



COOK NEW ENGLAND

by Olivia Wolfgang-Smith

EVELYN Barr is famous for making stuffed quahogs as wide across as a man's hand and for wearing size 11 pumps while she does it, and both the clams and the shoes look bigger from where John is sitting. He crouches behind her, ducking to stay beneath the lip of the counter—out of the shot. He holds a white dish over his head as if in supplication, feeling rather than hearing each tiny clink as it fills with shell fragments and celery trimmings and whatever other detritus Evelyn needs spirited away before they switch back to Camera 1, cutting away from the close-up to a countertop that needs to be pristine, swept clean as if by magic.

John does not feel particularly magical, sweating through the jacket of his wedding band suit. He is overdressed for the studio—nobody else’s coat has four buttons, space for a pocket square (John’s pocket square had been cheap fabric, sewn in, because he only had to look fancy to people drunk on champagne and dancing thirty feet away, his outfit half-hidden by his bass anyway. He’d ripped the fake square out with nail scissors the morning before he first came to set). He looks ridiculous, but the job is a new one, and until he pulls a few more paychecks, it’s the wedding uniform or dungarees.

In morbid moments, on nights when his dad wants to have the whole argument over again and threatens—then retracts, so far—to kick him out of the house unless he rejoins the band, John has already lain awake and imagined a potential future in which he goes grocery shopping in the scrap bucket on filming days.

“There,” Evelyn pronounces. “Doesn’t that look nice and substantial? Now is not the time to puff things full of air. You want it dense, like this; like holiday stuffing. Any day with stuffed quahogs is a holiday.” Her voice is pleasant and calm, even as her out-of-frame hand scrabbles rinds and sweeps stray breadcrumbs into John’s dish. It’s like there are two halves of her, on-camera and off. In the few weeks he’s been *Cook New England’s*

“filming assistant”—a job he thought would have much more to do with camera operation and much less with crouching here, his nose to the tile, arm upstretched and aching, watching the seam on Evelyn’s stockings and hearing her explain how to make cranberry relish or lobster bisque “*from scratch!*”—John has noticed this. At the start of that two-part Sunday episode, Evelyn had trilled “So Everyone Can Do It!” while plopping a lobster into boiling water from so high that sizzling droplets stung her arms, and John’s face below her. He flinched; she did not.

There are two Evelyn Barrs, and they share a body during filming—the way a duck sits serenely on the surface of a pond while kicking in a frenzy below, tempting snapping turtles. But when the cameras go off, the two Evelyns take turns. She is a beaming, cooing chef with her fans, when the studio tours bring them through. Little old ladies with vinyl purses clutched in two gloved hands—always concerned that their grandsons will be drafted to Vietnam, always managing to bring it up (John ducking their sympathetic looks, 4-F on account of asthma that hasn’t really bothered him since he was a teenager except in making him look, accurately, like a wimp); or else kids bored on a field trip who perk up at the sight of her, not because they enjoy her show but because they recognize her as *from TV* and thus *famous*, the way they would the weatherman; or else a surprising

number of bashful young men, who John had at first assumed were there for an eyeful—Evelyn is still young, and striking, over six feet tall and broad-shouldered, which he knows is some guys’ thing—but who turn out overwhelmingly to want cooking advice themselves, more earnest and more confused and even somehow less concerned with the draft than the little old ladies. Evelyn smiles beatifically as she poses for pictures and signs autographs and says “Mm, sounds delicious! I’ll have to try that,” at every wacky substitution or recipe (invariably passed down from an ancestor) these people lovingly pitch. But when no fan’s eye is trained on her, whether directly in the studio or via the cameras that broadcast her show live to public TV stations across the country, the other Evelyn takes over. Off-camera Evelyn slumps and cusses and smokes like a chimney. She glowers. Not as an absolute rule, but unless you expressly give her news she sees fit to smile about—ratings, mostly—that’s it on the motherly grin.

“Now isn’t that perfect,” Evelyn says, and turns so the toes of her shoes are angled towards John. He knows that this means she is oriented towards Camera 1, that the counter is clear enough to show on TV. He lowers the plate and moves the half-full bucket beside him to between his knees, shakes the new trash onto the pile. He is careful not to clang the dish and bucket together.

“Once you’ve got your stuffing ready,” Evelyn is saying, “you’ll want to spoon it into your shells. Fill them right up to the tippy top—*stuff* them, remember. Oh, look how nice that looks, the bacon and pepper and celery showing through. That’s what’s lovely about this recipe, you really see what you’ve worked on, not like in stuffing a turkey where it gets hidden away.”

John heaps his bucket with a potpourri of compost—stray flakes of parsley garnishing gristly quahog hinges and onion skin, eggshells and scraps of wax paper. *Eat up*, he thinks.

He listens as Evelyn tells *Cook New England* viewers to shape little hollows in the center of each stuffie and nestle a pat of butter in each one. “Sprinkle a little lemon juice,” she says—John closes his eyes and raises his dish, ready to receive the spent rinds and seeds—and Parmesan; a nice piece of bacon; a little paprika. Isn’t that beautiful?” John has noticed that she does this often, asks her silent audience to agree with her. They must, because *Cook New England* is the network’s flagship program, but John has only ever watched it accidentally, with his father and Natalie and Steve, when it’s on in a dressing room before a wedding gig. “Jesus, what is this cow up to now,” is his father’s basic refrain, which he shouts over Natalie’s vocal warmups while tuning his guitar—and then retuning John’s bass, perennially convinced he’d done it wrong—and John winces every time

Evelyn poses a question to her viewers. He knows she's giving people like his father an opening to heckle. *I'll tell you what'd be "beautiful,"* John hears him saying now, squeezing his eyes shut in an attempt to shut out the voice. *A woman half your size, sweetheart, fixing us some real food so we didn't have to settle for the TV version.* Steve would laugh, swilling beer—and so would Natalie, decking herself out in sequins and mascara between shots of whatever was cheapest, who seemed to see herself as so different from Evelyn Barr that jokes about the one couldn't possibly offend the other. The three of them just drinking buddies with a chore to do, loosening up with their own reception before going on to play some couple's first dance in a hotel ballroom; backyard arbor; multi-purpose room at a volunteer firehouse.

