

## Just Right

Flavia crouched outside the Orsino's house, her thick leather boots coated with the fresh mulch that lay underneath their hedges. She watched Mr. Orsino loading bulging backpacks into the family's bronze-colored SUV. The Orsinos were going camping. Mr. Orsino scratched his head, raking his massive fingers through his thick brown hair.

"Do you have the cooler?" he called towards the house.

Mrs. Orsino, her curls tied back with a paisley bandana, appeared at the screen door. She was wearing a cozy-looking fleece jacket, and her cheeks were flushed a healthy fuchsia from the havoc of packing for a weekend away with a toddler in tow.

"I had it half-full of ice packs before Ursula found it," she complained. "She dumped everything all over the floor and I had to start over. If you're done, I could actually use some help."

"Can you stick her in the playpen or something? I still have a few more things to grab."

"I had her in the playpen, and she wouldn't stop screaming. It sounded like someone was breaking her legs."

Flavia wished they'd speed things along. She'd had to pee for hours and she was eager for the opportunity to use a real bathroom. The Orsinos were a handsome family, young and tall and lanky and strong-looking. She'd stumbled upon them one night as they ate on the outdoor patio of a café in town, and her ears naturally perked up at their discussion of their impending holiday. Flavia had followed them home cautiously, to a large, rustic-looking house on a tree-lined suburban street. They kept their windows open all night, she'd noticed. Their backyard smelled like lilacs, and their kitchen was always warmly lit.

Flavia wiped a smear of mud off her cheek. It had rained earlier, and she was still new to the neighborhood, without a good knowledge of places like gazebos and park field houses and libraries to duck into to escape bad weather. She hoped she could stay here longer than the last town. It had been too small, and she'd been discovered too quickly. She'd had to catch an outbound bus before the law got involved, and she hadn't cared where she ended up. There was a twig stuck in her hair, she noticed. She undid and re-did her long, blonde braid, an excessively time-consuming nervous habit.

Mr. Orsino slammed shut the SUV's rear door, and jogged inside the house. He and Mrs. Orsino reappeared a moment later, carrying a large cooler between them on which sat three year-old Ursula, giggling at her impromptu palanquin.

"Faster!" she squealed, at which her father grunted.

"Mommy and Daddy can't move any faster," he told her, "because the cooler is heavy and Ursula makes it heavier."

"Faster!" she squealed again. She hopped off as they reached the car, and ran circles around a nearby tree while her parents hoisted their provisions into the back seat. Mrs. Orsino grabbed her mid-stride and swung her into the air.

"Who's going camping?" her mother asked.

"We're going camping!" the toddler screeched. Flavia winced. Mrs. Orsino buckled Ursula into her car seat and handed her a cup of juice and a teddy bear wearing a green bow tie. She met her husband coming around the front of the car and they came together in a brief smooch. As they pulled out of the driveway, Flavia began to relax. She had enacted a five-minute waiting period for herself before she snuck inside. People, especially people with kids,

always forgot something and, in her experience, came back to get it within just a few minutes of leaving. In her head, she counted backwards from three hundred.

The window over the kitchen sink was left open enough for Flavia to slip a hand inside and push it the rest of the way up. She tossed her backpack inside first, then each of her boots, then, bare-foot, she hoisted herself through the window. Once inside, she sat on the kitchen counter and washed her feet in the sink, watching weeks of grime slide down the drain. She sucked in a deep breath. The kitchen smelled like citrus and fresh bread. Everything was soft and clean, even Ursula's high-chair, which Mrs. Orsino had hand-painted with pale yellow ducks. Putting her backpack on the kitchen table, Flavia tip-toed out of the kitchen, in search of the nearest bathroom. She estimated the Orsino's house had to have at least three. Maybe two and a half.

She crept up the silver-carpeted staircase, and found a large bathroom down the hallway. She relieved herself with the door wide open, then washed her hands with liquid soap that was supposed to smell like wasabi and green tea. The shower head had to have a dozen different massage settings, and Flavia decided that her first order of business would be a delicious, hot shower. She looked down at her filthy t-shirt, her patched-up jeans, her greasy skin, and grew suddenly ashamed. She wondered if there was a washing machine in the basement. There had to be. The Orsinos had everything.

"Potty, Mommy," said Ursula. Toilet-training had so far been going smoothly, better than the Orsinos had ever hoped, but they had agreed to relax for the weekend and assume that, with her routine disrupted, Ursula couldn't be expected to keep big-girl underpants clean. Fifty

miles behind them on the highway, they were officially in the middle of nowhere and had just passed a rest area. Mr. Orsino cursed mildly under his breath.

“Okay, Honey, we’re going to try to find a potty, but if you can’t hold it anymore you can go in your diaper, okay?” He glanced at her in the rearview mirror.

“No!” she enthused. “Have to *potty*.” She emphatically grabbed at the crotch of her leggings. Her parents exchanged glances in the front seat. At the next exit was a gas station with pumps so old they didn’t accept credit cards. As Mr. Orsino pulled into a parking space, the car filled with the unmistakable odor of poop.

“I couldn’t wait,” wailed Ursula, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Mrs. Orsino hopped out of the car and retrieved her daughter from the back seat.

“Oh, Ursula, it’s okay. It’s okay, Honey. We’ll just go inside and change your diaper, okay? You’re okay.” She smoothed the tendrils of hair off Ursula’s hot little forehead. “Okay, Honey. Will you grab the diaper bag?” she asked Mr. Orsino. She carried the toddler inside to find the bathroom, although she didn’t hold out hopes for an acceptably hygienic environment.

Mr. Orsino opened the rear door and pawed through their backpacks. He looked under the cooler and in the back seat. He looked inside his wife’s pack. He looked under the front seats and for some reason, in the glove compartment. He found a single diaper, but the diaper bag remained missing.

Fresh from her shower, Flavia re-braided her hair and explored the rest of the house in her underwear. She dumped her clothing and the contents of her backpack into the washing machine along with the towel she’d used, and enjoyed the smell of fabric softener wafting up from the basement. She knew better than to turn on lights that had been left off, or turn off lights

that had been left on, in case the Orsinos were friendly with their neighbors. She estimated she still had a few hours before sunset.

Mr. Orsino had an office in which a desktop computer with a flat screen monitor dozed with a quiet hum, and built-in bookshelves lined the walls. The family room housed a green chenille sectional sofa and a matching recliner, along with the biggest television Flavia had ever seen and a stereo system on which lights blinked a brilliant blue.

Flavia's stomach growled in discontent. She thought of the loaf of wheat bread squirreled away in her backpack, which she ate alternately with crunchy peanut butter, or if she could scrounge up some change, chunks of cheese. She decided to raid the refrigerator. She skipped in mostly-nude joy into the kitchen, which she had determined was her favorite room of all. She discovered a container full of chili that Mr. Orsino loved and made fresh on a weekly basis. She scooped some delicately with her pinky, and popped it into her mouth. She choked. It was brutally spicy, hotter than anything she'd ever tasted. She stashed the chili back where she'd found it. Instead, she retrieved a take-out container of bread pudding that had been Mrs. Orsino's from dinner a few nights before. Flavia took a bite, but it was so mushy that just swallowing made her gag. Was bread pudding supposed to be slimy? She didn't think so.

In the freezer were several boxes of microwavable macaroni and cheese that were purchased almost exclusively for Ursula, who at times refused to eat anything else. Flavia popped one into the microwave and went to find something decent on TV.

“What do you mean, ‘it’s not there?’” asked Mrs. Orsino, snatching the single proffered diaper from her husband.

“It’s not there. It’s not in the car.”

“Did you look under the backpacks?”

“Oh, right, the backpacks. How silly of me to not actually move things around when searching desperately for the diaper bag.” He immediately regretted his tone.

“You don’t have to snap at me. What are we going to do?” She attempted to put Ursula down, but the child whined loudly in displeasure.

“You go change her. Use some wet paper towels. If we find a grocery store, can we just buy some extra stuff to take with us?”

Mrs. Orsino regarded her husband with contempt. “Everything is in that bag. Extra sippy cups, the changing pad, all her favorite books, the Raffi tape. We have to go back.”

“We’re an hour from home! If we go back now, we won’t get to the campground until ten o’clock. It’ll be pitch black!” He lowered his voice under the reproachful gaze of the gas station clerk, who puffed on a pipe behind the counter. “Pitch black,” he repeated in a stage whisper.

“I’m going to change *our daughter’s* diaper. You wait here and decide whether or not she’s more important to you than an hour and a half of daylight.” Mrs. Orsino spun around towards the bathroom, which, as she feared, was filthy. Her antibacterial spray was in the diaper bag. She sighed.

When Flavia finished the little black dish of macaroni, she raised it to her lips and licked it clean of its neon-yellow, cheesy coating. The dryer buzzed in the basement, and she skipped downstairs to put on some clothes, which were warm and comfortably fragrant. She cocooned herself inside her sweatshirt, and the heat of her clothing and the fullness of her belly made her suddenly and overwhelmingly sleepy. Not all days were this good. She was lucky to stumble

across the Orsinos, lucky that everything had worked out the way it had. The last shower she'd taken was under a chilly outdoor faucet at the beach, which people used to rinse the sand from their feet. It had been days ago, and miles away. The thought of sleeping in an actual bed was almost too luxurious to contemplate.

Flavia climbed the stairs to the top floor, enjoying the feeling of clean carpeting between her calloused toes. The master bedroom had a canopy, a bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub, and beautiful Tiffany lamps on each nightstand. She climbed up onto the bed, which was high enough off the ground to make the task somewhat difficult. She gave the mattress a little bounce. It did not respond in kind. How anyone could sleep in a bed so firm was beyond her. In any other situation, a vagabond such as herself couldn't hope for the extravagance to turn down a bed, but there were other places to sleep in the house.

In Ursula's bedroom, each wall was painted a different pastel color. All of the furniture was white, and everything smelled like baby powder. On the floor next to the changing table was a diaper bag painted with ducks that matched the high-chair in the kitchen. In a net above the crib hung a menagerie of stuffed animals. Ursula had apparently not yet upgraded to a bed big enough for an adult body, even one as slight as Flavia's.

She snatched a pillow from Mr. and Mrs. Orsino's bed, and located a cozy quilt in the linen closet. Trudging downstairs with her bounty, she curled up on the sofa in the living room and fell asleep to the somewhat muted sounds of the evening news.

The hour-long ride home for the Orsinos had been uncomfortably silent. While tension between the two adults could often be diffused as each gave all of their attention to Ursula, she had fallen asleep within minutes of getting into a fresh diaper and could no longer serve as a

buffer for her parents. Each silently blamed the other for their predicament: Mrs. Orsino had been responsible for packing the diaper bag and leaving it next to the changing table, while Mr. Orsino had taken on the task of loading everything into the car and had missed it.

