

# **SHORT STORY NIGHT**

## **The Boy Upstairs** **Joshua Ferris**

**Read this story and join library staff  
at Lion's Tail Brewing  
Monday, December 11th at 7:00 pm  
for a one-hour discussion featuring  
trivia, laughs, and other surprises.  
21 and older.**



# The Boy Upstairs

 [newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/06/the-boy-upstairs](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/06/the-boy-upstairs)

Joshua Ferris

May 27, 2022

She was often tempted to be done. She was tempted, but she would never do it. She had principles, and she had pleasures, too, sources of dumb joy. She had her husband and her dog. She had her books. True, books were also a source of anguish, as was her husband. But, on the whole, there was more upside than downside to books and husbands. She taught two classes a semester, and in her spare time made sense of her thoughts in papers submitted to journals of philosophy. She despaired over her low acceptance rate. The adjuncting gig was necessary but paid next to nothing. With her husband, she owned a small clapboard house with green shutters and a decaying front porch where sat a pair of teal Adirondack chairs made of plastic. They had no children.

She was tempted, but never would. To her, the temptation was not a sign of despair but a sane acknowledgment of the world we live in, and sane acknowledgment was its own source of comfort. She would carry on. She would put gas in the car. She would park and feed the meter. When she couldn't find any coins under the floor mats to feed the meter, she would go from shop to shop with her dollar bill, asking the clerks to make change. Life was made up of these little hassles—and of big tragedies, too, incalculable cruelties, things that no right-thinking person should abide.

She was not a stoic, and far from a saint. She was willful and morally pliable, her thoughts and actions half unknown to her even now, at forty. That was no excuse for bad behavior, but it was an explanation, and she was more interested in clarity than in forgiveness. Under the right circumstances she was capable of anything, as are we all. She had no respect for the small-minded comfort thinkers who believed in the essential and immutable self, the one that would never war or pillage or eat another human being because it had been born a Christian in Buffalo. Let's not be naïve, she liked to say. That was her favorite phrase. Let's not be naïve.

She had eight credit cards. She could remember applying for maybe two of them. They all had different interest rates and payment due dates and fee schedules, and one day it occurred to her that she could quit her adjuncting job and dedicate herself entirely to managing the payment of her monthly debt. And managing her debt was child's play compared with keeping her house clean. The minute she folded the laundry, which was like one of the twelve labors of Hercules, another slag heap of dirty clothes appeared in the bathroom hamper. Overnight it appeared, and here she would think of a second mythical figure, Sisyphus, and of Camus, her hero. She could never find a fucking stamp when she needed one.

Her weight, her hormones, her minor addictions to sex and alcohol and marijuana, her brain's requirement that her body assume the pose for twenty minutes and go as quiet as possible, her desire to punch men's faces when they pissed her off—any one of these things might get the better of her. Was she in grave peril, or was she just a modern girl? She suspected that people were more or less the same everywhere, and she wasn't likely to be the only one hostage to a dark and dangerous mind. Still, her fringier thoughts distressed her, because even dickheads were probably suffering, and the prospect of going to jail struck fear in her heart.

She knew she was difficult. She tried to ease up. She remembered herself as someone different, happier, more innocent. As a little seventh-grade Socrates, she had asked her social-studies teacher to define the concept of cynicism, and the reply she got back was so much unreal abstraction, so much adult gobbledygook, that she felt sure she never had to worry about it. Now those abstractions determined her moods, her mornings, the running commentary in her head. It was dreadful. She looked in vain for a way out.

•

Why, if tempted, would she never? Squeamishness. Inertia. Some curiosity. Only a few bold souls will walk out on even the most deplorable production before the curtain closes. Sometimes it's worth sticking around just to see who might flub a line. She loved two things more than anything else in the world: socks and milkshakes. The one kept your feet warm and the other

warmed your heart. These were trite adages, bumper-sticker slogans, but if she didn't indulge in one or two such things she would lose all connection to other people, forget her sympathies, and be done with love. And so: socks and milkshakes. But she didn't need any more socks, and God knows she didn't need another milkshake, so she decided to buy the socks for Chad and to make him the milkshake.

