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Road Closed to Thru Traffic

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Road Closed To Thru Traffic

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Jordan Crook

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For The Ponderosa.

For Katy.

And for Leland. Thank you for reading, re-reading, re-reading...

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Abstract

This collection of nine fiction stories explores the journeys of men and women who find themselves unable to continue on the path they've set for themselves. So often, the roads we follow are dictated by social conditioning. This collection considers how paths are predetermined by social norms and follows the characters as they react to unexpected obstacles encountered in common scenarios. Will they forge new paths? Turn back? Or will they take a detour and return to their original road?

Key Words: fiction, short stories, literary, substitutions

Beyond Question

In the confession booth, Maeve said nothing. Father Byrne waited patiently but heard only steady breathing and the occasional soft shuffling of her shoes on the floor.

“Maeve?” He said at last. He wasn’t supposed to say that—wasn’t supposed to use her name. He should have asked *what troubles you my child? Why have you come today?* But his was a small parish—everyone so familiar that it rendered such pretenses ineffective. He knew what troubled her. He knew why she was here.

He knew Maeve’s aunt Clara was pregnant again.

The first time Clara’s belly grew round, Maeve asked a lot of questions. Questions her mother, Aileen, wouldn’t answer. But then, that wasn’t so unusual; Aileen was a reserved woman—pensive, not given to chatter. Yet, at just seven years old, Maeve was relentless. She wanted to know why the moon waxed. Whether she could wear pants like the boys. What happened to her father.

“That’s just the way it is, Maeve,” Aileen would say. Or, when that wasn’t enough, “Go ask Charlie.”

Uncle Charlie always had answers. The moon waxes because it moves around the earth. A girl *could* wear pants but there isn’t much she can’t do in a dress, so why bother? Your father died in the mines, Maeve, three winters back. Aunt Clara’s belly is growing because we’re going to have a baby.

Maeve followed uncle Charlie for days after that, and he explained everything about babies. Babies are made when a husband and a wife are ready, he said, when they love each

other. Well, I don't know if it's a girl, but my gut tells me it is. Yes, of course you can hold her. A baby should be held like this—he pulled a log from the woodpile beside the woodstove and set it in his niece's arms—you support the head like this and your arm goes under the bum, here.

He was right, the baby was a girl. She came a week after thanksgiving, and they named her Leah.

Maeve listened from the kitchen, terrified, as cries of pain rang out from aunt Clara's room for several hours. Aileen went up and down the stairs with hot water and towels, muttering prayers nonstop under her breath. Uncle Charlie paced back and forth on the landing at the top of the stairs. A woman Maeve didn't recognize came with a big bag and was led upstairs before she even took her coat off. Maeve asked over and over what was wrong with aunt Clara. Whether she would be okay. About the lady with the bag. But no one answered her, not even uncle Charlie. Eventually Aileen thought to send her daughter to miss Katherine's, who lived in a cottage behind the neighboring farm.

“Stay there until I come and get you, Maeve,” Aileen said. “Katherine will understand.” Maeve obeyed, and between bites of bread pudding, she tried her questions on a new audience. Miss Katherine tied one of her aprons around Maeve and tried to distract her with kitchen tasks, and she only said over and over that everything was okay, that Aunt Clara and the baby would be okay.

Aileen came for Maeve the following afternoon, with dark circles under her eyes. Maeve listened as Aileen told miss Katherine that everything was, as Miss Katherine had predicted, okay. The baby was healthy, a girl, named Leah. Clara was fine.

When they returned home, Maeve ran up the stairs and into the room Charlie shared with his wife. But Leah screamed fiercely when they put her in Maeve's arms, though she did it just like Charlie had shown her—*support the head like this, one arm under her bum, here*. She was taken from Maeve then and on every subsequent attempt in the next two days, after which time Maeve decided that she really did not like Leah very much at all. She confessed as much to Charlie.

"She cries all the time," Maeve complained.

"You cried a lot as a baby, too," he said. "It will pass, Maeve, you just have to be patient."

"But she vomited on my sweater."

"She did?" He said, feigning shock. "Well, I admit, that wasn't terribly nice of her."

He chuckled as Maeve tried to hold back tears.

"And mama gave her my blanket," Maeve said, a first tear falling. "The one aunt Clara made for *me*."

His smile faded and his eyebrows scrunched with concern. He put his hands on Maeve's shoulders and moved his face level with hers.

"Listen, Maeve," he said. "It's okay if you don't love Leah right away. You'll learn to, I promise."

Maeve nodded, but she was still anxious. She crawled into Charlie's lap, and he patiently addressed one question after another. How will I know when I love her? How will I know if Leah loves me back? How long will it take?

"Not long, Maeve," he said. "And you'll know. Trust me, you'll know."

But for weeks, things only seemed to get worse. Maeve hated that Leah always screamed just before dawn. She hated the smell of Leah's napkins, and of the overripe vegetables they boiled for her. And how Maeve was often sent outside during Leah's naptime. Most of all, Maeve hated the way Leah took up most of Charlie's attention, every evening when he came back from the fields, caked in dirt, exhausted but still eager to hold his daughter. Maeve lingered at Charlie's elbow asking how long before Leah could talk? Why wouldn't she stop screaming? When would she walk? Couldn't he give the baby to someone else to hold for now?

It was a Friday in early January when Maeve awoke, just after dawn, to absolute silence. She felt strangely alert as she pulled a jumper over her head. A prickling sensation moved down her neck, but it had nothing to do with the winter cold. There was a stillness in the house that made Maeve hold her breath.

Maeve stepped tentatively out into the hallway and onto the landing, where her mother stood just outside Charlie and Clara's room. Their door was closed. Aileen didn't notice Maeve until they were within arm's reach of one another, and then she wrapped both arms around her daughter, her breathing ragged and uneven. Maeve pulled away to ask what was wrong, but Aileen cut her off with a sharp whisper.

"You're not to be wandering about or disrupting, Maeve," she said. "You hear? Now go on downstairs."

"But why?" Maeve wanted to know, whispering too. "Mama, where's Uncle Charlie?"

"Never you mind. I said get on downstairs," Aileen said, firmly. "Now."

Something in her mother's tone stifled Maeve's questioning. She went obediently down the stairs to the kitchen, where Miss Katherine was sitting at their dining table, her head bowed, and her apron wadded on the table.

Maeve's entrance made her look up and then she motioned eagerly for the young girl to come close, closer, close enough for Katherine to pull her into a suffocating embrace. Maeve felt miss Katherine's body heaving as she sobbed, so Maeve pushed herself away.

"What's going on, miss Katherine?" Maeve asked, struggling to understand. "Where is everybody?" Katherine either didn't hear or didn't answer. She rose from the table and crossed the kitchen, crying openly as she cut a thick slice of bread from the stale loaf in the bread box. She set it in front of Maeve and sat down beside her.

"It's Leah, Maeve," Katherine said. Her eyes blurred with fresh tears, but she didn't look away. "She's with the lord now."

Maeve knew what being with the lord meant. It was what people said about someone who died. It's what most people said when they talked about her father—that he was *with the lord*. And yet, the words didn't make sense to Maeve this time.

"But, miss Katherine," she said. "Leah's just a baby."

"I know, dear," Katherine said. Tears streamed down her face, and one splashed onto the table. "But the lord took her early."

Maeve looked confused and then frightened. She pressed both palms down on the table. "Can he take anyone early, Miss Katherine? Could he take me, if he wanted?"

Katherine reached out and put on hand gently on top of Leah's. "No, my love." She said. "You're not going anywhere." She put both arms around Maeve again.

Maeve hesitated. "Does that mean I'm not going to school?"

Katherine smiled faintly, and said, “I think it will probably be okay with your mother if you stay home from school today.”

“Yes,” said a voice from the kitchen doorway. Katherine and Maeve both turned to see Aileen in the door. “I think that’s best, Katherine. Could I ask your help upstairs?”

Katherine stood turned and followed Aileen up the stairs, leaving Maeve alone. She sat for a moment, eating the bread Katherine had cut for her. Katherine had forgotten the butter, so the bread was dry, but Maeve didn’t complain. She only listened eagerly for the sound of movement upstairs.

When the silence upstairs made it clear that no one was coming down, Maeve put on her winter coat and mittens and went outside to Charlie’s truck. She crawled into the cab’s passenger seat, where she sat on days that she went out into the fields with her uncle. She watched the dirt road that led up to the house, bored. Katherine came out several times to check on her, once bringing a blanket, and once a cup of warm milk. She said that Maeve would have to entertain herself while the adults were upstairs. Maeve began to wish that she *had* been made to go to school.

It was mid-morning when Maeve saw father Byrne walking hastily up the lane, hands deep in his coat pockets, each breath visible in the cold air. Maeve climbed out of the truck and walked back with him. He took her hand but was silent until they were nearly at the front door of the house.

“Doin’ all right?” He finally asked.

“Well,” she said, and was about to tell him about Leah, when the front door opened. It was Aunt Clara. Father Byrne pulled off his cap and went over to her. Maeve stopped a step behind.

“Mrs. Dunne, I—Katherine sent word early this morning,” he said. “My deepest sympathies.”

“Thank you for coming, father,” she said, her voice hoarse. “Please, come in.”

Maeve followed them both into the house, and as father Byrne removed his coat, she asked in a loud voice whether he had been praying for Leah. Father Byrne and Clara both turned to look at her.

Clara’s face screwed up like she was in pain, and father Byrne put a hand on her shoulder. “Of course, Maeve,” he said. “I have prayed for nothing else all morning.”

“Will we pray for her at church on Sunday?”

“Of course,” he said, before turning his attention back again to Clara. Maeve stepped closer to them, eager not to be left out again.

“Father?” She asked. “Will Leah go to hell because she never confessed her sins?”

Maeve didn’t even see Clara’s hand before it came down across her face. Maeve’s knees hit the floor. Then her hands. Tears stung her eyes, and a wave of heat spread across her cheek. She tasted the coppery taste of blood on her tongue. She tried to cry out, but her voice caught in her throat, and through the ringing in her ear, she heard father Byrne speaking. She looked up at him, but he was looking at Clara.

“No, child,” he said. “Leah was innocent: she had no sins to confess. She was baptized in the church and she is with the lord now.”

Maeve struggled to her feet and looked around, stunned. She backed slowly away until her back hit the wall. She stood there, cradling her own throbbing cheek with two hands, watching as Clara collapsed into father Byrne’s arms.

Clara's cries rang out, steadily louder and wilder, until they seemed to reverberate off the walls. Katherine and Aileen appeared in the doorway. Neither of them moved: they just stood, paralyzed, watching with their faces wet. It seemed like a long time before Clara's cries quieted, and then father Byrne helped her into a chair beside the fire. Katherine crossed the room and wrapped a shawl around her.

Clara stared into the embers and appeared not to notice when Aileen touched father Byrne's elbow and motioned up the stairs.

"Charlie found the baby this morning," Aileen whispered. "He won't let her go."

When at last father Byrne came downstairs, Aileen lagging a few steps behind him, Maeve was sitting at the kitchen table. Katherine had given her a cold washcloth to press against her swollen cheek and bread to soak in warm broth until it was soft enough to eat without chewing.

"Father?" Aileen said. Something in her tone caused the hair on Maeve's neck to stand up.

"I'm afraid he's in very bad shape, Aileen," father Byrne said. "Very bad. He'll not stop holding her, even in the latrine or as he sleeps. He's not eating, not responding to anyone, not even Clara."

Maeve knew that they were talking about uncle Charlie, but she wondered what it meant to be in bad shape. She opened her mouth to ask but the dull ache in her cheek throbbed, warning her against more questions.

"She was his first, father," Aileen said.

He nodded gravely and paused. "I know. I'll come back tomorrow." He looked around the room at each of them, and when his gaze fell on Maeve, he smiled weakly and said, "Don't forget your prayers, Maeve." He placed his cap on his head and stepped out the door. Maeve, Aileen, and Katherine watched him walk down the long, frost-coated lane in the dusk.

by the following morning, the neighbors had heard about Leah and there was a flurry of activity in the house. Mrs. Duncan brought a stew. Mrs. Crevier came and did the wash. Mr. Carlyle unloaded firewood from the back of his truck and stacked it outside the front door. Maeve watched in silence as Aileen attended each visitor with sad, tired smiles and words of thanks. But Charlie and Clara remained upstairs, their door closed.

only after the sun set did the house grow quiet again. Aileen warmed the stew from Mrs. Duncan and portioned it into bowls for Maeve and herself. Aileen picked at the food, exhausted. Maeve asked if they would attend mass the following morning. Aileen said she didn't know. Maeve asked if they would bury Leah behind the church, beside Maeve's father. Aileen nodded and then stood up from the table. She told Maeve to finish her food and then put another log in the woodstove. Then she filled two more bowls with stew and carried them upstairs.

Maeve went into the sitting room and added a log to the woodstove there, positioning it across the center, the way Charlie had taught her. She was still kneeling in front of it when Aileen descended again from upstairs and fell into a chair beside the stove. Maeve watched as her mother laid her head back and closed her eyes. She sat still like that so long Maeve thought she might have fallen asleep. When Aileen finally spoke, her words were so soft that Maeve could barely hear them over the crackling of wood.

“After we lost your father,” Aileen said, her eyes open, her gaze still fixed on the ceiling, “I thought nothing could be worse. I never imagined—” she paused and looked down at her daughter. “come closer, Maeve. Let me see you.”

Aileen licked her thumb and rubbed at a spot on Maeve’s forehead. She grazed her fingertips over her daughter’s bruised cheek.

“She didn’t mean to do that,” Aileen said. “Clara loves you. You know that, right?”

“But,” Maeve said. “How do you know?”

“What?” Aileen leaned forward and looked into Maeve’s eyes. “What do you mean ‘how do I know’?”

“How do you know when someone really loves you?”

Aileen looked at Maeve for a long time before she spoke. “Clara loves you, Maeve,” she said. “It’s just—you can hurt so much that you’re not even yourself anymore.”

“Are you yourself?” Maeve asked.

“I’m getting back there,” she said. “I’ve been sad, but we’ll be all right.” She touched Maeve on the end of the nose and smiled faintly. “Those freckles are from your daddy.” Aileen leaned back in her chair, and then a knock at the door drew the attention of both Maeve and her mother.

It was Father Byrne. Stepping inside, he shook the rain from his cap and apologized for the hour.

“How are you, Aileen?”

“A little better, Father.”

“And the others?”

She sighed. “I’m afraid they’re just the same as when you left.”

“I see,” he said gravely, hanging his coat on one of the nails beside the door. “Has Charlie...”

“No,” Aileen said, shaking her head. “He holds her still.”

Father Byrne nodded. “Well, I suppose I must try again.”

He climbed the stairs, Maeve and Aileen following closely behind him. He opened the door to Charlie and Clara’s room, but Maeve saw nothing inside before he closed it again.

“Bed time, Maeve,” Aileen said.

Sometime in the night Maeve awoke to see Aileen sitting next to her. Light from the hallway streamed in through the open door, throwing heavy shadows across her face.

“Maeve, dear, you have to wake up,” said a raspy voice and Maeve looked up to father Byrne, who stood behind Aileen. Maeve felt confused as sleep pulled at her. Aileen shook her shoulders gently and Maeve fought to keep her eyes open. But Aileen insisted, sliding her cold hands beneath Maeve’s arms and lifting her daughter up to a sitting position in the bed.

“Come on, Maeve,” she said again. “You have to wake up now, just for a bit.”

Maeve squinted in the darkness, squeezing the tiredness from her eyes, and noticed only vaguely when father Byrne stepped through the door and moved to the bedside.

“Maeve,” he whispered, looking at her intently from over Aileen’s shoulder. “we need your help.”

“For uncle Charlie,” Aileen added.

“Okay,” Maeve said. In her still-waking state, another response did not occur to her. Not even a question of how or why.

“Maeve,” Aileen said. “uncle Charlie is very tired. He needs to sleep. But he doesn’t trust anyone else to hold Leah, you see? He’s not let anyone else—”

Maeve stared at her, not understanding.

“We just need you go talk to him, dear,” Aileen said.

“But I thought Leah was—”

“Yes, Maeve,” father Byrne interrupted, whispering. “But you have to try to help us—to help her rest in peace. Your uncle Charlie needs your help, Maeve.”

It had been two days since Maeve had seen her Uncle, and the possibility of seeing him was enough to pull her from bed without further hesitation. She wore an old nightgown, with stains around the hem and a tear in the sleeve. It was cold, but she left the room barefoot, without even slippers to protect her feet from splinters in the worn hallway floorboards.

The hinges groaned softly as she opened the door to Charlie and Clara’s room—the door that had closed them in for two days now. The air inside was noticeably stale and humid, smelling faintly of stew. Maeve looked around and saw two full bowls on the bureau, untouched. A fire burned low in the hearth and threw strange shadows across the room so that everything looked different than Maeve remembered it. The bureau drawer that had doubled as Leah’s crib was still beside the bed, empty and hard. A dress was draped over the window as a makeshift curtain.

Clara lay atop the blankets of their unmade bed, fully-clothed, staring at the doorway but not stirring when Maeve entered. Charlie sat by the fire, wearing the same long underwear that he’d put on Wednesday night, and the fire’s soft glow emphasized the dark circles under his eyes. His arms were wrapped around his daughter, her tiny body enveloped in the knitted blanket that had once belonged to Maeve. From across the dark room, Leah’s skin looked like porcelain.

Slowly, silently, Maeve stepped into the room, leaving the door open behind her.

She neared Charlie and Leah, and when she was standing before them, she leaned forward, looking at Leah's long, dark eyelashes. At the wisps of hair on her round head. And at her tiny, bluish fist. Each finger looked impossibly delicate, curled perfectly around a bent thumb, held close to a smooth, white cheek.

"Uncle Charlie," Maeve whispered. "Look at her fingers; I love her fingers."

A tear splashed on the strong forearm wrapped around the baby, and Maeve realized distantly that it was her own. But the sensation awoke something in her uncle. His eyes shifted and took Maeve in for the first time since she'd entered the room.

"Maeve, shhh," he said, his voice choked and hoarse. "Maeve, don't cry. It'll be all right."

She nodded, finding comfort in his words even as tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

"Can I hold her?" She kept her voice low, feeling that anything loud might shatter something fragile in the room. "I remember how. One under the neck, one under the bum. Just like you taught me."

His mouth twitched. Maeve couldn't tell if he was trying to speak or smile or cry, but after some time he held Leah out, his arms stiff as they unfolded from around her.

"Just like we practiced," he said.

Maeve braced herself for the weight of Leah's body. Her arms moved to support her small frame. She stood like that, swaying gently back and forth as Charlie watched.

"She's beautiful," Maeve whispered.