“Maybe we should just try this again next weekend,” Mrs. Orsino hissed as they pulled into their driveway.

“We promised Ursula,” her husband reminded her, “She won’t understand if we don’t go. She’ll be crushed.”

“She’s three,” she rationalized, “By tomorrow she won’t remember.”

Mr. Orsino turned off the engine and groaned. “We’re already packed. The weather is perfect. You couldn’t ask for a nicer weekend to... commune with nature.” He made a flamboyant gesture with his hands that Mrs. Orsino assumed was supposed to mime the grandness of nature.

“Next weekend will be just as pleasant. And just think of how nice it’ll be to not have to pack! We can leave as soon as you get home Friday.” Ursula stirred in her car seat. Mrs. Orsino continued. “I’m tired. I’m grumpy. You’re grumpy. We’ll enjoy the trip much more if we’re not pissed at each other, don’t you think? Let’s just bring the stuff in and go to bed. Please?”

Mr. Orsino considered his wife, how sincere she always managed to look without trying, the pleading in her brown eyes. He gently took the bandana out of her hair and kissed the top of her head.

“Okay. Next weekend.”

While she carried a sleepy Ursula, he gathered several of the bags out of the trunk. They both agreed that the cooler could wait until the morning. The sound of the family's arrival did not rouse Flavia, still deeply asleep on the sofa.

"Did you leave the TV on?" Mrs. Orsino whispered to her husband.

"I didn't think I did," he answered. "Maybe."

Ursula squirmed out of her mother's arms and ran into the living room while her parents set down their loaded backpacks. A moment later she reappeared, pulling on Mr. Orsino's leg.

"Daddy?" she whispered, "There's a lady sleeping on the couch." Her parents exchanged wide-eyed glances, then followed Ursula as she toddled towards the living room before being snatched up by her father. Curled up in a ball on the couch, wrapped in Mrs. Orsino's mother's quilt, was a blonde-haired girl of fifteen or sixteen, her lips chapped and pale, her eyes sallow and sunken. Ursula squirmed, wanting to be let down to play with their guest.

"What in God's name?..." murmured Mrs. Orsino.

"I'm calling the police," her husband told her, shifting Ursula into her arms. "Take her upstairs."

"On a kid? She's sleeping, not trashing the place."

"She broke into our home," Mr. Orsino growled, his face suddenly deeply red, "She could be dangerous. She could have a knife. She could be insane. I'm not taking that chance. I'm calling the police. You take her and *go upstairs*."

Flavia jerked out of sleep to find herself surrounded by a tall, lanky, angry-looking family. She jumped, then scrambled up off the couch as the feeling came back to her limbs. Mrs. Orsino clutched the child to her and stepped back.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Flavia whispered. "I didn't take anything. I'm sorry."

Mr. Orsino rose to his full height, well over a foot taller than the petite intruder. “Get out,” he said flatly.

“My backpack is in the kitchen. Can I just get my – ”

“Get *out!*” he roared.

Terrified, Ursula immediately began wailing.

“Oh Sweetie, Daddy’s sorry,” he said, turning to his daughter. “Daddy’s sorry. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at the lady.” He tried to take Ursula, who shied away, burying her pink face in Mrs. Orsino’s shoulder. He turned to Flavia, who stood unsure on her feet, motionless as a rabbit.

“Are you deaf?” he snarled. “Get out of my house!” He lunged towards the girl, who leapt away, into the kitchen.

Seizing her backpack and her pair of mucky boots, she ran out the door. Almost all of her clothing was still in the Orsino’s basement. She was now the proud owner of a single pair of jeans and two shirts. She didn’t even have a spare pair of panties.

Stumbling on the moist ground, she whimpered. She knew Mr. Orsino would be watching her from the window, making sure she didn’t stop. It was the same every time she got caught. Tomorrow there would be a story in the local paper, fliers stapled around town, a neighborhood watch meeting held entirely in her honor. She never took anything, she never broke anything, and she always cleaned up after herself. She wasn’t really that bad, was she? Slogging up the street with her backpack, she wondered how long it would take her to collect enough change for another bus ticket, and which of her possessions she could sell. She wasn’t sure where she was going to go next. She was running out of small towns, and no one in the big cities ever left their windows open.

## Hello, Little Girl

Grandma's Diner was opened by a shrewish bottle-blonde woman named Marion who had no children. At fifty-five, she could never remember having felt the tick-tick-ticking of her biological clock. She could, however, feel the desperation of a small town without a greasy-spoon, and she found one, and cashed in. As sole owner and proprietor, Marion was at the diner every morning at 7:30, taking orders from the blue-collars with sleep still crusting their eyes, refilling perpetually empty coffee mugs, serving plates that ranneth over with eggs and bacon, slicing pie, and operating the cash register with its delicate "ching." Her lone employee was a swarthy line cook of indeterminate age named Cab whose rhythmic chant of, "Order's up" quickly became his only mode of communication. Marion single-handedly took care of the Counter Codgers, the Table Tramps, and the Booth Broods until 7:30 at night when she finally turned off the burners and the neon and went home alone. The townies called her Grandma.

It wasn't until her diagnosis that Marion began looking for help. The sheet of paper scribbled with the words "Waitress Wanted" in black marker hung in the window of Grandma's until it got dusty, its edges yellowing and crinkling in the sunlight. Sixteen year-old Ruby Tabard was the only one who answered the call, having dropped out of school only days earlier, and was awarded the position by default. Marion would rather have distanced herself and her diner from the girl; the unanimous conclusion among the giggling Table Tramps as they sipped vanilla Cokes was that Ruby was, as they said, "in trouble." If she was, Marion rationalized, she wouldn't show for months, petite little thing that she was. Some girls never showed, she knew, just gave birth in their bathtubs before anyone knew what was what. She could always find another girl later. Ruby would do for now.

Ruby wasn't pregnant, but she wasn't planning to tell Grandma. She believed that it was some modicum of sympathy towards her situation that landed her the job. And if she never produced a child, they could all assume whatever they wanted. She didn't like answering questions.

In the months after increasing her staff by fifty percent, Marion's business boomed. Ruby still wasn't showing, although Marion had purposely given her a scarlet employee polo a size too large, just in case. She secretly believed that it wasn't necessarily the addition of another waitress that had boosted her clientele, but the addition of Ruby in particular. The girl wore lipstick the color of her work shirt and sweet blonde braids, and the sprinkle of freckles across her nose was like a sprinkling of cinnamon on apple pie. Marion saw the way the Counter Codgers leered at her as she bent to pour their coffee, how they watched her surreptitiously over the tops of their newspapers. She noted a similar effect on the male members of the Booth Broods. Marion wasn't jealous, no. If anything, she was grateful for the boost.

Ruby was sure of it: Grandma was jealous of her. She didn't care. Even in that cheap, stiff polo shirt, a dozen men a day flirted with her as she took their order. She swung her curveless hips and tossed her pigtails and they left her five-dollar tips. It was more than Grandma was making, she knew. Let the old woman stew, she thought. Just a few more months and she might have enough saved up for a bus ticket to anywhere, just enough to get out of Dodge. Ruby wasn't going to end up like Grandma with a greasy diner out in the Boonies. Not like her mother, alone with two kids at age twenty-two. Not like her sister, Cammie, with her constant stream of purple-yellow black eyes and excuses about her new husband. The love of

her life, right. Ruby would bounce out of there so fast, she wouldn't be anything more than a pale blur before their eyes.

It was a lazy Tuesday the day that Marion fell so ill, she couldn't get out of bed. Grasping for the telephone on her night table, she dialed Ruby's number at home, letting it ring eight, nine, ten times before Ruby answered, her voice congested and raspy from slumber. After they hung up, Marion bowed her coiffed head and prayed for the first time in years. Ruby, alone at the diner, a scared, inexperienced teenage girl? And pregnant, to boot? Anything could happen, Marion knew. Anything. But isn't this why she hired the girl in the first place? She'd asked Ruby to bring her some of Cab's chicken noodle soup after the diner closed, and some white bread. She couldn't get out of bed to cook, not that there was anything in her refrigerator, anyway. Marion always ate at the diner. She hadn't bought groceries since it opened.

Mr. Wolf was a Counter Codger in good standing, a mustachioed retiree with a beer belly strapped to his torso with the same pair of brown suspenders every day. Like Marion, he had never married. Like Marion, his visits to the diner often lasted twelve hours at a stretch, his bottomless cup of coffee a down-payment for the mortgage on his swivel-stool. It's not that he liked the diner, liked Grandma, liked the coffee. It's that he didn't really have anywhere else to go. A curmudgeon since his teenage years, Mr. Wolf did not discuss local politics or fishing with the other Counter Codgers. He wanted none of their fraternity.

Admittedly, his attendance at the counter had risen as of late, among a few other things that hadn't risen in some time. That little Ruby Tabard was growing into a woman before his eyes, not to mention the eyes of every other man in the place. Still somewhat scrawny, flat in all

the wrong places, but she'd fill out soon enough. The way she smiled when she put down his plate of buttery scrambled eggs, how she winked when she brought out a fresh pot of coffee, the aroma of the brew forming a *mélange* with the scent of her adolescent skin... Mr. Wolf could watch her all day. And he would, if not for Grandma lurking about, monitoring the girl, it seemed. Wouldn't ever let her get too friendly with the customers. Matronly woman like that would be jealous of such a pretty young thing. Mr. Wolf had seen it before.

This afternoon, though, Grandma was nowhere in sight, a fact that both befuddled Mr. Wolf and thrilled him.

"Where she at?" he asked Ruby, who greeted him with a flustered smile and a nod when he entered the diner, rusty-sounding bells jingling as the door closed behind him.

"Oh, sick," she trilled, putting in an order for Cab.

"Order's up!" Cab said, sliding a plate of hot pancakes onto the expo line. Ruby whisked them away, throwing a smile at Mr. Wolf over her shoulder that betrayed the tiniest bit of cherry lipstick clinging to her teeth. He was captivated.

"Think I'll sit at a booth today," he mumbled cheerily, mostly to himself. He slid into the nearest booth, clad in stripes of cream and crimson vinyl, which creaked and squeaked in protest of his girth. Opening his newspaper, he turned over the coffee cup that sat at his place on the formica, its face upside-down in its saucer, waiting for Ruby and a fresh pot.

"How's your Ma?" he asked as she poured, reaching for the sugar.

"'Bout the same. Real tired, but she's alright."

"She home today?"

"Gardening."

"Ooh, save one o' those tomaters for me." He winked at her.

She smirked. Creepy old man. Big tipper, though. She couldn't tell if he was lonely or horny. She hoped lonely.

"Yessir. You know what you'd like?" Scrambled eggs, dry toast, strawberry jam, she thought. Old people were so boring.

