

“The Blight”

By [Emma Cline](#)

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And here was a town house, five stories high. The car idled in front. David looked out the window of the back seat, up at the stone façade. There was a guard, installed on the front steps, and a rash of flags mounted over the door, as if it were an embassy. The façade was lighted from below by the exterior lights that specified the building, separated it from the other night buildings.

It was the flags that threw him, there over the big door. Scrambled his thinking.

Then David had a flash of understanding. They were already in Zurich: this was an official building, the appointed time upon him at last.

There was a hitch in his breath. Too soon, wasn't it? He wasn't ready!

His eyes caught his assistant's with visible alarm.

Instantly, the boy's hand was on David's arm. Cody calmly took out the itinerary, read it aloud: Rebecca. Dinner. London.

This was the club. Seven p.m. reservation, under Larkin. Restaurant upstairs, check-in downstairs.

I'm coming in with you, the boy said.

Squeeze, squeeze, went the boy's hand, signalling that everything was correct.

Cody would wait in the car during dinner, but the handoff was important, these interstitials, and Cody would be here when it was time for pickup. Time to ferry him to the hotel.

I'll be waiting, Cody said soothingly.

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An entryway, a stone floor. Polished to lawsuit-slickness. The walls were seamless sheets of wood that wavered in candlelight. David hung back, letting Cody be the one to approach the woman sitting at the front desk, crowded out by a floral arrangement. So big, the arrangement. Were those actual tree branches?

She was a ghoul, this woman, with her many requirements. She needed to see identification. Needed the full names of both parties. The boy supplied the correct answers, had any number of important David documents on his person, ready for the woman's perusal.

She wrote something on her paper and checked a tablet. Ms. Larkin is in the restaurant, she told David, Cody apparently already dismissed. Fourth floor.

Just the named guest, she said, when Cody took his arm.

I'm his assistant, Cody said. It's medical. For medical reasons. I'll be down as soon as he's with his daughter.

Only the named guest, the woman said.

I'll get lost, David said. He smiled. I really will.

You can see, Cody told the woman, on your little video screen. I'll take him up and come right back down.

All right, the woman said finally.

And you can send him after me, Cody said, nodding at the security guard, if I'm not right back down.

The woman frowned. The guard didn't react.

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Cody stayed at David's side, his arm through David's, helping him navigate the elevator, the hallways hung with heavy velvet curtains. The carpeting was so thick that it seemed to eat up their footsteps.

The people they encountered seemed like children, dressed up in party wear, traipsing around the rooms of this doll house. Their faces were done up and their hair shone.

Good for you, David thought, as a woman pushed past in a short dress and high heels.

Now that he did not want to expend any effort, he saw nothing but effort all around him.

Too many levels—Cody steadied him through each transition, a turn down a hallway and then three shallow steps. A dip and another set of steps.

They passed through a dim bar area, wall lights dialled to a golden glow. Then they arrived at another bar, the correct bar.

A lull.

Cody pointed out the woman who had taken up an uncomfortable perch on a barstool.

There we are, Cody supplied helpfully. Rebecca.

David nodded. Of course.

I'll check in with her later, Cody said. But Rebecca knows to text whenever you're ready. I'll just be around the corner.

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David started toward his daughter. Dressed in the prim British style, or so he decided, without any real knowledge of what that might be—a narrow skirt, tall boots whose tops were hidden by the skirt, a Peter Pan blouse. Gold jewelry that flashed its minor dazzle, its subtle good taste.

She appeared to have finished most of the glass of white wine on the bar in front of her. She said something to the bartender, but the bartender glanced in David's direction, which made her turn, too.

Rebecca stood up nervously, her eyes taking him in with diagnostic intensity. What was she noticing, or trying to notice? She closed the distance between them, put an arm through his, and led him back to her barstool.

Dad, she said, and at least that was familiar, not some British affectation.

Something something about the place. She was chattering a bit.

When it's sunny out, there's a nice roof terrace, she said. They open it up—it's nice. Not now, of course.

Yeah.

It's a bit frustrating, she said, looking around. Table's not ready. It's not even so busy. They're good about that stuff, she said, usually.

Right.

She squinted at him. Dad, she said, you've got— She tapped her cheek.

He stared at her dumbly.

