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Purity

Written by Jonathan Franzen

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PURITY

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for Elisabeth Robinson

. . . Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft

Purity in Oakland

MONDAY

Oh pussycat, I'm so glad to hear your voice," the girl's mother said on the telephone. "My body is betraying me again. Sometimes I think my life is nothing but one long process of bodily betrayal."

"Isn't that everybody's life?" the girl, Pip, said. She'd taken to calling her mother midway through her lunch break at Renewable Solutions. It brought her some relief from the feeling that she wasn't suited for her job, that she had a job that nobody could be suited for, or that she was a person unsuited for any kind of job; and then, after twenty minutes, she could honestly say that she needed to get back to work.

"My left eyelid is drooping," her mother explained. "It's like there's a weight on it that's pulling it down, like a tiny fisherman's sinker or something."

"Right now?"

"Off and on. I'm wondering if it might be Bell's palsy."

"Whatever Bell's palsy is, I'm sure you don't have it."

"If you don't even know what it is, pussycat, how can you be so sure?"

"I don't know—because you didn't have Graves' disease? Hyperthyroidism? Melanoma?"

It wasn't as if Pip felt good about making fun of her mother. But their dealings were all tainted by *moral hazard*, a useful phrase she'd learned in college economics. She was like a bank too big in her mother's economy to fail, an employee too indispensable to be fired for bad attitude. Some of her friends in Oakland also had problematic parents, but they still managed to speak to them daily without undue

weirdnesses transpiring, because even the most problematic of them had resources that consisted of more than just their single offspring. Pip was it, as far as her own mother was concerned.

"Well, I don't think I can go to work today," her mother said. "My Endeavor is the only thing that makes that job survivable, and I can't connect with the Endeavor when there's an invisible *fisherman's sinker* pulling on my eyelid."

"Mom, you can't call in sick again. It's not even July. What if you get the actual flu or something?"

"And meanwhile everybody's wondering what this old woman with half her face drooping onto her shoulder is doing bagging their groceries. You have no idea how I envy you your cubicle. The invisibility of it."

"Let's not romanticize the cubicle," Pip said.

"This is the terrible thing about bodies. They're so *visible*, so *visible*."

Pip's mother, though chronically depressed, wasn't crazy. She'd managed to hold on to her checkout-clerk job at the New Leaf Community Market in Felton for more than ten years, and as soon as Pip relinquished her own way of thinking and submitted to her mother's she could track what she was saying perfectly well. The only decoration on the gray segments of her cubicle was a bumper sticker, AT LEAST THE WAR ON THE ENVIRONMENT IS GOING WELL. Her colleagues' cubicles were covered with photos and clippings, but Pip herself understood the attraction of invisibility. Also, she expected to be fired any month now, so why settle in.

"Have you given any thought to how you want to not-celebrate your not-birthday?" she asked her mother.

"Frankly, I'd like to stay in bed all day with the covers over my head. I don't need a not-birthday to remind me I'm getting older. My eyelid is doing a very good job of that already."

"Why don't I make you a cake and I'll come down and we can eat it. You sound sort of more depressed than usual."

"I'm not depressed when I see you."

"Ha, too bad I'm not available in pill form. Could you handle a cake made with stevia?"

"I don't know. Stevia does something funny to the chemistry of my mouth. There's no fooling a taste bud, in my experience."

"Sugar has an aftertaste, too," Pip said, although she knew that argument was futile.

"Sugar has a *sour* aftertaste that the taste bud has no problem with, because it's built to report sourness without dwelling on it. The taste bud doesn't have to spend five hours registering strangeness, strangeness! Which was what happened to me the one time I drank a stevia drink."

"But I'm saying the sourness does linger."

"There's something very wrong when a taste bud is still reporting strangeness five hours after you had a sweetened drink. Do you know that if you smoke crystal meth even once, your entire brain chemistry is altered for the rest of your life? That's what stevia tastes like to me."

"I'm not sitting here puffing on a meth stem, if that's what you're trying to say."

"I'm saying I don't need a cake."

"No, I'll find a different kind of cake. I'm sorry I suggested a kind that's *poison* to you."