Charlie nodded slowly, and then, for the first time in two days, he rose from the chair beside the fire. He kissed Maeve softly on the top of my head and shuffled across the room, lying down beside Clara.

Without him there beside her, Maeve felt Leah grow suddenly cold and heavy in her arms, heavier every second, heavier than seemed possible. Father Byrne and Aileen appeared at Maeve's side, and then the weight was gone. Her mother's arms wrapped around Maeve and led her back to her room. When she awoke in the morning, she asked no questions.

It would be two years before Charlie and Clara conceived again. And this time, Maeve understood what was happening. When she realized, she grew quieter even than she had been during the two years since Leah's death. She ate little and lay awake late into the night, her hand pressed against her mother's neck or arm, finding comfort in skin's warmth. She started following Charlie to his truck each morning, refusing to get out of the cab when it came time for school.

Aileen grew worried. Clara, too.

Charlie seemed to be the only one who understood Maeve's distress, the only one who shared it. They each found comfort in the quiet presence of the other, and Charlie often convinced Aileen to let Maeve miss school and ride along with him instead. But as the months progressed and Maeve grew thinner as Clara grew rounder, even Charlie began to worry.

Aileen took Maeve to see father Byrne, hoping he would know what to do, hoping he could help. But when Maeve sat in the confession booth, separated from father Byrne by a thin, opaque screen, she said nothing.

“Maeve,” father Byrne said. “I have a confession to make, because I know you’re scared.”

Maeve didn’t respond, but she stopped shuffling her feet along the floor.

“I have to confess,” he said. “I’m scared, too.”

There was a long silence, and then Maeve spoke, her voice thin from lack of use. “Is it a sin to be scared, father?” It was the first question she had asked anyone in months.

“No, Maeve,” father Byrne answered. “It’s not a sin to be afraid. It’s a sign to pray.”

“But we prayed last time,” Maeve said.

“We did,” father Byrne said. “We did.”

“Then why did—why did she die?”

“That’s a good question, Maeve,” Father Byrne said. “A very good question.”

The Rhetoric of Tupperware

“Jesus, Lydia,” Allison said, rummaging through the cupboard of mismatched Tupperware containers and lids. “How do you find anything in this mess?”

She was teasing, but I couldn’t laugh. I kept scraping the remnants of thanksgiving dinner from one plate after the next, before dropping them in the soapy water in the left-hand sink. Occasionally, drops of water splashed onto the window in front of the sink, dripping down slowly and leaving little streams in their wake. Another thing to clean later.

Allison’s husband—my brother, Jerry—and their two teenaged children were in the basement with my husband and son, shooting pool, so that the occasional clatter of billiard balls echoed up the stairs and spilled into the kitchen. Jerry’s family had driven up to Albany from Hartford, per the tradition we’d started twenty-four years ago, the year I married Drew. And this part, the part where Allison and I were left alone to clean up while everyone else retreated downstairs, was the one I both dreaded and looked anxiously forward to all year.

“I don’t,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. “I never use them. Those were all gifts or left here. Take them, if you want. I’ve never really liked Tupperware as much as you.”

Allison stood, three Tupperware in her hands, and turned to the mashed potatoes. I watched her reflection in the window. She kept her chin down, careful not to look at me.

“I should have guessed that,” she said.

And I knew what she meant, what she remembered...

“Ladies, we all know a woman is only as good as her kitchen,” Mrs. Banks said to the small crowd of women in her kitchen. “And a woman her who keeps her cupboards organized is

half way to an organized kitchen—to an organized home, a happy home. And a happy home, well, that’s sure something, ladies. Trust me.”

Mrs. Banks lifted the container over her head so that everyone could see. She spun it purposefully with manicured fingers, allowing us to see the inside and the outside. The glass caught the modern fluorescent light just right, so you could see right through it and it framed her doll-like face perfectly within its rim, the glass amplifying the luster of the red gloss on her lips.

Years later I would watch women showcase luxury cars and new vacuums and dinnerware sets on day-time television game shows, and I would think of Mrs. Banks holding that Tupperware.

She opened the cupboard and displayed several well-organized shelves of Tupperware, filled with flour, dried oats, beans.

“I used to keep everything in the original container it came in,” she said. “I didn’t even *realize* things weren’t staying fresh. You know, we’ve all just gotten so used to stale ingredients that we simply don’t *notice*!”

A murmur washed over the crowd of women in the small kitchen. I mimicked their awe, turning to my neighbor and nodded enthusiastically, pretending to understand. I was the youngest girl there, just barely turned seventeen, and I realized that everyone in the room was married, most with children. So every woman there had a kitchen to keep, except me. And Allison, who had invited me. But Allison would be one of these women soon, because she was already engaged to my brother Jerry. I would eventually be something like them, too, but I couldn’t see that far down the road. I couldn’t see past afternoons spent with Allison, even if those afternoons were filled with Tupperware parties and snobby older women whom I didn’t know.

Mrs. Banks opened the refrigerator. I stood on my toes to see past the door to the spotless white interior of the luxurious appliance. Tupperware lined the shelves here too. Baked beans, casserole, chicken noodle soup.

“The same is true of leftovers. They stay fresh at least *three* times longer. Can you believe it? Well, believe it. It’s true! I just can’t—”

I didn’t hear what came after that because just then, Mrs. Eneking took one step left, towards the fridge and with her massive frame shifted and I had a clear view of Allison.

My mother would not have let me leave the house wearing what Allison was wearing. She would have said I was too young, though I was just two years behind Allison and Jerry. The neckline on her emerald, knitted dress wrapped around her shoulders, baring her ivory collarbone. All of the women watched Mrs. Banks spoon hot soup from a pot into a Tupperware container while I studied the curve of Allison’s neck, cheekbones, shoulders, lips. I suddenly understood why mothers—mine, along with most, though apparently not Allison’s—kept us in turtlenecks three fourths of the year. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

“It’s foolproof!” Mrs. Banks shouted. I looked over to see her holding a container of soup upside down, beaming with perfect pride at the watertight seal. She set the container down on the counter and turned to the group as our applause died down. Her expression was pained and she said, “Just last week my boy Cole spilled the whole pot of soup when he was trying to get to the lemonade pitcher. So much waste and such a mess, all for no reason. If I’d only put it in a Tupperware...”

Several heads nodded in sympathetic understanding. I looked at Allison and saw that she was nodding, too. I wondered if she imagined having her own little boy soon, if she was excited to clean up little Jerry’s messes and store his lunches in watertight Tupperware containers. I

looked at her left hand, which rested gently on the linoleum countertop. Her engagement ring was still slightly too big for her slender finger, so the gem in the middle fell to one side.

Mrs. Banks finished her pitch and a bustle broke out among the women. Several followed her into the next room, where she would be selling Tupperware of all shapes and sizes, until the party ended. Others, including Mrs. Eneking, congregated in little groups to gossip and fuss. They were all women I knew only vaguely. Women I'd seen at neighborhood barbeques, the swim club, church on Sundays. Married women who were welcoming Allison into their ranks.

She'd invited me to come along with her and had introduced me to the group on our arrival as "Jerry's younger sister, Lydia," and a few ladies said politely, "Oh yes, why of *course*."

Several of those women gathered around Allison now, hugging her, offering their congratulations, admiring her ring animatedly. Allison held her hand out for them to see, smiling incessantly. I stood awkwardly at the edge of the group, catching fragments of the conversation and studying her face, trying to gauge whether she truly liked the attention or not.

"Lydia, dear, remind me what your parents do?"

I turned to see a curvy woman my mother's age, in a dress that my mother would have called too tight. The too-tight dress made me feel younger and more out of place. I wished I'd worn my Sadie Hawkins dress from last year or at least a blouse. Something that wasn't a sweater and corduroy pants. Two other women heard her question and turned to look at me.

"My dad's a mechanic," I answered. "And my mother works part time in the deli down at The Red Apple."

The women glanced between themselves and avoided my gaze.

“Lydia is here with Allison,” another woman said, and the others made little sounds of understanding.

“She’s such a dear, that Allison,” another responded. “So much potential, just like her mother.”

Everyone in the group turned in unison to look at Allison, who was still surrounded by chatty, admiring housewives. As if feeling the weight of so many gazes, Allison excused herself politely and moved through the doorway and into the hallway.

“She’s engaged to my older brother, Jerry,” I said to the women.

“Oh yes,” said the curvy woman in the too-tight dress. “And what a game he played yesterday, too. My husband says he’s the best quarterback we’ve had in a decade. A natural.”

“He’s a mechanic, too,” I said brusquely and then turned to follow Allison into the hallway before any of the women had a chance to recover the looks of distaste on their faces.

In the hallway, the first door on the right was closed, and a light leaked out from around the doorframe. The hallway walls were lined with photographs, but the light was dimmer than the rest of the house, and I had to let my eyes adjust for a second before I could make out the images. Gradually, I recognized a younger Mrs. Banks, wearing a white dress and a veil, beside a man in a tuxedo, whom I took for Mr. Banks. The next frame showed the banks couple strategically positioned on either side of two young boys. Hanging above the family portrait, high on the wall, was another picture of a young Mrs. Banks, standing on the beach, her arms flung wide and hair blowing wildly.

I stood on tip toe, trying to examine the beach scene more closely. Her black bathing suit clung tight to her shapely figure, and she showed her firm, curvy legs with unabashed confidence. Her mouth was wide open and smiling, her joy obvious.

“Is that Denise?” Allison asked from behind. I stepped back from the photo, trying to regain a respectable viewing distance.

“In the picture?” I said. “It’s Mrs. Banks.”

Allison stepped up beside me and looked up at the picture. “She was really something.” She paused and then added, “Not that she’s not still, you know, really something, I just meant—”

I smiled at her. “Don’t worry, I know what you meant.”

“I was just freshening up,” she said. Allison glanced down the hall and, sure we were alone, lowered her voice. “That Mrs. Eneking, she’s sweet but honestly sometimes I find her enthusiasm just a bit exhausting.” She paused and sighed. “To be honest, *all* the enthusiasm is exhausting lately. I’m grateful of course, and happy, it’s just—it’s a lot. Do you know what I mean?”

I didn’t really know, but I nodded because it’s what she wanted.

“I hope you’re having a good time,” she said, her voice higher pitched again.

“Oh—yeah. I am,” I said. “It’s really nice of you to bring me along.”

“Of course!” She said, grabbing my hand. “After all, we’re going to be sisters pretty soon.” I was grateful for the dim lighting that hid the goosebumps as they rippled up my forearms.

“Yes, but all the same, I—”

“All the same, we’re sisters now,” she said, cutting me off. She gave my hand one last squeeze before letting it go. “Or, well, nearly. This is what sisters do.”

I wondered how she knew that. She was an only child, and I only had Jerry. Neither of us had experience having a sister. And besides, I didn’t want to be sisters. A lump formed in my

throat, and I swallowed hard to push it down. There was a silence between us and I held her gaze.

“Well,” she said, giggling softly. “I suppose we’d better be getting back.” She turned toward the kitchen. I wondered why she’d giggled like that—what had she thought as we stood there, hand-in-hand, sisters-to-be, in the dimly lit hallway? I willed myself to follow her but my feet stayed rooted to the floor. She was almost to the end of the hallway before I found my voice.

“Allison, wait—”

She turned back to me, her face innocent and smiling.

“I was wondering...” I whispered, scared that my voice might shake if I spoke any louder. “Is Jerry...do you think—well, do you think he’s really the...I mean...”

She took a few steps back toward me, drawn by the whispering, like a confidant. Except she wasn’t in on the secret. Her head was tilted and her brow furrowed, pure confusion written on her face. My heart sank because I wanted her to understand what I meant without me having to say it. But she didn’t and I’d already said too much.

“I just mean, you’re sure Jerry’s the one?” I asked, practically pleading.

“Well, of course I’m sure,” she whispered, like I was in on a secret. She took another step, closing most of the space between us, and I wished that she hadn’t. “You’re so good, trying to look after him. But don’t worry, I’ve never been more sure of anything. I’ll take good care of him.”

The lump returned to my throat, bigger than before, and I suddenly thought I might choke.

I turned with urgency toward the bathroom, but Allison caught my arm with more force than I would have expected.

“You believe me, don’t you?” She said, and the desperation in her voice was palpable.

If she hadn’t grabbed my arm—hadn’t touched me, had just let me go into the bathroom—then I wouldn’t have kissed her. And if I hadn’t kissed her the way I kissed her, she wouldn’t have known. But she did grab me, and I did kiss her, and I know that she understood me after that—understood how I felt. Worse, I knew how I felt after that, knew right then that I wouldn’t kiss anyone the same way again. And I haven’t. Not even my husband, who I love deeply, same as I love Jerry, and my daughter and my granddaughter Tessa.

But it’s not the same love that I remember feeling when I saw the look on Allison’s face, a look of rebellion and revelry, both of us still breathless. But I remember, too, the way she brushed that look off with the back of her sleeve and went back to Mrs. Bank’s kitchen, where she bought two dozen Tupperware containers—more than anyone else—proving her potential as a future housewife.

“Look at that,” Allison said, filling the last of the three Tupperware containers with the final scoop of leftover mashed potatoes. “Funny how things tend to work out exactly the way they’re supposed to.”

“You really think so?” I asked.

I dropped the last of the silverware into the murky sink water and watched the splash drip down the window before turning to face Allison.

“Sure,” she said, softly, as she stacked the three plastic containers. She braced herself with both arms on the countertop and kept her eyes averted, not meeting my gaze.

The sound of billiard balls connecting floated up from the basement, followed by triumphant cheering, and I could almost see the last ball sinking into the corner pocket.

Somewhat Used

I think Kolbi was about nineteen when she got Stuart. I remember because she'd just moved out of her dad's house and was on her own for the first time, waitressing at Rooster's Bar & Grill to save money for some beautician course that I don't think she ever took. She said something about being too lonely in her apartment, and Tina told her to get a dog.

"Something to break the silence up a bit. Something that needs you, you know? It's a decent substitute for a man." A classic Tina solution.

A week later, Kolbi adopted a pretty calico cat from the local animal shelter and re-named him: Stuart. She made a big deal about him for a while, kept pictures in her phone, raved about a new cat collar her dad bought for Christmas. You know, typical cat people shit. But it seemed to help her and, as far as I know, it was just the two of them in her little one-bedroom apartment for the next two years or so.

And then Derick.

I remember the day Derick first came into rooster's because I was actually his waitress. He threw a fit over some slightly-burnt waffles, asked for a different server, got a free meal, and somehow left with Kolbi's phone number. And she was so giddy about it, you'd think it was the first time she got hit on by a customer. Might have been. Or maybe just the first time it was a young guy like that, all tattooed and I-don't-give-a-fuck, instead of the gray-haired grandpas we usually get.

Anyways, Derick moved in with Kolbi two months later and said he didn't like cats. So on some random Tuesday or whatever, Kolbi took Stuart over to her dad's and left him. I can only guess that it was unannounced and unexplained, but she swore it was just temporary. Derick

just needed time. Plus, her dad—I think his name is Alan—really liked the cat. You could tell he was the type to get attached. I bet he bought Stuart a scratch post and spoiled him with people food and stuff. I think Tina’s right about pets easing the loneliness—I’d even take a cat in my worst moments, and I’m a dog person.

But weeks went by and Stuart was still at Alan’s, and Kolbi was ignoring his calls. She was ignoring all of our calls. For us, that was easy to shrug off. We looked at each other and shook our heads because we understand that everyone has to make a mistake like Derick—sooner or later, every girl learns love the hard way. It wasn’t our first time watching it all go down, phone number on a napkin and then calls straight to voicemail.

But I mean, Alan was Kolbi’s dad, so I’m sure it was worse for him. Dads don’t ever understand about their little girls and love. It such a sad picture, to imagine him worrying, pacing back and forth in his kitchen, probably talking through it out loud with Stuart, trying to figure out what to do. But of course there wasn’t anything *to* do.

I wasn’t working on the day Alan came in with Stuart, but I heard the story from a few regulars and waitresses who were there. I guess he came in and sat at the bar and set Stuart’s crate, with Stuart in it, on the stool next to him. My guess is he was bringing Stuart back to Kolbi. You know, to do the fatherly thing and hold her responsible for the decision to get a pet. Or to find out why she’d abandon the cat she’d loved so much. Or, I don’t know, maybe he was just a kook who brought his cat to a bar.

But of course, Derick is there, and he’s piss drunk like he gets on Fridays, being loud and complaining that the mariners are shit again this year. I’d started noticing, near the end, that Kolbi avoided the bar when he came in. She’d constantly disappear to the back of the house, chat with the cooks until she had to check on tables and customers and whatnot.

Anyways, that day Derick is there and he notices when Alan walks in with the crate and says “Dude, is that a cat? Well, shit!” And then he raises his voice, announcing it to the bar.

“Dude brought a fucking cat into a bar. Kolbi! Kolbi, get this crazy fucker outa here.”

Of course Kolbi realizes it’s her dad. Says so. She told me they just all looked at each other for so long that she didn’t know what to do. So she made an excuse about needing something from the kitchen. Poor thing knows she shouldn’t have left—says now that she should’ve just kicked her dad out. Would have been easiest just to say that management was strict about animals inside. Health code, sorry, Dad. And that would have been it.

But she didn’t. She left the room and when she came back, Derick had Stuart suspended in the air. Kolbi says when Derick’s fingers flexed around the animal’s neck, she felt like they closed around her throat, too.

I guess than then Alan went at Derick, to save the cat, and of course the old man got laid out. Some say he was out cold right then. Others say Derick hit him across the head with a bottle and then landed a few punches. I think that’s probably closer to the truth. You don’t get fucked up the way he did from one punch.

Kolbi tried to step in. Ended up with a broken nose and eleven stitches and looked like hell for a month. Luckily some customers stepped in before Derick got her good. I heard they pinned him to the floor and then he calmed down for a minute, until the idiots let him back up and he went nuts again.

Derick didn’t quite get back to Alan, thank God, but somewhere in the mix that bastard punted Stuart across the room. What kind of cat doesn’t scam in the middle of a bar fight, I don’t know, but Tina told me it landed on all fours and she thought it was fine. But then Kolbi had to put him down a week later, so I guess not.

Kolbi moved back in with her dad not long after he left the hospital. She tells us that he does things that are out of character, like calling her at two in the morning and parking outside the restaurant for hours at a time. So she claims he needs extra help after the ordeal. But I'm not sure that's really why she went back. She's young, but she's a smart girl, and I think it's more likely she caught on about the kind of trouble she'd got herself in when she wrote her number on that napkin.

