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Life in Color

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Colby College

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LIFE IN COLOR

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“Did you see James the other day? He was staring right at you!”

“No, no he wasn’t!”

“Yes he was!”

Lily buried her face in the sales rack, deliberately turning her back to Ann. A hand on her shoulder made her pause. “Seriously, Lily- you’re in high school and—it’s a little embarrassing—you get straight A’s, but that means nothing if you don’t have a boyfriend. The only other girls who haven’t dated anyone yet are the ones no one talks to.”

Lily pulled away and fled to the back of the store, but Ann refused to be dissuaded. “What is your deal? It’s not like boys don’t like you! You just never give them any encouragement!”

A shadow flitted across Lily’s face. “Encouragement?” Why encourage them? What’s here to like anyways?

“Yes, encouragement! Smile at them more! Touch their arm when you’re talking to them! Wear something a little risqué!”

“Like what?”

Ann frowned and turned back to the racks. Triumphanty, she held up a skirt. “Like this!”

It was a white jean skirt, neatly hemmed and a half size too small. “But that’s so short!”

“Exactly.”

“But... are you sure? I don’t want to look slutty.”

“What’s the harm in looking slutty sometimes? Come on, you don’t want to be one of those girls no one talks to!”

“Okay...” Lily sighed and accepted the skirt.
Two days later, Lily joined Ann’s other group of friends on Bradford Beach, wearing the skirt at Ann’s coaching. Feeling naked with so much of her brown legs exposed, Lily edged towards the two people she knew. James saw her coming and waved her over; Lily smiled, trying to suppress her nerves. “Hi,” she squeaked and ducked to study the sand.

“Hey, Lily.” James’ voice was smooth and filled with his smile.

At Ann’s gentle poke, Lily cleared her throat and tried again. “Hi James.”

“Guys, this is Lily.”

“Hey girl.”

“How’s it going?”

Ann edged left, creating space between her and James. Lily took the hint and casually plopped down, only to have James casually throw his arm around her, laughing at the darkening sky. Lily pretended to laugh with him, her heart pounding, leaning away towards her friend. Ann nudged Lily back into James’ embrace. He gently squeezed her shoulders and smiled this huge, warm, award-winning smile. Lily couldn’t help but smile back.

On their way back up the hill, James spoke only with her. Suddenly, Lily was the center of someone else’s world and, although she still couldn’t figure out why, she realized she loved it. As the group split in two to head back to their two neighborhoods, James suddenly got quiet. Concerned she’d said something stupid, Lily instantly shut up.

Just as Lily turned to head back to the East Side, James grabbed her hand for a moment. “Wanna see that new movie with me sometime?”

Her mouth went dry. She swallowed. “Yeah, sure.”

He smiled at her and she felt like the most beautiful girl in the world.
A week later, Lily was waiting just inside the Landmark Oriental Theater. She peered into one of the mirrors lining the hall and smoothed her curly black hair and studied her figure. She’d chosen to wear the lucky white skirt again, but Ann had picked out a different shirt for her, a cute button-up with just one button too many undone. She saw James push open the gilt-framed doors and look around anxiously. He was wearing a nice shirt she’d never seen before. She gave him a jerky wave and a wavering smile. He grinned and led her up to the ticketing booth.

They got popcorn to share, though she made him carry it- Lily didn’t want to get butter on her skirt. He got a giant Coke and she stole a few sips while he was busy juggling the tickets and the popcorn, smirking at him as he called her out on it.

The movie, *The Illusionist*, looked good, but Lily couldn’t quite focus on it; James kept tickling her palm. She caught his eye and caught her breath. His smile was soft, gentle. He leaned towards her and gently pushed his lips against hers. She melted against him and lost track of the film’s plot.

* 

The skirt’s hem was let down once in the following six months, then a second time in the next year. She never gave up on her lucky skirt, though it wasn’t always as lucky on test days at school. After one such unfortunate test on a Friday, she made plans to meet her friends at Jason’s house just on the east side of the river.

As she puckered for the lip gloss and stared down her reflection for eye liner, she caught sight of her skirt. It *was* a bit shorter on her than it was last fall. She hesitated. *Change outfits?* She turned sideways in the mirror. *Nah, it’s fine.* Her mother let her out of the house in the skirt, so it wasn’t *too* short.

The Polish District was inaccurately named; it was mostly populated by hipsters who worked or hung out on Brady Street just to the south or by UW-Milwaukee students who couldn’t afford the duplexes north of North Avenue.
Jason answered the door on the second ring and she leaned in to kiss him.

“Hey you. How’d that test go?”

She grimaced. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

“I’ve got a solution, if not thinking is what you want,” he replied, a twinkle in his eye.

She frowned. “Jason, we talked about that—”

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” he interrupted. “My old man is gone tonight, and my brother’s around. We’ve got beer and stuff! Come on,” he laughed, leading her by the wrist downstairs.

Their friends were gathered around the basement, lounging on couches while MTV blared “I kissed a girl, and I liked it!” There were cans of beer on everything—speak...
“You are so lucky to have Jason, you know.” One of her friends leaned over the couch’s arm to stare down at her. “He’s got arms like a swimmer and abs like a washboard. Mmm... Once you’re done with him, can I hop on that love train?”

She looked up at her friend, terrified. *Jason won’t always be with me?*

Both girls looked up at the people tromping down the stairs. Jason was leading down another girl wearing a tiny, lacy shirt and tight jeans. As he handed her a beer, his eyes twinkled.

The white skirt wasn’t as perfectly white anymore. It also looked really plain. Maybe something to dress it up a bit would be nice.

*

Lily giggled as the effects of her second of tequila took effect. She passed the bottle back to her friend Liza, who slipped what was left into her backpack. “I like tequila,” Lily admitted, marveling at how it seemed to slide into her stomach and send waves of bliss back up to her head.

“It makes me feel silly,” Caroline added.

“I think Carol’s had enough,” Lily stage-whispered to Liza. “I, however, would love to take another shot.”

“Well, if you’re a heavyweight like your parents are, you can have some more later. No being drunk yet,” Liza warned.

“Don’t be a jerk- you know I can handle my liquor!” Lily scowled playfully, adding “Tequila Nazi.”

“Hey, this stuff cost me good money!”

“All right, all right; I was just kidding! Next bottle’s on me, okay?” Lily offered her hand in mock agreement. Liza took it and grabbed Caroline, who had started trying to ask a tree to dance with her.

The three girls tottered down the sidewalk on their way to the dance in UW-Milwaukee’s student center, laughing at each other and, especially Caroline, who couldn’t quite get the hang of her heels.
Lily smiled up to the city-lit sky. Winter had finally broken its hold on Milwaukee and she’d finally gotten a chance to wear her lucky skirt. There was a subtle color difference between where the skirt would crease across her lap and where it was exposed to books, bags, and midnight quesadillas. Eyelet lace had been added to the bottom of the skirt, giving it another inch in length. The rip along the back waist and the body of the skirt had been problematic until Lily “borrowed” some lace from the theater’s scene shop to patch it. She thought it looked delightfully distressed, and the guys definitely noticed her. Her lucky skirt had gotten her four boyfriends between 9th grade and sophomore year of college!

When they finally reached the dance—ankles miraculously intact—and heard the throbbing music, Caroline revived a bit. “Come on! There won’t be any good guys left!”

Laughing, Lily trotted to keep up with her and Liza. The room was almost pitch black; the strobe offered glimpses of sound-silhouetted still life. Lily entered the fray as the techno song hit its pinnacle to find Caroline and Liza, who had already joined the flip-book bouncing crowd.

Swirling, weaving, swaying within the tiny box allotted to them by the dancing mass, Liza, Caroline, and Lily danced for each other, cutting out everyone else, a proven method to get white guys to notice them. Within five minutes, there were four white boys vying for their attention, grouped around the outside of their triangle, trying to grind up on the girls. The girls each picked one and turned away from each other. Lily had chosen a tall, Nordic-looking guy with a goofy smile on his face who said his name was Aksel. She fit into his arms so comfortably that she actually considered taking him home for a bit before she realized that was probably the tequila talking.

In the middle of her favorite song, someone grabbed Lily’s shoulder. “Caroline’s sick!” Liza shouted over the music. “We’re in the bathroom!”

“I’ll be right there!” Lily responded, wanting to finish the song with Aksel, her Norse god.
After making her excuses, Lily wove her way to the bathroom, dodging exhibitionist couples plastered against the walls. Pushing past the short line of girls, Lily entered the bathroom. “Liza?” No response. “Caroline? Liza?” Nothing. Confused, Lily returned to the dance. They’d agreed they’d all stay together or leave together- where were they?

A glimpse of shiny, straightened black hair on the dance floor, a pink dress on chocolate skin. Liza? Lily dove back into the masses, wondering if Caroline’s sickness had been a false alarm. She got to where she thought she’d seen Liza, but she wasn’t there. Someone nearly bowled Lily over- it was a girl with the same hair treatment as Liza had. Lily started trying to push her way out of the mass of people.

While waiting for two couples making out the move so she could get through, Lily felt a guy start grinding on her from behind. She turned to tell him off and saw that it was the fourth guy who’d wanted to dance with her and her friends, who’d lost out. He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her close, over one of his legs. “I’m glad you didn’t leave,” he whisper-shouted. He reeked of whisky.

“ar actually just about to,” Lily replied, gently pushing away.

He pulled her even closer. “Without dancing with me first? That’s rude.”

“I have to go.”

“Come on, just one dance?”

“I’m sorry, no.”

“I won’t leave you alone until you dance with me for one song.”

Lily sighed. “Fine.” He was drunk- what harm could he possibly do?

A new song started and he crushed her hips to his, his hands squeezing her lower back, working their way gradually lower. When they reached her butt, Lily couldn’t ignore it any longer.

“Hey. Hey! Stop-“ she was cut off as he shoved her against a wall, her head slamming backwards. Her vision spinning, the music pounding in time with her head, Lily blinked, trying to understand what was happening. He’d pulled up her skirt so the stiff material shielded her stomach and
was rubbing against her, one hand squeezing her breast through her shirt. She pushed him, but not hard
enough- he just came right back and started sucking on her neck. Lily shoved him again, harder. He
stumbled back into the crowd, bouncing off a couple to charge back at her. He slapped her hard.

“Whore,” he spat, and stalked away.

Lily sunk to the ground, one hand cradling her cheek, the other trying to pull down her skirt,
now speckled by tears.

* 

Lily peered into her closet, examining her skirt collection. There was the short jean one she’d
have to wear tights with, the frilly black one that didn’t really go with anything, the longer sage one
she’d purchased for her job interviews, and the white one. Instinctively, she reached for the white one,
holding it up to examine it in the light.

The skirt had seen a lot of her life- getting together with James, catching Jason cheating, that
awful night at the dance, her senior superlative for best-dressed... It had gotten her exactly what Ann,
her old friend, had promised: boys, affection, and attention.

But.

But the guys hadn’t gotten her anywhere. They didn’t deserve to be on a pedestal. Lily looked
up in the mirror and saw her lightly freckled face, her curling black hair, and her patient brown eyes. She
had been the one to ace the organic chemistry final, the one to finish fourth in her class. She had been
admitted to Marquette University’s law school, the one person in her family to succeed in academics.

She put the white skirt back in her closet.

“Lily! Lily, come on!” Jena was knocking on her door. “Lily, we’re going to be late for
graduation!” There was a note of panic in her voice.

Lily smiled. “Don’t worry; I’m coming.”

*I’m there.*
II. Black Ink

The application read Claire Murphy, to be rooming with her one-year old daughter Rose. She listed her employment for the past three years as Silk Exotic Dancers, Gentlemen’s Club and was currently living in a building owned by Greaves, Unlimited.

The in-over-her-head temp, meant to act only as an assistant to a TBD leasing agent who was never actually hired, looked up at Claire. Claire, with straight, medium-length brown hair, a light dusting of freckles and blue eyes, cradled hazel-eyed Rose against her chest; whether it was for her own comfort or Rose’s was unclear.

“Do you remember which building you looked at?” asked the temp, noticing several blanks on the application.

“Oh, the cheapest one. I think they said rent would be about six-hundred-twenty-five dollars a month?” Claire responded, gently hefting the red-headed Rose higher on to her hip.

“That’d be the Prospective Apartments,” murmured the temp, jotting down the building on the application. “And when were you looking to move in?”

“I’d just like to live in a new place,” Claire said, her voice soft. “It doesn’t matter when exactly, but soon would be good.”

“Well, when did you give your landlord notice to vacate?” the temp asked, smiling at Rose as she gurgled and stuck her fist in her mouth.

“Notice to vacate?”

The temp frowned. “You have to give your landlord notice to vacate. Usually 60 days’ notice.”

“Oh.” Claire frowned. “What day is it again?”

“June fourth, 2008.” The temp grimaced—who gives the year—then continued, “You could probably give notice today and still move out at the end of July.”
“Oh, that would be good.”

“August it is then.” The temp smiled encouragingly at Claire, then turned back to the application. “You didn’t write down your income here.”

“Oh, it changes; I wasn’t sure what to put down.”

“Well, if you bring us three paystubs with a low-, middle-, and high-paying pay period, we can figure out an average income.”

Claire stared at the temp, then shifted Rose again, then opened her mouth, and closed it without saying anything.

“If you’re paid under the table or it’s mostly tips, you can bring us a bank statement and just black out all the things you don’t want us to see.”

“Okay, I can do that.” Claire wasn’t looking at the temp at all anymore.

“Finally, we’ll need a $25 credit reporting fee so we can check your credit.”

“Can I pay with a credit card?” Claire asked, reaching for her small purse.

“I’m really sorry, but we only accept checks or money orders.”

“Where can I get a money order?”

“You go to your bank and I think you can just get one from a teller,” the temp replied, revealing her own youth and inexperience. “Once you’ve got it, just bring it back here.”

Claire bit her lip.

“I’ll be here at Terra Nova Enterprises every weekday, from eight am to six pm. You just come by as soon as you can in the next week, okay?”

“All right.” Claire nodded and, with that, she turned and scurried out of the office.

The temp watched her retreating form down the hall long after she was gone. Finally, she turned to her stack of applications, reaching Claire’s just as the clocks chimed six. She hesitated, then placed Claire’s application in the hanging folder box next to her computer. She’d have time aplenty
tomorrow morning to process Claire’s application; Claire probably wouldn’t be back before 10am anyway.

* 

The next morning, after clearing her voicemail and responding to emailed inquiries about various apartments, the temp turned her attention back to Claire’s application. She’d filled out an application for her daughter too, which was cute, but not entirely necessary.

There were six apartments coming available in the Prospective for August 1st, three of which had been specifically selected by other applicants. Claire hadn’t indicated a specific apartment, so the temp chose the one on the sixth floor towards the back with the nice, newly refurbished kitchen- high enough up to avoid the noise of traffic on busy Prospect Avenue and private enough to care for Rose without worry of nosey neighbors who think they know what’s best for a child.

Next came the real processing: checking a prospective tenant’s criminal history, salary, credit, and rental history. The temp opened CCAP, the Wisconsin Circuit Court Access portal, and typed in Claire’s name, stopping short at her birth date. Claire was barely 21 years old.

The temp shook herself out of it, typed out Claire’s birthday, and hit “Search.” There were only two cases that matched the name and birthday: one domestic disturbance charge and one speeding ticket. The domestic disturbance charge was filed two years ago against a Mitchell Greaves and Claire Murphy. Apparently shouting, slamming, and breaking things had wakened the neighbors. The speeding ticket was filed a bit over a year and a half ago for going one-hundred-twenty miles per hour in Robert Greaves’ car in a sixty-five mile per hour zone. Points and a fine were levied, but she hadn’t been intoxicated or under the influence of any drugs. The temp noted the domestic disturbance and the ticket on Claire’s application, then set it aside.
The temp pulled out Rose Greaves’ application and checked her record, just to be on the safe side. After she hit search, she looked at Rose’s birthday, May 7th, 2007 and quickly calculated backwards. She grabbed Claire’s application again and checked the ticket’s date: August 30th of 2006. The temp sat back in her chair wearily. At age 19, Claire had been hired by Silk Exotic Dancers. Shortly later, she got pregnant and, when she found out, she took someone else’s car and drove as fast as she could as far as she could, only to be stopped by the police, and bound back to life.

*God, thought the temp, I really hope we can help her.*

* * *

The following Tuesday, Claire and Rose returned with a money order and a bank statement. Rose was in a pretty pink dress with a matching hair band.

“Thanks so much for stopping by with these,” the temp said, smiling kindly at the pair as Claire dug through her purse for the appropriate envelope. As she handed it to the temp, the temp saw hand-sized bruises up and down Claire’s right arm. She quickly ducked her head to compose herself, pulling open the envelope as pretext.

“Do you know when I’ll find out if I got the apartment?” Claire asked softly.

“Well, as soon as I process your credit and your income, I should be able to get back to you about whether or not you’ve got the apartment or if you need a co-signer.”

“A co-signer?”

“Yes, someone who basically guarantees that you’ll pay rent when it’s due.”

“Oh. And who does that?”

“Usually a parent or a family member.” Claire’s face fell. “Or a good friend who’s got good credit and a well-paying job,” the temp added quickly.

“Okay. Thank you,” responded Claire quietly.
“I’ll give you a call as soon as I know,” the temp said, smiling up at the young mother. Claire gave the temp a watery smile of her own and hefted Rose higher on her hip before heading out again.

The temp placed Claire’s information on her desk, stood, and paced up the long office hallway, sipped a drink at the bubbler as an excuse, then returned to her seat. It didn’t help. The bruises on Claire’s arm haunted her still.

*

After scratching down Claire’s income (which somehow completely disappeared within three days of entering her bank account every time) and checking her credit, the temp leaned back in her chair. Claire barely had an acceptable level of income for the apartment, and her credit was pretty bad: 495. The temp got up and headed back towards the property manager’s office.

“Chelsea?”

The woman looked up from a Jimmy John’s sandwich. “Hummf?”

“Have you got a moment?”

Chelsea swallowed. “Sure. What’s up?”

“There’s this woman, Claire, and her daughter, who are interested in one of the Prospective apartments for August 1st.”

“Great; rent as many of those as you can. We’ve got a bunch of people moving out in the next month and a half.”

“The thing is, Claire is a dancer at Silk Exotic and Rose’s dad is out of the picture and, while she barely makes enough to qualify to rent in the Prospective, she has pretty bad credit.”

“Then she needs a co-signer.”

“I’m not sure she’ll be able to find one.”

“Then we can’t rent to her.”
“But she’s trying to raise this baby girl all alone and she’s in a bad situation in her current building and she’s already given her notice to vacate.”

“She still needs a co-signer. We have to make sure she will pay us.” Chelsea, seeing the temp’s face, sighed. “We can’t afford to be a charity right now. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

“All right. Thanks.”

The temp returned to her desk and dialed the number on Claire’s application. It went straight to voicemail. “Hi Claire, this is Terra Nova Enterprises calling. I just wanted to let you know that it looks like you will need a co-signer for the apartment. Once you find someone, they will need to come in with a recent paystub and a $25 credit report fee so they can fill out an application with us. Thanks so much! Bye now!”

*

A week passed, with still no word from or sign of Claire. The temp called Claire on the 13th, and again on the 16th. Finally, she reached Claire on the 18th; Claire said she’d be in on Friday the 20th with her co-signer.

True to her word, Claire arrived at 3:45pm on Friday afternoon with Rose on her hip, a young man leading the way in.

“Hi Claire; I’m glad to see you. This must be your co-signer...”

“I’m Robert Greaves. Why does she need a co-signer?”

“Hi Robert. Claire needs a co-signer because her credit does not meet our company’s requirements.”

“Yes, but why does she need a co-signer?”