But some part of Natalie must have heard the clumsy jokes, insults, loose-fisted swings. She must have taken offense at something—or just soaked in it slowly like John had, disgust with his life developing in him like a photo in a darkroom. Natalie must have understood, or else why would she have given him the studio's number, her roommate's brother's name. "He says they need an assistant on that Barr's show," she'd said on the night that felt to both of them like the last straw, dabbing hydrogen peroxide on John's cheek after they'd put his father to bed—one of those early afternoon weddings where the party goes on twice as long, gets twice

as wild. “They haven’t even advertised it yet, so you’d be the first person they interview.” Natalie has a good voice; it’s a voice that makes you listen.

John would dearly love to forget the look on his father’s face when he’d told him he was quitting the band, when he’d had to clarify that his “job in television” was being assistant to “that woman who cooks”—the show his father had once called “porn without the sexy parts.”

Evelyn’s real voice hovers on the edge of John’s awareness in the darkness. He is not ready to open his eyes yet; it always takes a minute or two to shake off his dad’s ghost. “Now,” Evelyn is saying, “you’ll want to bake these at 350 degrees for about fifteen minutes, or until—”

Too late, John realizes she’ll be turning from the counter to put the tray of stuffies into the oven and take out the pre-made example of the final product. He opens his eyes and stiffens to attention just in time to see, but too late to prevent, Evelyn kicking the scrap bucket so it rolls across the tile floor with a metallic clatter, scattering garbage in a wide arc.

The sound rings in John’s ears, his hands frozen in helpless claws in front of him. The compost on the floor; the vomiting bucket; his stupid sad-sack carcass in his cheap, half-dismembered tux are all still out of the viewers’ sight, but the bang and roll—the great Evelyn Barr stopping mid-

sentence and looking, for the first time John knows of, at her feet—all of this this goes out live on national television.

John is fired. John is dead. John will be melted down and used to season off-camera Evelyn's cast iron pans.

“Ooh, clumsy me!” Evelyn says, and her voice turns conspiratorial. “That’s why you want to be alone in the kitchen, if you can help it. So, fifteen minutes, or until they’re nice and browned on top.” The spring-creak of the oven opening, closing. More banter. Cooing satisfaction at the browned and steaming stuffies. John’s heart beats like a rabbit’s. He will have to go back to the band. He can never go back, not like it was. He will always be the kid who tried to leave.

“There you have the stuffed quahog, so anyone can do it,” Evelyn says. The theme song begins to fade in under her voice. John knows that Rachel Katz is making it happen, can see her in the music: her headphones and dark red nails on the soundboard controls, following her cues. Just one of tens of people here doing their jobs correctly. “Have a delicious week,” Evelyn finishes, “and we’ll see you next time on *Cook New England*.”

“We’re clear,” comes the voice of Greg the AP, and then, “son of a *fuck*, kid.”

John experiments with staying on the floor. He curls into a slightly tighter ball.

Three sharp raps on his head, old-fashioned and shaming—the pain feels like it comes from the top of a cane, pewter molded into the head of a snarling animal. John’s vision starbursts and he looks up. Evelyn Barr looms above him, her knuckle still raised. “Good morning,” she says, sugar laced with ant poison.

John is still too far inside the bunker in his head to do anything but play the script. “Good morning,” he says, automatically.

“Nope,” Evelyn says. It is impossible, at least for John, to gauge what she is thinking. Her tone is many-flavored.

Stomping vibrations in the floor announce AP Greg before he arrives, shorter than Evelyn but still towering over John. His tie has come loose from its clip again; it swings out over John’s head. “What in the fuck was that about?” he says.

“I’m sorry,” John says. “It was an accident. I got distracted.”

Evelyn cuts across Greg. “Clean it up,” she says. “Then you better take a walk. Be back in fifteen for dinner and second show. Back and *awake*.”

For a moment John thinks his ears might still be ringing from her knock. He isn't fired. He gets another chance.

As John leans forward on his knees to sweep crumbs and scrapings back into the bucket, AP Greg finishes what he'd started to say. "If you get too distracted to do this, you're gonna have a tough life," he says. "I mean, name me one job in the goddamn world easier than yours."

Wedding band bassist, John tries out in his head, his ears so hot they *feel* red. He did that for five years, and he never poured a bucket of garbage over anyone's marriage. In fact, he was usually the most sober person on stage, more focused than his dad and Natalie and Steve—Steve a particular nightmare, a drunk drummer taking the tempo on a spiritual journey where none could follow.

But no. The band had not been easier; it had been terrible, a job that made him spend almost every waking minute with his dad, a black hole without role models or progress, just John and three decaying bullies. Every wedding the same after a while: the drunken rote empty best day of someone else's life.

This is better. John experiments with the assertion. Here people make enough money to run their own lives; here people learn new skills and

advance over time and do work they can be proud of. Here people get fan mail. He cups his hand around a clod of egg-soaked bread crust. Lemon juice stings the raw places where he has gnawed his nails too close to the quick. He pulls back and flutters his hands, trying to shake the pain. “What the fuck are you doing now?” Greg asks from across the set. *This is better*, John repeats. He can tell because he is afraid of being fired; he is not afraid to come to work.