On the bright side, I think things are looking up again. Last week she was scrolling through her phone, and I assume she's on tinder the way she's swiping left, left, left. And I think, well, that's good: maybe she's getting over that whole Derick mess. I ask if she's looking for someone new, and she says no, but she got another kitten. That's good, too, I think. For the same reason—the moving on thing. Anyways the swiping was her looking at kitten-sized collars online. I said I didn't know it was so hard to pick out a cat collar. She said she wanted to find something used but still in pretty good condition.

Wet Denim

The airport security guard's grip on my arm was painful, even through the haze of drugs and alcohol. There would be small bruises later, where his thick, strong fingers wrapped tight around my bicep. I tried to tell him he was hurting me, but he said maybe I should have thought of that before lighting up on an airplane.

As the guard dragged me through the terminal, a throbbing built up in my head, and waves of nausea churned my stomach. I pulled hard against his hold on my arm, not wanting to break free so much as slow down. But it was useless; the guard was big man, muscles still visible despite the layer of doughy flesh that covered them.

I could feel people staring as we passed, but I was too preoccupied with my bruising arm and throbbing head to care. We passed a restroom, and I stepped toward it before the grip on my arm pulled me back.

"I have to pee," I said. My tongue felt thick, and the words came out slow.

"You already did," the guard said. I looked down and registered, distantly, the sticky feeling of wet denim against my skin. The realization had a slightly sobering effect.

"Well I need to go again," I said, a little more firmly.

"Yeah, vodka will do that to you," he said.

But he did not lead me to a bathroom. Instead, he pulled me along until we reached a generic, white-walled room with four folding chairs lined against one wall. A plump, middle-aged woman wearing cheap lipstick and glasses sat in the last chair, a clipboard in her lap. She looked me up and down as the security guard ushered me in, her gaze lingering briefly on the large wet patch between my legs.

“This is the one who lit a cigarette on the delta flight,” the security officer said to the woman. He finally released my arm and then told me to sit.

“I’m going to grab a coffee,” the guard said to the clipboard woman. “I’ll be right back.”

I winced when the heavy metal doors slammed shut.

Off my feet, I felt exhausted. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. I tried to reconstruct the last twenty-four hours: the phone call from my mother, her explanations fragmented between heavy sobs. *Dani, it’s about your Aunt Tori. An accident. Medication. Didn’t wake up.* And then the way my knees collapsed from under me. The simultaneous waves of relief and devastation. And finally, a slow return to the panicked voice, the gasping in the phone receiver. *Mom, calm down. Mom, it’s going to be okay. I’m coming home.*

Click. And then confusion. A numbness, a fog. It wasn’t an accident. I knew that. It was Tori’s way of finally giving me a way to come home. I’d spoken with her on the phone just a week before, answering only after she called me eight times in the middle of the night. *Will you be home for thanksgiving this year, kiddo? But you stayed there all summer.* Her words were slurred, and even from three thousand miles away, I could almost smell the vodka. *Wait, don’t hang up, just... kiddo...is it me?*

I’d hung up without answering. Of course it was her.

The security guard’s return interrupted my thoughts. He had a coffee in one hand and he dragged one of the folding chairs to the corner of the room. He sipped his coffee and nodded at the clipboard woman. She hit a button on the recorder.

“My name is Heidi Wetzel,” she said. Her voice was raspy and deeper than expected, but not unkind. “I’m an airport security investigator and will be asking you a few questions about

today's incident. And you've already met security officer barns." She set a black recorder on the chair beside her, and said, "We're legally obligated to record this conversation."

Then Heidi asked my name, date of birth, home residence. *Danielle Henderson, September 9, 1990. 253 45th street*—the house where my mother, brother, aunt Tori and I lived. Or had lived.

She paused after every answer, taking meticulous notes. The scratching of her pen on the clipboard was irritating and the occasional slurp of the guard's coffee made my stomach turn.

"You're nineteen years old, Miss Henderson," she said. "Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"As I'm sure you know, it's illegal for anyone under twenty-one years of age to be in possession of alcohol."

I nodded.

"How did you obtain that bottle of vodka, Miss Henderson?" She said.

I hesitated. A lie wouldn't work—I've never been a good liar, and besides, airports have cameras.

"I stole it," I said. "At the airport." It wouldn't help to say that I hadn't actually planned to drink it. But walking through the duty-free shops at the airport, reminders of Tori had been everywhere. Camel cigarettes and ray ban sunglasses, Smirnoff vodka and the stupid Chanel perfume she spent fortunes on. Without thinking, I shoved item after item into my bag. Things I'd avoided for a year and a half.

Heidi's pen scratched at her clipboard for a long time. I looked at the security guard who leered at me over the Styrofoam rim of his coffee cup.

“can you tell us what you were you doing in New York, Miss Henderson?” Heidi asked. Her voice rang in my ears and pounded painfully on the inside of my skull.

“I’m in school,” I said. The room wasn’t keeping still. I leaned my head back against the wall again and closed my eyes to try to stop its spinning. I focused instead on the dryness in my throat and the aching in my head.

“It’s the middle of October,” Heidi said. “Isn’t school still in session?”

The security officer snorted.

I didn’t answer. I could feel my stomach seizing, rejecting the vodka, and the pain in my head seemed to concentrate itself just behind my eyes. There was a silence while the woman waited for a response, then she tried again, a little louder.

“What’s the reason for your travel, Miss Henderson?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I couldn’t bear the thought of that pen scratching Tori’s death into the clipboard.

“You have to speak up, kiddo,” Heidi said. “For the recording.”

Kiddo. I opened my eyes and looked at the ceiling. *This will be our little secret, right kiddo?* I was nine and Tori was kissing the skin on the inside of my thigh before pulling my underwear gently up over my hips. She tucked the blankets tight around me and pressed her mouth on mine. *You know it would upset the others if they knew I love you most. You don’t want to hurt their feelings, do you? You won’t tell them our secret, will you, kiddo?* Young, trusting, I would have done anything to be her favorite, so I kept silent.

“Speak up!” I heard someone say in a deep voice. I looked down and saw the security guard leaning forward in his chair, his eyes angry.

“She asked you a question,” he said, louder than before.

I tried to say yes, to say anything that would make him stop yelling at me. But my mouth was so dry, all I could manage was to nod, but the movement made me nauseated and then the dirty white linoleum floor rushed up to meet me, and I covered it in sour vomit. On hands and knees, I heaved until nothing else came up, and then I sat back on my heels, catching my breath. I wiped my hands on my damp blue jeans.

“Yes,” I said. “I heard her.”

I was only dimly aware when the woman set her clipboard and recorder on the chair and left the room. The security guard followed her to the door and closed it behind her. I heard a dull thud as the lock fell into place, and I froze. His steps echoed across the linoleum as he went to the corner of the room and to the recorder on the chair. Finally, he squatted down beside me. I turned my head to the side, looking into his icy blue eyes. He’d removed his hat, and I noticed that he was nearly bald. I felt the familiar grip of his thick fingers around both my biceps.

“look, you little shit,” he whispered, his mouth so close I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face, could smell a hint of bitter coffee. “This isn’t one of your fucking college parties. You’re in a lot of trouble, you know that?” I felt his fingers tighten their grip and then release.

“But you know, we might come to some kind of agreement” he said, and then he ran his rough, calloused fingers along my jaw. He was biting his lower lip, and his nostrils flared. He grazed his thumb across my lips. “Do you understand me?”

I understood perfectly. Better than he knew. I’d seen that same hungry look on Tori’s face for years. Even after my fifteenth birthday, when she reached for me for the last time. *Stop*, I’d finally said, after so many years. *Or I’ll tell*. And she’d laughed, because I’ve never been a good liar. *Then I’ll kill myself*. She stopped laughing. I didn’t know I’d meant it until I said it,

until my voice didn't waver and she stopped laughing. She didn't touch me again after that, but she always looked at me with the same hungry look I saw reflected now in the eyes of the security officer.

"Fuck you," I whispered. A shrewd smile spread across his face.

"So you *do* understand," he said, releasing my jaw and rising to his feet. He looked down at me. "It could help you—I could help you."

I looked over at the recorder, at the door.

"Oh come on, kid," he said, laughing. "college student, huh? You're smarter than that. You know that no one is watching. No one can hear."

"I'll tell," I said. He laughed almost before I said it.

"Go ahead, tell them," he said. He tilted his head to the side, eyes intent on my face. "But no, you won't. You won't tell because you're smarter than that because why would they believe a skinny little bitch who's drunk off her ass with stolen vodka?"

"Fuck you," I said again, but there was no bite in it. I knew—even better than he did—that I wouldn't say anything. That I hadn't ever said anything; that silence was ingrained and my worst habit.

He laughed and released my jaw.

"Have it your way," he said. "but keep it in mind. It could be our little secret." And when I said nothing, did nothing, not even blink, he said, "Suit yourself, kid. What do I care? I'll have three or four more options in here before my shift's up. You're only screwing yourself."

He rose to his feet, walked back to the chair with the clipboard, and pressed a button on the recorder. A gentle humming sound told me it was recording again. He retrieved his hat from

the security camera he'd hung it on and unlocked the door. He returned to his chair and pulled his cap over his eyes.

When Heidi came back, she asked the security guard to step outside for a minute, so I could change. He hung his cap over the security camera again, feigning decency, winking at me as he closed the door behind him.

Heidi handed me a paper bag and pair of those blue paper pants that hospital patients wear. She hadn't seen the wink and misinterpreted my hesitation to change.

"Sorry," she said. "but someone has to remain in the room with you at all times."

While I changed, Heidi moved two chairs to the opposite end of the room, far from the puddle of vomit on the floor. She sat in one and waited patiently for me to finish.

"Listen, Miss Henderson," she said. "I know you don't feel well, but it will be a lot easier on you later if you can manage to get through a few more questions."

I nodded as I tied the drawstrings on the blue pants. I piled my dirty denim jeans into the plastic bag and went to sit in the second chair she'd moved.

"I thought you might be thirsty or hungry," she said, pulling a Slimfast and a weight loss bar from her coat pockets. She handed them to me.

"Not that you need diet *anything*," she said. "But this was all I had."

I understood that she was giving me what she had brought to work for herself and felt a rush of gratitude at the gesture. I thanked her and unscrewed the cap of the Slimfast bottle, but when I took a drink, the nausea returned and I screwed the cap back on.

"Now," she said. "Can you tell me why you are going home?"

I swallowed hard, my throat still burning from the remnants of the acidic vomit.

"My aunt died," I said.

She paused and then said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Heidi was quiet a long time and then she rose from her chair and moved toward the door.

"Don't be," I said. "I'm not." Which wasn't totally true, but I was hoping it would end the conversation. I didn't want to continue it in front of the security officer, who came back in and took his cap down from the camera and sat in his chair.

I tried not to look at him.

Heidi made a long note on her clipboard before skimming her finger down the paperwork on the clipboard. When her finger stopped, she spoke again.

"Okay, last I'm going ask you a series of questions that will help TSA determine the severity of your infraction and the penalties. Okay?"

"Fine," I said.

"Miss Henderson," she said, her voice taking on a more formal tone. "Did you know it's illegal for passengers to open alcohol onboard an aircraft?"

"I do now," I said.

"And that smoking is prohibited onboard any aircraft?"

"Yeah."

"Smoking fines are several thousand dollars, kid," the officer said, speaking loudly from his corner. The woman turned and looked at him, but he kept his eyes locked on mine. "You got several thousand dollars lying around?"

I said nothing.

"Didn't think so," he said, smirking.

“James, please,” she said. Her reprimand was calm and I wondered how often things happened behind her back, how many before me had looked over her shoulder into his smug, hungry face, how many after me would have to.

Heidi turned to face me again, unsuspecting, and said, “Unfortunately, he’s right, Danielle. And it might go easier on you if you can explain your behavior.”

I shrugged. I was not going to talk about Tori. Not here, not in front of him. And probably not ever. I’d decided that years ago.

“So you weren’t drinking because of grief? Or smoking because of stress? Or anything like that?” She asked. She was trying to draw an answer that would keep me out of too much trouble, trying to help me, and once more I felt a rush of gratitude towards her. But I was determined not to look more vulnerable than I already did. I paused, looked at the guard, back to Heidi and shook my head decidedly.

She tilted her head, her eyes sad, and sighed. “Then why, Miss Henderson?”

I shrugged. “Had a craving I guess,” I said. Which was a lie—I hadn’t smoked in over a year—not since leaving home, where Tori would leave cigarettes and cash and miniature bottles of vodka where I could find them. Little bribes; attempts to win back the love I’d shown her as a child. And I took them all, accepting payment not for love, but for silence.

There was more scratching on the clipboard and a few more logistical questions. James was sent to gather my bags, and belongings. I made a call to my mother, telling her I’d landed, not telling her more.

When I hung up, Heidi stared at me.

“You know,” Heidi said. “I have two daughters myself.” I looked at her. “And I would be very concerned if I knew either of them were in your shoes.”

I looked at the security guard and didn't take my eyes off him as I said, "Who knows, maybe they are." Heidi followed my gaze to the security guard, saw the anger in his eyes and looked back to me with a confused look on her face. She opened her mouth as if to ask another question, but I stood up and went to stand by my bags. She stood too, dropping whatever question she'd had.

That was the closest to I'd ever come to telling and it wasn't even close to being enough.

Heidi said that James the security officer would accompany me from the terminal, and that I could expect a federal attorney to be in touch about a court date.

"Great, can't wait," I said, lifting my bag off the floor.

"Well," she said. "Sorry about your ordeal, Miss Henderson."

"Me too." And I was. I was sorry for all of us. For Tori and my mother and Heidi's daughters. All of us.

I followed James from the security room. He didn't look at me or speak to me as we walked through the terminal, past the baggage pickup and out to ground transportation. Travelers stood around outside, chatting on cell phones or watching the coming and going of cars that would carry them away one by one. I breathed a sigh of relief, assured that I wouldn't wait alone, or worse, alone with him.

The officer spun to face me and stepped closer. I resisted stepping back, refusing him the satisfaction of knowing how afraid I was. He leaned slightly toward me and whispered, "You're fucked, kid".

A moment later he was swallowed by the automatic doors as he returned to the terminal. I was trembling and let my bags fall to the concrete. My breathing came heavier for a minute, and I fought back tears.

Fifteen minutes later, my mother pulled up to the sidewalk in her red Subaru. She was out of the car almost before it stopped. Her arms wrapped around me and I felt safe, like her body in front of mine was a shield, even though, of course, it had never been. And she squeezed me so tight I thought everything might burst out all at once. And I almost said *I need to tell you something*, but I opened my eyes and there, over her shoulder was barns, watching through the glass walls of the airport, the smirk on his face daring me to tell. But I wouldn't, no, because I thought maybe, at least, I could shield my mother.

Seeing Red on Aurora

Nikki's first time out to Aurora avenue, Gretta assured her she wouldn't need to do anything.

"Two together make more money than one," Gretta said. "And it's safer. Come on, help me out."

Nikki said she wasn't sure—it wasn't really her scene. What about those two girls that came over last week?

"Nah," Gretta said. "Those two are a package deal, and you know, three won't make shit. It's too intimidating for a guy to pull up on a crowd, ya know? Two, though, *two* is the money maker. C'mon Nikki, you won't have to do anything, and I'll split the money with you."

Gretta tossed a tube of lipstick underhand across the room, and Nikki dropped the paintbrush she was cleaning off to catch it.

Once on Aurora, heels high, skirts short, Nikki felt nervous and silly and sexy all at the same time. She was only twenty, not old enough even to drink, but Gretta, who was nearly thirty, always treated her like she was older. Told her everything about Aurora, about the working girls and the guys who picked them up, about the pay and trade secrets like where to pick up free condoms and how to survive four-inch heels.

Gretta and Nikki were standing outside the Marco Polo motel that night when an unassuming silver Acura pulled up to the curb. Nikki stood back on the sidewalk and watched the way Gretta approached the passenger-side window slowly, warily, masking any hesitance with a sexy, exaggerated sway of her hips. She bent down low, holding onto the windowsill with

two manicured hands, and spoke to the driver. When she waved Nikki over, she said loudly to him, “She’s a customer, too, but she just wants to watch. I’ll give you a little discount. Cool?”

Nikki said nothing but looked to the driver. She saw him raise his eyebrows as his gaze moved over her face, down to her breasts and hips, her bare legs.

He smiled slyly, then shrugged and said, “Whatever gets you going, sweetheart.”

“Great,” Gretta said. “Let’s go.” She opened the door to the back seat and held it open for Nikki. Nikki hesitated, but Gretta grabbed her forearm and tugged as she said, “Don’t worry. I learned this way, too. Trust me, you’ll be fine.” Nikki was in the back seat and the door was closed before she realized she’d agreed.

The passenger-side windows of the Acura were streaked with crusted-over bird droppings, as if the owner had parked under a telephone wire lined with pigeons. He and Gretta talked softly in the front seats, but Nikki didn’t hear any of it—her attention was occupied entirely by the bird droppings. Even when Gretta ushered her into a chair inside the motel room, even when she whispered “enjoy the show” and pushed the driver down onto one of two beds in the room, Nikki’s thoughts were on the pattern of bird shit on glass, its grays and whites and yellows and browns, the rugged paint-like texture when it dried.

Once, when Nikki was just ten years old, her mother had left home for three days, had forgotten about Nikki in the flurry of a short-lived romance. Nikki ate cereal and pop-tarts and watched Disney’s *The Lion King* over and over until her mother returned with a sixty-four-piece set of coloring crayons and no further explanation. It was a pattern that would repeat itself in the coming years, though the gifts graduated to watercolors and markers, pastels and acrylics. Nikki retreated to her room in their small apartment with each gift, portraying images she both did and

did not see—the gray Seattle sky, the changing shape of her body, the square jawline of a boy she didn't know—images that captivated her long enough for her mother to forget her again.

So Nikki both did and did not see Gretta in the motel room, the way she rocked back and forth with the Acura driver between her legs, the way their tangled bodies reflected off the black screen of the unused television, the way their breathing sped up. The scene played before her like a movie on mute, but her thoughts stayed with the bird shit. She knew from years of experience what inspiration felt like: it felt like patterns and textures and colors rattling around in her mind, leaving no room for anything else—not even Gretta and the Acura driver—until they were all out on a canvas.

Gretta wasn't prone to worrying. In a decade of turning tricks, she'd learned that worrying wouldn't change anything. She believed that only money could change things. It was money, not worrying, that had elevated her from a girlfriend's couch to a downtown apartment. It wasn't worrying that replaced worn down heels or paid for drugs when she needed a pick-me-up, or, once, the abortion that kept her from going flat broke. And in Gretta's mind, the only way to get money was to stop worrying and get out there and hustle.