"Scrambled eggs, dry toast, strawberry jam. You know how I like it." He chuckled, and she noticed that he'd nicked himself shaving in several spots. Her stomach lurched.

"You know I do! Comin' right up." She didn't bother to write it down. Cab had probably started making it the second Mr. Wolf walked in the door.

"Say, Ruby. You see Grandma soon, you send her my regards." He nodded seriously. Best if the old witch thinks she's missed, he thought.

"I'll do that, I will. I'm taking her some soup tonight after we shut down; poor girl's all laid up in bed and can't hardly feed herself from weakness. She'll be glad to hear from you." Ruby knew she was shameless.

"Order's up!"

She patted the table-top regretfully and rushed off. Mr. Wolf watched her shiny braids as they bounced on her slender shoulders, and shivered. He hadn't had a woman in so long. Ruby, she wasn't exactly a woman, but she'd do. She'd do just fine. He knew she wasn't up the spout; the rumor had been around for nearly a year and not an infant to be found. Probably never even been touched by a man, never known the kind of love that he could show her, a man with experience in the ways of love. He imagined her small, creamy torso, the white satin bra under her shirt, imagined devouring her with lust, consuming her entirely. She startled him by showing up with his meal, the plate steaming and her freckled cheeks flushed pink.

"There y'are." She set it down before him.

“Say, Ruby. You said you’re heading over to Grandma’s after your shift?”

“Yessir.”

“Y’all close now about 7:30?”

“Yessir. ‘Bout four hours now.” The tiny white hairs on the back of Ruby’s neck stood on end. Mr. Wolf looked hungry, but he hadn’t so much as glanced at his eggs.

“That’s very good. You’re a good girl, Ruby. A very good girl.” He grinned at her, showing my-what-big-teeth-you-have. She resisted the urge to back away from the table.

“Thank you,” she mumbled. Then, “I’ll bring you more coffee.”

“Order’s up!”

Shuffling back to the expo line with her back hunched, Ruby glanced back at Mr. Wolf, who was tucking into his platter with a strange voracity, forsaking his daily paper. She delivered a large plate of French fries to a pair of Table Tramps who were reapplying their mascara and loudly talking about her.

“... Went all the way with Troy again a few months ago in the bed of his Daddy’s truck,” Anna-Beth was finishing, barely bothering to censor herself as Ruby approached.

Krystal, her dining companion, bowed her chubby head to stare at the table as Ruby deposited their fries without a word.

“They say that particular sort of activity ain’t good for the baby,” she guffawed as Ruby walked away, and the Tramps exploded in giggles. Ruby chewed on the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood, tinny and brackish on her tongue.

Returning with a hot pot of coffee to Mr. Wolf’s booth, she found him already gone, his plate cleaned, his newspaper askew, a ten-dollar bill on the table. She’d never seen him run off so quickly. Whatever. She truly hoped the creepy old fucker didn’t come back for awhile; she

had her hands full with running the entire diner on her own without flirting with every old man who smiled her way. She'd bring Grandma all the soup in the world if she'd just get up and come back to work. Her back ached, her feet throbbed, her cheeks hurt from smiling, and her hair already smelled thickly of bacon grease. She didn't know how Grandma did this alone for so long. She knew for sure now that she had to skip town, and fast. She couldn't imagine anything happening to her that'd be worse than this.

## Into Gold

The day Johanna Palmer quit nude modeling for art classes was the day one of the art students, a greasy young guy named Ernesto, handed her his portrait of her body, done in oil pastels.

“This is without a doubt, like, my best work to date,” he enthused. “It’s for you. Be careful with it; it’ll be worth a lot of cash someday.” Grinning, he gestured towards his signature in the bottom corner of the drawing, under which was scrawled his phone number.

Johanna surveyed the work with disgust. Ernesto had depicted her pubic hair as flames leaping at her navel, melting her thighs like pink wax which dripped down her calves. The smell of oil pastels coming off the drawing was thick, and Johanna suddenly felt like vomiting.

“Thank you so much,” she choked out. She noticed that in Ernesto’s piece, the tip of her ponytail had caught alight via a rogue ember from her crotch.

Ernesto mistook her revulsion for speechless wonder. “I know, it’s good, right? Like I said, I’m gonna be huge. The next big thing, right?” A pause. “That’s my number at the bottom there,” he added unnecessarily. “If you want to have like, a private session sometime, give me a call.” He winked at her and sauntered off.

She looked down at herself, at the colorless robe she wore in the studio, her feet bare on the paint-streaked floor. The next time the program supervisor called, Johanna dropped her phone back into her purse, unanswered.

Feeling a strange pull towards the artistic community but at best untalented, Johanna had made her living as a nude model for art students. She supplemented her creative lifestyle by working part-time at a jewelry boutique geared towards “tween” girls, those not yet too old for

Hannah Montana but not too young to wear sparkly purple eye shadow. She spent her days reorganizing trays of pink plastic rings and racks of ball-chain necklaces with rhinestone charms. She only enjoyed herself while she was modeling, a strange outlet considering it required nothing of her but for nudity and absolute stillness.

Without her creative outlet, Johanna felt sure she could feel her skin collapsing in on itself, shriveled and malnourished. The idea came to her in the bathtub one night, as ideas often came to creative people: Johanna could not paint, or sketch, or mold, or chisel, or decoupage. But she was fairly certain that writing required no skill that she did not already possess. The realization, or perhaps the cooling water, sent chills through her.

Thrilled by the prospect of never again organizing sets of Disney-princess fingerless gloves, Johanna began her job hunt. The fact that she had written nothing but essays in school didn't phase her; she was certain it would come naturally once she began.

The ad had requested a "motivated self-starter," which Johanna thought she was, and a "team-player," which she was sure she could be. A well-known independent magazine, *Hot Potatoes*, was looking for a low-level editor, which Johanna saw as a foot in the door. Once she was settled and well-liked, she could start submitting articles, maybe work her way up, become a contributor, generate celebrity, publish a book. The plan was flawless.

The plan's only flaw was her lack of references. Thinking quickly, she listed her father as a reference under her grandmother's maiden name, giving him detailed instructions to act as though he were the editor-in-chief of a non-existent local paper in her hometown. He was to give her a glowing reference, one that any future employer would be absolutely idiotic to turn down. She'd turned in her resume a week ago. What her father had said was a mystery, but it

had been good enough to merit an interview. She cringed. Her father loved to tell tall tales; it was something he did almost compulsively. She hoped he'd seemed believable.

This morning, Johanna was dressed in a tailored black pantsuit with silver pinstripes. She had swept her hair back off her face with bobby pins, and her shoes made an impressive clacking sound when she walked on hard flooring. She thought she looked like an asset to the company, a phrase she repeated to herself in case she needed to use it in response to a question.

Her interviewer was a man named Rex Hammond, and though his office was impressive, he was younger than she had expected. He wore slim dark blue jeans and a t-shirt under a black leather blazer with large pockets. His brown hair swooped in waxy layers past his ears, and the strip of hair on his chin was bleached platinum blonde. When he shook Johanna's hand, she noticed that her fingers almost disappeared into his palm, but that his nails were manicured.

His office was painted a bright lime green, his desk and his executive chair both a dark shade of cherry. All of the office's accents were chrome, and interspersed with photos on his walls were past covers of *Hot Potatoes* mounted behind frameless glass plates.

"So," Rex began, sitting down, "Mr. Steiner gave you a magnificent reference. Couldn't say enough good things about you."

"Thank you." Johanna could feel the flush creeping over her ears and across her cheeks, but she couldn't tell if she was embarrassed by her lie or his flattery. He gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk, and she plopped down clumsily.

"He said you were magnificent to work with, very polite, very dedicated. Said you could..." Here Rex paused to look over a note on his desk, "... 'Spin words into gold.' That is... magnificent." He beamed at her.

Johanna had no idea what to say. She'd never lied so grandly before; of course, she hadn't authorized such an exaggeration. She was practically blameless.

"We lost a member of our team fairly recently, and in a fairly spectacular fashion," he continued. "Went completely nuts one day, stripped off his clothes in the middle of the office and tried to get our secretary to 'boogie down' with him on top of his desk. We all wish him a speedy recovery." Rex shook his head in a "what can you do" manner. "We don't have a lot of time to interview prospectives. I'm hoping that you could be the very person we're looking for." This comment was punctuated with a two-handed point straight at Johanna. She couldn't help looking down, as though she had a stain on her jacket.

"Well, I hope so, too!" Finding nothing else to say, she flashed an awkward smile.

"So, let's wrap this thing up! Do you have a writing sample?"

Johanna feigned horror. "Oh my Gosh! I left my entire portfolio on my desk." She thought back to her "portfolio," a stack and a half of wrinkled pages she considered practice. "Can I email you a sample this evening?"

"That'd be great."

In a panic, Johanna stripped out of her suit in the middle of her living room, grabbing a long skirt and her laptop from her bedroom. She redressed and stole away to Beans and Bagels, the coffee shop below her apartment. Writing anything of value at her desk was out of the question; she couldn't even sit in her chair anymore. Everything was covered with newspaper want ads and crumpled pages torn from her notebook, which crawled over her room like an aggressive ivy. And, while she valued writing free-hand (she believed that only through a pen could she truly find her muse), she needed her sample to look professional.

Beans and Bagels was abuzz with the post-work pretentious hipster set, out to be seen avoiding being seen. A handful of men wearing varying thicknesses of black-framed glasses were typing on laptops at tables, but the crowd was mostly broken into couples and triples lounging apathetically around the café. The air was perfumed with the bitterness of roasting coffee beans and the aroma of fresh bagels. Johanna's stomach growled, and she thought back to her breakfast, a handful of Cheerios and two slices of American-flavored processed cheese food. She ordered a bagel with tomato and a schmear, and a café Americano with so much cream she wondered if it could legally still be called coffee. The pink-haired girl at the register raised a pierced eyebrow when she handed Johanna her drink, and a wrinkle appeared above the pierced bridge of her nose. Johanna tried not to stare.

“Yeah, it hurt, but not as much as the one in my cha-cha,” said the girl flatly.

“Have a nice night,” Johanna replied, taking her change.

The only available electrical outlet in the place was next to a profusely ugly troll of a man who was using its twin to charge his Blackberry. He was alone, nursing an enormous blended coffee beverage topped with a cloud of whipped cream, and staring wordlessly out the window. Johanna sat in a cushy velour chair and pulled up to the table next to the outlet. She spread her dinner and her computer out over the table, and opened a fresh document. She waited for it to invite her to write, but she had no idea where to begin. Unwrapping her bagel, she ate while trying to brainstorm. She wasn't going to come up with anything usable on an empty stomach.