“Well, the idea is that the co-signer basically guarantees that the rent will be paid in full on time.”
Robert grunted and turned his back to the temp and addressed Claire with quick, harsh words.

Rose stared at Robert in silence.

“Fine.” Robert had turned back to the temp. “What do I have to do?”

“Well, you have to fill out this sheet here, give us a copy of a recent paystub, and pay us the $25 credit reporting fee.”

“This sheet says ‘Application.’ I’m not applying for anything, why do I have to fill out an application?”

The temp quailed under his fierce, hazel gaze. “We simply use the same form for co-signers as we do for applicants. If you want, we can cross out ‘Application’ and put down ‘Co-Signer’s Form.’”

Plumes of black ink slashed across the page as Robert made the change.

“Why do you need my social security number?”

“It’s so we can check your credit and your criminal record.”

“But I’m just the co-signer; it’s not like I’ll actually be living there.”

“You’re right; your criminal history doesn’t matter, but your credit does.”

“Why?”

“We need at least one person on the lease whose credit is above 700.”

“Fine.” Robert scribbled madly for a couple minutes while Claire fixed Rose’s hair and played with her, peek-a-boo and tickling. The temp smiled, happy Claire at least had Rose, if not a kind or willing co-signer. Rose giggled and Robert spun around, glaring at Claire. Claire went pale and turned to Rose, gently shushing her. Rose quieted quickly, as though sensing her mother’s urgency.

The temp froze; she realized she hadn’t heard Rose cry or scream or anything in her meetings with Claire. This giggle was the first noise she’d heard Rose make at all.

“Here. And you want how much money for the credit report?”

---
“Twenty-five dollars. It all goes directly to the credit reporting agency,” the temp replied defensively.

“Hmmf. Well there it all is. We have to go.”

“Actually, I still need a paystub from you,” the temp told Robert’s retreating back. He spun around.

“I’m sorry, but it’s required of all co-signers.”

“Huh.”

“You can bring it back later-” Robert glared at the temp. “Or you could mail it at your convenience in the next few days.”

Robert hesitated, then nodded, and led Claire and Rose out.

*

The following Tuesday, Robert’s paystub arrived via snail mail. The temp approved him as a co-signer with sufficient credit and more than adequate income, then placed the entire bundle of applications, credit reports, and criminal histories on Chelsea’s desk for final approval.

The next morning, Chelsea returned the bundled application to the temp. It bore a giant red “Declined” stamp across the front.

“Why did you decline Claire Murphy the apartment?” The temp demanded as she entered Chelsea’s office.

“Her credit isn’t good enough.”

“But her co-signer has a score of 765.”

“We don’t accept anyone, regardless of co-signer, who has a credit score below 500.” She studied the temp’s face. “If it’s below 500, they pretty much have never paid anything on time.”

“But it looks like she’s paying her current rent on time-”

“Did you ask her landlord?”
"I mean, he wouldn’t have anything good to say about her because of their history. I mean, either he or his son got her pregnant-"

"Well, then, that’s too bad."

"But she’s been counting on this apartment and she’s already given notice to vacate-"

"She’s moving out at the end of July, right? She’s still got 35 days."

The temp got up. “Can’t we do anything?”

"Give her a refund."

The temp nodded slowly, then returned to her desk. Slowly, she dialed Claire Murphy’s number.

“Claire? I have some bad news.”

*  

That afternoon, Claire stopped by the office, without Rose for the first time.

“What am I going to do?” She asked as the temp handed her two checks to refund her and Robert. “I have to move out. Can I change my notice to vacate?”

“That depends on your landlord. You could try calling Wickman Enterprises, or Delman Estates.

Rent Assistance is also pretty good.”

“They can help me?”

“I think so.”

“Okay.” With reproachful eyes, Claire turned and walked out of Terra Nova and into the muggy evening.

The temp spent a long time staring blankly at her computer.
III. Grey Snow, or Fall

“Jim! You’re home! We’re so glad to see you!”

Jim braced himself for his step-father’s famous bear-hug, a smile plastered on his face. Once he could breathe again, he responded, “It’s great to see you too, Ray!”

“I’m that Jim?” A voice called down from upstairs, followed by the quick thumping of feet down the stairwell. A blonde blur flew into Jim, nearly knocking him over. “You! I’m so mad at you for leaving again!”

Jim laughed, “It’s college; I had to go away! But never again, I promise! I’ll be in Milwaukee for three full months, maybe longer if Mr. Frederick at the law firm likes me. After that, grad school here or in Madison!” Then, assuming a falsely lofty, poetic tone, Jim stepped back and bowed to his step-sister, saying “I shall never part from your side again, my fair lady.” As he looked up from his bow, he finally saw Lizzy.

“Are you stuck? I told you I could have helped you carry in your enormous suitcase!” Jim’s mother’s voice made him jerk upright; he turned away from Lizzy quickly.

“Oh, yeah- I mean, no problem with the suitcase. You know I’ve been training all year for soccer.” Jim glanced at Lizzy to see the effect of his words, caught himself, then faced his mother again. “Yeah, no problems.” She looked at him, confused by his sudden highly-literal humor. “I’ll just bring these upstairs.” Jim grabbed his suitcase, as well as the backpack his mother was carrying and hurried towards the stairs.

“It’s been a long day,” Jim heard Ray telling his mom. “I’m sure he’s just tired.”

Jim flung his bag onto his old bed and his backpack on the floor, collapsing into the armchair.

*When did Lizzy get... hot?* He’d always thought of her as his adorable step-sister, a sunny addition into his, and more importantly, his mom’s life after his dad’s death five years ago. But... *hot?* There was
something about the way her eyes lit up when she saw him, about how her hair fell carelessly around her breasts, about her suddenly irresistible freckles... No. No. _Lizzy is fine as far as little sisters go_, Jim reminded himself. She’d never stolen his things or played pranks on him. He’d even helped her with her homework and before dances, zipping up her dresses... _NO_. Jim pounded his fist into his thigh. No.

_That’s that._

Satisfied that Lizzy was his younger sister, _and nothing more_, he reminded himself, Jim pulled off his hoodie and headed back downstairs to catch a movie with his family. He _would_ remember his place; that was that.

* 

“So, do you have any questions about the apartment?”

Jim scratched his head, free of any questions whatsoever, save the one, the one he shouldn’t ask, the one he shouldn’t be thinking-

“Jim? Jim, was it, do you have questions?”

“Um, I don’t know. I don’t think so. What questions do people usually have?”

The landlord’s daughter smiled prettily at him. “Oh, about temperature, amenities. This upper flat runs on the warm side, but it’s cozy, with the nooks and the slanted ceiling. Plus, you get the great view of Cambridge Avenue in the front and the Oak Leaf bike trail in the ravine in back.” A shadow crossed her face. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait until the end of the month? It’s just a few weeks away, and we’ll have so many more places I can show you—”

“No, this is perfect,” Jim smiled, thinking he’d finally found a way out.

“Well,” the girl sighed, “if you think it is, then it definitely is,” she finished warmly, sidling up to Jim. “Great. I’ll give you a call once we’ve processed your application so we can schedule the lease signing.”
Jim didn’t even notice her until she ran light fingers up his arm, guiding him out of the apartment. His initial reaction was to stay far away from her unwanted attention, but, as she smiled at him as he strolled away down the block, he reconsidered. *Maybe all I need is a distraction. Someone else who’s, you know, not in High School.* Jim looked back over his shoulder. The girl watched him still, waving a bit when she caught his gaze. She was a brunette, slim, and tall—exactly what Lizzy was not.

Lizzy. For a week, Jim had tried to stop seeing her as attractive. But every time he saw her around the house, he couldn’t help but admire her curves, her sweet smile as she looked up into his face, her gently waving long hair. Every time he thought about her, he tried to see her as a blood-sister, a product of Ray’s physical attentions to his own mother. It didn’t stick.

Two days ago, Jim’s mother had asked him if he was feeling well. He’d realized he’d gotten bags under his eyes and was off his appetite. That afternoon, he started searching online for apartments. Once he’d heard about the search, Ray had protested, trying to convince Jim that he and Jim’s mother were happy to have him home again, that there was plenty of time to find an apartment in the fall if he was determined to move out. Once Ray had realized how set Jim was on the idea, he’d insisted that Jim come over for dinner at least once a week since “It wouldn’t make sense for you to drive home to the Polish District or, worse, Riverwest at 10 at night.”

*If only he knew why I wanted to move out,* Jim thought, *what I want to do to his daughter—NOT do, not do, but—NO.* He kicked a rock out of a divot in the sidewalk.

Jim’s mother had even recommended this property management company because she knew the owner’s wife from her job at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Lizzy, of course, only made matters worse. “You’re moving out? But you just got back! I thought you said you’d be here.” There’d been actual hurt in her eyes, behind the teasing. Jim’s heart twisted.

“I’m not going far, I promise! Mom’s friend’s got a place just over on Cambridge. It’s right over our ravine where we take Jojo for walks, only two blocks away—”
“If it’s only two blocks, then why are you moving? Don’t you love us anymore?”

“You have no idea how much I love you,” Jim replied softly. “But I need to do this for me.”

“Just because you’re all graduated now, you don’t have time for me? I’m only 5 years younger than you- that’s not so much! Besides, it’ll take forever for me to walk over to see you! Cambridge is like four blocks away!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“No, you’re counting wrong! You have to count walking up this one block, then over the side of it—that’s two—then the side of another block—that’s three—then up the fourth block!”

“So, which is it? I’m too far away or I’m stupidly close?” Jim asked, his eyes twinkling at Lizzy’s dramatics.

She stuck out her tongue at him. Barely resisting the urge to kiss it, he merely smiled and turned to walk out of the room.

“You’re much nicer than you used to be,” Lizzy told his retreating back softly. “Before, you would’ve called me illogical and—what’s that word—obnoxious.”

Jim had slowed as she spoke, but quickly continued out after she finished. Although he couldn’t escape Lizzy or his feelings for her in the house, he could escape the house.

*

“Why is that window boarded up?” Jim’s mother asked slowly as she parked her stuffed Suburban in front of Jim’s duplex. The large front window facing the street held a black-painted sheet of plywood. Jim frowned at it.

“I have no idea. I didn’t notice it before.”

“Is it new?”

“It doesn’t look new,” Lizzy commented from the back of the SUV, carrying a giant bin towards the front door.
“And you can tell over those sleeping bags?” Ray responded, smiling.

“I have perfect vision,” Lizzy replied tartly.

Jim took Lizzy’s crate—ignoring her mild complaints—and hurried up the porch to unlock the door for his waiting mother, her own arms full of plastic-coated hangers bearing clothing.

“It’ll actually be a relief to finally move your stuff out of the attic,” she said absently as Jim led the way up the steep stairs. There was a soft rustle of plastic, then she added hurriedly, “Not that I don’t want you want home, Jim; I’ve just been meaning to clean out the attic and this is just the impetus I need.” Ray. It had to be Ray. He was the only one who ever got through to Jim’s mom that her words sometimes had an edge that could cut a diamond.

Jim unlocked the second door at the top of the stairs that actually led into the apartment and put the trunk just to the right of the door. His mother, still burdened by his clothing, crinkled in behind him. “Well,” she announced to the empty living room.

“This is it...” murmured Jim, seeing the place through his mother’s eyes.

There was dust in the corners of the living room, and the once pristine hardwood floors had been mercilessly mutilated by years of college furniture, sanded down, and painted white. The ceilings were low, and started slanting towards the roof’s peak only four feet off the floor. What had been a fireplace in a former life was now a framed rectangle against the far back wall, complete with a mantelpiece. Jim’s mom sniffed.

“The bedroom is in here, Mom.” Jim led his mother to the left towards the dining room, then abruptly turned right. “The closet is back here, towards the bathroom.”

His mother, forgetting her load of clothes, wandered into the bathroom, looking around silently in abject horror. Jim followed her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as she noticed every chipped floor tile in the bathroom and every cracked ceramic tile on the walls. The caulk between the
bathtub and the wall was a dark green in the far corner, and the toilet was at a slight, barely perceptible angle to the floor. She sniffed again.

Jim fled back through the bedroom and down the stairs outside, nearly knocking Ray over as he carried things from the car to the porch. “Your mother’s not satisfied with the quality of her son’s first apartment?” he asked, examining Jim’s face. He shook his head. “I’ll go talk to her,” Ray said, setting down his bin on the porch. “You help the squirt.”

“Daaadd, I’m seventeen! I’m not a squirt anymore!” Lizzy called from the Suburban. She is the cutest thing when she pouts, Jim thought, then promptly ducked his head. A muffled “Ummph” made him look up again.

“Here, you should let me take the big stuff,” Jim said, rushing over to grab a huge bin from Lizzy.

“I can handle it.” When Jim gripped both sides, Lizzy froze and stared him down. “No really, I can handle it.” He valiantly bowed to her as she huffed past him. As he grabbed a fourth bin, Lizzy dropped her load onto the porch and plopped on top of it. “Jeeze, what have you got in these?”

“Well, this is mostly my college stuff; I guess you got my book bin. Sorry about that,” Jim grimaced at the thought. He couldn’t bear to part with the classics, or the Pulitzer-winning books, or the new ones that should win Pulitzers, or the British ones, or-

“It’s nice you didn’t have to unpack just to repack,” Lizzy interrupted bitterly.

“Lizzy.” Jim set down his bin beside hers, sat on top of it, and took her hands. “Lizzy, I’m graduated from college now. I need a place of my own. I’d look like a huge bum if my coworkers asked about where I live and I told them ‘with my Mom.’ I had to move out; you understand.”

Lizzy rolled her eyes. “You are a bum. Besides, you just wanted a place to bring girls home to. Sarah isn’t too happy about it-”

“Yeah, I know. Ray’s up talking to her now, to calm her down.”
“Haha, lucky Dad. But, she said that even though she’s not happy about it, her friend has a very pretty daughter who’s your age.”

“Who, Rachel? Yeah, she showed me this apartment for her dad.”

“Yes as in yes she’s pretty and you wanna take her out and then take her home?” Lizzy asked wickedly.

“My dearest Lizzy, she’s got nothing on you.” Jim’s heart pounded in his throat, in his cheeks. *What was he thinking to say that out loud?* He gave her a silly bow to detract from his tone; she giggled, flapped her hand at him—who does that?—and ran back to the car.

Jim dropped his head into his hands. *Thank God I’m moving out now and not in three weeks.*

“Jim! Jim! This is that house that was on the news! With all the police cars and the fire engine this past winter!” His mother was racing down the stairs. “I knew I recognized it! Jim, you cannot live here; I forbid it!” Ray was close behind her; he caught up to her and started speaking quickly and quietly in her ear.

Lizzy poked her head out of the back of the car. “Jim, are you going to live in the ghost house where that family disappeared?”

*

The next few months were agonizing for Jim. He’d go days without thinking about Lizzy, then he’d have to go to family dinner and there she was, as bright and beautiful and sensual as ever. She nearly drove him insane, going from meltingly enthusiastic that he was home, to heart-breakingly melancholic that he’d been gone, to sexily pouty that he refused to visit more often.

“I’ve picked up more hours at the office so I can keep paying rent and eating food.” Jim saw his mother frown. “It’s actually really good for me; Mr. Frederick sees that I’m working hard and it looks like he’s going to keep me on through the winter. If I’m very lucky, he might even give me a promotion come January.”
Ray applauded and even Jim’s mom looked pleased. Lizzy’s eyes shone with unadulterated pride. Jim swallowed hard and forced himself to think about Rachel.

Rachel had stopped by often enough to “check up on things” that Jim would either have to take out a restraining order, or take her out to dinner.

* 

A week later, as Jim agonized over going home and seeing Lizzy again, he happened to glance at a business card taped to his fridge. Rachel hadn’t visited for almost two weeks, but she was the only one who could have left her card there. Jim pulled it off and held it up to the fading light out the window. October had arrived with a vengeance and the sun’s progressively earlier disappearance seemed in direct response to its increasing frigidity. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number.

“Hey, Rachel? It’s Jim. Yeah, hi! So, I was wondering if you’d like to grab dinner with me sometime at Via on Downer.”

Five minutes later, Jim hung up, his mouth set. He’d miss family dinner next week to go out with Rachel- a double win. He would be with Rachel and he would forget he ever thought of Lizzy in that way, and that would be that.

Jim threw on his coat and hurried down the back stairs towards the garage, pausing briefly on the landing behind the first floor flat, wondering why it still hadn’t been cleaned out or rented. He shrugged and continued out. He’d ask Rachel on Thursday next week. He smiled at the thought, at his absurd rush of hope.

Less than two hours later, his hope had been all but dashed. Lizzy’s warm embrace at the door had driven all thoughts of Rachel from his mind, and his mom’s bright eyes had shamed him for wanting to stay away. It was dessert by the time he finally worked up the nerve to tell them he wouldn’t be available next week.

“Why?” Lizzy demanded, as though he’d just told her he never wanted to see her again ever.
“Lizzy, give your brother a break; I’m sure he has his reasons.” Ray’s kind tone didn’t quite reach his stern eyes as he looked at Jim, then glanced towards Jim’s mother who was biting her lips.

Jim mentally scrambled for the right words to halt her anxiety attack before it really got rolling.

“I’m going out with Rachel Hayes, Mom.”

“Rachel Hayes? Melissa’s daughter?”

“Yeah. She was the one who showed me the apartment.”

“Oh, Rachel. She’s such a nice girl! She went to UWM, you know; I had her in one of my classes.”

“Yeah, we’re going out to dinner.”

“Well, you’d better be on your best behavior; I won’t have you breaking that girl’s heart!”

Jim tried to chuckle as his mom chattered on about “that nice girl Rachel.” Lizzy just poked at her beignet.

As Jim was putting on his coat to leave, Ray pulled him aside.

“Your mother doesn’t do well with separation, Jim. When your father died, she said, she was terrified that everyone she cared about would leave her by the end of the year.”

Jim grimaced at his thoughtlessness. “You’re right, Ray. I’ll try not to schedule stuff on Thursdays.”


Jim forced a smile. If only he knew…

Jim’s dinner with Rachel went well. He managed to keep the conversation on her—Lizzy had taught him that girls love to talk about themselves. When she tried to ask about his family, Jim made himself look down and mutter something about his dad’s death. Rachel cooed at him and offered him a shoulder to cry on; she looked properly dismayed and was dissuaded from asking any more questions about it. Jim felt bad using his father’s death to dodge an awkward subject, but there was no way he’d
be able to talk about Lizzy to Rachel. She’d know. She’d know and be disgusted with him. And she’d tell her mother, who would tell his. He couldn’t lose them; he couldn’t lose her.

“So tell me more about your job,” Rachel said after the waiter arrived and left on cue.

“Well, I work at Frederick and Dunphrey Associates down on the Lower East Side. We’re right across the street from the Pizza Shuttle.”


“Well, you should know, being a leasing agent there, that I grew up in Cambridge Heights, not that far from the duplex now.”

“Haha, fine, we’re even.” Rachel smiled prettily at Jim from under her eyelashes.

Maybe I can do this, Jim thought.

“Anyways, I work with Mr. Frederick across the street from The Pizza Shuttle. Actually, I saw something weird a few months ago; I can’t believe I didn’t remember until now.” Jim frowned at the memory. “There was this girl—who looked younger than me—who I saw when I was leaving work. She had this adorable baby girl with red hair balanced on her hip and bruises up and down her arm. I only noticed them because she tripped going down the stairs and I caught her. Huh.”

Rachel grew sullen. “I can’t even handle people who do that to a woman. They’re disgusting, worse than rats.” She looked up at Jim. “What did you do?”

