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AURA

Once a year everyone else hated numbers as much as she did. She faced the pile of bank statements, receipts, 1099s, and W-2s with the comforting certainty that everyone else -- all hundred million or so heads of household (or their spouses) -- felt exactly the same about the columns of numbers. Taxes again. Some people used computers, of course, and some had accountants. She had herself, four sharp pencils, and a pen to ink over the numbers if they ever balanced.

Brad would check them before she inked them. In an ordinary year, he would expect nothing of her but a steady supply of coffee and snacks, and the assembly of the documents, but this year he had orders --doctor's orders -not to bother himself with tax preparation. He was sure she could do the taxes if she tried. He had recovered pretty well from the stroke, but he found it very hard to read. The words, he said, jumped around on the page.

She knew all about that, but with her it was numbers. Letters had graceful shapes, decorative qualities. Words carried with them their meaning smooth and rough, clear and opaque, each word on the page evoking a separate image in her mind. They never tangled themselves up, and best of all no one ever insisted on checking the sum, Numbers . . . she remembered her second-grade teacher slapping a ruler on the desk, and insisting that numbers were simpler than words, that any child who could read so well could surely add. "There's only one right answer," her teacher had said, and she had understood even then why words were better. You could imagine green as any shade of green you wanted . . . it didn't have to be right.

She remembered the trickle of sweat down her sides under her starched dress during flashcard drills, the horrible foreknowledge that she would blurt out the wrong answer and have to sit down, while another child "traveled" to the next desk. The children had laughed; the teacher had scolded her for carelessness; her mother had dragged her to the eye doctor for tests. Her eyes, he'd said, were normal. It was probably an emotional thing, a physical symptom of her dislike of numbers. Most girls, he'd said as he parted her head, didn't like arithmetic. Her mother and the teacher both interpreted this as laziness and deceitfulness, and she'd spent miserable hours with the flash-cards until she passed into third grade.

Now she watched the numbers writhe, the blurred print of Brad's W-2 shimmering so that she could hardly pick out the middle two digits of his Social Security number. Why did they insist on using numbers for identification? She'd have gladly changed her name to something outlandish to ensure uniqueness. And if they had to use them, why couldn't she put her own number? But they demanded his, and there was something even more humiliating about being identified by his number instead of her own. She didn't like it; she never had, and she never would.

She printed Brad's number in the little space, grimly careful, and began filling in the other blanks. Perhaps if she concentrated -- her teachers had emphasized the dangers of daydreaming, of letting her imagination loose where numbers were concerned-- she could get through this. She would treat it as a recipe, a long, complicated old-world recipe, or perhaps directions for reupholstering a couch. First you do this, then that, and at the end it looks like something you could eat, or sit on.

The problem was that she had no picture in her mind of what the completed, perfect tax form should look like. Cookbooks had pictures of those fancy dishes. Sewing books or home decorating books had pictures, pictures of drapes, dresses, furniture. The directions would make sense, because she would know what the end

was . . . if you add sleeves to bodice, and bodice to skirt, you have a dress. If you add filling to meat, and meat to pastry, you have a fancy entree. Numbers had no pictures; she could not see anything in them, no final outcome of all these blanks filled in except a form with its blanks filled in . . . it meant nothing.

She found she'd miscopied the amount of interest income, and erased it carefully. That was wrong of course. Carelessness. It did mean something; it meant if she made a mistake, they would come for her. They would take the money, and the house, and even put her in prison. The page before her shimmered, then went flat; for a moment she could not find the right blank to fill in. Prison was all numbers, like the military. Brad had been in the military; he still said, "By the numbers," sometimes, a kind of joke from those days. She had written him two letters, to addresses full of numbers and letters in a jumbled mix that made no sense. Why, she had asked, couldn't the army have normal addresses? He had laughed.