An essay, certainly, just a couple of pages would do. Or maybe a review? *Hot Potatoes* was renowned for its snarky, brutal reviews of local bands, restaurants and art exhibitions. Johanna could be snarky, maybe. She could try. Reviewing Beans and Bagels seemed almost like cheating, but she considered her current situation. She nibbled her last bite of bagel and

tried to describe the taste, but words failed her. Chewy? Delicious? Chewy and delicious. She was already boring herself.

After twenty minutes, all Johanna had was a list of adjectives to describe Beans and Bagels, its food, and its clientele. Chewy. Fresh. Strong. Pretentious. Kitschy. Caucasian. Bagelicious. “Bagelicious?” She put her head down on her keyboard and in doing so managed to spill the remaining half of her coffee all over the floor and her laptop case.

“Shit!” Johanna emptied the napkin dispenser on her table and dumped its contents onto the beige puddle creeping across the floor. She sopped up the warm coffee and dumped the soggy mess of napkins into the garbage. The hipsters were staring at her, unmoving. A Beans and Bagels employee trudged over with a mop and bucket.

“Sorry,” Johanna whispered. The employee ignored her. She placed her head back onto the keyboard and sighed. The tears boiled in her eyes. They slid down her cheeks onto the keys, and she had to sit up. After everything, she wasn’t going to ruin her own laptop.

“Are you okay, Miss?”

She jumped. Peering over the screen of her computer was the troll. Up close he was even uglier; his nose was misshapen, his eyes seemed too big for their sockets and were a murky indescribable color. He had almost no chin, and he was balding. He had shaved the remaining hair on his head, and Johanna could tell because he hadn’t done it in a few days and had sprouted graying stubble. He gave her a shy smile, which was bizarrely boyish and friendly, as though his mouth hadn’t aged along with the rest of him.

“I’m fine,” she mumbled, “Thanks.”

“Aww, come on now,” he chided. “I can always tell when something’s wrong. Usually the tears, you know. Maybe you’ll feel better if you talk it out.”

Johanna snorted. "I doubt it."

The troll came around the table and sat beside her. He had a pus-filled pimple next to his nose. She instinctively looked away, and as she did the words spilled out before she could stop herself, all over the place just like her coffee.

"I'm trying to get this job at a magazine, but I've never really written anything before, and definitely nothing that was even remotely good, and I had no references so I used my Dad as a fake reference who told the interviewer that I could spin words into gold, and the interview seemed to be going really well until he asked for a writing sample and I acted surprised and told him I'd left my portfolio at home and he said I could email him something but I've been sitting here trying to write and nothing's coming out." It wasn't until she was done that she realized the whole story had come out in a single sentence. "Nothing at all," she concluded.

The troll nodded along. He paused for a moment before saying, "I'm a writer."

"That's great." Having purged, Johanna was again uninterested.

"For twenty bucks, I'll write you whatever you want."

Johanna raised her gaze to the troll's, scanning his face for signs of jest. "Are you kidding?"

"No. You need a writing sample, I need some cash. I think it's what they call... 'symbiosis.'" He smiled again, looking for all the world like he could burst into giggles at any second.

Johanna nodded. Symbiosis. She had two tens in her wallet. She'd come this far, why back down now? She pictured herself sitting in Rex's office, in his enormous leather chair, surrounded by framed issues of *Hot Potatoes* that she'd edited. She pictured a book deal, a book tour, signing autographs for crazed fans in cozy cafés and sprawling mega-bookstores.

She opened her wallet and pulled out the bills. “I’m Johanna,” she told him, handing him the money.

“That’s nice,” he said.

In less than an hour, the troll had finished a four-page review of a local Brazilian steakhouse that had opened a few months ago. The review was at times scathing and at others full of praise like a proud parent. It was smooth and coherent, friendly and a little bit funny. It was perfect, although Johanna did have to ask the troll how to pronounce, “churrascaria.” While Johanna emailed the article to Rex, the troll patted her on the shoulder in a reassuring way that made her skin crawl.

“Thanks.” She turned towards him after hitting “send,” but he wasn’t there. The bells on the door of the café tinkled. Johanna put her laptop away and headed back up to her apartment to immediately crawl into bed.

Johanna’s first day at *Hot Potatoes* was that Friday, following a call from a joyful Rex that praised her article as, “Magnificent.” She arrived nearly a half-hour early, dressed in a brand-new maroon suit. She’d packed her own lunch, an egg-salad sandwich and a strawberry yogurt, which she stashed in the fridge in the break room. All the offices were locked, so she sat on the asymmetrical red couch outside Rex’s office for thirty agonizing minutes. She spent nearly the whole time staring at a framed photo of the Chicago skyline on the wall. When Rex arrived, the jingling of his keys broke the silence, and she sprung off the couch.

“Well, you’re here early!” he enthused. “I love an eager beaver.” This, he punctuated with an exaggerated wink and a “click” made by sucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

The tips of Johanna’s ears blushed.

“Well, you know, I’m just really excited to get to work. Where should I go? What should I do?” For some reason, she was already out of breath.

Rex smiled and motioned for her to follow him. At the end of the hall, he came to a locked door with an empty name plate on its face. With much ado, he produced his key, and opened the door with a flourish.

“This is all you, Baby,” he announced. Already breathless, Johanna was now rendered speechless as well. The office was painted a rich red, and all of its accents were gold. Her desk and chair reigned over the room with less pomp than the set in Rex’s office, but were impressive nonetheless. The walls were mostly bare except for a round, gold-framed mirror, and the windows were covered with gold-painted mini blinds. The room looked almost regal, if not a bit empty. It had, Johanna immediately decided, potential.

“This is *my* office?” she asked.

“All you,” he said again. “Here, let me show you how to log in to your computer.” He pulled out the chair behind her desk, and she sat, feeling like a princess. He stood behind her, typing on the keyboard over her shoulder. If glitter had a smell, it would have smelled like Rex, she thought. He smelled like pure charisma. He gave her a username and a password for the *Hot Potatoes* network, and showed her how to change her password to something more personal. As she was debating how to work, “thank you, weird troll guy” into a password, there was a delicate tap on the open door to her office.

The woman standing at the door left Johanna feeling uncomfortably overdressed. She had short blonde dreadlocks gathered into high pigtails, and wore a lace tank-top and a skirt that flared out at her thighs like a tango dancer's. Thick wooden bangles crawled up her forearms.

"Fresh meat?" she asked Rex. As she entered the room, Johanna noticed that each of her fingernails was painted a different color.

"Tanzie, this is Johanna. Johanna, Tanzie is our, uh, administrative assistant." The political correctness seemed to fall out of his mouth like a piece of gristle.

"'Secretary' is fine," said Tanzie, clasping Johanna's hand. "Shorter that way. Although every so often I am going to save your ass, at which point you can call me 'Goddess Tanzie.'"

Johanna wasn't sure whether to laugh, and opted for a subtle chuckle.

"Anyway," Tanzie went on, "Joe's here. Joe is our layout editor. You've got to meet Joe. He's a trip." Taking Johanna's hand, Tanzie practically dragged her from the office.

Rex waved as she stumbled out. "I'll see you at lunch," he called. "I thought we'd do Mexican today!" Johanna thought back to her sad little egg salad sandwich in the refrigerator.

Joe, whom Johanna soon learned was referred to by the staff as, "Big Gay Joe," had to be nearly seven feet tall. He was wearing a purple sweater knit with sparkly silver thread, black leather pants, and small gold hoops in his ears. This, combined with his full beard, gave the effect of being in the presence of an extremely flamboyant genie.

"You can call me the Layout Fairy," he told Johanna. "It works on every level. Oh, Honey, we have got to do something about this hair. Who's your stylist? How do you feel about highlights?"

Tanzie dragged Johanna away as Joe continued on like a teen girl on meth.

"We'll chat later!" he called.

By lunch, Johanna had met the entire staff of *Hot Potatoes*. Layla, the fundraising director (“I seduce people into advertising with us,” she’d said), had blue-black hair tied up in twin buns on top of her head, and cherry red lipstick. She spent most of her time talking about her fiancé, Michael, whom Tanzie told Johanna had broken off their engagement nearly a year ago. The editorials were reviewed, and often written, by a pair of Thai-American twins named Annie and Adam who seemed to argue constantly, but did so in hushed, harsh tones, nearly entirely in Thai. The woman responsible for obtaining and editing freelance reviews was named Sam, and she wore a tiny tiara studded with pink rhinestones. She appeared to be about twelve, although Tanzie whispered that Sam was pushing forty and was presumed to bathe in the blood of infants to keep her skin looking so damn fantastic, the bitch.

The head (and only) photographer was a man named Eli, whose slender arms were covered to the wrist with tattoos, which he showed off to Johanna with wiggling eyebrows. One sleeve appeared to be the story of Christ from birth to crucifixion, if both the Virgin Mother and Mary Magdalene were half-naked pin-up girls. The other, a salute to bar food. Marching across Eli’s left arm was a parade of nachos, hot wings, jalapeno poppers, burgers, popcorn, and for some unexplained reason, a chicken Caesar salad.

Rex passed around a menu for a Mexican restaurant around 11:00. “Magazine buys lunch on Fridays,” he told Johanna, “Order whatever.”

When the food arrived, in hot aluminum containers smelling of onions and beans, the staff gathered in the break room to eat. The room filled with people lounging and laughing. No one was discussing work. Johanna became involved in a conversation with Big Gay Joe about her hair, which quickly progressed to her suit. There was apparently no such thing as “business

casual” at *Hot Potatoes*. She decided to return the new other suits she’d bought. She wondered how she’d look with red highlights.

All the editing Johanna did on the first day was the week’s Letters to the Editor. It was Johanna’s job to truncate letters that rambled and distill them down to their most important points, correcting the spelling, and ensure that none of the letters cursed gratuitously. It was easy enough for a little kid to do, and she was filled with hope. If they were starting her easy, her new job could be a learning experience and she could become an expert before Rex discovered that she had no idea what she was doing.

After work, Big Gay Joe and Tanzie invited Johanna for girly drinks at a nearby bar, and after three cosmopolitans and a strawberry margarita, she fell into a cab headed towards home. She’d never been a big drinker, but she could get into it. Her new co-workers were fun and easygoing, and she felt a kinship with them that she never quite achieved with the trio of high-school dropouts she’d worked with at the store. These were her people. They were *creative*. They were artists. She was an artist. Did artists all wear leather and tiaras? She’d have to look into it.

Johanna’s cell phone rang as she was paying the cabbie, a number she didn’t recognize. She answered, slamming the taxi door behind her.

“Hello?”

“How was your first day at work?” It was a slow male voice she didn’t recognize, the slightest bit nasal.

“Who is this, please?”

“You know who this is. We met a few days ago. In the coffee shop? I helped you bullshit your way into a new job.”

Little shots of ice fired through Johanna's veins. The troll. How did he get her number?

"I – I'm sorry, how did you get this number?"

"That's not really important. Was your first day good?"

