

## Happiness is Skin-Deep

**3:23pm**

“What a pitiful man,” Brenda said as she subtly inspected her neighbor.

“That psychologist?” Jeanine asked with a squeak in her voice. The two women watched him from their porch. He traced an aged finger across his government-issued sports car, polishing his windows for minutes as he held a smile that spanned from ear to ear, gliding a hand through his hair—lathered with enough gel to stick to his head like a swim cap—in unfiltered bliss. The psychologist only broke focus when someone shouted, “nice car!”

After the two women tired of watching this routine, Jeanine decided to speak up. “Which group does he lead? He looks like a B-grade.”

“Try G,” Brenda snickered.

“The group lower than F? Ew, wonder what his problem is.”

“Beats me. He’s got government training, though.”

“Yeah, like *all* psychologists. Guess he’s not special after all,” Jeanine snorted.

“But honestly, can’t the same be said for us?”

Through their thinly veiled criticisms, a smile never left their faces. They couldn’t think to act any other way.

**4:13pm**

The psychologist examined the yellowing grass through his shades as he drove across the countryside. The cows looked like his patients: gnawing on their lips, unsure of what to think or

how to feel. He could relate to the farmers; it must be hard to give the animals some purpose, whether it's winning some pageant or being cut into slabs on the dinner table. He snickered to himself as he turned back to the road ahead.

The G-grade therapy group that he led was hosting a party, led by the comedian. The comedian's home was on the outskirts of town, about an hour off from any notable residency. The psychologist was grateful for his invitation and was enthralled with the idea of being the center of attention for more than that precious hour a week they all spent together. He was an artist, weaving smiles to sew the gaping holes in his overworked patients' hearts.

The grades of each patient were based on how highly other patrons of the town thought of them. Therapy was mandated for every member of the town, including A-grades. As the rookie psychologist, he began by working with the F-grade, but as all of his patients drifted down to G-grade, so did he as a professional. The psychologist gripped the wheel tighter; having a get-together like this *surely* meant that he—or rather, they—were on the road to becoming A-grades.

#### **4:00pm**

The wedding planner was the first to arrive at the comedian's house. She wasn't impressed at its size; it was just enough to contain the comedian's ego, she thought. She knocked on the front door once, and almost immediately, the door opened in turn. The comedian looked at her and the parts of his baby face widened when he saw her at the door. His eyes were already plump like cherries; now seeing them opened entirely, along with his tiny mouth being agape, he truly looked like a cooing infant. What a brat.

"Are you surprised to see me this early?" the wedding planner asked. "I figured you must need help with preparations."

“Knowing you, I’m surprised you didn’t break into my house and start setting things up while I was asleep.”

What a childish response when she was only trying to help. The wedding planner rolled her eyes and pushed him aside before delicately placing an elegant cheesecake on the table in his living room.

“Oh boy,” she heard him mutter under his breath. “You’ve been in this town for a while now, right? You ever notice how, despite all the weddings you’ve planned, you’ve never once been written on the guest list for any of them?” He was referencing her ordinary life before she moved to this town, back when therapy wasn’t mandated and people weren’t put into grades based on public opinion.

“Shows what you know. I was never invited to any weddings back home, either.”

The comedian burst into laughter, and the wedding planner couldn’t help but wish he would choke. She had no idea why he was laughing, but surely it must have been for some foul reason. Despite his bright and chipper voice, she noticed since therapy that his particular brand of humor held more than a tinge of malevolence.

“Well, anyway,” the comedian continued, wiping a tear off out of his eye. “Put the cheesecake in the fridge. The kitchen’s right behind me.”

The wedding planner rolled her eyes. A court jester had no right to organize a gala of any sort. She recognized this as soon as her elegant cheesecake, lathered in a tantalizingly decadent blueberry spread, was banished to the confines of a kitchen as odious as a frat house. It was left there, unattended, between an avocado and half a can of sprite.

**7:00pm**

It was seven in the evening. The journalist checked her watch to ensure the time. It was a habit of hers, always knowing the time in case that “next big story” popped up in front of her. As if.

Everyone else in the party looked so peppy, she thought to herself. Peppy sickened her. Peppy was neat and always presentable, something that went down easy like chocolate milk or sugarplums. The town didn’t like sad things, and the press was no exception. She felt her purse to ensure her camera was there—another habit of hers—and pretended to be happy. Seemed like that was all anyone ever wanted from her.

“Hey, girl!” she squealed giddily to the programmer, who would certainly be just as bummed at a party. “We never get to see each other besides for therapy.” The journalist’s voice bounced like she was teaching an infant how to swallow their peas, but she always thought this was how people wanted her to act. “What’s up? How’ve you been?”

“Good,” the programmer spoke sullenly. Like always, she had her head lowered below her shoulders and her back arched as if humans were designed that way. Her quivering voice was more than enough to scream her discomfort. The journalist could certainly hear it loud and clear, but she was bored and needed something to occupy the time.

“Oh my god, you always say that,” the journalist laughed, patting the programmer’s arm like they were suddenly friends. “Aren’t you going to talk to anyone?”

“Not really,” the programmer chuckled, which surprised her. “I have a deadline to meet—for work, you see.” She bobbed her shoulder to emphasize the laptop bag strapped over her arm.