"I didn't say it was poison. It's simply that stevia does something funny—"

"To your mouth chemistry, yeah."

"Pussycat, I'll eat whatever kind of cake you bring me, refined sugar won't kill me, I didn't mean to upset you. Sweetheart, please."

No phone call was complete before each had made the other wretched. The problem, as Pip saw it—the essence of the handicap she lived with; the presumable cause of her inability to be effective at anything—was that she loved her mother. Pitied her; suffered with her; warmed to the sound of her voice; felt an unsettling kind of nonsexual attraction to her body; was solicitous even of her mouth chemistry; wished her greater happiness; hated upsetting her; found her dear. This was the massive block of granite at the center of her life, the source of all the anger and sarcasm that she directed not only at her mother but, more and more self-defeatingly of late, at less appropriate objects. When Pip got angry, it wasn't really at her mother but at the granite block.

She'd been eight or nine when it occurred to her to ask why her birthday was the only one celebrated in their little cabin, in the redwoods outside Felton. Her mother had replied that she didn't have a birthday; the only one that mattered to her was Pip's. But Pip had pestered her until she agreed to celebrate the summer solstice with a cake that they would call not-birthday. This had then raised the question of her mother's age, which she'd refused to divulge, saying only, with a

smile suitable to the posing of a koan, "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"No, but how old are you *really*?"

"Look at my hands," her mother had said. "If you practice, you can learn to tell a woman's age by her hands."

And so—for the first time, it seemed—Pip had looked at her mother's hands. The skin on the back of them wasn't pink and opaque like her own skin. It was as if the bones and veins were working their way to the surface; as if the skin were water receding to expose shapes at the bottom of a harbor. Although her hair was thick and very long, there were dry-looking strands of gray in it, and the skin at the base of her throat was like a peach a day past ripe. That night, Pip lay awake in bed and worried that her mother might die soon. It was her first premonition of the granite block.

She'd since come fervently to wish that her mother had a man in her life, or really just one other person of any description, to love her. Potential candidates over the years had included their next-door neighbor Linda, who was likewise a single mom and likewise a student of Sanskrit, and the New Leaf butcher, Ernie, who was likewise a vegan, and the pediatrician Vanessa Tong, whose powerful crush on Pip's mother had taken the form of trying to interest her in birdwatching, and the mountain-bearded handyman Sonny, for whom no maintenance job was too small to occasion a discourse on ancient Pueblo ways of being. All these good-hearted San Lorenzo Valley types had glimpsed in Pip's mother what Pip herself, in her early teens, had seen and felt proud of: an ineffable sort of greatness. You didn't have to write to be a poet, you didn't have to create things to be an artist. Her mother's spiritual Endeavor was itself a kind of art—an art of invisibility. There was never a television in their cabin and no computer before Pip turned twelve; her mother's main source of news was the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, which she read for the small daily pleasure of being appalled by the world. In itself, this was not so uncommon in the Valley. The trouble was that Pip's mother herself exuded a shy belief in her greatness, or at least carried herself as if she'd once been great, back in a pre-Pip past that she categorically refused to talk about. She wasn't so much offended as mortified that their neighbor Linda could compare her frog-catching, mouth-breathing son, Damian, to her own

singular and perfect Pip. She imagined that the butcher would be permanently shattered if she told him that he smelled to her like meat, even after a shower; she made herself miserable dodging Vanessa Tong's invitations rather than just admit she was afraid of birds; and whenever Sonny's high-clearance pickup rolled into their driveway she made Pip go to the door while she fled out the back way and into the redwoods. What gave her the luxury of being impossibly choosy was Pip. Over and over, she'd made it clear: Pip was the only person who passed muster, the only person *she* loved.

This all became a source of searing embarrassment, of course, when Pip hit adolescence. And by then she was too busy hating and punishing her mother to clock the damage that her mother's unworldliness was doing to her own life prospects. Nobody was there to tell her that it might not be the best idea, if she wanted to set about doing good in the world, to graduate from college with $130,000 in student debt. Nobody had warned her that the figure to pay attention to when she was being interviewed by Igor, the head of consumer outreach at Renewable Solutions, was not the "thirty or forty thousand dollars" in commissions that he foresaw her earning in her very first year but the $21,000 base salary he was offering, or that a salesman as persuasive as Igor might also be skilled at selling shit jobs to unsuspecting twenty-one-year-olds.