"My first day was great. Thanks again. And, uh, thanks for checking on me. Listen, I have to go, so..." She needed call her cell phone company and block his number.

"I'm not calling to check up on you, Johanna. I need a favor." He snickered quietly, and she felt none of the boyish joy he had exuded in Beans and Bagels.

"Um, sure, yeah, if I can, I'd be glad to help you." She entered her apartment, locking the door quickly behind her and turning on the lights in the living room and kitchen.

"I think you can. I have this theory, see, that since you wouldn't have gotten your job without me, it's half mine. Like, financially. Like, half your salary."

"What? No, I don't think so. That's crazy. You said twenty dollars; I gave you twenty dollars, transaction over. I'm sorry, but I really need to go. Please don't call me again." Johanna closed the blinds in the living room and grabbed a notepad to write down what he'd said, in case she needed to call the police.

"I wasn't asking, Johanna. You like your new job? You like your new boss? Your co-workers? From what I've seen, you appear to."

"How did you –"

"I wasn't finished," he snapped. "Here's how this is going to work. There's an out-of-use newspaper box on the street outside your apartment. You cash your paycheck every week, put half the cash in a brown paper bag and slip it in there. I take it out. You don't, I call Mr. Rex Hammond, editor-in-chief of *Hot Potatoes* and tell him his new employee is a fake, a sham, a fraud who had to hire some guy in a coffee shop to get a writing sample. A nobody, so

desperate that she used her own father as a reference. I'll send him my original review of that steakhouse that's been saved on my computer for six months. You think you'll last another second in that place after that? You think they'll ever speak to you again? You think you'll *ever* get another job that doesn't involve frozen burger patties? Give it a shot. See what happens." A pause. "You're lucky I'm only asking for half."

Johanna wasn't sure if she was still breathing.

"Johanna? You still with me, Honey?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"If you call the cops, this whole thing is going to blow wide open. If I see cops, I turn around and call your boss on my way home. They'll never find me. This is a prepaid cell phone. It's untraceable. You don't know anything about me. You don't know where I live; you don't know where I work. You don't even know my name." He snickered again.

Johanna racked her brain. Of course she knew his name. She'd introduced herself. Hadn't she?

"I'll expect your first deposit a week from tomorrow. Don't push me, kid. I got no stake in whether or not you keep your job. Have a nice night." Johanna's phone made a quiet beep, signaling the end of the call. She put the phone down, stripped off her suit and climbed into bed in her underwear. She lay awake for a long time, trembling in the dark, staring at the stacks of want ads creeping across her desk.

## Bravissimo

I miss my kids. I miss diapers, runny noses, the soft way their heads smelled after a bath. I miss the fullness of the house when all nine of us were home, nearly bursting with love and warmth like a shaken-up can of pop. The way Benny and Beth would burrow into bed with us in the mornings like chipmunks; how Maya would answer the phone and try to sound just like me. How the Baby looked, her face a masterpiece of mashed carrots. I even miss parent-teacher conferences. Thinking about the start of the school year coming up, I can taste the bitter bile tickling the back of my throat. The Amber Alerts have yielded nothing. When the detective assigned to our case says that there aren't any new developments, even his business suit crumples in resignation. They just disappeared, he says, faded out like the last notes of a song falling from the air. I haven't gotten out of bed in five weeks.

We first found the droppings, these little brown greasy pellets, peppered into our carpeting at the end of May. Joy and Jack, my twins, insisted that they were chocolate sprinkles and, since they're five years-old, wouldn't listen to reason. As babies five and six, you'd think I'd have learned by now: my kids never listen to reason. I eventually settled for keeping sprinkle-inviting foods away from them until the problem was solved, even if I'd just vacuumed. They always seemed to find crap that I'd missed, and then, into the ice cream it went. So, no ice cream. Or yogurt. Or cupcakes.

Hoping that the problem was temporary, or an attack of tiny brown dustbunnies, or just the product of one or two lost rodents, I invested in a more powerful vacuum. Maya, my biggest girl at thirteen, christened it the "poo-poo problem," which she thought was hilarious.

Unfortunately, not even a proclamation from their biggest role model could convince the twins that the droppings were anything other than delicious. I ran that vacuum every morning, and by the afternoon, I'd find more, in smatterings close to the molding and clustered together in corners.

We never said the words “rat problem.” Rat problems are expensive, and Harry and I had just spent the last few thousand dollars in our savings to repair our back porch. The concrete was crumbling like a stale cookie, and it made the place look condemned. The last straw came when Benny (age ten), nearly broke his neck when the edge of the step he was standing on collapsed out from under him, like the suspenseful climax of an *Indiana Jones* flick. Harry caught him under the arm and pulled him back, but it was too close, and a week later, we were down another \$3,000.

We were doing okay; we'd learned how to be frugal, but we were okay. But before the back porch, was the transmission on our van. We have one car, and it's mine, for carting around the kids. Harry takes the train, often squished up against other suits so closely he can't even drink his coffee, some of them apparently with quite regrettable body odor. Like I said, frugal. But the van was approaching its twelfth birthday and the transmission blew out one day when I had four out of seven in the backseat in the Aldi parking lot. It cost \$3,000 to rebuild, parts and labor. No getting around that one; you can't buy a nine-seater for \$3,000 that would run any better than my van does now.

We're not poor. We're not even struggling. We're just not... comfortable. Harry is an editorial assistant who has dreamt his whole life about being a big-name publisher, but his boss is full of more shit than our carpet and Harry is too loyal to realize that his company has never – ever – promoted from within. So, while he spent his days sifting through slush manuscripts for

the Next Big Thing and sucking up to his gin-soaked inbred boss, I raised seven kids. People with this many kids seem to always be joking about how they “Just don’t know how it happened!” but let me tell you, they know exactly how it happened and so do I, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. But I loved my kids and even if I got into bed sometimes in tears from the sheer weight of it all, I loved my life.

Even if I got into bed *often* in tears from the sheer weight of it all. “Often” is more appropriate. I was alone most of the day, with just the Baby, the two of us running errands the second I carted off the rest to school. At one and a half she had a name, but it really just wasn’t appropriate yet. She wasn’t the best conversationalist, and kind of a slob, and not very helpful when it came to things like grocery shopping or mending or mopping. And she had a set of lungs like I had never encountered on a child before or since.

The three o’clock bell each day was a juggling act for me. It seems like six of seven had a different activity to be chauffeured to nearly every day, to the point where I restricted them to activities that took place between three and five o’clock so I could have some sort of stability. There is an enormous dry erase calendar in my kitchen, and each kid was a different color marker. I felt like for the past fourteen years I’d been pregnant, or in perpetual motion, or miraculously both. I felt like I hadn’t really relaxed in a decade.

I got by almost entirely by watching my babies while they slept, when they were at their most angelic and reminded me of peace and grace and everything that those stupid maternity guides said that motherhood should be (and I’ve probably read them all). Every one of my kids had this glowing strawberry blonde hair (mine) and enormous blue eyes (Harry’s). They reminded me of paintings, familiar images of Mother Mary from my girlhood, wisps of incense smoke curling around her virginal shawl.

I couldn't sleep without checking in on the kids first, and I only slept well knowing they were safe. Maya and Beth slept under these fluffy pink canopies we found for them at Wal-Mart, Beth snoring louder than even her Daddy. Jack and Joy slept in bunks in the tiniest room, often in the exact same position without ever knowing it. Shawn and Benny slept in a room painted this insanely vibrant blue that Harry had bought on a whim, in D.C. superhero pj's. As we were out of rooms when she was born, the Baby slept in a crib in a nook in our "master bedroom," a misnomer since they were all more or less the same size.

One morning, Shawn actually saw a rat, stealthily scrambling along the pristine molding of our family room. His shrieks of excitement brought everyone else running, and sent the poor rat into a panic. (It took me forty minutes to get the Baby back down.) In the pantry, Harry found boxes of crackers and Cheerios gnawed through, the bags torn open and crumbs leaking pathetically onto the shelf. We couldn't afford to share our dry goods, and Jack and Joy whined the entire way to school because they were in the middle of a very Cheerio-heavy phase. Which is when I had the nightmare, this horrible vivid apparition of sharp little claws crawling across the faces of my babies while they slept, infecting them with Lord only knows and chewing on their nightclothes.

We closed our eyes and prayed for as long as we could, since the last of our savings was now supporting our back steps. We hoped the rats would go away, find a more suitable home, or at least just stop shitting everywhere. When you have a small house for a big family, cleanliness is above Godliness. It's above God, and my mother would *still* slap me across the face if she heard me say that. But the rats didn't leave and I had the nightmare again and again until I was nearly too exhausted to move. I woke up one night a few days later after a particularly bad one and I couldn't shake it, no matter how much I actually shook. I rocked Harry awake.

“They’re in the walls,” I hissed, “in the walls. They’re going to infect the kids.”

“What the Hell?” Harry mumbled into his pillow. “Who’s in the walls?”

“The rats. Rats are in the walls. They’re eating our food and shitting in the carpet. If I don’t watch the twins constantly they try to eat the carpet poops. I’ll never be able to look at a chocolate jimmy again. The kids are going to get rabies.”

“Lanie, you’re rambling,” he moaned. “The kids are not going to get rabies. We’ll deal with it tomorrow. Or Saturday. I’ll be home all day on Saturday. Just not now. Not now,” he repeated, “not now, not now.”

“Now!” I hit my husband with a pillow sham, which bounced satisfyingly on his head. “I’m not going to sleep until they’re gone, and while you’re off playing golf on your lunch break with the inbred dry-martini crowd, I’m at home dealing with the lunatic spawn of your *Goddamn* loins. I. Need. My. Sleep.” He was actually much more likely to be collating copies on his lunch break than playing golf, which wasn’t the point.

The Baby cooed in her crib, and I lowered my voice. “Get up and call an exterminator. Leave a message. Find one who can come over, *tomorrow*, or so help me you will get as much sleep tonight as I will. Lowest bidder, Harry. Go, go, go.”

Harry sat up and blinked at me, his big blue eyes bloodshot and almost terrifying in their intensity. He got up and stumbled downstairs in his smiley-face boxers, returning moments later with the phone book. I happily tucked the pillow sham away as Harry reached for the phone on the bedside table. I fell asleep to the soft rumble of what he called his “business voice,” drowsily leaving messages for the entire “Pest Control” tab of the Yellow Book.

I was still sleeping the next morning when the doorbell rang. Harry, either because he is a wonderful husband or because he is still terrified of me, had woken early, dressed and fed the kids, and taken them to school without letting any of them wake me. The extra sleep was better than a foot massage, but the doorbell set off the Baby, who was apparently trying to impress me with her lung capacity. My head nearly exploding, I tied on my “#1 Mommy” bathrobe from three Mothers’ Days back, snatched the Baby from her crib where she stood with arms outstretched, and sprinted downstairs. I deposited her into her playpen with a fresh pacifier, and went to the door.