“At a party?” the journalist was genuinely surprised. Not by the work, but that the programmer would come *here* to do it. “That’s like holding a press conference in the ball pit.”

The programmer leaned in and her face turned serious. “He told me to come,” pointing her eyes at the psychologist while trying to be discrete.

“He wants to be A-grade that bad, huh?” Surely, when the comedian suggested this get-together, the psychologist saw this as a chance to assert how much progress everyone made. It’d hurt his case if one of his patients was a no-show. “That man’s not fooling anybody.”

“Thank you for understanding. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” the programmer stopped mid-sentence, adjusted her glasses, and paced quickly passed the journalist and into the kitchen.

The journalist sighed. She felt like she knew the programmer a bit better than before, without the need to put up a façade. It’s a shame, though, that people can’t be this genuine when smiles are glued to their faces.

### 7:34pm

The detective nodded, finally satisfied with her inspection. Including herself, there were now seven people in the comedian’s home. Their town was already far enough from civilization; the fact that his home in particular was an hour’s drive to the town meant that this was effectively a closed murder mystery. There would be six suspects once Mr. Body’s introduced, assuming Mr. Body didn’t fake his death so he could kill everyone from the shadows. Once again, the detective darted her eyes discretely at everyone in the room: the psychologist, the comedian, the wedding planner, the fitness trainer, the journalist, and herself. The programmer was not presently in the room, having went down into the basement from the kitchen. The detective saw her go down there, noting that she has not yet come back up.

Of course, all of this would be silly if there weren't a corpse. The detective was fortunately very lucky. Before coming to this town, she couldn't go three days without finding a body somewhere. They could be hung without provocation of suicide or bashed with an axe so gruesomely that she'd be *dying* to know the culprit's motive. Here, everyone is happy, and any fights that intervene are immediately broken up by cops armed with sedatives. Her riveting career of solving mysteries was now finding the shoes of those same, overworked policemen. It was enough to drive a woman insane. A town so fixated on happiness meant a town without motive. You can't kill without motive—humans just aren't programmed that way. She scoffed and gnawed on her pizza like a chew toy.

Then she stopped, a loud booming sound roared right behind her. The detective jumped up at once and cried, "Gunshots, finally!"

"No, that's a party popper," the fitness trainer said. She walked up from behind, her dusty hands holding onto a few party poppers of various colors. "Pretty cool, right? The journalist brought some over; said she had some extras."

The detective looked at her, baffled. "They make them so loud in this town."

"Why wouldn't they? It's not *that* scary. When we hear one of these babies, the first thing people think of is a party going on!"

"But it sounds just like a," she stopped and sighed. "Never mind, you wouldn't get it."

The detective waved a hand dismissively.

"I was trying to cheer you up, you looked like you were slouching. Brewing over another tough case?" the fitness trainer asked. "Oh, did you solve the one about the dog that won't stop barking?" She straddled the seat beside her, putting an arm on the detective's shoulder.

“That was an easy one. It was their son.” She snickered, imagining a mother so cluelessly optimistic that they couldn’t comprehend their own child crying. “Spoiled brat’s screaming was incomprehensible.”

“Wow, an unhappy kid,” the trainer sighed. “That’s rare nowadays.”

The detective was certain that a case would come, so she kept her wits sharp. To train her body to be just as strong, she hired the fitness trainer after they met in therapy and they’ve worked together for several years. She was Watson, the detective thought to herself. A deceptively smart cookie, despite being a musclehead. Absorbed every case she told her about like a sponge.

“You were born and raised in this town, right?” the detective asked. It was a rhetorical question, but the fitness trainer nodded anyway. Typical Watson. “Isn’t it insane to keep *everyone* in this place happy, all the time?”

The trainer put a finger to her chin. “Nope, I don’t think so. All those cases you told me about—those *shuu-tings*—they were caused by the bad emotions that we *don’t* have, right? Aren’t we better off just being happy?”

Philosophically, the detective knew that her partner was right. But she was a detective. Without those enticing riddles to keep her occupied with something to mull over, her days just felt empty.

**9:05pm**

The psychologist was not disappointed. He examined his patients and was impressed with the results. He was truly talented if he could take in such dumb, defective cows and make them

look human. He observed them all for a while, but began to get bored as people left the room. The programmer seemed to find a staircase in the kitchen leading to the basement, and the journalist went to use the restroom next to the living room, where everyone else was currently present. From where he was standing, he could see everything that was happening, which felt quite symbolic. Even with two less people, he figured it was time that he, the guest of honor, would be allowed to speak.

“Excuse me, everyone!” he called before tapping his glass, a gesture which he was confident looked refined to his obedient patients. “A brief thank you to our lovely host for this party tonight.” He made sure to emphasize the word “brief” to keep their applause short for the comedian. “Now, I’d like to speak about the progress we’ve made since we all first met.”

### **9:06pm**

Brief’s right, the comedian thought to himself. He watched the psychologist commend him for a whole thirteen seconds, before getting back to talking about himself. Apparently, the psychologist found the mirror, and as he spoke about “our progress,” he wouldn’t dare take his eyes off himself. This went on for about twenty minutes until the comedian had about enough. He shrugged at the other three who were there with him, aggressively pointing with his eyes to say, “Get a load of *this guy!*” They took the hint, and eventually dispersed to the other rooms. He was left alone, watching the psychologist, who pretended to empathize as he poured his heart out over his own woes. This was no different than in therapy, the comedian thought. He felt great joy in knowing that only he could keep a crowd.