She bought the socks—the first pair clocked with lollipops and the second with pinecones—at a favorite boutique in uptown Kingston, then swung around the roundabout to the ShopRite along the strip to gather the ingredients for a milkshake, which she would top with whipped cream and leave as a surprise in the fridge. She had just paid for her groceries when she got a text from her friend Andy.

Andy was currently in Antarctica, where, until very recently, it had been impossible to continue his research on the depauperate floras of the subantarctic islands into the winter months of May and June, because of whiteouts and lunacy, but, conditions having irrevocably changed, he would be at it this year until the first of July. He was, she gathered, something like ten thousand miles away in a near-permanent night—why was he texting?

It read, “Can we talk? Somebody needs to tell you.”

Her stomach dropped. When it lurched back into place, it was knotted with dread.

“Ma’am?”

She turned. The pale checkout girl with jet-black hair was holding one of her eight credit cards in the air.

“Thank you,” she said—she would have left it behind otherwise—and taking the card in hand she walked out with her groceries in a daze.

•



What was it, what rumor had Andy got wind of? What was out there, finally? Her mind raced. Was it something not even her husband knew about? How badly would it embarrass her? Would it finish off her so-called career? Andy had written, from so alarmingly far away as Antarctica, to say: *Somebody needs to tell you*. He didn't want her to hear the details of her ruin from anyone else.

•

Her fears were unfounded. Andy reached her by satellite phone at four dollars a minute and quickly revealed that his bad news had no direct bearing on her. But the news itself was deeply distressing.

"I think Nicky hanged himself," Andy said.

"Nicky?" she said.

"Anna's son."

"Anna's son? Anna's son is eleven."

"He's twelve."

She was in the ShopRite parking lot, on a little bluff overlooking the busy road. She had the windows cracked and could hear the manic rattle of shopping carts riding over the pavement and the blithe patter of a couple as they packed away their groceries in a shiny new Volvo. Her shitty red sedan was like an engorged pimple next to such a beautiful car. She didn't care to know that a twelve-year-old could willfully end his own life.

"You think Anna's son hanged himself?"

She had met Nicky twice, once when he was about a year old and again when he was seven. On the second occasion, he had wandered off, squatted low on the sand at a remove from the other, wildly active children on the playground, and proceeded to stare at them fixedly for the next hour with longing but without hope. He looked perplexed, as if visiting from an alien planet. He had been born at a loss. These were brute facts evident to the most casual observer, but Anna made no mention of them, only saying late in

the otherwise breezy conversation that Nicky's doctors had placed him on the spectrum. "Doctors," she reported back to her husband that night, after parting from Anna and her furtive, dark-eyed child. "Plural."

She had always wondered if Anna, who had been a good friend for many years, had withdrawn because she had wearied of her insistence on acknowledging the shit of life, that set of facts which would deter a thinking person from recommending it to others. Anna's own disposition was very different. She rode horses. She owned a china cabinet. Her diet consisted mostly of leafy greens. She spent her summers on the coast of Maine and was married to a man who sold imported fabrics. The closest she and Anna came to having it out was when Anna said to her, "You've given up." She knew that to be both broadly true and wholly inaccurate. It was not lost on her that Anna had been pregnant when she began to distance herself—had withdrawn from her to protect the child who had, apparently, now taken his own life.

"Why do you only *think* he hanged himself?" she asked Andy. "Why aren't you a hundred per cent certain?"

"Because I didn't hear it from Anna," Andy said. "I heard it from Gary. But that was five days ago, and there's been nothing but radio silence from Gary since then. And I'm far away. I'm not in any position to get all the facts. Maybe I've misunderstood something, maybe I've *really* misunderstood. Which is why I'm reaching out to you. Have you heard anything?"

"Me? No."