Jim shrugged, a touch of pink tinting his cheeks. “She apologized for making me catch her, then she practically ran out of the building. I’m not sure where she was coming from on the second floor. There’s a property management company there. But- Oh! That’s what happened! Just as I was about to head outside myself, Nancy, Mr. Frederick’s secretary called me back. One of our clients had just called, wanting to divorce his wife and she couldn’t find the paperwork for Mr. Frederick- he wanted to take it home to review it. We looked for it for almost forty-five minutes; it turned out that Mr. Dunphrey, the
other lawyer, had grabbed the man’s folder by mistake when he was pulling people who wanted to declare bankruptcy.”

“Ugh, I hate filing,” Rachel responded, groaning.

“Thank God for people like Nancy.”

“To secretaries everywhere!” Rachel raised her glass.

“To secretaries everywhere,” Jim repeated, smiling in earnest pleasure.

*

It wasn’t long before Jim was seeing Rachel twice a week. She was his salvation, or at least he tried to convince himself she was. He met her for lunch at Koppa’s on Wednesday and then for dinner on Fridays wherever. The idea was to prepare himself on Wednesday for Thursday dinners with his family and then to try to recover on Friday. His recovery was less a curing of an ailment than a distraction from his sickness.

Rachel was lovely, and appreciated literature, and liked going for walks, and had a pretty smile. But every time Jim started to relax and actually enjoy his time with Rachel, he’d just start thinking about Lizzy again, and how shiny her blonde hair had looked last week, or how she’d made him laugh yesterday, or how, when it was just the two of them doing dishes, he’d pretend they were together.

It was a full month before Jim brought Rachel back to his place. They’d kissed, but every time Jim had opened his eyes again, he’d always been disappointed to see content brown eyes looking back at him instead of laughing blue ones. If it was dark, Jim had rationalized, he wouldn’t be able to see her face. He’d managed to gracefully invite Rachel over after a Friday dinner while still conveying that he wanted to take things slow. He’d seen a question in her eyes and had murmured something about his father. In a second, she was all compassion and understanding, and he felt like an even bigger dick for using his father’s memory.
Perhaps as a result of his mother’s constant sniff of disdain, Jim had kept the apartment relatively clean. The kitchen in particular was almost spotless, though more from lack of use than from attention to detail; grilled cheese and quesadillas didn’t call for much counter space. Jim dug out two wine glasses from a cabinet as Rachel complimented him on his housekeeping.

“I’m actually a bit impressed.”

“Hey, most guys are not that messy.”

“You’re probably right,” Rachel sighed dramatically. “I suppose I’m just used to college guys. It’s such a pain to try to show their flats; there are posters of beer and tits everywhere and boxers hanging off of the lamps.” She shook her head. “I guess I’m just relieved to know it’s just a phase.”

Jim chuckled. “I’m sorry to disappoint, but I never went through that phase. Maybe I’m actually immature and it’s still coming.”

“Very funny, Mr. Clean.” She sighed again, more reflectively this time. “I didn’t think this old place could ever look dressed up again.”

“Oh? Were the last tenants here college guys with beer and tits and boxers?”

“No, not up here...” Rachel shifted uncomfortably.

“Downstairs?”

Rachel remained silent, swirling the red wine in her glass.

“I’ve actually been meaning to ask you about that. Why hasn’t anyone moved in downstairs? The front window’s been boarded up for months now. My mom gets crept out every time she drives by, and she’s in a giant SUV.”

“Oh, well the police won’t let us take the plywood down or clean up—”

“The police? Wait, why are—”

“They say it’s part of an ‘on-going’ investigation, but no one’s been by in almost 6 months—”

“Rachel,” Jim interrupted firmly. “What happened there? Why are the police involved?”
Rachel bit her lip, still focusing intently on her pinot noir. “It’s nothing, really. There was a family who lived there, but one day, they just up and left. They’d paid rent through the end of the month—this was back in March—and suddenly, poof, they were gone. The mom’s sister went over because they weren’t answering their phone, and she called the police. They hadn’t packed anything up or cleaned anything up, but they’d left. I mean, it happens sometimes. People just leave. Maybe they were in witness protection or something.”

“But wouldn’t the feds tell the cops that and let you re-rent the place?”

“I don’t know!” Rachel met Jim’s eyes squarely, as if he’d been the cause of the mystery. “Sometimes people just leave!”

“Whoa, what are you yelling at me for? I asked a simple question, and you blow up at me? What the hell?”

Silence reigned for almost a full minute.

“I should go.”

Jim just turned and dumped his wine in the sink, watching the red slowly spread over the white, circling the gaping hole labeled “In-Sinkerator.” He heard the front door close gently.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now?

*

Two days later, Rachel called. Jim let it go to voicemail. She tried to explain she’d had too much to drink, that she was sorry, that her last boyfriend had left without explanation. She sounded as if she’d been crying. She only had a beer and half a glass of wine, Jim thought, deleting the message before it was done.

Then, the next day, Rachel’s father called to personally apologize to Jim for not coming out and telling him about what had happened in the lower flat. He started talking about the winter clause in Jim’s lease that prevented him from vacating between November 1st and March 30th, then quickly
shifted tactics, offering Jim one month’s free rent if he’d just stay on until December 30th. Jim called his landlord back and took him up on his offer.

The following Thursday, Jim’s mom wouldn’t stop talking about “that poor, nice Rachel” and how devastated she must be to have hurt Jim and “Jim, you really should stop being such a brute and give the poor girl a call.” Lizzy saw Jim frown and, asked him what had happened while they were doing dishes.

“Nothing.”

“Come on, Jim. You can tell me anything.” Her blue eyes were so soft, so sincere-

“Nothing happened, Lizzy.”

After a moment, a soapy arm wrapped around his waist. “I’m sorry, Jim. You’re too good for her anyways.”

Jim tentatively put his arm around her shoulders, allowing himself this much, this much and no more, just the warm feeling of her soft skin by her neck and the ticking of her hair on his arm-

“Jim!” his mother called from the living room. He jumped, and carefully disentangled himself from Lizzy. “Would you like to stay and watch a movie with us?”

“Get out while you still can,” Lizzy whispered, wide-eyed. “She wants to make you watch Just Say Anything so you’ll call what’sherstupidface. That ‘poor, nice Rachel.’”

“Thanks, kid,” Jim whispered back gruffly.

“Jim? Won’t you stay?”

“Jeeze, Mom, I’m really sorry. Mr. Frederick asked me to come in early tomorrow morning. He wants to see how I handle this one account on my own.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!”

“You’d better not be dodging Rachel with work, Jim,” Ray called.

Jim made a face. Lizzy poked him in the side and mouthed Liar.
“Am not!” Jim whispered back. “He does want me early tomorrow! 9:30 is totally early!”

Lizzy’s skepticism turned into a muffled fit of giggles. Jim felt a warm bubble rise in his chest. He liked making her laugh.

*

It was shortly after Thanksgiving when Jim finally called Rachel back. The holiday had been rough. Jim’s mother had expected him to spend the entire weekend home and he had no ready work excuse to bow out, not that Ray would have let him.

Thrilled that he was finally home and that she’d finally get to spend time with him, Lizzy had been all over Jim. Every time he locked himself in his old room to clear his head, Lizzy would come knocking. Had he heard of the new Mario game? Did he want to go see that new animated movie, Bolt? Dad said to have to shovel the walk—she’d salt if he shoveled. At least the indoor activities didn’t make her cheeks flush or leave her with snowflakes perched in her hair, framing her face.

What’s worse, on Thanksgiving Day, he’d practically run her over as she left the shower in his haste to change clothes for company. Usually she showered after dinner, but she’d changed her habit for the holiday.

“Oh, hi Jim,” she’d laughed at his surprised face. “Sorry, I must be dripping on you.” Lizzy smiled, stepped back from Jim, and wandered into her room. Her hair was a harsher color and poker straight with all the water in it, but that only meant he’d gotten a glimpse of her usually-hidden shoulders, creamy and steaming slightly. Her eyes, though—nothing could dull her beautiful eyes.

Jim had seen girls headed to the showers in the dorms at school, but they’d always been nervous or hunched-over, always scuttling like crabs to and from the bathroom, avoiding eye contact. Lizzy had looked straight at Jim, with no shame, no embarrassment, and no anxiety. Then, she’d danced away, as though Jim meant nothing in the world to her.
As he switched shirts and put on some good pants, Jim replayed the scene over and over in his head. He couldn’t handle this anymore.

He’d barely managed to escape the torture on Sunday morning by “suddenly remembering” a file Mr. Frederick had sent home with him for review, but that didn’t stop his horrible, enchanting, shameful dreams that night.

“Hi, Rachel?”

“Oh! Oh, hi Jim!”

“Hi. So, I’ve been thinking—”

“Jim, listen; I feel so bad about yelling that night. I’d had a beer and some wine and I’m really, really sorry. Let me make it up to you by taking you out to lunch?”

“Oh, um, sure; that sounds great.”

“Great! How about Friday? I’ll meet you at Koppa’s!”

She’d sounded so bright, so cheerful. It would work this time; she would drive Lizzy from his dreams.

*

Except that it didn’t work. Jim hadn’t thought it possible, but now he thought about Lizzy more. The differences between Rachel and Lizzy were bad; Jim couldn’t stop comparing how Rachel ate like a bird on their dates to how Lizzy devoured exactly as much as she wanted—no more, no less. The similarities were far worse, though. Both girls would spin their forks between their fingers when they were thinking, both would lean in and hold their stomachs when they laughed.

Jim’s mother invited Jim and Rachel over for New Year’s, but the idea of Lizzy and Rachel in the same place was unthinkable. The world would explode, Jim thought as his mother pressed him. The next day, Jim asked Rachel how she wanted to celebrate New Year’s Eve. She looked surprised, then genuinely pleased. I should probably work harder at making her think I care, Jim realized, resigned.
“Well, my family’s having a get together. It might be nice, if you’re interested.” Jim forced a smile. He really disliked Rachel’s double-talk, how she always let him have the final say. Lizzy spoke her mind and stuck to it.

“That sounds great; I’d love to go with you.”

Rachel smiled, and, for a moment, she was the only girl on his mind.

Jim’s mother took the news that he’d be missing the family New Year’s party better than he’d expected. It was only as he was leaving that he overheard her hushed conversation with Melissa, Rachel’s mother. Apparently, both women considered themselves the best of matchmakers to have united their children. Jim sighed heavily, wondering if he’d have to marry Rachel and, if he did, whether he’d finally be able to get Lizzy out of his head.

New Year’s Eve passed in a blur. Melissa kept introducing Jim to her friends as though he and Rachel were engaged. Rachel seemed oblivious, but she did have a giant smile on her face. Jim finally got a moment with her alone, shortly before the countdown. “Your mom seems to think we’re engaged.”

Rachel’s eyes grew enormous and her smile dropped away. “Oh, Jim, I’m so sorry. I never thought- I’m so sorry; I’ll talk to her right away.”

“Thanks, Liz- Rachel, thank you.” She was already headed away to find her mother. Jim spent the last ten seconds of the old year and the first ten minutes of the new year drinking as much champagne as he could find. That was probably why he ended up in a small dark coat closet making out with Rachel an hour later.

As he stumbled home, accidental physical blows from trees and railings that got in his way compounded mental blows for his actions. What was he thinking? Would he really take any option to get Lizzy out of his head? And what self-respecting 22-year-old made out in the family coat closet?
Fortunately for Jim, he didn’t remember the coat closet the next morning, and it took Rachel a month to remind him of what had happened. By Groundhog Day, Jim could no longer ignore her less-than-subtle signs that she wanted more than handsy kissing.

“So, Valentine’s Day is in less than two weeks. It’s next Saturday.” Jim couldn’t see Rachel’s expression over the phone, but her tone left little to the imagination.

Jim took the hint. “I was thinking of inviting you over for dinner, if you’re all right with a bachelor’s attempt at fancy cooking.”

“Oh, Jim, you’re so wonderful!” Wonderful at taking direction, he thought. “So let’s move next Friday’s dinner to Saturday, okay, honey?”

Jim grimaced. “Sure, Rachel.” No amount of “honey” or “wonderful” could move him to call her a pet name. Lizzy... Lizzy needed no pet name; Lizzy was a perfect name as it was. She was his Lizzy, his-

“Great, I’ll see you on Wednesday!”

“Actually Rachel, I’m really sorry, but I can’t make it.” Silence. “Mr. Frederick invited me out to lunch with one of his clients.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll see you Friday then.”

“Friday’s not so great for me either.”

“Well then, Saturday?”

“Uh, sure. Sure, Rachel. I’ll see you on Saturday.” She was getting obnoxious. Her prattling conversation was worse than a high schooler’s. Except that Lizzy never just prattled on; she was all sly wit and plainly frank and graceful sincerity. Maybe he’d stop by on Friday, to surprise her. They could go for a walk in the ravine. His mom and Ray would certainly appreciate his visit.

* * *

It was 3pm on Valentine’s Day before Jim remembered that Rachel was coming over. He’d practically flown down the back stairs to his car and nearly broken an axel as he skidded over the thick
ice into the street. Sendik’s was still open, thank God. The flower shop only had mums, though they were red and white ones. Jim had them wrap the flowers while he dove down the refrigerated aisle, grabbing Buitoni sausage tortellini and a jar of “homemade” tomato sauce. At the last second, he picked up a package of fresh basil. By 4pm, he had water heating on the stove, basil drying by the sink, and the mums cooling in the back hall.

When Rachel rang the bell at 5:30, Jim was just tugging on a clean pair of jeans and praying his shower-wet hair wasn’t clinging to his scalp. He thumped down the stairs and tugged open the heavy door. “Hey Rachel.”

“Hey you.” He stared. Her eyes, usually brown and content, were smoky and suggestive. Her long coat just hit her knees and revealed only black nylons. “You wanna let a girl in out of the cold?” She raised an eye brown and smiled. Jim gulped.

“C-come on in, Rachel.” As she led the way upstairs, he couldn’t help but notice her legs and the tiniest glimmer of lace at the top of her stockings. She shed her coat and handed it to him as he closed the inside door behind them. “You look great.” She did; under her coat and scarf she was wearing a low-cut black dress that hugged her in all the right places. She couldn’t have made it any more clear that she had expectations of Jim that night, and that he had better fulfill them. “You can head into the kitchen; I’ll be right there.”

Jim hung her coat on the rack and took a deep breath. It’d be nice to have sex again. The last time had been in early May after the final senior dance; the girl had apparently liked him for years, and she wasn’t unattractive. They’d both known it wouldn’t go anywhere, but Jim got the impression both he and the girl were satisfied with the evening. Besides, now he wouldn’t have to worry about a roommate or a neighbor arriving unannounced.

Unbidden, Lizzy’s voice popped into his head: “You just wanted a place to bring girls home to.”
Jim tugged his collared shirt down hard and heard the shoulder seams strain. He marched into the kitchen to find Rachel posing on a stool at the table- she could only be posing; no girl sat with her legs crossed that high while wearing a dress or with her breasts almost completely exposed to preying (praying? Jim wondered) eyes. He cleared his throat. “I see you found the wine?”

“I remembered where you kept it.” Rachel met his eyes provocatively, then, in a sudden burst of self-doubt, looked down. “I am sorry about last time.”

“Don’t mention it. Really, it’s all in the past.” Jim turned and poured himself a glass of wine; he knew his duty and his required responses. He’d never have survived his first girlfriend if Lizzy hadn’t explained it to him. As he turned back to Rachel, Lizzy’s teasing voice again intruded on his thoughts: “you just wanted a place to bring girls home to.”

Jim shook his head and glimpsed the microwave. He punched START and smiled at Rachel. “TV dinners?” Rachel asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No at all. Jim’s Semi-Homemade Sausage Tortellini with a basil-tomato sauce from our Secret Family Recipe.” The bottle of sauce had advertised as much, at least.

“Hmm, not bad,” Rachel purred. “But what will you feed me while we wait for it to heat up? I’m faint with hunger.” She smiled.

She looks more ready to pounce on me than to faint, Jim thought, smiling wanly. He opened the fridge and pulled out half a loaf of Italian bread, then set it on the table next to Rachel. “Oh, how fancy-bread.”

“Patience, my dear.” If she was acting, so would he. He grabbed a bottle of olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette and dumped both into a small dish, sprinkling garlic salt and basil over the top. “Aromatic olive oil to dip your bread in, en Italiano!”

She smiled, appeased, and sipped her wine, her eyes on Jim.
Within ten minutes after they finished eating, Rachel had dragged Jim into his room and was quickly unbuttoning his shirt as he fumbled with her zipper.

Jim froze, Lizzy’s sweet face drawn in scorn and hurt drifted in front of him. He jerked the dress’ zipper down hard and heard a rip.

“Let it go,” Rachel murmured as her lips found his neck and her fingers his naked chest. Jim’s mind drifted a moment, enjoying the feeling of skin on skin. Then he opened his eyes. Rachel did look very good in her black, lacy bra and panties with the matching stockings. But her hair-

This is wrong. Lizzy’s hair is blonde, not brown. NOT thinking about her. Wait, what am I even doing? I don’t even like this girl and I’m going to-

Rachel’s tongue flicked the bottom of Jim’s ear and he completely forgot his moral compass. He turned off the lights as he walked her back towards his bed, his own lips brushing her forehead.

“You just wanted a place to bring girls home to.”

Jim pushed his towel out of the way as they sat, then lay down. Rachel’s hand traced its way down his chest and he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

After a moment, she paused, her voice small. “Jim?”

“Mm?”

“Is... is there something wrong?”

Jim pulled his face away from hers and realized she’d had her hand on him and he still hadn’t risen to the occasion. Lizzy’s smile, Lizzy’s laugh, Lizzy’s eyes, Lizzy- she spun before him in all her perfection.

“I’m sorry, Rachel. It’s just... There’s this other... Oh shit.” Rachel stood up and started putting her dress back on. “Can I help—”

“Don’t touch me.” The rip beneath the zipper showed her stark skin ripple. “Why couldn’t you make dinner last week Friday?”
“Rachel-”

“Why? Were you with her?”

“I’m with you-“

“Obviously not.” He could feel her gaze burning into him, the light from the bathroom window filtering in. “Don’t you dare call me.” She threw open his bedroom door and stalked to the front door.

“Rachel-”

She grabbed her coat. “We’re done.” She met his eyes squarely, leaving no doubt about her decision. Then, more softly, “we’re done.”

*

The next morning, Jim wandered into the kitchen, his head woozy. The remains of his spectacularly failed Valentine’s Day dinner lay on the table, by the sink. The pasta’s remains would be crusty and the pasta sauce would have to be thrown out.

Jim was tempted to throw out the dishes, the glassware, and the cutlery too. Instead, he heaved a sigh and got to work on the dishes, doing his best to think of nothing at all.

Work the next day was relaxing, at least. Mr. Frederick wasn’t in until nearly 3pm and Mr. Dunphrey was almost never in on Mondays, so Jim and Nancy had the office to themselves. When Mr. Frederick did hobble in on his cane, he spotted Jim almost instantly and invited him into his office.

“Have a seat, son. Jim, you’ve been an immense help here, and I’ve seen a spark in you that reminds me of myself when I was about your age.”

“Thank you, Mr. Frederick; that’s very kind of you.”

“Nonsense- I call it like I see it, and I see you succeeding in law. Now, I don’t know what you’ve got planned in terms of law school, but I would be pleased if you might consider working here until then as a clerk instead of merely an assistant.”

“Mr. Frederick, I’d be honored; thank you so much,” Jim replied, truly pleased.
“It’s nothing; you deserve it. You’ve got a knack for this and someday, you might look to me to help you find a partnership.” Mr. Frederick offered his hand and Jim took it, standing to lean over the desk.

Thursday evening, he arrived at his parents’ house early to share the good news.

“Mom, Ray, you won’t believe it!”

“What? What you did to that poor, nice Rachel? She has a good heart, and you did something to her to break it! Did you cheat on her?” His mother loomed over him; Jim had never seen a wooden spoon look so threatening.

