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### Miss Lamp.

Miss Lamp shines.

A half-smile from Miss Lamp lights her hotel room like a yellow party dress. She left her sky-blue knee-high skirt at home, home where she strums songs on Saturdays, songs about chameleons, raccoons or not eating dill pickles. The stoop hits thirty degrees on a good June morning. She sings with shiny lips on a good June morning. Peach lip balm.

That skirt gets hot enough to melt. But it just shines bluer.

She lies in her hotel bed in the evening, sun still up, wiggling her toes free of the sheets. Dribbling a sip of juice on her flannel Mountie pyjamas, she caresses her neck and says, 'I miss my water pillow.' After reading the 'Major Major Major Major' chapter from *Catch-22* aloud, she thinks about insurance.

Her travel bag sits snugly beside the door of Room 32. Miss Lamp travels light. She flies a lot when that dental-insurance company retains her counsel, so she's well-read in dentistry. Her attaché case contains the latest news on the practice of malpractice, plastic-composite teeth, the benefits of freezing gum tissue before drilling and transcripts about her gentle, ailing mother, Abby.

Miss Lamp's belly grumbles in Room 32, barely halfway across town from her gentle, ailing crybaby of a mother.

'One more mission,' sighs Miss Lamp. 'At least the peaches are in season.'

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### The Cheque's in the Mail.

Ever since the dentist, Abby's finger is a real whack of volts.

Chewing gum makes her jaw ache. Her red lips quiver at the thought of the drill – she's pursed to sing like a raven with a mouth full of Q-tips. Cotton batting packs a statute of limitations, nerve damage and overmedication. The needle for her tooth fixed her left index finger just fine. Now it twitches during meetings where people look at watches, ask for phone numbers, go for drinks and grin with teeth picked clean of grief.

Abby's daughter picks at whatever's not nailed down. A real nattering magpie.

Abby's mailbox rattles in the wind. Sits on a post as straight as a sunflower stalk and turns up empty each day.

No payment for the pills she pops to keep her nerves in check. No new music box from her lawyer or a daughter either. 'I shouldn't have wound the crank so tight,' says Abby. 'She sings a different tune now.'

### Service with a Smile.

For the seventh time since 6:42 a.m., Miss Lamp reminds herself that she loves the law and that grilled cheese goes quite well with warm tomato soup. She grins and picks at the fat manila envelope marked DELANO.

A crisp knock at the door brings a push of manila out of sight. ‘Yes?’

‘Room service, ma’am. Um, I’m really sorry, but we don’t have any Campbell’s Tomato Soup. But there’s a Safeway down the street and I’d be happy to get some for you – it’ll be five minutes or so. I’m really sorry because I know you asked for Campbell’s Tomato Soup specifically and, well, we’re all out, ma’am.’

Miss Lamp nibbles at a hangnail. His voice sounds young. Fresh. ‘Oh. I’m not sure then.’

Room Service Boy knocks again, less crisply.

‘Room service, ma’am ... Um ... do you still want the grilled cheese? Golden brown, wasn’t it? I can go to Safeway, ma’am, I don’t mind. It’s my job.’ Room Service Boy prides himself on customer satisfaction.

Miss Lamp clenches the nail between her teeth and pulls. Halfway to a crescent moon. ‘Ow! Jesus!’ The flesh underneath turns purple and red in a hurry.

‘Ma’am? Are you okay?’ He shuffles his feet closer to the door. The hallway smells of mothballs and tea. ‘Ma’am, do you still want the grilled cheese? Golden brown, cut to corners.’ Room Service Boy counts to himself. ‘In four, with a pickle on the side?’

Miss Lamp removes a throbbing finger from her mouth. It tastes like a pretty penny. ‘No. Not now. Maybe later when you have the right soup.’

Miss Lamp requires the right kind of soup.

The envelope returns to its place while Room Service Boy responds with a humble 'Thank you, ma'am.' Her voice gives him goosebumps. As he scuffs back down the hall, he sniffs at the armpits of his purple uniform.

### Squeak Goes the Wagon.

Delano always hit Paper Boy with a pewter-tipped walking stick. It never occurred to Paper Boy to run away. He didn't run, scream or argue when he saw the heavy walking stick. Sparks flew when that walking stick hit the sidewalk.

