

Emma Burris

Beginning Fiction Workshop

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### Fare Thee Well

“Yes, I’d like to change the payment to that name,” Mara says, peeing. “No, it’s the same address, just a transfer of ownership. Yes, I signed a new deed.” The warmth pools around her legs, trickling horizontally down the length of her back until it erases itself at the drain. “Correct, the credit card information is the same. Okey dokey. Sounds good. You too.”

Mara sets her phone back on the ledge, balancing it on top of the shampoo bottle to protect it from the stream of water. She grabs her canned tuna, teetering on top of the conditioner, and finishes the rest of the package, pinching the bits of the fleshy pink substance between her fingers and shoving it into her mouth. Once the fish is gone, Mara tilts the remaining liquid down her throat, a mixture of tuna backwash and shower water. The tangy, menstrual smell of tuna wafts through the room, mixing with the steam that almost always sets off the smoke detector.

She hears a faint yell, almost masked by the rush of falling water. “Shit,” she says, putting her razor between her teeth and standing up, leg half-shaven.

He’s fallen again. By now, she can recognize the sound, one that always reminds her of a dying boar she had seen in a documentary once. At first, his pained cry disturbed her, made her think of the shame he must feel at letting out such a pitiful, guttural sound. But the more it happened, the more it grated her. Did it have to sound so helpless every time? Had he not learned to anticipate hazards?

Mara turns off the shower and nestles herself into her robe, not bothering to throw out the empty tuna can, nor the Bud Lights that had accumulated on the floor. Turning her ankle a bit to mop up a small flood that had formed next to the bath mat, she remembers. *Oh, right.* She draws the razor across her leg, dryly sweeping short bristles into a clump at the knob of her foot. Tossing the razor into the sink, she slips on her flip-flops and walks out the door.

She finds him down the hallway, next to the linen closet. He is coughing; his gaze frantically wanders around the room as if he is trying to focus on each individual atom suspended in the air.

“Hey, you alright?” Mara asks, snapping her fingers to get his attention. “Can you see okay? Did you hurt anything?” Finally, he catches her eyes, blinking away the shock.

“I...I was trying to get out the guest towels.”

“Why so? Are you having any guests?” she jokes. He blinks back, confused. “Are you?” He appears further inward now, no longer looking at everything, but at nothing at all. “Hey, can you hear me?” Nothing. She grabs the heap of towels on the floor and tosses them back up onto the shelf, shoving them out of their shapes, depriving them of their neatness. Closing the door, she pats the old man’s head, as if he were a lap dog, or perhaps a teenager freshly free from wisdom teeth. “Let’s get you up, okay?”

Mara pushes her weight under his, lifting his torso with her arms. “Do you want me to get your walker?” she asks. He shakes his head, reaches for the banister. A cough nearly sends him to the floor again, but she is there, pushing her hands into his rib cage, helping him up. “Can you walk?” He doesn’t respond, but shifts his feet, afraid that removing a foot from the floor would be another fast lane to the ground. “Don’t mess up the carpet,” she snaps, smoothing out the rolls forming in the runner. “Do you think you can get to bed? It’s just a few steps, okay?”

“You’re bleeding.”

“What?”

“Your leg. It’s bleeding.”

“Oh. I’ll get a band-aid in a second.”

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“So how long does he have to live?”

“I don’t know. This is my job, okay? I can’t like, think about that sort of thing.” Mara plays with the band-aid on her leg, folding up the sides stuck with day-old gray bits, half listening to her friend’s voice droning over the phone, half thinking about what she’ll have for dinner.

Mara’s friend continues, prodding on. “Well, you can think about whatever you want? That’s not a crime?”

“I can’t *talk* about it, then. That’s unethical.”

“Well, okay, I get it then. But it’s not like I’m your supervisor or something. Or Kant.”

“I know, I know. But I’m living in Arthur’s *house*, okay? You know I get paranoid about this sort of stuff.”

“I know, Mara. I’m just saying that maybe...you don’t have to be? It’s not like you’re gonna get fired or anything.”