Andy sighed. His voice was remarkably clear for someone very near the South Pole. "I need to confirm it somehow, I just don't know how," he said. "And I'm not sure why. What will I do then?"

"Please let me know the minute you do," she said.

"What will we do then?" he asked.

They were both silent.



“I should probably go,” he said.

“Those poor people,” she said. “Poor Anna.”

“Yes,” he said. “If it’s true, I’m not sure how she will survive.”

After the call ended and the carefree Volvo couple had driven off, she sat in her car looking out on the day’s traffic as it washed past. She had been tempted—but never as a child of twelve. At twelve, despite a difficult tonsillectomy and her parents’ divorce, she was warmly housed, lovingly tended, doted on by grandparents and adored by older cousins. She was left alone for hours in her bedroom to dream of Bono and eighth-grade boys. A suicide at twelve would know nothing of the endless trifles she had enjoyed at that age. They included socks and milkshakes, of course, and a dog that rivalled in tenderness the dog she had now. Her delight in ballet was coming to an end, but books and fast-pitch softball had filled the void, and it was the gift of sleepaway camp, the fact of koalas and the bright burning filament inside copper bulbs that brought her around to philosophy. Why was she something and not nothing? Why this bliss, this abundance, this mind-boggling being called by her name? When these questions appeared, when she was twelve, so too did the palpable sensation that she was on the cusp of grasping the answers—a cusp that had widened to a chasm by the time she turned forty. Nicky had had no such brief idyll. He was born as she was now, thwarted, disillusioned, and very obviously tempted. The poor child, the poor, unfortunate child.

The question that had quickly formed and then been filed away during her conversation with Andy now came back to her fully articulated. Knowing Andy’s news, was she relieved that it had nothing to do with her? Or would she have welcomed the public disclosure of, oh, say, half a dozen squirmy things, if it meant the child might still be alive and his mother forced to stop what she was doing, even with a little irritation, to make the boy a turkey sandwich with pretzels and a cold glass of milk?

She was in transit again when the answer arrived. Yes: she would accept public scandal, she would happily invite ruin in exchange for that boy’s life and her once dear friend’s release from Hell. What pact was this, what power

did she have? Who did she think she was talking to—God? She didn't know. But she would go further. She would trade places with Anna. She would replace the cynicism of the barren philosopher with the howling sorrow of the bereft mother. She could do it—she was prepared. She, the cynic, the expectant, was deserving. She would swap fates in an instant.

•

She risked the ice cream for Chad's milkshake melting to stop by campus, where final grades for the spring semester were due with her signature. The assistant in the department office informed her that the chair wished to speak to her.

"Me?" she said. "The chair?"

The chair was a phenomenologist named Marvin Philips, a plump man of collared shirts and timeworn corduroy who, it was rumored, had run aground in philosophy and now spent his days writing haiku. When she popped her head in the doorway, he was sitting behind his desk with his shirtsleeves hiked to his elbows, raking a back scratcher through his copious salt-and-pepper arm hair. "Yes," he said, halting his self-care when she announced herself. "Yes, come in . . . and shut the door."

He stood and swiftly unfurled his shirtsleeves, buttoning the first with rapidity but the second only with terrific, time-consuming struggle. She became self-conscious and offered to help, but he waved her off with the hand held upright and captive to its busier counterpart. Through sheer force of will, his face reddening, he lodged the stubborn button in place at last, sat down, and handed a term paper across the desk. "Do you remember this student?" he asked.

The name didn't ring a bell. Was it any wonder? The paper was perfectly unmemorable. But the handwritten notes along the margins were hers. Where a different professor might have voiced encouragement ("Promising idea") or demanded more rigor ("Your logic is iffy"), she had written "Fuck off" no fewer than nineteen times along the snowy-white fringes of Adam Carter's eight inept pages.



“I returned it to him like this?”

“Unless our eyes deceive us,” the chair said.

She did this sort of thing from time to time. As a joke, a coping mechanism. But then she always went back and erased. Had she not erased?