“I didn’t do anything to her, Mom. I didn’t cheat on her-”

“Good,” Lizzy murmured from the other room. “I’d have to kill you if you did.”

“I have good news from the office, Mom,” Jim continued. His mother raised an eyebrow, though her spoon remained where it was. “They’re making me a clerk.”

“And a clerk is better than an assistant?” Lizzy asked, poking her head in from the living room.

“That sounds more like a demotion,” his mother replied, her fist tight around the spoon’s handle.

“They made you a clerk? That’s wonderful, Jim! Law Schools will be thrilled to see that!” Ray ambled in from the kitchen and deftly plucked the spoon from his wife’s grip.

“Thrilled?” Jim’s mother asked.

“Thrilled,” Ray repeated, smiling.

“Oh. Well, that’s wonderful, Jim.” She smoothed her apron. “Though that doesn’t absolve you for breaking up with Rachel.”

“I didn’t break up with her, Mom; she broke up with me!”

“Then why has she been upset for the past week? Her mother can’t even get her to pick up her phone, and they’ve always been close.” She shook her apron hard, as if to emphasize her last words. So,
Jim thought. *It’s going to be one of those nights.* He turned away and valiantly retreated to the living room where Lizzy had curled up again.

“She’s not going to let it drop, is she?” Jim asked Lizzy ruefully.

“Nope,” she responded evilly, slowly turning a page in her book.

“You wanna take a walk? Maybe she’ll start missing me and be nice if I’m gone for an hour or so.” Lizzy perked up at the suggestion, her book forgotten.

“Can we take a walk in the ravine? It’s nice and quiet there now.”

Jim stood and offered Lizzy his arm. “Shall we?”

“Surely,” she replied, twining her arm around his.

As they wandered up past Jim’s flat, then down the old stairs to the ravine, Jim had one of those magical moments where he could pretend he was with Lizzy. It was just the two of them, arm in arm, chatting, laughing, smiling. He could pretend that they were out for a walk after work, soon to return home to start making dinner. Once, not far along the ravine, he smiled down into her blue eyes and leaned closer to kiss her. Her eyes shifted up and away as he was a handbreadth from her nose and her voice stopped him mere centimeters from her lips.

“Is that your place up there?”

Jim jerked upright, grateful she hadn’t noticed his approach. “Um, yeah, I guess.” Unlike the front window, the back bay window of the lower flat wasn’t blocked by plywood. A fading ray of light made something blue sparkle in the window facing them.

“Wow. It juts really far out.”

“Huh? Oh, I guess it does.” The house’s foundation was barely hidden by the sheer ravine wall and the bay window hung above them like a promise.

“I wonder what happened there,” Lizzy murmured.

“Rachel said the family just up and disappeared.”
“Weird.” Lizzy stood transfixed for a moment before Jim tugged her along; the place was starting to look spooky.

They turned up and climbed out of the ravine once they reached Lizzy’s high school, Riverside. It wasn’t all that far from Jim’s flat, he realized, a little embarrassed. Provided he kept better control and he didn’t try to kiss her again, he could spend more time with her.

No sooner had they gotten back to his parents’ house did Jim’s mom start talking about ‘that poor, nice Rachel’ again. Jim bore it through dinner, but left before dessert with Ray’s help.

“Jim needs to be even better than before, getting there even earlier, especially for the next few weeks. He needs to show Mr. Frederick he did the right thing in promoting him.”

Jim sighed gratefully. Ray’s arrival in his mother’s life had been a blessing, just as Lizzy was a blessing in his. Or a curse, a resentful part of him thought. He’d had to move out, to lie to a good girl, to give up on relationships in general, all because of his absurd, unexplainable, inescapable feelings for his stepsister. As ever, Jim spent the short drive home trying to convince himself that Lizzy as anything more than a sister was disgusting. As ever, he failed miserably.

*

It took two more weeks of his mother’s nagging to make Jim snap. “Mom, my love life is my business. Things didn’t work out between me and Rachel and that’s our problem. We are done; she made that decision. There is nothing you can say or make me do that will change her mind or make me try to get her back. We are done.”

His mother stared at him blankly for a moment.

Lizzy gazed at her step-mother earnestly. “You know, if you like her so much, I’m sure Jim can give you her number. I’m not sure how Dad would feel about you stepping out on him with a younger woman, but, you know, that’s how life goes.”

Jim’s laugh turned into a polite cough as he met Ray’s eyes.
While life without Rachel was easier in some respects—he didn’t have to keep trying to convince a girl he didn’t like that he did like her—there were also the unbearable moments that made Jim regret his stubborn words to his mother. If he did have Rachel, he would have someone to focus on other than Lizzy. Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy. The already small amount of time he spent without thinking about her dwindled; she had taken over his body and invaded his dreams, now she possessed his thoughts as well.

Because of bad traffic one evening after work, Jim had decided to try taking a new route home. As he followed Brady to Humboldt then Humboldt to Locust that first day, he realized he would pass Riverside High School. For the low-low price of three more minutes in the car, he could catch a glimpse of Lizzy as she got out of track practice. What had started as a detour with the fringe benefit of a nice view soon became a once-a-week mission to ensure her safety. Was she talking with any creeps? Was it light enough out for her to walk home alone? Who were those girls she was talking to? Was that a boy she was laughing with?

Jim made it his job to check up on her; his mother was too lost in her own psyche and Ray was too lost in her for them to care for Lizzy adequately. It’s my duty, he told himself, watching her bend over to retie her shoe at the stop light.

Five weeks after his breakup with Rachel, Jim had forgotten that she ever existed. At first, the knowledge alone that he would never do anything with Lizzy in his parents’ home kept him from finding excuses to avoid family dinners. However, as time passed, the desperate pain-pleasure of Thursday night dinners with his family became his life force. Watching her smile or laugh at his jokes made his lower abdomen tingle and his breath catch in his throat; a moment later, Ray or his mother would speak and he’d feel nauseous for such vile wants. But he couldn’t help them. He’d tried and nothing had worked and now all he had left was want.

*
It was the end of March, the weekend after Lizzy’s 18th birthday. The snow had turned grey with the melt water mixing with dirt and splashing everything and everyone, but nothing could dim Lizzy’s spirits. Jim had given her a dainty silver necklace with a small heart pendant studded with tiny diamonds and a ruby on the back. He’d told his mother it was a knock-off of that fancy designer, but he’d lied. He’d pulled some of his savings and had started skimping on food to make up for it, but seeing his necklace around her delicate throat had been worth it.

Jim was so intent on the image as he hauled a week’s worth of empty Ramen and Easy Mac containers down the back stairs out to the garbage that he didn’t even notice it. But, on his way back up to his flat, he paused on the landing behind the first floor flat. The back door was the slightest bit ajar. The hair on the back of Jim’s neck prickled.

He hesitated a brief moment before gently pushing the door open. The last thing he needed was a crazy, drugged-out homeless guy living in his building. “Hello?” he called, softer than he’d meant to. He was surprised to see that the layout was very similar to his flat upstairs- but why shouldn’t it be? Jim made a face at his own dumb observation then froze as he saw the kitchen table on his left. There were two small bowls opposite each other, one with a spoon in it, the other with the spoon lying over-turned nearby. He took a couple steps closer. There was a small handful of cereal crumbs split between the bowls under the thin layer of dust that coated everything he could see. A glass sat on near the sink, a coffee mug on the counter. It looked like everyone had just stepped out for a moment, and never come back.

Jim shivered, then frowned at his own imagination. He squared his shoulders and turned towards the dining room. Framed family photos graced the buffet table; there’d been two children, a son and a daughter, who sat posed with their parents. The mother had short blonde hair; her daughter had her blue eyes. Jim tore his eyes away and looked into the bedroom.
The bed wasn’t made. It lay open, waiting to embrace someone. Various pairs of shoes lined one wall while stacks of magazines were piled next to the night stand. Jim backed out and turned towards the living room. This one was smaller than his upstairs living room; a third of it was devoted to a bedroom for the children. Clothes were everywhere, spread out by the hurricane of youth. Teddy bears and dolls lay scattered around the room, patiently waiting for their master and mistress to return and set them right again.

Jim quickly turned back to the dining room, nearly shouting when he saw movement. He took a breath, then a second, cursing himself five ways from Sunday for forgetting about the built-in china cabinets and sunken mirror that came standard in almost every house on Milwaukee’s East Side. Rachel had called it “East Side charm.” Jim grimaced- did fear equate Rachel in his mind?

Satisfied no one was squatting in the flat, Jim retraced his steps to the kitchen. He turned for a last look at the kitchen table, but was promptly distracted by the breakfast nook in the bay window. There was plastic sheeting hung messily over the nook with a small crack between the sheets revealing snatches of bright colors.

Jim slowly stepped towards the dangling plastic, easing it aside. The table was missing, but Jim barely noticed. There were these bright, translucent shapes made of gel stuck to the window without structure or pattern; the organic beauty of the colors could only have been produced by children. Jim reached out a hand and brushed one of the shapes with his finger tips.

Sharp cracking and wood splintering as glass shattering and the pane was falling out of the window in great shards into the ravine below. Jim stood frozen a moment, then quickly peered out the now empty frame to see where the glass had landed.

A girl lay directly below the window, her blonde hair fanned out, her blue eyes no longer laughing, and blood oozing from a shard imbedded in her forehead and her neck, her neck with a thin silver chain around it.
The grey snow around Lizzy was speckled with her too-bright blood and her unblinking eyes stared right up at Jim, questioning, accusing, knowing.

*

Jim leapt out of bed, his feet catching in his sweat-soaked sheets and fell flat. His heart pounding, Jim took a deep breath. *Lizzy will not die because of me. I can’t let anything happen to her.* Jim promptly started planning, absently scratching at his cheek where the plasticy carpet fibers tickled his stubble. After a few minutes, Jim pushed himself up from the floor and wandered into the kitchen. The remains of his spectacularly failed Valentine’s Day dinner lay on the table, by the sink. The leftover pasta would be crusty and the sauce would have to be thrown out.

Jim was tempted to throw out the dishes, the glassware, and the cutlery too. Instead, he heaved a sigh and got to work on the dishes, trying to figure out how best to protect Lizzy.

*

Work the following Monday was dull, at best. Mr. Frederick wasn’t in until nearly 3pm and Mr. Dunphrey was almost never in on Mondays, so Jim and Nancy had the office to themselves. When Mr. Frederick did walk in, he spotted Jim almost instantly and called him into his office.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Jim. I wanted to talk with you about your work here at the firm.”

“Yes, Mr. Frederick?”

“You’ve done satisfactory work as an assistant here. You are thorough; you arrive on time. You’ve been a great help to Nancy, and you’ve a good mind for details. I wanted to take a moment to thank you for your work here.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Frederick,” Jim replied.

“But of course! I make it a point to meet with our assistants from time to time. So, Jim: depending how the rest of this spring goes, we’ll see what we can do about keeping you on for another summer.” Mr. Frederick smiled gently at Jim, and waved him towards the door.
Thursday evening, Jim arrived at his parents’ house early to check in with Lizzy. He’d driven past Riverside High School every afternoon after work to make sure she was still alive, that she was still okay.

“Lizzy? Hey Lizzy?”

“Jim? Is that you?” His mother called. She came into the hall from the kitchen, a blue rooster apron hugging her waist, a stirring utensil clutched in her right hand, and a scowl on her face. “What you did to that poor, nice Rachel? She has a good heart, and you did something to her to break it! Did you cheat on her?” His mother loomed over him; Jim had never seen a wooden spoon look so threatening.

“I didn’t do anything to her, Mom. I didn’t cheat on her-”

“Good,” Lizzy said as she poked her head in from the living room. “I’d have to kill you if you did.”

“Lizzy! How’s it going? Everything all right?” Jim asked her, turning his back to his mother.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?” Lizzy raised an eyebrow.

“I just wanted to check up on you.” The eyebrow remained where it was. “I heard a girl got assaulted in the ravine last weekend.” The eyebrow dropped.

“Yes, a girl was assaulted near the ravine- her heart was broken by my heartless son!”

Jim sighed and turned back to his mother. “Mr. Frederick pulled me into his office today, Mom.” Her menacing wooden spoon dropped. “He said I’m doing very well. He said they might be able to keep me on for another summer.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Jim! Maybe you’ll make enough to go to Law School this fall!” Ray ambled in from the kitchen and deftly plucked the spoon from his wife’s grip.

“Law School? This year?” Jim’s mother asked.

“This year,” Ray repeated, smiling.

“Oh. Well, that’s wonderful, Jim.” She smoothed her apron. “Though that doesn’t absolve you for breaking up with Rachel.”

“I didn’t break up with her, Mom; she broke up with me!”
“Then why has she been upset for the past week? Her mother can’t even get her to pick up her phone, and they’ve always been close.” She shook her apron hard, as if to emphasize her last words. So, Jim thought. It’s going to be one of those nights. He turned away and valiantly retreated to the living room where Lizzy had curled up again.

“So, everything’s been good? No ‘creepers’ wandering around school?” Lizzy looked up from her book and made a face at Jim. He froze at her scowl, then tried again. “She’s not going to let it drop, is she?”

“Nope,” she responded evilly, slowly turning a page in her book.

“You wanna take a walk? Maybe she’ll start missing me and be nice if I’m gone for an hour or so.” Lizzy perked up at the suggestion, her book forgotten.

“Can we take a walk in the ravine? It’s nice and quiet there now.”

“No!” Jim leapt from the ottoman and nearly tumbled over it as it rolled backwards. “No, no.” As he tried to regain his composure, Jim continued, laughing dryly “No, you don’t want to go there. Like I said, a girl was assaulted there. Let’s take a walk around the campus; that’s much better.”

“Okay,” she replied, puzzled.

As they wandered down Hampshire towards Oakland Avenue, Jim had one of those magical moments where he could pretend he was with Lizzy. It was just the two of them, arm in arm, chatting, laughing, smiling. He could pretend that they were out for a walk after work, soon to return home to start making dinner.

“Hold on,” Jim cautioned Lizzy as they came to the intersection with Oakland. He grabbed her hand and held it tight as a solitary car drove past them.

“Come on!” Lizzy tugged Jim forward; he pulled her back. “The light down there is about to turn! Let’s go before there’s ten cars instead of one!”
Jim’s heart raced; it was far too easy to see Lizzy lying in the street, bleeding with a slightly dented car speeding away into the night. “Why don’t we cross down there? That way, the cars have to stop at the lights for us.”

“But it’ll take so much longer! Gah, see? Now we’ll have to wait for all these cars. We should’ve gone!”

“Well, if it’ll take longer either way, we might as well do it safely. Come on, Lizzy.” Jim tugged her down Oakland towards Kenwood, nearly missing her full, pouting lips as he considered the traffic.

Thirty minutes later, they got back to the house. No sooner did Jim hang up his coat than his mom start talking about ‘that poor, nice Rachel’ again.

He tried to dodge her questions by instead questioning Lizzy: who do you hang out with most right now? where does she live? does she have a boyfriend? do you have a crush on anyone? how’s track going? is the coach a guy or a girl? does he ever weird anyone out? what are your weekend plans? when will you be at Mary’s house? will there be any boys there? are there any good parties this weekend?

Finally, with Jim’s last question, Lizzy’s off-handed or silly responses were partnered with a glare. Jim quickly backed off and told her how much he missed hanging out with her, how left out he felt. Placated, she turned back to her beans with a wary glance at her father, who was busy trying to convince Sarah to leave Jim alone.

By dessert, Jim could no longer handle his mother’s remonstrations about Rachel. He barely managed to extricate himself from dinner with Ray’s help.

“Jim needs to be even better than before, getting there even earlier, especially for the next few weeks. He needs to show Mr. Frederick that he’ll be a good employee through the summer.”

Though his mother still glared, she voiced no further protests. Jim sighed gratefully. Ray’s arrival in his mother’s life had been a blessing, just as Lizzy was a blessing in his. A blessing he had to protect.

*
That Saturday, Jim hopped into his car at 5:30pm and parked down the block from his parents’ house, letting his car idle. At 6pm, a teal sedan pulled up to the house and Lizzy ran out to meet it. The girl who drove the car leaned over to hug Lizzy, then put the car into gear and pulled a U-turn. Jim eased out of his spot and followed the girls at a distance. It wasn’t hard to keep track of the bright car in Milwaukee’s train of silver, blue, and black sedans and SUVs, even as they approached Maryland Avenue. The girls parked on Shepherd behind Café Hollander; Jim pulled in to the parking lot just across the street and watched as they were ushered in. As they left the restaurant, Jim checked his watch. Their movie started in fifteen minutes. He saw them pull their coats tight against the cold as they headed down Downer towards the theater.

Jim sighed. Maybe he was being too protective. Lizzy was a good girl; she was doing exactly what she’d told him she would. A small bing drew his eyes down; his gas light was on. He’d need to stop by a gas station if he wanted to keep the heat on for much longer. As he looked back towards the Downer Landmark theater, he frowned. The girls had walked past it and were going into Ma Jolie next door. Jim sat up straight, straining to see into the store’s big front windows through the February darkness. Was Lizzy chatting with the clerk? The clerk smiled as Lizzy laughed.

Jim tapped his horn, then ducked beneath the wheel. After half a minute, he sat up again. Lizzy was with Mary, looking at shoes on sale and resettling her scarf. The girls left the shop and went next door into the theater. Jim had just been planning to make sure that the girls went to dinner and a movie as they’d said they would, but after the incident with the Ma Jolie clerk, he revised his plans. He waited fifteen minutes, then headed into the theater.

* 

Two weeks later, Jim knew the name of every one of Lizzy’s friends and close acquaintances, her favorite hang outs, and her weekly schedule. He had memorized the names of the boys Lizzy mentioned
a lot and he knew the faces of the ones she saw after classes and after practice. He even knew which students would be hosting parties with alcohol this coming weekend.

Which is why he was so irritated by the fact that Lizzy had managed to give him the slip the day before.

Lizzy was supposed to be at track practice until late, but when Jim had driven by, there’d been no sign of her with her teammates. He’d even circled back and parked nearby to wait and see if she’d gone to the bathroom. Thirty minutes later, she hadn’t shown. Jim quickly thought up a story and hopped out of the car and strolled over to the coach to ask about her, saying he was her brother and that he had a message. The coach had said that Lizzy’s father had needed her home. Jim thanked the man and turned back to his car. It had taken every ounce of his restraint to not sprint to his car and tear off to go searching for her.

Jim had spent the next ninety minutes driving around the East Side looking for her. Finally, at 7:15, he’d called his mother in a panic. Fortunately, Ray answered the phone; Lizzy had just gotten home from practice and was just hopping into the shower- maybe Jim could ask her his question tomorrow.

That was probably why Jim finally snapped at his mother when she brought up Rachel again. “Mom, my love life is my business. Things didn’t work out between me and Rachel and that’s our problem. We are done; she made that decision. There is nothing you can say or make me do that will change her mind or make me try to get her back. We are done.”

His mother stared at him blankly for a moment.

“You know, if you like her so much, I’m sure Jim can give you her number. I’m not sure how Dad would feel about you stepping out on him with a younger woman, but, you know, that’s how life goes.”

Lizzy gazed at her step-mother earnestly.

Jim smile at Lizzy turned into a glare as he remembered her deceit. “How does Coach Barnes feel about you stepping out on track practice?”
Her eyes huge, Lizzy turned to Jim, her mouth gaping. “Wait, what did Lizzy do?” Ray asked, confused.

“Jim!” Lizzy squeaked in indignation.

“You know that long track practice yesterday? She skipped it. She told Coach Barnes that you wanted her home, Ray.”

“Jim!” Lizzy shrieked.

“Lizzy, what were you doing?”

“You cannot lie to us, young lady! When you say you’re at track practice, you have to be at track practice!”

“What if something were to happen to you? No one would know where you were or where to look for you!”