So Gretta didn't worry when they got back to their apartment and Nikki retreated instantly to the living room, which doubled as her bedroom, without saying anything. Gretta figured she'd get over it soon, and then probably get back out there, like Gretta always did. But for the next three days and nights, Nikki barely spoke, barely ate or slept, only painted or stared into space. She called in sick to the movie theatre where she punched tickets every Saturday and Sunday. She turned down a Tuesday lunch shift at the taco stand where she worked part-time. It

was then that Gretta got nervous—she'd found a roommate for rent money, not for companionship. She already got more companionship than she wanted.

Gretta must have asked Nikki a hundred times if everything was okay. Nikki promised she was fine.

“Maybe I shouldn't have taken you out there,” Gretta said. “But I mean, you obviously don't ever have to go again, if you don't want. I just thought you should know what it's like, you know? It's not always as bad as people think, and honestly it's better money than most anything else. Sure, you get a bad client now and then, but that's any job, right?”

Nikki nodded, but it was obvious that she wasn't really listening. She wasn't thinking about Aurora or money or the Acura driver or the Marco Polo or whether she'd ever go back. She was staring her half-finished painting and wondering how to make white paint semi-translucent, like mucus, so that it would lie like a film over gray and brown and clotted bits of black. Gretta gave up on the conversation and left.

She came home early the next morning with a bag of junk food from the gas station on the corner—hot pockets, taquitos, and gummy worms. Nikki was washing her paint brushes in the kitchen sink.

“Hey there, Picasso” Gretta said. “You finish yet?”

Nikki nodded softly and smiled.

“Really?” Gretta said, relief obvious in her voice. “Can I see?”

Nikki set the brush she was washing carefully on the edge of the sink and dried her hands on a dirty towel. She led the way across her room, stepping between clothes and tissues that littered the floor. The coffee table was barely visible beneath coffee mugs and empty soda cans, small bottles of paint and several glass plates she'd used to mix paint. Nikki was usually tidy,

partly because her room was entirely visible from the kitchen and front door, but also because she didn't have enough things to really make a mess. She kept her few clothes and her paints in a couple of shoeboxes that were stacked beside the pull-out sofa.

the large canvas was leaning against the wall beside the window. The roommates stood side by side, staring silently down at it. A long time passed before Gretta said anything.

"It's good," she said, hesitantly.

She was so obviously just being polite that Nikki laughed aloud. "You can be honest."

"No, no, it is," Gretta protested. "It is good. It's just so... gray. I mean, I've never seen you use, like, no color or anything."

Nikki shrugged. They continued staring at the painting, and Gretta eventually cleared her throat. "It's—I mean, did you mean for it to look like—" she paused, searching for the right words.

"Like bird shit?" Nikki said, bluntly.

Gretta burst out laughing. "Yeah! Like a flock of fucking seagulls shat all over it."

Nikki laughed, too, a tired kind of laugh. "Yeah, actually. That's exactly what I meant."

"Well then," Gretta said. "You nailed that shit."

That Friday, six hours after putting it up for sale online, the bird shit painting sold for four-hundred and twenty-five dollars. It was Nikki's highest-ever sale. But she never had a chance to tell Gretta, who didn't come home that night, or the next. It wasn't Gretta's first time disappearing for a few days, so it wasn't until a week later that Nikki went into Gretta's room, where clothes and well-worn heels were strewn across the floor amidst candy wrappers and unopened condoms and tabloid magazines. Most of the dresser drawers were open and empty,

and Gretta's pillow was missing. Nikki understood then that Gretta wasn't planning to come back. She stood in the doorway, staring at the messy room, and let the disappointment sink in. Not the disappointment of being abandoned—it wasn't Nikki's first time being left alone. By now she regarded it simply as a fact of life, an event that happens now and again to everyone—but there was additional disappointment this time, because it meant four-hundred and twenty-five dollars would go towards Gretta's part of the rent, due at the end of the week. The disappointment grew slowly to frustration, desperation, and after an hour or so Nikki resolved to find Gretta. Maybe, she thought, Gretta would give her at least a few hundred bucks, just enough to make rent this month. Then Nikki could figure something out before the next bill was due.

Gretta had always called the area between downtown and Green Lake her "Sweet spot", the area not too far north or south of the city, where there was less competition and customers were less sketchy. Fewer hicks from the sticks, she always said. So, Nikki caught an eleven o'clock bus out to the corner of Aurora and 45th street and walked north from there. It was one in the morning when she was nearly hit by a middle-aged man in a shabby pick-up as he pulled off the road. The truck screeched to a stop and the driver leaned over to the passenger door, cranking a handle that lowered the window a few inches at a time.

He barked through the window, "Hey honey, how much ya' chargin'?"

Nikki stepped backwards, stammering. "Oh, no. I—I'm not."

"How much?" He asked, this time a little louder.

Nikki paused, thinking of the cash tucked in an old paint jar back at the apartment: her month's savings, plus the money from selling the bird shit painting. It was more than a typical month, but still not enough to cover the Gretta's half of the rent. The options, as far as Nikki could see, were to either find Gretta or to find four-hundred dollars. And to find one or the other

by the end of the week, sooner than she could finish another painting, sooner than she could possibly earn by making tacos a few days a week. But Nikki didn't know how much bodies went for, and she thought four-hundred sounded impossibly high. Still, she could make a dent in what she needed.

"A hundred bucks," she said, impulsively. She knew right away that it was a low number, from the way he immediately unlocked and pushed open the door for her. She approached cautiously, the way she'd seen Gretta do, minus the sex appeal. The man had a bright orange shirt on, with three yellow bars across the front, like the ones construction guys wear. Tattoos peeked out from under the orange sleeves, and his bronzed forearms were thick and muscled in a way that might have put Nikki on her guard. But the cab of the truck had the clean scent of a pine air freshener and upbeat blues music played over the radio at a low volume, and Nikki found herself surprisingly comfortable as she climbed in.

"Got a place you prefer?" He asked.

"Um... the Marco Polo," she said. It was the only place she knew by name.

He nodded, and they didn't speak again the rest of the way, even as he checked them into the motel, not until they reached their room on the third floor. Nikki followed the man in but stopped just inside the door, feeling disoriented. She'd assumed the room would look like the one she'd been in with Gretta and the Acura driver, with two double beds and a television set on the dresser. This room had one queen-sized bed and a dresser, but no small table and no tv. A rickety-looking rocking chair in the corner had been strangely turned to face the corner. The chair caught Nikki's attention, and she stared at it so long that the construction man had to double back, his shirt and shoes already off, and pull her towards the bed. Nikki thought only of

the rocking chair and those thoughts blurred with the motion of her body and the faint smell of pine and several times she almost felt like she was dreaming.

When the man was done, he stood and dressed, and he didn't comment on the fact that Nikki stayed where she was, lying on the overly-starched sheets with her eyes locked on the rocking chair. He said something but she didn't respond, and then he tucked several bills into her palm and left. The bills stayed clenched in her fist through the night as she lay awake studying the grain of the wooden chair and the shadow it cast on the wallpaper that was discolored in splotches from smoke and age.

When housekeeping knocked at the door the following morning, Nikki woke reluctantly and, half-dazed, put her clothes back on. She counted the money, relief and gratitude vaguely registering as she realized how easily the construction man could have blown her off. Then she tucked the money into her pocket before slipping out the door and down the hallway, past a distracted maid.

Nikki heard a knock at her apartment door two nights later and answered dressed in a paint-stained t-shirt and boxer shorts. It was the property manager whom Nikki had met once before, when she'd first moved in. She was an easy woman to recognize: middle-aged, short and stocky, with jet-black hair cut short. Like an eighties rock groupie for Patti Smith.

"Is Gretta around?" the woman asked.

Nikki shook her head.

"You're her new roommate?" The woman said.

Nikki had been living there over a year, but she said, "Yeah, I'm her roommate."

“Right. Well, your guys’ rent was due three days ago,” she said. “I called Gretta yesterday, but it said her number was disconnected.”

Nikki nodded.

“When she gets home tell her no more late payments. Last warning.”

“She hasn’t been here in almost two weeks,” Nikki said, honestly. “I’m not sure where she is.”

The woman narrowed her eyes and looked at Nikki for a long time, as though deciding whether or not to believe her.

“Did you let anyone know?” The woman asked. “Did you call the police?”

Nikki shook her head. “She took most of her stuff with her,” she said. “I don’t think she’s planning on coming back.”

“Fuck,” the woman said sharply. She rubbed the back of her head with one hand and said, almost to herself, “I’m so fucking done with this month-to-month shit.” Then, a little louder, she said, “Well, if you can’t make rent, then sorry, kid, but you gotta go.”

“I can pay,” Nikki said. She told the woman to wait there, and she returned a minute later with a wrinkled wad of cash.

The woman took it, straightened each bill, counting slowly while Nikki waited. Once she finished she asked, “What’s your name again, kid?”

“Nikki.”

“I’m jess,” she said. “So, looks like you got a job then, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Nikki said. “I work a few different places.”

“Oh yeah?” Jess said, one eyebrow raising. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something else, but then she closed it again.

“I’ll probably need another roommate,” Nikki said.

“That’s fine,” Jess said. “but that’s on you. I don’t care how you do it, I just want rent in on time—cash only. I’ve bounced too many checks here. And no smoking inside the apartment, and let me know asap of any issues with the place, okay? Like leaks or whatever. I prefer to keep it simple and if you can do that, we’re good.”

Nikki nodded, said goodbye, and retreated back inside the apartment. She opened the door to Gretta’s old room and looked around for a moment before returning to her painting. After the rocking chair was down on canvas—a mass of brown and white and yellow acrylic—she went back to the bedroom. She moved the orphaned heels and clothes into the living room, stuffed a few condoms and a tube of mascara into her pockets, and hauled the rest of Gretta’s things down to the dumpster. Nikki swept the floor, opened the blinds, and collapsed on the bed.

Lying on Gretta’s bed, in what was now her own apartment, with paint drying in the next room, Nikki thought about Aurora and the bird shit and the rocking chair. In an hour or two, she would post a photo of the rocking chair online and hope for someone to buy it. She didn’t want to, really. She would prefer to keep the painting around for a few days, enjoy the fruits of her labor. But rent would be due again next month, and she knew that the bird shit and the rocking chair were the best paintings she’d ever completed. Better yet, she knew where the inspiration for both had been found, and she smiled up at the ceiling.

Within a week Nikki found a new roommate. She used the same exact Craig’s list post as Gretta had: *Wanted, cool chick to share a one-bedroom apartment on first hill. No pets. Rent 700, plus utilities.* Within an hour she had a promising response: a girl named Koharu Nakamura, who went by Jenny.

Jenny was a freshman exchange student from Japan, studying pre-med at the University of Washington. She moved into Greta's old room right away and was okay paying more rent. She was rarely home; most of her time was spent in classes or at the library. When they occasionally crossed paths in the kitchen, it was usually in the early mornings or evenings.

In those rare crossings, Jenny would ask Nikki in a thick accent about uncommon English words like 'tofurkey', or certain Seattle customs, like why people didn't use umbrellas or rain boots. Or she'd comment politely on Nikki's latest painting. But Jenny kept conversation to safe subjects, never asking where Nikki was going on the nights when she squeezed into mini-skirts and high heels—nights when she felt uninspired and frustrated.

It wasn't about the money, though of course, money was always involved. And Nikki figured that while she was at it, she might as well come home with as much as possible. It meant more paint, more canvas, fewer shifts at the taco truck and movie theater. Plus, she learned quickly that she could charge more than most girls, because she was tall, her legs long and toned, her stomach flat. Because she had naturally straight teeth and none of them were missing or broken. That kind of thing goes a long way on Aurora. It never occurred to Nikki to wonder how long that might last.

Nikki kept to the same sweet spot as Greta had. There were trade-offs: while the men were generally cleaner and gentler, you had to be a little warier of cops; you didn't compete with as many women and rates were higher, but you might have to wait longer before getting picked up.

Nikki never had to wait that long.

Except once when the rain was heavy and visibility poor. That night she'd stood shivering under the Aurora bridge for nearly two hours, watching the rain water pour over the

sides, distorting the glow of streetlights in the distance, and when she got home she stripped off her wet clothes and painted, naked, until the sun came up. Jenny walked into the kitchen that morning and tried not to stare over to where Nikki stood, still naked, painting in the living room, at the splotches of red and yellow paint splattered across her bare stomach and thighs.

Nikki hadn't gone out to Aurora for nearly two weeks the night a four-runner pulled up to where she stood on the corner of the Winona Avenue intersection. She stood there, waiting patiently, her silhouette outlined by the neon lights of a 7-Eleven. The driver of the four-runner looked over at her quickly and then looked forward again. The automatic window rolled down on the passenger side and she moved cautiously toward the car, surveying the driver's expression, the way his hands gripped the steering wheel. She watched for anything suspicious—the overt twitching of a druggie; the lethargic, imprecise movements of a drunk.

This driver neither twitched nor swayed, but as she approached, he didn't look over at her. He stared straight ahead through the windshield. Maybe that should have been a red-flag, because most men check out the merchandise. Most men look a woman up and down and say something right away. But Nikki had met a few nervous men by now, first-timers and husbands, so she gave the driver the benefit of the doubt and lowered her face to the open window.

“Hello?” She said, as if she were answering a telephone.

The way she said it seemed to relax him a little, and he shifted slightly in his seat before turning to face her. Then she understood: the majority of the left side of his face—the side she hadn't been able to see—was covered in a scaly, raised birthmark. A division, like the coast of a topographical map, divided his face in two: smooth white skin on the right, and rough, reddened skin on the left.

“I usually charge two hundred an hour, plus room costs,” she said. *Usually*. If he said no, she would lower her price; if he wanted her longer, she would stay.

The man nodded and Nikki stood up straight, adjusted her mini-skirt and got in.

“I’m Nikki,” she said.

“Jacob,” he said, looking forward again so that the birthmark disappeared from view.

They went to a motel she hadn’t been to before, north of the lake by a few miles. They walked up to the motel concierge and a man behind the counter looked at Jacob, who said nothing and instead turned to Nikki. She realized he expected her to take the lead, so she cleared her throat and asked the concierge whether he had any rooms available. His cheeks puckered like he tasted something sour, but he responded, “For how long?”

“Just tonight,” she said.

His eyes narrowed, but he grabbed a key from the line of hooks below his desk and lifted it. “Full payment due up front,” he said. “Hundred bucks a night.”

Nikki knew those weren’t his standard rates. The kind of clients that stayed at motels on Aurora couldn’t afford that. But she looked at Jacob and he was already holding out five crisp twenty-dollar bills, which he shakily traded the concierge for a room key.

The curtains in the room were drawn, and Nikki closed them before dropping her jacket and purse onto the bedside table. She undressed down to her underwear without any coquetry, the way she usually did, but she felt suddenly nervous after that. Her inspiration had never been the client, she had never really needed or wanted to get them close.

Jacob was leaning against the desk, watching her intently, breathing rapidly. Nikki went to him and took his hand in hers. She stepped in close, leaning against him as she moved his hand to her bra clasp. He turned his face to the side, hiding the side Nikki wanted, so she cupped

his face in both her hands and turned his face toward hers. He pushed against her left palm, trying again to turn, but Nikki held him and smiled gently. They were close enough that she could see the beads of sweat forming around his brow, could examine the raised, pink birthmark that had captivated her instantly.

His hands were shaky, and he couldn't get her bra clasp undone, so eventually she released his face and undid it herself. His eyes fell across her bare breasts, and the look in them made her wonder if they were the first he'd seen. She let him stare as she worked her fingers deftly down his button-up, then she stepped backward towards the bed and he followed. She fell back onto the mattress, never remembering the condom in her purse, never taking her eyes off the left side of his face as he took off his pants. He lowered himself slowly, uncertain, onto her. Her hands guided him inside, her eyes open and focused on the rough, reddened skin covering half his face.

Nikki fell easily into the familiar trance, caught up in colors and textures and the way the unsightly birthmark distorted itself slightly whenever he opened his mouth to moan or sigh or breathe. She was transfixed at the way the scaly, red skin pulled taut over his cheekbone. She was so rapt, she didn't realize when she went still.

He noticed and pushed harder against her. "Don't stop," he said. "Don't stop."

But she remained immobile, not hearing what he said. She heard nothing, felt nothing, fascinated by the contrast of skin, white and red, smooth and rough. Her fingers lifted to his cheek and grazed the birthmark softly. He stopped moving then and after a moment he swatted her hand away and turned his cheek from her.

"Does it hurt?" She whispered.

The moments following that were a blur. The explosion just below her temple stopped time, movement, sound. She felt the hardness of the wood floor, the wind as it left her lungs. A few seconds later, and the room went dark.

Nikki woke with blood dried around her nostrils and across her right cheek. The canine tooth on the left side was on the floor, surrounded by a dark red stain. Panic and adrenaline moved through her for several minutes before she felt sure she was alive and alone. It hurt to breathe, to move. It was another half hour before she had enough strength and composure to call a taxi. When it arrived, she left the hotel without checking out, without even washing the blood from her face. The taxi driver asked if she was okay but she didn't answer.

At home, in the shower, she watched the red and pink water swirl together and down the drain. She didn't even dry off when she got out. Shivering, she went into her room and dragged a blank canvas to the middle of her bedroom floor.

Jenny froze just inside the door when she walked in later that night. Nikki was painting naked again, but the purple bruises covering her ribs and face were hideous, terrifying. There was red paint everywhere—smeared across the canvas, in small puddles on the coffee table, pressed into her hair and between her toes.

“Nikki?” Jenny said, her voice higher pitched than normal.

Nikki looked over at Jenny slowly.

“What happened to you?”

Nikki didn't respond because it hurt to move her jaw. She looked back to the red and pink canvases. The colors were perfect, the textures as intriguing as the face that inspired them. She knew it would sell exceptionally well—well enough to cover expenses until the bruises healed,

so she wasn't worried. Nikki stared at the drying paint and ran her tongue over the raw place between her teeth, savoring the coppery taste.

The Pantsuit

Janice Cashwell had two weeks on the outside before she took the pantsuit out of the closet. She laid it on her bed and stood naked in front of a full-length mirror, grimacing at the sight of her own head-to-toe reflection, still unfamiliar after nearly fourteen years in prison. The dimples in her thighs, the sag of her breasts, a slight jiggle in her hips and triceps—signs of years spent on a goddamn prison diet, all processed sugar and trans-fat. She struggled to fasten her bra and pull on a gray turtleneck without messing up the curlers in her hair, half of which was gray now.

Only after the curlers were removed and the navy blazer was layered over the turtleneck did Janice smile a bit. She stood up a little straighter and found that there was one place under the arms, at the top of the ribcage, where the jacket fit a little too snug, restricting upper-body movement ever so slightly. She'd have to avoid lifting her arms too high, but otherwise, it was perfect. It would sway interviews; it would win over employers; she would move forward for the first time in fourteen years.