On my front porch was a short man wearing a grey mechanic’s jumpsuit, so old it had been patched and re-patched with a cornucopia of fabrics in a rainbow of muted colors. His stocky frame seemed compressed, as though it originally belonged to a much taller man, and he wore a mesh baseball cap on his bald head. “Pfeiffer’s Pest Control,” it said, its original color impossible to discern. The name-tag patch sewn onto the breast pocket of his jumpsuit was embroidered, “Pfeiffer.” In one hand, he held a small stereo. In the other, a clipboard.

“Mr. Pfeiffer?” I offered, “Please come in.”

He grunted in response, looking me over. I groaned inwardly. Lowest bidder indeed.

“Pfeiffer will do.” His voice was like the grating of old machinery. He stepped inside, setting his stereo on the floor near the door.

The Baby screeched relentlessly from her playpen, now standing and shaking the rail with ever-reddening hands. I hoped it was her “hungry” screech.

“I’m assuming my husband described the problem to you?” I asked, running into the kitchen to grab a bottle.

“Yeah. Said to call him on his cell when I got in if I could come over *right first thing*,” he emphasized. “Rats are my specialty.” His chest inflated with pride in a way I’d only ever seen in Bugs Bunny cartoons.

I handed the bottle off to my daughter, who immediately quieted, plopping down in the playpen on top of a small pile of squeaky ducks, which gave a series of muffled quacks. I grimaced. So did the exterminator.

I gestured to the kitchen table, and he sat stonily while I scooped Folgers into a coffee filter. The silence seemed to seep into the room like a thick gas, poisoning us both with awkwardness.

“Well, great,” I finally ventured. “What’s the first step here?”

“I assess the problem,” Pfeiffer scribbled on the clipboard and pointedly avoided my eyes, “get you an estimate. I get rid of your rat problem, you cut me a check, ba-da-bing, ba-da-boom.”

I stifled a laugh, faking a cough. It was like someone had transplanted me into the middle of *My Cousin Vinny*. Where did this guy *come* from?

“What are your methods?” The coffee had begun to drip, and I sat down on the other side of the table.

“Humane. Non-toxic, non-harmful to you or your... litter.” He gestured to the admittedly ginger-headed family photo that hung on the wall over the table.

*I beg your pardon. My what?* I stretched my lips into something reminiscent of a smile.

“Fantastic,” I said, teeth clenched so hard I could feel a headache building.

I took the Baby and some toys into the family room, along with a cup of black coffee and two loads of unfolded laundry. I watched *Guiding Light* while Pfeiffer walked the house, pressing his ear to walls and picking droppings out of my carpet with a large pair of tweezers. He was done in less than a half-hour.

“Looks like they’re pretty much everywhere, Mrs. Hamelin,” he told me while he scrubbed his hands in my kitchen sink.

I watched dirty suds fall from his hairy mitts and coat the basin.

He continued, oblivious. “But the whole shebang should run you right around five hundred.”

“Five hundred dollars? That’s all?” I immediately forgave the grimy patina now desecrating my once-spotless sink. I could have kissed the creepy little guy. I did not.

“You bet. I’m sure you got errands to run. You go ahead, do what you gotta do. I’ll have ‘em out by the time you get the kiddies home from school. Guaranteed.” The smile he gave me was more than a little revolting: teeth, gums and lips all the wrong colors. I recoiled, suddenly clammy.

“Great. Yeah, great. Okay.” I took the Baby upstairs for a quick diaper change (I am the quick diaper-change *master*), put on a sweat suit and tied my hair up in a ponytail. As I was snapping the Baby into clean overalls, I could hear the exterminator’s stereo downstairs, playing, of all things, Simon and Garfunkel. The first sweet notes of “Scarborough Fair” drifted upstairs. I blinked at the Baby. “I don’t know about you, but I expected Guns N’ Roses,” I told her. She giggled. I was clearly the funniest person she knew. “What did *you* expect?” I asked. She shrieked and grabbed a handful of my hair.

“Are you going to Scarborough Fair?” asked the stereo. “Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Remember me to one who lives there; she once was a true love of mine.” The song ended as we descended the stairs, starting over again a moment later. I am the type of person who could never figure out the repeat function on my Discman, so I sympathized. I grabbed an extra bottle from the refrigerator and my diaper bag, and we two headed to the dry cleaner’s.

At four, I got home trailing seven hungry kids in various uniforms and outfits.

“Scarborough Fair” was again playing on the stereo, and Pfeiffer was gathering his effects.

“All through, Mrs. H,” he said, unplugging the boom box. “Invoice is on the kitchen table.” He tipped his hat and exited, nearly tripping over Shawn who had dropped a Ninja Turtle in the doorway, then dropped his backpack picking up the action figure. I draped the dry-cleaning over a kitchen chair while the kids ran into the family room to fight over the TV, my favorite babysitter. Maya (my second-favorite babysitter) set the Baby in her playpen.

Setting up to make six peanut butter sandwiches and one Lean Cuisine, I perused the invoice on the table. The logo in the top right corner had a caricature of Pfeiffer, squat and multi-patched, holding a squirming rat by its tail. The sum at the bottom read an even \$3,000. I blinked at the paper. Was it some kind of joke, some sort of *Candid Camera* “bad things happen in three’s” episode? I read it again. And again. I went over the lines of the invoice, one-by-one. Rodent infestation. Infestation removal. Cost per room, number of rooms. And there it was. Cost per room: \$500. Number of rooms: six.

My legs turned jelloid. Abandoning the open jar of peanut butter on the counter, I walked through each room of the house, searching crazily for droppings and listening at the walls for scritchings or scurrying noises. I found none. I heard none. There were none. In the family

room, my kids had decided on *Spongebob*. In the playpen, the Baby giggled. Now on some sort of stress-induced autopilot, I went back to the kitchen and poured myself a cup of now-tepid coffee. Pfeiffer wouldn't be back to his office for another half-hour, more if he had another appointment. I was so positive he had said \$500 for the whole thing. Five hundred. He'd even said it. "The whole shebang." My hands shook involuntarily, violently, and coffee spilled out of my cup into an amber pool on the table. I couldn't be bothered to wipe it up. I couldn't even swallow.

When Harry got home, dinner was not waiting. Just me, sitting at the kitchen table with the invoice, holding the Baby, who was gumming small pieces of dried apricot prepared by Maya. My biggest girl. I told him the story. He checked the pantry for more chewed-upon foodstuffs. There were none.

"We can't pay this," I murmured. "It's too much. He said five hundred for the whole thing. That was the estimate. Five hundred." I repeated it over and over, "five hundred," knowing full well I sounded like a lunatic.

Harry leaned over and kissed my forehead. "We'll figure it out. I'll call the guy tomorrow. Let's order pizza tonight, hmm?" He reached into the drawer where we kept the take-out menus and wandered into the family room to take a vote on toppings.

The next day was Saturday, and Harry called Pfeiffer the moment we woke up. We were attacked in bed by Shawn, Benny, and Beth, who demanded chocolate-chip pancakes. My kids were better than any alarm-clock. I could hear Harry on the phone in the bedroom while I mixed

a vat of batter in my robe and slippers. The sound of a phone being slammed onto its cradle rocked the house, and Harry appeared, red-faced.

“The smarmy S.O.B. said he never told you five hundred for the whole thing. Says he’s sure he told you it was *per room*,” Harry vented. “Said he expects payment *in full* or he’s going to be forced to *take action*.” He ran his hands through his hair. “You didn’t get an estimate in writing, did you?”

I flipped a pancake, and a chill went through me. “No. He said five hundred, then he rushed me out the door so he could get to work. I didn’t think...” I added the pancake to the stack growing on a platter next to the stove. “I didn’t think.” How stupid. Who forgets something like that?

“I told him, like hell we were paying *in full*. I told him we’re reporting him to the Better Business Bureau and that if need be he’d be hearing from my attorney,” Harry concluded, the vein in his forehead pulsing. We didn’t have an attorney, which wasn’t the point.

“What does ‘S.O.B.’ mean?” asked Joy, who was drinking orange juice at the kitchen table.

“Nothing,” we answered together.

Over the next few weeks, we received increasingly irate calls from Pfeiffer nearly every day, and invoices every other day through the mail. Harry instructed the children that they were not allowed to answer the telephone, even the older ones, and had taken to hanging up the phone as soon as he answered. I didn’t pick it up at all during the day when I was home alone. I set up a system with my mother that she should let the phone ring once, hang up, and call back thirty seconds later to signal herself. Clearly, things were getting out of control.

I started to see Pfeiffer everywhere, and I am not what you would call the hallucinatory type. I saw him waiting in line behind me at the grocery store, sitting in front of the house in his truck, across the street from my butcher. Soon he started showing up at Shawn's baseball practice, Maya and Beth's cheerleading, Benny's band rehearsals. The words, "You'll be sorry" wound up mysteriously spray-painted across my van overnight. The day I found him parked outside the kids' school was the day I called the police. They agreed to meet with us, and suggested a possible restraining order until the finances were "straightened out."

Harry told them we had no intention of paying. "It's fraud, pure and simple," he said. "We're not negotiating."

They nodded and told us to call them the next time we saw the exterminator. No written estimate, they said. Might not hold up in court. The next day, yet another invoice arrived, stamped "Final Notice" with bright red ink.

No more droppings were found in the carpeting.

I woke up early on June 26<sup>th</sup>. I don't know why. The magnolia tree outside our bedroom was gently tapping on the window as I stumbled out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom, the morning light almost blinding. As I passed the twin's room, I poked my head inside, out of habit. The bunk beds were empty. In the girls' room, no one laid under their canopies. The boys' sapphire-colored room sat quiet, unoccupied. I ran back to my room and peeked into the Baby's crib. Empty. Harry was still sleeping. I flew down the stairs into the family room, but the TV was off and the room was quiet. My heart plummeted into my feet so rapidly that it felt like I was walking on it every time I took a step.

"Harry!" I screamed, running desperately into the kitchen. "Harry!"

He came thumping down the stairs; by the time he got to me I was in full panic.

“The kids,” I panted by way of explanation, “The kids, the kids, the kids!” My kids, my kids. Gone. My kids were gone. “The kids are gone.”

The blood drained from Harry’s face. “I’m calling the police,” he whispered, and rushed into the kitchen for the phone.

Running towards the front door, I heard it, the unmistakable serenade of Simon and Garfunkel. Plugged in near the front door was the exterminator’s stereo. I struggled to breathe; the air in the room felt thick as water. Harry caught up to me, phone in his hand, jaw on the floor as I stared at the stereo, dumbfounded. The song faded out, then began again.

“Are you going to Scarborough Fair?” it sang, “Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.”