“I...I know, I know. I’m just paranoid that if I talk about his, you know, *mortality*, then it might jinx things for me, you know? I don’t want him to die so soon, necessarily...”

“So soon?”

“No, no, you know what I mean! I don’t want anybody to die!”

“Sure, just not so soon.”

“Hey!”

“I get it.”

“Okay, okay. I gotta go.”

She hangs up the phone, sighs, and stares up at the neon green stars plastered onto the ceiling, wondering when the last time Arthur’s son came home was. Strange, she thought—she had never met him, but she was living in his room. A room that had once belonged to a boy who had loved it, who had filled the space with Thomas the Tank Engines and Lego Stormtroopers, colored the walls with drawings of ring-tailed lemurs and baboons. An empty hermit crab cage lays in the corner, jammed with half-filled sketchbooks and uncapped Crayola markers. She always regarded the room like an ancient tomb, as if it were a collection of objects meant to travel with the dead boy to the underworld. He wasn’t dead, of course. He was somewhere—California, she thinks, but isn’t sure. It doesn’t matter. He might as well be dead. Nobody’s heard from him for years, it seems.

Arthur’s daughter, Cathy, is a different story. She also lives far, but took the responsibility of caring for her father upon herself. Or at least that’s how she likes to view it—like she’s the golden child, how she would be helping her dad if it “weren’t for work and the kids, and our trip to Aspen in the fall.” She would have come for Thanksgiving and Christmas, if only she hadn’t promised to spend the holidays with her husband’s family.

So she hired Mara, hearing of her from a friend of a friend (of a friend, maybe). She had asked for her resume, called her once over the phone, and mailed her the keys. “You can have whichever room you want,” she had said. “Just make sure to keep things tidy.” In the end, Mara had decided upon the son’s room—there was more history to it, more intrigue. Cathy’s room

looked like a page out of Pottery Barn Teen, whereas the guest bedroom contained nothing more than a pull-out and a creepy rocking chair, stacked with dusty quilts.

Mara knew this house was beautiful from the moment she laid eyes on it. The white shingles, the veranda with the baby blue porch swing, the cherry trees taking root in the backyard. She could picture it, years from now—overgrown brush trimmed, paint retouched, hardwood floors polished. She would put ferns and pothoses in every room, swap the modern lighting for knockoff Tiffany lamps, and install hummingbird feeders in the back.

Of course it was all just a fantasy. She knew that, but she needed something to pass the time. Cathy was paying her a hefty sum in addition to her employing organization's base rate, but she was only working around four hours a day. This was Mara's first full-time gig—previously, she had worked for a slew of different clients. One woman had mild Parkinson's and just needed someone to cook for her. Another client was a widower with severe sleep apnea, needing someone present in the room while he slept. She'd served the range, from retirees who needed a bit of extra help to hospice patients she'd stayed with until the end. But never before had she treated just one person, let alone lived with them.

"I've never had a caregiver before," Arthur had told her the day she moved in.

"Yeah?" she had asked, rummaging around for an outlet for her to plug in her SodaStream.

"I haven't had someone around to help me out for 30 years."

"That's a long time." She had continued unpacking things, shoving the beers between the V8s, wedging the frozen waffles between the peas. She remembers how he had watched her, not judging, but just observing, as if she were a casserole turning round and round in the microwave.

“What made you...why did you become...a caregiver?” he had offered, letting his words take their time.

And how could she answer? How could she have said that she never *really* wanted this, actually—that the reason she went into this profession was because it was suggested to her by a pen-and-paper career quiz written for “Students With Nontraditional Paths”? She had never really been passionate about anything academic, hoping maybe to be able to scrape by with an Associate’s in Business Management. After being put on academic probation, she found herself much happier imagining working with skills she already knew, without being obligated to keep trudging on for a degree that just wouldn’t cooperate.

She looked at Arthur. “Because I wanted to help people,” she settled upon, scratching off a blackhead. “Now, can you go to the bathroom by yourself?”