His knees creak as he stands. He knows that this is not supposed to happen yet. Just like he’s too young to be “unfit for service.” Maybe hard living with the band has aged him prematurely. He drags the bucket of twice-collected garbage to the industrial dumpster-cans at the edge of the studio.

“Sorry, man,” says a voice from the door. “That sucked.”

Between upending the bucket and hearing its contents hit the bottom of the can with a wet flop, John looks at the man leaning in the doorway: draft-dodger hair past his shoulders, wavy but fine; trimmed goatee; face in a sympathetic wince that is probably mockery. Draft-dodger shirt, too, wide collar unbuttoned maybe one button too far. In his thirties, John guesses—too old for this hippie style. He wears suspenders made of a beige, ratty elastic that makes them look like undergarments, makes John feel like he

should look away. And then a splash of neon catches his eye and he almost drops the bucket into the dumpster after its contents.

Instead of pants, the suspenders are holding up a set of lime green legs, fabric-covered foam thick enough that they have no visible shape or joints. As the hippie leans in the doorway, one ankle crossed over the other, they overlap like two stalks. The legs are so bright they almost glow, and ringed with slightly—only very slightly—darker green stripes. They end in two huge three-toed feet, each toe decorated with an orange nail.

“Uh,” John stares. “Um.”

The man laughs, or must—from somewhere on the periphery of John’s awareness laughter peals, and he cannot think of anyone else in the world who would express joy in his presence. The man performs some mysterious maneuver inside the legs so that one plush green ankle rolls, almost coquettish, its toes wiggling as if alive. John jumps, squeals a little.

“Trash kid!” AP Greg shouts. John whips around, flinches, but Greg is across the set. “Bring the bucket back or scram. You’re wasting your break and I’m sick of looking at you.”

When John turns to slink out for a pointless, sweaty lap around the parking lot, the hippie with the monster legs is gone.

He stomps around the asphalt in a tight circle, wishing he had a car to get into and drive away—or maybe just run the fan and listen to the radio. Just a pocket of space that doesn't belong to anyone else; a door that locks. But the van is his dad's, technically, and the band needs it for sound equipment and for spite. It had felt like it belonged to John, but they only let him drive it to gigs so they could drink. Turns out mistaking bitchwork for responsibility gets you riding the bus to a new job where the categories are much more distinct.

John checks his watch. An hour for dinner, and an hour to reset for the West Coast broadcast. It would be an easy mistake, he knows, to think of it as a second chance, a do-over. He fucked up on the important coast, and AP Greg has the memory of an elephant for fuckups. And Evelyn is mysterious, which is the only thing worse than mean in a boss.

John is a few steps from the studio door when the half-monstrous hippie bursts out of it back into the hallway. "There you are!" he says.

John slows his walk, shuffles sideways in an attempt to clear the hallway. Outgoing strangers always make him feel like he is being mugged.

The hippie takes a few steps toward him. The green legs bend and straighten, knee dimples forming in the foam and disappearing. The guy

brandishes two paper sacks, their bottoms stained with grease. “I got your dinner,” he says. “You need a place to eat it?”

“No,” John says, trying to decide if this man is harmless-crazy or dangerous-crazy. “That’s my studio.” He points with his head, trying to lean around the hippie.

The hippie kicks one three-toed foot out behind him like a startled horse, smacking the door hard enough to swing it open. Before it bangs shut again there’s a belligerent slice of AP Greg and Evelyn talking over each other about script edits—at the creak of the door-spring, Greg interrupts himself “who the *fuck* is—” and the rest is lost as the soundproof seal reforms.

The hippie starts down the hall, shaking the paper bags at arm’s length like bait, and John follows because he is a follower, because his known options are awful, and because the man with the monster legs has stolen his dinner.

“How’d you get food?” John asks as they round a corner. “It’s just supposed to be for the crew.”

“I asked nicely.” The man raises his eyebrows in a flutter, like Morse code.

“Asked *who* nicely?” John struggles to think of anyone on *Cook New England’s* crew who would respond to charm. The guy is either famous, some eccentric studio bigwig that John should be embarrassed he doesn’t recognize, or else crazy and stealthy enough to sneak through set and steal two crew dinners without getting caught, even in this outfit.

John gives up.

The man opens a door on their left, bending one green-foam knee against it, and they spill into another studio—black box, tape markers on the floor, the raw-wood backsides of set pieces. Compared to the *Cook New England* set it looks like a theater, John thinks; it looks—feeling some slurry of comfort and panic—like a stage.

“C’mere,” his abductor says, padding around a plywood screen. “Until dinner’s up,” he says. “Let them cool down over there.”

Around the corner: three brownstones with steps like medieval fortifications; brick-and-cement gardens making low, flat-topped walls; a stretch of sidewalk so clean it looks fresh-poured.

“It’s that kids’ show,” John realizes, running a finger over the flat plane of a brick wall backdrop. Plaster. “With the puppets. *Jumble—uh—Jumble Junction.*”

“Big fan, huh?” The hippie scoffs, not unkindly, and lowers himself onto one of the fake stoops. “Sit anywhere but there and there,” he says, pointing. “Anything else should hold you up.”

“So you’re a, a puppet,” John says, sitting on the steps of the building next door. There might be room to share the same stoop, but not without knocking knees.

“I perform Lonzo, yeah,” the hippie says. John doesn’t know who or what that is, but he can tell he’s supposed to. The hippie snaps open his paper bag, wiggles his fingers before reaching in for his sandwich—like it’s a magic trick.