'Stand still! I'm talking to you, boy! Stop leafing about!' Delano said, poking him with the cold tip of the walking stick. 'Do you understand the importance of *time*, boy? Do you know what it means to be *on time*? Oh, I'm not finished here yet.'

Delano coughed and spat feebly to the ground. A string of milky spittle joined his chin to the lapel of his loose-fitting mauve satin housecoat. Another jab bruised the pulp behind Paper Boy's sternum. The spit swung like a chain. 'We people rely on you for the facts of the day, boy. What would happen if everyone's facts of the day were late? Huh? I'll bet you never minded the global implications there, did you, boy? So don't start it now and don't start it here.'

He pushed hard on 'now' and 'here.'

'There would be chaos. Lots and lots of chaos, boy. Do you know what chaos is?'

Paper Boy uncrinkled his shirt.

'That's why I got a peephole in my door. And I use it too, so people like you don't start making chaos for people like me.'

Delano coughed again, swinging a hand into the calm, damp air as if to balance himself. 'Now give me my damn paper, you imbecile, and don't waste any more of my time. It's getting late and I have teeth to pull. Facts is facts, boy.'

Paper Boy thought the smelly, spitty man should use his walking stick properly – to help himself stand up. A walking stick did not belong in the middle of Paper Boy's paper-thin chest.

'You be on time tomorrow. Got it?'

Paper Boy's twelve-year-old legs lost their balance, crunching into the gravel driveway.

'Get up and give me my paper.'

He handed it over with ink-stained fingers.

'Stop shaking, boy. Why the hell are you twitching, anyway? Suck it up. I'm not going to tear you limb from limb.'

Paper Boy squeezed the rusty black handle of his red paper wagon, squeaking it away from the smelly, spitty man.

'Now get off my property, and don't forget to be on time, Paper Boy.'

Chirps from the trees turned the purple sky to red. Paper Boy checked his watch. The paper wasn't late at all.

**Sprung Flowers.**

Sitting on the end of one of the two twin beds, Miss Lamp rubs her right hand over polyester gardens. Not Best Western. The card on the side table reads WELCOME TO PEACHLAND HOTEL. Gideon's Bible rests in the drawer until she places it in her travel bag. She hums a bar of 'Rocky Raccoon.' Plastic flowers don't brighten up a room much either, but they won't collect dust in her travel bag.

Miss Lamp's cheeks itch when she craves Campbell's Tomato Soup. Her afternoon nap will not come easy on a stomach empty of Campbell's. Soup is good food.

Room Service Boy's knowledge of grilled-cheese presentation impresses Miss Lamp. Cut to corners, golden brown and not burnt. Grilled cheese is art, but not without the right kind of soup.

She nods slightly, picking at a clear thread from the pattern of hyacinths pink and blue, orange-centred beige daisies and prickly holly bushes. Her right fingertip finds this thread easy to wind. Within seconds, the bedspread lifts a little. An artificial garden freed from its fencing, she thinks.

Her threaded fingertip turns like a tulip. She leans into the bed as if to sniff it, snapping the excess plastic twine with her incisors. Her adeptness at removing clothing tags proves scissors obsolete – strong teeth will do. Her eyes reel in sleep.

### That's What Friends Are For.

Young Miss Lamp sat drunk when her seventeen looked fourteen. Paper Boy, whose seventeen looked seventeen, passed out while she squinted. She watched him wedged in the wooden Peachland Hotel chair, in various states of undress, until the sun went down.

'Can we borrow your lipstick?' Serge smirked widely.

'And do you have any rope, you know, to tie with?' said Rick.

'Rope?' Young Miss Lamp searched through her purse, finding some Peach Pastel and a fresh box of minty Butler dental floss. 'Will this do?'

'Thanks,' Serge said as she handed over the floss.

'We put four Demerols in his drink,' said Rick.

'He's out like a light,' slurred Serge.

Blobs of pulp glued the lazy corners of Paper Boy's mouth shut. Serge pulled yards and yards of minty fresh floss from the little white box. Rick snapped it taut on the rounded silver cutter.

Young Miss Lamp had never before seen Paper Boy in a pair of blue underwear, all tied up with dental floss.

Hands and feet.

He didn't even wake up.

'Poor fella,' she whispered to herself.