“Do you realize how unacceptable it is to profane a student in this manner?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” she said. “I’m so very sorry.”

“More importantly,” he said, and to her surprise handed her the iPad that had been sitting on a stack of papers on his desk. The browser was open to Facebook. “Are these photos of you with a student?”

•

Finding her tenuous affiliation with the institution that had employed her for nine consecutive semesters abruptly terminated, she fled the building.

She had made it to the faculty parking and was unlocking her car when the police cruiser pulled up. The officer inside, a meathead in sunglasses and mustache, powered down his window and identified her by name, which disconcerted her. The car keys began to tremble in her hand, so that unlocking the door became much harder. She had that irrational fear of going to jail. He inquired into the last time she had visited the Panera Bread on Ulster Avenue. Then he put the cruiser in park and stepped out, which disconcerted her further.

“Was it this morning?” he asked. “And did you walk out again without paying?”

“Without paying?”

“Did you serve yourself at the coffee station without paying in advance, and then walk out?”

She stalled, then shook her head. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Ma’am,” the cop said. “Management has the footage.”

- 

She agreed to follow the cop back to Panera, where, before a few rabidly curious onlookers and a majority of the staff, she apologized to the manager on duty and agreed to “make things right.” As they had days of security footage available for review, she proposed that she purchase fifty medium coffees, which in all likelihood underestimated by half the number of cups she had pinched in a stupid and long-running scheme. The first card the manager swiped was declined, she didn’t dare attempt four of the others, one had been cancelled by the bank and another had expired, and so she walked out with only one working credit card, now a hundred and fifty dollars nearer its limit, and with no source of income but her husband’s standing between her and bankruptcy. But at least she had avoided arrest.

By the time she got back in her car, the ice cream had melted. She returned to the ShopRite for another pint and was standing on the porch with groceries and two pairs of socks attempting to unlock the many confusing locks when someone opened the door from the inside. It was Chad’s wife.

“He’s not home,” the wife said.

She stared at her dumbly. She had never felt so caught or so accused. The woman was much older than she had thought, almost grandmotherly, with flowing white-gray hair and a severe underbite. Chad had said that she was leaving for Lansing that morning on a business trip.

“I’ve just posted some of your texts to my husband on Twitter,” the wife said. “I also DM’d your husband. I think you should leave now.”

- 

The voice mail awaiting her when she returned to the car was from her husband. He wasn’t sure which to discuss first: the tweets, the photographs circulating on Facebook, the direct message from Chad’s wife, or the voice mail he had received from the Kingston police inquiring into her whereabouts.



All together they served to shake him out of his stupor, and he announced that he would be initiating divorce proceedings while staying at his cousin's, in Rhinebeck.

- 

She was still parked outside Chad's house.

That budding Socrates in love with Bono and trifles had suffered a series of shocks as she entered adulthood: an episode of sexual assault in college; the swift death of her mother; the second Bush Administration; the gender imbalance at grad school and its attendant misogynies and inequalities, which also warped hiring practices in philosophy departments the year she went on the market; a million more structural injustices seemingly unnoticed by everyone else; the geologic pace of political change; the creep of addictions; compromised ideals. These disillusioning shocks wised her up to a corrupt and corroding world that, in the view of the empiricist she always tried to be, had been there all along, lurking just under the appearance of things. But at what point had she given herself permission to live as corruptly as the world?

She had never felt so rebuked as when she looked down at the passenger seat and saw the socks and ice cream. She drove home. She found the house desolate, as her husband had arrived before her and hauled off more than she would have thought possible, including the Adirondack chairs. It was even more desolate a minute later, when she realized that he had also taken her dog.

