On the Premises

A Good Place to Start

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In which authors were challenged to write stories in which some kind of vehicle plays an important role....

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First Place

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Tide's End

by Dave Dobson

The others were singing, but Jonas could hear her above them. Only she would have words. The Emira. *"Where are you, Man?"* Her voice was cold and wet, a harshness he had not heard for many years. It was muffled through the hull, but of course it could be heard through the oak and pitch, almost as if she were in the hold with him. Their voices were made to carry.

"I have a name," he growled. The ship creaked as it listed to port, grinding along the reef. He made his way through the upper hold to the steep stairs to the lower hold. There must be some weight he could offload, something he could move, to get the ship off the reef. The *Montrésor* wasn't hard aground; not if she were still scraping. Perhaps only a few hundredweight would be enough. That much he could lift alone.

"*How have you resisted?"* she asked. "*Are you deaf?*"

A silly question, thought Jonas, one he could hardly be expected to answer if he were. He glanced around the hold. The crates of sugar and barrels of rum were far too heavy, and he had no time for the winch. The shot? He studied the net

sacks full of shot, tied up next to the two six-pounders. The sacks, full as they were, would be too heavy for Jonas, even if he dragged them, but he could unload a few balls first. Kalani, with his broad brown shoulders, could have carried a full sack easily, but he'd been the first to succumb to the song. He must now lay lifeless below, his last thoughts of yearning and desire and soft, yielding warmth, lurching suddenly to terror. Jonas hoped Kalani had drowned before his flesh was punctured by the claws and teeth of the mermaid coven. That would be a mercy.

The coven had dined well. Nine from the ship were gone. Jonas was the only crew remaining. Hardly enough to sail. But if he could get off the reef, he could at least get the ship away. The coven might not follow. They'd prefer the shallows near the coral. Much more to eat there, warm waters for comfort, and an easy trap for ships, as the *Montrésor* had proven. As much as they'd fed already, they'd let him go rather than venture from the reef. Or so Jonas hoped.

"*We can come for you. There is no escape, Man. Better to succumb. Your passing will be gentle."* A threat, and then a lie. Mermaids were cruel by nature, and his death would be anything but gentle. The threat was more difficult to evaluate. Would they venture on board? Their lithe forms granted grace in the water, but steps and ladders and hard planking turned a tail into a liability. They might also think him better armed than he was. He hoped that was the case. The bosun's pistol he bore could take one of them, if his aim were true, but after that, barring time to reload, he'd be stuck with nothing more than a cargo hook. He could climb the rigging, where they could not follow, but that was no escape. Just a slow thirsty death.

He shook his head. No time for those thoughts. He needed to shed weight. To float the *Montrésor*. What came after could wait, though sailing a ship of this size alone was not really possible. But there was no other option. He pulled shot from the net bag, one ball at a time, letting them thump and roll on the deck below.

He grew doubtful. This was slow, and all the shot in the ship might not be enough weight. The song soared louder, and the melody changed. It was powerful now, so strong even he felt the draw, though it was easy enough to resist. He could hear at least five parts in brazen harmony. A big coven, then.

This Emira must be strong or old to lead so many. Perhaps both. He stopped, his arms aching from the work. He looked once more around the hold.

A bit of breeze blew down through the open hatch, and as it circulated, the odor from the bilge buffeted him. The water there. Could he pump it clear? Or at least enough to float? Perhaps, although that, too, might be beyond the strength of one man. The pump was not well maintained. It did not draw water quickly, and it normally required two men. If the ship were leaking, if the collision with the reef had opened new gaps, it would be a losing battle to empty the bilge even as the sea rushed in.

He dropped two more balls on the planking below, then stopped. The pump, then. It was worth a try before he spent all his strength carrying the shot up two steep stairways and over to the rail. He made his way back up to the deck and around to the pump.

"*I see you, Man."*

Jonas was tempted to look over the side, but he focused on cranking the pump wheel. "I care not."

"*You should. For I am your doom."*

"That may be." The pump loosened up after the first few cranks, and he began to make some progress. A trickle became a steady flow. This might work.

"*Why do you not follow the song? Does it not call to you?*"

Odd. She should know. Was she a new Emira after all? "It calls, but I am stronger."

"*Your kind cannot be stronger.*"

Jonas would not reply, and the Emira spoke no further. The coven's song grew louder, more complex. More powerful. Jonas' arms ached, but the foul bilgewater flowed freely. Jonas could feel the ship shifting, still dragging and scraping on the reef, but rocking more and more as the waves passed under. And moving. The

gentle current and the incessant waves guided the *Montrésor* along the reef as each swell lifted her a bit. Could this work? It had to work.

Then the song cut off. A soaring seventh, aching for resolution but finding none. The Emira had ended the song early. Jonas kept pumping.

"*Are you without desire, Man?*"

She must be newly risen from the Coven, then. There was much she did not know. It didn't matter if one loved, or longed, or lusted, or even if one were gelded entirely. The song would still call to the soul, if not the loins. Perhaps with even more strength.

"I told you, the song calls, but I am stronger."

"*That cannot be, Man.*"

"And still, it is."

"*Are my maidens not beautiful to your gaze? Do you not desire them?"* There was a pause. *"Do you desire men instead?"*

Jonas laughed despite himself, despite the sweat soaking his chest, despite the ache and strain in his arms and back. "I do." It was not a lie. And it might serve to confuse this unlearned Emira. To buy him some more time.

The direction of his compass in matters of love had nothing to do with anything. She should know that. The song called to all. Had they not just an hour before lured Annabella to her death? She had no longing for women, yet she'd gone over the side with the rest, entranced and undeterred. Poor girl. Barely eighteen, with a short life already full of pain. Now ended, even as it seemed to be on the mend. The loss of Annabella cut the deepest. Of her and Henry, Jonas amended. The rest of the sailors were a mix, some passing honest and moral, others utter knaves. The sea battered even the truest timbers, and all eventually bent to some extent.

Henry hadn't. Not yet. A good lad. He'd taken Annabella under his wing. Helped her escape from the plantation, at risk of arrest, and paid for her passage.

Handsomely. Jonas was surprised the captain had agreed to take on a fugitive, but silver spoke louder to him than any magistrate. And Henry had a great deal of silver.

Jonas wondered if Henry had known his love for Annabella was returned. Jonas assumed such words had never been spoken between them. There hadn't been much time, and Henry was reticent to a fault. But the growing bond between the two was clear to anyone with a penny's worth of sense. Jonas hoped Henry had known Annabella loved him. That, at least, might salve some of the pain and terror of his end.

The flow of water from the pump slowed as Jonas tired. He would have to stop before he dropped lifeless to the deck. He felt the ship move and rock beneath him. Perhaps the water had been enough. Perhaps the ship could now be freed.

He felt the ship rotate around its point of contact with the reef. Still stuck at the bow, though not as tight in as before. But she was spinning in the current now. And the wind had shifted. The wind that had driven them landward now blew westerly. A significant change from before, when the captain had lowered all but the jib to drop anchor, intent on dispatching a boat to shore for water and perhaps some fruit. That's when the songs began, when all the others went over the side to their deaths. And then the *Montrésor* had drifted into the reef, adding a new nightmare atop the other.

If Jonas could raise sail now, and pull it across this new wind, that might be enough to back the ship off the reef. To get underway again, and away from this place. He had no strategy beyond that. He made his way to the mainsail. It was heavy, but with the winch, he should be able to raise it. He tightened down the boom with the mainsheet line at what he hoped would be a proper angle, then pulled the halyard to the winch, wrapping it tight around.

Boom. Something struck the starboard hull. Something heavy. Away from the reef. What were they doing? *Boom.*Again, and again. Jonas left the halyard and ran to the side.

There were so many of them. This coven was huge. Fifteen strong at least, perhaps twenty, tails thrashing, their bare shoulders glistening in the surf. Between them, they bore a great timber with a metal cap. A ram. Where had they found such a thing? Modern ships, with sails and guns, had no use for such a primitive weapon. It had to be from an earlier time, when ships moved on the backs of oarsmen, when they clashed prow to hull amid the waves. Perhaps the coven had looted it from an ancient wreck. Or perhaps they'd improvised it from scraps of modern vessels they'd destroyed. It mattered little. *Boom.* The ram struck the side again. *Boom.* The sisters of the coven lacked a ship's mass, but they were agile, their tails strong, and they moved as one. Jonas could see the *Montrésor*'s hull splintering with each impact.

The Emira swam alongside the others, not deigning to assist in their efforts. She was an impressive matriarch, her green hair trailing behind her in the water. Twice as large as her sisters. Her eyes locked with his, and he could hear her clear as if she spoke at his side. "*We need no song, Man. We can take you even so.*"

Jonas ran back to the winch and cranked. The sail rose into the gray afternoon sky, slow, like an old man climbing steps. It snapped wide as the wind picked up, lashing back against the mainsheet line that held it, and Jonas could feel the ship lurch away from the reef. Still, the ram thudded against the ship, every impact a giant's footstep. Jonas cranked until the sail was full. Should he raise another? The foresail? He was so weary. The ship ground off the reef with a terrible scrape, then ran free, spinning in the current and forced along by the wind. His heart leapt. Free.

Boom. Even as the ship moved, they assaulted it. *Boom.* Jonas ran to the foresail and struggled with its halyard. The ship shifted in the wind as it spun, and the mainsail snapped taut, the boom catching on the mainsheet line.

Crunch. No. Not that. Splintering, cracking, rushing, bubbles. Barely perceptibly at first, the ship listed towards starboard, and the deck took on a tilt. There was a thump as the bow keel hit bottom again, sliding into the sand of the forereef, and the stern sank further, seeking its own resting spot. There the *Montrésor* would sit, rocking in the waves, until a storm broke her to pieces. She would sail no more.

"*Your doom is at hand, Man. Why not succumb to the melody? Surely it must be easier to give in. It will all be the same in the end.*" The coven's voices rose again, a minor chord, then another that spread higher and lower, adding notes and counterpoint as it grew. The damp air rang with seductive tones.

Jonas took a breath. Closed his eyes. A moment. A moment to push back the fear, to settle his mind. There must still be a way to save what he needed to save. There had to be.

He went over to starboard. The coven was below, their mouths open in song, their dead eyes staring at him, their pointed claws exposed as they reached upwards, beckoning. The Emira swam behind them, using slow swipes of her tail to maintain position, her arms out to her sides. A majestic specimen, he had to admit. He had not seen any with her size and beauty, cruel though it might be.

"You have not led your coven long." Jonas shouted to be heard over the song.

The Emira looked at him, then waved a hand. The song faded as the coven dropped out, one by one this time, lips closing over sharp fangs. *"You puzzle me, Man. How do you know this? How do you know our ways?"*

Jonas felt the stern settle to the bottom. The *Montrésor* was low in the water, tilted upward at twenty degrees. But she had come to rest. She would sink no further. That was a blessing, albeit a small one. "You and your sisters have fed well already today on my companions and friends. Would not a solution to this riddle be of more use than eating me?"

"*You flatter yourself, Man. What use could your story possibly be?"*

Jonas thought he heard curiosity in her denial. "If I can resist your wiles, others might as well. Your coven could starve. The sea would swallow your bones." Perhaps a tad overdramatic, but the Emira he had known before enjoyed colorful threats. "How many moons have you led your sisters? It cannot be more than five or six."

The Emira was silent for a bit. She and the coven stared at him. "*I awoke three moons ago. We have taken five ships in that time. My coven prospers. I lead with strength."*

*"*You inherited your power," said Jonas. "You could not have birthed such a large coven in that short time."

The Emira's features twisted with displeasure. "*I have spawned four. And these sisters would be as nothing without the wisdom of my command."*

"No. You are a pale reflection of your Mother's strength." Jonas made his way to the companionway. He hoped the hold had not flooded too deeply for what he wished to do. Needed to do.

"*Perhaps I shall devour you just to quiet you. I tire of this."*

He looked down the steep stairs. There was a little water, but the galley was mostly clear. But he needed to make it aftward, towards the cabins, down toward where the stern met the waves. "Hold a moment, Emira," he shouted. "There is still the mystery of how I can resist your songs. Were you more experienced, you might know this." He drew the pistol and took a few steps down the stairs.

"*You think to bargain this knowledge for your life?"* The Emira's words were laden with scorn. *"How you petty creatures rail against your destiny."*

The galley steps were flooded with murky water at the base. Perhaps a foot of water there. Jonas waited a moment to study the rate it was rising. Slow enough. Or so he hoped. He descended the steps and splashed into the galley. The cabins would be farther underwater because of the tilt of the ship. Too deep already? No. It must not be. He sloshed through the galley and into the narrow corridor leading to the cabins. The water was up to his thighs now. He drew the pistol from his belt and held it higher, keeping it from the water. Perhaps he should have left it on the deck.

The cabin he sought was the large one at the rear. The water would be at his waist there, judging from how much of the door was still exposed. That would

make recovering what he wanted to recover difficult. The water might already have risen too high inside. It could be too late.

He felt a sharp stab to his calf, then a rake of claws on his ankle. One of the mermaids was inside. The hole they'd made must be bigger than he'd imagined. The only light here was from the open hatch behind, at the top of the galley stairs. Not near enough to see her. The salt water stung the wound, an angry, intense pain. He hoped he was not bleeding much. He thought about using the pistol, but he had only a vague sense of where she was. He'd have a single shot. It would be foolish to try to reload down here. His cartridges were likely ruined already.

As he scanned the darkness, struggling to see movement beneath the ripples, he heard a slosh and saw a dull gleam. A scaly tail disappearing down the stairs to the hold. She was retreating. Or summoning her sisters.

He moved forward, pushing against the water, to reach the second cabin, where Henry and Annabella had bunked. In separate berths, as Henry had insisted, though that was not much face saved. It was scandalous that he and she had shared the cabin, but hardly more so than his flight with her from the plantation. And the captain would not grant them separate cabins. There were only three. The captain would never give his up, and Schmidt, the mate, would not have taken well to being cast out. So together they'd stayed in the guest cabin.

It was hard to open the door against the weight of water. There wasn't much current, but it was still difficult. He got the door open a crack, then slid a hand in and pulled some more. The displaced water flowed around and inward. The cabin was flooded, as he expected, but not deep. Not yet. Please, not too deep. The cabin portholes allowed some light in, despite being underwater. If only he could get the door a bit wider, he could slip in.

He heard a sound behind him, a disruption. Something more than the constant gurgle and knock of the water around him. A splash, then dripping. He turned. The silhouette of a woman, wet hair stuck to her neck and bare shoulders. Her eyes gleaming in the dark. She opened her mouth and sound poured forth. So

loud. So strong. Jonas felt the tug deep in his chest. A yearning. A pull. A hunger, almost.

But not strong enough. Not nearly. He leveled the pistol and fired. The blast was dreadful in the confined space, and his ears rang. The woman's head snapped back, and her song cut off, and with it came an abrupt cessation of its magnetic pull. She slid under the water, a black ichor staining the surface, spreading as she sank below. A smell of burning and sulfur filled the air as the smoke spread from the flintlock and the barrel.

The Emira's voice was as ice. "*You worm. You excrement. You flotsam. Whence comes your temerity, Man? But answer not. It matters little. You will not survive the hour. I will rend your flesh myself. I will flay you one strip at a time."*

*"*Was she one of your daughters, Emira?" Jonas shouted, trying to keep his tone saucy. He dropped the pistol and put two hands on the cabin door, forcing it farther. His eyes were almost adjusted to the gloom.

"*They are all my daughters, Man."*

*"*You know what I mean. She was yours. Your rage tells the tale."

The coven's song rose again, though he felt far less pull from this distance. The Emira's voice came again, pressing into his skull. *"I carry in my belly her sister. You have accomplished nothing. My coven yet grows, and it shall grow more, fed by your flesh and your blood."*

There it was. A chance, hidden in her taunting. His only chance now. He pushed into the cabin, the water at his chest. He cast his eyes about in the gloom. What he sought had to be here, somewhere. Please, let it not be below the water already.

There. A basket floating on the water, persisting in defiance of the coven, of the attack, of the sinking of the ship. He reached a hand in, and soft cloth met his fingers. Dry inside still. A minor miracle. He pulled the basket over to him and raised it up, holding it carefully above his shoulders, above the water. As quickly

as he could push through the water, he made his way out of the cabin. He was leaving behind Henry's silver, but Jonas had no time for that.

He sloshed through the galley towards the stairs. He spied the cook's carving knife in a slot in the wall. A weapon, perhaps, now that the pistol was gone, though it was not a knife meant for fighting. He grabbed it and tucked it in his belt under the small of his back. It was awkward climbing the stairs with the basket, but he held it behind him and made his way up. The afternoon glow hit his face, and the tropical air enveloped him with warmth and moisture. The ship was steady now, although he could feel the slap of the waves and hear the scrape and snap of coral as the ship settled into place.

Now he'd need to wait for an opportunity. One that might not even arise. The coven's song was loud, ululating up and down in a blaze of chords and harmonies. They were giving all they had. It was beautiful, and terrible, and it brought memories to his mind. Sunswept beaches, shapes moving in the shallows, blood on the foamy waves. He thrust them down, as he always did. They did not bear revisiting.

The song rose, broadened, then resolved into a bright, clarion chord. The voices cut off as one. The deck was treacherous, canted aftward, but he could navigate it with care. He got to the main mast and set the basket down against a supply chest. The sail behind him stretched tight against the wind, rippling in the breeze, straining, though it would never again move the ship. He moved down the boom to the mainsheet line, which held the boom against the wind. He looked back. When the coven came, they'd come from the stern. The rail there was low, wet with spray and breaking waves. That would be their easiest access. He doubted they'd come up from the hold.

"*Are you prepared for eternity, Man?"*

"I am." Jonas longed for a pistol. There were many in the captain's cabin, for use if the ship were under threat of boarding, but they were too far and too wet. No help.

An arm came over the aft rail. Shapely, slender. A face followed. One of the coven, but not the Emira. The mermaid pulled herself up and over the rail, tail kicking and slapping. Her power was remarkable, but Jonas well knew how strong they were. The mermaid slid up the deck, pulling herself forward with her arms and pushing with her tail. He stood still, one hand on the mainsheet line. This maiden had curly dark hair, hanging in bunches around her head and shoulders. Her dull black eyes stared at him, and her mouth twisted upward. She stopped, inclined her head just a bit to the side, then retreated back to the port rail. She laced an arm through it and sat back, her tail curled beneath her.

Jonas heard a screech of rage, then a rush of chittering syllables. The mermaids' own language, one he recognized but had never mastered, as it held sounds his mouth could not make. The Emira was angry, no doubt wondering why her maiden had not attacked. She was giving the others orders.

Another mermaid rose above the aft rail, this one with hair of red gold. She pulled herself up and over, and like the one before, she approached, then stopped. This one studied the basket as well. Her lips parted, revealing her fangs and pointed incisors, but she would not come nearer. She joined her sister at the side.

"*What sway do you hold over them, Man? This should not be."*

"Come see for yourself. Your grip weakens, and mine grows."

"*Your lies will avail you naught."* There was a stream of chitters from the water behind the ship. The curly-haired mermaid answered back, a few staccato shrieks. She would not be capable of much language – merely yes and no, joy and pain. And hunger.

"*Your pistol is gone. You are powerless."*

Jonas saw another arm come over the rear rail. It was huge, near twice as thick and long as his. The Emira. She pulled herself up and swung her tail over the rail in one fluid motion, an image of grace and confidence. She slid up the deck like a serpent, her tail making broad curves. She had no need to use her arms.

"*You smell…"* The Emira sniffed the air. *"But how?"* Then she saw the basket. *"You guard another. A prideful, futile effort."* She laughed. "*How has that one resisted our song? Is she as you are?"*

"She didn't resist. She just can't walk." Jonas glanced down at the baby. Annabella's baby, Maria. Her eyes were wide now, no longer entranced by the song. She'd always been a calm one. A sweet, sweet child.