Here, she said, and reached out. He felt a tiny tug of his skin, and then she held up a scrap of toilet paper, browned with blood. He tried not to look confused. She rolled the paper into a little ball that she rested on her cocktail napkin. He touched his face and checked his finger—no blood.

A mystery.

Your table is ready, the waiter said, and Rebecca drained her glass and stood.

Shall we?

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What did she know? Only that David had decided to slow down a bit, as of late. Step back from work.

Retirement, or some euphemistic version of retirement. That information alone had been enough to send her into a spiral. If she had known that there was actually something wrong, that a genuine diagnosis existed and David was keeping it from her—hard to imagine the fallout.

She had e-mailed Cody a string of articles to print and pass along to David. Retirement often marked a bad turn was the general gist; it was when people started their slow decline. That had to be actively avoided. When you retired, you actually had to work overtime in order to keep the brain and body stimulated. It was a job in itself, really!

Creatine research, peptides, the correct sauna temperature to best replicate the resilience of some Norwegians in a clinical study. These congenial, sweaty Norwegians scolded him—why had he not developed a lifelong habit of weekly saunas with a group of close-knit friends? That seemed to protect against any misfortune.

What was the correct sauna temperature? He didn't know, because the article had reported the temperature in Celsius and, according to his mental calculations, it came out to three hundred and ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit, which he knew was . . . probably . . . not correct.

A kitchen drawer had been taken over by bottles of vitamins, tipped on their side, labels up, and there had been a stretch of weeks in which he had bothered to force them down.

do not age, one supplement brand was called.

donut age, his eyes saw.

Was it truly possible for salvation to be purchased on Amazon.com or wherever Rebecca went to find these dim and stinky gelcaps? Was the brain just waiting for unregulated supplements to slough off the plaque before it would emerge, spanky and pink?

Her protocol had intersected somewhat with his own desperate push. His brief sobriety. The red-light hat on the skull, another line clipped up the nose: a laser pointer, really, shoved up a nostril. So how could it hurt, throwing her regimen into the mix? It was all folk medicine.

Offerings. The capsules tanged on his tongue as he washed them down: the green-tea-extract pill, the fat amino-acid vitamin that nudged its awkward way down the throat.

This is the body of Christ, amen—David back in grade school, Friday-morning Mass. He opened his mouth for the bland Communion host. The wafer dissolved almost instantly; his tongue roved around, trying to coax the soggy body of Christ from his molars. Even so, he'd made a real effort to summon some solemn holy feeling, as he did when he took these pills, a gesture for

the far-off daughter. The lost years, the brief birthday calls, dates for visits discussed but flights never booked—swallow, swallow, do this in memory of me.

Similarly disappointing, similarly unmiraculous.

Unmiraculous—like it had been to swallow the body of Christ. More like gumming the wet sock of Christ.

Do this in memory of me, ding-a-ling-a-ling.

This was the way of things, this desperate religious surge, Mecca in a gelcap. Maybe it would all work. Maybe it would!

For David, it had probably been a month, all told—that this surge of hope had lasted. Maybe he was a special case.

Why should I hire you, his first boss had asked, and David said, I graduated with honors—

So you think you're special? Mark said. His tone wasn't unkind. A special guy?

David sensed that the right answer was the one he had given.

Not at all, David said. But I work hard. I'm a hard worker.

Why me/why not me? That was how some people dealt with bad news. Accepting that they weren't special, after all.

Rebecca hadn't learned yet. He sort of had.

The blight had come for him; it was too late. The vitamins stayed in the drawer. He let his brain blank out on words without trying to chase them down.

The quick brown fox, the lazy dog.

The lazy—

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What did you call them, the little half curtains on the windows? Strung neatly along silver curtain rods. These booths with partitions that closed you off from the nearby tables. So you felt even more important.

Who did Rebecca come here with? People were members of such places so that they could take other people there. He didn't know the contours of her life well enough to imagine who those others might be. People she wanted to impress. She didn't work, hadn't worked for years—he was fairly certain of this. He had an automatic transfer set up, guilt money still on its biweekly distribution schedule.

Rebecca shook out her napkin, then checked her phone. He's really on top of things, she said, with a slight eye roll.

David waited to understand what she was talking about.

I don't like him, she said. When I call? He doesn't always tell you. I know it, too, his voice does this weird cutoff thing, and I just know he doesn't even mention it to you.