Then someone screamed. He covered his ears and instinctively told the psychologist to pipe it mid-sentence. The scream stopped, and a thud came from upstairs.

He heard the journalist start to panic in the bathroom. “Oh my god, what happened?”

“Hold tight, I’ll check,” the comedian replied. He was already imagining how to spin this into his next routine.

He quickly mounted the stairs, looking behind him to see the psychologist match his pace. Without an audience, he resembled a lost lamb, the comedian thought to himself. He looked ahead and continued up.

The top floor had four rooms: the bedroom, guest bedroom, another bathroom, and at the edge of the hall, there was a right turn that led into the storage room. All the doors he could see were closed, so the comedian instinctively ran for the storage room. It was the only room he couldn’t see upon first coming up the stairs, making it a blind spot from the hallway. The comedian turned into the storage room, which greeted him with an open doorway. He shouted, a puff of air blowing out of him as he recoiled from his own noise. The detective was on her stomach, a knife in her back. He tried his best to think of a joke to calm himself down. “How cliché,” was all he could utter.

### **9:29pm**

The fitness trainer was looking through the kitchen cabinets when she heard the scream. After rolling her eyes at the amount of Halloween candy that the comedian had stashed—she could only hope it was for giving out—she saw him rush up the stairs and she pounced into motion. She followed behind him and the psychologist and caught up to them as they stared at the body.

Her friend was lying there, a knife poking cleanly into her back. A knife shouldn't be there, she thought. In fact, how could someone even put it on their own back? By reaching their arm behind and thrusting? But who would even carry a knife like that?

"It looks like she's dead," the psychologist stuttered gravely. "Nobody can know about this. My job..."

This is what "dead" looks like? The trainer thought about it: dead means your heart rate's zero, that your muscles stiffen, and your body begins to stink—worse than running a marathon without taking a shower.

But accepting that the detective was truly dead, the trainer shook her head and pitied this "victim." She thought that the detective was stronger than this, but all their workouts together didn't seem to change this outcome. It doesn't make sense for the detective to stick a knife there herself, meaning someone else had to do it. There were no signs of a "*strug-gool*." The trainer concluded that the detective wasn't even strong enough to put up a fight. She punched the wall, feeling quite betrayed.

### **9:30pm**

The wedding planner was sickened by what she saw. Homicide at a dinner party; she was a fan of the murder mystery genre in her old life, but in this town, all games of *Clue* were stocked with valentine's day cards and boxes of chocolate instead of candlesticks and nooses. The wedding planner knew it was wrong, but without a clear culprit, all her anger was pent-up on the victim. How could the detective be lying there, so oblivious and unpresentable? How could she be *dead*, without even trying a slice of her cheesecake? Surely it was these dizzying

events that gave her such selfish thoughts, so she tried her best to present her refined parting remarks.

“After so many years of being a detective, it would only be a matter of time before you got caught up in a crime yourself.” She stammered and looked everyone behind her; they looked like they were lost in thought and didn’t hear a word she just said. The planner surmised it was for the best.

She didn’t know what to do here, so she figured it was best to forget it. If even funerals had no place in this town, it seemed her desire for some sort of ceremony would be completely unwelcome. After announcing she’d be downstairs to bring out the desserts, the others took this as a cue to take their leave as well.

“I think I left my purse in the bathroom,” the journalist remarked.

“We should tell *her* about what happened,” the fitness trainer grumbled, pointing downstairs to imply the programmer. The wedding planner sighed. Oftentimes when the bride gets cold feet, it would be the planner’s job to salvage the occasion as she buys time for the ceremony to resume.

“Let’s do that,” she replied. “After that, I’ll bring out the dessert. I think we all need to cool our heads for a bit.”

**10:06pm**

The programmer was typing meticulously in the basement’s rec room. She ignored the pool table behind her and was instead perfectly content limiting herself to the small desk in the

corner. There was an ethernet port and a charger just underneath, so she was able to make herself comfy while diligently optimizing her code.

The laptop she used was of this town's own design. It was a significant downgrade from what she used back home, but it was all that was offered here. She could only save every twenty-four hours and there was no search engine. The town was aware of the outside world, where phones that carried internet consumed people's public lives. Therefore, laptops were only given a thirty-minute battery life, to encourage indoor use of technology near an outlet where it's safe.

The internet was used only for uploading or downloading files, but of course she couldn't send things to other users—that'd be too efficient. Instead, all submissions were filtered through the IT group, ensuring that everything they see is appropriate to be sent to the desired recipient. As the programmer typed, she thought to herself how degrading she found this whole procedure. It was like getting a diagnosis from your physician and asking to consult a veterinarian for a second opinion. How could a ragtag group of B-rate code monkeys possibly read her code? All her client wanted was an algorithm to curate music playlists. And yet, the quality of her work was put on trial by IT, who could just as easily guess if she was building a missile or the "Hello world!" program that kids get assigned in middle school.

She stopped typing and gave herself a moment to outstretch her fingers, curl them up again, and repeat. She avoided developing hand pains by keeping her wrists at the same elevation as her fingertips, allowing for appropriate blood flow. And to avoid her butt from numbing, she got up intermittently at fifteen-minute intervals.