It’s just turkey on rye—“just because it’s a cooking show doesn’t make this a restaurant,” AP Greg said on John’s first shoot day—but there’s avocado spread thin on the bread, and enough herbed mayonnaise to stain the bags, and a cheese so nice that John doesn’t know what it is. *Fuck you, Greg*, he thinks, eating a quarter of his sandwich in one bite. *This is fancy.*

“What’s your name?” the hippie asks. He has avocado in his goatee.

“John.”

The hippie's eyes light up, his cheeks bulge with sandwich as he smiles. "Me too!" he says, and reaches across the stoop divider to rest an overdramatic hand on John's shoulder. "It's fate."

"It's not fate, it's just confusing" John says. "Plus maybe the most common—"

"Don't fret," the other John says. "I go by JP."

"Okay," John says. He flicks at a fingernail. He is not an idiot, and so he is embarrassed. JP is clearly a powerful player on his own show—John would never lounge around the *Cook New England* set like he owned the place—and by the strange math of the studio hierarchy (so much more complicated than a band, where it's all checks and balances between the guitar and drums), this weirdo might as well be John's boss.

JP considers the rest of his sandwich, puts it down, picks it up again. "These are good," he says, stupidly.

This makes John feel braver. "Where's the rest of you?" he asks, nodding at JP's legs. "Your costume?"

"Hanging up in back." JP flexes his feet. "I don't mind the bottoms; it's easier this way than climbing back in after every break. But the head would give me heatstroke."

John tries to think of a way to ask to see the top half of the costume without admitting that he has no idea what JP's character looks like. He still can't decide if he should be star-struck, and if so how much. This must be how grade-school kids feel when they meet Evelyn, he thinks—except that those kids would know Lonzo, whatever it is, blindfolded. “What’s it like inside?” he asks, because it seems like a safe bluff of a question. “How does it work?”

JP straightens his back and, so fast it startles John, raises one arm high above his head, fingers pinched together around the last of his sandwich like he's working a sock puppet. The movement is fluid, and it's clear that JP has spent many hundreds of hours this way—like this bizarre posture is somehow the way he's most comfortable. “Hey, John,” he says, in an outrageous voice that belongs to someone else, someone otherworldly—something like a five-year-old DJing drive-time radio. He flaps his hand in time to the words, and the sandwich falls into his lap. “Fuck,” he says, in his normal voice, and picks it up.

John stares at the empty space where JP's hand had been, trying to imagine a costume, a creature with a mouth that high up. He gives himself the creeps. He feels like he might as well have encountered the real thing.

An alien sensation: casual, bizarre virtuosity. “I should probably go,” he says. “What time is it? I should probably go.”

“Sure thing.” JP points, as if to remind John where the door is.

“Thanks,” John says. “For letting me, you know, hang out.”

JP reaches to shake his hand. It’s soft and dry, surprisingly so. John avoids the swipe of mayonnaise on his index finger. “Us behind-the-scenes guys have to stick together,” JP says.

“You’re not behind the scenes,” John says. His conviction is out of proportion to his knowledge of JP’s work, but the demonstration of Lonzo’s inner workings was so professional, so gripping.

JP’s face cracks into a grin. “Neither were you, today,” he says. “Your big break!”

He is still laughing as John shuts the door behind him. “See ya!” he calls.



All weekend it drives John crazy. He has to know.

Jumble Junction is on for the first time at 7:00 a.m. Monday. It plays again at 3:00, probably so it can catch kids at the beginning and end of their days. John can't imagine the viewers pulling the early shift—toddlers up too early for preschool; rural kids who have to be at the end of their half-mile driveways by 7:30 to make their bus; their dead-eyed moms—but he's glad they're a significant demographic, because he has to be at the studio by 9:00. A broadcast this early also means his dad won't be up yet, and John won't have to navigate turning on the network with him in the room. Not an option. It's not just the ridicule that would come from being caught watching a babies' show (no nostalgia here; when John was the right age for this, he and his dad were newly on their own, and the television never seemed to occur to either of them as a way to spend their time). Some other part of John knows he is tuning in to prove his father wrong. His dad thinks there's nothing at the network worth respecting; John needs to see JP in action. Maybe he's a genius. Maybe it's objective.

John pours a stickey cup of coffee and turns on the set, kicks a pizza box off the loveseat and sits.

The fake street where John and JP ate their dinner appears onscreen, the brownstones and their low walls fading into background for the characters—candy-colored puffs of fur and painted plastic, wide mouths

flapping with tongues painted on black felt. They're doing skits, little manic mini-scenes, lots of cutting in between. After getting almost used to *Cook New England's* format, it's odd to see something that isn't live-to-tape—so many different sets; a change of scene every minute or two. John slurps his coffee and watches quick bursts of surreal animation, mellow songs set to footage of the world outside the studio: grass and trees and water. None of it makes much sense to John. *Kids are weird*, he thinks. He considers idly that in a show with this format, his job wouldn't even exist.

There's another jump cut onscreen, and it's immediately clear which character is Lonzo. The other puppets have been tiny, stuffed-animal sized, “standing” behind the low walls so their puppeteers can crouch below and work them.

But Lonzo—JP—is huge, a mountain in electric green with a big bearish face (muzzle, ears) and purple eyelids, feathery eyelashes that float when he moves his head. He sits up straight on the brownstone's stoop and talks, laughs in that crazy voice. He has one hand resting on his knee while he gestures with the other—John guesses that the left arm must be an empty shell, misdirection while JP works the right hand and the mouth. But suddenly Lonzo groans, lifts both hands in exasperation. “Holy shit,” John breathes, imagining the mechanics. Magic. The costume is an instrument.

Lonzo is talking to a child actor, a kid with too much hair and a striped shirt. John wonders whether the kids know it's JP in there. Whether they think Lonzo is real. He would, if he were a kid. He almost does now.