Cody—she was talking about Cody.

He's a nice. Pause. A nice boy.

I wish you would answer your phone. Or your e-mails. It's just hard, she said. Always going through him.

You can call me, David said.

He says he tells you but I know he doesn't.

You can call me anytime, David said.

Somewhere in the restaurant, a champagne cork popped.

David forced himself to return his attention to Rebecca. She was peering at him. He smiled, this strange new habit—but it worked, in its way. It seemed to calm her.

Have you talked to Mom? he said.

Her face showed her surprise.

Annabel, he corrected himself.

Yeah. She's good. I mean, seems like it.

David had stayed polite, unfailingly so, with Annabel—it had been easier when she remarried and gave up alimony. So he was no longer aware, every month, of just how polite he was being. A doctor, the new husband—wasn't he? David had been relieved. Hadn't she ended up ahead? Wouldn't her anger finally lose its urgency, every conversation no longer a fresh report from the scene of her woundedness? Time for the farewell tour, Annabel, darling.

Though he couldn't remember when they had last talked. Where was she, in this world? Panic, a quick hit of it—surely he should know.

He hurried past this blank spot.

We came here on our honeymoon, David said. Did you know that?

Yeah, she said. I guess I did.

She paused, like he might offer some amusing story from the past, polished for her enjoyment, but he didn't.

The past, where he lived now. Rebecca was obviously, insistently, a citizen of this planet. With its clubs. With their many levels. The ego churn in the room was almost a visible thing. What's next, what's next, what's next—that was the hungry hum under everything.

The waiter's interruption was helpful.

David took a slice of the dark bread, spread it with a thick layer of butter.

She made an apologetic face at the waiter. For what, he didn't catch, but he assumed it had to do with him, some lag or error. He showed his teeth in a half smile, half grimace.

It's been cold here, she said, but it'll be much worse in Zurich. You know Geoff wanted us to go to Switzerland for Rainer's break. He's big into that, skiing, real treks, the *National Geographic* excursions. I wouldn't go now, she said. Not in the dead of winter. So gloomy. What's the project?

She waited for him to respond.

He waited, too, for another nudge in the right direction.

Switzerland? she added.

Oh, you know.

She studied him. She took another drink.

Lag time, enough for a creep of unease. Fill the silence, David.

It's for Stearns, he said. I do little things, here and there. The invocation of Stearns was calming, he could tell. A familiar signpost from a familiar life. And that was enough—didn't we just want the people we knew to stay in their familiar realms? Knock around inside the boundaries of their familiar selves, hit their familiar marks? Remain pretty much approximate.

When they'd set up this visit, he had made mention to Rebecca of a business thing, the outlines of some consulting project that awaited him in Zurich. Had Cody smoothed over any jarring gaps? Probably. Hopefully.

The prospect of actual business now seemed to brighten her tone.

It's wonderful to get back into things, she said in a high, unnatural voice. One less thing for her to worry about, if David kept himself busy.

Busy-ness, which used to be his life. A busy-ness man.

David had worked so frantically. Needless, his frantic work. And yet—they were all like him. Stearns and the others. Why did any of them fill their lives in this way? He had not needed to work as much as he had, not nearly as much, and not with a feeling of such terror.

He took a drink of his wine. His eyes fluttered a bit. The start of a histamine itch. But what could he be allergic to? He blinked rapidly.



"Lay off, Doug. I don't hook up with roommates."

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

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So much frantic work. But they had all seemed forlorn in times of leisure. Vacation sent him into strange moods: he was unkind to his family, he drank more. A dissatisfaction, like a sickness.

How everything seemed unfortunate, meagre. This was his portion? This was his slice of happiness? His family stared balefully at him, waiting for some alchemy to be performed by his hand, like those trips when he was somehow expected to navigate them through an unknown city.

It's probably time for lunch, his wife would say, as if he weren't hungry, too, as if he had failed to notice that they were all sweating and sunburned and lost, the unhappy little unit of his family there on the foreign sidewalk? If I see a place I'll stop, he said curtly, and returned to the thankless task of leading them along the strange streets, every restaurant shuttered, every passerby seeming to sneer at David.

We'll just head back to the main road, he said. I'm sure something is open.