Doggedly, she poked the calculator's flat-topped buttons. Wrong; she forgot the decimal point. Another wrong; her finger had slipped from the 8 to the 5. She blinked at the bank's form. Was that a computerized 0, or an 8? Hard to read anytime, and now . . . her chest tightened. She took a deep breath, held it, let it out slowly. Eight, or zero? Zero. Eight. The diagonal wavered, became horizontal, wavered back to diagonal, a tiny compass needle leading her the wrong way. She felt pressure in her head; the numbers acquired a sinister aspect on the page, even beyond the threat of taxes, IRS, flash cards. She would have to quit for today; she would have to come back to this later, another time, after a night's rest.

She carried the wineglass carefully by the stem, so that she would not smudge the clean delicate curves with her fingers. It seemed a long way from the kitchen to the dining room. It was the first time she had been trusted to carry anything so breakable. She was setting a holiday table for Aunt Sarah, who wasn't really her aunt, but her mother's best friend in the neighborhood.

She leaned forward between the chairs, enjoying the sound of men's voices speaking a language she did not know, to place the wineglass at the tip of the knife, just as Aunt Sarah had instructed. Strangers had come, friends of Uncle Sam's and Aunt Sarah's, from a time before they'd moved to the brick house on the corner. The men ignored her, as they talked; she expected that, though she didn't like it. Unlike the local men, they wore long sleeves, even in the heat. She wondered about that as she wondered about most things. Had they come from someplace even hotter? One of them, sitting with his back in a blaze of sunlight, had finally unbuttoned his cuffs, and turned them back, so perhaps they felt the heat just as she did.

But the numbers. The numbers on the stranger's arm, funny dark numbers that showed through wiry dark hair. She had never seen that.

She never remembered asking only that she had. Only that Aunt Sarah, for the first and only time, knuckled the back of her neck and dragged her into the next room, hissing fiercely in her ear: "Don't ever ask! Don't EVER ask!" And she remembered the man's face turning toward her, white as his shirt, as white as the cuff turned back so carefully . . . and buttoned down as quickly, emotions she could not understand quickly hidden as the numbers, buttoned snugly under a common face of gentleness and good holiday manners.

She had a headache that night, the kind with blinding flashes of light in her eyes that would not go away, the kind she could not explain to grownups. The next day the grownups explained to her--gently, because she was young (the first time she had been allowed to carry the wineglasses, so carefully, so quietly) about the numbers. They explained again later. They tried not to frighten her. You're lucky, they said. You will never know such things. It's all right. It's

over. He's not angry with you.

But that one sidelong glance, and the feel of loving fingers fastened on the neck of her dress, suddenly harsh, suddenly strange: that could not be undone. She never saw the man again; she was not surprised. He had been angry, she knew, whatever they said; he had been hurt, and it was her fault for being lucky, for being rude, for all the things she had ever done wrong. The headache had been punishment.

The memory cycled endlessly. She remembered the texture of the cloth, the pattern of Aunt Sarah's knives and forks, the feel of the wineglass stem between her fingers, the struggle she had had to walk carefully, not skipping from the kitchen, the dense sunlight streaming in the windows, the smell of the roast and vegetables, the way her foot had bumped the table leg. The dishes that day had pink roses around the rims, not linked blue squares; Aunt Sarah was funny about that, and never used both sets on the table at once.

She remembered the faint clean smell of Uncle Sam's shaving lotion, the men's strong hands gesturing as they talked in that language she had never heard, a language full of blocky, angular sounds. It sounded old, she thought, older than anything she spoke, older than Spanish, or the Latin the priests spoke in her friend Mary's church. She had liked the language, but she had not really liked the other men that much. They were ignoring her. Uncle Sam and Aunt Sarah never ignored her; they had no daughter and she fit neatly between their sons in age. She enjoyed a special position in this house; she often pretended she really was their niece, that she belonged to them. So even though she had been told to leave the men alone to talk, she wished they would all look at her, recognize her as part of the family, even approve of her, as Uncle Sam did.

It was in that context she had leaned forward, flicked a flirtatious glance at Uncle Sam, and asked what she had asked. About the numbers.