Above them on the stoop there's a middle-aged woman whose expression reminds John of Natalie when she's giving advice or putting his father to bed. The face, he guesses, of someone reasoning with a child.

"You don't need to hide if you're upset, Lonzo," the woman is saying by the time John starts paying attention to the words. "I'm sure Bryce would have been happy to talk about what was bothering you." The child actor nods ferociously, hitting even his silent lines too hard. "And you know I'm always here if you need a grown-up."

"Huh, I guess I never thought of it that way," Lonzo says.

"Come on," the kid—Bryce—says. "Let's go see what's happening at the playroom."

"Ok," Lonzo says, and gets to his feet in a fluid motion—John tries to imagine the labor, the athleticism, the artistry happening inside the suit. "I'll race you!" Lonzo says, and shuffle-runs off-camera with Bryce already well ahead, whatever dispute they'd had blown in and out like summer

weather. The neighbor lady watches them go, smiling, and then it cuts to a rainbow of child actors singing about tying shoes.

John sloshes coffee across the carpet as he sets the mug down and sprints to gather his work clothes before the segment is over. He dresses, brushes his hair, finishes what's left of his coffee in front of the TV. He tries to tie his Windsor knot by touch so he doesn't have to look away. He has to run for his bus.



Non-filming days are even more boring, the show office a windowless coffin wallpapered in loose-leaf notes. Filing donations, updating records, stuffing envelopes. Paper cuts and blurred vision. And Greg and Evelyn still around any corner, lying in wait.

Today he is typing a transcript of last week's show—they're scripted, but Evelyn always riffs, and they need a clean, official copy for the files. John spools the fresh tape forward and back, freezing a restarting Evelyn in the middle of a thousand different cheerful sentences about clams, and

types. He has been hoping that he gets better at this part of the job. He has not yet.

“Hey, it’s you!” inserts itself between playbacks of *isn’t that beautiful?*

John jumps, takes his finger off the pause button.

JP crosses the office in two strides and bounces onto the desk, swinging his feet. He’s in jeans and sneakers this time. Chicken legs. “She’s not here, huh?” He cranes around a filing cabinet.

“Evelyn?” No, she’s in a meeting with Greg and... people, I think.”

“Why aren’t you there?”

John shrugs, jerks his head at the screen—and realizes as he does so what’s coming up.

It’s not as bad on TV, of course, as it felt when he was curled up on the floor. Just a clang, the hitch in Evelyn’s speech and gait, her eyes following the bucket as it rolls. She saves it, as she always does, and John is invisible, as he always is.

“Not so bad,” JP says. “For an acting debut.”

“Hey,” John remembers, uncrumpling from his full-body cringe. “I saw you this morning on TV. *Jumble Junction*.”

JP snorts. “Gee, it’s true fans like you who keep—”

“No, seriously,” John says. “You were really good. You made it look easy, working the,” John mimes ineffectually. “The suit and all.”

JP rests his hand on his lapel. “Thanks, man,” he says, Evelyn Barr’s wrap-up warble in the background. “I appreciate you saying that.” He feints a swipe at John’s bangs and stands. “Look out, you’re losing your tape,” he says, nodding at the screen.

John looks in time to see Evelyn’s smiling face blip out into the end credits, scrolling by over stock B-roll of her hands in the kitchen. John jumps to catch the tape before his name rolls by. JP has filled him with inspiration to do the best he can at a job that means something, but all he has to do his best at is this. He rewinds. Anxiety crests.

“Tell her I said hi!” JP says.

“Yeah, okay,” John snorts, but he is too focused on finding where his transcript left off, and again he misses JP’s exit.

From then on, JP haunts the periphery of John’s world. He is most often glimpsed in doorways—either ghosting across them on his way to somewhere else, flared pants or neon foam-rubber powerwalking down the hallway, or else leaning on the doorframe, pulling a face at John when he catches his eye. They snatch quick conversations. Twice more, when Evelyn

has a meeting during the break and doesn't enforce crew dinner, JP invites John to the *Jumble Junction* set to eat.

It is too strange and John is too new to know whether things have always been this way—whether he and JP are friends or whether JP has always been a flitting presence at the edge of *Cook New England's* production. Between living with and working for and partying with the band, John has not made a real choice about his social life since he was a child. He doesn't know if he's making one now. Nobody is making him pay attention to JP, but it doesn't *feel* voluntary. He can't look away.

One day, deep in the paranoia-breeding solitude of stuffing pledge drive campaign envelopes, John begins to wonder whether he is the only person who can see JP; whether there's a reason he's never seen him interact with anyone else. But then on his next trip through the studio JP high-fives Rachel Katz, and John feels a private embarrassment that will resurface in an involuntary wince from time to time for the rest of his life.

At home, John watches JP work. He catches most of the 7:00 broadcast of *Jumble Junction* before he heads to the studio in the morning. On weekends, if his dad is at a gig, he sleeps late and indulges in the afternoon rerun. He settles into this routine: head down at home, avoiding his father; head down at work, avoiding Evelyn and Greg and the eye of

the camera. JP is a bright spot to focus on, a relief and an inspiration. Crouching behind the counter on set or sitting fully dressed in his bedroom, waiting for his father to lock the front door behind him before he starts his Saturday, John imagines having JP's confidence, his expertise. John would like more than anything to wear his vocation like a suit, so easily and with such pride that he can leave it on while he talks to friends, to strangers, to his father. John would like to be sure of himself. John would like to be the same person in every room he walks into, and he would like that person to be someone he is proud of, someone skilled and brave and in charge of something. He would like to be JP.