They looked at him, his wife and child, as if they'd found him on the bottom of their shoe.

It had always been a relief to return to work. Back to the universe that required his wholesale belief and, in turn, gave him the assurance that he, too, was real, that his life was something to believe in.

Rebecca did not know how things had ended with the board, only that they had. She knew none of the unpleasantness.

He welcomed his own forgetting on that subject.

Just really great to hear, Rebecca said. That you're back at it.

It's pretty straightforward, he said. The project.

Had he done his particular monologue already? No way to know.

For Stearns, he added.

He was saying Stearns's name too often, he gathered.

I do little things here and there, he said.

She gave him a look. But didn't ask any follow-up questions.

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They were served slivers of pale fish in sauce, barely-there disks of orange citrus that dotted the flesh.

This is to share, she said.

The waiter had said that when he put the plate down: This is to share.

A slackness between them. A smile, again, his big smile.

You can eat those, she said, when he started to pick off the citrus rounds. The skin, she said, is quite thin.

He chewed them obediently. You could eat them, yes. This seemed—chew, chew—technically true.

Oh, Dad. She looked sad.

He was silent. The pork chop came with an unfamiliar vegetable, shreds of a green stalk. He shifted the mass to the side with his knife. He scraped the plate audibly. Kept at it until the shreds were all in a knife-neatened square, cordoned off from the cutlet.

Aren't you hungry?

She reached across the table to take possession of his silverware. She used his knife and fork to cut up little pieces of the pork chop. It looks good, she said.

Don't do that. Perhaps he grabbed the knife and fork back with too much force.

She raised her hands, glanced around at no one. Well, I'm sorry, she said, her face red. She finished her glass.

He took up a piece of the cut meat with his fingers and put it in his mouth. Pork was very sweet. He forgot this every time until he was eating it again. Strangely sweet. He swallowed.

If Rebecca knew what was planned in Zurich, she'd stop him.

She'd figure out the legal avenue. Go straight for the cutoff switch.

What was the formal term—mentally unfit? Incompetent?

She'd make it official. Punitive in her way, Rebecca. She didn't seem to believe that anyone should escape their allotted pain in this lifetime. Stations of the Cross, Marylebone edition. Would she wear a hair shirt, if it were on offer in a nice navy?

As a girl, she would sometimes cry when David smoked cigarettes. Big, fakey tears that gusted in and out of genuine distress. It wasn't even so bad, then, smoking, but she was ahead of her time. Had a suspicious nose for her parents' pleasure, identified it as a destabilizing force. The time she'd refused to acknowledge Annabel when she'd cut her hair in the short style. Perhaps the girl had been right. It was a threat, wasn't it? Other people's desires, a mother taken by a new vision of herself. A father's insistence on the private pleasure of a cigarette.

Well, honey, this is like one big cigarette that Dad is going to smoke. A really big one.

The people in Switzerland had strongly suggested that he inform his loved ones about his plans. If you “sneak away into the beyond”—their words—you could hurt their feelings and make them angry.

Sneak away into the beyond—maybe this was a clumsy translation. Shouldn’t their terminology be more medical than that? Sneaking away into the beyond—like how you might describe a teen-ager dropping acid in the back yard. Groovy and loose.

And, anyway, hurt feelings, anger—that was exactly what would not matter to him, there in the groovy beyond. You made calculations, you weighed the future anger of others against the present trouble, and then you pretty much said, O.K. Kick the can down the road.

What would the alternative be, if Rebecca had her way?

A forced march through the brutal next decade. Whatever gruesome care scenario awaited him. His brain would short out completely, oh, sometime in the next year or so. He’d perhaps have the occasional flare of lucidity, though whatever scraps of reality he’d manage would be pierced with terror.

There would be the dutiful once-a-year visit from Rebecca and the child. Neither of them would want to be there. Wind would blow the trees against the windows and the humidifier would puff and David would deteriorate in his little slice of existence, running out the clock there on the very edge of other people’s real lives.

It was not—David picked at a shred of citrus peel caught between his teeth—a pleasant thought. Not pleasant at all.

So he was doing the right thing. His calculations were correct. Leave at five minutes to midnight.

It was a great party—thanks a ton!

He smiled at Rebecca.

Rainer is looking forward to seeing you, she said.

David kept smiling.