I miss my kids. I miss going to bed exhausted by the overwhelming joy produced by raising seven beautiful boys and girls. I miss cherry liquid cough medicine and Dora the Explorer band-aids. I miss the secret babbling language the twins used to tell each other jokes. I miss stretching a dollar with economy-sized crates of Lucky Charms and kegs of ketchup. I even miss the Jonas Brothers. The detective assigned to our case says there are no new developments. He says they just disappeared, faded out like the last notes of a song falling from the air.

## Magic Beans

It's been two weeks since I've eaten anything but scrambled eggs and ramen noodles. You can't beat the math: a pack of ramen is a whole meal for thirty-five cents plus the cost of boiling water; two eggs is a whole meal and that means you get six meals in a carton for less than two dollars. I'm almost out of the cash I stowed away from working the "manual labor division" of Goldblatt & Sons Landscaping, which is my resume's way of saying that I wheeled shit, dug shit, dragged shit, and cut shit all day and came home smelling like a Goddamn box of tree-shaped air fresheners. I got sacked three weeks ago, for smoking a bowl during my break. I mean, that's not entirely fair; I got sacked because I got caught.

Do you have any idea how much easier it is to sod three acres of some rich douchebag's obscenely huge backyard when you're blitzed out of your skull? It is so easy. It's a piece of piss. It's how I got through my day. If I woke up every morning with a clear memory of how much my life sucked the day before, I never would have made it into work.

But, whatever. That was then, this is now and now I'm finding it increasingly difficult to find another line of work. My resume may be jazzed up and sound professional, but I only have one previous employer for a reference and the only thing he'll do for me is call me a "stoner jackass" and start screaming shit from *Reefer Madness*. The last three guys who interviewed me were needless to say, less than impressed. Also, I could really use a haircut but ironically can't afford one until I have some form of employment. I'm starting to look like Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*. Zoinks.

So, I'm budgeting. My parents wouldn't give a hand out to their drugged-up drop-out loser kid, even if I sucked it up and asked. I'd have to send the request by carrier pigeon

anyway, since they haven't answered my calls for months. Last time right before my old man hung up on me, he went on some diatribe about how I "reflect poorly" on the family. I was really only half-listening.

I haven't touched pot in over a week, both to be sharp in job interviews and because I just can't fucking afford it. This unrelenting period of mental clarity has led to outstanding productivity on my part. Today, for example, I blitzkrieged this shitbox apartment that I currently call home and cleaned it into submission. I even got some laundry done, but since I don't have cash for the machines I sort of just piled some clothes in my tub with hot water and a chunk of Irish Spring, and stomped on it all with my bare feet like I was trying to make wine. I also did a sweep of all the crap under my couch, the whole time thanking my lucky stars that my mattress and box-spring lie flush with the floor. I can't imagine what sorts of reanimated sandwich creatures would be living under there if I had a bed frame.

If cleanliness is next to Godliness and God helps those who help themselves, the Big Guy really came through for me today. Among the fist-sized wads of dust fluff, Twix wrappers and roaches was something sparkly that I recognized as my Mom's cow pin. She went through a bizarre 4-H phase where all her accessories were livestock-based, and my Dad bought her a diamond-encrusted cow brooch for her birthday that year. It is exactly as ridiculous as it sounds. There's even a teeny gold bell on its collar that actually jingles. Mom lost it last year when she helped me move into Home Sweet Shitbox, but between their place, my place, the van and the disproportionate amount of time she spent barking orders at us from the sidewalk, she never found it.

I am going to pawn this sucker like there's no pawning in tomorrow. I am going to pawn this ugly, tacky little cow-pin so fast that even the dust bunnies won't know it was here. *Reflect this on the family, Douchebag*, I think as I walk out the door.

I meet T.J. on the way to Bo's Pawn, Guns and Porno Emporium, my friendly neighborhood sleaze shop. T.J. is a white Rasta with deluded aspirations of dealing a big market like Chicago or L.A. For right now though, he spends his time in various alleys in my neighborhood, twisting his dreads and nodding indiscreetly at passers-by in a way that's like a striped pole at a barber shop. I want to say he sees me coming, but T.J. likes to say that he can smell a repeat customer a mile away.

"Fi, fi, fo, fum, Mo'fucka." He greets me warmly and shakes my hand, "You here for a refill on your meds?" He laughs, like a train braking on icy tracks.

"No, T.J." I start to walk away.

"Oh come on, Man, I got some primo ganja today, the stickiest of icky, the coolest of cooly. And it can be yours for the low, low price of... Well, what you got?" He stops playing with a wooden bead on a particularly fat dread and looks me up and down.

"Nothing. I got nothing. I got no job, I got no food, I got no cash. I'm going right now to pawn this piece of shit—" I pull the cow-pin out of my pocket, "— so I can eat something other than Oriental-flavored ramen for the first time in weeks. So, no, I got nothing."

T.J. grabs for the pin, but being sober has sharpened my reflexes and I'm just faster than he is.

"*Dude*, man. You're selling that just so you can get some variety? Try the Shrimp flavor next time or the Beef flavor or something, man. Do you know how much ganj you can get for

that?” He pulls out a baggy of greenish herb closed with a twist-tie. “Smell this, man. Just breathe this shit in.”

I take it from him, and it does smell rather delightful, spicy and rich.

“How much, exactly?”

When he smiles, his teeth are as blonde as his white-boy dreads.

I know I suck. I really, really suck. I’m pathetic, and weak, and all-around no good. What is not pathetic, or weak, or all-around no good is the pot I barter from T.J. in a masterful quantity in exchange for the Tackiest Pin Ever. I roll a nice, fat joint when I get back to my shitbox and it looks better to me than a plate full of real food. On my first puff all I can think is, *No wonder my parents won’t speak to me.*

Within a half hour, though, all I can think about is a plate full of real food. Munchies are munchies, but after two weeks of crappy fried noodles and poorly-fried eggs, I am desperate for a bacon cheeseburger. I have thirty dollars in my checking account and I paid rent last week, so I rationalize that I can definitely get another job by the next time I’m out of eggs, and book it to Blarney’s.

Blarney’s is the bar I’ve been drinking at since I got my first fake I.D. at age 17, and it should tell you something that no one noticed that my name, birth date and picture changed when I turned 21. It’s really trying to be an Irish pub, which is fine except that the owners are Portuguese from Dallas. That being the case, it’s more of a caricature of an Irish pub than the real thing. The place is shades of green with gold accents from ceiling to floor; the bar-stools and counter a lovely emerald while the walls are more of a mint. The result is like drinking inside a sour apple Jolly Rancher. An enormous pine-green shamrock is painted above the door,

with the words “Erin go Bragh” in what is clearly the most Irish-looking font the printer could find. Above the bar in golden letters is the phrase, “Luck o’ the Irish,” and the napkin-holders are little red-haired leprechauns. The beer selection is limited to crappy domestics and pints of Guinness, but they have plenty of whiskeys behind the bar. Also, I’ve always had a crush on the barmaid. And also, there’s no other bar within walking distance.

I don’t have to fight for a seat at the bar tonight, which is just as well because I don’t think I’m in any state to deal with a bunch of drunk assholes who think St. Patty’s Day came early. The barmaid springs over, Missy, who has glowing black hair down to her ass and pale, freckled boobs nearly leaping out of her shirt. I try not to stare, and she laughs. It’s our usual dance, but it’s never gotten past this. I order a whiskey sour and a Shamrock Burger, which is a bacon cheeseburger made with “fine-aged Irish cheddar” that is pretty obviously just melted Velveeta.

I watch Missy making my whiskey sour. Her mesmerizing top half jiggles with every shake of the shaker, to my slightly altered mental state, becoming synchronized with the comforting sound of ice hitting metal. She doesn’t take her eyes off me, watching me watching her, even when she reaches into the container of bright red cherries to plop one into the lowball glass. She licks the syrup off her fingers before pouring my drink. It stains her lips a subtle pink.

“You’re really gunning for tips tonight, huh?” I ask and laugh awkwardly. When I’m high, I think I’m hilarious.

Lucky for me, she titters, which I notice also makes her boobs bounce a bit.

“We do what we have to,” she tells me.

I'm immediately struck by what I'm convinced is depth and wisdom behind her words. She punctuates her statement with a wink. Her eyes are hazel, I notice. For some reason in my head, they're always blue.

Before I can get too lost in inappropriate fantasy, my burger arrives. The fries are limp and over-salted, but I devour everything on my plate, including the garnish, with a thick layer of ketchup. My whiskey sour is as good as could be expected with the radioactive-colored mix Blarney's buys, and I'm about to pour the entire thing down my throat when Missy stops me.

"You've got a little ketchup, uh..." she mimes wiping her cheek with a finger.

I swipe at my face with a napkin and miss. Plucking another napkin from the nearest leprechaun, Missy leans towards me, resting her breasts on the bar, and dabs the ketchup from my cheek.

"Got it." She smiles. I smile. The whole world is smiling. Just then, the flannel-clad guy at the other end of the bar calls her over, and she shrugs apologetically. I eye the bottle of Heinz and wonder if she'd see me applying more ketchup to myself. It's 10:30, her shift is over at midnight, and I resolve right then to stay until she gets off. I swallow my drink while she's gone, and order another when she returns.

I keep drinking as an excuse not to leave, but in order to have enough left for a tip I consign myself to nursing pints of domestic alligator piss. It's not as much fun to watch Missy pour a beer as it is to watch her shake a drink, but whatever. We do what we have to, right? By last call at 11:45 I'm certainly not high anymore, but it's been replaced by a tranquil and almost understated drunk.

I pay with my debit card and leave enough of a tip to equal exactly thirty dollars. *Well, we're definitely fucked now*, my mind tells me. My crotch says, *We'd better be*. While the

handful of barflies clears out, Missy wipes down the green bar with large circular swipes of a damp towel. When she slings it over her shoulder, its moisture makes the white fabric translucent. She's wearing a hot pink bra. She comes over to my side of the counter and hops onto the stool next to me.

"I'm totally beat," she says absent-mindedly. "I can't wait to get home and just relax."

I'm a complete idiot, but I'm not dumb enough to miss this particular opportunity. I've got a healthy bit of T.J's weed stashed in the pocket of my sweatshirt, which I pull out for her consideration.

"If you're interested, I can certainly help with that." I replay this sentence in my mind to detect notes of sleaziness or slurring. I think I'm okay.

She grins, and I know I'm okay. "Your place or mine?"

My mind goes to my shitbox which, while unusually clean, is nonetheless still a shitbox.

"Yours, if that's okay." I backpedal almost immediately. I don't want her to think I'm a creep, and I accidentally tell the truth. "My place is disgusting."

Missy laughs, and it's just fine with me if she thinks I was kidding. She glances at the Guinness clock behind the bar.

"My place is fine."