"About the weekend," Pip said in a hard voice. "I have to warn you that I want to talk about something you don't like to talk about."

Her mother gave a little laugh intended to be winsome, to signal defenselessness. "There's only one thing I don't like to talk about with you."

"Well, and that is exactly the thing I want to talk about. So just be warned."

Her mother said nothing to this. Down in Felton, the fog would have burned off by now, the fog that her mother was daily sorry to see go, because it revealed a bright world to which she preferred not to belong. She practiced her Endeavor best in the safety of gray morning. Now there would be sunlight, greened and goldened by filtration through the redwoods' tiny needles, summer heat stealing through the sleeping porch's screened windows and over the bed that Pip had claimed as a privacy-craving teenager, relegating her mother to a cot in

the main room until she left for college and her mother took it back. She was probably on the bed practicing her Endeavor right now. If so, she wouldn't speak again until spoken to; she would be all breathing.

"This isn't personal," Pip said. "I'm not going anywhere. But I need money, and you don't have any, and I don't have any, and there's only one place I can think to get it. There's only one person who even theoretically *owes* me. So we're going to talk about it."

"Pussycat," her mother said sadly, "you know I won't do that. I'm sorry you need money, but this isn't a matter of what I like or don't like. It's a matter of can or can't. And I can't, so we'll have to think of something else for you."

Pip frowned. Every so often, she felt the need to strain against the circumstantial straitjacket in which she'd found herself two years earlier, to see if there might be a little new give in its sleeves. And, every time, she found it exactly as tight as before. Still $130,000 in debt, still her mother's sole comfort. It was kind of remarkable how instantly and totally she'd been trapped the minute her four years of college freedom ended; it would have depressed her, had she been able to afford being depressed.

"OK, I'm going to hang up now," she said into the phone. "You get yourself ready for work. Your eye's probably just bothering you because you're not sleeping enough. It happens to me sometimes when I don't sleep."

"Really?" her mother said eagerly. "You get this, too?"

Although Pip knew that it would prolong the call, and possibly entail extending the discussion to genetically heritable diseases, and certainly require copious fibbing on her part, she decided that her mother was better off thinking about insomnia than about Bell's palsy, if only because, as Pip had been pointing out to her for years, to no avail, there were actual medications she could take for her insomnia. But the result was that when Igor stuck his head in Pip's cubicle, at 1:22, she was still on the phone.

"Mom, sorry, gotta go right now, good-bye," she said, and hung up.

Igor was Gazing at her. He was a blond Russian, strokably bearded, unfairly handsome, and to Pip the only conceivable reason he hadn't fired her was that he enjoyed thinking about fucking her, and yet she was sure that, if it ever came to that, she would end up humiliated in

no time flat, because he was not only handsome but rather handsomely paid, while she was a girl with nothing but problems. She was sure that he must know this, too.

"I'm *sorry*," she said to him. "I'm sorry I went seven minutes over. My mom had a medical issue." She thought about this. "Actually, cancel that, I'm not sorry. What are the chances of me getting a positive response in any given seven-minute period?"

"Did I look censorious?" Igor said, batting his eyelashes.

"Well, why are you sticking your head in? Why are you staring at me?"

"I thought you might like to play Twenty Questions."

"I think not."

"You try to guess what I want from you, and I'll confine my answers to an innocuous yes or no. Let the record show: only yeses, only nos."

"Do you want to get sued for sexual harassment?"

Igor laughed, delighted with himself. "That's a no! Now you have nineteen questions."

"I'm not kidding about the lawsuit. I have a law-school friend who says it's enough that you create an atmosphere."

"That's not a question."

"How can I explain to you how not funny to me this is?"

"Yes–no questions only, please."

"Jesus Christ. Go away."

"Would you rather talk about your May performance?"

"Go away! I'm getting on the phone right now."