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Arthur wasn’t special, she thought. Most of the patients she had worked with had some form of dementia or cognitive impairment. If not, they tended to develop it before she was done with them. Mara knew everything she had to do—take the household chores off Arthur’s hands, help him create a record of everything he would need to remember, create a comfortable level of stimulation in order to maintain his cognitive reserve. She could anticipate his boiling frustration as his abilities failed him. He would cry into a photograph of his mother, struggling to remember her name. He would forget the way to the bathroom, soiling his pants at 3 am in the broom closet. Mara knew this would happen; she knew how it would affect his family. They would break down before her, pouring their back-shaking sobs into her understanding. For they would never understand—they could try, yes, but emotion would devour logic. *Why him?* They would ask. *Our father? Our grandfather? How can we go on without him?* And she would be there.

That's how Mara thought it would happen. But it didn't. Arthur and she spent their days in the same ways—she would watch TV, he would nap or find a way to keep himself busy. Arthur tended to spend most afternoons completing word searches or puzzles found within the translucent pages of old National Geographic Kids issues, which he kept in bulk in the basement crawl space. Each time he finished the activities in a book—a feat which would always take him exactly three days—they would take a journey down the stairs to retrieve a new one from the stack. There were hundreds, probably thousands, actually, of issues as far back as 1975, issued chronologically in their own plastic film. But each time Arthur finished an issue, he would take the very next one in the bunch and redo it. He was an idiot. For months, he solved the same Arctic animal crossword, connected the same dots that built a wild zebra, and unscrambled the same words of different biomes. For months, he spent the same amount of time filling out the exact. same. activities.

Over the time they spent together, she always wondered—*Did he notice? Did he understand it was all the same?* Perhaps he enjoyed the familiarity of the issues. Or perhaps he just didn't understand they were different. The funny thing is, never once did Arthur get upset when doing his “work,” as he called it. He treated it with the utmost seriousness—sharpening his no. 2 pencil to the finest tip, adjusting the curves of his glasses to fit around the exact bend of his ears, furrowing his wiry brows and chewing his flaky lips until he got a sufficient result. Arthur was never one for fits of frustration or tantrums. He did his work, and he did it well. He was responsible, on time, and efficient. And this was how it went on. Every day was the same, only set apart by occasional doctor's appointments or accidental falls.

Arthur seemed to live for this routine; Mara despised it. It's not that she didn't like the free time it afforded her—that, she relished in. But she hated sitting with him, hated the way his

little sniffles and throat clears upset the energy of the room. How now that she lived here, she had to go outside to get high, blowing the smoke into the neighbor's prickly gooseberry bush. Even though Arthur didn't require much, he was always there. "Her" space was never truly hers.

One of the strangest things about Arthur's life was his children. Or the lack of, really. They never called. Cathy had called her just once, a week after she had moved in, asking nothing more than, "Are you all settled in? Have you received the payment yet, does the recurring plan sound good?" She only knew there was a son because of his room, and didn't find out there was a second daughter until the funeral. When Arthur was alive, there was never a whiff of mourning-preparatory despair from the children. She wouldn't have even known of their existence in that house if it wasn't for the room she slept in or the direct deposits she received every first of the month. Arthur never spoke of them. But to be fair, she never asked.

One day, as they were completing their tasks—Mara watching a rerun of *The Sopranos*, Arthur puzzled over the right path of a maze of the Amazon—he put his pencil down and stared at her. She looked at him, eyes asking *Well? Are you done?*, itching at the tip of her nose.

"I..." he started. "I want to bring you back in the will."

*Back in the will?* Mara thought, having never discussed anything of the sort with him. She stammered, too taken aback to watch Paulie whack someone out on the TV.

"I know it's...hard for you, Rosie, but...I want to bring you back in the will." He swallowed, the whites of his eyes shining like great big bowls of milk, deep and unaware.

*Rosie?* Mara had never heard this name before—she knew it wasn't the name of his daughter, nor the wife who had left long ago, and the grandkids were both boys. "R...Rosie?" she echoed back at him.

“It’s just that, having you back has been so nice. I missed you.” He looked, and looked and looked. “Rosie...”

“...Yes?”

“I...It’s been so nice. I missed you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...you...”

