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An Undertow of Calm, 16:17 min.

As always, he gets up at 5.15 with no need for an alarm. What began as a retraining of his internal clock so that his wife, Sherri, could continue sleeping until a more humane hour has now turned into a game with himself, a rather self-satisfying way of confirming his own inbuilt discipline. He slowly folds back his quilt and extracts himself gently from the bed, swinging his feet across the edge and onto the floor, where his leather slippers are lying at attention. He had always enjoyed the early hours of the morning, often getting up long before leaving for work just to have time to himself before the kids got up. The kids have long since moved out, yet he still cherishes being awake in those dark moments which are nonetheless distinctly day and not night.

Sherri, now that she no longer works, has taken to sleeping in as long she seems to think is morally acceptable. She had always been an early riser herself; it is only lately that she seems to lack the will to face much of anything, if he allows himself to admit it. He had never encouraged her to stop working; he rather got the feeling that she grew out of it. The pet supply store had flourished since she had taken over as manager; what was once little more than a country store with basic dog treats such as smoked pig ears and a few bowls and leashes had been transformed into a shopping destination for the ever-growing middle class population in town. Even people from the neighboring counties started coming in to see for themselves the startling array of grooming products, training aids, pet food, animal crates and houses, and ever more personalized, embossed and engraved items. The store specialized in dogs and cats, as the people around here tended towards the conventional, but it also catered to owners of reptiles, birds, fish and rodents.

The pet store's success rested in close and attentive customer service. Sherri hated shopping online, and had a hunch that many others did too. There was no way to have an overview with all those tabs open at once, she just wanted to close them all again. And everything was so compartmentalized; there was no space for frivolity or surprise. She fondly remembered the mail order catalog that would arrive every month when she was a girl, filled with items as disparate as bathrobes, window shades and car radios. You didn't have to look for things, you could discover them.

At the pet store, Sherri tried to stock as wide a variety of items as possible, and also kept a stack of product catalogs on hand, dedicated to any kind of animal you could ever consider a pet, many spanning over one hundred pages. This way the customers had the benefit of choice coupled with personal in-store advice. She had installed a seating area, complete with free coffee, where people could flip through the catalogs, often resulting in the purchase of items that went beyond the practical to extend into the novel and the, frankly, uselessly luxurious.

The strategy worked. Sherri hired multiple employees to establish the store's "come on in, we'll take care of you" philosophy, and she herself seemed to spend upwards of 10 to 12 hours a day there. The owners of the franchise expanded the business model she had developed to their other stores and started making money hand over fist. Yet, unlike most people, who want to envelop themselves in the comfort of their success for as long as possible, Sherri seemed to grow bored once the achievements were in place. She tried to care, to push past her disinterest, showing up at the office at 6 am to research new products and staying late to tweak the display systems. But one day she just quit.

They didn't need the extra salary. The carpet business, which he had transformed into a high-end flooring enterprise, had shifted into high gear a few years earlier and seemed to stay there. Their fixed costs had gone down now that the kids were gone and the house was paid off, and they had always been far from the extravagant type anyway. All of a sudden they found they didn't have to check prices at the grocery store anymore, there was no need to plan or budget, no worrying about unforeseen expenses. This new state of affairs left him highly unsettled.

The slow and steady accumulation of wealth became an obsession for him. He was aware of the fact that one shouldn't hide cash in their house anymore, but he treated his bank account much like he would a shoebox in his closet. Money went in and did not go back out. He and Sherri differ greatly when it comes to dealing with money. She finds his hoarding pointless and depressing. She has stopped trying to educate him on interest rates and investment strategies, as he seems to willfully cling to his ignorance as the only means of justifying his retrograde and distrusting approach to finance. Quitting her job might actually have been a spiteful way of slowing down the constant and unnecessary accumulation.

Upstairs, Sherri shifts in bed, trying to be as silent as possible until her husband has left the house. She has come to feel like a guest in her own home, fearful not of violence or conflict, but of being judged for her moments of doubt, her hesitancy. She feels like she is living in parentheses, frozen in time yet well aware that time is actually passing her by. And she can tell that her ambivalence about this makes people anxious.

Once he leaves, she pulls on her bathrobe and pads downstairs to make coffee the way she likes it. Her husband takes his coffee like an old man, long and weak. Sherri bought herself one of those little Italian coffee makers a while back and cherishes having her own way of doing things that differs from those around her.

It's already hot outside and the screen door is dotted with bugs. No matter what they try, citronella oil, rubbing dryer sheets on the screen, they keep coming back. Her husband deals with insects in a very straightforward manner: they need to be eliminated. Sherri has long since stopped fretting about bugs, knowing that it is impossible to get rid of them completely and refusing to drive herself crazy by trying. She remembers when, in her early twenties and working as a receptionist at a car dealership in Jonesboro, she lived in this dinky apartment complex that looked like a bunch of trailers stacked on top of each other. One night, after a few drinks with her girlfriends, she came home to find a trail of ants steadily advancing from the direction of the bathroom. She turned on the light and looked up at the bathroom ceiling, which had a rather large hole in the drywall. A seemingly endless stream of ants was coming out of the hole, some of them clustering around the ceiling, others making their way down along the wall. Sherri, not knowing what to do, grabbed the vacuum cleaner and sucked them all up. Needless to say, the ants came back. A tug of war went on for several days before she finally decided to repair the gap in the ceiling. This temporarily stopped the stream but the apartment was old and cheap and, in time, the ants came back. Other experiences trying to eradicate food moths had taught her that waging war on insects is a never-ending endeavor best left to those with nerves of steel.