Her minute-long break was up, and she resumed her work. She heard a knock on the door and perked up momentarily. She almost forgot this was someone else's house. A shame they didn't knock while she was still on break; she doesn't like giving people half-attention.

**10:17pm**

The psychologist found the staircase in the kitchen that led down to the basement. Although it was spacious, it was not designed for guests; there were cobwebs on the ceiling, and the circuit breaker was rusted so that it could not shut properly. After snooping around for long enough, he knocked on the one door in the basement, which the comedian told him led into the rec room.

“What is it?” the programmer asked calmly. “I heard a noise earlier, did someone fall?”

The psychologist paused and selected his words carefully. She gasped in response.

“She *died*? That’s awful, awful...”

“We have cheesecake upstairs. Won’t you join us?”

“I’m sorry, I have... I still have a lot of work to do.” She continued typing systematically from inside the rec room. She focused back to her work and her voice turned mechanical, abandoning the sympathy she previously tried to express. “I noticed the circuit breaker looks a little finicky. Don’t mess it up; I’m charging my laptop.”

“Mess it up?” the psychologist laughed. “When have I ever been known to be a screw-up like that?” He held his breath, hoping she wouldn’t have a retort.

“I know you too well. Sorry, can I get back to work?”

“Sorry, sorry,” the psychologist said, already taking to the stairs to escape further backlash.

The psychologist left, dejected, and joined the others upstairs.

“Is she going to try any?” the wedding planner asked, pushing forward a piece of cheesecake.

“I doubt it,” he replied. “She’s *busy*.” He rolled his eyes. Even someone with as strong of a work ethic as the programmer would fail to do even a tenth of his job. He muttered small reassurances to himself to confirm this fact, then looked at the others to make sure they didn’t hear him. They were all looking down, just eating their cheesecake. He took a bite as well, and his head started to get foggy.

### **11:15pm**

The journalist opened her eyes and lifted her head from the table. She couldn’t see; the lights were pitch black. After nudging whoever sat next to her and not getting a response, she reached into her bag for her camera. She turned on flash and tried to snap a picture, then snickered to herself. She had the camera set to replay a video. She switched the settings and snapped a picture, allowing the flash to capture a picture of everyone so she could finally get a better view.

In the picture, she saw four people in front of her. That’s good, she thought. That means nobody’s missing. But after hearing someone clear their throat, she looked at the picture to see one of the faces visibly alert, looking at the camera with a look of disgust.

“You’re awake!” she whispered.

“Been awake for a few minutes,” the fitness trainer replied. “I didn’t expect you’d take a picture *now* of all times!”

“Come to think of it, we all passed out after eating my cheesecake,” the wedding planner said. “Did someone put something in it?”

“I think so,” the comedian said. “It felt like Slee-peey. You know, that liquid sleep aid?”

The journalist interrupted them to explain that using flash would help them see in the dark, so long as she was taking pictures.

“The circuit breaker’s downstairs,” the comedian said. “We should be able to get the lights back on, assuming nobody touched it without permission.”

“Why does it sound like you’re directing your voice at me?” the wedding planner replied, huffing in response.

The journalist was getting tired of this banter. “Let’s go downstairs, then. Follow me.”

The five of them moved as a unit, or at least tried to. The journalist felt the psychologist pushing up behind her, grumbling about how it might be better if he took the lead instead. She ignored his pleas for attention and guided them all down the steps. For once, she wasn’t expected to be energetic and cheerful. She felt bad given the circumstances, but it was liberating to abandon that valley girl persona, even for just a bit. She stopped thinking about this as soon as she reached the end of the stairs.

After the last picture, the comedian was able to find the circuit breaker. He said that it was not broken, merely shut off. The lights came back on, and everyone stopped herding around the journalist.

“What a relief,” the psychologist said. The journalist was irritated that he almost seemed disappointed that he couldn’t lead the group. But he dropped the subject, instead turning to the rec room door, where the programmer would be typing away. She looked around the room as people were fearing the worst. The psychologist opened the door to reveal the programmer lying on the ground, stock still with a pool of saliva escaping her mouth.

**11:23pm**

The comedian looked at her body and thought it was funny. The programmer always found the quietest room and stayed there, so she ended up dying in a power outage in his basement while everyone was asleep. No scream this time; it was almost natural that this would happen to her.

“What a quiet girl,” he said to break the silence. “If she weren’t so passive, maybe she wouldn’t have died here.” He looked around after he spoke. Everyone looked unsure of themselves, so he figured that nobody disagreed with his commentary.

If they did, they could just leave, he thought. That’s how his shows always went. He was happiest when he was met by a heckler, who’d interject in the middle of his jokes. They were clearly in the wrong, so when he picked on them, everyone would be on his side. Normally he can’t assault someone with words like that, but suddenly the crowd favors him if they think he’s doing it in self-defense. It’s awfully convenient.

The comedian looked around the room and wondered who’d be his heckler tonight; he realized he needed the distraction. Of course, he eyed the wedding planner. She’s always so uptight; surely, these unexpected murders have had her biting her lip with anxiety. Of course, if

he threw out accusations now, the crowd here would never be on his side, and there'd be no point. He'd just have to wait a little longer.

**11:25pm**

The fitness trainer realized that someone needed to move here. The five of them were standing around like they forgot how to walk. She approached the body and felt the programmer for her pulse. There was nothing there.