“Arthur, I...Is everything alright?” She stretched for the remote, pausing the TV and sinking back into her heap of cushions.

“No, you listen, Rosiebug. This isn’t, this isn’t the dementia,” he almost whined. “You’re...I’m putting you back in the will. I just...I just need you to find Bob, my...” He gripped the armrest, as if trying to extract knowledge from the soul of the house. “Bob, my lawyer...so he can, so we can write it up.”

“Arthur, I,” she offered, debating whether or not to get up and go to him.

“Please, honey. I need to take a nap.”

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*Oh God, Mara thought as she rummaged around his desk drawer. What should I do? Who does he think I am? Bob, a lawyer, a lawyer without a last name. There's got to be a business card somewhere,* she thought. After a while [five minutes, more or less] she tired of the searching, preferring to take the easy route and call Arthur’s daughter.

“Hello? Is this Cathy?” Mara asked.

“This is she?” Cathy responded skeptically, as if the person on the other end was running a Ponzi scheme.

“Hi, hi, this is Mara—you know, the one who’s looking after Arthur?”

“Oh, yes, yes—is everything alright?” she asked in a voice far too calm for the call’s suddenness.

“Yes, yes, everything is fine, Arthur’s doing great. He just...” she faltered, having realized she didn’t plan out her next steps. Should she tell Cathy? Ask who Rosie is? Or—“he just wanted”—words flew out of her mouth—“me to ask for”—before she’d even—“his lawyer’s contact information” decided how to use them. “You know, Bob?”

“Oh? Bob...Bob Friedman?”

“I—”

“—I can send his contact information over to you, yes. Did Arthur...is Arthur thinking of anything?”

“No, no, he just wanted...” Shit. How much family history was she supposed to know? Was the will a touchy subject? “I don’t know,” she heard herself saying. “Um...I think he just wanted to get in touch with someone he knew. For his memory?”

“Oh. His memory—would you say it’s, getting, worse? You’d say?”

“It’s...it’s hard to tell?” Their sentences danced like two strangers colliding in a hallway, failing to get past each other, muttering lazy strings of apologies. Cathy asked about Arthur only in abstracts, as if he were nothing but the concept of an old man. And Mara responded accordingly, speaking as if it was someone’s orchid she was watching instead of someone’s father.

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The next week, Bob was in the study, drawing up the will. “Arthur, are you sure about this?” he asked. “Last time I was here you were...” He faltered, choosing his words carefully. “You were very adamant about not having any future changes.”

Looking at him, Mara suddenly realized how small Arthur was in his seat. He was like a porcelain doll, delicately sat down by a child, sinking into the armchair's weight. What was he thinking? What was—

“—And you’re the caretaker, right?” Bob asked. A pleasantry, she knew—of course she was the caretaker. “How would you describe his mental status?”

She looked at Arthur, who stared at his argyle socks in either boredom or despair, she couldn’t be sure. A mannequin—that’s what he looked like. But was he really much different from one? Could he really think for himself? There he was, sitting there, completely convinced she was this “Rosie,” even as Bob addressed her otherwise.

But this was what he wanted, she told herself. “He’s sound,” she told Bob. “He—”

“—My Rosie, my little Rosiebug,” Arthur exclaimed, grabbing Mara’s arm. “My darling, I’m so sorry,” he cried, voice trembling, eyes blank as death, glued to the floor. “My Rosiebug...”

“Is he...is he referring to you as Rosie?” Mara felt Bob’s voice from behind her. Yes, he saw her as Rosie. But whoever this Rosie was, did she know he saw her this way? Did she know that whatever had happened between them was forgiven? Of course not. So what difference would it make? If Arthur put her name back in the will, she might not even accept it. Plus, who’s to say Rosie isn’t the one who fucked up? Why does she get the money? Rosie never lived with him, never cared for him as she did.

“Yes. I...I changed my name.”

“To...Mara?”

“Yes, well, Rosie is...short for Rosemary. I changed my name to Mara legally years back.”

“...I see. Arthur, is this person here Rosie?” he asked.

“Rosie...Rosie, my Rosie...”