"*My sisters may not touch you, but I can. My will is far stronger than their instincts."*

"I know."

The Emira's brow furrowed, but then her face set in an expression of rage. Of wrath. *"I shall dine on your entrails, Man."* She pushed forward, closing fast.

Jonas pulled the knife from his belt and slashed at the taut mainsheet line beside him, the one restraining the sail. The captain was a miser, so the manila rope was old and had begun to rot in places. It took a few quick strokes, but the knife blade cut through much of it, and the wind did the rest. Jonas crouched, and the boom swung over him and around, catching the Emira across the chest and fouling her in the sheet. She struggled to push it away, but for a moment there was an opening. Jonas ran forward, and his blade slid through her ribs, piercing her heart.

"*Man…"* She slid down, clutching the boom. *"Or are you man at all?"* Then the light left her eyes, and she sank to the deck. Jonas ran to the basket and pulled out Maria, stripping the swaddling from her. She was so tiny. But this would work. Had to work. Jonas returned to the Emira and cut her open, a long slice from above her waist to halfway down her tail. Gore spilled forth, but Jonas spied what he was after. The amnion, in which her offspring grew. The precious fluid within would guarantee Maria's safety from the mermaids. Its scent would identify her forever as a new sister of this coven. They would protect her, nurture her, feed her. When a new Emira rose from the sisters, Maria would yet live in safety. Already part of the coven, as Jonas had been, with his coven, after he was orphaned as a boy. He had almost no memories of life before the coven, but he

remembered his father coating him with the oily liquid, struggling to complete the task as he lay bleeding next to the dead Emira. So long ago.

One of the maidens approached. The one with curly hair. Her skin was the same color as Maria's. Jonas held out the baby. She squalled now, and glistened with fluid in the afternoon light. The maiden took Maria and held her close, nuzzling Maria's head with her lips. Not a preface to devouring her, but a gentle gesture, one of care, of soothing. Maria cooed, and then she latched onto the mermaid's breast.

Maria was safe. Perhaps one day she would leave this coven as he had and live again among people. Without any language, that might be difficult. But she had a far better chance with the coven than with Jonas, shipwrecked and alone on a barren island.

At least he was a good swimmer. His childhood had granted him that. He took a step back, nodded to the mermaid, then turned and dove over the side.
The *Montrésor* scraped and shuddered in the waves.

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SECOND PLACE

Marcie Roman's work has appeared in Toronto Journal, Driftwood, CALYX, Split Lip, Black Fox, The Gravity of the Thing, and in Short Edition story dispensers. Her novel, Journey to the Parallels, was named a Foreword Review Best Book of the Year. She is a fiction editor for the Baltimore Review and earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Online she can be found at marcieroman.com.

Intersection

by Marcie Roman

Izzy

Izzy stood in front of a Burger King with a police officer who looked as if he ate every meal there, and a blonde, middle-aged woman who'd just ruined Izzy's day. Cars heading south slowed and picked up speed. Izzy wished she could be in one of them. Specifically, her own.

The officer studied the other woman's license. "Ms. Aurora Lightly, you're not from around here, are you?"

"Just moved up from Albuquerque."

"Well here in Chicago, if you can't see if a car is coming, best to assume there is one."

This in response to Ms. Lightly's claim that a bus had blocked her view when she'd shot out of the restaurant parking lot.

Izzy felt vindicated until she heard the screech of tires and saw a tow-truck veer to the curb, a reminder that she had it way worse. This other woman was going to drive away *lightly* with just a few streaks of black paint marring her vehicle's front end like drips of mascara.

While Izzy waited for the officer to finish the report, the tow-truck driver approached. He had a day's worth of stubble and a partially shaved scalp that failed to mask the delineation of a receding hairline. But it was his left bicep that drew Izzy's attention. Openly in view—thanks to a sweat-stained Aerosmith tank-top—it provided a suitable canvas for the serpentine tattoo of a snake. The letters, *R, O,* and *Y* floated in the snake's belly as if in a perpetual state of pre-digestion. His name, Izzy assumed. But perhaps something more exotic. An ex-lover. A long-lost brother. A fondness for old cowboys.

He pointed to the vehicle that blocked the southbound lane and asked Izzy, "You the owner?"

Clearly, the rusted hatchback with the smashed fender matched Izzy better than the SUV-on-steroids idling at the curb. Izzy nodded.

Ms. Aurora Lightly babbled apologies in a raspy drawl. "I've got great insurance, honey. Don't you worry about a thing."

What did this woman know about Izzy's worries? How this delay meant she'd be late, yet again, for her shift at the grocery store, which put her one step closer to being fired, which meant not covering rent, which meant being forced to live on the street. Okay, perhaps that was a tad hyperbolic. There was, after all, her parents' home. That suburban sanctuary of garage door openers and bi-weekly lawn service. But it was not an exaggeration to claim that her personal finances were as stable as her car's bumper, which dangled like a hangnail waiting for a sympathetic bystander to give it a tug.

The officer handed Izzy her copy of the report—"Remember, any accident you can walk away from is a good one"—then led Aurora to the other car.

"I need to know where it's going," the tow driver demanded.

Izzy looked at him blankly. Did she seem like someone who kept a list of mechanics?

"What'd your insurance company say? You need to call them." His boot tapped the curb.

Like you've got any better place to be, Izzy thought, but she did as told and was given the name of a body shop in Rogers Park. It wasn't far from her apartment so she could walk home. She didn't bother to call work, which made it a guaranteed firing, the second that year. Add to that two broken relationships—boyfriend, best friend who was now ex-boyfriend's girlfriend—and it sure seemed like everything in her twenty-fourth year was a total wreck.

Izzy took the clipboard from the tow driver, hearing her father's reprimand as she blindly initialed next to a series of Xs. Crossing to her car she collected its detritus into a reusable grocery bag: a half-chewed pack of gum, old issues of the *Reader*, loose cassette tapes (she'd never gotten around to upgrading to a CD player, let alone Bluetooth), and a bag of bruised apples she'd rescued from the shop's throw-away bin. Before she shut the door, her hand lingered on the rip in the passenger seat. The heel of her boot had caught the fabric as she'd scampered to the roof to watch the fireworks off Navy Pier on her twenty-first birthday. She'd felt so free that night. Just a woman, her car, and a mind-blowing fireworks display lighting the way toward an uncertain but exciting future. She'd often fantasized about climbing into the driver's seat and taking off. No destination. No plan. Just get the hell out of the Midwest. But now that future seemed like an unreciprocated crush. One small change—a car out of nowhere, a vowel swap—and poof, the crush became yet another crash.

Roy

Roy could tell a lot about a person by the way they got into the truck. There were the foot hoppers, who swung in like they were getting on a horse. Those tended to be the pissed-off type whose legs never stopped swinging and left dusty imprints of their shoes on the dash. Arm folks pushed up as if getting out of a swimming pool. They tended to be worriers, wringing their hands and seeking reassurances. And then there were the poor pricks who didn't know what to do

and used everything they had: arms, thighs, asses, faces turning red. Roy once had a three-hundred-pound guy he'd had to push from behind, palms sinking into skin as soft and white as a Pillsbury biscuit.

The girl climbed in with determined efficiency, dropped her bag at her feet, and snapped the seatbelt into place. She was flat-chested, in old jeans and a fitted blouse. Skinny fat, he decided. Probably no muscle tone. Her face bore a smattering of freckles as though someone had dropped a fistful on her skin.

He pulled into traffic. "Name's Roy."

The girl's lips flickered. "Isabelle. But people who aren't my parents call me Izzy."

She reached for a *Rose Towing* business card from the pouch over the radio. Her nails were bitten down and a greater number of freckles trailed into the cuffs of her blouse. He guessed she was single because the ones who weren't stayed on the phone with the most prominent guy in their life.

"Who's Rose?"

"My Ma. Dad named the first truck after her. Now we've got a fleet."

Did three trucks make a fleet? Roy wasn't sure and wondered if he'd be able to call it that next week, or if they'd have all been repossessed. He felt the gut punch he'd been experiencing ever since the mess with the IRS started. His dad hadn't even put up a fight. That morning Roy found him passed out in the den, drunk limbs dangling from the recliner as if it were some kind of survival raft.

"I suppose cars are your area of expertise," Izzy said.

"Been working around them my whole life."

She started shredding the side of the card, like a nibbling mouse. Roy wanted to tell her to stop; they'd paid a shitload to get them in color.

"Do you think mine will be okay? I've had it since I was eighteen."

Her tone made him think of a cop show with some desperate woman pleading with the officer to find a missing person because he was "her only son", "her favorite uncle." Some way to stress that, unlike all the other cases, this one was *really* important. She'd probably gotten the car for graduation from Mommy and Daddy with a big ass bow on the hood.

"Car that old, probably a total loss."

"But I have insurance. And what about the woman? It was her fault. Doesn't her insurance have to pay?"

Roy shook his head. "I see it all the time. That woman will lie. She slipped a couple bills to the cop. Those forms'll never get filed right. I bet you get blue book, maybe three or four-thou."

The freckles on Izzy's face merged into blotches. "But you'll vouch for me, right? You'll tell them the truth." The card was down to a scrap with the phone number and a pile of paper flakes on her thigh.

"Well, now, that's really not my business, and I don't mess with cops." Got enough troubles of my own, he thought.

He pulled up in front of the body shop. In the window, a tattered banner read *Se habla Espanol*. Vehicles in various stages of distress lined the curb.

"Impudent pettifogger. This is so unfair!" Izzy banged her fists sending the paper shreds into the air.

Roy had no clue what she'd said—impotent frogger?— but he knew how she was feeling. It was like how his dad's company was going to die because of some stupid mistake (no matter what was said, he knew it wasn't intentional), and all those corporate bastards would keep using their tax breaks to jet around in private planes.

He softened his tone. "Look, I know it sucks."

"Yes," she said, flicking the last scrap off her jeans. "Sucks, it does."

As he swung out of the truck he told her, "You can go if you want. Your insurance company will call you."

She nodded but sat staring at the traffic streaming past.

When he returned, he was relieved to find her there. He dismissed it as nothing more than a pretty distraction, but, truth be told, he wasn't in the mood to be alone. She'd turned on the radio and was fiddling with the dial.

"It doesn't work. Just the tape deck. You need a ride somewhere?"

When she didn't answer, he reached into the cooler behind the seat. "Want one?"

Roy wasn't one of those guys who needed a constant IV of alcohol, but he'd grab a brew now and then when he was stuck in traffic or some asshole in a Lexus cut him off. Just a little cooling aid.

She hesitated then took the beer. They opened the cans to a harmonious pop and fizz. The ice bags Roy used were no match for the August heat and the beer was lukewarm. Izzy used her toe to push the tape into the cassette player. Thrashing guitar filled the cab. She grimaced.

"You gotta problem with this?" he yelled.

She gestured toward the logo on his shirt and yelled back, "I wasn't expecting Bob Dylan. Music should fit your mood and hearing music that basically says go fuck yourself seems appropriate under the circumstances."

He could have told her he was up on his Dylan. His mom loved all those old singers. Simon & Garfunkel. Joan Baez. Instead, he motioned. "The door. Feel free to use it."

She scowled and took another sip.

He finished his beer and reached for another, pointing it toward her like a microphone. "So, tell me Izzy, what do you do?"

She chewed a nail. “Well, I seem to excel at losing jobs and being a major disappointment.” The song ended and her words blared over the scratchy silence. She adjusted her volume. “At least according to my mother.”

“She said that?”

Her nail returned to her mouth. “Doesn’t have to.”

The music started again, its heavy bass vibrating through the seats. Izzy picked up Roy’s empty can. “Can I take this?” Without waiting for an answer, she set her beer on the floor and slid out. Through the open door, he watched her smash the can with her tennis shoe until it was nothing but a small aluminum circle. She picked it up and climbed back in. Took a hearty gulp from her own can followed by a burp that made her laugh. When she leaned into the door, the sunlight washed out her features. Roy blinked and her features returned.

“So what do you want to do?”

Izzy studied the can, as if it might offer a suggestion. “Growing up, I was told I had a lot of potential. Early reader. Straight A’s. And I was entrepreneurial too. You know how I got my car? All through tutoring. Which basically meant I was writing papers for jocks and deadbeats.” Her eyes flickered to Roy, as if making sure he hadn’t been a client. “When I went to college I expected to have this flash of inspiration about who I’m supposed to be, that one thing that gets the neurons all fired up. But I couldn’t stop asking, what’s the point? I mean who knows if we’re even going to have a planet to live on ten years from now.” She smiled, another shrug. “I know, typical existential angst. So, I guess you could say I’m waiting to find out what I should be doing.”

Roy nodded. “Uh, that’s cool. But I meant, what do you want to do right *now*?”

She studied her can. “I guess it’s still the same answer.”

Roy tossed his empty into the back. “I’ve gotta trash a clunker. You want to come? It’s just off Clybourn. I can give you a ride home after.”

Izzy fished around in her grocery bag and pulled out a cassette tape. "Okay by me, as long as I get to pick the tunes."

*

General Iron Recycling was one of Roy's favorite places. He could tell by the way Izzy's face lit up that she was equally in awe. Massive cranes transported automobile carcasses to be crushed, then stacked the metal pancakes onto a teetering tower. He got out to unhook the car. She scrambled from her seat as if they'd stopped at a scenic overlook. A grinding, crunching sound of destruction filled the air. It was almost too loud to think.

"This is absolutely apocalyptic!" Izzy clapped like a child.

The sky had been filling with clouds, but a ray of sun sliced through and bounced off the metallic hills creating a blinding glare. His heart pumped faster. The crushing always ramped him up, which was why he left the dumps for the end of the day. It made him want to jump into the fray and start smashing the shit out of things. Store windows. Other people's cars. But he always stopped himself. You can't do that kind of thing without a reason.

"Yours'll be here soon enough," he shouted.

Izzy scowled. She took a step back. "I want to go."

"Aw c'mon, it's just a car."

"I want to go now!"

Roy wished he could feed her some line to get her to chill out, but he knew she was going to get screwed. That blonde, stuck-up, suburban housewife was going to go right back to her on-line shopping and manicures without a scratch to her lifestyle. That's when the idea came riding in on a clanging, crashing wave of sound.

"Hey, do you have that police report?"

Izzy handed him a balled up sheet. He smoothed out the paper to read the personal information for Ms. Aurora Lightly, the Albuquerque address, and, in the margins, a local place of residence.

He grinned. "Got time for one more stop?"

Aurora

Aurora was back at her cousin Darlene's house trying to unwind. Even on her second gin and tonic, Aurora was still unsettled. *Stupid bitch, you should have just run*. That's what Ed would say when he found her. The fact that she was already on the run wouldn't matter anymore. Soon the insurance company would call their home number, and it was listed right there on that report where he could find her. What had been stupid was trying to bribe the cop not to list the address. "It's temporary," she'd pleaded, but then she was probably lucky he didn't arrest her. Course he also didn't give back the fifty. She'd been running low on cash and ATMs could be traced. But maybe that was the answer. Go to the machine at the 7-11, get as much as it would allow, and head East. She had a nephew in Virginia. Hadn't seen him in years, but maybe he'd help her out.

She rubbed the tender spot on her thigh where the bottle had hit her last week. One thing you could say about Ed, he had good aim. This was the second time she'd split. Last year, she'd made it as far as Colorado Springs, but then the fear of an unknown future sent her driving back to a dreaded, but known fate. Ed was better for a while—the walls took the brunt of his fits—until last month when the gas company laid him off, and then she was back to forcing smiles during the day and spending her nights sobbing, like some sort of Jekyll and Hyde character.

She took another sip and set about unraveling the efforts from the morning. She set her wig on the stand. Took a swipe of Oil of Olay to remove the make-up that had been thickening each year like a tree stump. Her hand froze at the sound of tires crunching gravel, followed by the squeak of old door hinges. It couldn't be Ed, not yet, although it sounded like his Chevy. And Darlene was at an AA retreat and wouldn't be back until the next night.

The sound of metal scratching metal. Shattered glass.

Aurora clutched the front of her bathrobe and walked to the living room window. On the way, she grabbed the gun propped next to the TV. There were no streetlights on the road to the house, but in the faint light spilling from the porch she saw a figure step into view and the silhouette of a crow bar. The bar swung and hit, shattering her car's front headlight. She watched it swing back for another strike.

Izzy

Izzy's heart raced. She had never felt so scared or alive. This is what it meant to take control. This, ladies and gentlemen, was the feeling of empowerment. She'd done some underage drinking, run a few stop signs, but this was the first time she'd really broken the law.

She heard Roy on the other side of the car, the whoosh of punctured tires, as she tried to imagine her father—for surely her mother would stay home—coming to a police station to pick her up. It was both scintillating and horrifying. Just one more headlight and then they'd split. But as she raised the crowbar, she felt herself being watched. She looked at the house and thought she saw movement by a window, a curtain dropped into place. She froze.

Roy must have seen it too. The resonating sounds of damage faded, replaced by softer movements: the buzz of mosquitoes, raccoons casing trashcans, the rumble of distant thunder. Then a new sound—non-organic, and alarming—the squeak of a screen door as Aurora stepped onto the porch, rifle in hand.

Izzy dropped the crowbar and raised her hands until a searing pain sent her tumbling to the ground.

Roy

Roy was working the fender when he heard the door swing open. He saw the gun and crouched. Who's the coward now? Of course, Izzy hadn't grown up in a neighborhood where every block had at least one off-duty cop who'd shoot anything that crossed his property line. A gust of wind blew the first drops of rain sideways. Tree branches shook overhead, setting off a cascade of leaves and twigs.

He peeked around the car and saw Aurora march over and pull Izzy to her feet, then lead her, hobbling, toward the house. He reached into his pocket for his keys. Empty. Were they in the cab? No, he remembered grabbing them. Surely, he hadn't been stupid enough to let them drop. His fingers scraped the dirt in a desperate grapple for an invisible key ring. Already he regretted the destruction. This wasn't the rush he got from watching things get smashed at the pound. This was wrong. This was *so* wrong. He wished he could go in reverse and see the car's broken pieces fly back into place. That was the problem with rage. It blinded you into stupidity but went running as soon as it had its way. He tried to reassure himself. The car would still start. It was only a couple of tires. A few headlights. The lady would drop a credit card and not even look at the bill. Right?

He couldn't say what led his boots to the house. Some sense of obligation? Or was it that he'd never felt safe outside in a storm? As the screen door slammed behind him, he saw Aurora place a pillow under Izzy's extended foot. He spotted the discarded weapon. Black plastic cables dangled from the back. It was nothing but a controller for a video game.

"Buck Hunter," Aurora said, "is my cousin Darlene's favorite pastime."

Aurora, Roy, and Izzy

The living room's three occupants sat in a dragged-out silence. Each felt claustrophobic for different reasons: Izzy, because her foot ached from dropping the crowbar on it and because the air was as thick as a tavern with cigarette smoke; Roy, because the collectible figurines lining the walls stared down at him, accusingly, through hundreds, maybe even thousands, of painted eyes; and Aurora, because there were two complete strangers sitting apart on Darlene's brown vinyl furniture, when, for all intents and purposes she should, right then and there, be the only one in the room. The air conditioner whirred to life. Rain pounded the windows and roof.

Aurora rose. "I'm gonna make another drink. If y'all wanna join me, shout out."

"Some water, if it's not too much trouble." Izzy winced as she shifted her foot.

"Sure thing, honey. And, you sir," she addressed Roy. "If you get any wise ideas, you should know I recorded your escapades on my phone."