“She’s definitely dead. I checked the detective too, after we left. Both are most certainly dead.”

“Didn’t realize I invited a party pooper,” the comedian groaned.

“Yeah, what’s the point?” the journalist chimed in.

“I think she died to...” the fitness trainer struggled to think of the word. “You drink it?

“Poison?” the comedian said before cracking a smile. “You forgot the word *poison*?”

“No, I just never learned it.” She heard about its existence from the detective, but remembering all these foreign terms was like remembering every race in a sci-fi show you never watched.

Everyone looked at her like she had two heads. They were probably wondering how the hell she came up with this conclusion. But it was simple; although she never saw two people fight, she heard countless stories from the detective of how to handle a crime scene. To the trainer, these weren’t acts of violence; they were puzzles, just as the detective had expressed to her in the past.

“There’s no obvious point of injury,” she said. “No bruises or anything like that. The fact she choked on her saliva makes me think she got,” she stumbled again, “*poi-soned*. If I had to guess, someone put something in her drink.” She looked for a response. The psychologist seemed like he wasn’t listening anymore.

“How despicable,” the wedding planner said boldly. “If you’re to kill someone, be direct about it! Or better yet, quit interrupting our party with your unwanted games.”

“There’s one weird thing, though,” the trainer added. “We can tell she took a gulp because there’s red wine all over her face. I guess she was poisoned as soon as she took a sip and fell out of her chair with the glass still pressed to her lips. But look,” she carefully picked up the glass sitting upright next to her. “The glass is full, almost like nothing spilled out of it at all.”

“So, if she *did* take a drink,” the journalist asked, “we shouldn’t be seeing a full glass?”

“Exactly. If she died, the glass shouldn’t be upright, either. But more importantly, there’s nothing here to pour more into her drink. So, someone else must have come in and refilled her glass after she was poisoned.”

Maybe the others were as unnerved as the trainer was. She walked past the others and moved upstairs.

**11:58pm**

The wedding planner looked around. The psychologist was in the bathroom, leaving the other four staring at each other like sad puppies. She took a seat back at the dining room table, and as she did so, it looked like everyone seemed to comply and do the same. Everyone was unsure of what to do.

“Does anyone here have a phone?” the trainer asked.

“Almost nobody does in this town,” the journalist sighed.

The wedding planner squinted as she eyed the journalist’s purse. “Then what’s that?” she pointed to the small device inside.

“This?” the journalist replied, pulling out the item in question. “It’s a remote for my camera.”

The comedian perked up. “Could we use it to call for help?”

The journalist shook her head. “It’s just for my camera, I’m sorry. And even then, all it does is let me change settings remotely, like whether I want to take pictures or playback a video.”

“So no getting in contact with the outside,” the wedding planner sighed. “If only one of us had a phone.”

“Yeah,” the journalist said. “There’s no way the town could monitor us if we could call each other anytime we wanted.”

“Hey, no getting political at *my* dinner table,” the comedian snapped back. “It’s a crime scene, not Thanksgiving!”

The wedding planner thought back to what she knew best. Sometimes the best man likes to take a risk, so he adds a story about the groom that he swore to keep secret. These types of speeches almost never work out, and it’s up to her to break up any fights that result and proceed with the event. The planner thought about how to redirect the conversation into something more productive. She eyed her cheesecake, still enamored with her own work.

“While we were still reeling from the first death,” the journalist thought aloud, “someone must have put something in most of the cheesecake to put us to sleep.”

“It’s Slee-peey, I’m sure they injected it into the cake,” the comedian commented. “It’s really effective stuff. I’m a big fan of it.”

“I thought they put it on recall,” the wedding planner mentioned. “Didn’t they recently find out it’s lethal if overdosed?”

The fitness trainer stammered in response. “Sorry, I’m a little confused what you’re talking about: I don’t quite get how Slee-peey could hurt anyone. But even though it’s on recall, couldn’t someone be holding onto an old dosage?”

Everyone looked deep in thought. The wedding planner agreed with this logic so far, and continued to explore the culprit’s actions.

“Then they turned out the power,” she elaborated, “which led to the second murder.”

The journalist nodded along. “Right. From what it sounds like, they were able to avoid putting themselves to sleep.”

“They were pre-sliced,” the wedding planner replied. “It wouldn’t be difficult in the least to avoid putting yourself to sleep.” She stopped talking after that and pouted.

“If I had to guess,” the comedian mentioned, “turning the lights off was just in case one of us woke up early. We would’ve caused a commotion and get the others to wake up. If one of us were gone, they obviously wouldn’t have an alibi. Something like that?” He was facing the trainer when he asked.

“That sounds right,” she stammered in response.

**12:01am**

The psychologist's brain was static. Two of his prized cows strayed away, and now he had four left who were only talking about death. He prided himself on making them elite members of society, respectable in their own fields. But now they were betraying all his hard work, teaching them not to talk about these kinds of things so long as he stayed in this town. Now everyone would downgrade them again and make assumptions that *he* taught them these things.

People who moved here from out-of-town did it for the security. The psychologist did it for money, since being a crucial member of the town's fixation on happiness would obviously come with monetary perks. When people move here, they're told to never bring up the things that make people upset, otherwise those born inside the town will begin to suspect that the outside world's not all peaches and gravy. The psychologist imagined one of his own patients bringing up the word "murder," and a child overhearing it who begins to ask their mama questions. The psychologist merely shivered in his seat before he slowly stood up.