She woke sweating from that nightmare again. She never quite heard her own voice, never quite remembered which intolerable words she had used to ask that intolerable question. If she heard herself, she sometimes thought, she could not bear it. She pushed the covers aside, and sat up. Over forty, and still caught in that old disgrace -- ! Ridiculous. Her friends told her that, and had told her that, and still once or twice a year she woke in a panic, like this, with the full weight of it still on her head. She knew, as they did not, that nothing could undo the pain she had given, and if an innocent child could thrust so sharp a sword into so wounded an adult, what hope for adults? What hope for her, who had made so many stupid mistakes, not only that one, and not only from opening her mouth to ask stupid questions . . . though that was, even now, a constant failing.

Brad was asleep; the cry she remembered giving must have been in the dream for he had not stirred. She pushed herself off the bed and blinked hard, trying to see in the darkness. Flickers of light, not quite enough to signal a migraine on its way, but a warning. She found her slippers by feel, and shuffled down the hall, running her hand along the wall. No sound from Lee's room, and none from Tina. They both slept heavily; she'd been lucky that way, too. Glimmers danced in her sight, linking into shapes she didn't want to see. Migraine aura, she reminded herself firmly. It's not really numbers, and certainly not those numbers; she had never been able to remember the numbers, not even when she could see the man's arm, the cigarette in his fingers, and the line at the wrist where the brown hand became the white arm. She could see the fine dark hairs, the white skin below, and the numbers...but not which.

She staggered into the kitchen doorframe, and clung to it. The glimmers twitched, pulsing: with her heartbeat, edging into almost coherent patterns. No longer strings of numbers . . . now they made headlines, glowing in nasty lime-green, of the most stupid or creel things she had ever said, and now

dislimned into portraits of dead faces, green on black. Then they turned gold, brilliant glittering specks of gold that broke crisply into angled patterns, dazzling. Migraine aura. She knew it had to be that, and nothing more . . . even when the gold brightened intolerably, each speck spreading to a wide flake like one lens of an insect's compound eye.

It stared at her, remote and hostile, each lens reflecting her child's face, the two little bows she had worn holding the side-hair back, the lace collar. The child's mouth opened -- her mouth -- and out sped geometric solids of glittering gold, flashing light from each facet, from a numeral etched on each face. Hundreds of mouths, hundreds of solids, hundreds of numbers, sickeningly in motion as the vast insect turned its head. From around the eye jointed antennae sprouted, proliferated, elaborated, into great feather fans that waved toward her.

She turned the light on. She had never seen the room before, this tiled kitchen floor with its glittering reflection, the ominous bulk of some purring alien at her side. She grabbed for safety, and its side came away in her hand; cold air poured over her feet. Re-fri-ger-a-tor floated through her mind in a stuttering sequence, each sound edged with tattered frills of meaning. She leaned toward the light and cold, but it disappeared with a faint thud, exhaling a stale odor of roast and vegetables. All across her vision, the faceted mosaic of gold and black lay between her and the strange room. Then it wavered and vanished, leaving behind only an edge of brightness around each object, a vague shimmer.

She still did not know the room. Or, she told herself, she knew it intellectually, but as an abstraction. She knew the canned peas would be behind that door; she knew her dishes had a pattern of blue flowers on white. It did not interest her, and it held no memories of emotion. Her dishes could have been cream with pink roses, or yellow with a chain of blue squares. The table on which she had served so many meals might have been oblong instead of round. It might have had another cloth on it. The printed pattern of hers, a wreath of green vine leaves, seemed to mock her.

Take your medicine, one comer of her mind told her. Take it now. Medicine. The medicine was down the hall again, in the dark, in the bathroom cabinet. It was locked, she would have to turn on the light to find the key. Brad would waken, and be muzzily sympathetic. In less than a breath, the right side of her face went stiff, she could feel the hardening of that side of her brain, as if someone had poured concrete into her empty skull. Too late now . . . a spike of pain impaled her head. Nausea rolled her stomach. So stupid, she told herself. You should have taken the medicine when you woke Up. She told herself that every time.