Aurora found her drink where she'd left it by the window and forced her hand to steady as she brought it into the kitchen. She'd been hiding her booze in the cleaning cabinet so as not to tempt Darlene. When she opened the door, the mop hit her in the face before crashing to the floor. "It's okay," she called automatically, as if she were having the ladies over for Mahjong.

In the living room, Izzy eyed Roy slumped in a recliner. She felt as if she were waking up after drinking too much at a party to find herself with an unexpected and mostly unknown companion. Was he thinking she was some unstable girl looking for entertainment? But hadn't it been all his idea? Everything from earlier that day had grown hazy under the dull headache from the beer and the pain in her foot. Plus, she was just so tired. Her parents would for sure have some psychobabble to explain her behavior, but this was certainly not her fault, other than moving her closer toward a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I'm scared to look at it," she said, addressing her unlaced shoe. When Roy didn't respond, she continued. "You could just leave, you know. Nothing wrong with your foot. Door's right there."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm not gonna do that."

Aurora swept in, flourishing glasses off a tray. "You could use some brandy, my dear." In front of Izzy, she set down a glass with amber liquid alongside one with water, then placed an ice bag in a flowered dishtowel on Izzy's propped foot. "And you get a little G&T with me, sir." She didn't tell Roy that it was pretty much all tonic, since she wasn't sure if it he was the type who got stupid and quiet or stupid and mad, and she had no interest in dealing with the latter.

Roy took the glass, watching Aurora for sudden moves. That was a joke. He was twice her size. But on her turf and with them at fault, she had the power. Plus, what were his options? Ditch the truck and walk? He glanced at Izzy. She looked frail. Her face was white under her freckles. Her hair in disarray. At the Iron

plant, she'd had potential, like a superhero sidekick. Roy slid into the slippery material of the seat, wishing he could slide through a hole in the floor.

"So now we got ourselves a little party," Aurora said. She settled into an armchair and tried to sit tall, although she felt naked without her makeup, weak without her wig. She held them captive on a lie, the recording on her phone as false a threat as the plastic gun. "Here's what I see as the situation. You've got yourselves some trouble if I call the police. I've got myself some trouble if the police come. I'm not gonna tell you why. That's personal. But I think I've got us a solution."

Izzy listened to Aurora's plan through a sleepy stupor. It was no crazier than anything else that had happened that day. They had a tow truck, a nearby lake, a partially-totaled car, a driver who could escape to a new life. She wondered at this last point. What was Aurora hiding from? Were they abetting a murderess? Aiding a felon? Izzy studied the hostess's fluffy bedroom slippers and faded blue robe, the gray tufts of hair escaping a hairnet. The fabrication was so simple. It was as if everything that day had happened to make this possible.

"No way," Roy said. "Right, Izzy?"

Izzy knew she needed to pick a side, yet how easy it would be not to act. To toss the ball back and let them tussle. She was already creating a story she could tell her parents about her damaged foot. The car accident that caused it. The crazy woman who escaped without blame. That would buy her a few weeks on the couch getting waited on while she streamed movies in a Vicodin daze. A few weeks to heal and she'd be as good as new.

Except, she'd only be as good as her old self. The one who stood in place, watching life from the side of the road. Waiting for someone, or something, to direct her. Maybe that wasn't the person she wanted to be anymore.

"Izzy?" Roy asked again.

It was Izzy's decision: to tip the scales, map the course. Her foot barely bothered her now or maybe it was just numb. Deep in her belly, she felt a surge. The surge of actual power. She wanted to suck on it like a peppermint stick. Have it linger

on her like a spotlight. The cushions crinkled as she sank onto the crocheted pillow.

“I need to close my eyes for a minute. Then we can talk.”

Izzy couldn’t see into the future to know that, in the morning, Roy would find his keys and head one way. Aurora would abandon her car and head in another. Izzy would limp to the nearest intersection to thumb a ride. Instead, as she drifted off, she imagined herself seated behind the wheel of her car—fixed up and as good as new—as she headed into the vast unchartered territory waiting to be discovered.

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THIRD PLACE

Norman Corenthal is a retired lawyer who has driven the streets of Queens many times, at 2 a.m. and otherwise. He lives there and in Woodstock, NY. He is married and has two daughters and two cars. “Joyriders” is his first foray into fiction.

Joyriders

by Norman Corenthal

Her days had been boring, useless, spent at stupid school or hanging out, chafing, angry, putting up, or not, with counselors, teachers, house parents, the occupying army of the annoying. He was as big as she was little, as tall and square and blonde as she was short and full and dark. He would circle outside the group, stomping and prowling, exasperating the counselor, always on the edge of leaving, until, once, he stopped, looked at her and got that light in his eyes. Outside the Center, she put her hand on his chest and shushed him and got on tiptoes, her lips on his neck, her dark eyes confusing him, until she ran off a little way, the image of her tiptoes making him follow.

He was good with cars. He’d get them silent and unmoving, and he’d wake them. They’d tremble and roar and settle down around him. Queens would empty for him at night. He’d idle his hotwired Charger, Camaro or Grand Prix in front of wherever she was living, and she would run down the stoop and jump in. He would floor it, freedom surging inside both of them as the speed took them, her foster parents looking through the blinds and shaking their heads slowly. The asphalt, the gray, vacant streets, roads, avenues, lanes and drives reflecting

unending rows of street lights, decorated by changing patches of red, green and yellow, purposeless at 3 a.m. because no one was stopping.

One night they went out to the club on Bell Boulevard, packed and loud and glittering with moving bling. Disco balls blinded them every few seconds to the dancing shoulders and arms pumping the air, other people's eyes sweeping over them and moving on as they entered and hesitated on the steps. She yanked him into the mass of muscles and breasts and mullets, put up her arms, and began moving to the blare. Her tenseness ebbed as the noise drowned out the world, but his increased. He was aware of girls looking at him, and he closed his eyes to them as he shook awkwardly, head tall above the others.

She danced with others to watch him stew, to see the bubbles form and rise in the roiling mass inside him, until the steam began to burn her and the time for watching was over. They went outside into the cool, into the welcoming dark, and drove into the night. Relieved by their growing speed, he tore up Frannie Lou and down Utopia. They felt for each other and hung back a few times, not speaking, something growing in their chests. They sped up 164th, to where it narrowed and jogged to the left at the cemetery. She grabbed at the roof, and he went faster, tasting her screams, adding his own, and he lost it in the curve. The Fury fishtailed and slammed into the parked cars, facing backward.

There was broken glass and that buzzing feeling in the teeth when the blood loses control inside you, and there was smashing up and everything going numb, and pounding metal and silence. She was bunched up in the far corner and the driver's door was crushed. They looked at each other as the lights went on in the houses, and the people came out in their undershirts and robes and looked into the windows. They saw each other breathing, and knew they were alive, and he pounded the dashboard and he pounded her arm, triumphant, and she was awed by his craziness and they heard the sirens and got out and ran into Kissena Park and into the bushes. She felt his back, touched his hands, looked up at his eyes, which darted around until they slowed and settled on her. She was soft, he lost his face in her dark hair. He felt her softly stroking him settling him like a child, for a little while.

He got better at hotwiring and he was able to take any car, Mercedes on down. He could open doors with screwdrivers and pliers. Killing time during the day, he'd go by the garages on Northern and ask to look in on the men, and he'd offer to roll tires away and back. He'd hang out and help at a place over behind Shea Stadium, and he stopped going to school altogether. Sometimes the cars appeared and left again at night, without customers. Sometimes the cars became pieces, stacked or hanging up awaiting buyers or reassembly. The boss started paying him, and one night he let on that he could get into and start any car, and the boss listened.

It was 3 a.m. when he headed out on Horace Harding to see her in a little Beemer the boss had asked for. He ran a light and heard a siren and got blocked by a garbage truck. He didn't have license or registration, and the cop saw the keyless ignition. He called her from the precinct and asked her to meet him at court. She called the boss, who called a lawyer.

She sat on the high radiator bank lining the hallway in the basement of the courthouse on Queens Boulevard, waiting for the lawyer, legs knocking against the grating, surrounded by the half of Queens County the other half wanted nothing to do with. The men around her, playing unconcerned, cool, slapped five with each other and checked her out, tempted until they saw the set of her jaw and the no in her dark eyes. Used-to-it-looking wives herded children from the bathroom,waiting to be displayed to the judge, to show that their husbands were somebody, that they had family. Lawyers scurried from one court part to another, checking calendars and calling out names in hopes of finding their clients' community ties.

She answered to her name, and hopped down to let the lawyer know she was there. He told her it would be OK. First arrest, no violence, no kilos, she wrote everything down in her notebook and he told her to stop, and she wrote that down, too, not allowing the words or the situation to spin away from her. The lawyer headed for the holding cells.

Everyone in the cells was bored into exhaustion, lying down on the wooden benches or squatting on the floor, looking away from each other. They were anonymous; whatever had happened hadn't happened. They stared; they were

anywhere but there. He was there, though, and he was angry. He stood out, tall and blonde and walking and pacing and annoying the others, reminding them of the present. He was new at this. His eyes flitted between details outside of the cells, he went back and forth like a Bronx Zoo hyena, fists clenching, hating the walls.

They brought him to a little desk outside the cell, and he was confused when the lawyer shook his hand, saying she was outside and waiting for him. He wondered how she knew a lawyer and then realized she had called the boss. He told the lawyer his aunt's name and address, and where he was registered for school. The lawyer told him he had roots and gave him the keep-your-mouth-shut speech. Out in the courtroom, his whiteness got him released, and that was that.

Out he went, onto the dirt next to Queens Boulevard, and down toward the subway. She ran to catch up to him, a mother chasing down her little kid. She pushed him, said, "What do you have to say?" He turned on her, asking, "You called the boss, didn't you? You stupid…." "'Course I did. You'd still be in jail. He owes you." "I would have got out with a legal aide. He doesn't owe me nothing. Now I owe him, he owns me." He raised a fist up against the side of his head and she stepped back. He put it down again and they stood for a minute. "C'mon," she said, and he followed her down into the subway.

*

The streets behind Shea Stadium were largely unpaved, with water-filled holes and tow-trucks and old Chevy Novas and Fords parked every which way. Other cars threaded their way through the holes and junk-piles, their owners choosing places that would sell them parts. No cop cars here; this was a place apart from the rest of the city, somewhere tropical, placed incongruously amidst the orderly and paved streets. He was one of a number of men who walked in the cloudy morning, heads down, hands in pockets, passing through doors cut into the plywood fences and through rows of fenders hanging on 2 x 4 frames, acetylene torches sparking alongside garbage pails filled with rags and towering piles of tires. The boss called him into his office and told him he had his back. He did heavy stuff in the shop and time dragged on. Nights were bad. He ached for the pavement and the excitement in the turns.

He went by her job at the Grand Union and watched her bagging. Then they got on the bus and went straight to the back, past the old ladies staring out the windows and the kids hanging from the swinging handles. They got off where the A train banged overhead and had slices with powdered garlic and freezing gulps of glass-fountain grape drink. They climbed up the stairs to the train and they looked over the buildings, toward the bay. The daylight faded as they barged through the cars and the train crossed Broad Channel. They watched the planes take off from the airport and they got off in Rockaway. He settled against the boardwalk, watching her run in wide circles on the beach as he tried not to think about jail, her arms outstretched, her clothes blowing in the night breeze, the waves humming like traffic and the sunset a cold redness off to the right.

A week later, they walked into the courthouse basement and sat in the back of the courtroom, watching the cases being called. The lawyer came in and they went out by the radiators to talk. The same people were hanging out in the hallway – the same men, the same mothers, the same drone of talk. His face fell when the lawyer told them this would go on a while, until the car-owner stopped thinking about it and it all became another file for the D.A. to get rid of. She wrote that down. It took forever for them to call his name. He had to go out into the hallway a few times and walk while she hovered by the door in case it was time. Then he went past the chain and stood there while the lawyers went up to the bench, the D.A. resting his elbows and the judge looking over his glasses, wondering how much to care. "It was a joy ride, an act of stupidity," the lawyer said, "a kid on a lark," "abandoned in the street," "who knows who took it?" "We'll see," said the judge, and told them to come back.

Each time they returned she brought him to the courthouse, and each time she wrote down what happened in her spiral note-pad. Finally the lawyer said that if he stayed out of trouble for six months the case would go away and did he consent? Oh yes, make it go away, and she wrote down "six months" in her spiral notebook and underlined it six times. That last time they didn't completely believe it was over, until the lawyer looked like he had really done something special and jogged across the traffic on Queens Boulevard to the Pastrami King to celebrate, while they walked away. That night, she hugged him on the couch in her new apartment upstairs and in the back on 188th Street, while he stared at

the ceiling, telling himself over and over that he was free of that courthouse bullshit.

But he wasn't, which shouldn't have been surprising when all the money wanted the good stuff and all the good stuff was illegal. The boss had friends who needed transportation for product, cars with legal plates and owners who wouldn't miss them. Trouble was, every black or Latin driver kept getting stopped and searched whether they owned the car or not. He definitely had work for the blond kid.

*

He sank down into his collar, which was turned up against the February wind, put his reddened hands into his pockets and leaned against the chain link fence, away from the lights on Conduit Boulevard, as a landing plane whined just overhead. The only man working this late in the long-term lot was warm inside the office-trailer. He watched the trailer a while, making sure the guy didn't come out. A quick jog to the right around the corner of the fence and he made it through the cars to a nice, anonymous Toyota. He got it humming just fine but he didn't count on the guard dog.

It was four months after Queens Boulevard. This time they set bail. And they did again a month later when he got pulled over. Someone had to have talked. He was careful driving—but what was this cop's lie in court about drugs on the seat? Before they left the precinct a detective asked if he wanted to talk. About what?

Jail was worse this time. When he got out of the House of D, he knew, no matter what, he wasn't going back. He was there longer, until the boss sent over the money, and this time the lawyer wasn't so smug – he worried about the other case, which was still open, he worried that the long-term lot had to show they were blameless and insisted on pressing charges. The charges were piling up. So she worried, too, and wrote a lot in her spiral notebook. Later, she looked at him on the couch and knew he had no idea there was such a thing as a future. The case took the usual year, and who knew if the witnesses still cared.

One Sunday afternoon they met on Roosevelt Avenue, not far from the shop, and walked through the old fairgrounds, over the railroad tracks and the little white

bridges over the ditches until they were in the middle of the park and there were bicycles and baby carriages and quinceaneras and it looked like hundreds of people in colors and stripes playing soccer on the worn yellow grass while their families cooked huge meals on barbecues. There were some big statues in their pools of dark water and little carts selling pretzels and ice cream. Then they were at the giant metal globe and there was a rush of sound, and shining silver water shot way up high in the air and hissed and caught the light. The breeze blew the water and through the spray the continents stood out in flat plates. Children ran wetly along the rim of the fountain and a few splashed in the water under the globe, and parents ran after them, also getting soaked. She pointed to the children as she laughed in the silver spray, holding her wet ice cream pop. Her hair and forehead were wet and reflected the sunlight, and then they left.

*

"They offered a deal," the lawyer told them. "They're offering a single charge to cover and a bullet, that's what we call a one year sentence." She sat up a little and wrote it down. The lawyer went on. "That's to cover your three arrests, the drug charge, the two grand larcenies and the joyriding. It's your decision, but I can't do any better and we'd have to win all three trials, which we won't. If we lose, it could be years. If you have any more arrests this is off the table. Just think about it."

She called the lawyer a few days later to say he would take the deal, and she went to court on the next date and waited until the lunch break. But he didn't show. He couldn't do it thinking of what it felt like to be locked up. He wouldn't take any bullet. He called her that night and she told him about the warrant. He said he had better stay away for a while.

He went to 188th Street a number of times, but each time he couldn't sleep, worrying if the door would be kicked in and looking out into the driveway whenever there was a noise, so he stayed away. He sat on one of the benches facing the green, algae-scummed pond in Crocheron Park, the bay just visible to the left past the end of 35th Avenue. At least the winter was over and he could sit outside. The big tree to his right hung black branches over the water and cast its shadow into it. There were some ducks swimming around, hunting for whatever

was down there and maybe crumbs left over from some old man. The pond wasn't very big, he thought, but the ducks can go back and forth, and they could fly, and they could make those stupid quacks without worrying about drawing attention. Why didn't they just fucking fly away? "Hey ducks," he said to them. He was like them, he did the same thing too, over and over, and none of them were going anywhere. He got cars, picked up packages and money and people, rang doorbells and made deliveries like a damned mailman, and left the cars walking distance from some subway station. He drove carefully, and he never got to just drive, let alone fast. The cars and the packages and the money had stolen his life. He picked up a rock and threw it into the water with a satisfying plop, right at the ducks, just to watch them fly away. But they only went around in a little circle and landed again.

That night it started to rain. He knew what his job was when he saw the guy inert and trussed up. Money had been missing after a delivery had been made, a lot of money, and no one bought the Spanish guy's story of being shortchanged and forgetting to count it. Small factories and freight depots lined the cracked and potholed streets down past Maspeth. The heavy trucks that had so abused the pavements were gone, the streetlamps casting silver pools onto asphalt, black and shining in the heavy rain. Past the yards, past the rusting freight rails, the streets got smaller and were lined with corrugated metal and padlocked chainlink gates until they petered out against the brown water or crossed it on steel mesh bridges. Oil slicks left wet rainbows as dark rivulets ran into the gutters, scouring out small objects and sending them into the creek. The inlet had lost its way a hundred years back. Its wastewaters were lifeless, and its stink had burned off whatever vegetation had clung to the bulkheads.

He turned the car into a block-long alley and nosed behind a dumpster at the end. He got out and closed the door carefully behind him. He was dark in his raingear, his head hidden inside his hood. He walked out briefly into the street and stared out into the downpour, satisfied that he saw only rain as far as the intersection.

He bent down, opened the trunk and pulled and lifted. His hood fell back and rain plastered his hair to his head, soaked his eyes and ears and sent cold into his collar.

He had to pull the man against him as he lifted him under the arms. It was only a few steps to the bulkhead and a splash unheard in the rain, and he watched as the tide pulled the dark form away and toward the river.

He went back to an apartment on Junction Boulevard where he'd been staying and looked out the window into the dark a long time, ignoring the neon. He knew too much, he had seen too much. Even Rikers wouldn't be an escape. A few days later there was a message. She wanted to meet at the diner and talk. He closed his eyes a minute, wanting to smile but unable to.

*

The Blue Bay Diner sat on Francis Lewis just above the Expressway, nowhere near the bay, a '63 Oldsmobile of a building, all glass and chrome and lights shining above the curb, a temple to gravy and all-night breakfasts, a place of layer cakes twirling in glass displays, of trays heaping with house specials and chicken baskets moving high above the heads of families in booths and horse-players on stools. People would stop there late on summer nights after days at the beach and concerts at the Jones Beach Theater, and sit in the air conditioning, they and their French fries in the big half-empty room.

That night they would have seen her come in, kiss the cheek of the greeter, go to her regular booth in the big window, glance distractedly at the menu and look out the window, waiting for him, her face lit intermittently by truck headlights. He came in, looked around and out at the street, walked quickly to her and told her to move over to the booth next to the curtain, all the way across the room from the occupied tables. They ordered coffee and sat in silence as he moved the curtain from time to time, and the coffee came and he looked around and out at the street again.

"I'm pregnant," she said, as the coffee grew cold. He finally looked up at her, his eyes a succession of confusion, of panic, of anger, of warmth. He muttered, "But we can't." Thank God, "we." She cried. She had held it in too long, and his "we" broke the dam. It took a while, but she spoke. "I didn't mean this. I know you think I'm stupid or careless, or that I'm trying to trap you. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not. It just happened, that's all. It just happened. It just did."

Time passed.

“Say something, say something please.”