Afterwards, John will remember this time as a fugue state, a single moment of confusion impossibly suspended. For a solid chunk of time he is charmed, starry-eyed, and the hazards of his life—work, Evelyn, Greg; home, his dad, the band; the future—all whiz by like bullets ruffling his hair. It lasts three weeks. In part this is random chance; in part it is because three weeks is how long it takes John to get lazy.

It is 3:30 on a Saturday, right in the middle of the afternoon broadcast, when John's dad and Steve bang through the front door carrying half of Steve's drum kit between them. John is in sweatpants and an undershirt, lying across the loveseat with his feet over one arm and his head over the other, watching *Jumble Junction* sideways. On screen, Lonzo is learning how to make candied apples. John is in a stupor of respect, which keeps him from scrabbling to the TV controls before it is too late.

“What the fuck are you watching?” Steve asks first, setting down his cymbals in their soft case—*clish*. “Hey, man,” he adds, shifty. Already he regrets drawing attention to the TV. Steve has not been sure how to treat John since he left the band, but his discomfort is scaffolding around an honest intention not to hurt anyone's feelings, and John is grateful for it. They're all caught in his dad's orbit, at the end of the day.

“Hey,” he says, struggling—to sit upright in the loveseat, to find an answer to Steve's question. “Hey, Steve. Dad. Hey.”

John's dad sets a snare and a bag of hand percussion in the corner. He shuffles to the kitchen, breaks the seal on the refrigerator with a soft *smek*.

Steve and John watch, waiting for a cue. In the background, a sing-song chorus of child actors and puppets—JP's Lonzo voice among them—

recite a rhyme about believing in yourself. John's fingers itch to dial down the volume, but he doesn't move.

His dad emerges with two cans, tosses one to Steve. His tab comes free with a metallic rip and gush of foam; he drops it into the sink. He takes a pull of his beer and stares at the scene in the living room, using the peninsula counter like a shield against whatever he decides he's looking at.

Steve scrubs the back of his neck. John sinks into the loveseat, eyes peeking over its back.

"Yeah," John's dad says, as though the conversation has not been padded with thirty seconds of silence. "What *are* you watching?"

"It's for work," John says, finding a way for it to be true.

His father drinks again. "You're not on that cooking lady anymore? You get demoted to the short-bus show?"

"No," John says, with a narrower reach than he means. "I know one of those guys. That one." He points at Lonzo.

"There's a guy in there?" Steve asks. "Weird," he says. "Fuck. Weird, man." He squints at the screen, tilts his head sideways. John thinks he can see Steve almost getting it, the way JP's virtuosity mesmerizes. It's a drummer's game, John thinks—dividing your body into discrete parts,

pumping different controls at the same time to add yourself back together into something bigger. Steve could get it, John thinks.

But Steve is not his own master any more than John is, or Natalie, and as long as John's dad is in the room it does not matter who keeps the beat or who is holding him up or who has technically quit the band—John's dad is in charge. And he doesn't see the artistry. He says, "You know the guy in *that* suit? The green thing?"

John nods once.

His dad turns an ear, cocks an eyebrow.

"Yeah," John says.

His dad seems to settle back into a denser mass. "Be careful," he says. "Bet you anything he wants to fuck you."

It feels like the loveseat is falling out from under John; he digs his fingers in to the arm. "What?" he says. "No."

Steve glugs from his can. All the energy in the tiny house eddies around Steve, the sole audience member for a rigged cage match. John and his father are both overflowing with things to prove, and Steve is the only person around to be convinced of anything.

“You know what a puppet is, right?” John’s dad says. “You know how they work?” He slides one hand up behind the other.

“*Dad,*” John says.

“*And,*” his dad says, “*and,* this shit is for kids.” He flips open a cabinet, takes down a can of roasted peanuts. “So he’s probably getting off on that too. I mean, all of them,” he gestures towards the screen, knocks back a handful of nuts. “I mean, it’s a known thing,” he says, crunching. “You read about it. You better be careful, a skinny piece of ass like you. And you cook, now. This guy probably thinks Christmas came early.”

Steve makes a noise that sounds only half-voluntary, something that could have started as a laugh or an objection but got strangled on the way out.

This is not how John pictured it happening—not like this, not over *Jumble Junction*, not on a Saturday afternoon with Steve watching. Not in daylight, not with his father clear-eyed and precise. But part of him knew it would happen somehow, and here it is. This is his father showing him how it is; this is his punishment for thinking he could quit. And it begins to work, a tug in his gut, hooked. John would like to be someone like JP, for himself. But he *has* to be someone his father approves of; he has to try. He

has cared too much about it for too long to give up, even though he wants to. “It’s not like that,” he says, thin and tight. “He’s not like that. He’s just—it’s just a guy I work with.”

His dad shrugs. In John’s ears it has a sound like breaking glass. “Watch your back is all,” he says. “Steve, bass drum?”

“Yeah, I gotcha.” Steve drains his beer, rubs his palms on his jeans. The two men head for the door. On his way by the loveseat, John’s dad reaches to run his hand over John’s cheek, wiping condensation from his beer in a slick of malt sweat across John’s face. “Watch out,” he says again, and he is close enough this time for John to see his eyes flash. “Those queers getcha, don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

Barely hauling back, with a control that might make it look almost affectionate to Steve and a speed that might make him miss it either way, John’s dad boxes his ear—a cuff that for all John knows *would* feel playful to a tougher man, one who could hold his booze and get into the Army and stand up to, or else to be around, the man attached to the fist. JP might not have felt it.

The thought sours, and John swallows a squeak of pain. “Need help?” he asks over the buzz in his ear.

“Gotta be vigilant.” The door shuts on his dad’s mutter.