Rainer, in his notebook, age nine. Rainer, age nine.

He’s nine, David said. An inane offering.

Almost ten. He’s got loads of friends—he’s really doing so well. We’re so pleased.

That’s good.

It was a little, you know, touch and go, right after last year, but the new school has been just so professional. Really a total shift—it's like night and day. He's thriving.

Wonderful, he said.

New school, O.K., some incident, but he had lost the context, so he just kept the child's name in his brain. Rainer, a solid name. Rainer, who was thriving, and he chewed dutifully on the chop, and, in this way, the dinner passed.

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Many opportunities to extend the meal. Coffee? Dessert?

To not choose these offered extensions seemed sad, an acknowledgment that the night had been only O.K., that no spark of familial magic had overcome them. And they were as they had always been, stiff with each other, missing the mark.

Like those holiday outings, post-divorce, with itineraries planned out by Annabel. Even at the peak of her anger, she'd remained the wholly capable stage director of everyone's emotions. Take the girl here, look at these lights, these window displays, there's a holiday village in the children's department, get an early dinner reservation at the restaurant on the highest floor—she'll like the glass elevator.

He'd been grateful. Enormously so.

Shirley Temple for madam, David had said. Rebecca's legs in their white tights swung from the restaurant chair.

Extra cherries? His voice had a festive strain.

Oh, no, the serious girl said. Thank you.

She opened her presents without fuss. Thank you, she said, in a neutral tone. She was often thanking him back then, but it seemed to mean something else, her affect oddly listless.

The time he called to let them know that she had left the new little coat behind, the wooden chess set.

We'll get them next visit, Annabel said.

Had they? Had Rebecca ever brought the chess set home? Quite expensive, he remembered. The chess set. A smooth wooden box with a felt-lined drawer where the pieces were kept.

Quite expensive.

No dessert—was Rebecca sure?

I'm really O.K., Rebecca said, but David waved a hand. We need something sweet. You love sweets. He studied the dessert menu. It seemed bizarrely coded. So many of the words were capitalized, confusingly, and he scanned gamely for a bit, then put it down.

You choose, he said.

One yuzu cheesecake, two forks.

You, zoo. You, zoo.

They took polite bites, Rebecca needlessly covering her mouth as she chewed.

He tried to think, I love you, to see what it scraped up in him. He tried to gather himself to match the seriousness of the occasion—the last time he would be alone with his only child.

His child. All the illnesses and treachery—hadn't she survived? His child, who had once vomited silently in the bathtub, then gone on playing happily with her bath toys. Who had once walked with mummy stiffness down the night hallway, her poxed limbs pink with dried calamine lotion. Who had broken a wrist on the back-yard flagstones, drooled cherry medicine down her sleeping face on the car ride back from the hospital.

The reel was playing too quickly; it was difficult to hold on to.

I'll have to show you the plaster, she chattered. It's an interesting technique. They basically picked up the entire kitchen and moved it to the sunroom. Where it used to be. A bigger footprint, though. It'll be totally different than when you saw it last—when was that?

He pretended to try to recall. Pinball eyes, looking up, looking down.

Gosh. I mean, maybe we hadn't even moved in. She smiled. Well. I guess it's been a long time.

Too long, he said. He surprised himself.

She kept smiling, surprised, too. Even this minor display of sentiment made them both awkward.

It was a crumb, compared to what he was supposed to say. He was supposed to invoke something, speak to the strangeness of passing from one world to another. Burnish this evening with dramatic color, emotions vivified like in those old hand-painted photographs.

Maybe he had prepared some sentiments in his notebook? Some . . . remarks?

He wasn't that person, and neither was Rebecca. This universe was bounded, meagre—they had only their usual roles, their approximate dialogue.

No more tears.

Mmm, Rebecca said aloud, to indicate that she liked the dessert.

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There was an e-mail that Cody would send out, after it was over, composed, mostly, by David. Certain additions had been made by Cody, reasonable enough, meant to forestall any liabilities. David understood the need to pay this kind of attention, and he was grateful.

A few different versions, for the different audiences. But hers had taken the most effort to compose.

Dear Rebecca, [sub recipient]

By the time you are reading this, I will have passed, peacefully and legally, in Switzerland. It was entirely my own decision, blah blah, signed off by these doctors, blah. My unfortunate diagnosis left no other choice. Dr. Blah has been authorized to share the details and an overview of my medical history with you, if so desired. I hope you can understand the many elements that went into this difficult decision.