He couldn’t. She took his silence for accusation, but he put his hands on top of hers, and he felt the wetness of her tears on them. “I can end it. I can. You have enough to worry about. This is no time…”

“Stop,” he said. “No one wanted me.” They sat a while in silence. He wasn’t aware of the diner any more, he forgot about the boss and the police and the cars and the packages. He didn’t want her to cry. He didn’t want her to hurt. He didn’t want her to be alone. She sensed it. She felt a lightening. She liked his big hands. She sat up a bit. The tears came again, but it was different. She felt giddy. The lines she rehearsed came pouring out. “A year isn’t so long. We can do this. Maybe the offer’s still open.” Focus returned and his face felt hot. No we can’t, he thought, no it isn’t. “We can live,” she pleaded. “We can live, together, we can have a life, it’s only a year and they’ll… we can have a life…”

He slammed the table. She didn’t understand, he had to be, what, he had to be outside, not sleepless on some cot under some fluorescent light, listening to constantly closing doors and other people talking in their sleep. There was no “only” about it. The bang of his hand on the formica filled the diner. He got up, turned abruptly and walked quickly to the door, to the outside, where it was darker and quieter.

*

Time passed. He needed to see her, it was too long. But he was confused, undecided if he should risk it. He stood in the lamp-shadow cast by a big tree on 188th Street and saw there was no one around, no cop car idling among the parked cars, no pedestrians nearby. He moved carefully up the driveway and saw the light on in her apartment, and he quietly let himself into the back door and made his way softly up the stairs. Standing inside the door, he saw her clothes on the bed and heard the hiss of water from the bathroom. He went in. She was in the shower and didn’t hear him come in, and she continued soaping and rinsing in the hot water. As he leaned against the wall in the steam, shapes and details

diminished in his vision to nothing but an awareness of tiles and light and a mirror obscured by condensation.

The steady sound of water was interrupted repeatedly as she moved around in the stall, and her limbs fluttered and bulged the curtain. He liked his invisibility; he was unseen, a spirit hovering near her, and he savored the aroma of coconut.

A quiet came into him. If only he could stay invisible, and she remain an aroma and steam in his nostrils. He backed out of the bathroom and left the apartment, careful not to let the doorknobs click as he closed the doors and went down the stairs. Emerging from the shower, she dried herself and sensed something was different. She looked around and went through the bathroom door, seeing an image of him in her mind's eye, but there was no one there. Her time was getting close.

*

They told him they were worried about this guy. He was in with people who bought product and last time it turned into a bust. Still, that was always a possibility, and you couldn't throw away business. They had followed the guy home and he lived on the Island. They told him the guy needed talking to, just let him know they knew where he lived. Maybe he had a family. That should stop him talking to the wrong people. And the guy didn't know him, and wouldn't see him again.

But first he had heard from her, she was at the hospital. He had to see her. It was after eight when there weren't supposed to be any visitors. The girl in the next bed was asleep. The nurses were elsewhere. The baby in his blue blanket was feeding quietly, and she felt warm and peaceful. She looked down at the tiny face, at the little lips working against her, and then she looked up. He was standing in the doorway, leaning awkwardly against the doorjamb. She hadn't seen him in a while. He looked shy, sort of scared, of the baby maybe. Nothing to be afraid of, she said in her mind. With a quick look down the hallway, he came inside and knelt beside the bed. He touched the little head with his lips, inhaling the baby aroma. After a while, he looked up at her. No one said anything. He stood up, leaned down, kissed her softly, and went back to work.

It was a little one story house out on the Island, a little Tudor-looking, with bushes under the windows and some more down a little slope next to the driveway. A small evergreen tree stood on the other side next to the garage. He had parked a block away, around a little curve, and he had to walk in the street to get there since there weren't any sidewalks. Things are smaller around here, he thought, and there's more sky.

He looked at the door for a second, at the big wrought iron hinge against the wood, and he rang the bell. A woman came to the door after a little while and opened it, not too old, scraggly hair, a pale face, flip-flops and a cigarette. He put his hand onto her shoulder. Her eyes widened and she caught her breath. "A message for your husband," he said, and she exhaled. "Watch it." He lowered his hand and turned away. He hadn't left the pool of light outside the door when he saw a car slowing down in the street.

He ducked behind the evergreen just as the car turned into the driveway. A man came out of the car, slammed the door, and still held his keys in his right hand as he glared at him, right at him. He came around the tree and took three quick steps to the man, stopping against his side, his hand seizing the man's right wrist at his pocket, immobilizing it against his waist. That was all, as the man's left hand quickly pulled a dark object from his jacket, drew it across his front, and shot him in the chest. Quiet followed the echo. In the faint light his blood was a black pool on the driveway, which expanded slowly as his life seeped into it and away.

*

The next morning among the other papers on the hallway-cart outside the room, the Daily News had a picture of a man splayed out on stained asphalt, covered by a tarp and surrounded by police tape. She knew. She walked down the hall to the room with the bassinets and looked down at the baby's face. He was sleeping quietly.

Six months later, she left the Grand Union, and went by the day care. She took the train to Rockaway, picked up the stroller and carried it down the stairs. She walked the long block to the beach, alongside the headless parking meter

stanchions, past the rubble of the urban-renewing cottages, and across the boardwalk. She took a blanket and tucked it around the little body, only a tuft of blond hair showing. She settled against a boardwalk pier, watching the sunset off to her right, and shivered a little as the wind blew cold from Jersey.

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Honorable Mention

Samuel Finn is a retired emergency physician living in Seattle. He has published a medical thriller, Heartbeat, available online, and is currently writing a near-future sci-fi series titled The Hope. The first chapter was recently published by Embark Literary Journal. His story, "The Gyre", was published by Dark Horses magazine. His story "Carbon" recently appeared in an anthology by JayHenge Publishing.

Junk Man

by Samuel Finn

What the hell is that thing anyway? Elias watches the odd oval shape on his screen. The zone-satellite vectored him to it, his twenty-third target this shift, maybe twenty-fourth, he's lost count.

It's his seventh month flying junk removal. He likes the ship, an Alpha 37. It's faster even than the Solar S5 he flew during the war. He made two kills in that ship, knocked down a half dozen missiles and took out a few PDRK satellites. The war ended in a few weeks, shortest war ever. Two nukes ended it, city-killers that took out thirty million people. Stupid, tragic, what was the word, genocide? When it ended they wanted to promote him, bump him to Squadron Leader. He had nine years under his belt, three oak leaf clusters. But it meant flying a desk instead of a ship. So he transferred to junk patrol, Space Debris Removal Service. He could keep flying. Right now, though, he's tired of the cramped cockpit, tired of staring into space and lassoing junk.

So what is that thing? He can't get visual on it yet. It's moving fast, way too fast for non-powered orbital dynamics. Maybe it's just passing through, a rock, a

meteor. How did the zone-sat even pick it up? Must be a mistake. He accelerates to catch it, still in daylight.

Specks of micro-junk flit by. The proximity guns lase a couple of them before they hit the ship, rosy beams that end in tiny flares. The target's image grows on the screen. It must be powered somehow, to maintain that orbit at that speed. Doesn't make sense. He sees its rough coppery surface. Two black bands circle one end, an odd pattern of openings decorates its nose. Angular ports, sensors maybe?

His Solar squadron buddies, they thought he was nuts to start flying junk. A few retired and bought aerocars to fly around the neighborhood, buzz the neighbors.

But Elias doesn't have a neighborhood, or a house, or a family anymore. He likes to fly, it's easy work, the pay's good. From so high up he can ignore the leaden clouds, the degraded land, the dying forests. Down there the planet is turning into hell.

And what else is he going to do? It would be different if Chania had lived, if he could have found her. But he couldn't, in that vast refugee camp in Niger where she disappeared. This thought is always there, underpinning the rest, setting the desolate stage for his own desolation.

Okay, time to focus. It looks like no junk he's ever seen, no dead satellite, obviously not a booster. A weapon? He's seen a lot of space weapons, hypersonics, platform lasers, MIRVs. He flew demolition for a while after the war, lasing lost missiles tumbling in orbit. Dangerous work, a couple guys got blown up. But nothing like this.

He pushes the Flight Control button on the com. "This is Alpha B9."

"Go ahead B9," a woman's voice replies.

"Hello, Zina, I need an ID on this target I just got assigned."

"Target ID, okay, hold one."

Now he can see it, but still can't tell its size. No spin, no tumble. That's odd.

The com pings. “Alpha B9, go ahead.” A man’s voice, sounds like Josephson.

“Sir, I’m targeted at an odd looking object. I’m concerned it might be dangerous, possibly military origin.”

“Military origin, huh. You know we’ve got all those tracked.”

“Yes, sir, I know we think we’ve got them all tracked.”

“Okay, Alpha B9,” Josephson replies, his voice flat, non-committal. “Elias, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Lieutenant, let me look it up. Send me the targeting data.”

Elias brings up the designation and forwards it.

“Where are you, Elias?” Josephson asks.

“Zone 17, sir.”

“This’ll take a minute.”

“Yes, sir.” He knows Josephson, Captain Josephson, a civilian with a commission, not a pilot, a desk jockey.

He’s half a klik away from the target, and moving very fast. The proximity alarm beeps and maneuvering thrusters fire, a jolt to the left, something whizzes by, something small. On the aft-view screen a tumbling box disappears, a dead shoebox satellite come and gone, too big for the proximity guns. This speed is dangerous, sustained like this in a junk field.

Close enough now he scans the target. The screen gives a schematic. It’s 18.6 meters long, diameter 3.7 meters, estimated mass 1,250 kilograms, no radiation. The material readout just says “unknown”. How is he going to snag it if it’s not magnetic?

The com pings. “Lieutenant Elias.” Josephson again.

"Yes, sir."

"Your target was recently acquired, unknown source, no origin signature."

"Unknown source?" Elias says. "We don't know anything about it?"

"Correct. So it's not a weapon or a bomb. Very unlikely to be dangerous," Josephson says in a reassuring voice. "Just random debris we never picked up before. Shouldn't be a problem."

Random debris, huh? It doesn't look like random debris.

"Probably Chinese," Josephson says. "Or maybe from India. They frequently launch sats and don't notify us. But it's dead, no EM signaling for a week, so you may as well scrap it."

"Yes, sir," Elias says. "My scan can't identify its material. Not sure my mag cable will attach."

"Well, do what you can up there, Lieutenant. You're shift's almost over, isn't it?" He sounds dismissive, done with the conversation.

"Yes, sir. Out." Elias sighs. *Okay, one pass and that's it. No EM for a week, so it's not talking to anyone.* He slows to get a stern view, nothing, then speeds up again on the other side. Nothing.

He sidles within range and deploys the smart cable, eighty-five meters of stabilized carbon fiber, thick as his arm, maneuverable, with four magnetic feet.

Up close the thing looks even stranger, its surface an oddly patterned roughness, nothing protruding, no antennae, no sensors. And no random movement, no spin, no tumble.

All right, here goes nothin'. He steers the cable out, its four round feet reaching. He edges closer to allow for slack. He activates the magnets and selects one foot on the joystick selector. He steers it to make contact. *This is routine, right? You're just a routine piece of junk, right? Don't blow up on me.*

The disk makes contact, attaches, its light goes to green on the console. *Okay, it's magnetic.* He steers each foot into position and four green lights wink at him.

Okay, baby, whatever you are you're mine now.

Suddenly he's in darkness, crossing the terminator line as the sun disappears behind him. It's always sudden in space, no sunset, like clicking a switch and it's dark.

But the thing's not dark. The openings at the front of the thing are glowing. *What the fuck! It's lit?* The angular windows shine with a cold white light. He couldn't see it in the sunlight.

There's lights on in that thing. It's not dead. What the hell am I supposed to do now? It sure as hell ain't junk. Time to detach and get the hell outa here.

His proximity alarm beeps. A cluster of micros, the guns fire, a couple fragments ding off his ship. At a glance the thing cruises through, fragments bouncing off. Not a scratch.

The com comes to life with a series of low tones he has never heard before.

Again the proximity alarm, this time with maneuvering thrusters. They pull the cable tight but the thing doesn't budge, speeds on, its trajectory unaffected. Something big flashes into sight, lit by the thing's bow lights. *A booster, shit.* In an instant it streaks in front of him and explodes against the thing, no flash, just a blast of metal fragments. They rain upon his ship, rattling against the hull and windshield. He waits for the hull breech alarm, reaching for his helmet. *Nothing, thank God.*

The thing shows no damage, not even a mark. Its course is unchanged. *It was hit by a booster, many times its mass, but no damage, didn't even knock it off course. How does that happen?*

Time to go. He switches off the mags and angles away. The cable stretches taut and he's pulled back to the thing's trajectory. *Wait, it didn't detach.* He sees three feet are loose but one is still attached. *What the hell!* He activates the mag switch

again, on for a few seconds then off. Three console lights show red but one stays green.

It's stuck, must have been that damn booster. I can't detach, what the fuck! His heart starts to pound. He brings up the cable settings, hands shaking as he types. He stares at the screen, nothing about nondetachment. *Okay, now what?*

More tones on the com, some kind of gibberish. *What am I hearing? Is someone talking to me, some language? Is there someone on board that thing?*

More gibberish. It sounds like a machine voice, harsh, no inflection. *What language is that, Chinese?* Then more gibberish, but different. *Is it trying a different language? Is that Russian, maybe German? I don't know fuckin' languages.*

"Speak English if you want to talk," Elias says to himself. *Doesn't the com have translation?* He brings up its settings. *Translation, damn, I've never used it before. I can't find it.*

Again the tones, then what sounds like maybe Spanish, or Italian. *An Italian satellite, right. I don't think so.* He starts to laugh, a pressured laugh. *I need to detach.*

Okay, he presses the talk button. "English," he says, almost shouting. "Speak English to me." *And why can't I fuckin' detach from you. I'm not liking this.*

He accelerates, swinging forward on the arc of the taut cable. He tries to see into the front windows of the thing, but there is only sterile white light. He switches on his searchlight and aims it at the stuck cable foot. It looks distorted, damaged by that crash with the booster. But why won't it release? He activates the release button again but there is no change.

"English language," the voice comes to him. "What is your purpose?"

He stares at the com. Definitely a machine voice, a primitive, simple voice.

What to say? "Um, who are you?" he says finally.

Silence, then more tones, varying a bit. But no reply.

“What country are you from? Are you Chinese?”

“What is your purpose?” it says again.

Back to that, huh. “I have no purpose. Will you detach my cable?”

“What cable is,” the thing answers.

Great, what cable is. He’s getting scared. *How can I get away from this thing?*

“My purpose is to clear space junk out of the sky,” Elias says. What’s it going to make of that. “What’s your purpose?” He laughs again, more panicked than before.

“What junk is?” the thing says.

“What is your purpose?” Elias asks.

“My purpose is to learn of your planet.”

Seriously? This is a joke, right? This is not an alien ship, right?

“Okay, cool,” Elias says. “So where you from?”

“What is from?”

“Sorry, where is your home?” *I can’t believe I’m saying this. Gotta be a joke, or something.*

Only silence.

“Okay, how about a name? Do you have a name?”

“I have no name. My classification is ffrronnng. This sound is foreign to you.”

“Yup, foreign,” Elias says, more than foreign. “Not sure I caught that. Can you say it again?”

“Yes.”

A pause till Elias understands. "Say it again."

"Ffrronnng."

"Got it, okay frong. And how about your home?"

"What is home?"

"What is your place of origin," Elias manages. "Your planet."

"Planet of origin is far away. Not say."

That figures. Am I really talking to a fuckin' alien? Can't be. Whatever this is it's just trying to scare me away. Should I record this? No one's going to believe me.

He sits in silence, being pulled along at eight kliks per second, a dangerous speed. *Wait, I can release the cable at this end. There's a cable release procedure. What the fuck.*

He fumbles about the control console, turns on the cabin lights. *Okay, where is it?* There's an overhead row of toggle switches he's never touched. Which one is it? What's the procedure?

He types "cable release procedure."

Nothing.

Okay, how about "detach cable."

A schematic of the mag controls appears, with instructions how to turn off the magnets.

Damn it. Can I lase the cable? With a proximity gun? I can't aim the damn things. They aim themselves.

The ship's motion changes. He is pressed to one side in his harness. *What the hell?* Outside the stars begin to spin, Earth rises overhead.

He's being pulled by the cable, by that thing, in a wide circle. He starts flipping the toggles. *I gotta release that damn cable.*

An alarm beeps, a light blinks overhead. "Okay, what are you doing?" he calls to the thing, voice strained, mouth dry.

The motion increases, the spin accelerates. He's getting vertigo. He closes his eyes. "What are you doing!" he yells at the com. "Let me go!" He tries other switches but nothing works.

Cable release, where is it? He reaches below the console, feels for more controls. The vertigo worsens. At a glance the stars are whizzing by. Nausea begins, he is lightheaded.

He fumbles with the com. "Flight control," he calls. "Zina, respond. This is Elias…"

There's a flash in the dark outside and, passing out, he feels his course straighten as he is flung at the stars.

*

The dream wakes him, the Chania dream. He's dreamt it many times. The camp in Niger, he stumbles about, calling her name, asking for her but no one speaks English. The heat, the stench, the fear of finding her, of not finding her.

He wakes up sweating, out of breath, in a bed, pale green walls, antiseptic odor. He lies still, waiting for his mind to reassemble, memory to return. He glances about, a hospital bed, controls on the rail, valves on the wall, a window with dirty gray sky beyond.

The dream, he hates the dream, because it awakens him with the ebbing feeling of hope, with terrible sadness as that hope is extinguished. She disappeared in that camp, while he was off flying. A nurse, she volunteered for some UN agency, to work in a refugee camp. She was excited to go, tired of the old hospital routine. They'd talked about getting pregnant, but no one gets pregnant anymore. No one wants to bring children into this failing world. So she tried refugee work. He didn't like the idea, but he was rarely home. War loomed.

The memories weigh upon him. She simply disappeared, melted away in that vast camp. They called him, another nurse called and told him. He traveled there, took leave, to find her. To Niger, a long trip to a failing state, a failing continent. He questioned the staff, but no one knew what happened. They had admired her, loved her, but had turned away from the loss of her by the time he arrived. Surrounded by the sick, dying and dead, they had only so much energy for grieving.

So he searched for months, trudged the dusty paths of the endless hot camp, endless tents and endless people, starving children, skeletal dogs, rats, horrid smells. It was a dangerous place, desperate people pushed to violence. They fought over the water; there were riots around the food trucks.

He learned some words in French—some of them spoke French—and Arabic. Mainly they just stared. The children answered, wanted to help. He handed out photos of her, dozens of copies. He offered rewards until he realized the foolishness of it. They would tell him anything for a dollar.

The mass graves, deep trenches bulldozed and filled with hundreds of bodies, brought by the truckload and simply dumped. He couldn't bring himself to search there. They wouldn't let him anyway; the diseases.

It all rushes back, until he consciously veers his thoughts away, stuffs them back in that box in his mind and puts that box away. It gets a little easier each time and he feels guilty that it does. This is why he hates the dream.

He moves in the bed, sits up. *Am I hurt?* Just a headache, a serious headache, but everything works, arms, legs. He lies back down, head throbbing.

How'd I get here? He searches his memory, the sequence of events slowly reassembles itself, but then stops short. *That thing, how'd I get away from that thing? Did it really talk to me?*

A nurse walks in, a man in pale green scrubs. "Oh, Lieutenant, you're awake? That's very good. How do you feel?"

"Got a pretty bad headache."

"Yes, sir, I'll bet you do." The man helps him stand and walk about. His head pounds.

"How'd I get here?" Elias asks.

"I'm not exactly sure, sir. I just came on duty. But there's someone here to see you. She looks official. She can probably answer your questions."

"Can I get something for this headache?"