Janice thought the gray turtleneck drew attention to the gray in her hair, but she couldn't really afford to get her hair dyed yet, and the turtleneck was the only shirt that hid the calligraphy tattooed along her collarbone. *Cash*, a play on her last name. She'd thought it clever when she got it, but now she considered it a nuisance. It was why, despite the intense heat of August, Janice was dressed as if it were late November.

After fourteen years of gray sweats and gray walls, Janice should have been ready to swear gray off forever. It should have given her anxiety, claustrophobia. And yet, it was oddly comforting, something uniform and familiar amid the fresh chaos of the outside. The chaos of

personal bank accounts, phone plans, and bus routes. Even now, as she looked in the mirror, it seemed to her that the only thing that connected today's Janice with the Janice of the last fourteen years was that gray turtleneck, barely visible under the formal, navy-blue pantsuit. But at the same time, Janice was aware that she was not supposed to show the Janice of the last fourteen years, and so she pulled the pantsuit blazer tight around her soft belly and fastened its two black buttons.

With her ensemble complete, Janice turned away from the mirror and searched for her wallet and house keys.

Janice had exactly two keys: a key to Trinity house, and a key for the private room she rented there. Prior to her release, Janice's counselor at the prison had helped her secure a room at Trinity, a low-income boarding house. She rented month-to-month, and her continued placement in the house was contingent on her compliance with five "house rules" which were typed out and posted on Janice's bedroom door the day she'd arrived. Another copy was taped to the front of the mini-fridge in the bedroom, and a third enclosed in a manila folder on the bedside table. In Janice's first week, the landlord stopped by several times and repeatedly encouraged her to memorize the house rules, since they were, as she put it, "obligatory." Janice studied them carefully.

The first rule was that she had to stay sober, a rule that the landlords enforced through random drug tests and a policy of no alcohol in the house. So far, Janice hadn't been randomly tested, but if she had there wouldn't have been an issue—she was determined to avoid falling into old habits. Plus, she couldn't afford drugs and alcohol even if she'd wanted to.

The second rule of Trinity house was that she had to "demonstrate progress" towards employment, which apparently meant that the landlord would visit at the end of the month and

ask her what she'd been up to lately. The end of the month was tomorrow, and in her first month as a resident, Janice's only attempt to find employment had been to print and mail her resume to several local hair salons. None had called the house or her pre-paid cell phone. None had e-mailed her new g-mail account, which had taken her over an hour to set up at the local library because she couldn't seem to come up with an email address that hadn't already been taken. She returned to the library every other day to log into the new account and check for responses to her resume, but so far there was nothing. She felt anxiety and stress building until it got to the point where she started getting headaches and having trouble falling asleep. Finally, desperation prompted her to put on the pantsuit.

Rule number three was that no overnight guests were allowed without the consent of the landlord. Janice's mother and father had moved to California shortly after she was incarcerated, and neither had visited even once as she served out her fourteen-year sentence. Nor had anyone else. Hosting guests was not something that occurred to Janice.

The fourth rule was that she was responsible for being a "good housemate", which the rules defined as contributing to the house-cleaning and keeping reasonable hours. Janice asked what it meant to keep reasonable hours.

"Well," the landlord said, clearing her throat as if preparing to give a well-practiced speech, "You know, it mostly means noise. We've had issues in the past with boarders disrupting the peace at late hours. You know, late night music or phone calls, that kind of thing."

Finally, rule five was that she had to pay a flat monthly rate of four-hundred dollars a month, which was impressive considering the city's average of *fourteen*-hundred dollars a month. But, cheap as that was, Janice still could not afford her room for long. Despite working for 14 years as a laundress in the prison, making a \$1.25 an hour, she had managed to save less

than a thousand dollars. Most of the money had been spent while she was still on the inside, on things like hair conditioner and protein bars and other overpriced “luxury items” available to inmates for purchase. The day she’d walked out of the prison, they’d printed her a report that was several pages long, with line item after line item detailing her earnings and purchases. She’d flipped eagerly to the last page and sighed with relief. At least her balance was positive, which was a better situation than most women end up with on release day.

They prison accountants had written her a check for nine-hundred eighty-three dollars and fifty-two cents, and in the first weeks on the outside, she spent nearly half of it—clothes, food, a pre-paid cell phone, photocopies, sheets, two towels and two blankets. She’d gotten everything second-hand but was down to four hundred and thirty-six dollars, which she had in hard cash that she counted regularly and kept in her wallet.

With her pantsuit on and her hair curlers out, Janice put her wallet and house keys into the canvas tote bag that the prison had presented her on her last day locked up. She took the copy of the house rules out of the manila folder on the bedside table and replaced it with ten fresh copies of an underwhelming resume, and a single page of notes about job hunting, which she’d taken during her last days at the prison. The notes were based on advice from a twenty-two-year-old facility volunteer named Paul.

Paul was a philosophy major at the university of Washington, who was earning course credit by volunteering twice a month at the prison, helping the inmates build resumes and conducting practice interviewing. Before Janice was released, he helped her prepare a professional resume and put together a plan for job hunting. Paul didn’t say so, but Janice didn’t have much worth including on her resume. Her education was limited to a GED and a cosmetology certificate, both earned in prison. She’d worked as a grocery store shelf-stocker for

just a month, then at a Subway for two months (but only part-time) and, finally, as a laundress while in prison. Of course, there had been other jobs, but they weren't the type you put on a resume—drug dealing, mostly. Janice and Paul spent two hours working on the resume, and then he got the prison staff to print three copies, so Janice could take them with her when she was released.

“You’re definitely going to find an awesome job,” Paul said, handing the resume copies over. “No problem.”

“Okay,” Janice said.

“Maybe you could look for work as a secretary or assistant in a salon or something,” Paul suggested. But after fourteen years of being told what to do and when, Janice didn’t even hear ‘maybe you could.’ She’d simply followed orders and sent her resume out to the nearest twelve salons and waited, trusting in Paul’s confidence.

But after nearly a month of waiting Janice felt she couldn’t delay any longer. So on a Tuesday morning she carefully curled her hair, put on the pantsuit, and bombarded a housemate in the kitchen to ask where she could catch a bus that led to city-center.

It was hot outside. Really hot, by Seattle standards, especially being just eleven o’clock in the morning. The sunlight washed over her as she locked the front door of Trinity house behind her and headed for the bus stop. Sweat was beading at her temples by the time the bus arrived. She paid the two-dollar fare in exact change and stepped with relief into the air conditioning. There were only two other passengers on board. A man in construction boots and a baseball cap was stretched out across two seats at the back of the bus, and at the front sat a teenage girl with bulky headphones and her toned and tanned stomach exposed. Janice grew

more aware of the places where her suit-jacket was a little too tight and took a seat a few rows in front of the construction man.

As the bus moved toward city-center, Janice tried not to look over at the slender girl's bare midriff, and instead went over Paul's job interview tips in her head. First, look the part. He'd shown her a poster titled "The do's and don't's of business attire". The "do's" included pencil skirts, blazers, dress shoes, slacks, cardigans, and pantsuits. Don'ts were jeans, low-cut blouses, wrinkles, stains, and face piercings. Janice had fixated on the pantsuit, to the exclusion of all else, and even now she didn't second-guess the pantsuit, despite its awkward shoulder pads and the way the snug jacket rode up slightly when she walked.

Janice was far more concerned about Paul's second interview tip.

"Don't reveal your weaknesses," he'd said. "but if asked, don't lie about your mistakes."

This confused Janice, who wasn't sure how exactly to draw the line between her weaknesses and mistakes. She'd always had a weakness for substances, for alcohol and cigarettes and then cocaine, heroin, whatever she could get her hands on. She had a weakness for men, for dropouts and drunks and, in the end, dealers. Every "weakness" had proven bigger mistake than the last and eventually it had cost her heavy charges for drug possession, dealing, and several accounts of theft, which had been prompted by her drug addiction—enough charges to put her away for fourteen years.

"Well, it's pretty obvious I've got a weakness for drugs," Janice had said to Paul. "So, I guess I won't bring that up?"

"Right," Paul said, nodding slowly, looking uncertain. "But you should be prepared in case they ask you to talk about your weaknesses or how you recover from mistakes. People ask that a lot in interviews."

“Okay,” Janice said, thinking for a moment. “Well, I’d have to say my biggest mistake was probably dating my dealer, and I guess I only recovered because the cops came for him and found me on the floor in his apartment. It was my third strike and, well, it was lucky for me they came, actually, because I probably wouldn’t have made it through the night.”

There was a long pause while Paul fumbled for something to say.

Janice felt uncomfortable in his silence and tried to explain further. “He forgot to turn me on my side,” she said.

Paul sighed. “Right,” he said, “But honestly, I wouldn’t say any of that.”

“Okay,” Janice said again, out of ideas. Paul had given her a few other tips—things like ‘always ask to speak with a manager’ and ‘be sure to look people in the eye when you shake their hand.’ They’d practiced shaking hands several times, because Janice had been too gentle at first, and then too firm. She’d taken a lot of notes during her time with Paul, which were now tucked inside the manila folder.

“Don’t overthink it,” Paul said. “Just be yourself.”

“Okay,” Janice said for a third time, still not sure she understood what to do.

Riding the bus, Janice felt as unlike herself as she ever had felt. At least, she felt far from the version of herself that she’d been on the inside. That Janice kept a regular routine of work and meals and classes for her GED or certificate programs. A routine lived within mandated gray sweat pants, within strict boundaries formed by chain-link fencing topped with razor-wire.

Of course, Janice loved the freedom of the outside, the option to go where she wanted when she wanted. She was *choosing* to find work, and that was what she had been waiting for, preparing for, during the fourteen years she spent inside. It was also the reason nerves were forming knots in her stomach as the bus lurched and stopped and lurched forward again.

“You heading to city hall?” A voice from behind Janice asked.

She turned around in her seat. The man in construction boots had moved into the seat behind her.

“Me? Oh...no,” she answered, turning to look at him more closely. He was younger than she’d thought at first. And handsome, with smooth, tan skin beneath the dark scruff along his jaw. He smiled at Janice, and his teeth seemed impossibly white, his eyes such a dark brown that they looked black in the shadow of his ball cap.

“Oh,” he said. “City hall is on this route.”

She nodded, as if she already knew that. “Well,” she said. “I’m not going there. I’m on my way to an interview.”

“Yeah, you look like a professional kind of lady,” he said as he leaned towards her slightly.

Janice felt a pleasant stirring behind the knots in her stomach. She tried to find something else to say to him, but she felt suddenly panicked, breathless, so she only smiled. It felt good to be noticed, especially by a man, and in front of some young teenager with a body like Janice used to have. But the smile was enough and, encouraged, the man moved into the seat next to her.

“Ricky,” he said, holding out his hand. Janice shook it and gave her name. “I’m ca— Janice,” she said, catching herself midway.

“pleasure to meet you, Cajanice,” he said. Janice chuckled nervously and sensed that, by giving up her name, she had unknowingly entered into some kind of agreement.

Ricky and Janice got off the bus twenty minutes later, just around noon, at the second and pike street stop. Ricky said he was heading to see a friend a few blocks away, and offered to walk with Janice, if she was going that way. Janice didn't actually know exactly where she was going—she only knew that there were more salons in city center than in the neighborhood around Trinity house. So she said sure, they could walk together.

Ricky walked in long, smooth strides, and Janice's shoes rubbed uncomfortably on her heels as she struggled to keep up. He didn't notice when she started limping slightly, or that her face was soon glistening from the heat. Janice soon forgot to look out for any hair salons. She was focused on keeping up with Ricky—who was talking at length about an ex-girlfriend—and trying to avoid catching her heels in the cracks crisscrossing the sidewalk.

"Yeah, so she was pissed that I quit the construction gig," Ricky was saying. "She said either I turn around and ask the assholes to give me my job back, or I had to pack up and leave."

"So, what did you do?" Janice asked, panting a bit.

"Packed my things yesterday," Ricky said. "Got everything in boxes, and i'm figuring out the rest, you know. Hey, this is it, my buddy's place."

Ricky stopped walking. Janice stopped too and looked up at Ricky's buddy's place.

"This bar is your buddy's place?"

"Not the bar," Ricky said. "He lives in the apartment above it. I'll only be a minute—are you in a big hurry?"

Janice thought of the hours she'd spent tossing and turning the night before, feeling panicked by the approaching rent due and the empty inbox of her g-mail account.

"I probably shouldn't delay too long," Janice said.

“Really,” Ricky said. “I’ll just be a minute. And I’d love to walk with you a bit more, you know, if that’s okay.”

“Okay,” she said. “If it’s just a minute.”

“Just a minute,” Ricky said again, and he went into the bar, leaving Janice standing out on the sidewalk alone. The heat was getting to be too much, so she pulled off her jacket and shoved it into her tote bag. She pushed up the sleeves of the turtleneck and took a copy of her resume out of the manila folder. She folded it back and forth on itself, until she’d fashioned a paper fan. Leaning against the wall of the bar, she fanned herself and closed her eyes.

After fourteen years in prison, a few weeks certainly hadn’t been enough to erase the novelty of freedom. Janice could have stood there all day, leaning against the wall with the sun on her face and the fan in her hand, with no one to tell her when to move along or where to go, except that it was so hot out. Eventually she felt the sweat beading at her temples and soaking through the fabric under her arms, and she stood up and thought maybe she’d go into the bar, just to get out of the heat.

Cool, recycled air washed over her as she stepped inside. She gave her eyes a second to adjust to the dim lighting, and then she glanced around, searching for Ricky in case he had come down from his friend’s apartment, but she didn’t see him. She felt slightly nervous—she’d spent fourteen years being ushered around by guards and counselors who assured her that drugs and alcohol led people like her down paths that lead to nothing but trouble. And here she was at a bar, just a few weeks after release. She reminded herself that it hadn’t been her choice, and that it was just for a few minutes. Then she took a deep breath and walked over to take a seat at the bar. The bartender looked up from the dishes he was drying and smiled at her.

“Hot out there,” he said, setting a cardboard coaster on the bar between them.

She smiled back and nodded.

“Can I get you a drink, sweetheart?”

She hesitated. She’d only wanted to look for Ricky, to tell him she really thought she should go. But he wasn’t here, and the air was so cool, and the thought of waiting outside any longer wasn’t attractive. Plus, she realized, she was thirsty, and it was expected that she order something.

“Can I just have a coke-a-cola?”

The bartender smiled again.

“I feel like nobody ever says the full name anymore,” he said, filling a glass with soda from a spout at the end of a short hose. He added a straw before setting it on the cardboard coaster and sliding it across the bar. “Here you are.”

Janice was grateful that he hadn’t pressured her into ordering any liquor, and his friendly attitude made Janice feel comfortable, chatty even.

“What does everyone else call it?” She asked, bending over and bringing her mouth to meet the straw.

“Just coke.”

“Oh, well, see,” Janice said, “I’ve ordered that before and ended up with a sinus infection.”

The bartender laughed hard, and Janice smiled, pleased. She took another sip from her coke and then said, “Hey, do you know where there’s a hair salon around here?”

“Hmm,” the bartender said. “Well there’s Rudy’s barbershop about a block down, but I don’t know if I’d call it a salon.” He looked down the bar and then said loudly, “Hey, Trish, you know where there’s a salon around here?”

A woman at the far end of the bar looked up slowly from her martini glass. Her big, teased-out hair was platinum blonde, and she had heavy eyeliner along the bottom rim of her eyes. She looked around vaguely, and it was a moment before she realized it was the bartender who'd spoken to her.

"A salon?" She asked, slurring her words slightly.

"Yeah," the bartender said. "You know where there's one around here? This lady's asking."

The woman looked at Janice and then back at the bartender. Then she looked away from them both and stared into space for a long moment. The bartender looked at Janice and shrugged.

"Verite," the woman named Trish called out. "Verite hair academy."

"Where's that?" The bartender asked.

"I don't know," she said, a little sharply. Then she added, "Like by Nordstrom's."

The bartender turned to Janice and smiled again. "There you go. Verite by Nordstrom's, according to Trish." He leaned in closer to Janice and whispered, "You can trust her hair on that one, I'd say."

"Okay, thanks," Janice said, smiling. Then, a little louder so Trish could hear, "Thank you."

"Yeah well, you need it, honey," Trish said, finishing off her martini.

Janice lowered her gaze to her coke and was suddenly thankful for the dim lighting.

"Don't listen to her," the bartender said. "She's never sober after ten a.m. Doesn't even know who she's talking to most of the time."

Janice nodded and then pulled the straw from her glass and lifted it to finish her coke. The ice slid the length of the glass and fell on her face. She tried to play it off, but two ice cubes fell noisily from the glass onto the floor.

“How much do I owe you?” She asked.

“Two-fifty,” the bartender said.

“Put that on my tab, Ken,” a voice across the bar said. She turned and saw Ricky just as he drew near and touched the back of her arm. “And while you’re at it, two shots of Jose Cuervo, amigo.”

“You got money to pay that tab this time, Ricky?” Ken said.

“Just got paid,” Ricky said, and he put a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. Ken reluctantly turned his back to them and reached up to a bottle on the shelf. Janice’s heart sped up. She’d sat through enough counseling sessions and sobriety groups during her early years at the prison, and she knew what to do. Tell them you’re dieting, or you’re pregnant, or you’re headed to work, or anything, really. Then get out of there.

“Oh,” Janice said to Ricky, “I really shou—”

“It’ll be quick,” Ricky said, interrupting her. “I know you have to go. But I’m really glad you waited.” He slipped his arm around her waist and squeezed gently. Janice hoped he couldn’t feel the sweat that had soaked through along her lower back, but his arm felt strong and confident, and she felt glad she’d stayed, too.

“It’s just that I have that interview,” Janice said.

“It’s cool,” Ricky said. “We’ll take the shot and get you a coffee or some gum or something.”

Ken turned back around and put the two shots down, a wedge of lime balanced neatly across the rim of each glass. He grabbed Ricky's twenty from the bar counter.

"Keep the change," Ricky said, grabbing his shot and throwing it back. Then he leaned in and kissed her playfully on the cheek.

It occurred then to Janice that in all those counseling sessions, they'd never told her how to decline a drink three times in a row. Especially not from an attractive man who pays for it. Janice forgot her list of excuses, and before she realized it, the tequila was burning in the back of her throat, and then an invigorating warmth spread outward from her stomach to her fingertips. She thought briefly of playfully suggesting they make it a double, but before she had a chance, Ricky was turning toward the door.

"All right," Ricky said. "Let's get out of here."

Janice jumped obediently down from the barstool. She smiled at the bartender, who didn't smile back this time. Janice paused a moment, bothered by the serious look on his face, but then she turned and followed Ricky out to the street.

"Where to?" Ricky said.

"What?" Janice said, as her eyes readjusted to the bright daylight.