She could not have worked on taxes the next day even if the threat of another migraine had not pressed in on her, squeezing her mind to the lining of her skull. She had visitors.

"Do you come from a dysfunctional family?" asked the new rector's wife. They had come to introduce themselves, to I earn "about your needs and how the church can help you," they had said. The rector's wife had the competent air of a good nurse who expects cooperation.

"No . . . not really," She had backed into her chair as far as she could; she flinched inwardly from the rector's wife's expression. They would already know, she supposed. They would already have made their judgments. "My -- uh -- parents were divorced, but aside from that --" That was not something most people could put aside, but she still felt that society's reaction m divorce, especially in school, had done her more harm than the divorce itself. Now it was fashionable to have, come from a dysfunctional family; back then only perfection would do. She distrusted the change in attitude.

"Aahh." A knowing professional sound, judgment made and rendered all in one. Efficient. "Are you all right, really?"

She was all right, really. She had learned to ignore the shimmering edges, the sudden disruption of vision into fragmented, faceted forms (easier, now, with computer graphics so common -- she could tell herself firmly that her visual computer was malfunctioning), even the strangeness that made her own house, her own family, so disturbing. Migraine aura. That's all it was, and the association with a childhood event purely accidental. No alcoholism, no drug addiction, no physical or sexual or emotional abuse. You've got nothing to complain about, said the anonymous voice. You're lucky. Luck being, as it were, her only handicap.

"Really all right," she repeated, hoping it was only once. "Fine." The rector's wife had begun to glitter dangerously; perhaps she would leave before she turned into an abstraction of planes and angles of beaten gold. The rector's wife would be terrifying as an insect, vast and intrusive; she would have grasping claws and the impersonal determination of a mantis dissecting a grasshopper for lunch. She must have said something else, because the rector was talking now, replying, it seemed, to something she had said. Something about her father. She blinked, hoping to resolve the pattern of bright dots and dark ones into something recognizable. The rector had dark hairs on the backs of his hands, and fingernails neatly dipped.

"-- ought to tell him how you feel," the rector said. "Or that's a kind of lying, too, isn't it? Concealing things? One should be honest . . ."

As a child, perhaps, A child craving attention. A child honestly curious. A child putting together those two childish things . . . instead of putting away childish things . . . and thereby releasing . . . whatever she had released. She knew better than to say that; she had said too much already. She walked them from the houses they smiled and waved. They had left their packet of wisdom for her. Honesty, forgiveness, love, wrapped in shining paper with shining ribbons around it. Her mind plucked at the glittering bows.

But it was not hers. It belonged to someone else. She glanced around, feeling unseen eyes. They had been blue, she remembered. Clear blue, and the whites very white, only a slight rim of red at the edge of the eyelid, probably from the smoke. Below his eyes a gray stain of sadness, the flesh sagging away from the bones. He had had one crooked front tooth, and some steel caps when he spoke that reflected points of light. It's not me that won't forgive, she said silently to the car that had long since driven away.

Around her, the gray blocks piled up, neatly, inexorably. The time she had said something about Emily's nose, the time she had snapped at Laura, the time she had lied about the check being in the mail. Days of plenty and peace, days of happiness, days when she had not thought of him at all, each one a gray stone walling her in. Stupid questions, cruel remarks, each a spike fixed in the stones, pointing inward. Clumsiness, inattention, laziness: the complaints of her teachers. Pride, insensitivity, selfishness: the complaints of her spiritual leaders. Hypersensitivity, priggishness: the complaints of her friends.

She looked at her arms, unsurprised to find them covered with blue numbers, zero to infinity, all she had done wrong and failed to do right. Her head shuddered and split into wedges, like a chopped tomato. Each wedge, impaled on a spike, had its own faceted eyes with which to see, and what remained of her voice rose from the soggy puddle of juice at the joining of the wedges. Sorry, it said, in a child's tremulous whisper. I'm sorry. Being sorry is not enough, said the voice she would never quite forget, in the language she had never heard before. She knew the meaning though. She always did.