"Sure thing. Let's get you back in bed first and I'll get you something."

He stares at the ceiling, then finds the button to raise himself up. *A woman here to see me, an official?* What's he going to tell her, that he found an alien ship, talked to an alien? She'll think he's nuts, that he doesn't know what he's saying.

He thinks again of Chania; what would she say about his alien. He almost smiles at the thought, but then not, that emptiness roars back.

"Lieutenant Elias? May I come in?" She wears the navy blue of Alliance Space Command, short dark hair, regulation cut, and a token smile. She sets a shoulder bag down on a chair. From her movements it contains something heavy, clearly not a purse.

"How are you feeling?" she says. "You weren't injured, were you?"

"Pretty bad headache, ma'am," Elias says. "Otherwise I'm okay. Don't remember much though."

"I am Commander Loftus from Space Command." She steps to his bedside and offers a firm, dry hand. "We are very interested in what happened to you yesterday. May I ask you some questions?"

"Yes, ma'am. But can you tell me how I got here, back to base? I don't remember any of it."

"Of course. What I'm told is that after your encounter with that object in space you became unconscious and lost control of your ship. They tracked your ship heading off into space, out of low orbit. So traffic control switched your ship to

remote piloting and one of the drone pilots at the base took over and flew you back. You were still unconscious when you landed. You were dragging about twenty meters of cable, but the pilot landed your ship without incident and no apparent damage, although they're still going over it. The cable was cut."

"The mag cable was cut?"

"Yes," she says, now hefting her bag and moving the chair by his bed. "What happened to you was unusual." Sitting down she gives him another tiny smile, but avoids eye contact. "What do you remember about what happened yesterday, Lieutenant?"

He shakes his head, the movement reminding him of his headache. "I don't remember much, gotta say."

The nurse walks in with a small paper cup. "Here's a couple Tylenol, sir. Should help with that headache."

"Lieutenant?" the woman says when he's swallowed the pills.

"Yes, ma'am. Well, I was vectored to this object. It was unusual looking and going fast. I had to speed up to catch it."

"Were you able to catch it?" she says.

"Yes. I called down to Flight Control for an ID. That was when I talked to Captain Josephson."

"Can you describe it?" she says.

He takes a breath. How much should he tell her? His head pounds, it's hard to think clearly. "Yes, ma'am. It was kind of oval shaped and had a copper color. No antenna or sensors that I could see." And no tumble, but he doesn't say that. Would she know what that means?

"And what did Captain Josephson tell you?"

"He said it was a recent acquisition, no origin signature."

“What did you think about that,” she asks.

“Ma’am?”

“Did that concern you that there was no information about it.”

“Yes, Ma’am, but I was able to tag it,” he says.

“Tag it?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I wasn’t sure if my cable feet would latch on. But they did, which meant it was magnetic.”

“So you were able to attach your cable, so then what happened?”

So then the damn cable got stuck and the thing started talking to me, but he’s not going there.

“Well, Ma’am, that’s about the last thing I remember.”

She stares at him, her expression hardening, the color rising in her face. “Are you sure, Lieutenant? This could be very important?”

She continues questioning him, her voice calm, more fake smiles. She is practiced at interrogation. He feels like a mouse dodging a cat. He gives her a few more meaningless details. Nothing about aliens, he’s not going there. Is that where she wants to go? Does she suspect, does she know?

Finally she opens her bag and pulls out a piece of the thick woven cable. “This is the end of your magnet cable, what was still attached to your ship when you landed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She holds it out for him to inspect. “This end is where the ground crew cut it off.” The thousands of carbon filaments show their neat bundled arrangement. Woven among them are electric wires, sheathed in various colors.

“This end is where it parted.” She shows him the other end, a smooth silvery dome, the filaments neatly fused together.

“Touch it,” she says, holding it out to him.

It seems an odd gesture, but he runs a finger over its cool flawless surface.

“Do you have any idea how this might have happened, Lieutenant?”

In truth he doesn’t. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, but I don’t. Maybe it’ll come back to me later, but I have no idea. Looks a little odd though, like it melted and fused together. Maintenance guys might have a better idea.”

She sighs, watching him. “I wish they did. This is a mystery. No one knows how this cable could have parted like this. It takes an extremely high temperature to melt these fibers and fuse them together in such a way.”

“Yes, ma’am, I wish I could be more helpful.” Is he in trouble here? What do they know? She wouldn’t be here if this wasn’t important to Space Command. Do they suspect an alien ship, the first contact ever with anything alien? The first concrete evidence?

But she hasn’t mentioned it, even hinted at it. Well, he’s damned if he’s going to open that door, a lowly junk pilot. Better to play dumb.

He reads disappointment on her face, maybe anger. Rising she says, “Well, Lieutenant, the doctors think you had a high-g blackout.” She replaces the cable into her bag. “It’s equivalent to a concussion and such a memory loss is not unusual. They say sometimes those memories return. It is extremely important that you let Captain Josephson know if anything further comes back to you.”

“You could send one of the other pilots after that thing. Maybe they could get more information about it.”

“It’s gone,” she says. “It disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“We can’t find it.”

He leans back, pondering her words. The thing talked to him, said it was here to "learn of your planet," in its harsh machine voice.

At the door she pauses, with yet another strained smile. "Lieutenant, I hope you're not holding anything back about this incident. We are not holding you at fault here, not anticipating any disciplinary measures. We're happy you returned safely. But this incident is quite unusual." She pats the shoulder bag. "The way this cable was cut is hard to explain. Any assistance you could give us would be welcome. I hope your recovery is rapid."

That day they run him through some tests, cognitive testing they call it. Simple tests, some almost silly, going up and down stairs with his eyes closed, spelling words backwards, picking up little weights and saying which is heavier. He struggles at times. It surprises him. They reassure him he'll recover, but it will take time.

Time means six months off the flight line, and twice a week therapy, cognitive recruitment they call it.

*

So there he stands, on the sidewalk outside the hospital, squinting in the glare, back in the crazy panhandle heat, hot and humid, maybe 110 degrees. He sweats beneath a face mask, handed to him as he left. He hates the damn things, but everyone wears them now. And the pills, anti-virals, a bottle of them accompanied the mask. So many strange viruses have emerged, you're never safe. Everyone takes them daily, but they don't always work.

The mask can't keep out the stench from the beach. He'd forgotten about it in the hospital, but now it slaps him in the face. Piles of rotting fish litter the shore. They've given up clearing the stuff away. More of it washes up every day.

Sweating, he moves to the minimal shade of the shuttle stop. His head still aches. Six months, damn, his service contract ends in four. Will he re-up, sign up for another year? He shakes his head. Maybe he's done flying. The thought slowly sinks in. There isn't much point to it anymore, clearing the junk, and

flying is the only reason he's been tolerating this place, without Chania. So now what?

People walk by in body suits, the latest thing. They're called enviro-suits. They look like full-body wetsuits with little backpacks that circulate coolant. In men's and women's colors, some with hoods, goggles, full facemasks for total isolation, and of course they synch with your phone.

He finds a seat on the nearly empty shuttle, a couple enviro-suit zombies sit in the back, no driver, the bus on autopilot. At least it's air conditioned.

A feeling of gloom descends upon him, loneliness, aimlessness. One of the therapists warned him of it, part of the black-out thing, she said. Did he have support people at home, she asked. A wife, girlfriend, family, close friends? He'd shrugged her off. Sure, he had friends, he told her. He'd be fine.

But he can't think of anyone he wants to talk to, hasn't reached out much since he returned from Niger.

What about that ship? He steers his thoughts away from himself. He's become good at it lately. That ship, it did talk to him. He remembers that. Was it really alien? He still has doubts. Was that what that Loftus woman from Space Command was looking for, with that fused cable end? Aliens? Did they suspect it?

That booster crashed into it, exploded against it, but didn't leave a scratch. Nothing human-made could have withstood that. Was his mind playing tricks? No, it was real.

His apartment has a little porch, five floors up, high enough to see the ocean. He finds a beer in his nearly empty fridge and sits down, ignoring the heat. At least the sun is behind the building.

An alien ship, seriously? Why? What would aliens want with this dying planet? Maybe they want to eat us. Maybe they want slaves. Lotta slaves here, but they better get ‘em quick. A couple billion have already died off.

The oily surface of the sea, two blocks away, reflects rainbows of color as the swells catch the sun. *Six months, damn, I don't want to hang around here for six months, grounded, in this little apartment, in the heat and the smell and nothing to do. I don't even have a TV.*

Chania had grown somber in the months before she left for Niger, withdrawn. She hated the state of things, the constant worry about getting sick, the isolation. She hated the "space suits" they all wore in the hospital, all the time. With helmets, air filtration units, speakers to talk to the patients.

She was a nurse, but he was the only person she ever actually touched, ever talked to without at least a mask. She envied him his flying, his escape.

He smells it before he sees it, the smoke blowing up from the south, the daily grey cloud of smoke, the Everglades burning. It's been burning for months. Who would have thought that huge swamp could burn, but it does. And they can't put it out, they gave up trying to put it out, the fleet of fan boats pumping slimy water into the treetops. They gave up and evacuated everyone months ago, all those crazies who lived down there. But the animals couldn't evacuate, the birds and fish and who knows what.

They'd vacationed there once, a couple years ago. She loved the birds, egrets, herons—he doesn't know birds. She left before it started burning, before the clouds of acrid smoke. It doesn't even smell like wood smoke, more like garbage burning. She would have hated it.

But she's not here, and he still is.

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Honorable Mention

Tony Concannon grew up in Massachusetts. After graduating from college with a degree in English and American Literature, he taught in Japan, where several of his stories are set. He began writing in 1979 and his work has appeared in *On the Premises*, *Columbia Journal*, *Litro*, and *THEMA*.

Rides

by Tony Concannon

Ellen waited in her car outside Bill's apartment building. One morning about a year earlier she'd seen him limping to the bus stop and she'd impulsively pulled over and asked if he needed a lift. He'd accepted and it had turned out he worked several blocks from her. Ever since then she'd been giving him a ride. Now she wanted to stop.

He came out, opened the car door, and tossed his bag into the back seat.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

He had a bad right hip, the result of a drunken crash, for which he'd lost his license, and getting into the car was a three-step procedure for him. First, he sat sideways. Once he was seated, he would swing his left leg, his good leg, into the car, and then he would lift his right with both hands and bring it into the car as he pivoted and settled back into the seat. Being a big man didn't make it easier for him.

He closed the door and fastened his seatbelt.

“Wait,” he said. “I forgot my sandwich. It’s in my bag. I’m sorry.”

This happened at least once a week. His injured hip prevented him from turning around and reaching for his bag and Ellen got out and opened the rear door. The bag was stuffed with everything he could possibly need. She took out his phone, which she knew he would want, and placed it on the roof of the car. She found the sandwich and handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

Ellen got back into the car and they were off. Bill unwrapped the sandwich and began stuffing it into his mouth. It drove her crazy how he ate in her car, making a mess, and never asking if it was okay.

“I saw a really funny movie last night,” he said. He told her the name.

“What’s good about it?”

“Sort of a black comedy satire. I won’t say anything more. I don’t want to ruin it for you.”

“I’ll check it out.”

That was the other thing about Bill. Once you got past his self-centeredness, he was quite intelligent and charming. He’d helped her think things through after her divorce, which had been finalized around the time she’d started giving him rides. He could get right to the heart of the matter. She’d even thought for a while that he might be interested in her.

*

That evening her doorbell rang. It was Bill. He held out his phone. The screen was shattered.

“You dropped my phone in the parking lot and it got run over,” he said.

Putting the phone on the roof of her car came back to her. She couldn’t recall giving it to him or putting it back into the bag.

“I didn’t drop it,” she said. “I left it on top of the car while I was looking for your sandwich. I meant to give it to you.”

“I didn’t need the phone this morning,” he said.

“You always want it.”

“I didn’t ask you to get it.”

She looked at the shattered screen.

“I’ll pay to have it fixed,” she said.

“I don’t think it can be fixed.”

She looked at the phone again.

“Let’s find out.”

“The Apple store is open until 9,” Bill said. “If we go now, I can get it taken care of this evening.”

“I’ll get my coat.”

The associate at the Apple store, a tall young man, didn’t think the phone could be fixed and even if it could, it might cost more than a new one.

“I want a new one,” Bill said.

“How much would this model cost?” Ellen asked the associate.

“I’m getting a newer model,” Bill said.

The associate told Ellen the price.

“I’ll pay that much,” she said to Bill. “If you want a newer one you can pay the difference.”

He didn’t look happy. She waited while he had his data transferred. He asked numerous questions.

The next morning Bill was late, as usual.

“I still can’t believe you left my phone on top of the car,” he said once they were underway.

Two hands gripping the wheel, Ellen concentrated on the road.

“I did, so let’s not talk about it anymore.”

“Touchy this morning.”

She didn’t respond and Bill didn’t mention the phone the rest of the way to work.

*

She made the decision on the weekend. Paying for the phone had brought home how much she resented giving him a ride every morning. She thought she would tell him her hours at work had changed. Then she realized she’d have to leave early every day so as not to get caught up in the lie. On Monday morning she told him the truth.

“Friday is going to be the last day I give you a ride.”

“What? Are you changing jobs?”

“No. I just don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t.”

“There has to be a reason,” Bill said.

“Giving you a ride messes me up. It puts me in a bad mood to start the day at work.”

“It seems awfully coincidental that you decide this a week after you have to pay for breaking my phone.”

"I've been thinking about it for a while."

He shook his head. She'd learned he did this whenever he didn't agree with you.

"Do you know how hard it is for me to walk to the bus stop every morning with my bad hip?" he said. "Never mind get on and off the bus and walk to my office."

"You didn't have to get drunk and smash your car into a truck," flashed through her mind. She didn't tell him that, though.

Instead, she said, "I know it's hard but I can't help you anymore. You're going to have to figure out a way to get to work on your own. How about looking into getting an Uber?"

"And how am I supposed to pay for that?"

"Whatever you decide to do, I'm sure it will work out for you."

He shook his head again.

"This is about the phone isn't it," he said.

"It's not about the phone. It's about me and my happiness and not wanting to do this anymore. It's as simple as that."

She could feel herself about to cry.

"I don't care what you say," he said. "We both know this is about the phone."

*

The following Monday morning Ellen felt free, almost as though she had been released from captivity, until she saw Bill limping along the side of the road. She thought of stopping and giving him a ride to the bus stop but she realized doing that wouldn't solve anything. The image of him limping along the road stayed with her all day.

Every morning Bill was out there, hobbling along. Anyone she talked to about the situation: Gary, her ex-husband, Katie, her best friend, or Tom, her supervisor

at work, congratulated her. They'd been telling her for months that Bill had been taking advantage of her good-naturedness and she'd should put a stop to it. She listened but didn't say much. Every time she saw Bill, or drove past his apartment, or even thought of him, she felt guilty.

She broke down on a morning when there was a torrential downpour. Bill was making his way along the road, holding up an umbrella. She stopped and rolled down the window.

"Get in," she said. "I'll give you a ride to work."

He looked at her before he spoke. "Are you sure I won't be ruining your day?"

"Just get in."

Having to manipulate the umbrella made his getting into the car take even longer. When he was settled, he turned to her and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The sun was out the next morning and she didn't stop when she saw him. She would save her offers of rides for the days when the weather was bad, she decided. She felt better about herself.

*

One morning a few weeks later she passed Bill getting into a car in front of his building. She didn't want to stare and she caught only a glimpse of the driver—a woman with long blond hair.

The next day the same car was there. Bill waved when he saw her. He had a look of triumph on his face, as if he'd won something. The woman turned her head and Ellen saw the woman was younger than her and quite pretty.

It wasn't until that evening that Ellen figured out what was bothering her. She was jealous. She knew how ridiculous it was to feel that way. Her problem had been solved. Not only was she no longer giving Bill a ride and but she also didn't even have to feel guilty about it anymore. She realized, though, that deep down

she had gotten some perverse pleasure from being the one to help him. Now the blonde-haired woman was.

*

The woman had been giving Bill rides for about three months when Ellen ran into them at the supermarket. Bill had a cane, the first time Ellen had seen him with one. She was about to duck down one of the aisles when Bill noticed her and called out, "Ellen." She walked slowly toward them.

"How are you doing?" Bill asked.

"Not bad. Yourself?"

"Good."

Ellen looked at the woman.

"Ellen, this is Lisa," Bill said.

"Hi," Lisa said.

"Hi. I see you every morning."

"I see you, too," the woman said.

"I used to give him rides."

"I know. Bill told me about you."

I bet he did, Ellen thought.

"What's with the cane?" Ellen asked Bill.

"Lisa makes me use it."

"I'm a PT," Lisa said.

"That's how we met," Bill added. "She was one of my PTs after my accident."

"I hope it helps," Ellen said.

"It does. Lisa, show her the ring."

Lisa held up her hand and Ellen saw the engagement ring on her finger.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"How did you guys reconnect?" Ellen asked.

"Bill called and asked if I could give him a ride to work. I live nearby," Lisa said.
"Well, I'm glad it worked out."

Ellen listened to their talk about the wedding plans for a few minutes before she said she had to get her shopping done. Bill had landed on his feet, she thought, as she pushed her carriage down the aisle.

*

Several more months went by. Ellen would wave to Lisa whenever she passed her car outside Bill's apartment building. Then Ellen didn't see the car for a whole week. Every morning she looked for it. Another week went by. One morning she saw Bill limping to the bus stop. He wasn't using his cane. Ellen stopped and rolled down her window.

"Do you need a ride?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Where's Lisa?" she asked once Bill was settled in the car.

"She broke off the engagement."

"I'm sorry that happened."

"I am, too."

He looked crestfallen, almost like a child who hadn't gotten any presents on his birthday.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ellen asked.

"No."

*

The next morning Ellen waited outside his building. When he came out, she put down the window.

"Are you going to give me a ride today?" he asked.

"It depends. Are you ready to listen?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. There are some rules. First, you're out here on time every day. Second, you get whatever you want out of your bag before you get in. Third, no eating. Finally, you're nice to me. Agree?"

He nodded his head. "Yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She took a deep breath. "You can get in now."

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GUEST WRITER

A. K. McCutcheon lives in sunny Southern California with her husband, in a house stacked with too many books to read in one lifetime. Her short stories have appeared in *Elegant Literature* e-zine. In 2023, her short story "The Offerings" received the First Place award in the Friends of San Diego Central Library Short Story Contest.

House Sitting by Betty

by A. K. McCutcheon

Fred was in a bad mood today. Betty could always tell. It might be the miserable San Francisco weather that made him out of sorts. All morning long, a torrent of warm spring rain streamed down the windows. Dripping like Karo syrup over hotcakes, Betty thought. She hadn't eaten today. Couldn't remember what she ate yesterday. *Did* she eat yesterday?

Her cell phone jangled rudely, interrupting her recollections.

"Hello, is this Miss Betty, with the house sitting?" The woman's accent trilled like birdsong. Before Betty could answer, the ear-splitting wail of an emergency vehicle siren pierced the background. The caller didn't wait for a reply. "I am Graciela Perez, housekeeper for the Mister and Missus Hansen. I need someone right away. The house sitter who was here went to the hospital. The neighbors, the Patels, they give me your number. They say you did very good house sitting for them last year."

Betty remembered the Patels. They paid her in cash, with a generous tip too. Mrs. Patel wore beautiful Indian saris. Their home—in an affluent community south

of the city—wafted a delicious sandalwood scent. *Oh, the woman with the musical accent is still talking.*

"…and there is a dog, a little one. If you can come today, I give the address. It is for three weeks. Can you stay the nights? They pay two hundred dollars for every day."