“It doesn’t matter where I was!” Lizzy screamed back at her parents.

“Yes, it does. And if you can’t see that, we’ll have to ground you.”

“No friends, no parties, no track practice for a week.”

“No track? But if I can’t go to track, I can’t go to our next meet!”

“You’ve already shown us that track is not as important to you as it should be. If you miss your next meet, maybe you’ll think twice about skipping practice and lying to your parents about it.”

“I hate you, Jim!” Lizzy screamed as she shoved her chair back and ran upstairs. A final “you’re ruining my life!” echoed down the stairwell.

Something caught in Jim’s overly-dry throat and his vision became blurry. He felt a fracture growing in his heart, but he pushed it back. *This is for her protection. She will live if I can keep her safe; I will keep her safe.* He swallowed, cleared his throat, and took a sip of his water. *I will keep her safe.*

*
The next week was sweet agony. When Lizzy wasn’t at home, she was at school; there was always someone with her, always someone watching her. Jim hadn’t felt this relieved since before Valentine’s Day.

And yet...

And yet, Lizzy’s words haunted Jim: “I hate you, Jim!” He’d be up all night wondering if he had done the right thing to rat her out, then he’d doze off at 6am, barely waking up in time to make it to work. Nancy had suggested Jim take a couple days off to deal with whatever he was going through, but the worst thing Jim could imagine was having nothing to do but sit and think about Lizzy’s anger. The weekend after the family dinner had been bad enough; adding a Wednesday or a Thursday to that was unthinkable.

The weather had finally broken and it was still above 40 degrees by the time left for his weekly dinner. He convinced himself that was the reason he’d chosen to walk over. Definitely not to put off seeing the harsh consequences of his actions on Lizzy. How often does Wisconsin see 40 degrees before the middle of March? Never. If Jim took the long way to his parents’ house that night, it was only to make the most of the warm thaw.

For the first time since he got home from college, Lizzy was not downstairs when he arrived. Jim felt the fracture in his chest grow. He hadn’t realized she made it a point to be there to greet him when he came in. The seed of remorse he’d been trying to crush all week sprouted. Forlorn, Jim wandered into the kitchen where his mother promptly handed him plates for the dining room table and a healthy dose of guilt for being ten minutes late. Jim obeyed, trying desperately to convince himself he’d done the right thing in telling on her.

Ray arrived a moment later with the cutlery and napkins. While Jim set the knives and forks around the table, Ray folded and placed napkins. “Apparently Lizzy was with Mary last week Wednesday. They were getting fake IDs in Riverwest so they could go to some of the bars for Lizzy’s
birthday next week. I don’t think they understood that some of those places have cops on hand to arrest you for using a fake ID.”

“Lizzy was in Riverwest?!” Jim exclaimed, terrified. “But she might have been raped or shot!”

“Jim, you’re over-reacting a bit. Riverwest is fine—”

“Yeah, if you stay in your car on Locust Street! Ray, Jimmy John’s won’t even deliver there because one of their guys got shot for the change they carry with them.”

“Jim—”

“Lizzy! Time for dinner!” Jim’s mother’s voice interrupted and both men focused on finishing setting the table.

Dinner was worse than Jim had hoped. Lizzy wouldn’t even look at him. She went so far as to walk around the table to grab the salt and pepper instead of asking Jim to pass them. Every one of Jim’s jokes fell flat and not even gentle questions about homework provoked an answer. Ray had tried to intervene, but Jim’s mother had shot him a look. Apparently, it was up to Jim to take the blame for the punishment and to fix things with Lizzy. Jim’s desperation grew worse with every course. Finally, while his mother was distributing the pudding, he swallowed his pride and cross the room to her side.

With a gallant flourish of his imaginary hat and cape, Jim knelt on one knee beside Lizzy. “My dearest Lizzy, I have behaved atrociously towards you. I have wronged you unconscionably and I can only hope that I may someday find a way to return myself to your good graces. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, the lowest of the low, the rattiest of the rats?” He was rewarded with a slight tick at the corner of her mouth as she fought a smile. He continued, “I humbly beg of you, on bended knee, to forgive me.” After a second’s pause, Jim added, with a twinge of his own, “An older brother’s shenanigans must be forgiven, you see, because he is just an older brother who doesn’t know any better.”

At that, Lizzy giggled and flapped her hand at him. “You’re an idiot.”
Jim stood and bowed. “In the immortal words of Han Solo, I know.”

“He was saying ‘I know’ to Princess Leia’s ‘I love you,’ though.”

“Nerd alert! Nerd alert!”

“You’re the one saying ‘nerd alert,’” Lizzy told Jim imperiously, then spoiled the effect by giggling again. “I’m still mad at you though.”

“Well, maybe I can bribe my way back into your affections with my birthday present for you.”

After dinner, just before Jim left, Ray pulled him aside. “Lizzy’s had a tough week, Jim. Because she missed this week’s practice, she’ll have to sit out of her next track meet. Apparently, this meet and her next one are the meets when a state representative comes to judge who qualifies for the state meet this spring. Lizzy will be at a disadvantage for the next meet, but maybe she’ll have learned her lesson.”

“I didn’t realize, Ray.”

“I see it as character building and good motivation. In any case, Lizzy’s taking this kind of hard. Although she kind of blames you for this, she’s always loved your company. You might bring her out of it if you could make an effort to spend more time with her.”

“Oh, okay.” Jim’s heart pounded. “Sure, Ray.” Spend more time with Lizzy? What could be better? Jim smiled as he trotted home. He’d more or less gotten permission from her father to spend as much time as he wanted with Lizzy. He’d be able to keep her safe.

*

The very next day, Jim begged out of work early, saying he had a doctor’s appointment he’d forgotten about at 2:45pm. He sped home, dropped off his car, and arrived at Riverside just in time to pick up Lizzy after class. With the fresh reminder of her inability to join her teammates on the track, Lizzy was frosty towards Jim, but his happiness at being with her was catching. By the time they got home, Lizzy was throwing her head back and laughing at Jim’s tales of Mr. Frederick’s more ridiculous clients.
“Can you believe it? He calls her ‘the Gremlin’!” Jim had to steady Lizzy as she curled over, laughing so hard he could see tears in the corners of her eyes when she stood up straight again. They arrived at their parents’ house far too soon. “Hey, Lizzy, do you want to go to Alterra with me tomorrow afternoon?”

“Oh, actually, I was going to get coffee with Alice at Starbucks on Downer tomorrow at three.”

“Great; I can get coffee with the both of you!”

“Um, actually-”

At that moment, Ray poked his head outside. “Hey Lizzy, Jim. Home from school already? Jim, would you like to come in for a bit?” Jim glanced his mother over Ray’s shoulder. Her lips had a mulish set.

“No thanks, Ray- dirty dishes are calling me. But I’ll probably see you again tomorrow; Lizzy and Alice and I are going to Starbucks.”

“Actually, Jim, this is kind of a just-me-and-Alice thing-”

“Nonsense! I think it’s a wonderful idea. Jim, you’ll come pick Lizzy up at- what?”

“Just before three.”

“Great! Well, then-”

“Ray, tell the kids to either come in or stay out; you’re letting in a draft.”

“Sorry dear! In or out, guys?”

“Dad, could you give us a second?” Lizzy asked.

“Sure, sure. See you tomorrow, Jim!” Jim saluted at Ray as he pulled the door closed.

“Jim, this is a me-and-Alice thing. I kind of just want to talk with her. I’ve been cooped up with family for a week; I kinda want to see other people”

The word ‘family’ stabbed at Jim’s chest. He swallowed and forced a smile. “What, are you scared Alice might fall in love with me?”
“What? No! Never! Eww!” Lizzy’s suddenly bright red face contradicted something in her statement, but, before Jim could put his finger on it, his mother opened the door.

“Lizzy, you’ll catch your death. Jim, I hear we’ll see you tomorrow afternoon?”

Jim looked at Lizzy, worried about the flush on her cheeks and the cold weather. She sighed.

“Yeah, he’ll be here at three.”

*

Despite Lizzy’s fears, Jim was in fine form at Starbucks, keeping the girls laughing, treating them to cupcakes in addition to their drinks, and listening closely as Alice bemoaned her mother. Lizzy refused to admit it, but Jim was pretty sure he hadn’t completely mortified her in front of her friend. Once he heard that the girls were planning on going to the mall, he even offered to drive them there and back; Mr. Frederick had very suddenly needed copies of some documents at the Hanon and Confrey law offices there. In any case, Lizzy had no complaints to offer Jim at the end of the day.

On Monday, Jim told the still-concerned Nancy that he was going through something and he hadn’t been sleeping normal hours. He explained that the only time he could get any rest was from five in the afternoon until ten at night, that the doctor’s appointment had been to get a prescription to fix his insomnia. Nancy coddled the ‘poor boy’ and readily assented to decreased hours for Jim this week. Jim had expressed his gratitude with a bouquet of origami flowers he made over lunch break.

As soon as the clock struck four, he started yawning. Something about Nancy’s desk made him particularly sleepy, it seemed. She sent him home with a hug at 4:30 and by 5pm, Jim was standing in front of Riverside, waiting for Lizzy to emerge.

The next day, while Jim was just as prompt, Lizzy was fifteen minutes late. “Where were you?” Jim asked, trying to keep his exploding anxiety under control.

“Well, today’s the track meet and I was talking with my friends, wishing them luck. Do you think we can stay and watch them run?”
“Sure,” Jim, placated, replied as he reached for his cell phone. “I’ll give Ray a call to let them know.” Lizzy’s arms held him captive as she gave him an enormous hug.

“Thank you so much, Jim!” She released him, smiled into his flushed face, and dragged him to the track.

Jim had known that Lizzy loved track, but nothing had prepared him for her incredible enthusiasm. She stood right up against the fence surround the track and started to lose her voice after only twenty minutes of cheering. Jim bought them both hot cocoa to warm their hands and to soothe Lizzy’s throat. As the short-distance events ended, Lizzy finally gave up her perch next to the fence and joined Jim on the metal bleachers. Jim tugged a bit of the car blanket he was sitting on over for Lizzy to share. “Your team seems to be doing really well,” he smiled at her.

“Yeah, we’re probably going to sweep state this year.” Lizzy’s eyes were on the long-distance runners as they walked over to the blocks and started placing their feet.

“A nice finish to your senior year,” Jim observed.

“And how I’m going to get into Lake Forest.”

“The college? You’ve got the grades to get in there easy, don’t you?”

Lizzy stared at the runners silently.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Jim asked softly. “I could have helped you. I’m good at the obnoxious things like derivatives in math and extended symbolism.” Lizzy gave him the stink eye. “And I’m very good at being obnoxious too.” Jim sighed.

Lizzy stared at her feet for a moment before responding. “I didn’t want you to think I’m dumb. You always use these big words.”

“Lizzy, I-” The starter pistol went off and the racers sprung to their feet. Lizzy reacted just as the runners did, leaping back to the fence to shout encouragement to her teammates. Jim leaned back and sighed, then perked up as he saw a guy sidle over to Lizzy. They spoke quietly, Lizzy’s attention fully
diverted from the race, then they turned to look at Jim. Jim met the boy’s eyes squarely, daring him to try to touch Lizzy. The guy frowned at Jim, then at Lizzy, and wandered away.

It wasn’t until the end of the race that Lizzy returned to the bleacher. “Hey, who was that guy, Lizzy? Was that Ian?” Lizzy had mentioned an Ian a couple times, and this kid looked like an Ian.

“Who? Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was Ian.”

“What’d he want?”

“Oh, it’s actually really funny; he wanted to know if you’re my boyfriend!” Lizzy laughed outright at the very idea. Jim chuckled along, wanly.

“What’d you tell him?” Jim asked, his gut kicked in.

“I said, ‘wouldn’t you like to know,’ then sent him off.” Lizzy smiled imperiously. “It’s none of his business.” Jim’s gut felt much better, suddenly.

“Hey, can I get you something to eat? I kinda want to try the cheesy nachos.”

“Yeah, that sounds perfect.” Jim smiled, stuffed his hands into his pocket, and wandered towards the snack shop, a smile lighting his way.

* 

For Lizzy’s birthday that Friday, Jim had purchased her a dainty silver necklace with a small heart pendant studded with tiny diamonds and a ruby on the back. He’d told his mother it was a knock-off of that fancy designer, but he’d lied. He loved seeing his gift around her neck, a constant reminder of his presence in her life, keeping her safe. Lizzy loved how “sparkly” it was and, as Jim had hoped, his gift restored him to her good graces. The small loan he’d take out from the bank had been worth it.

But, work the Monday after Lizzy’s birthday was not. Jim was fresh out of excuses to leave early to pick up Lizzy from school and Mr. Frederick had noticed his absence the week before. When the clock hit 4:30pm, Jim completely lost his ability to focus. By 4:45, Jim stood to, as he told Nancy, ‘run to the restroom’ and paced the long hallway, dying to be able to make sure Lizzy got home all right. Finally, at
5:12, Mr. Frederick gave Nancy, and thus Jim, the go-ahead to close up. Jim bolted downstairs to his car, only one arm inside his coat sleeve and was headed north on Humboldt before 5:20pm. Of course, by the time he managed to negotiate rush hour traffic, Riverside’s track was empty and dark.

Missing picking up Lizzy after track got even more agonizing for Jim as the week wore on. Every day at 4:30, the anxiety would start. By 4:45, Jim would seriously consider just disappearing early, however, Mr. Frederick somehow seemed to guess Jim’s urgency to leave. He seemed to find more and more excuses to ‘check in’ with Jim as the afternoon progressed, which somehow made the passage of time even slower. By Thursday, it was only the knowledge that his job enabled him to live in an apartment rather than at home—sweet torture that it would be—that kept Jim from leaving early, despite Mr. Frederick’s vigilance.

The look on Lizzy’s face as she greeted Jim at the door and his gift around her neck made it all worth it though.

*  

That image of silver against creamy skin kept Jim warm the next couple nights. Jim was still so wrapped up in the warm embrace of it Saturday morning as he hauled a week’s worth of empty Ramen and Easy Mac containers down the back stairs out to the garbage that he didn’t even notice it. But, on his way back up to his flat, he paused on the landing behind the first floor flat. The back door was the slightest bit ajar.

The hair on the back of Jim’s neck prickled and a cold bead of sweat tickled his forehead.

He hesitated a brief moment before gently pushing the door open. “Hello?” he called self-consciously. The layout was almost exactly the same as in that dream he’d had. There was the kitchen table on his left. There were the two small bowls opposite each other, one with a spoon in it, the other with the spoon lying over-turned nearby. He took a couple steps closer. There was the small handful of cereal crumbs split between the bowls under the thin layer of dust that coated everything he could see.
A glass sat on near the sink, a coffee mug on the counter. Everything was as it should be, but as it shouldn’t be.

Jim shivered, then frowned at his own imagination. He squared his shoulders and turned towards the dining room, deliberately not looking around to his left. Framed family photos graced the buffet table; there’d been two children, a son and a daughter, who sat posed with their parents. The mother had short blonde hair; her daughter had her blue eyes. Jim tore his eyes away and looked into the bedroom.

The bed wasn’t made. It lay open, waiting to embrace someone. Jim backed out and turned towards the kitchen again, nearly shouting when he saw movement. He took a breath, then a second, cursing himself five ways from Sunday for forgetting about the built-in china cabinets and sunken mirror that came standard in almost every house on Milwaukee’s East Side. Someone, he couldn’t remember who, had called it “East Side charm.”

On his way out, Jim’s eyes were unavoidably drawn to the right, towards the plastic-shielded bay window. Bright colors stared back at him. Jim froze in horror, then, with a shake of his head, he growled. No dream would dictate his life! He pulled down one of the plastic sheets, but couldn’t make himself step closer to the windows. His feet were riveted to the hardwood floor.

A creak drew his attention to the back door, which was slowly swinging open again. A blonde head poked in.

“Lizzy?”

“Oh! Oh, Jim.” Her shock quickly turned to fury; Jim noticed she’d been crying. “Jim, do you know what you did?”

“Lizzy, what’s-“

“Don’t ‘Lizzy’ me! Do you know what you did? I’m not going to get to go to Lake Forest and it’s all your fault!”
“I don’t.”

“Shut up!” Lizzy strode toward Jim, her hands clenched by her sides. “You ruined- you ruined everything!” Her voice caught, but she kept her eyes dry. “Coach Barnes called me this morning to tell me that they canceled the next track meet! Not enough schools signed up and- and the state won’t send anyone else later for qualifications!”

“I’m sure something can be worked-”

“Coach Barnes called them and tried pulling all his strings but no one will come down to see me run! I missed my one and only chance to go to state this year and to get a scholarship and it’s all your fault!” Tears streamed down Lizzy’s cheeks.

“Lizzy, I had to tell Mom and Ray-”

“You had to? You had to?” Lizzy’s voice crescendoed and echoed around the empty flat.

“I needed to know where you were! I need to know you’re safe! You need to be safe!”

“Safe?! ”

“Safe! That’s why I’ve been checking on you and walking you home from school! I don’t want anything bad to happen to you!”

“What?” Lizzy spat the word at him, contempt in her eyes.

“You have to stay safe! Even before I walked you home last week, I changed my route so I could drive past Riverside to make sure you could get home safe! I made sure you and Mary or you and Alice went where you said and that no one hurt you!”

“Have you been stalking me?!”

“No! I’ve been keeping you safe!”

“From what? From who?”

“From boys, from rapists, from anything that might hurt you. I don’t want you to die!”

“You’ve been protecting me from guys? What, are you some jealous ex-lover?”
“Yes!” The word hung in the air, Lizzy’s jaw hung open. “I mean, I’ve been protecting—”

“Jim, you like me??”

“Lizzy—”

“You like me? That’s the only reason you’ve been spending time with me? I thought you were my brother; I thought that—”

“Just wait a second, Lizzy—”

“No! And now, because of you, I won’t get in to Lake Forest and I’ll have to stay in this stupid town and go to fucking UWM and it’s all because of you!” Lizzy’s face was covered with tears. She turned away from Jim towards the bay window with its brightly colored gels. “There is nothing for me—there is nothing.” Lizzy took a step closer to the window and looked back at Jim over her shoulder. “Nothing.”

As she turned back to face the window, Jim tried to go to her, to clasp her to his chest, but, no matter how badly he wanted to, his feet would not obey his mind’s instructions. Lizzy took a step towards the window and then, before Jim could even comprehend what she was doing, she threw herself out of the central pane.

Sharp cracking and wood splintering as glass shattering and Lizzy and great shards of the pane were falling out of the window into the ravine below. Jim rushed to the window and peered out of the now empty frame.

She lay directly below, her blonde hair fanned out, her blue eyes no longer crying, and blood oozing from a shard imbedded in her forehead and her neck, her neck with a thin silver chain around it.

The grey snow around Lizzy was speckled with her too-bright blood and her unblinking eyes stared right up at Jim, questioning, accusing, knowing.

*
Jim leapt out of bed, his feet catching in his sweat-soaked sheets and fell flat. His heart pounding, Jim took a deep breath. *I will not be the cause of Lizzy’s death. I won’t let anything happen to her.* Jim pushed himself up quickly and crossed his legs. If his active involvement would hurt her, he would find a way to get involved passively.

As he carefully considered ideas, Jim wandered into the kitchen. The remains of his spectacularly failed Valentine’s Day dinner lay on the table, by the sink. The leftover pasta would be crusty and the sauce would have to be thrown out.

Jim mindlessly got to work on the dishes, trying to figure out how to keep Lizzy alive.

* 

Work the following Monday was just as mindless. Jim came back from his lunch break forty minutes late because he’d been too engrossed in his thoughts for Lizzy to take proper note of the time. Mr. Frederick had decided to break his Monday tradition and to come in early. When Jim got back from lunch, Mr. Frederick spotted Jim almost instantly and called him into his office.