"Your interview," Ricky said, adjusting a backpack on his shoulders. Janice was sure that he hadn't had a backpack earlier. "Where's the place?"

"Oh," Janice said, realizing what he meant and feeling disconcerted by her own forgetfulness. "It's over by the Nordstrom's."

"Gotcha," Ricky said, thinking for a minute. Janice noticed the redness in his eyes and the way the pupils were slightly dilated.

“I think Nordstrom’s is back this way,” Ricky said, and he turned in the direction they’d come from earlier. Within minutes of walking, she was overheated again and the pain in her feet was back where the blisters were surely forming at her heels and toes. But despite the discomfort, she was happy, because, for a few minutes, she was just your average woman, walking down the city streets with an attractive man.

When they had walked the three blocks to Nordstrom’s, Janice said, “It should be around here somewhere. It’s called, um, Very-something Hair Academy.”

They both looked around for a minute, and then Ricky pointed up at a building with floor to ceiling glass windows.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Janice said, reading the silver block letters at the top of the glass storefront. “Verite Hair Academy.” They moved closer, and through the glass they could see the marble floors and rows of leather chairs filled with thin women, their hair separated by layers of foil and painted with chemicals.

“Damn,” Ricky said. “Fancy place.”

Janice nodded but she didn’t smile. She felt a light fluttering in her stomach. This was not the kind of place she’d anticipated—she didn’t even know salons like this existed.

“Well, it’s just an interview,” she said, mostly for herself.

“What time will you be done?” He asked.

Janice shrugged. “I’m not sure,” she said. “But it won’t take long, I think.” She didn’t say what else she hoped, but he must have known because he asked if he could wait for her.

“We could catch the bus back together afterwards” he said. “Maybe get dinner on the way.”

“That sounds good,” she said.

“Great,” Ricky said, flashing her another smile. “It’s a date.”

Janice didn’t say anything else before turning and walking into Verite, feeling like she was floating, like she’d won the lottery. That morning, looking in the mirror at her naked body, she’d seen only an overweight, ex-felon with just four-hundred dollars to her name. Now she was downtown in a pantsuit with a man waiting for her, and she felt like a woman worth a million bucks.

Once inside, Janice crossed the marble foyer to where two young receptionists stood behind a desk. Both looked up as the glass door thudded closed behind her, and then the two girls exchanged a look—sly smiles and raised eyebrows—that brought the fluttering feeling back to Janice’s stomach. The girl with short blonde hair, who was clearly the younger of the two and appeared to be in her early twenties, turned to Janice. The other, a brunette with long, blue-black hair that was perfectly straight, began typing on her computer.

As Janice stepped up to the counter, she couldn’t help but look over it at the girls’ outfits. Both were wearing short black dresses and four-inch heels. Their nails were long and manicured, their legs hairless, their eyelashes thick and impossibly long. Janice couldn’t help but linger on the eyelashes for a moment. She hadn’t actually seen fake eyelashes before, though she’d heard of them from young girls who came to prison with their eyebrows shaved off because they usually drew them on with eyeliner, with holes in their noses where rings had been. And she understood suddenly, looking at the receptionists now, why those girls had felt so naked and ugly. She became suddenly aware of her short, thin eyelashes now, and of the sweaty turtleneck sticking to her back, of the gray in her hair and the extra weight around her hips.

“Good afternoon,” the blonde receptionist said.

In her nervousness, Janice was hasty. She was focused on the tips Paul had given her: always ask to speak with a manager, be willing to wait, eye contact and a firm handshake. She was so focused she didn't even hear the receptionist's greeting. It went unreturned and the blonde stiffened slightly. Janice asked straight away to speak with a manager.

"Do you have an appointment?" The receptionist asked.

"No."

"I see," the blonde said. "Well, she's currently with a client."

"No problem," Janice said. "I'll wait." She walked over to a sofa beside the glass wall. A man who looked slightly older than her sat in one of the chairs across from her and looked up as she sat down, smiling politely at her.

"We're in the same boat," he said, briefly touching the gray roots of his thick black hair. "God, I hate how it takes so much work to keep up." He sighed and looked down at his phone. Janice felt her face reddening, and she reached for one of the many hair-stylist magazines on the table between them. For several minutes, she pretended to be deeply engrossed by the magazine, but really she didn't see anything on the pages. She watched the man out of the corner of her eye, concerned that he might be looking at her hair, her thin eyelashes and unmanicured nails, until, finally, the blonde receptionist called his name and escorted him to the back of the salon.

Janice waited another fifteen minutes before returning to the reception desk. The blonde looked up, appearing annoyed to see Janice standing there again.

"do you know what time the manager will be available?" Janice asked

"I can ask her," the receptionist said lazily. "Can I tell her what it's about?"

"I'd like to speak with her about opportunities for employment," Janice said, more softly than she'd meant to. Even in Janice's ears the words felt scripted and forced. They were. Janice

had written those exact words on her notes from Paul's workshop, and practiced them so many times in preparation for this moment. But in the mirror of her rented room, the line had always sounded better, more natural and confident.

"Oh," said the blonde, drawing out the 'o' sound. "you're looking for a job."

"Yes," Janice said. She thought "opportunities for employment" sounded better.

"I see," the receptionist said. "My apologies, I didn't realize. I thought you were a client. I can actually tell you straight away that, unfortunately, we're not hiring at the moment."

Janice stood there for a moment, confused at first, because Paul hadn't talked about what to do if you were turned down. But gradually the confusion turned to relief. It hadn't been too painful, the rejection, not so humiliating as she'd anticipated. But what an effort—the turtleneck, the bus, the waiting around, wasting time. At the same time, though, Janice certainly didn't regret the effort and the expedition because Ricky would be waiting for her outside.

The receptionist shifted in her chair, uncomfortable in Janice's extended silence. "But if you have a resume, we can keep your information on file," she said. "So, if something fitting opens up, maybe..."

"Oh, yeah," Janice said. "That would be great." She pulled her jacket from the bag and found the manila folder below it. She removed a copy of her resume from the manila folder and held it out for the receptionist.

"Actually," the receptionist said, not reaching out to take the paper. "We prefer everything to be submitted online." She slid a business card across the desk. "Just go to the site listed on the card here."

Janice nodded and tucked the resume and business card into her manila folder. She turned to leave but slowed to a stop before she reached the door. It had only been twenty minutes,

probably not as long as an interview should take, and she realized now that she didn't want to have to tell Ricky that there had been no interview.

Turning back, she asked the receptionist, "How much does it cost to get your hair dyed?"

The receptionist hesitated. "It depends," she said. "A basic color is seventy-five dollars and it goes up from there."

It was more than double what Janice expected, who had never had her hair dyed in a salon, but she tried to look unconcerned at the price. She had four-hundred and thirty-six dollars in her wallet. She knew four-hundred was for the rent she was supposed to pay in three days, but she thought if she dipped into that, she could manage to come up with fifty or so dollars somewhere. Maybe Ricky could even lend her that much, if she needed it. Plus, she thought, it was obvious to her now that you couldn't work at a hair salon without having perfect hair.

"Okay," Janice said. "I'll do that one."

The receptionist's eyes narrowed slightly. "Our manager is booked all day," she said. "But you could see our new girl, Alisha, in five or ten minutes."

An hour later, Alisha spun Janice around in a salon chair to face the mirror. Janice's hair was two inches shorter and dyed a rich, reddish-brown. She'd had to take her turtleneck off, to avoid getting hair dye along the collar, so the tattoo on her neck was exposed just above the top of the hairdresser cape that Alisha had wrapped around her.

The appointment hadn't felt like an hour to Janice, who had been captivated from the moment she sat in the leather chair, relaxed by the hot towel on her neck and the free coffee and the luxurious feeling of conditioner and warm water on her scalp. And more than anything else, she'd been captivated by her hairdresser, Alisha.

Alisha couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old, but she talked to Janice as if they were old friends who had everything in common. Alisha told Janice about her failed attempts at dieting, about the latest trends in hairstyling, about her recent car trouble. Janice hung on every word like she was being trusted with deep secrets, it never occurred to her that Alisha told dozens of customers these intimacies every day. It only struck her that she hadn't felt trusted like that by anyone in a long time.

"So? Do you like it?" Alisha asked as she watched Janice stare into the mirror at her new hair. Janice smiled and nodded slowly.

"It makes you look a lot younger," Alisha said. Janice stood up and the smock around her slipped down to the floor.

Alisha removed the smock that covered Janice, forgetting that Janice was in nothing more than a bra underneath.

"Shit, sorry, jan," Alisha said, covering Janice with the smock again, "I totally forgot."

Janice said it was okay and reached out from under the smock to where her bag sat on the table beside the mirror. She pulled out the turtleneck and Alisha said, "Don't you think it's pretty hot out there for a turtleneck?"

"Yeah, I wasn't thinking," Janice said, slipping her arms into the turtleneck. "And I didn't bring anything else besides a jacket."

"I'd just wear the jacket," Alisha said, and Janice paused. "Pantsuits without undershirts are so chic, sort of sexy, you know? And with your new hair."

Janice wasn't sure about abandoning the turtleneck, but she thought that if Alisha trusted her, she would trust Alisha. So Janice pulled out the pantsuit jacket and put it on without the turtleneck. She could feel that an inch of her midriff was exposed and looking in the mirror she

saw deep cleavage and the tattoo on her neck. It was a look meant for someone Alisha's age—someone the age Janice had been when they locked her up.

Looking in the mirror, Janice felt more like herself than she had in years. She thought of Paul telling her to be herself, and though she realized that this version of the pantsuit ensemble wouldn't have met with Paul's approval for interview attire, she buttoned the jacket. Then she paid her bill in cash, not considering that tips were customary, and left.

Out on the sidewalk, out of the chemically-fragranced air of the salon and back in the late-afternoon heat, Janice felt less sure about the decision to forego the turtleneck. She felt exposed and thought she could feel people staring at her.

She looked around for Ricky, but he wasn't there. Janice felt her chest tighten as disappointment welled up inside her.

Janice walked to the corner, in what she hoped was the direction of the bus stop, but she only made it half the block before the pain in her blistering feet became unbearable. She stood still for several minutes on the corner before giving up and finally taking the heels off, shoving them in her bag with the turtleneck. Then she crossed the street quickly in her bare feet, eager to get to the shade of the next building, where the ground wasn't so hot.

When she reached the shade, she heard a long, deep whistle and looked up to see Ricky sitting on a bench against the building wall.

"Well hot damn, look at you!" He said. "I thought you were doing an interview, not a makeover."

He was holding two McDonald's cups and offered one to her.

“It was sort of both,” she answered, taking a soda and sitting next to him on the bench. Then she’d added, “Sorry it took so long. Honestly, I thought you’d left.”

“Nah,” he said, shaking the ice his empty soda cup. “I just needed some food. And shade.” He pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

Janice sipped the soda and realized that she was both hungry and thirsty. The soda didn’t taste quite like the soda she’d had earlier, and she recognized the faint taste of cheap whiskey. She looked up at Ricky, who winked at her. He pulled a silver flask partway out of his pants pocket before pushing it back in again.

“Figured we could have a little fun,” he said. “And man, I mean, look at you, all dolled up and shit.” Janice couldn’t help but smile.

“Did you get the job?” He asked.

“Yeah,” she lied. “I start next week.”

He exhaled heavily and said, “Good. Then you’re free tonight.”

It wasn’t a question, but Janice felt the same pleasant sensation stir in her as before, and it gave her confidence.

“Maybe. If you play your cards right,” she said.

He smiled and took a drag on his Marlboro, then pointed it towards the calligraphy on her collarbone. “What’s this mean?”

“It’s my name. Last name. Sorta.”

“It’s sexy,” he said, leaning toward her slightly. “Janice Cash.”

“Cashwell,” Janice said, looking at him as she slurped up more of her drink. “Cash is sort of a nickname.”

“All right then Cash,” he said. “Where to next?”

Janice awoke the next morning to a heavy knocking at her bedroom door. Her head was pounding and as she sat up slowly, she registered a familiar burning in her nose and throat. She wanted water. There was more knocking and more throbbing in her head. She squeezed her eyes shut and, as loud as she could manage, she said, “Just a minute.”

She stood and realized she was naked, so she reached for the blanket on the bed and wrapped it around her. Looking around briefly, she saw an empty liquor bottle and several plastic coke-a-cola bottles on her bedroom floor. The door to the mini-fridge was wide open, as was the window. Janice remembered climbing the stairs to her room the night before, with Ricky close behind her, but she couldn’t remember anything else. She saw the house rules scattered on the ground and thought vaguely that she hoped they’d been quiet enough, and that Ricky had gone home last night, and not this morning.

“Janice?” Said a voice outside Janice’s door. Janice recognized it as her landlord’s voice, and she went to the door and cracked it open. Her elderly landlord stood there, brow furrowed and arms crossed.

“Hi, Cathy,” Janice said, pulling the blanket around her more closely. “Sorry, I was sleeping.”

“It’s nearly noon,” Cathy said. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” Janice said. “I just had a late night.”

“A late Tuesday night?” Cathy said, her eyebrows arching slightly. Her voice wasn’t unfriendly or judgmental, but rather, concerned and maybe slightly disappointed. “You have—it looks like your nose is bleeding.”

Janice reached up with one hand and wiped a finger against her nose. She felt the rough texture of dry blood, so when she pulled her hand away it was clean.

“It’s just dry blood,” Janice said.

“Uh huh,” Cathy said. “So...I take it you haven’t found work yet?”

“Not exactly,” Janice said, shifting on her feet. “But I had an interview yesterday.”

“That’s very nice,” Cathy said. “And your hair looks great, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Janice said, remembering her dark hair and bringing one hand to her scalp.

“But listen,” Cathy said, her tone more serious. “I’m here because unfortunately there were some complaints of rowdiness last night. You do know and understand the house rules, right Janice?”

“Oh, yes,” Janice said. “I’m really sorry about that. I—I had a—a cousin over for dinner, and he stayed a little late. It won’t happen again.”

“Sure,” Cathy said, not sounding unconvinced. “And the other thing, as you know, is no visitors past ten without approval, right?”

Janice nodded. “I understand,” she said, and, assuming that was all, she started to close the door slowly, but Cathy stepped forward slightly.

“And one last thing, Janice,” she said. “You remember that it’s the last day of the month tomorrow?”

Janice stared at Cathy for a long time, unsure of what she was implying. She assumed it was another rule, and she went through them as fast as she could in her head. Stay sober. No overnights. Show progress. Be a good housemate. Pay rent.

“Oh,” Janice said. “Yeah, I’ll have it.”

Janice closed the door and turned back to the room. She looked around at the empty bottles and clothes strewn across the floor, searching for her bag among them. She realized she probably hadn't remembered to ask Ricky to loan her some cash, so she would be a little short, unless she could somehow make that much before the morning.

It was several minutes before Janice found the bag behind the door, sitting on top of Janice's crumpled pantsuit, too, lay in a pile.

She carried the tote over to her bed and pulled out the contents, one by one. Two keys on a keyring. A cheap, pre-paid cell phone. A manila folder with ten copies of an underwhelming resume. A receipt from a seven-eleven gas station. And a business card for Verite hair academy. And her wallet.

Janice opened the wallet and counted out three-hundred sixty-four dollars. She breathed a sigh of relief that it was the same as it had been after paying for her hair. But still she was concerned about the thirty-six dollars she needed.

Janice stared into the bottom of the empty tote bag for a long time before reloading all the items carefully back into the bag, and it was only as she went to set the bag beside her bed that she noticed the hundred-dollar bill sitting beside her pillow. Beside it was a receipt with the crumples smoothed out, and a pen. There was a generic smiley face drawn on the receipt, and nothing else. No name. No number. Janice flipped the receipt over and saw that it was from a seven-eleven. She muttered aloud to herself as she read through the itemized list.

"Pack of Marlboros. Coca-a-cola. Jack Daniel's. Doritos ranch. Hot pocket peperoni. Seventy-two dollars."

She crumpled the receipt and threw it onto her floor before taking the hundred-dollar bill and tucking it into her wallet. She would have preferred for Ricky to keep his money and leave

his number. But, as she picked up the wrinkled jacket of her pantsuit and hung it carefully back in her closet, she thought it had been an enjoyable way to make a hundred dollars.

Displaced Faith

After returning from the early service at holy cross catholic church, Ben pulled a can of soda out of the fridge. He would have loved a beer, but his wife, Meredith, had long since stopped buying it. Now they only drank on special occasions. Plus, he had to be back to the church for the evening service, and he wouldn't have wanted the other ushers to smell beer on his breath.

Ben cracked the tab on the can as the refrigerator door swung closed and the impact shook a weak magnet from the front. Ben picked the magnet up and examined it a moment to make sure it hadn't broken. It was a small picture of a shepherd leading his sheep, and the fall from the fridge didn't appear to have done any damage. Ben put the magnet back and grabbed a bag of chips from the cupboard before heading into the tv room.

"Let's go, Dusty," he said. "game's starting."

Dusty, Ben's six-month-old Labrador, heard the crackle of the chip bag and scrambled up from under the kitchen table. He followed closely on Ben's heels and Ben turned on the football game and sank into the sofa. The pup had been a gift from Meredith two months earlier, and was, to Ben's frustration, still in training. Dusty still begged for human food and didn't always come when called and he got up on the furniture. Worse, he still peed in the house on occasion—though it was increasingly rare.

To be fair, at sixty-nine years old, Ben was perhaps too old to be training a puppy. Or at the very least, Ben was a much older than he had been when training his last dog, Ranger, who had run away three months ago. Ben had been in San Francisco at the time, visiting their son Jason for a week, when Meredith called him, panicked.

"Ranger's gone," she'd cried out, before Ben even had the phone up to his ear.

“Ranger’s what?” He’d asked.

“Gone,” she said, this time more softly.

“Gone?” Ben repeated. “But he’s never run away before. You’re sure?”

There was a long hesitation, a silence that seemed to last a long time, before Meredith whispered, “Yes.”

“But he’s never run away before,” Ben repeated.

“I left him with the neighbor this weekend. I was at that overnight choir retreat, remember?” Meredith spoke slowly, her voice cracking as she struggled to hold back tears. “He escaped and...I’m so sorry, ben.”

Ben flew home on the next available flight and desperately drove around Phoenix every day for nearly two weeks. He posted flyers and called the shelters non-stop. Meredith was always beside him, sitting quietly in the cab of his truck, as loyal and steadfast as Ranger had been, ringing her hands anxiously or fingering the rosary beads that usually hung from the rearview mirror. She muttered to herself, sliding the beads between her fingers. Meredith could never bear to watch someone else’s suffering, always overcome by their sadness or pain. It was a quality that caused her to swear off eating meat and to avoid watching the news or football. She didn’t even speak badly of the neighbor who’d let Ranger out.

