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A Desirable Middle

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I knew a girl when I was in college who had the biggest eyes I've ever seen. She had bulbous, cow eye-sized eyes. And, the irises were so dark, the pupils were nearly missing. Her eyes were these huge, bovine black holes with just a thin event horizon where the irises ended and the nothingness of the pupil began. I thought they were stunning, really, but I think she had trouble attracting boys. She was an intense girl, studying to be a metallurgical engineer; a very specific focus for someone so young. It could have been this intensity that unnerved the boys. It could have been the fearful gravity of her gigantic eyes, or her willowy body, or her soft, scalloped teeth that were mottled with white spots. Kissing a girl with soft teeth could be daunting to a young boy. He might worry that her teeth would give way under the pressure of his tongue.

My date tonight had normal-sized blue-gray eyes with distinct black pupils. There was no risk of spaghettification in his eyes. He had normal eyes and I had good teeth.

"He's nice, right?" Melissa, my twin sister, whispered a wet boozy cloud into my ear. She had set us up to meet tonight, at her regular happy hour. His name was Arthur and he was the new architect in her office. He had brown eyebrows that arched nicely over his normal-sized blue-gray eyes. He had close-cropped brown-gray hair, a nice smile, clean fingernails, and a genuine laugh. He drank very expensive scotch, slowly. He was perfectly lovely and a good match for any divorced woman who was looking for that sort of thing.

Melissa thought I should be looking for that sort of thing. But, despite the myths about twins, my sister and I did not have great insights into each other's emotional needs or nature. We did not have a mysterious, inexplicable connection. We did not feel each other's physical pain or understand each other's deepest desires. She did not understand me and what I understood about her was nothing definite or precise—it was more like a cloud of probability. I could not predict when or how she would landslide into sadness or anger; I only knew that it would happen.

I sipped my own drink—a very briny and dry vodka martini with three blue cheese stuffed olives—also slowly (isn't that lovely that we have that in common?)

and nodded. “Yes, Missy, he’s very nice.” My glass was etched with shallow furrows every 30 degrees around its perimeter. The subtraction of material made the weight of the glass feel wrong. I sipped again and moved the glass from my right hand to my left so I could look at the design. I began to divide the conic glass into its constituent sections: circle, ellipse, parabola, hyperbola. “So, when do you think you’ll see him again?” Melissa rested her chin on my shoulder. She was probably on her third or fourth drink.

“Missy, I don’t know, it’s just happy hour.”

“Megan, you need to get back into the game,” she said. “Alex signed the papers, right?”

“Yes, he signed the papers.” I thought about the divorce papers. They were on my desk at home. They were ivory linen, 8-1/2 × 14-inch legal papers folded in thirds. “I don’t think I want to date right now.”

Melissa shook her head and muttered, “You are going to end up alone. You are too picky.”

Melissa was only minutes older but always years ahead, trying to drag me along with her. Melissa, who at 45 looked ten years older from cigarettes and booze and volatile relationships, was never alone, ever.

“Well,” my date Arthur said, breaking into our sisterly circle, “I’m afraid I have to go, I’ve got the kids this weekend. It was really nice to finally meet you, Megan,” he handed me his business card: Arthur C. Clarke. I laughed. I offered my cheek as he came in for a chaste kiss good night. “Melissa, thank you for bringing her along tonight,” he said. My sister winked and lifted her glass, slugging what was left of it.

“It was very nice to meet you, too, Arthur,” I said. He made his way toward the door, turning to wave before he left. I waved back. Melissa headed for the bar and boldly wedged herself between two young men. I looked at Arthur’s card: stiff, with rounded corners, lettered and embossed with metallic silver ink. Expensive, tasteful. Melissa did say he was a partner in the firm, newly arrived from the Omaha branch. I ran my thumb along the smooth corners, noticing that the edge of the card was marked with the same shiny ink as the text. At the right angle, it glinted like a tiny neon tube. Clever. But something wasn’t right with the card. There was something off with the card in the same way there was something off about the doorway to the bar and the martini glass and the bundle of divorce papers on my desk at home. I held the card up and played with its lighted edge, its mountainous words.

It was the wrong shape.

The girl with cow eye-sized eyes was named Bridget. I remembered it on the drive home. Bridget Monahan. She was from a small town in Nebraska (maybe Omaha? Maybe she knew Arthur C. Clarke?). No, I think she was from a small cowboy town. That explained her cowboy body, her long, rangy form. Quick to turn in the saddle. I didn't really know that much about cowboys. I knew more about ranchers. We lived in Texas and Oklahoma for most of my childhood. My dad was a chemist for an oil and gas company and had to go where the fossil fuel was. My mother tired early in the marriage of the dry empty west and the dreary industrialized Gulf coast. She left him and remarried an accountant for a pharmaceutical company. They lived in Florida. I'm not sure why I was thinking about these things. Something about the car starting and stopping at streetlights pumped the memories from my brain.