When the two other boys required a dainty finger to secure the floss in a double knot, she said, 'I'll do it.' With a bit of encouragement, she wrote LOSER across his forehead.

Then she handed over the lipstick.

Rick and Serge took liberty upon his fresh white skin. Young Miss Lamp saw the coarse, dark beginnings of belly hair. FOR A GOOD TIME, it said, ROLL ME OVER. A brittle chest and peach air freshener.

‘Poor fella,’ she whispered to herself again. ‘He doesn’t even know what’s happening, and only in underwear.’ Young Miss Lamp freshened her seventh Captain Morgan and Coke, rubbed her eyes and returned to the foot of the bed.

### Soup Is Good Food.

Leaving the sanctity of mothballs and tea to wear out his heels on the warm asphalt of the Safeway parking lot, Room Service Boy walks slowly, wondering why he buys Campbell's Tomato Soup for rich, stuck-up lawyer-types who talk at him through closed doors.

'It's my job,' he reminds himself to random passersby as they scuttle through automatic doors, armed with bags and trolleys. 'It's my job,' he repeats for assurance. 'Soup. Aisle 7. Next to soups of other brands, flavours and qualities. Pricing is not dependant on size. Adjacent to stews, vegetable and mechanically separated meat products. Microwave in foam for real beef taste. Scotch Broth with Barley, Chicken Vegetable, Cream of Mushroom, Celery, Chicken Noodle and Tomato. A healthy source of vitamin C. Make with one part milk for a creamier taste and do not allow to boil. Must be stirred continuously. Continuously.'

A film of fluorescent lighting bleaches the floor and Room Service Boy bites his lip before he gets too loud. White-knuckling the can all the way to Express Checkout 3, he spies a name tag that reads LUCY. She smiles at Room Service Boy. Her hair is yellow like the banana tray in front of her checkout and she has all the shape of a swizzle stick. He places the can of Campbell's Tomato Soup heavily on the rubber conveyor belt.

Banana Tray Hair's lips move along with the soup tin, closer and closer together.

'How are we today?'

Grumpy, he thinks, Burnt milk is unacceptable.

'Just the soup then?'

'Yes.'

'Working tonight, are we?'

'Yes.' Room Service Boy wears his purple suit to prove it.

‘Club Card and Air Miles, please.’

‘I don’t – ’

‘No? Will this be all then?’ Banana Tray Hair expedites her customers speedily.

Room Service Boy nods in agreement.

‘Your total comes to \$1.52 with tax. Do you need help out with that?’

Banana Tray Hair smiles at Room Service Boy again. The receipt for the soup belongs in his pocket. Not since his last time chatting with Banana Tray Hair has Room Service Boy heard so many questions in a row. All directed at him.

‘We are closing in ten minutes, shoppers. Please finalize your purchasing choices. Thank you for choosing Safeway, and have a good night, Soup Boy.’

His cheeks match his purple dickie bow tie. He imagines saying, ‘Now you have a good night too, Banana Tray Hair, ma’am,’ but his tongue congeals the words. The best he can do is a squeak of thanks as he shuffles toward the yawn of the automatic door.

Back across the parking lot, he wonders how many ways a person could be helped out with a can of soup. After the 437 steps to the hotel, Room Service Boy spins through its revolving Plexiglas door, bounds into the lobby and shouts, ‘Six!’

‘Get that soup to the kitchen at once – he’s closing soon.’ The Front Desk Man taps the receipts for the day into a tidy ruffle of a square. ‘It’s for the shut-in in Room 32. And don’t spill it either.’ Room Service Boy never spills.

Sliding on the wet kitchen floor with a tin of Campbell’s Tomato Soup in his hand, Room Service Boy eyes The Cook. The Cook grumbles about closing time while Room Service Boy squishes his soles back to the mat. With milk, he remembers, this soup is an excellent source of calcium. His lips move slightly when remembering, but not enough to cause a stir. He brims over all of

the six possibilities put together, the six possible ways a Safeway shopper might be helped out of Safeway with a single can of tomato soup.

1. Banana Tray Hair pays for the soup.
2. Banana Tray Hair carries the soup to the hotel.
3. Banana Tray Hair opens the can of soup.
4. Banana Tray Hair cooks the soup.
5. Banana Tray Hair pours the soup in a bowl.
6. Banana Tray Hair delivers the soup to Room 32 without spilling it.