"Hey," the journalist exclaimed to get his attention. "You were the one who broke the news to her about the first murder." She pointed her finger down, probably referring to the programmer. "Why do *you* think she stayed down there the whole time?"

"Why else?" the psychologist groaned. "She was working."

"Did she saying anything interesting?" the comedian asked. "I don't know, like, 'watch out for my evil twin.' Anything?"

The psychologist wasn't amused; he shook his head and said, "She was charging her laptop."

The wedding planner stood up as soon as he finished speaking. “We were asleep for about an hour. If the power was shut off, that definitely would’ve killed her computer by then.”

“That’d definitely make her lose all her work,” the journalist said. “She couldn’t possibly save beforehand.”

“All that work down the drain,” the comedian snickered. “In a way, it’s almost better that she died. She would’ve freaked if she learned that she lost a whole 24 hours of progress.”

Is he right? Is she better off dead? That doesn’t look good on a report, but maybe that’s the escape she needed. The psychologist could understand that for a woman so fixated on the precision of her work, having her progress deleted might have been the last straw. But then he realized: they already determined she wasn’t alone in the room when she was poisoned.

“I’ll be upstairs,” was all the psychologist could get out before he shuffled towards the staircase. He didn’t know where he’d go. The psychologist considered kneeling in front of the bodies and weeping; for the first time, he realized he had sadness to hide, too. They already invented a G-grade to account for how poorly these patients adjusted to this town. In the end, he was no exception. It’s difficult to be happy—was he a villain for forcing people to live this way?

### 12:37am

The trainer was pacing in the kitchen, staring at that bag of candy the comedian kept in the closet. How could people live like that, wasting a perfectly healthy body? In a way, corpses were the same. Nobody here was at the age where they should die without a struggle. If someone were to come at her with a knife, she’d make them squeal, simple as that. How could they simply allow themselves to die?

She was angry and forgot how many times she pounded the countertop as she continued to walk back and forth. For all she knew, the others were already dead. They were all somewhere else in the house, surely. The detective would have told her to keep a close eye on everyone. She was too pissed to even do that, which was a novel emotion for her to experience.

Then she heard a window break. It came from upstairs. She raced up the stairs and found herself first to reach the master bedroom. She patted herself on the back; it was only natural, given how hard she trained. She stepped into the room to find the curtains of a large window overlooking a patch of rocks and dirt. The comedian didn't seem to be the type to care about yardwork, so she wasn't surprised. There was barely any glass on the floor, so she was able to effortlessly traverse towards the window before looking down. The psychologist was lying down, motionless in the yard with his limbs contorted. She shouted for the others to come to her.

### **12:38am**

The journalist was the last one to enter the master bedroom. She stubbed her toe upon entering and cursed under her breath.

“What's going on?” she inquired. “Did someone else die?”

“Looks like the psychologist this time,” the comedian said, still looking at the body. “See for yourself.”

She did just that and stepped closer towards the window. The psychologist was belly-up, almost like he was looking up at the stars. His tie was resting over his shoulder, and his legs were haphazardly strewn on the ground below. The journalist stepped away from the window and all she said was “wow.”

“This is ridiculous,” the wedding planner repeated, shaking her head. That was the second time she said this. The journalist noted this and sighed; nobody likes the unhappy things. But the town constantly forcing her to write happy stories was enough to make her sick. People die, and she couldn’t write about it. Arguments break out, and she couldn’t take a picture. She sympathized with the planner; it’s no wonder she didn’t know how to handle these things. All of them were censored from being able to express their grievances.

The comedian broke her train of thought. “To think our damn psychologist would jump out the window. I guess he wasn’t as stable as we thought.” He shook his head and was the first to move towards the door. The journalist lowered her head and followed.

### **1:00am**

The fitness trainer sat with the others at the dining table. This seemed to be their new favorite spot, as the four of them merely sat there in silence. She felt like a slob, doing absolutely nothing. Her legs were spread out, and she was bouncing one of them constantly, deliberating what to do. Since she rested her arms on the table, the whole thing shook as she moved. She noticed but didn’t stop.

“I can’t take this anymore,” the wedding planner said. “I’m heading outside.”

She didn’t know how to reply. The comedian seemed to be making fun of her, but the trainer wasn’t paying attention to know for sure. Seeing the planner move towards the door without stopping, it seemed she didn’t care, either. She looked at the other two. Eventually, the journalist stepped out of her seat and volunteered to go after her.

### **1:03am**

This party's a bust, the wedding planner thought. She was sniffling as she stepped away from the house. All their cars were parked out front. It would be a long drive home, she thought, but she pulled out her car keys as she moved towards her vehicle. But something was obviously wrong.

The tires were slashed. That's impossible, she thought; there's nothing *she* would have done to pop them like this. Then she looked at the other cars. There was something to say about comparing her things to others that always made her feel better. But this was not one of those times. Almost all the cars had slashed tires—all but one, to be precise. Then she gasped. The planner realized what this meant. But just as she did, she felt something sharp press against her back.

“So, you know now, don’t you?” a voice whispered in her ear. “You know what I’ve done.” It was a familiar voice, and she wanted to greet it head-on. “Turn around and I’ll gut you here. You can’t control this. You can’t control *anything* that’s happening here.”

