resist this. Did I mention the bonuses? The hours? We have a chalet in Zermatt you could use for skiing. Every director-level gets a key. I'm serious."

"When did you and Rachel talk about this?"

It was Sam's turn to bowl. He banged out another strike, and when he came back, Toby wanted to ask the question again but couldn't think of a way of repeating himself without sounding panicked and paranoid.

Toby vowed to not address this with Rachel until they returned to the city. There was no private place to argue, and he knew he'd have a hard time pretending things were fine at dinner once she began saying awful things to him about his career.

But Rachel had other plans. That night was New Year's, and waiters in black and white passed hors d'oeuvres and champagne and Toby sat on a couch alone until about eleven, when Solly came to sit with him for a minute and fell asleep on his lap. He carried Solly up to bed, wondering if he could get away with falling asleep in bed with him, but Rachel followed them upstairs.

"Well?" she whispered. "I've been waiting to hear."

"Hear what?"

"What did you and Sam talk about?"

"You know what we talked about. You colluded and orchestrated it behind my back."

"Collusion! That's a big word for this. He mentioned it a few weeks ago. I thought you might like the opportunity!"

"It's actually the opposite of an opportunity. It is the antithesis of what I do. He wants me to head up a division that encourages the deprivation of legitimate avenues of healing to sick patients."

She sat on the bed, looking up at him. "I know. But you're so good at your job. You should be rewarded. You should have a break from the grind."

"I don't need a break from my job. My job is not a grind."

"You are screaming," she said through her teeth. "Do not embarrass me."

"How about you embarrassing me? By implying that I have so little integrity—"

"Integrity? You think insisting on keeping your job when you have an opportunity to literally what—quadruple your salary and make our lives better is integrity? Me working myself into an early grave so that you can do what you want to do instead of what you have to do is integrity?"

"What is the problem here? I'm perfectly—"

"You're still an attending."

"I'm an attending because I like working with patients."

"You totally pissed away that grant—"

"Jesus Christ. The grant again."

Her lipstick, her always-red lipstick, had somehow gotten onto her teeth. It made her look like a lunatic on the subway. "You are so wedded to this narrative that you are good and everyone else is bad. It's not bad to want money. It's not bad to have a teaspoon of ambition. It's not bad to work hard to make your family happy."

Solly appeared in the doorway, rubbing his eyes.

"Why are you fighting?"

Rachel stood up. "Go back to bed, baby, it's okay."

"What are you fighting about?"

"Go to sleep."

Toby stood up and without a word took Solly by the hand and led him back to his bed, where he lay down next to him, facing him. He put his hand on Solly's cheek, and Solly responded by putting his hand on Toby's cheek.

"I want to be a doctor when I grow up, Dad."

"You do?"

"I want to have patients and make them better."

"You will be great at doing that. Go to sleep."

Some time later, the door opened, and Toby could feel Rachel seething at the threshold. He kept his eyes closed and pretended he was asleep.

A week later, out of nowhere, or maybe not, Rachel decided she could no longer live on Seventy-second Street in their perfectly good three-bedroom with a doorman and what Solly thought was the fanciest elevator in all of New York City. She began looking, on her own, for a new apartment. She would take Hannah with her, and Hannah would report back over dinner that there was no anteroom or the kitchen door opened straight into the living room or there was no additional storage or there was no parking or there was just a living room and no den.

There was a new building being built on Seventy-fifth Street at the time, at the corner of Third. There were new buildings being built on Eighty-sixth and Seventy-ninth, too—all glass and metal with advertisements over their scaffoldings about the amenities and tennis courts and Jacuzzis and community rooms and how easy and glamorous life could be. They were exactly what Rachel wanted, but she didn't want them. Rachel was more interested in the building on Seventy-fifth Street that would not have amenities. It was being built new to look like one of the old art deco buildings—one of the old-money buildings their richer friends lived in. It had bronze arches and high ceilings and metal doors, and it was to be called the Golden. The Fleishmans went to see it one night after dinner.

"They're not even officially showing it yet, but Sam Rothberg knows the developer and got us in early," Rachel said.

"I don't know why we need something so big," he said.

"This isn't big. This is a regular size for a family of four."

"Those modern buildings are so much nicer. They have swimming pools."

"We have the club for that. And I don't want to live in all that glass. It's so old-school and romantic here."

"Maybe there's a gym here," Hannah said.

"There isn't," Rachel answered, looking at the crown molding in the apartment.

"How do you know?" Toby asked. The agent hadn't yet met them in the model apartment.

Rachel stopped for a minute. "I asked Sam."

"Have you looked at this before?"

"Of course not. How would I?" He was pretty sure she was lying.

They closed on the apartment three weeks later. He wasn't asked. He was told. It was his punishment for not taking the Fendant job. Fine, he thought, as he helped label boxes for moving. As long as this means we're even.

Now Toby found himself back at their house, Rachel's house, with the car running in the driveway.

"Dad?" Solly asked.

Toby blinked. He had no recollection as to how he'd gotten here. He had thought they were even, but they weren't. They never would be. When he was seventeen, he got into a car accident with his parents' Volvo. The next three days, all he could think was: What if I'd left exactly one minute earlier? What if I hadn't stopped for gas? It drove him crazy, and more than that, it didn't matter. It didn't matter because it wasn't the reality he was living. What if he had taken that job? Or what if he'd even been open to talking about it? What if his lab had flourished and his grant had been renewed? What if he'd never gone to the party where he met Rachel? What was the point in even asking? Do you see why he didn't want to talk about the block universe anymore? Because somewhere, in one of them, he was still a hopeless idiot who didn't see this all coming.