“Call Nancy in too, Jim. I wanted to talk with you about your work here at the firm. Nancy, you may take a seat there, and Jim, you can sit here in front of me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Frederick.”

“Now, Jim, I hate to have to do this, but your work here at the firm has been lacking. Although you arrive on time, your filing is sloppy, your notes are imprecise, and your demeanor can only be described as cold, at best.”

“Sir?” Jim asked, mildly confused.

“Jim, what I’m trying to say is that Frederick and Dunphrey no longer has a position for you. I know you’re planning to go to law school, and perhaps that will make all the difference in the world, but I have too much to do without taking the time to train you on the basics. I am willing to let you quit so the basic integrity of your transcript and your résumé remains intact, but Jim, you should know that I
will be perfectly frank if anyone calls us looking for a reference for you.” Mr. Frederick stared gravely at Jim while Nancy fidgeted in her chair.

“Mr. Frederick, you are being more than kind. Thank you so much for the opportunity to work with you. I find that my mind is being drawn to other matters to the detriment of my work here; I will remove the burden I have placed on the firm and tender my resignation this afternoon.”

Mr. Frederick stood, “Jim,” nodded at him, and gestured for Nancy to open the office door.

*

Thursday evening, Jim arrived at his parents’ house early to scout the block for more observation posts. He’d already established four near Riverside High School and had followed Lizzy five times, at a distance.

Satisfied with his choices, Jim rapped on the door.

“Jim? Is that you?” His mother called. She came into the hall from the kitchen, a blue rooster apron hugging her waist, a stirring utensil clutched in her right hand, and a scowl on her face. “What you did to that poor, nice Rachel? She has a good heart, and you did something to her to break it! Did you cheat on her?” His mother loomed over him; Jim had never seen a wooden spoon look so threatening.

“Wait, who? Rachel? I didn’t do anything to her.”

“Who? What do you mean, who? Only the girl you’ve been dating for the last six months!”

“So, Mom, I have news from the law firm.”

“News? Nothing new about it- the same-old workaholic drivel. The only thing new here is your absolute lack of a heart!”

“I’m leaving the law firm. Mr. Frederick had to cut back on expenses and, while he’d initially planned on simply asking Nancy and me to work reduced hours, I know how much Nancy needs the full time job, raising her daughter all alone. So, I told Mr. Frederick that I would be glad to remove myself
from the equation, so he could continue paying Nancy her accustomed salary and maybe hire a part-
time temp for a month.”

“That’s very good of you, Jim.”

“How is it that you feel more compassion for this Nancy than for poor Rachel? Is her daughter yours? Did you sleep with her while you were with Rachel?” What had started out as a snide comment escalated into an accusatory screech.

“Sarah-”

She glared at her husband, however, she adjusted her tone. “Rachel has been upset for the past week! Her mother can’t even get her to pick up her phone, and they’ve always been close.” She shook her apron hard, as if to emphasize her last words. *So, Jim thought. It’s going to be one of those nights.* He turned away and valiantly retreated to the living room where Lizzy had curled up with a book.

“Hey you,” Jim said carefully.

“Hey,” Lizzy sighed as she turned a page.

“This isn’t over, Jim! Why you ever broke it off with such a pretty girl, I’ll never know!”

“I didn’t break up with her, Mom; she broke up with me,” Jim heaved a sigh of his own.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” Lizzy asked.

About to answer in the negative, Jim’s resolve melted in the face of large, pleading blue eyes.

“All right. Where do you want to go?”

“How about the ravine?”

“The ravine? Why would you want to go there? It’s all rusty cans and broken glass,” Jim swallowed and continued quickly, “and even if you get a clear patch, the bike messengers use it; they’ll run you down before you even hear them coming.”

“Oh, okay. Want to walk down Kenwood?”

“That sounds great.”
Jim set a leisurely pace, fully aware that, if his plans worked out, this would be one of his last opportunities to have a good conversation with Lizzy.

“How are things going at school, Lizzy?” Her very name still sent a warm shiver down his back.

“All right. Track is going great, though! I just managed to shave two seconds off my thousand-yard dash!”

“Wow, two whole seconds!”

“Yeah, that’s actually a lot. Usually it’s only like tenths or hundredths of a second.”

“Lizzy, you are incredible.”

Her smile could have spanned Lake Michigan. “I know.”

At dinner, Jim’s mother’s jabs about Rachel didn’t even register; Jim was too preoccupied with planning how to protect Lizzy. It’d be hard to slip into the gym if they had to run inside.

“…that poor Rachel…” The words washed over Jim and, as they drew back into the tide, epiphany hit; he smiled broadly. There was a weight room that looked over the indoor eighth-mile track. He could find his old student ID and watch her as he worked out.

“What can you possibly be smiling about?” Jim’s mother’s shrill voice broke through his thoughts. “You just lost your job and your girlfriend! Next, you’ll lose your apartment—”

He would lose the apartment if he couldn’t pay his rent. February was taken care of, but March was fast approaching. Jim shook his head and quoted Margaret Mitchell’s famed protagonist. ‘I’ll think about it tomorrow.’

As Jim was settling his coat around his shoulders, Ray drew him aside. “Jim, what you did today for Nancy impressed me. I want you to know that not many people have your heart. I’m proud of you, son.” Ray squeezed Jim’s shoulder.

Jim swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “Thanks Ray.”
“Now, you should know that this won’t happen again, but I know finding a new job in this economy may take some time. You should be focused on finding the right job for you—and for your future—rather than on how to pay next month’s rent. Here,” Ray handed Jim an envelope.

“Ray-“

“No buts. I won’t take it back, and if you don’t cash it, I’ll just send another straight to Rachel’s father.”

“Really, Ray-“

“No, Jim. Honorable deeds aren’t rewarded often enough in this world. I just want to make sure you won’t suffer for what you did. Just say thank you.”

“Thank you, Ray. This means a lot.”

Ray gave Jim one of his giant bear hugs, then patted him on the shoulder as he headed out the door.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Jim’s insomnia that night had nothing to do with Lizzy.

* 

Jim roused himself out of his vacant-eyed stupor the next morning at his usual hour but, instead of putting on a dress shirt and tie as on Monday, he pulled on the clothes he’d worn Tuesday, Wednesday, and the day before: an old, black hoodie from his mortifying goth faze right after his father’s death, dark, worn jeans, and a scuffed-up pair of Converse. With the hood up and his hands buried in his front pocket, he looked almost high-school aged.

He was halfway down the front stairs when he remembered he’d forgotten the most important part of his disguise. He raced back up to the apartment and, less than a minute later, returned with a black and purple backpack slung over his shoulder.

It’d look strange if a student wandered around a high school without any books. People would remember the kid without a backpack, Jim had realized. So, just a couple hours before his meeting with
Mr. Frederick on Monday, Jim had stopped by the office building’s lost and found and grabbed the
black-purple Vans backpack. The very next day, he’d dug out his old sweatshirt and, at 4:30pm, he made
his way to the high school to be in place before Lizzy got out of track.

By 7:30am, Jim was leaning against a tree half a block up from his parents’ house. Less than
fifteen minutes later, Lizzy emerged, munching on a bagel. Jim waited until she was almost to the first
intersection, then casually started walking in the same direction on the opposite side of the street.

The ten-minute warning bell was just ringing as Lizzy and Jim arrived at Riverside. A massive
horde of students crammed on to the front steps and filled the sidewalk. The gutsier kids even stood in
the street, flipping off cars that got too close. Like a single finger could stop a speeding car, Jim sighed.

Lizzy joined a group of girls across the street from Riverside. A few of them looked like her—
tight pants, midriff-bearing shirts under puffy coats, worn trainers, and blonde hair pulled back into
swinging ponytails—but, for some reason, they all looked young. When she was talking with the other
girls, Lizzy remained composed, serene, and self-contained; even her makeup was restrained. She was
above them all. Jim’s heart swelled.

The class bell rang and Jim watched as the mass of students oozed into the building. Lizzy and
her friends dashed across the street and slipped into the crowd. Satisfied she had gotten in safely, Jim
turned and headed for home, trying to figure out what to do until Lizzy got out of track practice.

* * *

Through subtle calls to his parents, Jim was able to figure out Lizzy’s schedule without having to
ask her directly. He desperately didn’t want her to know the extent of his protection; the look in her
eyes when she’d realized it... Even though it had just been a dream, Jim couldn’t shake the image.

That weekend, Jim pulled out all the over-sized hooded sweatshirts he owned and donned a
new one to follow Lizzy every time she went out. Over the course of the next week, he got very good at
hunching his shoulders to push the hoods forward and at nonchalantly ducking his head anytime Lizzy
looked in his direction. The trees at the top lip of the ravine were particularly well-suited for Jim’s needs during Lizzy’s outdoor track practices.

A week and a half after leaving Mr. Frederick’s firm, Jim cashed Ray’s check and dropped March’s rent in the mail. He couldn’t help but wonder what job he could get that would allow him to disappear from 7:30 to 8:15am, from 4:30 to 5:15pm, and sporadically on weekends whenever Lizzy went out. Maybe Alterra? Or the Downer Landmark theater? Even if he couldn’t make sure she got to and from the coffee house or the movies safely, he’d be able to keep an eye on her without having to worry about hiding. Jim paused to reconsider. He didn’t want her knowing how much time he spent watching her or thinking about her or being around her. Jim’s eyes widened at the last thought. Quickly, he popped out his cell phone.

“Hey, Ray? I’m really sorry, but I won’t be able to make it to dinner this week. Yeah, I know.; it’s just that there’s a law convention up in Madison on Thursday where I might be able to pick up a lead on a job.”

*

The following Wednesday, Jim drove to Riverside early on a hunch to ‘pick up’ Lizzy. He scanned Lizzy’s peers as they streamed out the front doors, the athletes breaking off to file towards the gym. Two minutes later, he spotted Lizzy and Mary heading for Mary’s car. He turned on his own car and watched as the girls turned out of the parking lot onto Locust. Jim eased out onto the main street, keeping a couple cars between them. He applauded his mother’s sense in making him choose a ubiquitous silver sedan, though he doubted she would like her reasoning applied in such a manner.

The girls turned off of Locust a few blocks into Riverwest and, two blocks later, pulled up in front of a run-down duplex. Jim parked his car on the nearby cross-street and hopped out. Their errand, he hoped, wouldn’t take too long; he could only walk up and down the street so many times before someone would come out and either mug him or try to buy drugs. Just as Jim crossed in front of the
house a fourth time, the door opened and Lizzy and Mary trotted out, the former tugging her jacket lower to hide her figure and the later marveling at her “new” Pennsylvania address.

It took every ounce of will Jim possessed to not sprint around the corner. Yes, they had seen him, but they certainly had not recognized him. He’d made sure to study the ground from the depths of his hood every time he drew near the house.

“There’s still like another hour of track practice; can I come over for a bit?” Lizzy’s voice carried on the wind.

Jim plopped into his car with a sigh. He wasn’t tough enough for Riverwest, and he knew it. He followed the girls to Mary’s house in the Polish district and settled in to wait for the wait. What was he going to do about the fake IDs? He really didn’t want Lizzy to get arrested, but he certainly couldn’t tell his parents and keep her from her track meet. His cell phone buzzed; it was his mother.

“Hello, Mom,” Jim answered.

“I just love it when my one and only son answers my calls so cheerfully!” she responded sarcastically.

“I’m sorry, Mom. The job search is just really hard.”

“I understand. I just wanted to let you know that dinner might be a little late tomorrow—” Jim stiffened, remembering how badly the dinner after Lizzy’s lie had gone. “Ray and I have to go to an alumni reception on campus and you know how Milwaukeeans love to drink. In any case, are you all right with coming to dinner at 7:30pm instead of at 6:30pm?”

“Actually, Mom, I’m really sorry, but I don’t think I can make it. I was going to have to leave early anyway; there’s a law employment fair in Whitefish Bay right at 7:30pm. I’ll see you next week though.”

“Oh, okay. Okay, Jimmy, we’ll see you next week.” Her voice was softer, quieter.

Jim sighed. “I love you, Mom. I’ll see you soon. Yeah, bye.”

When had it gotten so easy for Jim to lie?
For the next two weeks, Jim was able to keep Lizzy under complete surveillance every time she left home or school. However, it was becoming harder and harder to come up with excuses to get out of family dinners.

“Chicago? Which firm in Chicago?”

“If you can land a job at a firm in Chicago, Jimbo, you’ve got it made. Gotham City wasn’t based on it for nothing!” Ray’s praise only made the lies feel worse.

Lizzy’s birthday the next week complicated things. “So Ray, I can pick one of two time slots for an interview in Appleton this week: the first would be at 5pm tomorrow night, so I’d miss family dinner, and the second would be at 5:30pm on Friday night, so I’d be really, really late to Lizzy’s birthday party.”

“Jim, I’d hate to have to tell your mother that you’re going to miss another family dinner.” There was a warning in his voice.

“You know I wouldn’t miss family dinners for anything trivial, Ray-”

“Yes, yes.” Ray sighed. “I know. But here’s the thing: Lizzy’s been missing you terribly, Jim. She wants to tell you about her meet yesterday and she probably really wouldn’t forgive you if you missed her party.”

“Tomorrow it is, then,” agreed Jim, his chest tightening at the thought of Lizzy in pain.

* *

It was strange, Jim thought later that night as he studied Lizzy and Ray and his mom through the dining room window. It was like watching one of those old TV episodes from the ‘40s or ‘50s: daughter chattering nonstop, father teasing daughter, mother presiding over everything. It was the perfect family dinner.

*
The next evening, Jim arrived at Lizzy’s with an exaggerated fashionable lateness; most of the family friends had already eaten. He hoped that Ray hadn’t exaggerated Lizzy’s sadness at his continued absence; he really didn’t want to be around too much. As he scooped up leftover French bean dip and mac n’ cheese—Lizzy had chosen the menu—his mother wandered in from the other room, her tumbler already empty.

“Jim! Oh, Jim, we haven’t seen you in ages!” She gave him a hug and a kiss and added a scoop of scalloped potatoes to his plate “your favorites.” It was a full five minutes before she began to scold him for his tardiness.

“So where’s the birthday girl?” Jim interrupted.

“Oh, she’s downstairs with the Goldstein kids. They’re playing on the TV, Epic Crush, or something like that.”

“Super Smash?”

“Yes, that sounds right. Well, go on! Go wish your sister a happy birthday!”

Just as Jim was starting to wonder how he’d get the basement door open with his hands occupied by his food and Coke, Ray pushed it aside using a stack of pink wrapped boxes. “Jim! You’re here! I’m so glad to see you! Once I set these down, I’ve got a hug for you-”

“Thanks, Ray; it’s good to see you too.” Jim’s smile was easy, relaxed.

“How was yesterday?”

“Yesterday?”

“Yeah, up in, was it Appleton?”

“Oh, yeah. Yesterday: yesterday went pretty well. They had a ton of guys just like me sitting in the waiting room though; the competition will be stiff.”

“I’m sure you’ll come out on top,” Ray grinned over the presents.
As Jim and Ray sidled past each other in the narrow hallway, Jim heard anxious teenaged-boy voices drifting up the stairs. Quickly, he bumped down the stairs, hanging a sharp right to find three boys surrounding Lizzy as she screamed in fury.

“Lizzy?!”

Suddenly, the four fell silent. “Jim!!” Lizzy squealed as she leapt to her feet and dove for him. He had just enough time to set his food and drink down before she tackled him. She was so warm and soft and her hair smelled like vanilla and coconut and he could feel her breasts against his chest and-

“Dibs!” cried one of the Goldsteins, snatching the controller Lizzy had just abandoned.

“Hey, that’s mine! I wasn’t done yet!” Lizzy sprinted back to the boys and tried to reach over one of them to reclaim her prize.

“Bye bye, Picachu!” cried the third boy, victorious.

“Hey, you killed me! Rufus, it’s all your fault; you let me die!”

“No, you were mostly dead anyways; you’d have killed yourself by now.”

Lizzy scowled at the boys, then went back to Jim. “Come on, Jim; let’s go upstairs with the rest of the adults.” She primly picked up Jim’s Coke for him, then ruined her exit by sticking out her tongue at the game-hypnotized Goldsteins. Jim couldn’t help but laugh as he followed her up the stairs.

Less than thirty minutes later, the cake, a culinary confection in daffodil yellow and Easter bunny pink, was placed before its mistress. “Make a wish,” Jim whispered in Lizzy’s ear, enjoying being so close to her at last.

As soon as everyone had a slice of cake, Lizzy strode over to her mountain of presents. “Hmm...” she murmured. She tried to subtly examine the “To/From” cards, but Ray would have none of it.

“No cheating, Lizzy!”
She had already found what she was looking for though, and had carried the small purple-wrapped box to the table. Jim’s heart nearly burst when he realized she’d picked his present first. Inside the flat black velvet box was the most perfect, dainty silver necklace.

“Oh, Jim,” Lizzy sighed, her eyes quavering. Respectful ‘oohs’ rose in gentle waves from the guests.

“Here, let me,” Jim offered as she started to fiddle with the clasp. She pulled her long blonde hair over her shoulder and Jim looped the necklace and its heart pendant around her neck, smoothing the chain against her skin to settle it as he took a step away. Lizzy turned to face him, a questioning smile on her face.

“You look beautiful,” he replied.

*  

No matter how much he wanted to repeat that experience, Jim knew that he would never be able to leave her sight again if she smiled at him like that a second time. His mother answered the phone when he called this week.

“Mom, I’m really, really sorry to do this again, but-”

“I really hope one of these interviews pays off and you get a job soon so you can come have dinner with us,” she told him sternly.

“Actually Mom, it’s cocktails this week with Mr. Frederick downtown. He wanted to introduce me to some of his colleagues. Maybe he can help me find another job in Milwaukee.”

That certainly had a placating effect.

The only problem is, Jim reflected after he hung up, now I have to find a job in Milwaukee.

*
That Saturday, Jim was bagging up the garbage—a week’s worth of empty Ramen and Easy Mac containers—when he realized it was the last Saturday in March. He froze, his skin prickling, sweat beading on his forehead, and his palms tingling.

He dashed down the back stairs and stared at the downstairs flat’s back door.

It was closed.

He couldn’t just leave it to chance. He had to make sure. He gripped the doorknob with a clammy hand and turned—

“That? Jim, are you down here?” Lizzy’s voice rang down the stairs from Jim’s apartment.

“Oh, yeah! I’ll be right there! Don’t move!” Jim scrambled up the stairs, not realizing the downstairs flat’s back door now stood slightly ajar.

“Lizzy! What are you doing here?”

“I missed you! Can’t I come over to visit?” She pouted prettily. “Anyways, you left so quickly after I opened your present that I never got the chance to thank you.”

“Oh, it’s no problem.” Jim was trembling. He had to get her out of the house now. “Hey, how was the walk over here? Is it nice out?”

“Huh?” Jim’s quick subject change left Lizzy dazed. “Oh, um, yeah; it’s really nice out. The snow has almost all melted! Though now it’s just grey and gross.”

“You wanna go for a walk?”

Lizzy’s already radiant smile brightened perceptibly. “Yeah, that sounds great!”

Jim practically pushed Lizzy down the front stairs and out the door on to Cambridge. She turned left as he shoved an arm into his coat, following her at a trot. “But yeah, thanks so much for the necklace! It’s beautiful! I absolutely love it! I don’t think I’ll ever take it off.”

Jim grinned stupidly at the sidewalk. “I’m really glad you like it.”

“I do! Oh, and Jim, guess what?”
“What?”

“Go on! Guess!”

“Umm, Lake Forest is in love with you and offered you early admission?”

“Almost, but-”

“Almost? Lizzy, that’s wonderful! Congratulations!”