Of Room Service Boy's six possibilities for being helped out with the soup, he deems Number 6 least plausible, since she would probably spill some of the soup, marring his impeccable record of food delivery. 'The grilled cheese must be golden brown and cut to corners,' he says to himself. 'It's my job,' he repeats for assurance. The Cook doesn't notice Room Service Boy's lips moving at all.

### The Tooth, the Whole Tooth.

Paper Boy woke before the sun warmed the room. He smelled of minty, waxy peaches as he writhed on the carpet in his blue underwear, all flossed up with nowhere to go.

Rick and Serge were sawing themselves to sleep.

He picked and frayed and broke the floss, along with one of his good straight teeth. A bottle opener freed his ankles, then his shaky fingers collected a thin line of red-and-white string. He found his pants and jacket beside the toilet. His soppy T-shirt was fit for the tub. He didn't look in the mirror, and he didn't look in the mirror of the Checker Cab he called from the lobby. He tried to erase the lines on his wrists. Silly doodles in red pen. Tracing gums with his tongue, he realized he'd swallowed part of a good straight tooth.

Paper Boy let out a crinkle, paying the cabbie slightly less than was due. Dollar bills, quarters and nickels. He felt thin and shy. Parched.

'That's enough, buddy. Don't give me all your damn change.' With a paternal glint, the cabbie continued, 'Go wash your face, and maybe you should sleep some. It's supposed to rain today anyway. Christ, boy, you don't look so hot. Should I take you to the hospital?'

Paper Boy hid his wrists with the cuffs of his jacket. He left the cab door open behind him, and his voice box seized up. A broken crank. Without a thank you, he spat blood to the curb.

He was missing his watch, a good Timex, with a band that buckled. His rubbery muscles sprang and sprung toward the river. The Demerol in his veins numbed his legs from the knees down. After the cabbie stretched his strong arm behind the front seat to shut the open door, Paper Boy turned around to wave, to check if

his wrist still worked. An elastic band waiting to snap a question.  
A pensive palm bent slightly.

‘You can’t wear a watch now anyway,’ he said to his wrist.

**Hangnail for a Wink.**

Between the creases of her pillow, Miss Lamp picks the sleep from her eyes. An itch on her cheek brings her left hand out from under her side. Congealed blood, skin and toilet paper drag along the polyester bedspread. She sucks in her cheeks like a lemon. Pins and needles tickle her immaculately shaved underarm, sewing themselves into the lapel of her collarbone. Her eyes blink wet.

‘That was smart,’ she says. ‘I need a band-aid.’

Leaning over the side of the bed, she reaches into her carry-on, beams at her manicure kit and zips slowly around its corners. It’s full of shiny picks, files, clippers, tweezers and scissors. ‘Security is blind,’ she says, pondering the possibility of hijacking an airplane with a pair of well-sharpened nail scissors. Just a glimpse of an emery board and her finger throbs like an eardrum at 10,000 metres.

She roasts germs from the tweezers’ steel limbs with her cigarette lighter. When the handles get hot she stops the flame with a lift of thumb. Hygienic. Wiping away the soot, she picks off five minutes’ worth of paper, skin and nail. Almost to the moon. Running her finger under the tap eases out a wince. ‘Water take me home,’ she sings, almost in key, dancing her blue toenails beneath the bathroom sink. Two of four Hollywood-style globes snap and hum.

Turning the cold tap left, she lathers up the one hotel soap cake not already in her travel bag and puts her finger in the bubbles. The sting brings a squint. The squint brings wrinkles. She holds the squint for certainty. She holds the squint to tally a census.

Fourteen. Six under the right eye and eight under the left.

The winking eye has one more wrinkle than the last time she checked. In a hotel room similar to this one, with a north-facing

balcony, waiting for Campbell's Tomato Soup, she counted thirteen wrinkles. Now it's fourteen. It makes her twenty-three look twenty-three. Her winking eye deserves rest. With eyes barely visible in the bathroom mirror, she decides to not wink at Room Service Boys or pilots or dentists or judges or children anymore. Children can't wink properly anyway. Miss Lamp weathers the damage of the wink. Cut down a tree and count the rings around its drying heart. Miss Lamp lets her face drop. It's her mother's fault.