It was such an ordinary thing for a culprit to say, the wedding planner thought. Before she moved to this town, there were always old crime movies she’d like to rent on her free time. Free time... she could do anything she wanted, so why did she always choose to work? It was an ordinary thing for the culprit to say, but somehow it hurt her deeply, like that comment of “control” was directed at her intentionally.

“You killed them,” she replied. “Right?”

The voice grew silent. Because the planner couldn’t look at the person talking to her, they seemed less like a human being they’ve been in therapy with for years, and more like a distant voice in her head. Maybe this was her “conscience” that the psychologist always mentioned.

“It wasn’t just my decision, per se,” the voice replied. “They asked me to kill them. I think that’s different.”

“And what, you want me to ask you to kill me too?” She was gritting her teeth as she spoke.

“That’s exactly right.”

The wedding planner stopped to consider it. This whole thing was ridiculous. She hated the guests, the drinks had poison in them, nobody was awake to praise her on the cheesecake, and to top it off, that putrid house kept pumping out corpses. She had no control over the situation. And if she pulled away, she was likely to get stabbed anyway. This was the last decision she was allowed to make.

“Kill me, then,” she finally spilled out after stammering. The person behind her turned something on and put it up to her face.

“Repeat it.”

“Do it, already,” the planner said, more clearly this time. “Please, kill me.”

### 1:07am

The journalist saw it: the planner was stabbed, then fell. The journalist responded to this and screamed. By the time she stopped, both the trainer and comedian were already by her side.

“Okay, okay, quit it!” the trainer said, and slapped her in the face. “What happened?”

The journalist spoke between rapid breaths. “She got stabbed in the back and fell.” As she spoke, her voice began to slow down, and eventually became understandable. “I tried to run

after her, but there was already somebody behind her. By the time I screamed, they already got away.”

“Did you get a good look?” the comedian quickly asked.

“No! It all happened so fast, I’m not even sure I was seeing it right. I don’t think they were covered-up. I didn’t get to look long enough, I’m sorry.”

“Whatever,” the comedian muttered. The journalist was annoyed at their ambivalence but forced herself to shrug it off. She told them as much as she could.

### **1:16am**

The fitness trainer returned to the house along with the other two. She thought back to what the journalist had told them: someone “stabbed” the wedding planner, which is what you call sticking a knife in them. Whether it was someone they knew or not, this was definitely “murder,” which is the act of taking someone else’s life. Of course, the journalist could also be lying, in which case she’d be the killer. Thinking through these steps seemed to calm the trainer down. She started to appreciate the detective’s interest in solving crimes.

She was sprawled out on the living room couch. She could make out the comedian and the journalist talking from the kitchen about something, and grimaced. If they could talk to each other like that, why not include her as well? But rather than complain to them, the trainer thought this was as good a time as any to do something. She picked herself up off the couch and walked to the door.

The planner's body was on its stomach in the driveway. She moved immediately to the body, worried she'd be spotted at any minute. It was the same kind of knife that killed the detective. Pretty much the exact same cause of death. There was no sign of a struggle at all.

She moved around the house to the psychologist's body. He was lying there on shards of glass, his head broken in by a rock that must have hit him on the way down. His stomach was facing up, much like when they first found him. She thought for a bit what this would mean, then remembered a puzzle the detective gave her with the same answer.

If he fell face-up, then he would have had to jump from the window backwards. But more likely, this would mean he was *pushed*. She thought back to the master bedroom; there were no signs of resistance. If he were facing the killer, he would have been able to at least put up a fight. But he didn't; she concluded all these crimes were murders, but the victims chose to die. She tried to recall the word she was taught. Some kind of assisted... *sewer-side*?

“Hey!” the journalist called outside. “Where are you?”

“I’m here,” the trainer replied. “I’m coming back in!”

She did so and was greeted by both the journalist and the comedian, who were standing in the doorway. It looked like the journalist had on a forced smile, and that pissed the trainer off.

“What do you want?”

“We were talking,” the journalist said, pointing to the comedian, who just cracked a grin and looked away. “We think it’d be best if we kept an eye on each other.” She looked both ways and leaned in. “These things keep happening because we keep getting separated.”

The trainer knew this girl had a point. Begrudgingly she agreed and closed the door behind her as she walked further inside.

## 2:13am

The three of them were sitting in silence. The journalist held a hand to her chest, her heart pounding as she looked idly around the room. They were in the dining room once again, the cheesecake still scattered across the table from when they took their first bites. It really was good cheesecake.

She kept worrying what would happen next. The journalist kept her hand to her chest, and she checked where her purse was; she could still see it on the far side of the living room. That calmed her down a little, to see the same equipment that she mastered over the years within her eyesight.

The trainer mentioned the knives, and the comedian replied, saying they were his. The trainer replied that someone must have taken them from the kitchen. The journalist couldn't keep listening and started breathing heavily instead. They seemed to ignore her and kept talking amongst themselves. She feared what would happen.

Then she heard a ferocious booming sound and collapsed.

“Oh my god, what happened?” the trainer cried out. “Who set off that party popper?”

“A gunshot!” the comedian exclaimed. “Wait, the hell did you just say?”

“Gunshot... I heard that word earlier today. What’s that?”