John huddles in the loveseat and tries to strategize. He wants desperately to leave. But they’ll know, if he does. The darkened TV, his closed bedroom door—or worse, truly leaving, having to pass them in the driveway—they’ll know they scared him off.

But if he stays—if he finishes the show (already wrapping up, glazed and misty version of the final segment), if he sits in front of whatever comes on next just to make a point—he will confirm something terrible about himself in his dad’s eyes. *Yes*, he will be saying. *I am this person.*

He can’t think. His ear hurts. He can’t decide what he wants to say, and to whom, let alone how to signal it.

In the end, his paralysis decides for him. He sits in the loveseat, stiff, sightless, as *Jumble Junction* ends and a toothless travel show begins and his father and Steve come in and out and in and then disappear into the backyard with a carton of cigarettes and the rest of the cold beer. If they acknowledge him, John doesn’t hear it. He is lost in his own mind, playing back tape of every conversation with JP. Soft focus in his memory that makes him curdle with shame, now. The edges warp, JP twisting and shifting. Puppetry is the art of manipulation. And beneath disgust, fear,

embarrassment, the undercurrent of John's admiration still tugs. Silent, rigid, he windmills for balance.

When he comes to, it is night, his father and Steve off at their gig. He eats the rest of the can of peanuts for dinner, drinks three warm beers from the pantry to put himself under again. The sugar wakes him in the wee hours, and through a festering headache he runs it all back again.



On Sunday, he walks twelve aimless miles—bitter and black, his heels blistered, then bloody, then raw.

He gets maybe two hours of sleep, segmented and fitful. His teeth ache. He knows he is an idiot, but he cannot decide why, cannot decide which part of himself to amputate.

He rides the bus to the studio on Monday because it is what he is supposed to do, for now. While he decides.

It is a filming day, a new episode. Pie. Lemon meringue—jellied yellow base, fluffed peaks on top like frozen whitecaps. Evelyn and AP Greg have

big plans for this—the Maine Blueberry Pie episode is one of their most popular in reruns.

John slumps behind the counter with his bucket, his dish. He stares at the tile while Evelyn coos a preamble about French settlers in New England, about Arcadia and Woonsocket and a million other things that John can't imagine having the brainpower to care about. He feels almost drunk—confused and unfiltered with lack of sleep, stress. In danger; dangerous. He stares in to the scrap bucket: lemon rinds and eggshells. Why, he wonders, does so much of Evelyn's food leave behind the same detritus? How can there be lemons in everything she makes when he's never bought one in his life?

He is not listening to her drone. She drops a damp rag into his lap. He was supposed to reach for it after she wiped the counter free of flour. This is a warning. He picks up the rag and arranges it in the scrap bucket as if covering a picnic, red-and-white checkered cloth over a wicker basket. *Pay attention*, screams half of his brain. He considers it with a slow blink, trying to decide if it is the right part of him.

Movement in the corner of John's eye, at the edge of the studio. A flash of—yes—no—neon green. He starts to straighten, catches himself. Crouching on his heels, he leans as far as he dares—pressing a cheek flush

to the wood of Evelyn's counter, peering around the side. He is not hiding from the camera now, trained above him. He is hiding from JP: leaning against the wall, wearing Lonzo's legs and watching the show, smile quirking his lips. Imagining, John thinks, him, crouched under the counter.

Storm-surges of pride and revulsion crest and mingle in John. He reels, extends a hand. His knee dips, cracks against the tile, and he rears back to regain his balance, reaches up for anything solid, a reflex—

Clatter of a baking sheet; Evelyn's yelp (off-camera and on-camera Evelyn battling in her voice, clawing to the surface); something heavy resists John's pull, then gives. He sits down heavily and watches as beside him on the floor the pie seems to bloom straight from the tile—smashed shards of glass and electric yellow goo and frothy meringue. He hears the crash—late, more in his gut than in his ears. Everything else is muffled.

He gathers his feet under him and stands.

Rachel with her fingers poised over the soundboard, mouth hanging open. AP Greg in the midst of an aneurism. Dark eyes of Camera 1 and Camera 2 unable to blink, their operators looking to each other for help, desperate. In the heart-stopping silence that follows breaking glass John is broadcast across the East Coast, cheap suit and stricken expression, hair

unmoored across his forehead. Dollops of meringue on his shoulder and in his hair, like seafoam on a monster of the deep. A tremor shakes his fingers; *ta-da*. He does not look at JP.

Evelyn is a pillar of fire beside him. She laughs, calling up the sound from some memory of real amusement. John blinks, toggles his head in a nod. A trickle of blood runs between his knuckles; he brushes the sliver of glass from his hand. He walks off set.

Evelyn is speaking again behind him—whether trying to explain him or dropping the needle back into the script, he doesn't know and couldn't tell if he tried. He finds the door, walks a straight line towards it.

AP Greg looms beside him like a mugger in an alley, death in his eyes, already hissing something poisonous at John—but there's a flurry of movement and a whispered counterattack, JP rushing in like a linebacker just ahead of John. "Give us a minute," JP says under his breath, reaching behind and feeling for John's sleeve. "Just give him a minute." This John hears. He lets JP drag him from the room, follows dazed down the hallway.

The *Jumble Junction* set is different this time, an outdoor scene (AstroTurf, painted sky, those same low brick walls). JP tries to prop John

on one of the walls; he slides down onto the fake grass, leans against the painted brick.

“So,” JP says, sitting cross-legged on the grass and studying him. Lonzo’s feet flare at his sides. “Holy shit.”

John is blank.

“You got something going on?” JP asks.

John shrugs, like—he can feel it—like a toddler. Stinging eyes and wet lip. He scrunches his face, presses harder against the wall.