When Igor was gone, she brought up her call sheet on her computer, glanced at it with distaste, and minimized it again. In four of the twenty-two months she'd worked for Renewable Solutions, she'd succeeded in being only next-to-last, not last, on the whiteboard where her and her associates' "outreach points" were tallied. Perhaps not coincidentally, four out of twenty-two was roughly the frequency with which she looked in a mirror and saw someone pretty, rather than someone who, if it had been anybody but her, might have been considered pretty but, because it was her, wasn't. She'd definitely inherited some of her mother's body issues, but she at least had the hard evidence of her experience with boys to back her up. Many were quite attracted to her, few ended up not thinking there'd been some error. Igor had

been trying to puzzle it out for two years now. He was forever studying her the way she studied herself in the mirror: "She seemed good-looking yesterday, and yet . . ."

From somewhere, in college, Pip had gotten the idea—her mind was like a balloon with static cling, attracting random ideas as they floated by—that the height of civilization was to spend Sunday morning reading an actual paper copy of the Sunday *New York Times* at a café. This had become her weekly ritual, and, in truth, wherever the idea had come from, her Sunday mornings were when she felt most civilized. No matter how late she'd been out drinking, she bought the *Times* at 8 a.m., took it to Peet's Coffee, ordered a scone and a double cappuccino, claimed her favorite table in the corner, and happily forgot herself for a few hours.

The previous winter, at Peet's, she'd become aware of a nice-looking, skinny boy who had the same Sunday ritual. Within a few weeks, instead of reading the news, she was thinking about how she looked to the boy while reading, and whether to raise her eyes and catch him looking, until finally it was clear that she would either have to find a new café or talk to him. The next time she caught his eye, she attempted an invitational head-tilt that felt so creaky and studied that she was shocked by how instantly it worked. The boy came right over and boldly proposed that, since they were both there at the same time every week, they could start sharing a paper and save a tree.

"What if we both want the same section?" Pip said with some hostility.

"You were here before I was," the boy said, "so you could have first choice." He went on to complain that his parents, in College Station, Texas, had the wasteful practice of buying two copies of the Sunday *Times*, to avoid squabbling over sections.

Pip, like a dog that knows only its name and five simple words in human language, heard only that the boy came from a normal two-parent family with money to burn. "But this is kind of my one time entirely for myself all week," she said.

"I'm sorry," the boy said, backing away. "It just looked like you wanted to say something."

Pip didn't know how not to be hostile to boys her own age who were interested in her. Part of it was that the only person in the world she trusted was her mother. From her experiences in high school and

college, she'd already learned that the nicer the boy was, the more painful it would be for both of them when he discovered that she was much more of a mess than her own niceness had led him to believe. What she hadn't yet learned was how not to want somebody to be nice to her. The not-nice boys were particularly adept at sensing this and exploiting it. Thus neither the nice ones nor the not-nice ones could be trusted, and she was, moreover, not very good at telling the two apart until she was in bed with them.

"Maybe we could have coffee some other time," she said to the boy. "Some not-Sunday morning."

"Sure," he said uncertainly.

"Because now that we've actually spoken, we don't have to keep looking at each other. We can just read our separate papers, like your parents."

"My name's Jason, by the way."

"I'm Pip. And now that we know each other's names, we especially don't have to keep looking at each other. I can think, oh, that's just Jason, and you can think, oh, that's just Pip."

He laughed. It turned out that he had a degree in math from Stanford and was living the math major's dream, working for a foundation that promoted American numeracy while trying to write a textbook that he hoped would revolutionize the teaching of statistics. After two dates, she liked him enough to think she'd better sleep with him before he or she got hurt. If she waited too long, Jason would learn that she was a mess of debts and duties, and would run for his life. Or she would have to tell him that her deeper affections were engaged with an older guy who not only didn't believe in money—as in U.S. currency; as in the mere possession of it—but also had a wife.

So as not to be totally undisclosive, she told Jason about the after-hours volunteer "work" that she was doing on nuclear disarmament, a subject he seemed to know so much more about than she did, despite its being *her* "work," not his, that she became slightly hostile. Fortunately, he was a great talker, an enthusiast for Philip K. Dick, for *Breaking Bad*, for sea otters and mountain lions, for mathematics applied to daily life, and especially for his geometrical method of statistics pedagogy, which he explained so well she almost understood it. The third time she saw him, at a noodle joint where she was forced to pretend not to be hungry because her latest Renewable Solutions paycheck hadn't

cleared yet, she found herself at a crossroads: either risk friendship or retreat to the safety of casual sex.