“He could have at least apologized,” Ben said, driving slowly through a neighborhood a few miles from their house. “Or offered to help us.”

“He’s a nice man, Ben,” Meredith said. “And he apologized to me several times. I can only assume that he’s pretty torn up about this. Imagine how you’d feel if you lost someone else’s dog.”

“Still,” Ben said, pathetically, knowing she was right.

She rested her hand on his arm and squeezed gently.

“You’ll feel better if you just forgive him and move on,” she said, softly.

“I know,” Ben said, and then he sighed heavily. He was frustrated and sad, not only at losing Ranger, but also because he *did* want to forgive that guy, John. But it came harder for him, apparently, than for Meredith. Her constancy, her unending patience and forgiveness, astounded him. He had never seen it waver, not once in forty-eight years of marriage. He assumed it grew out of her commitment to the church, which was as strong as her commitment to Ben. For forty-eight years, Ben had tried to cultivate those same qualities in himself: he went to church with Meredith every Sunday morning and served as an usher during the evening service. He listened attentively to the pastor and sang softly along with the hymns he knew so well. But Ben struggled to recall the church’s lessons outside the four walls of the sanctuary. He forgot to pray, or read the bible, or forgive his trespassers. It was only when Meredith reminded him, like she did now, that he put his faith into practice.

“Fine,” he said, turning the truck back into their driveway. “I can forgive him. But he sure as hell won’t be watching Ranger again, when we find him.”

“Ben, please,” Meredith said, cringing.

“Sorry,” Ben said, putting the car in park.

Ben searched for another week before, returning home one afternoon from a visit to the phoenix animal shelter, he found Meredith crouched on the living room floor, smiling as a fluffy, brown puppy licked her face.

“You’re giving up?” Ben said.

“Ben,” she said, standing. “I’m afraid it might be—what if we can’t find him? What if he’s really gone?”

The puppy wandered over to Ben and sniffed eagerly at his feet. Ben was wearing sandals and felt the cool, wet nose grazing his toes, and he smiled at the sensation. A second later he felt guilty, and the smile faded. He shook his head softly before turning and walking away.

Meredith stood and followed him into the bedroom, where she found Ben lying on the bed.

“Ranger was an irreplaceable dog, ben,” she said from the doorway. “But I think you’ll come to love another dog just as much, after a while.”

“I can’t just give up on him, Mer,” Ben said. Meredith walked over and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. There was a long silence, and the puppy appeared in the doorway. Ben lifted his eyes to the wall to avoid looking at the dog Meredith had found to replace Ranger.

Midway up the wall, Meredith had long ago hung a large crucifix between two cross-stich embroideries. One read *trust the lord with all your heart, he shall direct thy path* and the other *for god so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son*. Ben had never fully considered the passages before—he’d heard the scriptures so many times in forty-eight years of Sunday services, that they had become background noise, like branding slogans or commercial jingles. But he considered the full significance of god’s sacrifice now, in light of losing Ranger. He knew, of course, that the death of a son was a much more significant loss than a dog, but the point, as it occurred to ben, was that he wasn’t alone. It was the closest thing to a spiritual revelation that Ben had ever experienced, and he understood finally why people like his wife devoted their whole lives to a god who had so loved the world. Tears stung his eyes and his breathing became more strained for a minute. Meredith waited until his breathing returned to normal before speaking again.

“Then don’t,” she said, hooking her thin arm around his back. “Don’t give up on Ranger. But maybe you’d like Dusty to take my place in the truck for a few days.”

“You named him already?” Ben said, turning to her, already forgetting his revelation.

Meredith smiled and shrugged.

“Fine,” Ben said. “But when I find Ranger, *Dusty* has to find another home. This house is too small, and we’re too old for two dogs, mer. Probably too old for even one. Too old for a puppy, certainly.”

Meredith didn’t argue.

Ben and Dusty kept up their search two more weeks before it faded out. Football season started, and then their son Jason visited, and one by one new distractions slowly pushed Ranger from Ben’s mind. So that now, three months since Ranger’s disappearance, Ben didn’t think about Ranger as Dusty followed him and the crackling chip bag back to the tv room.

Dusty rested his head on the sofa’s seat cushion for a minute, staring at the chips in Ben’s hand, before jumping up. Ben shook his head softly in disapproval. Getting on the furniture was something Meredith had never allowed with Ranger, who’d always sat at Ben’s feet.

But Meredith spoiled Dusty. She bought him treats and the wet, expensive dog food. She chose a large blanket embroidered with three trumpeting angels and laid it on the sofa, calling it “Dusty’s spot.” She even took him for extra walks and brushed his fur—things she had never done for Ranger, who had really always been Ben’s dog. Ben figured Meredith’s attention to Dusty stemmed from guilt—he guessed that she blamed herself, in part, for Ranger’s disappearance, since Ranger had been left in her care.

Meredith wouldn’t be around to spoil Dusty much today though, since she went out to brunch every Sunday after the morning service with her fellow choir members. From there she’d

go to choir practice, and finally one of the other sopranos would drop her off at home, where Ben always had Sunday dinner ready. Then the two of them would return once again to the church where Meredith would sing for the evening service—the service meant to target teens and young adults—and Ben would serve as an usher. That was their routine.

Ben loved the Sunday routine mostly for the evening service, when he and a few of the other choir husbands would gather in the foyer during the actual service and talk football over cheap instant coffee. Ben loved football, so those talks were his favorite part of the whole week, and they were always better if he actually managed to watch the games.

This Sunday, Ben and Dusty settled in on the couch just as the Arizona Cardinals completed a first-down. Ben nodded his approval at the completion and, feeling generous, he set a single potato chip on Dusty's blanket. The dog devoured it eagerly, tail wagging, before looking up for more.

"No, just one," Ben said, reaching for his beer as the cardinals fumbled the football for a turnover.

"My mother could have held onto that," Ben complained, turning to Dusty. "*You* could have held that."

Dusty reacted to the attention, spinning in a circle and then crouching awkwardly to pee on his blanket.

"Whaoh! No, no, no, no, no, no," Ben said, getting up from the sofa and struggling to grab the puppy around the midsection. He carried the dog across the living room as quickly as he could, leaving a trail of dog urine on the floor between the couch and the front door. He half-dropped Dusty onto the porch, and the puppy yelped once before making its way down the steps and into the yard. Ben turned back inside, his heart pounding a little harder than usual, and shut

the door behind him. He stood just inside the doorway, on the mat that read *stand in grace*, peering from there into the living room. He craned his neck to watch two plays before opening the door again to let Dusty back inside. But during those few plays, Dusty had disappeared from sight.

It hadn't been long enough for Dusty to go very far, so Ben wasn't worried. He was only irritated to be out in the suffocating Arizona heat, pulled away from the air-conditioning and football game. He rounded the house to the backyard—a dry desert barren except for single Palo Verde tree, which sloped gently downward to the Arizona canal. Dusty was near the water's edge, a hundred yards or so from the house. He pounced on something and whipped his head back and forth, and then froze.

“Dusty!” Ben called, and the when Dusty turned toward him Ben saw that there was something hanging dead and limp, from the dog's mouth.

a rabbit. Usually, Ben would have been impressed because Arizona jackrabbits are anything but an easy catch. At the moment though, Dusty's feat was overshadowed by the fact that the cardinals were fighting for a spot in the playoffs and there was urine to be cleaned from the couch and living room floor. Ben might have been able to forgive and forget all that within a few minutes, except that now, in addition to the couch, he would have to clean the blood from Dusty's coat and get rid of the dead rabbit. Bloody rabbits fell into the category of newscasts and football, and the sight of either would drive Meredith to tears, so it had to be dealt with before she got home. Ben would likely miss the whole second quarter the cardinal's game, and it would take more than a few minutes before Ben could forgive Dusty for *that*.

“You're lucky my wife's a saint,” Ben muttered to the dog. “Or I'd have say to hell with you and your rabbit.”

Then Ben crouched down and whistled to Dusty, who ran eagerly over. Ben snatched the dead rabbit, wrestling it from the dog's mouth. Ranger had caught a rabbit or two in his day, and Ben knew better than to throw it in the trash, where it would reek within hours and be covered with maggots by the following afternoon. So, with the rabbit in hand and the dog on his heels, Ben went to his small toolshed, wrapped the rabbit in a plastic garbage bag, and grabbed a shovel.

In late September, the Arizona heat peaked at around a hundred degrees each afternoon, and by the time Ben returned from the shed, sweat was beading along his temples and upper lip. He wasn't eager to be outside, and so he didn't go as far out in the yard as he probably should have before tossing the bagged rabbit onto the ground, where Dusty sniffed at it. Ben thrust the head of the shovel into the earth. But below a thin layer of sand, the earth was rock-hard, and Ben's shovel didn't penetrate the surface more than a centimeter or two. A second attempt yielded nothing more, and Ben realized this would take much more work than he'd anticipated. He stood up straight and looked around.

He considered tossing the rabbit in the canal, but the fines were heavy if someone saw you throw anything in the canal and reported you. Ben had given up trusting his neighbors.

His gaze landed on the Palo Verde tree at the edge of their yard, where the blossoming yellow branches offered the only color and shade in the Dusty, brown landscape. There was a little bench under the Palo Verde that Ben had built the previous summer. Meredith had placed a small statuette of the Virgin Mary beside the bench and planted various succulents and desert flowers in colorful pots which she arranged at either end. She watered them regularly and sometimes sat on the bench in the early mornings. Ben rarely went out to the space, but he had to admit it was charming, especially with the dessert flowers blooming spectacularly as they were

now. Perhaps, Ben thought, the earth would be somewhat softer there, in the shade of the Palo Verde.

He crossed the yard and as he neared the tree, he noticed a strange discoloration in the dirt. Looking closer, Ben realized that the discoloration stretched into the area below the bench and flower pots, which might have been from Meredith watering the plants, except that the discolored area was perfectly square. He stepped forward and pressed the shovel into the discolored area, and as the spade sank deep into the soil, he understood that it had been shoveled before, and not too long ago.

Curious, Ben moved the pots and the statue and bench away from the area of loose dirt and pressed the shovel into the earth again. Over and over, he methodically scooped wherever the dirt appeared loose and before long he felt the heat in his palms as blisters formed. But Ben had a nagging feeling that kept him at it until his shovel hit something soft but unyielding. He froze for a brief moment, but then a sense of dread seized his chest, and he felt his heartrate speed up. He attacked the earth more urgently, scooping out shovel after shovel, until he'd uncovered the plastic black trash bag.

Ben sat on the ground, his legs hanging over the edge of the hole, as he recovered his breath. Sweat dripped down his temples to his neck, so that the collar of his shirt was soaked. It would be better not to look in the bag, Ben knew. Better to just put the dead rabbit in the hole alongside the black plastic, push the dirt back, and go watch the end of the game. But he also knew he couldn't do that, knew he had to open that bag.

When Ben felt composed enough, he took a deep breath and reached into the hole, which he realized now was actually rather shallow, despite the effort it had cost him. He could only imagine what the same depth would have cost the first digger in that hard, dry soil. He hauled the

dirty bag up to ground level and, squatting over the plastic, patiently untied the double-knotted closure. A rancid odor met Ben's nostrils as he pulled back the mouth of the bag and Ranger's decaying head appeared.

He stared a long time, letting it sink in. He thought about Meredith's anxiety, her quiet demeanor beside him in the truck, week after week. And then the puppy. *We'll keep him until we find Ranger*, Ben had said, and she had agreed so easily. *You'll feel better if you just forgive and move on*. Suddenly the forgiveness and empathy that had so impressed him before seemed repulsive, insensitive. Deceptive.

But in forty-eight years of marriage, Ben hadn't seen Meredith hurt a fly, hadn't heard her utter a curse word. He couldn't believe she would hurt Ranger, but he ran through the details over and over in his mind and he knew that, at the very least, she had lied to him. He'd thought she was incapable of even that much, and the discovery that she was left him feeling lost and confused.

Dusty appeared at Ben's elbow, barking. Ben watched him but the barking sounded far away. The puppy neared Ranger's corpse and sniffed warily before barking again.

"No," Ben said absently, swatting half-heartedly at the puppy, who neither heard nor heeded him. It sniffed again at Ranger's corpse and this time let out a short, sharp whine. And the whine, unlike the bark, caught Ben's attention. He tied the black garbage bag again and returned it to the hole, covering it with dirt, and finally the bench and flower pots.

He felt broken, exhausted, but he stood and scooped Dusty into his arms, struggling more than he had just an hour before. He carried the dog across the yard and put him in the cab of the truck. Twenty minutes later he walked into the phoenix animal shelter and set the puppy, whimpering softly, on the counter.

When Meredith was dropped off at four o'clock by one of the other sopranos, Ben was calmly watching the final quarter of Green Bay versus Philadelphia. His hair was wet and he was wearing a fresh change of clothes. He didn't acknowledge her entry, didn't look at her even when she leaned over him and kissed his forehead.

"Sorry I'm late, dear," she said. "We're working on a new version of *Blessed Assurance* and rehearsals ran late. Did you just shower?"

She stood back from the couch and looked at him. He didn't look at her and didn't respond.

"Hello? Ben? Honey?" She waved her hand in front of him.

"Yeah," he said vacantly. "I got dirty."

"Where's Dusty?" She asked, looking around.

"I took him to an animal shelter," Ben said, slowly, his gaze finally meeting hers. The hollowness in his voice and eyes made the hair on Meredith's neck stand up.

"You what? But why?"

"I told you," Ben said, "That I would take him back when I found Ranger."

Meredith stepped backwards.

"Ben, I—", she started, but then stopped.

"You lied to me, Meredith," Ben said.

There was a long silence, and then Ben stood up. He went to their room and sat on the end of bed, and after a moment, Meredith appeared in the doorway.

“I didn’t mean to hit him,” she whispered. “I was leaving, rushing, and I backed right over him. I was trying to tell you when I called, but you thought he’d just run away, and I—I lost courage and just...let you believe that.”

She paused, giving Ben a chance to say he forgave her, that he understood, that it would be okay. But he said nothing. She moved from the doorway to the bed and sat on the edge, leaving a few feet of distance between them.

“I thought if I found a puppy, it might be easier. That we would both feel better,” she continued, her face wet with tears. “I’m so sorry. Trust me, I never meant to hurt you, I just—”

For a second everything was still as the two sat side by side at the end of the bed, facing the bedroom wall with its crucifixes and embroidered bible verses. With Meredith’s words still ringing in his ears, Ben’s eyes ran over the first verse, *Trust the lord with all your heart, he shall direct thy path.*

“Trust you?” Ben repeated. “I *did* trust you. And what did you do?”

Meredith’s mouth fell open, like she was going to say something, but only a small sound came out. Ben stood and reached up to the crucifix on the wall. He pulled it down firmly, tearing the nail it hung on from away from the wall, and dropped it heavily onto the floor. He did the same with both the embroideries, and the sounds of them crashing against the crucifix made Meredith flinch.

Ben left the room and this time Meredith didn’t follow. Ben moved around in the kitchen, preparing dinner noisily, making sure Meredith could hear the clatter of dishes and silverware being tossed into the sink. It wasn’t the smell of burning bread filled the house that Meredith finally appeared in the kitchen doorway, her eyes red and glassy.

The burning smell was coming from several slightly-burnt bread rolls piled on a plate at the dinner table. On either side of the table were two bowls of plain pasta with butter, and Meredith sat in front of hers without a word. She folded her hands and bowed her head, the way she always did, waiting for Ben to sit across from her and say grace so they could eat.

After pulling several magnets from the fridge and tossing them into the sink, Ben finally sat across from her. Meredith kept her eyes averted and heard the was the sound of his chair scraping the floor as he scooted closer to the table, and the sound of his fork against the bowl. Meredith looked up, and he did the same, looking her straight in the eye as he chewed and swallowed.

Disfigured

“Now listen, I know what the papers said about Trudy’s accident. About how she was brainwashed and mentally unstable and all of that. But I can tell you people in this town don’t see it like that. For folks around here it was just another chapter in a long story, you know? You might even call it a love story, I guess. The kind of love story only Trudy and Jason could have.

Really the story starts a good long time before that gun went off. A long time before Trudy even came around. It started with a few local boys who grew up around here—we used to refer to as ‘The Diamond’, on account of they all played in the infield. Let’s see, I think it was Travis on first, Kyle at shortstop, and...and Austin was the catcher. I always forget him for a sec, he was so quiet. And then on the mound, pitching, you had Jason. And as you might expect of a pitcher, Jason was sort of the leader of the group. Led them to two state championships their junior and senior year. It was the most excitement this town had since well before my time. And I’m no spring chicken, you know.

Anyhow, The Diamond frequented my tavern because Jason grew up in a house just around the corner and like I said, he was the leader. And so the four of them lined up here every Saturday at the counter, like clockwork. And they sat and ate—except Jason, he just drank coffee on game days; said the hunger kept him clearer. He was strange that way. We’d talk about the last game and the upcoming ones and the Major Leagues and whatnot. I can still hear them hollerin’ at me from their stools “Heya, Jimmy, trade you an RBI for a basket of fries! Heya Jimmy, how ‘bout a soda for every hit I get today?” And I kept them coming in that way, which was good for business because they were local heroes around town, and it was good for folks to see them coming in here. Plus, they were fun kids, easy to have around.

Of all the boys, Jason had the best shot to play in the Majors, and he wanted it bad. Put all his energy into baseball. And almost made it, too. Played four years at UCLA, and they were a top team. But Jason wasn't pitching a whole lot for them near the end, and he didn't get signed in the draft like we'd all expected him to. Did a quick stint in the minors but after a few seasons he was right back here.

The other three—Travis, Kyle, and Austin—they never had the prospects that Jason had, but never had the same hunger, either. Travis and Austin were cousins, and they played together at Ohio State, and then they both became physical therapists and opened a practice together out in Graham, about thirty minutes from here. Kyle stayed in Eatonville after high school and went to trade school, I think, and then got right into construction, like his dad. Plans to take over the family business.

Anyways, my point in telling you all this is basically to say that eventually, in the end, they all made it back here and started their normal, non-baseball lives. Except Jason.

Sure, Jason came back, too, but he had trouble letting go of baseball. He didn't have a back-up plan. He had a four-year degree in something like English or photography. That 'Liberal Arts' stuff is all well and good, but sort of useless in a town like this, if you understand me. So he bummed around for a few months, mostly sitting here at the bar and collected inches around his waistline, until Kyle got him a job in construction.

After that, things looked up for Jason. He got busier and seemed to like construction work okay. I saw a lot less of him around here for a while, which was good for him. And for me, too, honestly, because he's a bit of a rowdy drunk and, well, I love the kid, but I've got other customers to think about, and we need to make money, you know.