“Haha, thanks! But I’m not all the way in yet- I still have to impress them.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, at the State Track Meet!” Lizzy jumped into the air with joy. Jim smiled at her.

A gap in the trees yawned to their left. “Hey, you wanna walk in the ravine?”

“Um, actually, Lizzy, I don’t think that’s a good idea-” Jim’s smile shattered as she started bounding down the stairs like a gazelle. “Lizzy! Hey, Lizzy, come back!”

“Come on Jim! We haven’t gone for a walk in the ravine forever!” She was almost out of sight. Jim dashed down the stairs after her, his heart pounding.

As he neared the bottom, he glimpsed her blonde hair in the sunlight. “Hey, how about we walk to the right today? We never go that way!”

“But this way makes so much more sense! Oh, Jim, I’m so incredibly happy! I ran the fastest thousand-yard dash in the county last week Tuesday!” Just as Jim reached for her hand, she spun away, dancing down the ravine.

“Lizzy, come back! Lizzy!” He dove for her, but she just leapt out of the way.

“I’ll bet you can’t catch me!” She laughed as she galloped off.

“Lizzy, no!” Jim was starting to panic. Maybe she heard it in his voice because she stopped mid-stride and turned to face him, a puzzled look on her face.

Sharp cracking and wood splintering as glass shattering and great shards falling and Lizzy looking up and they were buried, all gleaming and icy and cold and still.
She lay directly below, her blonde hair fanned out, her blue eyes silent, and blood oozing from a shard imbedded in her forehead and her neck, her neck with a thin silver chain around it.

The grey snow around Lizzy was speckled with her too-bright blood and her unblinking eyes stared straight up, questioning, accusing, knowing.

Jim stared at her in mute horror. He followed her gaze up to the house, where he saw himself standing in the window, looking down.
IV. Black Trunks: Waterproof

It took Robert a full ten minutes to even get out of the car. Not an auspicious start, he was forced to admit.

With a great sigh, he heaved his duffle out of the trunk and turned to face the dreaded entrance. There was nothing about it that was particularly foreboding: thin brick columns supported a sunny gable with—contrarily, Robert thought—bright blue letters proclaiming “Lake View Community Pool.” However, its shiny demeanor did nothing to keep the edifice out of Robert’s dreams.

Robert had been granted admission to the exclusive “community” pool after he’d moved into one of the Lake View condos. As chic and elite as the condos were, Robert had preferred his beautiful Lake Drive home. But, because he’d purchased the house in his ex-wife’s name as a gift, Elizabeth, or “the Gremlin,” as he now called her, had been able to keep it in the divorce.

With another great sigh, Robert stepped away from the car, locking it behind him. Technically, he hadn’t needed to drive from his condo to the pool, but it gave him an inconspicuous place to steel himself for the ordeal.

“He’s a useless child who can’t even swim, much less tie his shoes without my help,” the Gremlin had told an acquaintance at a party. Although Robert’s back had been turned, he’d been mere feet away.

She’d once said her favorite brand of lipstick was snake venom. Robert thought it an appropriate choice.

A girl in a pale yellow polo sat at the welcome desk where, if you didn’t have a membership card, you were turned away. Robert strode up to her and flashed his card as though he did this every day. The girl nodded and returned to the magazine hidden on her lap under the desk. A few feet beyond
the desk lay Robert’s next hurdle: dressing rooms. Although he’d passed through the men’s dressing room on his way to the poolside café a handful of times, he’d never actually used one.

The café offered a good view of the pool, and, more importantly to Robert, the swimmers in it. He could pretend to read while studying how swimmers would push their arms (alternating!), palms flat, back along their bodies and kick their feet. It had taken Robert longer to figure out how people could stay afloat while standing upright in ten-foot deep water. But, on a cloudy day last week as Robert crossed the pavilion to his usual spot in the café, he finally spotted one such swimmer. The man was scissoring his legs slowly underwater and his arms and hands (palms flat!) were spread out on the surface to hold himself steady.

*It’s just simple coordination*, Robert had told himself.

He repeated it now as he turned down the mini maze to the dressing room. Were there stalls? Or just aisles? Gritting his teeth, Robert turned right and found the plush dressing room did, in fact, offer stalls for everyone. Medium-sized dark blue lockers lined the wall to his left opposite the stalls. A polished bench stretched the length of the lockers, inviting tired swimmers to take a seat as they loaded their bags. Seeing two men at the far end of the room, Robert subtly observed their actions. One man was already in his suit, talking to the other while he pulled off his T-shirt. Without bothering to use the stall, the second man pulled his shorts off over his suit and threw everything in his bag.

Robert’s brow furrowed; *I’ll show her who’s helpless*. Dropping his duffle carelessly onto the bench, Robert threw the zipper open. Tugging his new tennis polo over his head, he tucked it into his bag. Like the other man, he was already wearing his suit, as if it had been an almost forgotten habit. Robert removed his Docksiders and replaced them with some sandals from his bag. Then, he tugged down his khaki shorts, pleased to note that working out had had the desired effect; his once-paunchy stomach was now lean and toned. His simple black swim trunks, purchased two days ago, swished
together scratchily. They had clean, white lines swooping down along the sides and a zipper pocket just inside the waist band for keys or rings.

Rings. *Yup, won’t have to worry about* that one anymore. The Gremlin had never stopped complaining about her engagement ring. For the first year, it was all ‘Some day, when you make money, we can afford that diamond I know you wanted to buy me.’ Then, as time progressed, ‘You can’t even see this thing from five feet away.’ During their fifteen years of marriage, Robert had upgraded the diamond three times: first to a two carat, then a three carat, then to a North Star-cut 3.15 carat. The Gremlin had been trying to coerce Robert into buying her a five carat when he found out about the Chinese professor at the University.

Robert zipped up his bag and turned towards the lockers. *Where were the keys?* There were locks, but no keys in any of the locker doors. Robert tugged on one door gently, seeing if there was a special latch.

Nothing happened.

Robert tugged harder. There were no other bags on the floor or in the corners. Robert, starting to panic, pulled on the locker door even harder, rattling the metal grill. The sound spooked him enough to bring him back to his senses. If he couldn’t even open the locker, how was he ever going to-

No. Positive thoughts. Clearly he was just not ready for this yet. Robert put his bag over his shoulder and turned towards the exit, only to be stopped by a bright blue placard.

*Keys may be purchased for 75¢ at the Welcome Desk*

Damn it. Taking a deep breath, Robert dug his wallet out of his duffle, then, at the last moment, he tugged his polo back over his head. Trying hard to pretend like this was not a big deal, Robert made himself stroll back into the hallway and casually approach the desk, leaning over it as if to flirt with Magazine Girl.

“Hey there.”
“Key?” She didn’t even glance up.

“Um, yeah.”

“Seventy-five cents.” Robert dropped the change into her open palm, flashing a winning smile that again went unnoticed. She slapped a key onto the counter.

“That’ll be number 83, Mister...?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I’m Stephens- Mr. Stephens.” Her gaze shifted to the pad of paper on her right as she jotted his name down, then back to the grainy, pixilated blown-up photos in the magazine. Robert wavered between his incredible need to run and his desire to make sure he had given her the information she needed.

Three hour-long seconds passed. He slowly turned and started walking back towards the dressing room, fully expecting to be called back with something like- “Oh, Mr. Stephens, didn’t you know we need a photo ID? All of our members usually have their IDs at the ready- are you new here?”

Magazine girl remained entranced by her magazine.

Robert sat down hard on the dressing room bench next to his duffle. What a miserable fake he was. “Useless,” the Gremlin had called him.

_Nope, not today, my dear Elizabeth_, Robert thought, standing. He pulled his polo back off, grabbed his bag and found locker 83. After pulling out ten dollars—it’s always good to have money on hand— and his towel, Robert gingerly placed his shoes, then his duffle, then his polo in the locker. Feeling better for the thought he’d put into the organization, he headed out to the pool, his towel casually slung over his shoulder.

While his mind debated which beach chair to claim, his feet mechanically took him to his usual seat in the café where a bright green table tent drew Robert’s attention. “Adult Swim Classes,” he read softly to himself. _Well, now, there’s a good idea. Why should I risk drowning myself now when I can have_
Robert thought. *I’ll just go and get my things and head home.*

Home. Home was on Lake Drive in Whitefish Bay, where the Gremlin kept her Chinese professor.

“He’s a useless child who can’t even swim, much less tie his shoes without my help.”

No. He was not going to let some instructor help him learn to swim. He was a grown man, fully capable of swimming without anyone’s help.

Robert replaced the table tent, then strode over to a beach chair near the café. He tossed his towel down and casually kicked off his sandals. He surveyed the pavilion as a business man surveys a conference room when he knows he’s about to make “big money.”

He took a few steps towards the pool and faltered. How had he missed it? This one, simple, painfully obvious thing? There were no stairs leading into the pool; just ladders. No one was using the ladders. They eased themselves in from the ledges or jumped off of the racers’ starting blocks. He’d counted on just being able to wade in without drawing any attention.

*All right. All right,* he thought, *I can do this.*

Near the edge of the pool, right next to the nine-foot deep marker, Robert stretched his long arms and rolled his neck out, as if he’d done this every day of his life.

Robert went through his mental checklist—trunks, towel, sandals, locker key, no ring, haven’t eaten for three hours.

Eaten.

The Gremlin, formerly the adorable, soft, warm—if demanding—Elizabeth, had eaten the Chinese professor after midnight; however, her transformation didn’t come until over a year later, when Robert found the videos she and the professor had made together. Then, she mutated into a vile, blood-thirsty reptile, intent on devouring all she could lay her hands on.
Enough procrastinating, Robert told himself. Already, he’d noticed one person looking at him. He was sure he’d been perched at the edge of the pool for over an hour; it was a miracle they didn’t try to make him leave; they were surly suspicious at this point. Poser.

Not a poser. A Swimmer.

With that, Robert stepped up to the ledge. He curled his toes over and felt the warm, over-chlorinated water lick them.

Robert took a huge breath-

and jumped.

Water closed over his head, sending him under. His arms floated at his sides, as though he was flying. His descent slowed, but when he reached down with his feet, he couldn’t touch the ground. Panicking, Robert struck out with his arms and legs, trying to climb through the water.

His head erupted from the water and he had to make a conscious effort not to scream. Robert barely had time to breathe before he dropped beneath the surface again. He pushed down against the water with his arms and managed to break into open air again. He spread his arms out instinctively, trying to hold the water beneath his chin. He swished his legs back and forth just like the man he’d seen last week, but it just propelled him away from the wall.

Legs growing weak, Robert slowed his kicking and was surprised to find it was now easier to control his motion. Gasping air as discreetly as possible, Robert pushed his lateral arms behind him and moved forward, like he was a canoe.

He was floating.

He was floating and he had beaten water.

He was waterproof.
V. White Sparks

It was a cross-section of the WASP human experience—talk of sex ruining and joining families on the porch, reminiscences about taking three jobs to pay for college over cigars in the pantry, truffle pâté next to pīrags in the kitchen, and Disney in the parlor. I wander between these histories of my family, picking up tidbits about old scandals, what hard work and dedication truly mean, and suggestions of life’s darknesses. Finally, I settle with my step-cousins in the parlor. Sometimes, Disney’s simplicity is exactly what a person needs.

Ronnie pokes her head in through the curtain, her eyes squinting to penetrate our home-made theater’s darkness. I wave her in, but she shakes her head. “Ellie, you’re up.” I sigh. Arguably the funniest—and my least favorite—part of the evening is just about to begin. Ronnie, Billie, and I did a complex round of rock-paper-scissors on the five minute ride over to our grandparents’ house for the Fourth of July celebration in order to determine who got the early, the middle, and the late shift. Despite being the oldest, I got stuck with the late shift.

I join Ronnie in the front hall. “Okay, who’s had what?”

“Well, Judie’s had two cosmos and three beers, so she’s pretty toasted. Billie said Beth only had three glasses of champagne, but she’s waaay too far gone for that little; I bet Billie just watched TV in the attic instead of watching her.”

“Typical,” I respond.

Ronnie makes a face. “Anyway, Linnet seems to be trying to keep up with Beth, but I’m sure she’s only had three glasses of wine.” I nod.

“Judie’s still on the porch?”

“Yeah, and Beth’s in the living room with Mom. Mom’s trying to keep an eye on her too. Linnet’s been helping with the dishes in the kitchen.”
It always amazes me that the tiniest of my borderline-alcoholic relatives shows her intoxication the least. A loud burst of laughter carries in from outside. “I’ll start with Judie.”

“GC.”

“What?”

“Good call- jeeze, where have you been? Oh, don’t tell me- reading.” Only Ronnie could make that sound so insulting. I shrug on my way out. Popular girls.

Judie, my step-grandmother, is holding court at the two large wicker tables on the porch. “So I shaid, ‘why don’t you shtup the other one too?'” Everyone burst out laughing. “Well, ffuck it’s hot out here.” Judie has always been the life of the party. Although my biological grandmother says Judie stole Grandpa Lars from her, I can easily imagine how Judie brought him to life with her incredible stories and off-color jokes and perfect sense of humor.

“I heard it’s supposed to get up to ninety later this week.” Appropriate murmurs of complaint passed around the circle.

“If it’s that hot, I’ll stop asking him to do it- I’ll make Larsy sell this dusty old heat trap!” Laughter mingled with protests.

“Judie, don’t make Grandpa Lars sell the house! I love it here!” I pipe up, my sixteen year-old voice barely audible over the bubbling women. She didn’t hear me, but that’s okay; most people don’t hear me. Mom says I have to assert myself, but it’s hard when she just shoots me down or when the girls at school just stare at me as though I’d called their perfectly-manicured mothers prostitutes.

“I’m thirsty. Where’d Ronnie go? I swear she’s watering down my drinks.” Judie struggles to push her chair back, laughing at her rather useless attempts. When one of her friends tries to help her, Judie just shoos her away. I try to push through the now-standing people to reach her, so she won’t have to do it herself. Judie stands swaying on her heels, then takes three steps before falling into her sister’s lap. Both women burst out laughing.
“Judie, I can get your drink for you; I was going to the kitchen anyways.”

“Oh, Ellie! Oh, good. I want- I want- what do I want, Sally?” Judie asked her sister.

“A good shtup with your man!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“I’ll bring you a Bud Light, okay Judie?”

“Perfect sweetie; thank you.”

I head into the house, trying desperately not to think about what the women had just suggested.

“But Noo!” Beth’s characteristic party cry echoed through the first floor.

My friends at school think that I’m judging my family when I tell them about the stunts they pull when they’re drunk. It’s not that I’m judging them; I’m just telling my friends exactly what happened. Maybe I don’t sugar-coat it, but it’s hard to sugar-coat an aunt vomiting all over your four year-old cousin or your grandmother stumbling into and destroying stacks of designer dishes. My other aunt is no longer allowed to use the champagne flutes or wine glasses at any of our houses; they always end up broken. Mom wanted to by her a sippy cup for Christmas, but Daddy convinced her that was mean.

Back in the pantry, I dodge the men folk on my way to the fridge. Grandpa Lars likes to say that his idea of complete happiness is being able to afford a refrigerator devoted exclusively to beer to share with his friends. He is perched on a stool, a Chimay in one hand, a cigar in the other. “MSOE doesn’t actually stand for Milwaukee School of Engineering. As an alum, I can tell you it stands for Miserable Source of Education!” The men chortled gleefully.

“But look where it got you!” one man said, gesturing openly to Grandpa Lars’ house, generally known as ‘The Castle House’ to Milwaukeeans.

“That wasn’t MSOE; that was quality real estate managing and property investment.”
I carefully pour a Sharpe’s into Judie’s glass, then twist a lemon in it to hide the lack of alcohol.

“Hi Princess.”

“Hey Daddy.”

“Are you finally going to grab a beer and join us?” Grandpa Lars demanded, gesturing to his knee for me to take a seat.

“Actually, I’m just grabbing a beer for Judie.” Daddy saw the Sharpe’s can as I tucked it back into a corner. He winked at me as I turned back and I hid a smile. Any self-respecting Wisconsinite knows Bud Light is one of the most disgusting beers on the market; almost anything tastes better. If Judie notices a taste difference, she’ll probably assume it’s the lemon. I slot it decoratively on the rim of the glass.

“Well, come back and grab one for yourself sometime soon!” Grandpa Lars called as I retreated to the now-empty dining room.

“But Nooo!” Beth’s voice follows me out to the porch.

“Here Judie,” I place the glass firmly on the table before her, where no elbows can knock it over.

“Aww, thanks Sweetie. Hey, do you want to hear about the first time your mother had sex with your father? Apparently, it was a scream!”

All the women laugh at the pun; some of them are also laughing at my obvious discomfort. I smile and sidle away. Their laughter isn’t nearly as bad as the popular girls’ at school; there’s no real laughter there, just meanness.

The Sharpe’s would keep Judie busy for at least another half an hour, unless she decides she’s really thirsty. I go over to the cooler by the door and pull out a bottle of water, then discreetly place it near Judie’s beer.

_Maybe she’ll drink it and sober up_, I think hopefully. _Maybe._

At that thought, I grab another two water bottles and head for the back living room where Mom has Beth sequestered.
“Ellieeee!” she squeals when she sees me. It’s nice to be greeted so enthusiastically, but I know it’s just the alcohol taking. Beth’s in there somewhere, but we can’t see her or hear her right now behind the booze.

“Hi Lisel!”

“Ohh, I love it when you call me that!” On one of our monthly auntie-Ellie lunch dates, Beth had told me how much she loved the Von Trapp family and how much she wished that could have been her life growing up, Nazis and all.

“It’s just like the Sound of—”

“But no, Jane, it’s the Sound of Music, with Julie Andrews and that song, that beautiful song she sings!” Beth cuts Mom off as I offer both women water.

“I’m parched,” Mom says, grabbing both bottles. “It’s been so hot! I don’t know how you can stand it, especially when Erik won’t even let you turn on the air conditioner until eleven!”

“I know! He’s such an old skin-flint! Maybe I should have stayed divorced from him—”

“Here- aren’t you thirsty? I go through six bottles of water before noon, it’s so hot!”

“You go through six?” Beth asks unbelievingly as Mom opens the bottle and puts it in her hand.

“Uh-huh,” Mom lies, winking at me so I’ll know.

“Well, I go through seven!”

“Wow! You must be really thirsty!”

“I am, though!” Beth gulps down a fourth of her bottle.

I’m moving around the ottoman to grab a seat on Beth’s other side when I see a splash of orange next to the couch. A bottle of Veuve Cliquot sits hidden in the shadows near Beth’s right arm. I pull out my cell phone and casually tap the far side of my head with it while making direct eye contact with Mom. She pulls out her own phone and sets it on her lap.

She’s got an empty bottle of Veuve hidden on my side of the couch.
A moment later, Mom’s phone buzzes. She flips it open as Beth chatters on about her “skinflint husband” and stares at it bewildered. Finally, she meets my eyes with this incredulous, exasperated look. She turns to her cell phone, then, a moment later, flips it closed, and asks Beth what her favorite Sound of Music song is. I steel myself as Beth begins to sing.

It’s not that she has a bad voice so much as she’s completely tone-deaf when she’s drunk.

Buzzbuzz.

I left her to go to the bathroom for five minutes less than half an hour ago; I haven’t left since

My bewilderment matches Mom’s perfectly.

Buzzbuzz.

Did you know they brought two bottles of really cheap champagne as hostess gifts?

I sigh.

Perhaps she was planning a trade, but presented it as a gift to make up for the price difference

“These are a few of my favorite things! When the cat meows, when the bird stings, these are a few of my favorite things!”

Buzzbuzz.

Mom starts laughing, then quickly turns it into a cough. Once Beth decides she wants to know something, she will not be deterred.

“Jane, what was that?”

Too late.