The wooden stairs and porches that line the back of Missy's apartment building are painted an earthy green. By floor six, I barely notice the color. I'm so exhausted, I barely notice any colors at all.

"Elevator's broken," was all she said when we arrived.

I was so blinded by her radiant beauty (you buy that, right?) that I could think of nothing else, even what now seems like thousands of flights of stairs from the ground to her apartment. She lives on the top floor.

Gasping for air and feeling as though my very life is slipping away, I try to concentrate on Missy's ass as she climbs the stairs in front of me. Up, down, up, down, each side repeats endlessly. I allow myself to become hypnotized, recognizing it as perhaps my only hope of survival. We finally arrive, and I hold onto the wall as she digs out her key to open the door, due to my legs becoming suddenly unable to support my weight.

"Refreshing," I enthuse as she looks me over. I nod wildly for emphasis.

She finally gets the door open, and I collapse onto the first piece of furniture I see, a brown pleather sofa that has seen better days.

"Water," I gasp. "Water."

Missy giggles. "Someone's not used to exercise." She goes into the kitchen and I can hear water gushing into a glass, followed by the plunk-plunk of ice cubes. I nearly grab the proffered water out of her hands when she returns.

"I'm a landscaper," I only half-lie, "I'm used to exercise. This isn't exercise. This is some form of torture. I think the Aztecs invented it to slowly kill war prisoners." I gulp the water down and she laughs again. *Good*, I think. If I can keep her laughing, maybe she won't notice that I'm scared shitless.

She sits down next to me, and the sofa makes an unattractive farting noise. I notice then that the floor is covered in brown shag carpeting, roughly the same shade as the couch. The place is tiny and drab. It could easily be a shitbox to match even mine, if it wasn't lived in by a girl who apparently has actual standards for cleanliness. The decorative fireplace is stuffed with

cotton-candy-colored issues of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. Barware lines the mantel: a silver shaker, cocktail stirrers tipped with plastic cherries, plastic martini glasses with pink zebra stripes. You've got to love a girl who brings her work home with her.

She kicks off her shoes and puts her feet in my lap. "It's not much," she says.

"It's fantastic," I assure her, my eyes now riveted to her toes, which are painted the fiery red of a vintage Corvette.

"Break out that shit you've got in your pocket and I'll give you the grand tour." She winks at me, and my muscles feel like they're melting. It's all I can do to keep it together enough to roll a joint. When I'm about to lick the paper to seal it, she takes it from me and runs her tongue along the edge, then pinches it closed. I am in. I am so in. Now, the useless melted muscle goo sitting under my skin starts jumping around like it's looking for an exit. I remember this feeling. I'm about to get laid.

"Ladies first," says Missy, digging around in her pocket for a lighter. Her jeans are too tight, and she has to lean back in order to reach in far enough. It is completely adorable. She pulls out a tube of strawberry lip gloss and curses. "I swear I had a lighter in here," she mumbles.

I pull out my own and give her a light. She cups her hands around mine to protect the flame even though we're inside, brushing the back of my hands with the tips of her fingers. She exhales and sighs, passing the joint to me. Then, she takes my free hand to lead me into her bedroom, and I'm worried she's going to feel everything that I'm thinking through my skin.

Missy's bedroom is a fucking nightmare of pastel colors, accented with blocky black furniture: a desk and chair, two night-tables, an enormous wardrobe along one wall. I can't

remember the last time I saw a wardrobe, but it makes sense: there's no closet in here. It smells like artificial strawberries and something creamy that might be vanilla. Next to the brown shag that reaches even into her bedroom, the landscape of pinks, purples, yellows and greens looks overrun with weeds.

For a few minutes, we lie side-by-side in her bed without touching, passing the joint back and forth in absolute silence. She doesn't ask any more about me, although she doesn't know much, and I get the feeling that she doesn't care. She drops the smoldering remnants of the joint into the ashtray on her night table. When she leans over to kiss me, I think, *I'm going to have to find a new bar.*

Missy tastes like the same strawberries of which her room smells, and for a second my senses are overloaded. I forget momentarily the next step, but suddenly remember my earlier glimpse of her Barbie-colored bra. Reaching around her, I pull off her t-shirt and drop it to the floor. She kisses me harder, and behind all that saccharin I can taste ashes. I'm trying to figure out a graceful way to undo my own pants (of which I'm convinced there are none) when we hear keys in the door.

I'm about to vocalize my surprise when she clamps her hand over my mouth.

"Shit!" she hisses. "Shit, shit, shit!" She pulls me off the bed and over to her wardrobe. "Get in," she instructs, rushing to put her shirt back on. "My boyfriend is here. I thought he was working all night."

"Get in *where*?" I try to shout in a whisper and find it nearly impossible. "Your *what*? You want me to get in *where* to hide from your *what*!?"

"I'm sorry! I'll explain later." Her eyes are pleading.

I rationalize that this isn't the worst thing that's happened to me in a girl's bedroom. I groan and climb into the wardrobe, crouching next to a sea of flip-flops and an outcast pair of suede boots.

"Stay here until I come get you. I'll try to get rid of him but *he can't find you here.*" She closes the wardrobe door and rushes out to head off her previously-irrelevant boyfriend.

I open it a crack and peer out. I hear an unintelligible, somewhat frantic back-and-forth between Missy and a rumbling male voice, which begins to move closer to the bedroom.

The thing that precedes Missy through the bedroom door is like the sickening lovechild of a kaijuu movie and a skinhead thriller. He is meatier than the biggest wad of beef. I can't believe he can even fit through the doorframe. He's bald from the neck up but furry from the neck down, wearing a brown tank top that clings to his frame and exaggerates the ripples of his build. I can see the outline of his nipple piercings. His hands are the size of my whole head. I didn't know they made guys this big. He lies down on her bed, hands behind his head, his feet hanging off the end of the mattress. I concentrate on not pissing myself. It's somewhat bizarre and grotesque, this monstrosity lying on top of that girly bedspread.

Missy stands in the doorway, shifting her weight from side to side like she has to pee.

"I thought you were working all night," she complains.

"Got off early," it says. "Thought I'd come see my baby."

"I have a headache, if you know what I mean," she tries. "Tonight isn't good."

The mammoth on the bed snorts. "Don't flatter yourself, Missy. My apartment smells like ass right now and I just need a place to crash." He pauses. "I'm totally beat, so you go right ahead and keep those clothes on, if you can."

“Look, Thor –” Yeah, that figures, “— tonight really isn’t good. Can you please just crash at your place?”

“Look, *Missy*,” he spits out her name like it’s a bad word, “it’s late. I’m tired. All I want to do is count my tips and go to sleep. You think I can fucking do that? Count my tips and go to sleep? Is that a really big problem for you? A big inconvenience to share a bed with your man?”

I glance at Missy, who is staring directly at the floor. The behemoth continues.

“In fact, why don’t you walk your sweet little ass into the kitchen and grab me a beer while I start counting this?” He pulls a chunk of singles as thick as a romance novel out of his back pocket and drags it across his face, inhaling deeply for dramatic effect.

What a fucking tool. Missy casts a sideways look at the wardrobe where I’m currently huddled, trying not to breathe. She walks out of the room. I’m stuck. Oh my God, I’m stuck. This guy could crush my skull like a Christmas ornament and I’m stuck.

The disgusting colossus takes off his immense shoes, then his enormous watch, then leans back with his tip cash. He paws through it expertly, and I can see that even though it’s mostly singles and fives, he’s probably holding two- if not three-hundred dollars. I salivate a little despite myself. Missy returns, handing him an open bottle of beer. While he tips back a swig, she winks at me, then turns and walks out of the room.

Only a couple minutes after slurping down the last of the brew, Thor is snoring loudly and sounds like a downshifting truck. I cringe. My toes are starting to fall asleep. Missy still hasn’t come back, but I’m willing to take my chances. The wardrobe door creaks when I open it, and I dive back in. But, the monster sleeps on. As I stealthily sneak out of the room, my eyes land on Thor’s tip money, which sits on his chest, moving up and down with each snort. I’m

officially sober, and realize that I officially possess zero dollars. Not a penny. It doesn't take a lot to convince myself to pocket the cash.

From there, it's not too much of a leap to also filch the huge douchebag's watch, which is huge and gold and resting on Missy's nightstand. I promise myself that this time I will take the T.J.-free route to Bo's, and maybe I can get enough for the watch to pay next month's rent.

Pockets full of treasures, I am literally one foot out of the room when the watch alarm goes off. Paralyzed, I look back at Thor, who is looking directly at me.

"*What the fuck!?*" Thor leaps out of bed, his ugly, beady eyes wild. He lunges towards me, and my legs finally obey the frantic "flee" signals from my brain. I run through the living room where Missy is lying on the couch, her hands over her face. She sits up as I run by, hopping over the arm of the sofa and out the back door.

"Asshole took my watch!" Thor yells to her.

"I'll call you!" I yell. Perhaps not the smartest thing to say. I start out dashing down the stairs, but quickly realize that my feet could easily go out from under me this way, leaving my body broken on someone's porch. I take the more efficient route, and start sliding down the banisters from flight to flight. After three banisters, my ass is burning but Thor still hasn't caught up. I can hear him thundering down the stairs above me, sounding like his feet could come crashing down on me at any minute. I slide faster.

"You fucking punk!" I hear from above, his voice dropping like bombs at my heels.

Missy's neighbors five floors down have a large potted plant on their back porch, which I knock over with my shin, spilling potting soil all over the only closed-toed shoes I currently own. I see stars for a second, sure my shin is bleeding or bruised or busted in half, but I can't stop moving. I hop up onto the next banister, and as I'm sliding I think about how much Irish Spring

it'll take to stamp the gross out of my Chuck Taylors, and how long they'll take to dry. Within seconds my feet are touching the sweet, sweet sidewalk.

That's when I hear the crack, what sounds like the entire Goddamn stairwell splitting open behind me. I turn around just as Thor begins rolling down the stairs, his knees thumping on each step on the way down, his head bouncing with the sound of bone hitting floor, enormous mitts scrambling to break his fall. From the scattered soil rolling down with him, he seems to have tripped over the errant plant and gone down headfirst. He lands on the concrete next to me, and I can already see that his arms are scratched, his chin leaking blood. On his back, gasping for breath, arms spread like Christ on steroids, he almost looks pathetic. I decide almost instantly not to stick around to see if the brachiating simian has a concussion.

I glance at the watch that caused all the trouble. The alarm beeps once again, and I reconsider it. With a pocket literally full of cash money, I don't need this kind of trouble. I drop it on his heaving chest, which is when I hear the pitter-pat of adorable little feet on the stairs, little feet with adorable little cherry-red toenails. I take one last glance at the fallen giant bleeding on the sidewalk, and book it the fuck out of there. I wonder where I can find a cab this time of night.

*Definitely going to have to find a new bar, I think.*