Somewhere in there The Diamond started playing together in a Sunday league, and every now and then the four of them would come back in here after a game. For old times' sake. It was like the old times, except not totally because they weren't just talking baseball anymore. They weren't carrying the hopes of a small town around on the front of their jerseys. You know, they had wives and kids and houses to talk about.

Except, again, there was Jason. Like I've been telling you, Jason was just kind of always the exception. And for whatever reason, he never seemed to have a lady. Sort of strange really, considering the way things tend to go, in the movies and whatnot, where the quarterback and the pitcher and those guys, seems like they always get the head cheerleader or whatever. But not Jason. No, he was too focused for that, maybe. The star of the team and the league MVP but never made time for much else.

So that was why Kyle started bringing Trudy around—because he thought she might be a match for Jason. And, man oh man, some match it was. I mean, in some ways, Jason and Trudy were oil and water. Jason wasn't a dummy, but he was no match for Trudy. Sometimes I called her *doctor* Trudy, just to poke fun, because we all knew she had like ten degrees or something and was here in Eatonville doing some kind of scientific nature research. A young scientist with a face like Kathrine Hepburn and a body like Cindy Crawford, if you can believe that. And one hell of an attitude. Feisty as hell. I certainly never really understood what it was she was doing in this town and sure couldn't tell you what she was doing with a guy like Jason. I mean, come on, Jason was hard-pressed to even find a job. Oh! And one of the first times she was in here she came up to the bar and asked me if I had any music that wasn't so *country*. So you see she couldn't have had a whole lot in common with Jason or most of the folks here in Eatonville. Best I can figure is she was lonely, desperate even. Ready to settle.

But there you have it, good fit or not, she and Jason started going together. I'm sure I didn't see them apart for a few months on end. They even moved in together right off the bat. And I would tell you I was happy for them, except that it was more like a tight feeling in my chest, because I knew—everyone knew—right from the beginning that it wasn't going to end well. We just didn't expect it to get *so* bad. They'd come in, sometimes, all lovey-dovey, with her practically sitting in his lap, and then suddenly she would up and leave the tavern without him. So I'd have to pack up their food on the double and ask one of the regulars to give Jason a lift on home. I remember that one time they were taking ages to order dinner and I warned them that the kitchen was closing, so Jason orders a bacon burger with cheese and a side of fries. Then Trudy looked at him and said, "I thought we were going to share something." Jason just shrugged and then Trudy stormed out, pausing in the door way to yell back at him. And you know what she yelled, right here in front of all my customers? She yelled "What part of vegetarian don't you fucking understand, you dumb shit." Excuse my language, I'm just telling the story here. Language like that is bad for business, and I had to go around apologizing to the folks with kids and all that. Then, and I myself can never believe this, the two stroll in here about a week later like nothing'd ever happened. They were like that. Both of them. Hot-headed like you've never seen and so wrapped up in themselves.

But that's about when Jason's accident happened. Kyle was there, and he came in the day after and told me. He didn't have to say anything more than *bandsaw*, really. Went right through three of Jason's fingers like they were butter. Kyle rushed Jason to the hospital, where they should have been able to sew them back on, but somehow or other nobody remembered to pick the fingers up off the floor, and Kyle's dog got to them. Jason blamed Kyle for that and didn't talk to him again for months.

Someone called Trudy, and I guess she made quite a scene at the hospital until they let her see him. She was probably the reason he survived those first few weeks, from what I gather. She came in here alone a few times, to unwind. Because between work and taking care of him, it was lot for her, poor thing. She hinted that Jason was burning through his pills faster than he should and drinking himself blind. I heard through the grapevine that he was getting a bit rowdy, breaking things and upsetting the neighbors, so much they even called the cops on him more than once. Couldn't really blame Trudy for needing a break every now and then—Jason would have been a lot for anybody to handle in those few weeks.

And I'm not saying it was easy for him, either. I mean, I can only imagine. You'd have to re-learn *everything*. One time I cut this finger pretty good on a broken pint glass—you can still see the scar there, went straight through the tendon—and I remember I'd forget all the time that I couldn't use it. Still reached for things, scratched myself, tried to flip switches, that kind of thing. I must have broken a hundred dishes that month.

But what made it worse for Jason was that he wasn't working at all. Couldn't, of course. Money wasn't a big concern at first because he was collecting L&I, but a person can only sit on the couch for so long before going a little crazy. And that's what Jason was doing—sitting around, I mean—sitting and drinking and watching games, with way too much time to think and feel sorry for himself. Maybe he didn't know what else to do. Had a hard-enough time finding the construction job in the first place, and that wasn't going to work anymore, with one hand mostly gone.

Actually, I reckon what he could and couldn't do was mostly a mental thing, because lord knows I've seen folks with less doing more than even you or I could do. But of course, you can't exactly tell a man who's missing three fingers to just suck it up and be grateful for what he's got.

The thing is, what really got to Jason—the reason he was acting up so much—wasn't work at all. It was baseball. With Jason, baseball was life and with three fingers missing from his pitching hand, he couldn't play.

Hotheaded as she was, Trudy was still a smart girl, and she knew that Jason was grieving and frustrated, even if he never admitted it. So, she was trying to cut him some slack, trying hard to be patient. But anyone could see she was wearing down. I shouldn't say it, but she looked pretty bad a couple months after Jason's accident, paler and thinner than usual, with dark circles under the eyes. Like you see with new parents, except without that new-baby glow that eclipses all the bad stuff.

And when Jason eventually came in here to the pub, he looked just about as bad as Trudy, except where she was all skin and bones, Jason was bloated and soft. He sat here at the bar and I never said anything like sorry man or don't worry, because I'd talked to Trudy enough to know what was eating Jason up, and I knew sorry wouldn't throw a baseball.

The rest of the guys were good to Jason for as long as they could be. Kyle introduced him to some local little league coaches, so he could stay connected to the game, but Jason's coaching stint didn't last long. Could have told you it wouldn't—Jason took the game too seriously to coach kids.

The best Jacob could do was go to The Diamond's recreational games and sit in the dugout. The guys started calling him coach, probably so he still felt like he had a role to play. Maybe the nickname went to his head or maybe he was just overcompensating for not being able to play, but soon he was getting on everyone's nerves, telling them what was wrong with their swing and trying to make them have extra practices and stuff like that.

You end up in a funny position if you run a tavern like this in a small town. You hear every story five different ways. I'd see Kyle in here one morning for a coffee, talking about how Jason was acting up and then Jason would be here mid-afternoon for a drink, saying the boys were embarrassing because they couldn't even win a rec-league title. Which wasn't true, exactly, because they couldn't have lost more than a game or so, when a key player or two couldn't make it for whatever reason.

Anyhow, I had to listen to all of them. Or got to, depending on your point of view. People would pay a high price for those stories now, only they ain't talking. If you watch your friends crash and burn, you don't really want to talk about it. Easier for me to speak up, maybe, because I wasn't actually at the park the day Trudy lost it. But I was quiet for a while, too, just out of plain respect for privacy. But a man gets tired of hearing the story told wrong, of seeing the papers bend the facts and get the story disfigured. That's how a small-town issue gets blown up into some national news story about mental health and gun control and god knows what all else. But I guess I can't complain about that unless I'm going to speak up, so I'm speaking up.

Trudy came in here the night before the last game of the season for the rec league. She ordered a double shot of Jack Daniel's and was in tears before she finished it. Not loud, just to herself. Her being so quiet is what caught me off guard, to tell you the truth, because I'd seen her angry plenty of times, but never sad like that. Never fragile, you know? I gave her some space for a while because not everyone likes to be seen crying, but after a while we started chatting. I knew it had to be Jason again, so after a minute I just asked her how he was doing and the flood gates broke.

She said once he lost his fingers, Jason started pushing her away. He kept trying to kick her out of their apartment, saying she didn't have to hang around for a pity-case, telling her he didn't need a do-gooder making him feel like a burden all the time.

Course I told her that was silly, and she said, *you think I didn't tell him that, Jimmy? You think he's listening to me?*

Of course, I knew he wasn't listening to nobody. A few of the guys had tried talking to him at various times, and he turned a deaf ear. Once or twice they tried giving him some tough love, as they say, but god, that got ugly. And they got pretty sick of him. Saw it right here one night, when they came in after a game, and Jason yelled across their table, loud enough for the whole place to hear, "Y'all see Travis's swing today? Never seen anything so embarrassing in my life." And the bar went quiet because it was just nasty enough not to laugh at, and Travis said, real steady, "no, Jason, embarrassing would be if I couldn't even throw the fucking ball anymore." That's what he said, just like that, and it took the other three guys to separate the two of them. It was the only time I had to kick The Diamond out of here, but I had to that night. That was a week or so before Trudy came in here and told me about that Jason was trying to kick her out.

From here you probably know the story, because the papers were all over it. Not just local, but *big* papers. We had reporters from all over the country crawling around here for a week straight, asking questions and posting up in front of the field at eatonville city park day and night. But they didn't care an inch for the real story. They were so focused on where the gun came from and how such a smart girl could have done something like that.

Listen, you have to understand something about this place: round here it isn't hard to get your hands on a gun. They're as common as kitchen knives or tire chains in the winter, and folks

don't see one and think someone is automatically going to get hurt like they do in the city. Every man for miles has a gun, most more than one. Me too. None of us were surprised that Jason had a forty caliber, or that Trudy got her hands on it. It was more surprising that Jason hadn't tried to use it on himself or on her, considering how he'd been since his injury.

Anyways the last baseball game of the season was at the end of summer, on a beautiful day. Don't know how anyone could be anything but happy on a day like that. I'll never forget that when kyle and his wife came in here to tell me what happened, I looked outside and thought *on a day like this?* Perfect day for a baseball game, of course, and with the weather like that all the wives and the kids out sitting in the stands or beyond the outfield with their coolers and lawn chairs and all that.

Obviously, they must have fought before the game—Trudy and Jason, I mean—because he showed up late to the dugout and barely said a word. Didn't yell at the ump or criticize the boys or anything. Just sat in the dugout chewing and spitting.

And then Trudy tears into the parking lot in her wrangler. She even hit marty pratt's car. A couple folks that saw her said she jumped out and stormed across the park looking like a madwoman, face red from crying and a pistol in her hand. You might have expected her to head to the dug-out but I guess she wanted to make a show of it because she marched right out the pitching mound.

The game stopped of course because, I mean, a woman with a gun is walking out across the diamond.

And you know the rest. She took one hard look at Jason, who was sitting there in the dugout, frozen like everyone else, and then she pressed the gun to her left palm and pulled the trigger. When I heard that, I sort of understood what she was trying to do—she was trying to stop

all his talks of pity-love, trying to put them on a level playing field so they could get back to where they were before. Not sure *why*, because even before they only got along half the time. But I guess some people love like that.

Her hand was in a lot worse shape than Jason—a bandsaw makes a lot cleaner work than a pistol. The mess was bad enough to end the game. Travis rushed Trudy and Jason to the hospital because Jason was too much of a mess to drive. He didn't leave her side for weeks, at the hospital or after. Didn't look for a job until she went back to hers.

The papers speculated that she was mentally unstable or brainwashed or something crazy like that. They couldn't understand why a girl like Trudy, who had so much going for her, would throw it all away. Yep, that's what they said. *Throwing it all away*—whatever *it* is. I'm pretty sure she still has a job with the same science lab, and she's still got all those degrees, and she's still got Jason. Love's tricky like that, I guess. Doesn't always make sense. I'm not saying she should have gone and blown her hand off, but I am saying that you can be the smartest cookie in the world and still fall in love."

Two Is Company

Seventy-eight year old Peter Hollimon returned home at nine in the evening, an hour after his night shift at Wegman's department store should have started, except he'd been fired upon arrival. He opened the front door to his home and paused in the entryway, hoping for a greeting or some kind of acknowledgement. Maybe 'hello, dear' or 'you're home early!'. Or even just a turn of the head. But no.

He looked sadly at her thin neck and ballerina bun, visible over the back of the sofa and perfect the way only synthetic hair could be, silhouetted by the tv's glow, which was playing late-night re-runs of *the Andy Griffith show*. Maggie had always loved re-runs. Peter stopped fighting her on that years ago.

He closed the door behind him just as the phone rang, loud and jarring.

"Geeze," Peter said. "Who calls at this hour?" But he knew.

It rang again.

"That'll be your sister, I bet," he said. "She's friends with the department store ladies. She'll have heard that—"

He was interrupted by a third ring, and then the click of the answering machine turning on. Peter braced himself for the voicemail. Peter found Maggie's sister, Elena, hard to tolerate. She called often and asked so many questions. Could she stop by for visit? Did he need any help? Would he please just call her back?

"Peter," Elena's voice rang out over the machine. "It's Elena. I've just heard about— well, your job, and I—I just wanted to see how you're doing. I'm a little worried about you. Can you call me when you get this?"

There were two clicks as she hung up and the recording ended.

“Well,” Peter said, removing his cap and hanging it by the door. “You’ll be wondering what that was all about.” He hesitated, embarrassed at the admission. “Tony laid me off.”

Peter crossed the room, heading for the kitchen. “Don’t worry, though. I mean, we never really needed the money.” He said it mostly to himself. “It was just a time-passer. Or, I mean, a time past.”

The cat jumped down from where it sat, on the coffee table, to follow him. Peter stopped in the kitchen doorway and turned back.

“Pastime,” he said, after a minute. “I meant *pastime*.” He tapped a finger against his temple. “I’m getting all fuzzy up here.”

In the kitchen, Peter filled the kettle.

“Maybe that’s why they fired me,” he said to himself. “Because I’m getting fuzzy.”

He took two mugs from the cupboard and two tea bags—it was always herbal for Maggie, black for him. He set his glasses on the counter and rubbed his eyes.

“But no,” he said. “No, that’s not it. They *told* me why. It’s because they saw me taking makeup samples. On the security tapes.”

The cat mewed.

“No,” Peter said to the cat. “Before they gave me a *warning*. But that was about taking the window display. I thought—these were just samples. I thought it wouldn’t really matter.”

The cat pawed at the refrigerator door.

“Let’s not tell Maggie,” Peter said, opening the fridge. “She’ll blame herself. After all, the job was *her* idea. She said I had to find something to do besides wait around for her to—”

Peter trailed off just as the phone rang again in the next room. He shuffled back to the living room, but didn't continue to the table where the phone sat next to a pile of magazines. Instead he just stared at the phone for two more rings.

"She's calling again already?" He said. "It's not been five minutes."

When the answering machine clicked on this time, Elena's voice was less friendly. "Peter," it said. "I need to speak to you. You haven't returned my calls for several weeks, and after talking with Tony, I'm very concerned. Like it or not, we're family. You can't avoid me forever. Call me back."

Peter shook his head softly as the recording ended, and said softly to himself, "I think she's losing it."

He went back into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He deliberated a moment and then grabbed three slices of pre-packaged cheese and a tub of sour cream.

"Maggie!" He called out. "I'm making mayo and cheese sandwiches."

He got three slices of bread from a cupboard. Maggie would only want half a sandwich—cancer had taken her appetite along with her hair and bodyweight. He put the bread, topped with sour cream and cheese, on a plate. With a shaky hand, he set it in the microwave and pressed *start*. The tray began to spin.

Peter moved to the doorway and looked again at the ballerina bun. It had been done up just that way on their first date sixty years ago. He'd taken her to the movies and would never forget how the light from the silver screen reflected off her perfectly smoothed hair, like it did now. It had done that in the department store lighting, too.

The kettle whistled, and the microwave beeped.

And the phone rang again.

Once again, Peter didn't answer it. As the second and third rings passed, he made two trips, moving the tea cups and dinner plates to the living room coffee table.

He heard the click of the voice recorder and another click when she hung up.

"Your sister's getting a little excessive, I'd say." He looked directly into the glassy eyes of the mannequin on the sofa and saw the reflection of his own silhouette in its eyes. He looked closer, studying his own face, and thought he looked old and tired.

"I'm surprised you're still up," he said. "but at least we can eat together tonight."

Peter bent down, wobbling slightly, to kiss the mannequin's crown of fake hair before reaching for a makeup sample, a tube of lipstick, on the side-table. He squinted at the label.

"This one is called red wonders," he said. "What do you think? Shall we give it a go?"

The permanent, soft smile seemed, as always, a yes. Peter struggled to remove the plastic seal around the lipstick cap, but when he got it, he spun the tube's base until the red contents emerged from the top. Then he pressed it against the mannequin's hard, plastic lips.

"Funny thing," he said, spreading the lip color as evenly as he could. "I think I'll miss the department store. Not just for the money, but you know, it sort of felt like a second home."

Peter took a long look at the mannequin, smiled and turned to his sandwich. He took two bites and then sat back on the couch. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "It was like home, in the sense that I took a particular pride in the details, you know? Folding things the right way, filling the bathroom supplies, making sure everything was ready to go for the next day."

Peter heard the soft rumble of a car on the road outside, and through his closed eyelids he noted the brief brightness of headlights passing over the living room windows.

“And you know, I even felt like I had friends there,” he said. “Not *real* friends, I guess, but company, at least. Every display had a few figures, and I’d chat with them through the night. I’d notice their new outfits and hairstyles. That’s how I knew you’d keep me company here.”

The cat meowed softly and somewhere in the house, wood creaked.

“Obviously it’s not the way it *was*,” Peter said. “But for a while there I felt like I was forgetting you in the little ways. The way you fixed your hair. The perfume you wore.”

“Peter?” A voice said.

Peter opened his eyes and saw Elena in the doorway, standing as if frozen in place, with her hand still on the doorknob. In her other hand she held a bottle of wine.

“When I was a kid, Elena,” Peter said, “People knocked.”

“I did knock,” she said.

“I didn’t hear you knock,” he said.

Elena looked between Peter and the mannequin on the sofa. She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. After another minute she said, “I tried to call you a few times.”

Peter stared at her. “Oh,” he said. “Yeah.”

She lifted the bottle in her hand a little. “I wondered how you’re doing. I haven’t seen you much since—well, since she—I thought maybe we could talk a while.”

Peter nodded slowly and then stood up.

“Guess I wouldn’t mind the extra company,” he said. “Come on in, have a seat.”

Elena hesitated, and then finally nodded and closed the door behind her. She walked over to the sofa where Peter stood, and she leaned in for a hug. Peter reluctantly wrapped his arms around her and when they moved apart again, Elena’s eyes were glassy. She handed Peter the wine bottle and he set it on the coffee table beside the tea and sandwiches.

“I’ll find some glasses,” he said, and went to the kitchen.

When he returned, Elena was seated on the sofa beside the mannequin, her hand resting gently on its plastic forearm. She smiled at Peter as he filled three wine glasses with a slightly shaky hand.

Vita

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Before enrolling in an MFA program with the university of New Orleans, she studied

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