Olivia was her name. She was a mutt with a lot of bluetick hound in her, mournful eyes, and daily petitions to be accepted as an equal among humans. Olivia longed for contact. She liked to snuggle. She stood on two legs and made herself tall for human embraces. Her husband had taken Olivia to punish her, and he had succeeded. It was not the disgrace of being terminated for gross misconduct, or her mortifications at the Panera Bread, or Chad's wife's scorn, or the rebuke she felt at the sight of a pair of socks, but the absence of Olivia that reminded her that the world, no matter how corrupt, required careful tending, and even deserved it. She sat down in the middle of

the kitchen and wept. Late-spring sunlight filled the windows. Birdsong came through, as did an early-spring breeze. But she buried her head in her hands and streamed such tears as could not have been her own, inconsolable tears, tears of protest and tears of guilt. They were the tears of someone still connected to the distant dreams of childhood and the heart's reckless affections. Why was she something and not nothing? She would never know! She wished she could believe she ever would. Then she might never be tempted again, as she was now. She should do it, she should just do it. That made her think of Nicky, the twelve-year-old. Then she remembered Anna.

She stopped crying. She heard, for the first time, a noise coming from upstairs.

She stood, found her phone on the counter, and called Andy's cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. She sent him four quick texts. "Have you confirmed that Nicky hurt himself?" she asked. Andy didn't reply. He had stepped away, or was sleeping. What time was it in Antarctica, anyway? "Andy, please, I need to know. Might Nicky still be alive?"

She stood in her kitchen waiting for a response. There was nothing. Of course there was nothing. He was in Antarctica! But when he wrote back—if he wrote back—and if he said that he had misunderstood something, that the boy was still alive . . .

But that was insane. Did she really believe that some pact she made to try and bring the boy back to life—

She thought of calling Anna. But she quickly thought better of it. What would she say? She didn't know where she would even begin.

The rigor and logic of her academic training fully reasserted itself, and she realized that she was being foolish. She couldn't restore the natural order of things by secretly striking some fantastic bargain with a nonexistent God. There was no discriminating between the innocent and the guilty in this world. Both risked everything, both suffered. The one could not pay a moral cost for



the other, especially after the fact, thereby restoring things to the way they had been. It was just a coincidence that Andy's news and her dumb pact and sentimental hopes and actual disgrace came on the same day.

But if he wrote back . . . if he was mistaken . . . *if!*

She texted again. "Andy?"

Still nothing.

Then she heard the noise again. Faint at first, it might have only been the house shifting. But, no, there it was. She stood still, her ears pricked. A sudden rustle. A hush. It faded in and out. She listened intently to what, over time, sounded to her like a child at play.

It must be Olivia, she thought. The dog was here, after all.

But, no, the dog would have come bounding down to greet her.

She left the kitchen and went to the foot of the stairs. She peered up at the second-floor landing. It was still, shrouded in shadow. But what was that sudden thump, and those low, faint, whispering sounds?

She mounted the stairs slowly. She was being stupid. She knew it, too. She had swapped fates with no one, she had saved no one's life. Her own life in tatters, she was being swept up in wishful thinking. It was the scrabble of a trapped squirrel, or an intruder. Much more likely an intruder than a child. She could not summon a child back to life!

But if someone or something had agreed to the pact?

She reaches the top of the stairs. The door is closed to the room from which the faint scrabbling is coming. She knows in her mind that she will soon be mauled by a rodent, or clobbered by a maniac, or locked in a passionate embrace the minute she releases her dear dog from confinement. But it is Nicky she wants, Nicky she hopes to find. The possibility of Nicky would redeem her crimes, restore whole worlds that have fallen away.

She stands outside the door and listens. There it is again! Her eyes fill with tears of an entirely different order than the ones she shed in the kitchen. She pictures Nicky crouched in some corner, only not as he was on that playground, dark and unsmiling. No, he is whispering to himself, indulging his whims, dreaming. She imagines a toy airplane in a hand held aloft, now in a sudden nosedive. It is absurd. She takes the doorknob in hand. She pauses before turning it. She stands a moment in sheer wonder. Why not? Why not? There is something in her, however briefly, that is alive again to the possibilities. And, with that, she opens the door. ♦