The raucous din of the congested Walmart parking lot *almost* swallowed those last few words, but not quite. Inside her ancient Volvo, crammed with everything she owned, Betty muted her phone, let out a joyful shriek, and jiggled both feet on the floor mat in a happy dance. "Hear that, Fred? A job. A place to stay. Two hundred a day! Now, be a sweetheart and get me there."

She took her phone off mute and chirped, "Yes, I can clear my schedule for three weeks. Give me the address, dear."

*

Betty Markham wriggled onto the high-backed leather chair behind the hardwood desk in the office of the Hansen's elegant residence, her feet dangling inches above the Turkish carpet. She wore her favorite floral blouse untucked, hiding the button she couldn't close on the matching pink capri pants. Despite frantic efforts to tame her bobbed gray curls, they corkscrewed in every direction.

At least the skies had brightened for their road trip. Fred's mood improved, and Betty had enjoyed the pleasant drive down the peninsula highway to the house. Mansion, more like. During their tour of the stately home and grounds, the cheerful, chubby housekeeper called it "French Colonial."

Across the room, a small brown dog—scrunched face and ears like a bat—lounged in a plush daybed, blinking at her with large round eyes. Betty frowned. *That dog has a nicer bed than some people.*

She swiveled the chair for a better view of the framed photos adorning the walls: portraits of a smiling couple in snow gear against backdrops of soaring white

peaks. She squinted to read the engravings on the frames: Mt. Whitney 2012, Kilimanjaro 2014, Mont Blanc 2017, Denali 2020.

Betty shook her head. *This beautiful home, and they're off climbing mountains. If I had a house like this, I'd never leave.*

Graciela switched on the desktop printer, made a copy of Betty's driver's license, and handed her a Taxpayer ID Form. Under the housekeeper's watchful gaze, Betty fidgeted with the silver-tipped pen before deciding on a business name for the form: House Sitting by Betty.

A car horn blared twice from outside the kitchen entrance near the detached six-car garage. Graciela shouldered her handbag and sweater. "Okay, Miss Betty, I see you next week." Betty followed her through the chandeliered foyer, past the formal living and dining rooms, and into the Food Network-style kitchen, with the dog scurrying behind. The housekeeper stopped at the kitchen door. "The Hansens are good people. I am with them five years. Take care of this house, okay?"

Betty nodded. "I promise—" she began, before a swell of gratitude and excitement constricted her throat. She managed to rasp, "I promise, I will treat this house as if it were my own." *Amazing, how life can change in a day, in an hour, in a heartbeat.*

She stood in the doorway and waved as Graciela pulled open the passenger door of a white Ford pickup. A man sat behind the wheel, trim mustache, sunglasses, wearing what looked like white overalls. Beside him sat a young girl, pony-tailed black hair, about twelve years old. Betty remembered her own Sarah at that age, when they were still a family, she and Doug and Sarah, in their tiny home in the East Bay. She smiled faintly at the memories.

Uh-oh, what's going on?

Graciela had dropped her sweater and bag inside the truck and was walking back toward the house. She pointed to Betty's old silver Volvo hatchback, parked in front of the pickup near the kitchen entrance. "Miss Betty, you can park your car in the garage. The remote control is there for you in the kitchen."

"Thank you, Graciela. Please call me Betty, just Betty. And… I'd like to have Fred nearby, where I can see him. So, if it's all right, he'll just spend the night there, outside the kitchen window."

The housekeeper's face froze. "Fred? There is a pet, or… someone is in the car?"

Betty struggled not to laugh. "Gracious, no. That's Fred, right there. My faithful old car. We've been through a lot together, Fred and I. He's a friend. My best friend."

Graciela's mouth formed a silent "oh." She studied Betty's face intently, then looked at the Volvo, then back at Betty. The mustached man in the truck tapped the horn and raised his hands in a questioning gesture.

Graciela lifted her chin. "Miss… ah, Betty," her tone was firm, "I will see you *tomorrow*." She trotted back to the pickup and climbed in, glancing back at Betty as they drove away.

Betty didn't need to ask why the housekeeper decided to return sooner than expected. People didn't understand about Fred. She'd grown accustomed to the indulgent nodding and clucking, and often, snickering. Let them laugh. She didn't need their pity or their charity.

She hovered at the kitchen window until the white truck disappeared around the first bend of the oak-lined driveway. Then, targeting a bowl of fruit atop the kitchen counter, she pounced on a banana, ripped off the peel, and stuffed the soft sweet fruit into her mouth. Chewing furiously, she made her way to the double-wide refrigerator and threw open the door. She almost cried when she spied the delights within. Minutes later, perched on a barstool at the kitchen island, she gulped a Diet Coke and savored every crumb of an overstuffed turkey sandwich.

Betty tidied the kitchen after her meal, reveling in the pleasingly uncomfortable sensation of a full stomach. She cracked open the kitchen door to a rush of cool evening air, lifted the dog's leash from a hook near the door, and whistled a trio of shrill notes. The dog came running and hopped around her feet. She scooped

him into her arms and clipped the leash to his collar. "Time for a walk and a pee-pee, little guy. Let's go see Fred."

The dog pulled at the leash, sniffing excitedly around the boxwood shrubbery and lifting his leg every few feet. Finally, he settled, and they walked along the edge of the sloping manicured lawn toward the garage before heading back to the house. When they approached the parked Volvo, Betty stopped, marveling at the quiet. No traffic sounds, no neighbor activity, even the birds observed the hush. The ebbing twilight lingered at the treetops. A gentle breeze tickled her cheek. She stood still and inhaled deeply: moist leaves, nearby chimney smoke, the distant Bay.

For the first time—in how long?—she felt relaxed, at peace, even hopeful.

She peered inside the vehicle, the beige rear seat barely visible beneath bags of clothing, folded blankets, stacked pillows. "What do you think of this place, Fred? I think it's nice."

No, people didn't understand about Fred. With her husband gone, the house gone, the money gone, even basic needs were often unattainable, unaffordable. As long as she could rely on Fred to keep her and her scant possessions off the streets, and take her where she needed to go, she was secure in her world. When she allocated spare change to pay for a meal or buy fuel for Fred's tank, the money would go to Fred first, every time. That's what you do for your best friend, especially when he's all the home you have left.

*

Betty woke at dawn the next morning. Shivering, she sat up, stretched her stiff legs, and gazed out the Volvo's windshield at a pinking sky, dewy hedges, and the stone façade of the house looming overhead. She mumbled, "Morning, Fred," then wrapped her warmest blanket around her shoulders, pushed open the car door, and made her way gingerly across the gravel toward the kitchen door.

*

Late that afternoon, as she stacked the day's mail in the office, Betty's throat fluttered, a trembling sensation in her chest. She hugged her upper arms, massaging up and down. The familiar craving sensations were back. She called them her "jitters": the restless shaking, tingling fingers, parched mouth. Determined to distract herself, she grabbed a Diet Coke from the fridge and headed for the TV room. When she passed the formal living room, she stopped. How did she not notice it yesterday? A Steinway grand piano, resplendent at the far end of the room. Satin ebony finish. Gleaming brass hardware beneath the open lid.

Betty set her Coke can on the hardwood floor and slid onto the piano bench, adjusting the seat height with the pneumatic control knob. She rubbed her hands briskly to warm them, touched the keys, and began to play. Debussy's Arabesque No.1. A short piece, one of her favorites. After the last tinkling notes, she dropped her hands in her lap and sighed.

"Betty, that was very beautiful." Graciela stood in the doorway, smiling.

Betty jerked, startled. "Oh, Graciela, I didn't hear you come in. Thank you… It's been a long time since I've played. I used to teach piano. Years ago." She stroked the keys tenderly. "I've never played an instrument as fine as this one."

The housekeeper nodded as she crossed the room. "The Mister Hansen, he plays. The piano belonged to his mother." Her eyebrows creased. "Ah, Betty, I was upstairs right now. You didn't sleep in your bed last night? Is everything all right with the room?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Everything's fine." Betty hoped her tone was reassuring. "Will I see you again tomorrow?"

Graciela shook her head slowly. "I will see you next week on Friday." She reached across the piano and patted Betty's hand. "Take care of yourself, Betty." Her eyes glinted; not unkindly, Betty thought.

Moments after the housekeeper left the room, Betty's phone vibrated and rang. *Sarah*. Her voice urgent, alarmed. "Mom, where are you? The manager at

Glen Terrace called. She said you owe this month's rent and last month's too. What's going on?"

"Honey, everything's fine. I moved out, that's all. I have a new house sitting job. Three weeks. Good money too."

"House sitting? I thought you gave that up after you moved to Glen Terrace. You said your bills were paid up and—"

Betty tensed, biting her lip.

Sarah's voice dropped, low and breathy. "Mom, are you going online again?"

The jitters bubbled in Betty's chest.

"Oh, Mom." A heavy sigh. "I can't help you anymore. Josh asked about the money. I told him I needed things for the kids. Are you… are you still going to meetings?"

Betty wished she hadn't answered the phone.

"Mom, *please* call the number. Promise me, please."

The anguish in her daughter's voice tightened the knot in Betty's throat. She tugged at her collar. "Honey, it's okay. I'm okay. I'll call. I promise."

Betty moved to the TV room, flopped onto the pillowy couch, and keyed the number into her phone. A male voice answered. "This is the Gambling Helpline. How can I help—"

She ended the call.

"I called," Betty muttered to the empty room. "Promise made, promise kept."

Sarah's voice flickered across her memory, despondent, insistent. Flickering… fading… gone. The jitters consumed the familiar pangs of guilt and shame, growling with a beastly hunger, demanding to be fed.

What was the Wi-Fi password Graciela mentioned? I remember now, it's the dog's name: B-U-S-T-E-R. Betty grimaced. *People are so predictable.*

She opened the app on her phone. Vegas Slots, her favorite online casino. Cash still available in her account. She spotted a new game: "Anchors Aweigh." *My Doug was in the Navy when we met. It's a sign!*

Her momentary excitement gave way to an avalanche of melancholy. Memories of Doug. Life with him wasn't perfect, far from it. But it was simpler then. And when you love someone, you love them, right? Even in the hard times, she felt… grounded, centered, needed. That was before. Before she lost him to lung cancer, before she lost everything. Her lips quivered. These thoughts always came up on her unexpectedly. She couldn't bear to think sad thoughts anymore.

The phone heated the skin of her palm. The screen glowed and vibrated with alluring shapes, whirling colors. Lock in a bet, and… swipe. Ka-ching! Ka-ching! Ka-ching! A winner! Lock in, and swipe. Ka-ching! Five free plays!

Betty kicked off her shoes and gave herself to the game: the warm flush cascading over her body after every win; the bitter aftertaste of every loss; the fevered heat of expectation before each new roll. As long as her luck held out, there would be no sleep tonight.

She hoped Fred wouldn't miss her too much.

*

Betty sat slumped on the floor in the TV room, surrounded by two empty boxes of Italian cookies and six drained Diet Coke cans. Gone. The money was gone. Kneading her tingling hands, she practiced the self-talk recommended in therapy: *Just hold on until this job pays out and you can go home to Glen Terrace. Now you need to sleep. Maybe, in a real bed tonight?*

Bleary-eyed, she trudged up the sweeping marble staircase in the dark, took a wrong turn at the top, and flung open the door to an unfamiliar room. A room she hadn't toured with Graciela. Peeking inside—*Wow, this place is huge.Must be*

the master bedroom. She hesitated, her hand lingering near the door knob. *I guess it wouldn't hurt to look around…*

A stone fireplace. A canopied four-poster bed. Two bathrooms. A walk-in closet more spacious than her last studio apartment, soft lighting, a dazzling wardrobe, and—*Is that one of those fainting couches?* Betty wondered if Melanie Hansen ever fainted. Recalling the photos of the athletic-looking woman wielding an ice ax, she thought: *probably not a fainter*. Unable to resist, she stretched out on the button-tufted gold fabric.

From her reclined position, she detected subtle movement overhead; the mirror on the wall above the couch wobbled slightly. *Will that thing fall on me?* She leaned forward, gripped the frame, and yelped— "Whoa!"—as the mirror swung out, revealing a concealed wall safe.

Betty gawked at the safe, openmouthed, then shook her head and closed the mirror. *Not a good hiding place. I hope she doesn't keep many valuables inside.* Smiling wearily, she settled back on the couch… eyelids heavy, head drooping, arms numb.

*

Betty awoke to shrill ringing. The house phone. She stumbled groggily downstairs to the speaker phone in the kitchen and keyed in the voicemail code.

"Hello, Mrs. Yamashita," the message began. *That must be the house sitter who went to the hospital.* "Evelyn Sutterfield calling, the Hansen's attorney. I have difficult news. There was a disaster in Nepal. An avalanche. The Hansens did not survive." Betty swayed backward, one hand over her mouth. "Please arrange to vacate the home today. An associate from the firm will arrive this afternoon to reset the security alarm and convey the pet to a kennel. Please remit an invoice for your services to be paid as the estate is settled—"

Betty registered that the lawyer's message was still playing, but her brain refused to process the words. She dropped to the floor and hugged her knees, rocking back and forth.

Vacate today? Where will I go? I can't wait to be paid. I need the money now.

Minutes later, she stood before the hidden safe in the walk-in closet. A keypad lock. She tried B-U-S-T-E-R, the voicemail code, the house alarm code. None worked. *People are predictable. Think, Betty, think.*

She collapsed onto the armchair near the bed, rubbing her eyes. An object on the fireplace mantel came into focus: a metal jar inscribed "Cookie" in block lettering. *A cookie jar in a bedroom?* She moved closer to the fireplace. The jar was embossed with tiny pawprints. An urn. The ashes of a beloved pet. *Could it be so simple?* She returned to the closet and keyed in the letters: C-O-O-K-I-E. The safe clicked and popped open. Inside, five stacked sliding drawers displayed glittering ornaments on white velvet: necklaces, bracelets, earrings, watches, rings. Her heartbeat pulsing in her ears, she hesitated… and gripped the door to relock the safe. Then—her mind made up—she opened it wide.

Betty made her way downstairs, her canvas duffel bag brushing the top of each step. Inside the bag, a sock concealed diamond earrings and a Rolex watch. *No need for greed. The earrings and watch will do fine. The nice folks at the Oakland Jewelry Exchange will give me a fair price. With luck, they'll still have my wedding ring.*

As she passed the office, she spotted Buster napping on his chaise. "Did you hear the lawyer? You're going to a kennel. I'm sorry, buddy." The dog hopped onto the rug and scampered over to her, yipping expectantly. Betty considered the tiny animal circling her feet. "Why should you end up all alone in a strange place? My grandkids would love a cute little guy like you."

She sat at the desk and reached for a notepad. *Dear Lawyers*, she wrote, *Buster ran away. I looked everywhere. I'm so sorry.*

The letter done, she spotted the manila folder on the desk. *Aha!* She opened the folder, removed her driver's license copy and tax form, crumpled the pages, and stuffed them into the pocket of her cardigan. Satisfied, she rose from the desk, smiling. "Hey, Buster, wanna go for a ride? Fred's waiting."

Betty coaxed the sputtering Volvo toward the main road, heading for the bridge to Oakland. Pulling the dog onto her lap, she mused dreamily about her tiny furnished apartment at Glen Terrace. "Yunno, Fred, it will be so good to be home."

*

Ten days later, a black Mercedes eased along the tree-lined drive to the Hansen home and parked beneath the porte-cochère. The driver turned to the lone passenger: a slender woman, her left leg encased in a heavy brace. "Let's get you inside so you can rest that leg." Her face softened with compassion. "George was a treasured client and a good friend. Please let me know if there is anything the firm can do for you. Call me any time."

Melanie Hansen gazed at the house, eyes glistening. "Thank you, Evelyn." She sighed. "You know, in the middle of… everything… all I kept thinking was: It will be so good to be home."

*

Betty shifted uneasily on the cushions of the pearl-white couch in the formal living room, tapping her foot on the eggshell-white carpet. She balanced the delicate tea cup in both hands, terrified of sloshing a drop of Oolong on the spotless surroundings. Her focus darted around the room, then returned to the face of the woman seated in the creamy-white armchair opposite the couch. The conversation had settled into an uncomfortable lull following the initial polite small talk. Buster snored softly on the rug near Betty's feet, his ears twitching.

Melanie winced and shifted her braced leg to a more centered position on the white footstool. She sipped from her cup, then continued tearfully, "I never imagined I'd come home without George." Regaining her composure, she shook her head. "I'm sorry about that first phone call from Evelyn, about the confusion, asking you to leave so suddenly. Conditions on the mountain were… awful, chaotic. It was another woman who was found, poor thing." She lowered her eyes, then looked up. "There is one thing I'd like to know." She caught Betty's gaze with a direct look. "I know why you left in such a hurry. I want to know why you turned around and came back."

Betty's foot stopped tapping; her body stilled.

Melanie placed her teacup on the tray table near her chair. "The security cameras at the front driveway recorded you leaving. But you turned your car around before you reached the road. Before the attorney arrived to tell you that I'd be coming home." She leaned forward, her head tilted.

"There are motion-detector cameras in the bedroom closet. The cameras are activated when the safe is opened. Everything was recorded. So, why did you come back that day? Why did you return my jewelry to the safe?"

"Because I'm not a thief." Betty's voice wobbled, but the words flowed out in a rush. "I was sad, I was scared, I had nowhere to go, I needed money. But I… I'm not a thief." *This is it*, she thought, *I'm going to jail.*

Melanie's face was impassive, unreadable. "After I saw the recording, I asked Evelyn's firm to look into your background. I spoke to your daughter. I know it's been difficult for you since your husband's death. And earlier, with his gambling problems, the bankruptcy. Is he the reason you started gambling?"

Betty didn't answer. Her face flushed with heat. *My Doug is none of your business.* Her stomach twisted with the mortifying realization: *This woman talked to Sarah. How could she do that?*

Melanie's expression softened, her eyes warming. "Let me tell you something about me, Betty. All this—" she waved a hand to indicate the room, the walls, the furnishings— "is George's legacy, not mine. We met late in life. He was an adventurer. So we set out together to live his dreams." Her voice quavered. "And now, I'm alone in the house he built before he met me… the house he loved."

Betty wondered where all this talk was leading. *Is she going to call the police, or not?*

Melanie propped her arms on her knees and folded her hands as if in prayer. "Betty, you and I have something in common. We're both survivors. I know that George would want me to go on, to find peace and happiness without him, if I

can. I think your husband would want the same for you. I've been given a second chance at life. I'd like to offer you another chance too."

Betty's thoughts swirled; the effect was dizzying.

"I'm leaving soon, to stay with my sister on the east coast. I don't know when I'll be back." She exhaled a shuddering breath. "There are just too many memories here."

Melanie sat back in her chair and smiled softly. "Betty, I'd like you to stay on. I know you're not a thief. You made a mistake, and you made it right. I believe I can trust you to take care of the house, and Buster too. He was George's dog, and he seems to love you. Graciela mentioned you play piano. That's wonderful. The Steinway should be played to keep it in good order. If you agree to stay, we'll talk about a monthly salary and benefits.

"There is one condition." Her tone deepened. "You must complete an addiction treatment program. There are several excellent outpatient programs within driving distance. I would receive reports on your progress."

Betty's hands began to tremble. *I don't need this rich woman's pity. Or her charity.*

Then it happened. Her fingers slipped on the cup, ever so slightly… just enough to tip a splash of tea onto the eggshell carpet. Betty recoiled in dismay at the dark stain expanding at her feet. She grabbed a handful of napkins from the tray table, dropped to her knees, and began blotting the carpet frantically. Buster, startled from his nap, flipped onto his belly and scooted behind the couch.

Melanie reached out and touched Betty's arm gently. "Betty, it's fine, it's fine. Please stop, it's not necessary."