The trainer was raised here, so the comedian explained in painstaking detail what a “gun” was. It was painfully elementary, like teaching a kid how to spell their own name. Eventually, the trainer said she understood.

**2:15am**

The comedian watched the trainer move closer to the body. Was she doing this again? It was weird to him that a girl who didn’t even know what a gun was would be examining a corpse.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Blood’s falling out.” She pointed to the body’s chest, where blood was splashing out.

“Yeah, it is. Hey, don’t keep getting closer to it!”

“Why not?”

He struggled to think of a reason. “It’s weird, isn’t it? You don’t know what you’re looking for at all.”

“Of course, I do, I’m checking for her pulse.”

“Even that’s too much!” He opened his mouth and began laughing. This girl has no idea how crazy she was, investigating corpses with no knowledge about homicide. If anyone were to walk into this room, they’d immediately agree and take his side. “You’ve got a weird fetish, but I’d prefer you do this *outside* my home.”

The trainer didn’t respond. She just looked at him and blinked. “I already did, I checked the bodies outside.”

What an idiot! She's clearly insane. "And I'm sure you're best friends with them too. Do you talk with them? Is that what you do?"

"No, I just... look at them." She lost her traction. Now he just needed a punchline. But out of concern, he reiterated she shouldn't touch the body.

**2:17am**

The trainer was getting impatient. The journalist was bleeding out, but the comedian knelt in front of her with his arms outstretched like he was asking to give the trainer a hug. He was pathetic, defending someone who wasn't even strong enough to survive. That girl probably wanted to die, too. Just like the others.

"Do you dress the bodies too?" the comedian asked, sweat pouring from his forehead. "Barbie is a bit old for you, isn't it? So, you wanted to make it more grown-up? I don't think that's what anyone had in mind."

He wouldn't shut up. He kept making jokes about how the trainer was interested in corpses. She just knew the human body well, and she was great at feeling for people's pulse. The trainer was pissed. She reached for one of the plates of cheesecake and shoved it in his face.

"Shove it and eat up!" she exclaimed, pushing it further into his face. He got up with her, and he continued stumbling backwards as she marched towards him with a hand still on his face. He fell back on the couch. She lifted him by the collar and socked him in the jaw, rendering him unconscious and completely vulnerable.

But that wasn't enough for her. She punched him again, and again. He wouldn't die, but she wouldn't let up. Not once in her life did she think of making a fist to hurt someone, but all

that boxercise came to good use. His face turned purple fast—it was impressive how strong yet susceptible the body was. The trainer was taking careful notes. A light flashed behind her, but she didn't care. Then she slumped off the couch and her butt hit the floor. She was breathing heavily.

“Feeling better now?” a voice asked behind her. The trainer recognized that voice and nodded. She didn't know what came over her. What was she?

The voice became a person as it walked into the trainer's narrow field of vision.

“How'd this happen?” the trainer asked them.

The culprit happily complied. “When I stabbed the detective, I hid in the upstairs bathroom. I counted the number of people that ran past it into the storage room, and I exited the bathroom only when I know nobody would see me in there. I did the same thing for the psychologist.”

“That's why you were the last one to enter,” the trainer said.

“I also have this,” the culprit said, and dragged over the purse. “My camera can playback video—while everyone thought I was in the bathroom on this floor, I snuck out during the psychologist's speech and took my first life. All I did was make a video of my voice ahead of time, and I could choose from anywhere in the house when to play that audio with the remote I have on me.”

The trainer started to understand. “The gunshot too?”

“You were right; I actually recorded one of the party poppers go off prior to my arrival here. I figured with my sudden collapse, anyone in their right mind would have associated the

sound with a gunshot. But I guess you're far from normal, aren't you?" The journalist let go of her chest, and packets of fake blood spilled out. "You can't buy these in stores at this town, but you can certainly make a substitute with enough syrup and food coloring."

The trainer didn't respond.

"I hinted to the comedian that it'd be weird to watch someone feel up the body of a corpse," the journalist continued. "I needed to make sure you wouldn't check my pulse. There's only so much I can do to pretend to be dead. He'd obviously take it as an excuse to make fun of you, but I honestly didn't expect you to knock him unconscious. I guess I shouldn't be surprised." She looked at the camera again. "I got a good shot of you wailing on him. You're pretty strong."

"Thanks." The trainer's breath was still shaky. "So, are you going to kill me too?"

"Only if you ask." She sounded serious when she said this.

The trainer looked at her hands, and back at the comedian. She did that to him. She didn't know herself at all anymore. Everyone else seemed so okay with dying. Maybe none of them knew how to look after themselves.

"It's okay," the journalist told her. "This town made us all like this. Happy people with no clue how to be sad. You probably have it the worst out of all of us."

She turned on her camera and started a video as she moved towards the trainer.

"I'll point the camera away. I just need to hear you say it."

"I give up..."

The journalist turned off the camera and put it back into her purse. She pulled out another knife and showed it to her. “Stole these at the beginning of the party. Now don’t worry, I’ll ditch this town. I plan to write a big article when this is over. A town of happy people won’t last long when the police from outside come storming in, saying five people wanna die and that one of them had the moxie to kill them. Six when the comedian wakes up.”

The journalist moved behind the trainer, who simply held her breath. She knew what was coming next. Only now did she realize how hollow her “happiness” really was.