Outside the restaurant, in light fog, in the Sunday-evening quiet of Telegraph Avenue, she put the moves on Jason and he responded avidly. She could feel her stomach growling as she pressed it into his; she hoped he couldn't hear it.

"Do you want to go to your house?" she murmured in his ear.

Jason said no, regrettably, he had a sister visiting.

At the word *sister*, Pip's heart constricted with hostility. Having no siblings of her own, she couldn't help resenting the demands and potential supportiveness of other people's; their nuclear-family normalcy, their inherited wealth of closeness.

"We can go to my house," she said, somewhat crossly. And she was so absorbed in resenting Jason's sister for displacing her from his bedroom (and, by extension, from his heart, although she didn't particularly want a place in it), so vexed by her circumstances as she and Jason walked hand in hand down Telegraph Avenue, that they'd reached the door of her house before she remembered that they couldn't go there.

"Oh," she said. "Oh. Could you wait outside for a second while I deal with something?"

"Um, sure," Jason said.

She gave him a grateful kiss, and they proceeded to neck and grind for ten minutes on her doorstep, Pip burying herself in the pleasure of being touched by a clean and highly competent boy, until a distinctly audible growl from her stomach brought her out of it.

"One second, OK?" she said.

"Are you *hungry*?"

"No! Or actually suddenly maybe yes, slightly. I wasn't at the restaurant, though."

She eased her key into the lock and went inside. In the living room, her schizophrenic housemate, Dreyfuss, was watching a basketball game with her disabled housemate, Ramón, on a scavenged TV set whose digital converter a third housemate, Stephen, the one she was more or less in love with, had obtained by sidewalk barter. Dreyfuss's body, bloated by the medications that he'd to date been good about taking, filled a low, scavenged armchair.

"Pip, Pip," Ramón cried out, "Pip, what are you doing now, you

said you might help me with my vocabbleree, you wanna help me with it now?"

Pip put a finger to her lips, and Ramón clapped his hands over his mouth.

"That's right," said Dreyfuss quietly. "She doesn't want anyone to know she's here. And why might that be? Could it be because the German spies are in the kitchen? I use the word *spies* loosely, of course, though perhaps not entirely inappropriately, given the fact that there are some thirty-five members of the Oakland Nuclear Disarmament Study Group, of which Pip and Stephen are by no means the least dispensable, and yet the house that the Germans have chosen to favor with their all too typically German earnestness and nosiness, for nearly a week now, is ours. A curious fact, worth considering."

"Dreyfuss," Pip hissed, moving closer to him to avoid raising her voice.

Dreyfuss placidly knit his fat fingers on his belly and continued speaking to Ramón, who never tired of listening to him. "Could it be that Pip wants to avoid talking to the German spies? Perhaps especially tonight? When she's brought home a young gentleman with whom she's been osculating on the front porch for some fifteen minutes now?"

"*You're* the spy," Pip whispered furiously. "I hate your spying."

"She hates it when I observe things that no intelligent person could fail to notice," Dreyfuss explained to Ramón. "To observe what's in plain sight is not to spy, Ramón. And perhaps the Germans, too, are doing no more than that. What constitutes a spy, however, is *motive*, and there, Pip—" He turned to her. "There I would advise you to ask yourself what these nosy, earnest Germans are doing in our house."

"You didn't stop taking your meds, did you?" Pip whispered.

"*Osculate*, Ramón. There's a fine vocabulary word for you."

"Whassit mean?"

"Why, it means to *neck*. To *lock lips*. To *pluck up kisses by their roots*."

"Pip, you gonna help me with my vocabbleree?"

"I believe she has other plans tonight, my friend."

"Sweetie, no, not now," Pip whispered to Ramón, and then, to Dreyfuss, "The Germans are here because we invited them, because we had room. But you're right, I need you not to tell them I'm here."