“I think I know what it is,” JP says, gently. “You’re not a behind-the-scenes guy, either.”

Life with the band rears out of a dark lake in John’s mind, wraps a strangling tendril around his ankle. “I’m not a performer,” he gasps, and they feel like his first words.

“You sure?” JP is almost laughing, working not to. “Vaudeville, maybe?” He reaches across to John, flicks a dollop of meringue from his hair.

A shiver. A flinch. “JP.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not a, I’m not gay.”

JP guffaws. “Okay,” he says.

The AstroTurf prickles John’s hands, patterning them crosshatched. He presses back, stares. He sees understanding strike like a match in JP’s face; realizes only then that he has guessed wrong.

“You know,” JP says, slow and careful. “You know I’m Evelyn’s partner.”

“No,” John says. Falling, again. He has been falling for three days. Or he has been falling for three weeks. Or he has always been falling.

JP repositions himself, scoots closer. Striped green knees in the plastic grass. “Why do you think I’m always in her studio?” He stops himself, gentles even further. “Oh,” he says. “Oh. Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lead you on.”

John opens his mouth to say that’s not it at all; he’s relived. The words die on his tongue as though a pin has let the air out of them. He’s stuck for a minute, just stuck.

“It’s okay,” JP says. “You’re gonna end up somewhere good. And until then... it’s still all okay.”

Six years from now, finally tumbling into Wilbur Bradley after another network’s Christmas party in a closet-sized sublet on the Lower East Side,

John will remember this conversation as a seed of permission, JP as the person who taught him to see himself. Now, he spins with vertigo.

There's a knock at the studio door; JP seems to recognize it. He stands, Lonzo's legs unfolding. "I'm gonna let Evelyn in here," he says, and watches John's heart stutter. "She's gonna give you good advice, if you stay. Build you some character." He nods to the shadowy back corner of the room, an illuminated Exit sign. "That's straight out to the parking lot. You want a ten-second head-start?"

"I'll stay," John says. JP nods, heads for the door. "No wait—" he jerks up, trips and stumbles back over the wall just as Evelyn Barr enters. She watches him fall.

JP laughs. "God, you're gonna kill yourself." He helps John up, sets him on the wall. This time John stays up. JP sits beside him. Evelyn stands over them for a long, silent moment, towering in a floral dress and apron. She has a fresh bandage on her index finger.

"Sorry," John says, nodding towards it. He imagines the slice of glass, the shattered pie plate. The end of the episode, dragging itself through the shrapnel to the end credits. His voice is hollow.

Evelyn flexes her fingers, shakes her head. In a languid movement that, being unexpected, still seems sudden to John, she sits and leans against JP like a chaise longue. He holds her up. She reaches back into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes. She lights one, takes a long drag, watching John flush and crumble in on himself at the sight of this new, third Evelyn Barr.

“Do you want me to let them fire you?” she asks, finally.

“What?”

“I mean,” Evelyn taps ash into her hand—*her hand!*—and wipes it on her apron. “I can get you one more chance. But I’m not gonna waste the effort if you just want to go home.”

John doesn’t know if he wants to keep this job, but he knows one thing. “I don’t want to go home.”

“That’s something,” Evelyn says. “Do you have a future in this stuff?”

“I don’t know,” John swallows. “Do you think so?”

“How the hell should I know,” Evelyn says. All I’ve seen you do is drop a pie.” In her shadow, JP gums his lips. He leans harder, pushing Evelyn up. “But holding pie has fuck-all to do with TV, even our show.

And seems to me it's more piss-ant to drop a pie and go home over it than to just drop a pie."

"Well," John says. Evelyn smokes. He is a patchwork of certainty and doubt about whether he is about to cry. "Now—now I *can't* go."

"Then, sounds like you have more of a plan than you did thirty seconds ago. 'Scuse me while I go throw a fit about your value to the organization." Evelyn stands, eyes the set pieces around her, stubs out the cigarette on the concrete of the studio wall. "This is a one-time service," she adds at the door. "You need to get your shit together."

She leaves; the door sucks shut behind her. In the vacuum of her absence, John struggles for breath. In silence the haze of her cigarette hangs in the air, disperses into the air above them.

"You don't know whether that was good or bad, huh," JP says.

John might shake his head. He means to.

"Evelyn is smarter than anyone else you've ever met," JP says. "She's right about everything." He stretches his felt-covered legs across the wall, nudges John with one three-toed foot. "She's right about this."

"Okay," John says, staring.

“You hang out in here,” JP says. “I’m gonna—I’ll see you when you’re ready.”

“Okay.” Again, the door opens, shuts. John lies down, curls sideways on the low wall, knees bent so he fits. He drifts.

For another two years, John will crouch at Evelyn Barr’s feet and pass her offerings, accept her garbage. When her lavalier mic goes out on a filming day, he will hold a padded microphone until his muscles cramp and spasm, loft it over his bowed head so that the world can hear her voice. He will escape home—first to the studio, then to his own closet-sized apartment with a crooked staircase and camp stove, and then out of town, commuting underground to an office overlooking a skating rink. He will never quite be friends with JP and Evelyn—he will be too starry-eyed, too worshipful. He has needed them too desperately to begin again on even footing. He will still be so young. He will turn down JP’s offer to let him try on the Lonzo costume, stammering and red-faced for reasons he won’t fully understand. He will leave, eventually. He will learn what he needs. He will get his shit together. And he will live his life in tribute, as an offering, until he does not remember to whom.

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Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's writing has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *The Common*, *Flyway*, *Fourth Genre*, and elsewhere. Her fiction has been longlisted for *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Brooklyn and is at work on a novel.

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