The coffee machine's hissing shakes her out of her thoughts. She pours herself some in her new cup; a plain and simple one that screams in contrast to their array of jokey, personalized mugs covered in slogans and cartoons. She looks out the window at the lawn, thinking she might give it a trim. Sherri loves mowing the lawn with the ride-on mower. Their yard isn't really big enough to warrant one, but she insisted on buying a full-blown model with articulated steering. Chores should be fun, after all. It also has a reverse operating system; mowing in reverse gets better results, and riding backwards while looking over her shoulder always makes her feel like an expert.

Sherri drains her coffee and slowly washes her cup. He has, of course, left the sink immaculate. His cleaning habits irritate her no end. Her husband is a productive person, an activity at every fingertip. Years ago, when trying to cut back on his drinking, he had taken up knitting, and now sits several nights a week on the sofa, the current project on his lap illuminated by his flexible daylight lamp, knitting things nobody wants to wear. They do share the same passion for flooring though. Years ago they still had carpeting everywhere: high twist frieze in the bedrooms, loop pile wool in the living room, hand tufted Moroccan rugs in the dining room, a hemp runner in the hallway and anti-fatigue mats in the kitchen. Every carpet with its own function and characteristics. A few years ago they got rid of all the wall-to-wall and installed a combination of cork flooring and large seagrass carpets in various weaves. This rather odd combination was Sherri's idea; though she thought of the floors more as a decorating project than as the undisputed center of their home, she still managed to come up with a solution that was sufficiently durable to not be vetoed by her husband.

Sherri makes her way to the bathroom to wash up. The small rituals of preparation—making coffee, trimming her nails, writing post-its for unnecessary tasks—have come to shape her day, and she clings to them, hovering between the freedom of nothingness and the security of control. As she brushes her teeth, her eyes scan the bathroom for hairs, drops of water, any sign of a human being having passed through there. Her gaze settles on a pasty white smear on the side of the sink, an inadvertently wasteful squeeze of the tub of toothpaste that has managed to escape his attention. She leaves it there, curious to see if he will wipe it away without mention or else pretend that she is the one responsible for it and leave the gob of toothpaste there, to grow dry and crusty. She wouldn't put it past him.

As she heads towards their bedroom, she stops to look in on Taylor's old room. On a final childish whim, Taylor had insisted that they keep everything the way it was after she moved out, down to the pictures of her and her girlfriends on the wall. She had left home in a seemingly adult yet aching immature manner, marrying herself off to the first guy who came along. Sherri had gone along with the wedding and the nostalgia shrine, yet had silently resolved to clear the room out as soon as she thought Taylor was so preoccupied with other things that she wouldn't care

anymore. Oddly enough, that moment never came, or has not come so far, in any case. When Taylor visits, every two weeks or so, she sits at the dresser in her room, one of those tacky old fashioned ones, white with pink trim and light bulbs around the mirror, and brushes her hair while telling her mother about the nail salon and how she had to fire her assistant because she had over trimmed a client's cuticles. The poor woman showed up one week later with a severe case of paronychia, threatening to sue.

Taylor's closet has been cleared out and houses their old paperwork and things they do not want to part with yet keep out of eyesight. Sherri has kept several boxes filled with old concert flyers, birthday cards and things from when she was a child. She climbs up on the dresser stool and pulls down a worn cardboard box. It's filled with letters and birthday cards, many older than she would like to remember. She sifts through things she had no recollection of having, mostly letters her girlfriends had sent her when they moved away. Fort Benning. West Point. A map dotted with military bases. She remembers vividly the injustice of being beholden to the professional and emotional lives of parents. The letters contain mostly boring anecdotes about new schools, making new friends but not forgetting her, stories about pets and siblings. The many "miss yous!" sound pat, the whole tone of the letters as if they had learned to speak from watching sitcoms. Formulaic thank you notes for birthday presents, probably written at their parents' incitation. Christmas greetings on store bought red cards filled with glitter and reindeer. She somehow cannot bring herself to read the letters in full. She finds it hard to believe that she took them so seriously, cherished them and reread them. Jennifer always begins her letters with Sherri's name, no greeting, followed by an exclamation mark with a bubble for a dot. Caroline's letters have Barbie-like figures drawn in artificial poses, traced from a Crayola fashion designer. Katie always uses light blue letter paper with Garfield on it. Melanie fills her letters, and sometimes the envelopes, with exclamations —Neat! Cool! carefully drawn in magic marker. One letter contains a hand written "award for being such a good friend". The words sit atop ruler-drawn lines in Heather's best writing, surrounded by little drawings of things that are meant to symbolize their friendship. Suddenly embarrassed, Sherri stuffs the letters back in the box and puts it away. She sits down at Taylor's dresser and fingers the utensils that are still in their place. Sherri picks up a pair of tweezers, quite a precise pair that she should actually keep for herself. She singles out a rather long hair on her calf and pulls.