“Arthur, is this person Rosie?”

He looked up, mournfully, shooting daggers into the room. “It’s her...it’s my girl...”

“Ro—or, Ma—, or—could you please leave the room for a minute?” Bob asked. Mara stepped outside and waited a minute, then a minute longer, then twenty more. “You can come back in,” Bob finally remarked. “I had to speak with Arthur alone. Just to make sure you weren’t convincing him to do this. He’s old and he’s got some issues, sure. But you’re right, he’s sound.”

He nodded to himself, shuffled some papers around, and handed a stack to Mara. “Sign here,” he proposed. “And here.”

And then there were numbers, and assets, and more numbers and assets than Mara had ever imagined herself having, even if she had decided to work her ass off, or maybe marry that ex-boyfriend whose dad had a yacht. And the more she read, the more there was—the numbers had numbers, the assets had assets, the stocks traded themselves, and the taxes looped and looped into each neat little hole. And it was all hers. Once Arthur had gone, at least.

A few days later, everything was completed. A notary was found, witnesses were arranged, and once-blank spaces were now filled with runs of affirmatory ink. Now all Mara had to do was wait, to endure the grueling months—or years, maybe, hopefully not years—until it all belonged to her. Until she never had to work again, could spend her days doing whatever the fuck she wanted. Redecorate the house. Maybe put in a pool. She’s sure she could convince Arthur to go ahead and transfer the house’s deed to her name, tell him it’s easier for “management, and all.” She’s sure there’s a lot of things she could do.

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“Did you get your bandaid?” Arthur asks, still on the floor, the pain in his back having become comfortable.

“Oh?” Mara walks by, having remembered that she had left him lying there.

“Darling, could you please not smoke that in here?”

She takes a puff, internally noting to try the indica strain next time. Holding the hastily rolled joint between her lips, she tugs on Arthur’s arm, inducing a short intake of air. “Let’s get you to bed, huh?”

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Mara begins sleeping in later, neglecting to do Arthur’s laundry, forgetting to buy the fresh cantaloupe and bran cereal he likes. She realizes she can scrape by a bit, that she doesn’t have to do everything she doesn’t want to. Cathy doesn’t check up on her, and her outside employer was only required to do one house check after a month. It’s not like she’s going to completely stop doing her job. No, no, not at all—it’s just that when she wakes up in the morning, the first thing she thinks of isn’t how she’ll make Arthur’s eggs or if he’s had trouble sleeping, but how she’ll spend the money after he’s out of the picture.

So yes, she starts taking her time with some things. Just the things that don’t have much of an impact. As long as Arthur doesn’t complain, she’s in the clear. So Mara starts making more microwave dinners, flicking her boogers onto the floor, shitting with the door open. Stops mowing the grass and killing the gnats that congregate near the garbage can. Decides to only bathe him once a week, because it’s not like a bit of soap will change his decaying moth smell, anyways. Eventually, she even stops taking the thirty-minute drive to the specialty pharmacy in order to get Arthur’s hippie vitamins, which really don’t do much that, she doesn’t know, fucking

carrots can't do. She starts hotboxing the master bathroom and procrastinating on refilling his prescriptions at Walgreens. One day she feeds him dog food just because she's bored.

"I've decided I don't want to bathe you anymore," she remarks one evening, on a whim. "It's just too gross. I don't want like, your old man folds all over me." He just looks at her with his big, sad milk eyes, wondering if it is her who's going crazy, or him?

He does start to go a bit crazy, Mara notes. Sometimes, when she dozes off in the living room, he gets up, puts on his coat, and walks out the front door, ever so slowly. When she tries to herd him back inside, he just plants his feet firmly on the ground, refusing to move. Crazy.

So Mara continues her new habits, pleasantly surprised by how much she enjoys playing God. Eventually, Arthur gets used to it, she imagines. When he's allowed, he enjoys eating his stale Wonder Bread, turning over its softness between his tongue and decaying teeth. Instead of his kids' magazines, he finds it stimulating to lick off the mayonnaise she spreads on the tip of his nose. When she puts Depends on him, he is happy, because now the cunt has freedom to piss and shit wherever the fuck he wants. Ha ha. Hell, he'd probably eat his own shit if she put it in front of him. That would be funny.