Her usual reluctance to confront numbers suggested the mail as an escape. A pile

of bills, advertisements, and two magazines. She picked up the magazine and flipped it open.

She had scarcely looked at the picture when her vision blurred; with no warning aura, the migraine invaded, overflowing her skull, pressing cruel thumbs on her eyeballs. She squinted at the magazine anyway. A black and white photograph danced on the page like a clipping on the wind.

Blurred face, sad eyes, lines of age and pain. She could not read the obituary, not really . . . she had never known his name; she had never remembered his profession. This was not the same man, could not be. One word only resolved into letters, quivering. She had seen that name in school, under the pictures of dead men stacked like firewood, a few survivors' masklike faces. Those faces shifted, merged into faces from later pictures, later wars, flickered through her mind in an endless stream: men, women, children, babies, bodies, mouths gaping, eyes wide or closed in death, crowds behind barbed wire, single prisoners bunched in cells, eyes glistening in the camera's flash, staring at her, through the lens and flickering shutter, with that expression she had never forgotten, that disbelief, that horror, that disgust.

The migraine squeezed itself, contracting to a single point of pain in midbrain. She grunted, as if someone had slugged her belly. Nothing was enough, nothing would ever be enough. She thought, as always too late, what she could have said to the rector's smiling wife: "No, not a dysfunctional family. A dysfunctional world."

With the suddenness of a pricked soap bubble, the migraine disappeared, leaving her unbalanced, almost giddy.

She laid the magazine on her desk, atop the piles of bank statements, the half-finished tax return. She felt warm and moist, a loaf of bread new-baked, steaming slightly. While her head was clear, while she could think, she would try to finish the taxes. Such respites, rare proof of the reality of miracles, lasted at most a few hours.

The numbers lay quiet, their meaning leached of danger, no more remarkable than a collection of letters. She fed them into the calculator, copied them, added and subtracted as the directions specified. The result had a certainty she had never associated with numbers, a feeling of solidity so new that it surprised her into noticing.

Tentatively, she let her mind visualize a number: just a number, not a dark mark on white skin. A cascade of them, in the bright pastels of her childhood's books, tumbled over each other, eager as puppies. Little yellow fives, soft lavender fours, orange threes, blue twos, fat white marshmallow ones, no longer scintillating in dangerous light, but docile, friendly, even affectionate. She felt as if she had stumbled into a strange universe where all the familiar rules changed.

In one blinding flash more intrusive than even the migraine, she saw the book itself, its pages smudged and worn at the edges, its pictures simple and innocent and harmless. Her own hand, none too clean (her adult eye recognized grape jelly and peanut butter) spread starfish-wise, her own voice piping "I like one and I like two and . . . that makes three, Mommy!"

So she had not always hated numbers; she had not always been driven to blind panic by the operation of one upon another. Had that panic come from her question, which even now loomed worse than the pain of migraines? She shivered, hoping as always that she would not remember it. But the numbers themselves surrounded her, touched her hands, stroked her head; softly, gently, insistently, they urged her through that final door where the terrible question lay, coiled malice, proof of iniquity beyond forgiveness, steeped in a poison

only she could brew. No aura splintered that sight into painless abstraction, no migraine split her consciousness away from it -- the numbers, merciless once more, compelled her.

Cowering in the comer of her mind, that memory trembled, fragile as a wineglass, as a child's trust, as an adult's courage.

She had thought he had numbers on his arm because he liked numbers, just as she liked numbers. Why else would someone put numbers on his arm, instead of the dragon or heart or snake tattoos she had seen on other men? She wanted numbers too, perhaps in pretty colors like the dragons. She waited for a pause in the conversation, because she knew that interrupting was rude, and she asked her question as politely as she knew how. "When will I get my numbers?"