Betty clutched the soggy napkins in her fist and rose shakily to her feet. "I'm sorry about the rug. I think I'll—" She looked around the elegantly furnished room, at the magnificent grand piano, at the view of the trees through the bay window overlooking the front drive. "I think I'll go upstairs and get my bag now," she said, careful to avoid Melanie's eyes. "I appreciate your offer, I just… I just don't think it's right for me."

Betty backed out of the room slowly, then turned and headed for the stairs.

Melanie shifted in her chair and called after her: "Betty, I hope I didn't offend you. I really wish you'd reconsider." She grabbed Buster's collar as the dog whimpered and struggled to follow Betty from the room.

Ten minutes later, Betty steered the creaky Volvo down the curving driveway. She glanced at the reflection of the house in the rearview mirror: Melanie and Graciela standing side by side at the bay window, watching her departure. Tightening her grip on the wheel, she whispered, "I'm scared, Fred. I'm so scared."

She jolted at the sound of her phone's ringtone. A familiar number lit up the screen: Graciela calling. Betty stopped the car; the Volvo's red brake lights reflected in the smooth glass of the bay window.

"Hello, Betty. The Missus Hansen wants to tell you the garage is *heated*. She says Fred will be comfortable there when the weather is cold."

Betty dabbed her wet cheeks and muted the phone. "What do you think about that, Fred?"

The reflection of the Volvo's tail lights in the bay window changed from bright red to brilliant white, as the car executed a perfect three-point turn and headed back up the driveway toward the house.

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Guest Writer

This author did not provide a biographical note.

Worth the Risk

by H. I. Brown

Meredith heard the motorcycle before she saw it. She turned from where she stood at the coffee machine to the window, and presently the black Triumph Street Triple standard came into view, humming along the road, slowed at the bottom of her driveway, turned, and revved up to the house. Meredith smiled, her heart aglow. She poured a second cup of coffee, and let herself out the door to greet her visitor.

The bike growled to a halt. The biker removed his helmet and hung it on the handlebar, then faced her, dressed in black leather from his broad shoulders to his mud-spattered boots, a large white cross patch on the back of his jacket, the warm glow of the sparkle in his eyes reflecting the sunshine that had burst in her own spirit. He let himself inside the gated yard and approached her.

“Levi, hi!” she greeted him.

“Hey!” he laughed, and spread his arms.

She pressed herself into his embrace. He held her clasped in his arms for a moment, then released her with a squeeze and retreated a respectful step back.

She grinned up at him. “You must’ve gotten up when it was still dark. What are you doing here this early?”

His eyes sparkled. “You were on my way, and I just thought I’d get out early enough to come by and see you before your shift starts.”

“Well, *here*, since you’re here.”

She handed him the coffee. He downed a sip, growling at the bitter taste of it black. “Did I ever tell you you make biker coffee, girl?”

She chuckled, her eyes flashing sparks off his humor. “Deal with it. It’s firefighter coffee.”

He laughed.

Meredith frowned, the rush of joy at seeing him overshadowed by anxiety as she realized what it meant that he had ridden to her house on his bike.

“You’re taking that thing to Klamath Falls? Why don’t you take your truck?”

Never in her life had Meredith thought she would love a man who rode a motorcycle and smoked. She wanted nothing to do with those who did such things, as she already considered such a one to be reckless and irresponsible. And if her first glimpse of Levi had been while he was seated on his bike with a pack of cigarettes in his jacket pocket, she never would have looked at him again.

But she had not met him that way. She had met him in church. As their conversations had lengthened, each found, to the other’s surprise, that they were the corresponding counterpart to each other’s soul. She loved him for his character, his sober and genuine grasp of what was important and what was not, and his brokenness, without which he would never have reached the depth of soul that set him apart from most men. His mother had left when he was eight, and his father, a man of explosive temper and sharp words, had brutalized and terrorized the boy until he was sixteen—when he left home to live in his car for four years until he had secured a place to live.

And she knew that he loved her. She knew, because he had not carried a pack of cigarettes in his pocket for nine months. She reflected on that conversation from time to time.

"I love you," she had told him. "I love you, and I never want to lose you to something as stupid as a pack of cigarettes. Those things will kill you. It hurts me every time I see you smoke one."

She remembered the look in his eyes, a deep and sober respect, a profound humility, as if he couldn't believe the words she was saying to him, couldn't believe that she was standing in front of him telling him she loved him.

"And it is going to hurt me every time I see that, all my life. So… please, you've got to give up smoking, please. If we're going to be together… you've got to. Because I can't do this if you don't."

He had been silent for a moment, his lips parted as if he intended to speak, but breathless as if he could not determine what to say. His eyes had glowed softly. "Okay," he had said, simply. "Okay."

But while he had quit smoking, she could not seem to prevail against him to sell his motorcycle. She had seen enough horrific motorcycle wrecks in her years as a firefighter and EMT to hate the things, but Levi stubbornly shrugged off her pleas, and she was beginning to feel that she could not make a dent in his tenacity for that particular habit.

And he was riding his motorcycle on the long, dangerous drive to Klamath Falls.

"There's a reason they call them 'murdercycles,' you know." Her tone was teasing, but she was dead serious.

He knew it. "Yeah… I know," he conceded. "Well, I'd better let you go." He returned the coffee cup.

"Okay. Please be careful," she said through the ache in her voice.

"I will. God bless your shift!"

He let himself out the gate and mounted his bike. She returned his wave and his smile, and he turned and rumbled down the driveway.

Meredith drew a breath against the anxiety swelling beneath her lungs as she watched him go, a prayer upon her lips. "Oh Lord, please keep him safe…. Please.

She turned and let herself back into the house, but the worry that tugged at her heart would not go away.

*

The tones sounded for a call for Meredith's fire station. When she heard the dispatch information, her heart froze, and she could not breathe. There had been a motorcycle wreck, involving a young male rider, on Highway 140 not far along the route to Klamath Falls.

Once on scene, Meredith and the crew unloaded from the truck. Skid marks drew a swerving path to the bent guardrail, and glass and fragments of metal littered the pavement. Law enforcement was controlling traffic.

A state trooper approached them, his face grave and severe. "Witness says a deer ran out in front of him and he swerved to miss it and went straight into the guardrail," he explained. "He's in the trees down there," he pointed off to the roadside, "about fifty feet from the bike. Deputy sheriff was first on scene and applied a tourniquet to his left leg, his thigh. But otherwise we haven't moved him. It's a bad one, though."

Carrying oxygen and suction equipment and a long backboard, the fire crew climbed over the guardrail.

Oh God, her heart beat the rhythm of the prayer, *please, please no. Oh God, please no.*

They started down the steep bank that fell away from the roadside, dropping several yards down into the forest that sloped away below. Meredith felt her heart freeze as her eyes fell to what lay below them. A black Triumph Street

Triple lay nearly at the bottom of the shoulder, headlight broken, front wheel gone, handlebars mangled and detached. Meredith could hear her heart roaring in her ears as she fought to breathe, swallowing back the bile and panic that rose in sickening dread in her throat, feeling as though her legs were about to buckle beneath her as she stumbled down the steep bank. Her mind refused to accept the unimaginable reality that presented itself to her, refused to believe it, refused to give in to the horror that would crush her if she did, until she was sure.

Oh God, please no… Oh God….

As they descended the hill, she spotted the rider, a patch of black leather lying awkwardly at the tree line, like a discarded article of cloth some motorist had cast out of their window along the roadway. The deputy sheriff stood near him, his hands still covered in blood from applying the tourniquet; he backed away as the fire crew approached to give them room to work. As they neared, she saw that the man lay unmoving, wrapped around a tree where his chest and side had caught the trunk as he had come to a stop from his headlong tumble from the roadside.

Oh God… no….

Meredith fought down the churning of her stomach, and the edges of her vision began to dim as the panic in her heaving chest threatened to swamp her. He was dressed all in black leather, his large, tall form sprawled in horrific unreality against the tree in the dirt and blood.

Oh God… please…

As they neared him, she noticed the lion's head emblem, not a cross, emblazoned on the back of his riding jacket…. The relief that he was not Levi almost buckled her knees, her ears roaring and hissing in shock as she found herself to be involuntarily gasping in horror, but the relief was immediately replaced with the equally visceral realization that this man was someone's loved one, that every feature of his face, every inflection of his voice, every facet of his character, was precious, was treasured, was counted dear by someone, as Levi was to her, and

the shock combined with this understanding hardened immediately into urgent and competent purpose.

Lord, she pleaded, all her heart in the prayer, *please be with me, please help me, please guide my hands. Please save this man's life, please save his soul, please put Your hand upon him and help me know what to do, help him to return to his family. Amen.* And she felt at that moment the peace and the confidence, the assurance of God's hand upon the situation, that she always felt when she prayed at the scene of a call.

The blood and torn up soil, the marks where the man's body had skidded across the ground, told what had occurred. As the bike had flipped from the high-speed impact with the guardrail, he had been hurled over the handlebars, one handlebar catching his left leg, which lay flexed and twisted beneath him, deformed at the thigh below the tourniquet the deputy had applied, his leggings torn and stained bright red where the bone had pierced the leather, the soil and pine needles beneath him flecked with spots and blotched with rubbery, opaque clots of blood the size of her hand. If the deputy sheriff had not arrived when he did and immediately applied the tourniquet, he would have bled to death before the fire crew arrived. He had plowed into the ground headfirst, and his momentum had carried him tumbling head over heels into the tree trunk. His helmet lay broken in three pieces several yards from where he lay.

"Okay," the fire captain instructed the crew. "Let's get his airway clear and get him on the backboard."

*

Time faded out, became irrelevant, as the young man broken on the ground before her became to Meredith at that moment the only person in the world, and she did not know how long she and the crew labored over him.

"Medics are here," one of the firefighters commented, and Meredith looked up to see the ambulance roll up at the top of the embankment. Soon the advanced life support team was navigating their way down the shoulder of the roadside.

"Thank God you guys are here," she exclaimed.

The fire captain stepped forward to address the paramedic who approached them. “Fractures to cervical and thoracic spine,” he reported, “blood in his ears bilaterally so possible skull fracture, malocclusion so probable jaw fracture, several broken ribs and flail chest on right chest, diminished breath sounds on right side so possible collapsed lung, massive bruising to right upper quadrant so possible liver laceration….” He summarized his crew’s findings and the medical interventions they’d performed, detailing the nearly endless enumeration of obvious and suspected damage, to provide the emergency medical personnel with the information they needed to take over his care.

The fire crew assisted the EMTs and paramedics in the difficult task of carrying the young man, strapped securely to a long backboard, up the bank, and transferred him to the ambulance stretcher.

As the ambulance lit up the siren and pulled away, Meredith felt her composure shatter as the pressure to perform the best she could to save the young man’s life vanished; she had been leaning against it, and when it caved beneath her, she crumbled too.

She did not know whether the young man would survive his injuries, if he would ever wake up from the massive injury his brain had sustained. If he did wake, he may have to learn how to walk again, how to speak again, how to swallow again, and may never. He was probably paralyzed, perhaps from the neck down. Even if he survived with the best possible outcome, no paralysis, and only mild brain damage that left him with only difficulty remembering things and an inconvenient propensity to occasionally act on impulse without thinking for the rest of his life, this day had changed his life forever, in just a few short seconds, and he would never remember it. And all because a deer had run out in front of him. If he had been driving a car, they would have been cleaning his blood from the airbag, not extricating him from around a tree.

She gazed down the embankment at the mangled Triumph Street Triple, and just how horrible it all was suddenly rose up in her in a sickening wave. Suddenly, she doubled over, her back turned to the responders on roadside, and vomited over the guardrail. She rocked back, trembling, sobs rising in her throat.

Another firefighter was immediately beside her. “You okay?” she asked, her face pained and concerned.

Meredith stared down the hill at the broken bike. “When we first drove up on scene,” she murmured, her voice barely audible, “I thought it was Levi.”

The firefighter’s face turned pale as she realized.

Meredith leaned into her friend’s embrace, racked with sobs.

*

At the fire station, Meredith dialed Levi’s number. She just wanted to hear his voice. Her heart beat hard beneath her throat as she listened into the phone as it rang into the silence, counting the seconds.

He picked up. “Hey, you.”

Her chest heaved. “Levi, where are you?”

“I’m just heading back out to Klamath Falls now,” he explained. “I went back into town to do a few things before heading out, and by the time I got going there was a wreck on One-Forty that had traffic all backed up. I turned back. I really want to get that bike part before I go back to work tomorrow or else I won’t be able to get it for another week, though, so I decided to head over after all that. I’ll make it by nightfall; the guy says he can meet me at eight. It’s supposed to rain this evening, though, so I stopped back by the house and took the truck. Be a late night, but if it gets too late I can just sleep in the truck and get back in time for work in the morning.”

The silence stretched after his words, too long.

“Meredith, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she managed, swallowing back tears.

“Bad call?” His voice had turned gentle, deep with understanding concern.

She choked on the words then. “Gotta go,” she managed.

“Okay.” She heard him draw a breath. “I love you, Meredith. You call me if you need me.”

The tears came then, released in a flood tide of grief, dread, relief, and care that seized her in its grip and wracked her entire body in sobs that crushed the breath from her. She hung up, unable to speak.

*

That night, after her shift had concluded, Meredith drove home, alone with her thoughts that pressed in on every side. Once home and changed from her uniform into loose hoodie and jeans, she lowered herself into the easy chair by the window without turning on a light, and stared into the darkness outside. She could not sleep. She knew better than to try. It was better to sit and stare.

Still, the image of that young man’s face, pale and smeared with blood and dirt, the crunch of his broken neck beneath her fingers, the scattered fragments of the bike strewn over the road shoulder in disarrayed testament to the violence of force and momentum visited upon the unrestrained and exposed rider, thrust itself to the surface of her mind. She remembered the jerking of his legs and the trembling of his hands as his oxygen-deprived brain racked his body with convulsions, the red-stained froth as she suctioned the vomit and blood from his bitten tongue and broken teeth from the back of his throat, the tinge of dark, alarming blue about his lips as she sealed the oxygen mask over his face once the shaking had stopped. She remembered the relief as she heard him draw a clear, unobstructed breath. She remembered the dark brows, the strong chin, the large hands, the face someone knew and loved.

She realized suddenly that she was weeping uncontrollably, tears rolling hot and fast down her face. She didn’t brush them away. The pain, the grief, the dread, the fear, and the love rose within her in a crushing, overwhelming flood.

She did not want to live in a world where these things could happen, where you could love someone that much and, in an instant, lose them to some stupid, senseless accident. The pain of even the thought was too much for her, the agony

that threatened to tear her heart out if it ever were to sink its teeth into her life raking across her soul. She had seen too much death, too much suffering, too much damage, too much tragedy, to not keep it from happening, at all and any cost, if she could do anything to protect those she loved. The anger rose, and hardened like a spearhead forged sharp by pain.

She lurched from her seat. She reached into the corner of the room in the gap between the wall and a bookcase, and pulled out the twelve-gauge shotgun she kept there for self defense or predator control. She opened the gun safe where she stored ammunition, and reached for a box of copper-plated buckshot. She strode out of the house, the shotgun gripped resolutely in her hand. She opened the back door of her truck and laid it across the back seat.

She had several long minutes to think about what she intended to do by the time she reached Levi's house in the woods, but all she could feel was the pain and the black, roiling fury in her chest, dark and immovable as glowering thunderclouds, obscuring all else.

As she pulled up to his house, she confirmed that he was still not home; he had probably opted to stop halfway back and sleep in the truck. His motorcycle stood next to the house, gleaming in the moonlight.

Meredith got out of the truck and took the shotgun from the back seat. She donned the safety glasses and ear protection her first responder's insistence on safety had compelled her to bring.

She stopped a few yards away from the motorcycle, took a breath, then threw the shotgun up to her shoulder, sighted, and fired.

By the time she had emptied the full box of shells, the bike looked as if it had been bombed. Fragments of metal, glass, foam, shell casings and plastic shotshell wads lay around it in a debris field.

Meredith stood trembling, her heart pounding into the silence of the night which followed the barrage, as the reality of what she had done began to sink in. She laid the shotgun across her back seat again, and set the empty shotshell box beside it, then pulled off her glasses and earmuffs. She stood for a moment,

breathing hard, until the last of the fury and pain burning in her chest faded and spent itself, while her saner reason contemplated in detached surprise what she had just done.

Before she left, she turned one last time to look at the bike.

She was not sorry. After what she had seen, she would rather see Levi sitting in the driver's seat of a truck shielded from the ricocheting metal, the asphalt, the guardrail, the tree trunks, and the unmitigated forces of gravity and momentum by an engine, a back seat, a roof, a floor, a backrest, headrest, and restraining seatbelt, two metal doors, two airbags, and three laminated glass windows, even if it meant he never spoke to her again, than see him lying broken on the side of the road. She would rather he hate her and be alive than lose this remarkable, beautiful, precious man she loved so much it hurt to some stupid cause and know that it could have been prevented.

Without a regret, she drove home.

*

The next morning, Meredith's heart leaped when her phone rang. It was Levi. She had slept only an hour or two; she was glad she did not have a shift that day.

"Hey." His voice was astonished, disbelief ringing in every word. "Uh, you're never gonna believe this, but uh, someone, ah, destroyed my motorcycle last night while I was gone. Like, literally destroyed it… looks like they used a shotgun. There are shells everywhere. Must be twenty, twenty-five shots. I just, have like, absolutely no idea… what happened, or why, or who did it, or…. Yeah, this is just crazy."

She remained silent.

"Wait—" Disbelief raised his deep voice to a pitch it almost never attained, "Meredith, did you—?"

She did not answer.

"You did it!"

She heard him scoff in utter disbelief. Several seconds' silence followed.

"Meredith, why?" he stuttered. "Why did you do that?"

Her heart was pounding so hard in her throat that she was for a moment unsure if she could answer him. She swallowed, and drew a deep breath against the tightness of her chest, preparing for the worst.

"That wreck on One-Forty yesterday…." The words dropped from her mouth like shards of glass, "I was called to it. It… it was a motorcycle wreck, a young man… he swerved to miss a deer and went head over handlebars over the guardrail, and he went down the bank into the trees. He'd hit the ground with his face so he had a skull fracture and his jaw was broken and his teeth were all messed up and he was choking…. Massive TBI, his back broken in two places, fractured ribs, collapsed lung, bruised liver…." She let her tears fall unashamed. "Last I heard, he was on a ventilator, and they didn't know if he was gonna make it through the night. If he does, they don't know how much function he'll regain, his brain was pretty damaged…. He was so young." She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "When… when we first got to the scene… I thought… it was you…."

She choked, and Levi said nothing while she fought to gather the breath to speak.

"I can't do that. I can't. I can't roll up to a bike wreck and see you lying there like that. I just can't do it. I'm not gonna let that happen. I can't. So…."

There was nothing else to say.

When Levi did speak, his voice was low, guttural, and unreadable. "Come see me at the house."

"…Now?"

"Right now."

She gulped, her voice dead. "Okay."

He hung up before she did.

*

When she pulled up to Levi's house, he was waiting for her, standing in front of the destroyed bike with his arms crossed over his chest.

She approached him as though she expected the ground to cave beneath her, her boots scuffing in the gravel.

He came to her, covering the ground quickly with his long strides, and enfolded her in an embrace so tight it crushed the breath from her, enveloping her in the sound of his beating heart. After several long seconds of surprise, Meredith allowed herself to melt into him, and wrapped her own arms tight around his shoulders as she had wanted to do all the harrowing day before. Then she felt his chest heave beneath her cheek as he drew a breath, and he released her.

He held her at arms' length with his strong hands on her shoulders, his gaze glowing warm upon her. To her surprise, she noticed that there were tears in his eyes, and as he blinked, they spilled to roll down his whiskered cheeks.