"What do you think, Ramón?" Dreyfuss said. "Should we help her? She's not helping you with your vocabulary."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Help him yourself. You're the one with the huge vocabulary."

Dreyfuss turned again to Pip and looked at her steadily, his eyes all intellect, no affect. It was as if his meds suppressed his condition well enough to keep him from butchering people in the street with a broadsword but not quite enough to banish it from his eyes. Stephen had assured Pip that Dreyfuss looked at everyone the same way, but she persisted in thinking that, if he ever stopped taking his meds, she would be the person he went after with a broadsword or whatever, the person in whom he would pinpoint the trouble in the world, the conspiracy against him; and, what's more, she believed that he was seeing something true about her falseness.

"These Germans and their spying are distasteful to me," Dreyfuss said to her. "Their first thought when they walk into a house is how to take it over."

"They're peace activists, Dreyfuss. They stopped trying to be world conquerors, like, seventy years ago."

"I want you and Stephen to make them go away."

"OK! We will! Later. Tomorrow."

"We don't like the Germans, do we, Ramón?"

"We like it when it's jus' the five of us, like famlee," Ramón said.

"Well . . . not a family. Not exactly. No. We each have our own families, don't we, Pip?"

Dreyfuss looked into her eyes again, significantly, knowingly, with no human warmth—or was it maybe simply no trace of desire? Maybe every man would look at her this heartlessly if sex were entirely subtracted? She went over to Ramón and put her hands on his fat, sloping shoulders. "Ramón, sweetie, I'm busy tonight," she said. "But I'll be home all night tomorrow. OK?"

"OK," he said, completely trusting her.

She hurried back to the front door and let in Jason, who was blowing on his cupped fingers. As they passed by the living room, Ramón again clapped his hands to his mouth, miming his commitment to secrecy, while Dreyfuss imperturbably watched basketball. There were so many things for Jason to see in the house and so few that Pip cared for him to see, and Dreyfuss and Ramón each had a smell, Dreyfuss's yeasty, Ramón's uriney, that she was used to but visitors weren't. She climbed the stairs rapidly on tiptoe, hoping that Jason would get the

idea to hurry and be quiet. From behind a closed door on the second floor came the familiar cadences of Stephen and his wife finding fault with each other.

In her little bedroom, on the third floor, she led Jason to her mattress without turning any lights on, because she didn't want him to see how poor she was. She was horribly poor but her sheets were clean; she was rich in cleanliness. When she'd moved into the room, a year earlier, she'd scrubbed every inch of floor and windowsill, using a spray bottle of disinfectant cleaner, and when mice had come to visit her she'd learned from Stephen that stuffing steel wool into every conceivable ingress point would keep them out, and then she'd cleaned the floors again. But now, after tugging Jason's T-shirt up over his bony shoulders and letting him undress her and engaging in various pleasurable preliminaries, only to recall that her only condoms were in the toiletries bag that she'd left in the first-floor bathroom before going out, because the Germans had occupied her regular bathroom, her cleanliness became another handicap. She gave Jason's cleanly circumcised erection a peck with her lips, murmured, "Sorry, one second, I'll be right back," and grabbed a robe that she didn't get fully arranged and knotted until she was halfway down the last flight of stairs and realized she'd neglected to explain where she was going.

"Fuck," she said, pausing on the stairs. Nothing about Jason had suggested wild promiscuity, and she possessed a still-valid morning-after prescription, and she was feeling, at that moment, as if sex were the only thing in her life that she was reasonably effective at; but she had to try to keep her body clean. Self-pity seeped into her, a conviction that for no one but her was sex so logistically ungainly, a tasty fish with so many small bones. Behind her, behind the marital bedroom door, Stephen's wife was raising her voice on the subject of moral vanity.

"I'll take my chances with moral vanity," Stephen interrupted, "when the alternative is signing on with a divine plan that immiserates four billion people."

"That is the essence of moral vanity!" the wife crowed.

Stephen's voice triggered in Pip a longing deeper than any she felt for Jason, and she quickly concluded that she herself wasn't guilty of moral vanity—was more like a case of moral low self-esteem, since the man she really wanted was not the one she was intent on fucking now.