Melissa would not have driven this way, through town. She hated to decelerate. She would have hopped on the arterial 894 highway that went around Milwaukee rather than crawl with traffic and stop lights. I liked this span of road. I could see the glowing edge of Lake Michigan. I liked driving through the city on my way home, the hubbub of it falling away the further I got from the center.

I still lived in the house that Alex and I bought ten years ago when we first got married. I liked most of the house. There were only a few things I hated, which had nothing to do with Alex. The house was like Arthur's business card. It was the wrong shape. It was a more complicated wrongness because of the house's complexity: the size of rooms and the placement of windows and stairs and the way it lost heat and the sounds it made. As I pulled in the driveway to my not-quite-right house, I saw the realtor's sign. It was on the market, a provision of the divorce. After it sold, I could find a place with more windows, fewer stairs, higher ceilings, bigger back yard-if that's what I wanted.

I walked from the garage to the kitchen, locking the door behind me. I stood at the butcher-block island that Alex had custom-made for us so we could cook together. The island was perfect. The kitchen cabinets were wrong, though. The refrigerator was too big; it loomed over the room. The entry way to the dining room was good, though. High and wide enough. Not completely right, but so close to right that the difference was really infinitesimal. But the island felt perfect, so I'd measure the island first.

The tape measure was in the junk drawer. I flipped on the stovetop light and grabbed the tape out of the drawer and ran a length of the numbered yellow ribbon along the top of the island. I did it for the width and then for the height from the floor, storing the three measurements in my head. My heart was pounding. I grabbed an envelope from the stack of yesterday's mail, a bill from the power company, and

wrote down the three numbers. I looked at the numbers, then began to stack them, one on top of the other: length to width; width to height; height to length. I still had my coat on. My purse still hung from my shoulder.



It was late. I sat at the dining room table with a stack of my favorite books. I'd measured them and wrote down the dimensions. I took out the china coffee cup I used every morning. I found the small fishing tackle box that my dad gave me on my tenth birthday; now it contained a miscellany of beads, needles, and bobbins of thread. I took down my favorite picture in my favorite frame: my dad, Alex, and my brother Matthew from a trip to the lake. These objects sat on the dining room table with Arthur's business card and the divorce papers.

I held each object, turning it over a few times in my hands, and then measured whatever parameter I thought would help define it: its height, width, length, circumference.

Bridget Monahan and I were in Calculus I together. That's when I'd first met her and noticed her beautiful black hole eyes. She was studying the crystalline structure of metals. She was fascinated by the unique characteristics that emerged from the order of their molecules. She was in love with metals, she told me. She learned about Penrose tiling and the Fibonacci Sequence and the Golden Ratio in her Intro to Disordered Solids class. We talked about it the same night she confided in me that she was having difficulty finding a nice boy.

The golden ratio—1.618—is the number many architects used to design doorways and arches. It defined the composition of many famous works of art—what to put here, what to put there. It appeared in nature, in the turns of a seashell's spiral or the order of petals in a flower. It was the basis of the shape of the paperback book. I didn't like the shape of paperback books. They were too narrow.

I think it went beyond simple preferences. There were objects I just inexplicably adored, like how Bridget loved her metals. Years ago, I had stolen a rectangular plastic organizer box from my ex-fiancé because I was obsessed with the compact efficiency of its variously-sized compartments. I never used it for anything. My ex-fiancé used it to store his stud earrings, because back then men pierced one ear and he was the type to change his earring every day to fit his mood.

Over the next few days I collected my favorite and most precious objects: notebooks with corrugated cardboard covers, intricately gaudy costume brooches inherited from my great aunt, cups, sweaters and scarves and socks, more books, pencils

and pens. The collection grew daily. Objects lay scattered on the surface of the dining room table. Every night I came home to this odd miscellany spreading across the table and added to it. The collection grew like stars popping out in a darkening night sky, each a unique destination somewhere out there.

My personal golden mean was something different than the standard 1.618 used by architects to design windows and doors, something different from the number determined by psychologists to have some inherently pleasing qualities to the human aesthetic. Something different, and at last, I would have evidence for why I felt the way I felt. Why I was a disappointment to my sister. Why my sister was a chore to me. Why I loved the feeling I got from one martini but could never let go enough to have three. Why my marriage failed. Where I should go from here.

It took two weeks to assemble all of the objects and another three days to organize them into a hierarchy of preference. I set aside a Saturday morning to do my calculations. I had a pot of coffee brewing and my second favorite cup staged next to the coffee maker. I had a stack of graph paper, a scientific calculator, the tape measure, a ruler, a mechanical pencil with a .5 mm lead for the measurements, and a blue ink pen for the resulting ratios. The coffeepot beeped, signaling it was ready.