With his next words, he surprised her yet again. "Thank you," he said.

She furrowed her brow, bewildered. "I destroyed your bike."

He gulped, and more tears spilled. He lifted a hand from her shoulder to brush them away. "I don't mind," he said, his deep, strong voice broken by tears. "I'm not… used to having someone care about me… someone worry about me. I've… never had someone care about me like that." He shook his head. "Ever."

Tears welled in her own eyes as he continued.

"So I don't mind. … I've never had someone, someone that it mattered if something happened to me, and… and I need to do something about that… I need to take care of myself now. It's different now… it's not just me now… I need to take care of myself *for you*. And I wanna do it. For you. I need to do it. So… " he drew a breath, and met her eyes, "thank you for caring."

"I love you," she said, and she heard something break in his throat.

They held each other for a time, then at long last broke away, each brushing away tears.

Levi cleared his throat, then turned to look at her, that mischievous twinkle she knew and loved so well returning to his eyes, and suddenly a full-toothed smile broke over his face through the drying tears. “But you know,” he said, “I did actually just find a buyer for the bike.”

Meredith’s brows rose in astonishment. “What—? You were selling it?”

He grinned, nodding.

“No way!” She laughed.

“Yeah!” He chuckled, rolling his eyes at the bike. “And now I’ve gotta call the guy and tell him my crazy girlfriend shot my bike.”

Meredith snorted, unable to contain the hilarity of the irony, and Levi’s full-chested laugh mingled with hers.

“Maybe you could still sell it for… parts?” she offered, half apologetically.

He shook his head, his face alight with his full, bright grin. “No way. I’m going to keep it just the way it is. Every time I see it, I’ll remember how much you love me.” His eyes glowed as he met her gaze. “And that you are worth it all.”

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GUEST WRITER

Jan Allen's short stories have appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Apple in the Dark*, and fellow-writer-voted *Sixfold*.

Redefining Everything

by Jan Allen

I haven't seen the biological father of my firstborn child for 53 years, but when Paul Westerfeld passes me, in the aisle seat of the fifth row, I don't have to look twice. His face is thinner, he's lost some hair, his lips rest in a less pronounced upswing at the corners. But his green eyes have that look they got sometimes, like he's deciphering a math problem, even though he's just searching for a seat on our tour bus that's bound for New York City.

I owe my husband Norman everything. He married me when I was eight months pregnant. He's snoring softly beside me now; the window of the bus is his pillow. He's been asleep the whole time I've known him.

*

There were ten of us on the bus when we left Steubenville at 7 a.m. We picked up Paul and the rest of the passengers in Pittsburgh at 8:00.

It is now 1 p.m. We are stopped at a convenience store in Harrisburg, three hours from New York City. Less than an hour ago we'd stopped at a Buc-ee's-wannabe, where I cleverly evaded Paul while standing in line for the ladies' room, then

waited for him to reboard the bus before purchasing a sharing-size bag of M&Ms, which I did not share.

I say, "We just had a bathroom break an hour ago. Why do you think we've stopped again? At this dinky gas station to boot. Do you think something's wrong with the bus?"

My husband, who's looking out his window, doesn't answer. But the woman across the aisle overhears. I'd started to befriend her at 7:30 in an effort to resuscitate the better person I used to be. But this was before we picked up Paul.

"For sure!" Mary Ann (Mary Lou? Mary Ellen?) exclaims. "The bus is broke down!" She is elated. "This is our lucky day. We made it to this 7-Eleven. If we woulda broke down on the side of the road, they'd be takin' a bunch of us to the hospital with frostbite."

Mary Ann's seatmate Laverne (Shirley? Rhoda?) adds enthusiastically, "On my last trip, when we broke down in 105-degree heat, they had to take away two old ladies by ambulance. Heatstroke."

Our tour guide gets on her microphone and exuberantly announces that Mary Ann and I have surmised correctly; we are waiting for a brand new bus that will arrive by 3:00. For the next two hours I am going to be crammed in a tiny gas station with fifty-four other passengers, one of whom doesn't know he is the father of my oldest daughter.

What constitutes a lucky day is relative.

There is a lively buzz in the bus as my fellow travelers gather their things. I don't hear a single complaint or exclamation of surprise. I guess a broken-down bus is an old people's adrenaline rush.

When we'd stopped at the Buc-ee's wannabe, we'd filed out in order, front to back. But this time when the women in front of us, then next to us, stand and depart, I stay seated. My husband doesn't question my inaction. He never questions anything I do, or don't do. And especially in the decades when I was

singlehandedly raising our four children—three of whom matched Norman's DNA—I did some crazy stuff. I miss those days.

I wait until the bus is empty. I have decided to redefine the "everything" that I owe my husband.

"Norman, it looks like Melanie's biological father is on this tour. I'm not going to be able to avoid him in there."

If Norman cried at any time during the three years his twin brother Greg suffered with AIDS, I didn't witness it; I didn't see him cry with relief when Greg died. If Norman cried last year when our youngest daughter, Jenna, was diagnosed with lymphoma, I didn't witness that either; I didn't see him cry with relief when she received our son Andy's stem cells and is now, they tell us, cured. (When my children were tested for the bone marrow transplant, Melanie did not match any of her siblings. If this revelation is being discussed, it is not being discussed with us, at least not yet.)

I notice now that Norman is crying a little. He turns away and wipes his tears, as men sometimes do, with the thumb and middle finger of his dominant hand. I get up and walk down the aisle, because it might've taken me a decade or two but I finally got the message about emotional detachment. I do wait for Norman outside the bus door. Mary Ann wasn't kidding about frostbite. He joins me a minute or two later, and we walk toward the tiny gas station in silence.

When Norman opens the door, the five people closest to it stare at us furiously. Not only have we let in the frigid cold, but these five people now have to nudge others so we can close the door behind us. COVID, anyone? RSV?

I watch in a ceiling-corner convex mirror as an overwhelmed worker weaves between some of us to unlock a storage area so we can spill into it.

With mumbled "Excuse Me"s and "Sorry"s, Norman shuffles off, toward the restroom I assume, since he'd remained on the bus fifty minutes ago at the Buc-ee's-wannabe.

I might've been a little quick to say I wouldn't be able to avoid Paul in here, because it is impossible for the sardine at one end of the can to detect the sardine at the other end. We have a whole week of group activities ahead of us though, so I'm bound to run into him eventually. I might as well get this reunion over with.

I find Paul by looking in the ceiling-corner mirror. At the same time, I'm rehearsing what I'm going to say. The words forming in my mind are the ones that a woman suddenly standing next to me says:

"Hi. You might not remember me, but we went to high school together."

She is a woman I noticed when she boarded the bus—I realize now this was right before Paul boarded—and also in the convenience store an hour ago. I could tell from her lack of eyebrows and how her knitted cap slid up that she had no hair on her head.

When you see someone young who is probably dying, "Oh, God, no" goes through your mind. When you see someone who is probably dying but who has reached a certain age—is it 60?, is it 65?—you think "Oh…well." This woman has reached the "Oh, well" category. As have most of us on this bus.

She says, "My name was Wendy Westerfeld then."

I look in her eyes and I remember. Paul's sister. She's caught me off guard, and all I can do is whisper her first name.

"I idolized you, you know?" Wendy says. "You and Paul weren't nasty like all the other popular kids. When I talked, you stopped what you were doing and listened. And you guys let me hang around with you a lot."

Even though Wendy was two years younger than Paul and me, I idolized her right back. She always blurted out whatever was on her mind, and the bigger her audience, the better. She was what used to be called a pistol, or a smart-aleck. I wonder where that got her in life.

Wendy continues. “I thought what I was witnessing was true love. The way both of your faces lit up when you were together. The way you laughed. How you couldn’t keep your hands off each other.” She turns away. If I’ve figured out the convex mirror, she’s looking where her brother is. When she turns back to me, her eyes have a hostile glare. “When you moved, you promised him you’d call as soon as you got to Steubenville. He kept waiting. For a phone call. Or a letter. Even a Dear John letter would’ve been better than nothing. You broke more than his heart. You broke my brother’s soul.”

After my mother discovered, in the summer of 1971, that there weren’t enough tampons missing, my parents’ orders were explicit. I would leave Pittsburgh to live with my spinster aunt, Kate, in Steubenville. It was that or be sent to an unwed mothers’ home where the nuns would make sure my childbirth would be excruciating, and then they would take my baby away from me. They told me that at seventeen I didn’t have the foggiest idea what love was, and I needed to let that boy start his adult life unencumbered.

I was terrified. I did what my parents told me to do.

At any time after I was whisked away, if Paul had driven his Chevy Nova down the mile-long cul-de-sac to the house at the end where we conceived Melanie, he might’ve seen one of my parents’ cars in the driveway, or even one of my parents. But he had no reason to suspect I’d lied when I told him my father’s company had transferred him.

“I need to talk to Paul, Wendy,” I tell her.

But she is having none of that. “Don’t you dare go near him.”

“Even if I wanted to, how could I avoid him this whole week?”

“Bundle up. A heavy coat, a hat. Wear a mask. Just until tomorrow. We’re meeting my daughter at Tavern on the Green. I’ll get sick. I’ll make sure Paul and I don’t finish the trip.”

“I really need to talk to him.”

"Sure, sure. Do that. Introduce him to your lovely husband, show him pictures of your beautiful kids and grandkids. He never married, Dori. He spent fifteen years of his life taking care of our dad. So go ahead, go over there right now." She squeezes my upper arm through my heavy coat with the strength of a young Arnold Schwarzenegger and pulls me toward where she had looked earlier. "Rub your beautiful life in his face."

I start shuffling through the slightly thinned-out crowd in the direction Wendy's pull has put in motion.

Wendy jerks me back by my arm that she is still holding. "What are you doing?"

"You told me to go over there."

"Are you an idiot? Don't you understand sarcasm?"

I turn to face her. I place my hand over hers, the one that's still gripping my arm. "I'm doing the right thing. At least it finally feels like the right thing. You'll see, Wendy."

Paul is listening intently to a man who is storytelling with upper extremity accompaniment. Paul, Norman and this man might be the only males on this tour. I wait until the other man's arms fold across his chest.

"Hi. Excuse me," I say to both of them. Then I turn my attention to Paul. "You might not remember me, but we went to high school together. My name was Dori Williams then."

His mouth falls open, but otherwise there is no response. At first I just stand, frozen, too. I'd never gotten past memorizing the little speech I just delivered. Finally, I reach out my hand for shaking, but he pulls me in. He must make eye contact with Wendy as he does, because when our short hug ends, she is standing beside me instead of cowering behind Mary Ann and Laverne, who've followed Wendy and me to this aisle of the store. Mary Ann and Laverne have been so blatant about listening in, there's no way you could call it eavesdropping. At least the man Paul had been talking to has graciously turned his back to us.

Paul smiles. “How’ve you been for the past, what, 60 years?”

“Good.” I say it with a brief nod. I’m all business as I pull out my phone, type in my password.

I’ve never cared much if I’ve aged well or not, or if I’ve put on a few pounds (concealed by my puffy coat, I hope), or if my hair isn’t staying put where it’s supposed to. Today especially, I can’t worry about a curl going up instead of under, not when Wendy doesn’t have any hair at all. Can I? But I know that while I’m searching, Paul is studying me like I’m an equation to be solved, and to say I’m a bundle of nerves is vastly underestimating the bundles.

I can never find what I’m looking for on this stupid device!

If it is possible to clear your throat angrily, that is what Wendy is doing. She has to be furious, sure that I’m going to rub beautiful photos of my grandkids in her brother’s face. Well…

I finally find what I’m looking for, a video of Melanie holding Ethan, who was a newborn at the time. Melanie’s expression had reminded me so much of Paul that my breath had caught.

I say, “This is a video of your biological daughter.” I hand him the phone and add, “Also, your grandson.”

The video lasts twenty seconds. In it, Melanie runs her index finger down Ethan’s nose and across his quivering lips, kisses his forehead, then looks at her husband, who is holding the camera, with bewilderment.

Paul watches it, then leans toward Wendy, and they both watch it five or six times. Finally, they look back at me.

I reach for my phone. Paul doesn’t pull it away but he doesn’t meet me halfway to give it back either. He doesn’t seem angry, or happy, or anything. Maybe his brain is trying to solve for X, but X is too old and complicated to find the solution to.

I say, "Her name is Melanie. And her son is Ethan. She has three kids. Ethan, Sarah and Robbie."

This time I reach farther, and I take my phone from his hand. "I have to tell you, Melanie doesn't know that my husband isn't her father. She's about to find out though." I don't know if this is true. Maybe the kids have already taken DNA tests. "I can't guarantee she'll agree to meet with you—if that is what you want—but I'm pretty sure she would. Do you want to see more photos? Or—"

Our tour guide interrupts with a shout. I try to find her in the mirror, but instead I find Norman. He is standing by the door leading to the outside, where he has an unobstructed view of me, of us, in both a direct line of vision and in the mirror. We make eye contact without the mirror. He looks bone-tired.

I'm beginning to detect our tour guide's flair for melodrama as she announces the new bus has arrived and we must board. Immediately! Norman is pushed out the door by people behind him. Those around us start filing out too; reluctantly, even Mary Ann and Laverne. But Paul holds me back. There's probably still an indentation on my puffy coat from his sister, a place to grab.

"Wendy, I'll be right out," Paul says.

Through the store window, Paul stares at Wendy until she boards. We are the only people from our bus remaining in the store. Norman might not notice, or care, that I am missing, but Wendy certainly won't let them leave without us. Right?

Paul takes a deep breath. "Wendy would blow a gasket if she knew I was saying this to you. She thinks people can only be happy if they have kids. A few years here and there notwithstanding, I've had a great life. I don't have any interest in meeting Melody."

I look at the shelf directly behind him. I think about pushing him against it so that it will topple over and he will land among the food staples. But he's so short and skinny and wiry, he'd probably catch his balance, and the only thing that would happen is a couple of five-dollar cans of Campbell soup would topple. If I pushed Norman, on the other hand, he'd take down this shelf and perhaps all the

others in a domino effect, because Norman is tall and burly, and also, he wouldn't have a clue I was about to push him.

I try to keep my face neutral, but I move just enough so Paul knows I want him to remove his horrible, horrible hand from my arm.

He does. "Well, I suppose if she wanted to meet for dinner, that would be all right. I guess what I'm saying is I don't want to build any kind of relationship."

"Noted." I nod, turn, and walk to the bus.

When I sit down, Norman is not sleeping. He is not looking out the window. He is watching me with the concentration he usually reserves for books about the Watergate break-in or the Chappaquiddick scandal.

I don't try to hide the fact that I am furious. I believe I'm panting. Steam might be spewing from my ears. When Paul walks down the aisle, I duck, as if to tie the shoelace on one of my pull-on boots.

I can feel Norman's stare.

I sit back up and snap at him, "What?"

Norman looks down, starts softly laughing. So fricking inappropriate. He can't tell I'm about to lose it; he's as oblivious to my mood as this stupid filthy bus is, as it speeds down this stupid boring interstate. Brand new bus my ass!

When Norman is able to stop laughing, he says, "Of all the scenarios I've conjured up over the years, him rejecting you has never entered my mind. That's what just happened, right, Dori?"

"How dare that jerk!" I am still caught up in my moment, not Norman's, not yet. I'm talking to myself, like I always do whether or not Norman is present. "Who does he think he is?" I'm indignant, I'm vehement, but I'm whispering. I don't want Mary Ann and Laverne to hear me. I hiss: "Who actually uses the word 'notwithstanding'?"

Norman says, “I’ve always known you would find him. You’d write him a letter or call him, or later, when social media reared its ugly head, I figured you’d look him up.” Norman hasn’t made eye contact with me since he started talking. He turns away, toward the window. “And then you would leave me.”

Now he’s got my attention. “No. No. That part of my life was over as soon as I left Pittsburgh. I approached him for Melanie. Not for me. Because of her bone marrow not matching. She’s going to start questioning her paternity.” This might not be true exactly. It might not be true at all. But if one of my children could be presented with a dad who cared about her, didn’t I have to give her that option? I didn’t think it was possible to have a father who cared less than Norman, but apparently I thought wrong. “Why did you think I would leave you?”

“I knew you didn’t love me, that you loved Melanie’s father like I loved you, that you married me out of desperation.”

Back then, I wasn’t a rule-breaker, at least not rules with stigmas like mine (unwed mother), so I suppose I was desperate. I’d loved Paul, but I was being honest when I told Norman I left him behind in Pittsburgh.

Had I loved Norman? “You were so quiet and shy,” I say, “I didn’t know you that well. But Aunt Kate sang your praises, and I thought it was wonderful of you to offer to marry me. I knew I would grow to love you.”

Norman doesn’t ask me the obvious next question. If he did, I would circumvent answering.

He is still looking out the window. “My parents would always say, ‘Norman never gives us any trouble like his brother does. He’s such a good boy.’ Kate assumed I was marriage material because I cut her lawn for free and answered every question with ‘yes, ma’am’ or ‘no, ma’am’. It’s like when people assign emotions to a squirrel; it’s human nature to assign positive ones.” Bleak that Norman is comparing himself to a rodent. “What is that old saying? If you stay quiet, people will think you’re stupid, but if you speak up, everyone will know for sure.”

“Being an introvert is one thing, but you still could’ve gone to our kids’ activities. You could’ve just sat there quietly. But you didn’t. Sometimes I would

see you open the door to the gym, like you were going to come in, but then you would change your mind, like you had something more important to do."

"Dori, I can't believe you thought I had something better to do. Didn't you realize that I was bad luck for our family? If I went to Melanie's diving competition, she over-rotated. If I went to Andy's little league game, he struck out." Even bleaker, Norman thinks he is a jinxed rodent. "I thought the more I backed away, the more you all would love me. After I realized that wasn't true, I didn't have another personality I could magically transform into."

"It's not magic, Norman. It's as easy as this conversation."

Not quite not that easy, but it's a start.

*

I love Manhattan. I'm constantly looking up at the skyscrapers, but my neck doesn't get stiff. My back isn't killing me. My hips, knees and feet don't hurt as Norman and I walk together more than we have in years. I want to see all the sights. Norman holds my hand; the sidewalks are so crowded he has to, or else we will lose each other.

When we return to the bus after seeing a Broadway show, I ask Norman if he liked the play. When he answers "sure," I challenge him to "tell me specifically what you liked about it." And he does.

At the end of the second day when we all return to the bus, our tour guide counts us off with her usual fervor. She gets to fifty-two, not fifty-four, but says "let's go" to the bus driver. Wendy and Paul are gone. Wendy told me yesterday she would fake an illness; Paul said Wendy would blow a gasket. I hope it's one of those things, not that Wendy is really sick.

As Norman and I sit in Radio City Music Hall, waiting for the Christmas Spectacular to begin, he tells me he believes that our daughter Jenna will be the one who will get the 23andMe DNA test kits. This will be after she catches up on all the other duties she has had to let slide while fighting for her life. He surmises that Jenna and Melanie will approach not both of us but only me when

they get the results. The conclusions Norman reaches about our family make me realize that although he's taken a back seat all these years, he's been paying close attention from there.

When I started raising my kids, it was almost 40 years before Sarah Palin compared a hockey mom to a pit bull with lipstick. I was more like a bison in a garter belt, and later, a grizzly bear in L'eggs pantyhose. What I'm saying is perhaps Norman remained in the background because the foreground was already occupied. Norman's emotional absence bothers me more now that our kids and grandkids are grown and it's just the two of us. But decades-old habits are going to be hard to change.

It's our third day in New York City. We've made it to the observation deck of the Empire State Building. It's dusk. I'm not going to tell Norman I love him until I do. I can't assure him I'll never leave him but only because I might die first. So I borrow a page from The Book of Norman and stand here silently, holding his hand.

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