I apologize if this causes you pain. Please respect my blah, know that I will always love you. My lawyer can be reached at blah. He is expecting your call and is prepared to answer any questions or concerns you might have. Thank you for being my daughter. I'm sorry for any ways in which I have disappointed you, or any failings. In particular, I wish that I had been more present, and communicated more often my considerable pride in you. Know that I have loved you as much as I could.

Your loving father,

David Hastings

(Was the last name really necessary?)

Not ideal. To ambush her with an e-mail. But it seemed the only real way to handle it.

The slice of You Zoo steadily disappeared from the plate. The two of them alternated with their forks until there was nothing left.

He wiped half-heartedly at his mouth and thought, Rebecca is full grown, she is a full-grown woman. Her constellation of self, her preferences and complexes and aversions, her taste for sweetness—he would only ever know a fraction of Rebecca. A shadow moving in another room, spied through a keyhole. A girl who had once loved a ratty doll, a doll now lost to the black mouth of the indifferent universe. This nervous woman with her nervous clothes and how her tone went up an octave as she spoke to the waiter—she was of his flesh but not of his flesh.

This was a promising line of thought, and emotion stirred in his chest. My child.

Like little Rebecca with her fake/real tears—the sentiment was real, this love for her, and swelled through him convincingly, totally, but he couldn't hold on to it.

The feeling receded. He tried to get it back, but the music was too loud, there was a distracting after-dinner surge for the bar.

This whole place, how odd, the look of a real restaurant, filled with people, but still it seemed so airless. It was sealed off in some essential way, and, no matter how much they dedicated themselves to appearing otherwise, they were false, actual life kept at too much of a remove.

Still, he raised the cup of espresso to his lips and it tasted real, like the real thing, and wasn't it pleasant enough? This real cup of espresso, the daughter who had his DNA twisting through her, and what would it even look like to break it all open, his life, break himself open, like a Christmas cracker: here was his birthday lunch, David a little boy, an hour that passed in near-silence, *Don't you speak to your father that way*; here were the years at school; here was Annabel on their wedding night, trying to hold in a fart unsuccessfully and bursting into sobs when she couldn't.

A being entrusted to his care—that was how he'd felt about Annabel, and then about Rebecca. The baby with wrinkled hands that flickered and twitched around her face, her eyes black before they were blue. She grumbled in her sleep, with each breath, a wheezy ancient in the house.

Annabel's bones had shifted during pregnancy, her pelvis spread outward. Another time when the animal was ascendant. There was one person, then there were two. The sudden creature in the hospital room. Then the second labor: the placenta, marbled with fat blue veins. No one had prepared him. It had seemed horrifyingly solid, as if they might be expected to take it home. Another mouth to feed.

Annabel had to sit on a little inflatable pillow for a month. She retreated to an animal privacy, bent over her child. Whatever she and David had had between them was revealed as flimsy. It didn't matter so much for Annabel—she had found herself in a new country, with its absorbing new customs. But David was forlorn, redundant. The man in the suit who lumbered around in the background of their lives. Coming in and out of focus like a clumsy stagehand.

His doing, certainly. Still.

They'd divorced when Rebecca was ten.

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David tried to get the check—awkward, the fumble to accept the little leather folder, David peering at the receipt. He groped for a pen but it was all swimmy. Impossible. He handed the whole mess to Rebecca.

My eyes, he said vaguely.

She took over with her usual briskness. They just charge me directly, she said.

Take my card, at least.

They just need a signature, Dad—it's all on file here, she said. My account.

Tot up all the money he had spent on her—hundreds of thousands, private school and college and one year of business school, the help with the house purchase—and this evening would be a drop. But it was good, to nourish one's offspring.

The daughter looked at him with concern. Yes? he said.

Ready? she said.

He blinked.

To go?

The table in front of him was empty, wiped clean, even the candle blown out. When had that happened?

They took the bill?

Dad?

Ready, he said, his hands braced on the cleared surface, for support. Up we go. ♦

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[Emma Cline](#) is the author of "[The Guest](#)," "[The Girls](#)," and "[Switzzy](#)" (September, 2026), among other books.