I started measuring the lesser shapes, the ones low on the preference hierarchy. There was a book my mother gave me for Christmas one year. I measured its width and length, writing the numbers down with the pencil. I divided the larger number by the smaller. The book jacket was a beautiful illustration of rabbits, the paper soft and nubby. The ratio was 1.599. I wrote it down with the pen, a pen I took from the office because I liked the way it felt between my fingers, I liked the weight of the ink stroke and its dark blue color.

I measured and calculated the 53 items that represented some meaningful entirety of my life. There was a rectangular pin that my best friend Eileen had given me when we were in middle school and a diary that was an “anniversary” gift from my ex-fiancé. He was an oddly sentimental man and picked a random date to stand for our “anniversary” until we could get married and claim a real one. The diary was the right size and shape, but it had other variables that made it appealing, like the narrow rule of the paper and the color of the ruled lines. The cover of the diary was a heavy cardboard with a linen-like finish and the coated wire spiral binding it all together was square instead of round. Inside, there was an inscription: “To Megan, with all my love. You are everything I’ll ever need, Joshua.”

“Ugh,” I said it out loud and got up to refill my coffee cup. It was a sweet thought, a little too sweet. Cloying actually. It was why I left. At least that equation was

solved. My piece of graph paper filled with measurements and ratios. The phone rang. It was Melissa.

“It’s a beautiful Saturday, come to Manchester with me. We can shop; we can get lunch at that great little tavern and have a couple of beers. Maybe there will be interesting people there, interesting male people.”

I thanked her, but declined. I looked at all of my objects on my dining room table.

“Megan, come on, what are you doing right now that could possibly be more important?”

What was I doing? Categorizing objects, measuring them, searching them for meaning. I told her I was busy.

After I measured everything and wrote it all down, I put everything away. It sounds like some sort of deranged delayed gratification, but it seemed appropriate. I wanted the results revealed to me in an orderly fashion, not surrounded by the subjects of the experiment. It took me a couple of hours to put away all of my 53 sacred objects. Some were simple to return, but others had come from hidden places: boxes in the garage that had still been sealed from the move here over ten years ago. Others were zipped up in wardrobe bags hung in the attic. As I rewrapped Aunt Edith’s crystal champagne flute (she gave us a pair for the wedding), I wondered if there was an object I missed. What if there was an object I had stored so lovingly and so securely I’d forgotten all about it? What if that one object was the quintessential object, the primer to all the rest?

Bridget Monahan graduated at the top of our class and went on to graduate school at UCLA. I remember being happy for her. She was in love with metals. She beheld their beauty with her enormous dark field eyes and saw some mystery only she could see.

After all of my objects were put away, I turned off the coffee pot and did the dishes. I fed the cat. The sun was going down, so I pulled all of the blinds and turned on a couple of lights in the living room. I might start a fire in the fireplace later.

One by one, I entered the list of blue ink ratios into the calculator, feeling the anticipation of mathematical truth. The numbers would be comfort, absolution, purpose.

$1.599 + 1.445 + 1.602 + 1.556 + 1.332\dots$ and so on. Then divide by 53. The calculator seemed to stop and think. The tiny black screen blanked out for just a

second as it prepared to give me my own personal golden mean. In a flash, I saw the cover of the book about rabbits that my mother gave me and I remembered an argument we'd had when I was eight years old, about fat pencils. All the other kids had thin pencils, why did I have to go to school with fat pencils? I hated these fat pencils! My mother had started to cry.

I thought about the pin, the gift from Eileen when we were in middle school. Three months after she gave me that pin, her brother died of cancer. What had its ratio been? What about the delicate writing papers from Alex? Aunt Edith's champagne flutes? Suddenly, I wanted to grab the numbers back from the calculator.

What about the order of preference? I didn't consider that when I was taking measurements and calculating ratios. I didn't normalize my calculations based on my hierarchy. The ratio for object number 53, my least favorite favorite, carried the same meaning as the ratio for object number 1, my ultimate favorite. And what was object number 1? I'd already forgotten and I'd put it away. My heart was pounding. Then, the number appeared on the calculator screen: 1.505.

I stared at it for a while, until my heart slowed. I wrote it down with my blue ink pen and underlined it three times. My golden mean was different than the standard. I had a different aesthetic; it explained why I didn't like the feel of paperback books, despite the fact that their shape made them easy to hold.

I sat back in my chair and looked out the sliding glass door to the back yard. I hadn't pulled the curtains in this room yet. The sky was a deep, darkening blue, like the layers of porcelain glaze on the inside of the bowl Melissa gave me for my fifth wedding anniversary. She'd said, "Who cares if porcelain is for the 18th anniversary, why wait?" The trees swayed in the wind. I loved wind. Even in winter. I loved snow, even the icy, filthy piles of snow that persist into March. I wish I knew why I loved the wind and the snow. I wanted to know why I liked blue ink and white canvas sneakers and dark brown lipstick. Why I loved certain colors of lilacs and the smell of rain and my mother's lasagna. Why, of all things, I missed the feel of Alex's shoulder-length black hair.

But I had no idea how to do the math.