He becomes a little toy to her, a little puppet whose strings she can pull and watch dance. But as the weeks progress, she begins to bore of him. If only there were a way to return him and keep the house. No, there's not much she still has to do besides making sure he gets his slop and can crawl up and down the stairs without toppling over. But it's his presence alone that does it—he's like Pigpen the way his filth gets everywhere. The beams of this house just shake at his presence, the grout between the tiles wants to hurl. Maybe the worst thing of all is how she can see her reflection in those sad little milk eyes. She wonders if those eyes can still perceive, if the

head behind them can still think at all. For he doesn't speak as much as he used to. Maybe he's finally getting sicker.

Later that winter it finally happens. Not like how she thought it would—pneumonia or a persistent UTI, or something—but worse. She doesn't notice he's gone until a police officer comes to her door, telling her that Arthur must have gotten locked out of the house the night before. “Gotten locked out?” she asks. “But we keep the doors unlocked. This is a safe neighborhood.” It's not until then that she sees the imprint of a figure in the snow, lined with a thin dribble of blood and a spot of something yellow.

“He must have fallen,” the officer tells her. “He couldn't get up,” she half-hears, unregistering. “He froze to death. I'm so sorry.” Frozen. Frozen to death. “He was holding this when we found him,” the officer states, handing over a stuffed pillowcase. “It's some personals.” Mara looks inside, finding some pill bottles, a few packets of fruit snacks, and his will.

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The funeral is small, held in the basement of some non-denominational church nearby, the main chapel having been booked out until March. Mara isn't sure what to expect—she's notified Cathy, but hasn't received confirmation that anyone is coming. But as Mara walks in that morning, she finds about a dozen people already seated.

A middle-aged woman, wrinkly-eyed from time and tears, approaches her, moving slowly, locking eyes. “Oh, honey,” she says. “I'm so sorry. They told me you're the one who took care of him, yes?”

“Yeah, yeah, I...”

“Oh, I'm so sorry. He was such a good man. We haven't met, I'm just a niece of his. I bet you took such good care of him. After Rosie, we were—”

“—Sorry, Rosie?”

“Did nobody tell you?” Mara shakes her head. “Oh...well, Rosie’s his daughter, who...”

“Daughter? But Cathy is his daughter.”

“No, no, the other one. She used to live with Arthur, before you did. After she got out of prison, he let her live with him until she got back on her feet, you know? Despite everything she did. You didn’t know this?”

“No, no, not at all.”

“Well, I suppose it’s one of those taboo subjects. Anywho, Rosie took advantage of poor Arthur. She told him she would stop the drugs. But she didn’t. Then she started stealing his stuff to sell for drug money, despite everything he already paid for. And then she just started dealing again from his house, bringing all sorts of bad people to the neighborhood. She didn’t look after him—didn’t feed him, didn’t look after his health, none of that. Which was part of the deal for her to stay there—Arthur really needed another set of hands at that point, you know? Anywho...it was a real tragedy. But oh, honey, he must have been so lucky to have *you!*”

Everything becomes small. She is suddenly hyperconscious of the sweat seeping from the pads of her feet, tightening her wool socks within her ankle boots, half a size too small. She wants to leave, go back to bed, the bed in his house, his house that was now her house, now that the will was in her name, her house that was his house that he died in front of, on the porch, surrounded by blood and bile. She thinks about his house, his house *her house* his house, full of weed and beer and gnats and mayonnaise and carpet stains and cobwebs and dirt boogers shit piss dust fingernail litterings adult diapers processed food crumpled-up tissues contaminated air sickness sickness sickness sickness death.

Was it all her fault? But it wasn't, it wasn't. She was nothing like Rosie. She didn't, she didn't *hurt* people. She didn't. It was just...it was just...

"Honey, are you okay?"

She broke down crying, spitting out heavy, back-shaking sobs, and let herself be wrapped in the nice woman's arms.