“I think you got the lyrics wrong-”

“But no!”
Even though I’ve only ever done lights and sound for plays, I take that as my exit cue and head for the kitchen. The cigar smoke from the pantry is starting to make my throat raw, but it’s summer, so my asthma probably won’t act up too badly.

Rushing water drowns out most of the conversation in the next two rooms; I can’t even hear Beth anymore. Better yet, Linnet is nursing a glass of ice water and—I do a quick sweep of the kitchen corners—there is no bottle hidden away for personal use.

“Hey Linnet. Can I help?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure. I’ll wash if you dry.”

Linnet is a quietly sad drunk. She’ll be forty-five next month, but she never managed to settle down with anyone. She loves caring for other people’s pets, but she’s completely incapable of caring for one of her own. “She’s easily overwhelmed,” Mom said.

“So I just found out that Beth polished off an entire bottle of Veuve in under five minutes. She brought two bottles of cheap champagne as ‘hostess gifts’; I think she just wanted to trade, but wasn’t man enough to say so.”

“Ah… Yeah, that sounds like Beth.” Linnet’s eyes stay on the sponge and the soapy water.

No dice. New subject: “So how’s catering coming?”

“Pretty well. I’ve got a bunch of parties lined up for later this month, then a ton in August.”

“Linnet, that’s really cool! Good job!”

“Thanks.”

I hate it when she’s sad. She’s the most beautiful woman in the world and one of the most talented cooks. If only she could see herself how I see her. “You know,” I say, an idea springing to mind, “I heard Grandpa Lars telling one of his friends how impressed he is with you.”

She perks up, but her eyes stay glued to the sink. “Oh yeah?”
“Yeah. He said that not many new businesses can make it in this economy, but yours has. He thinks you got his entrepreneurial gene.”

“Aww, that’s really nice.” Linnet has a smile on her face.

“So are you doing any themed parties?”

“Oh yeah; there’s a Gotham City one, then a Gone with the Wind one, and a few more, but those two I’m most excited about.”

“What are you going to make for the Gotham one? Do you get to wear a Batman cape? Because, if you don’t, you should really ask for more money.”

Linnet laughs.

Success.

Fifteen minutes later, we finish the dishes and head outside for the fireworks. We can hear the big ones over the lake echoing down the boulevard while Daddy and Sally’s husband Jeff help Grandpa Lars set up our own fireworks. Jeff rigged the fuses together, so they only need one lighter. Grandpa Lars has that honor.

As he sets the cord alight, white sparks chase each other through the grass of the boulevard. I can see the white sparkling in my family’s eyes.

As the last firework explodes in a shower of red, white, and blue that is reflected by a cop car’s lights as one pulls up, I study my family again. They’re all laughing at the poor cop who now has two district attorneys and two of Milwaukee’s top-paid lawyers cramming their heads through the window to talk at him or her.

Alcoholics or not, I wouldn’t trade them for the world.
“Fuck.”

You pull the Nokia away from your ear and squeeze “7” as though from sheer pressure, you could erase not only the voicemail, but also Hanna, who you haven’t called “mom” in five years. Of the hundred ways she could try to hurt you, this is the only way she might succeed. “Fuck. What a bitch.”

Your alarm starts wailing and you pound the off button. “Calvin!” you call into the other room. “Calvin!”

A drowsy, blanket-muffled “what” responds.

“Your shift is in thirty minutes.”

Silence.

You shove off the mustard yellow blanket that still reeks of Jason’s sweat and cum and climb from the air mattress. “Calvin, you little bitch, I’m in no mood to dick around.”

A dark head pokes out from one of the three piles of blankets on the floor and turns towards you. “Tú eres una puta, Callie.”

“You were the one who told me to wake you up at 1:30. You said Jack would fire you if you missed another afternoon shift.”

“Cago en el cono de la madre de Jack.” Despite his words, Calvin pushes himself from the floor. “Nice legs, chica.”

“Fuck you.” You flip him the bird for good measure and return to the other room, a would-be walk-in closet you’d reappropriated.

Reappropriated.

You smile at the word. Those pretentious rich fucks from your prestigious prep school would be so proud. They’re probably sauntering around equally prestigious New England college campuses right
now, collars popped, brand-name book bags dangling from the girls’ perky forearms and vineyard salmon shorts covering the guys’ Florida-tanned legs.

Like your brother had done.

Thank God you got out.

You glance at your clock. Another hour before your shift at the independent deli, then, afterwards, fifteen minutes to eat dinner and bike to the tattoo parlor. You need to ask for more hours. Or maybe Jack would give you Calvin’s shift if he did get fired. And then, thanks to Hanna, unless you called up Jason, a four-hour round-trip by bike up to Cedarburg.

Fucking Hanna.

“My son’s trying to decide between accepting the violinist scholarship at Carnegie Melon, the full ride at Tufts for engineering, Harvard, and the medical grant at Georgetown.” Every time she’d see someone she remotely knew, she’d recite Ryan’s accomplishments, repeating them so often you swore it was her personal mantra.

What a bitch. Unlike your grandmother, she hadn’t even noticed you.

Ryan had always been a prissy ass fuck.

You pull a pair of stiff black jeans over your naked legs and tug your black tank to your nose. Not too bad. You cross back through the real bedroom; Calvin doesn’t see you as he pulls his “Fuck the Police!” T-shirt over his head.

The cracked mirror in the bathroom leers back at you until you kneel next to the tub and turn on the faucet. You duck under the lukewarm water and let it rinse out yesterday’s gel. As you turn the tap off, you catch a glimpse of your scarred wrists, snaky physicalized memories of suppression and desperation after your grandmother’s death.

The cracked mirror is waiting for you. With your black hair wet and lying flat over the bleached and buzzed sides, you glimpse who you used to be.
You jerk open the medicine cabinet hard, cracking a new corner of the mirror. “Well fuck.”

You’ve only been awake for thirty minutes and already your day is turning out great.

You brush a moth off your gel and quickly spike your hair back into a mohawk, leaving the mirror facing the tub. After cleaning your ear gauges and putting some anti-septic on your new eyebrow piercing, you slap the mirror shut. Much better. No one will notice your freckles now. No one will expect too much of you. No one from the past will try too hard to reconnect.

***

“Can I get the Stralkowski?” the man points at Koppa’s overhead leering menu. “Oh, and last time, you put the alfalfa sprouts and tomato on before toasting it. Don’t do that this time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The alfalfa sprouts are bad when they’re wilted.”

“I’m sorry; it was an accident.”

“I’d think it’s common sense.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“The tomato was bad too.”

“I’m sorry, all right!”

The man stares at you silently.

“Your sandwich will be ready in a moment,” you murmur.

He sniffs stiffly and heads towards Walter, who’s manning the checkout lane.

“Fuck,” you swear under your breath. Both Walter’s mother and father were Polish, so he was raised in a rather traditional household. He firmly obeyed the three strikes rule and, unless you can convince your coworkers to convince him otherwise, this was your third strike in only eight weeks.

Fucking traditional Poles.
Hanna would have loved to raise you traditionally, to speak Polish like her, but you had no interest.

Unlike Ryan.

“What a bastard,” you murmur to Jess. She has almost as many tattoos as you, one thing that Walter didn’t mind.

“Actually, Callie, you should know better.”

You stop dusting the chicken and mozzarella with secret spice. “Are you shitting me?”

“You know that guy’s fussy; you just have to let it go.”

“I’m not going to just let some asshole walk all over me. I left home so I don’t have to.”

Jess shrugged and walked away, joining Mary and Bekka, who just stare at you.

Just as you lift the sandwich to the toaster, you see Walter looking at you too. Three strikes and you’re out.

You turn back to the sandwich and smile as you add alfalfa sprouts and tomatoes before sliding it carefully into the toaster.

***

Joe grunts at you as you enter the tattoo parlor.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

Another grunt.

“My bastard of a boss fucking fired me because some prick had a pine tree growing up his ass and didn’t like the way his sandwich tasted.”

Joe turns back to his sketch book.

As you head into the back of the parlor to drop off your bag and your bike, Arty straightens from where he leans on a counter. It takes a moment; six and a half feet separate his buzzed brown hair from his steel-toed combat boots. “You got fired?”
“Yeah; there was this asshole who apparently can’t handle anything less than perfection."

“On a sandwich? Jesus...”

“I know, right?” You perk up.

“It’s one thing if it’s a tattoo, but a sandwich?”

“Maybe he considers each sandwich a tattoo on his stomach.”

“More like five extra pounds on his beer belly!” You both chuckle and, for a second, listening to his deep, warm laugh, it actually feels like everything will turn out okay.

“So how’s our cassette chicken doing?”

“I don’t know- I haven’t checked yet.”

“Well, come here!”

You plop down on a stool in front of Arty and pull your left tank top strap down, off your arm. Arty gently peels the gauze and medical tape away. “How’s it look?”

“Awful.”

You peer over your shoulder and catch the glint in his eye. “You bastard!” You aim a half-hearted kick in his direction.

“Yeah, I know,” he chuckles again and you can’t help but smile too. “It looks really cool.” He hands you a mirror and holds a second one behind you so you can examine it yourself.

You can make out the title of the cassette your grandmother loved and you feel a huge grin break over your face. “It’s perfect!”

“Says the oh-so-modest artiste.” You blush. “How’s MIAD going?”

“Oh. Well, the teachers are actually pretty shitty. No art teacher with talent chooses Milwaukee’s Institute of Art and Design; I mean, think about it. If you’ve got any talent and want to be in the Midwest, you’ll probably be in Chicago at the Institute of Art or the School of Design.”

“At least you get to show your classmates up.”
You break eye contact and tug your tank’s strap back up. “Nah; it’s not really worth my time.”

“Uh-huh.” You can almost hear his eyebrow rise.

“Money’s kind of tight at the moment, so I had to drop a couple credits.” Not a complete lie.

“Okay.” You sigh with the subject as it falls. “So I was Facebook stalking last night and I saw something interesting.”

Your sigh catches in your throat and you cough to clear it, grabbing the clipboard listing appointments off the wall. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You look crazy different now than you used to.”

“I mean, I’m sure you do too.”

“Yeah, but I was an ugly-ass kid. You could’ve modeled.”

“Shut up.”

“Seriously. You were beautiful.”

_The big ass can’t take a hint_, you think wretchedly.

Arty misinterprets your silence. “Not that you’re not beautiful now; you’re still stunning.” You turn your pale green gaze on him. He starts to squirm, but continues onward anyways. “You were just so… wow then.”

You give him a moment. “Are you finished?”

“Yeah…” You have complete control over him and he’s three years older than you; one benefit of your new look is that people start listening to you and respecting you.

Hanna didn’t listen until the school shrink called to say you were cutting yourself. Within months, she’d stopped listening again until that rat of a shrink called a second time to say you weren’t eating and had dangerously low weight. Even then, her solution had been to pay someone else—given it was a therapist—to listen for her.

Anger twists your face for a second.
“I’m really sorry, Callie.” Arty’s voice and the phone ringing in the other room bring you back.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. Hey, I was wondering, is there any way I could pick up some extra hours here?”

Arty scratches his head. Joe only made him a partner a month ago. You bite your lip; if he asks Joe, there’s only half a chance you’ll get more hours.

“Hey, Art.”

“Yeah Joe?” Arty stands and pokes his head into the parlor.

“Mike just called in sick.”

“That’s the fifth time in the last six weeks.”

“He’s not sick.”

“What do you mean, Joe?”

“He’s been screwing us over so he can go bartend. Makes more money.”

Arty glances at you. “What if we just got rid of him?”

“He’s the only piercer we’ve got.”

“Callie can do it. She needs the hours.”

You peer around Arty; Joe meets your eyes. “I can do it,” you say firmly. Joe grunts, nods, and returns to his magazine.

“Thanks, Arty,” you whisper, smiling up at him.

“Any time, Cal. Any time.”

***

It’s nearly eleven by the time you get home and the idea of spending the next four hours biking to and from Cedarburg is unbearable. You heave a sigh as you flop onto the futon in the living room of the apartment, releasing a hazy odor of old pot and cigarette smoke. James is in the kitchen, making an absolute mess over something that smells incredible.
“Hey James?”

“Nope.”

“Please?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll clean up the kitchen for you if you-“

“Throw in one hundred dollars for the mirror you broke this morning and bathroom duty for a week and I’ll consider sharing.”

“The mirror was already cracked—”

“Yeah, but they’ll know this is a new crack. I’m losing my security deposit over it, so you better pay up.”

“You’re a real ass, James.”

“Yeah, and you still owe me a hundred dollars.”

“Fuck you,” you respond, not bothering to retreat to your room.

Instead, you pull out your phone and peer at the screen. What did Hanna say? Was it eight am or ten am?

“Since I haven’t seen you in over a year, it’s clear to me that you don’t live here anymore. However, your stuff is still filling up entire rooms of my house. If you don’t come pick up your things before tomorrow morning, I’m putting it all in the dumpsters. You have until...”

You have a cargo trailer from the bike messengers, but adding that and filling it with your old clothes and the letters and cards from your grandmother would really slow you down.


“Hey baby; calling me again so soon?”

“I just need to borrow your car.”

“Oh, is that what you’re calling it?”
“No, I actually need to borrow your car. I need to get up to Cedarburg tonight.”

“Seeing a suburb boy? Callie, I’m hurt.” His oily tone belies his words.

“I have to go home to get my stuff. Hanna wants to throw it out; she’s such a bitch.”

“Hmm, well maybe we can work something out.”

“Please Jason; you weren’t going to use it tonight anyway.”

“That’s not how it works.” You hear anger snaking between his words.

“Could you just be a friend and help me out?”

“It’s quid pro quo, Callie.”

You sit there silently, hoping he’ll reconsider.

“Well, if you don’t want my help, I’ve got stuff–”

“Jason, wait.”

“Ahh, baby comes back.”

“Fine, but it has to be quick. Where should I meet you?”

“Ooo, quick and dirty. I like it when you go that way, Callie.” Your stomach twists. “You can come by my place. I’ll see you in ten minutes.”

“Fine.”

You hang up and lean back into the pot futon, eyes closed.

***

Thirty minutes later, you roll out of Jason’s bed and push the covers aside, searching for your underwear. A hand snakes around you and grabs your breast.

“Where you going, baby?”

“Jason, stop.” You push his hand away and stand up, now farther away than he can reach. You fish your underwear out of the bedspread and hop into them.

“You’re so sexy.” Jason’s voice rumbles in his chest. “Come back to bed.”
“I have to go.” You pull your bra off of the floor and fasten it. “Where are your keys?”

“Give me a blow job and I’ll tell you.”

“Jason-”

“Callie.” His hands suddenly sneak around you and grab your breasts. He’s standing behind you, pressing himself against you. You spin and slap him hard.

“Where the fuck are your goddamn keys, you son of a bitch?”

“In my jeans.” Jason sits heavily on the bed, mindlessly rubbing his cheek.

You tug on your pants and shirt while managing to simultaneously dig through his jeans on the floor. Keys in hand, you straighten and walk out of the room, not once looking back.

***

You’ve been staring at the dashboard clock for seven minutes. The fourth digit blinks. It’s now 12:21am. “Shit.” You push open the car door and slam it behind you. The sound echoes around the warped cul-de-sac, reminding you just how much you hate the suburbs. You stride up to your half of the town house and ring the doorbell. Gentle chimes waft faintly through the damp air. You shiver in your tank top. A minute later, you press and hold the doorbell, at once willing her to answer and to sleep through it.

Just as you reach for the bell a third time, the door opens softly. Hanna stands there in the moonlight, her round face composed, her soft pink robe fluttering in the wake of the false breeze.

“Callie?” Even her voice is placid.

“I’m here for my stuff.”

Briefly, a frown wrinkles her brow. “It’s gone, Callie.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“I had to go to the bank and I dropped it off at the dump on the way to save me trouble tomorrow.”
“You said you weren’t going until tomorrow morning!” Your hands start to tremble and your stomach starts churning.

“I didn’t think you were coming. It’s after midnight now; since you didn’t come earlier, I didn’t think you would.”

“Hanna, you went to the bank first! Banks are only open during business hours! You got rid of my things before it was even 6pm!”

The barest flush rose in her cheeks. “I called you at 10am, Callie; seven and a half hours is more than enough time to drive up to Cedarburg.”

“I worked until three this morning! I didn’t even wake up until 1:30 and I had work from 2:30 until 11! When was I supposed to come up?”

“If you kept normal hours-”

“If you helped pay for school-”

“You should’ve worked harder in school to get a scholarship like Ryan did.”

You stare at her in stunned silence. She still doesn’t get it.

“Where are my letters from Grandma?”

“Callie, I threw out everything.”

You turn and cross the yard to Jason’s car. You don’t even hear Hanna calling your name as you start the engine and swing the car around.

The pools of mustard yellow light beneath the street lamps blur together.

“Fucking Hanna. Where the hell is the dump?”
May and Tommy! she thought, her heart racing. Is today the day—no. No. That’s not until tomorrow. With a heavy sigh, Ieva carefully sat up in bed, her joints protesting the entire way. Every year, her grandchildren May and Tommy came to visit her from Florida just before Christmas. Liva, for whatever reason, decided it was more important for them to spend Christmas Day itself with her husband’s family. Glimpsing the stripes of sunlight on the wall, Ieva fumbled for her glasses on her nightstand. Once they were firmly on her nose, she peered at the window.

There’s nothing quite like snowy winter sunlight, she thought, sighing. Ieva carefully eased herself out of bed, gingerly testing her weight on her legs. “Getting old isn’t for sissies,” she exclaimed aloud, proud of the fact she could stand without any assistance. She lifted her eyes and smiled at the wreath perched on her bathroom door- crisp pinecones twined with cranberries, sparkling in the faint light. Ieva took a tottering step and sighed. She could stand without assistance, but walking required help. Eyeing the matte steel cane with a firm glare that would have sent Liva racing to finish her homework, Ieva took a second step. Cane firmly in hand, she made her slow way towards the wreath.

The bathroom was scented with cloves and cinnamon and balsam, a small pot of Christmas potpourri grinning from the shelves left of the sink. Two small reindeer magnets that May had made last year danced at the corners of Ieva’s mirror. Ieva frowned; one of the reindeer was missing his left foot. She’d have to tell Liva to get better materials for the kids’ crafts that would last longer than these.

Before the argument, Liva would take Ieva and the kids to the Christmas ceremony at the Latvian church, where the carolers would sing like they used to at Home, in the language of the pines and the ocean and seashore amber. Not in this English gibberish, all pointed nails and jagged teeth.
Although her knees and hips had a hard time on the car ride out to Wauwatosa, the congregation was her only source of Latvian culture anymore.

Every night, partly as a memory exercise that Dr. Schultz kept urging her to take seriously and partly out of nostalgia, leva baked maizemi ābols and, every morning, she had the leftovers for breakfast. As she settled at her kitchen table, leva daintily cut up the squares of apple bread with a spoon, leaving some for Tommy. Tommy loved maizemi ābols more than almost anything else; only pīrags and chocolate chip cookies were better, to his four-year-old mind. Pulling her thick pink robe close to ward away winter’s morning chill, leva smiled. Wearing her robe at breakfast was a luxury she allowed herself one week a year, starting the day before her grandchildren came and going until New Year’s Eve. May and Tommy woke her up too early to get dressed properly, so leva simply put it off until they had started the dishes with Liva. But, after they left and the New Year started, that was it- leva figured she should start the New Year off on the right foot.

After she tucked her plate into the empty sink, leva returned to her room for her second seasonal wardrobe resolution: a Christmas sweater. Her friend Marianne—who was in another independent-living apartment down the hall—loved to knit; she would periodically drop off a new Christmas sweater, much to leva’s pleasure.

As she examined rows of neatly hung or folded sweaters in green, white, blue and red, leva realized she had amassed quite a collection. Reaching first for her Rudolph sweater—Tommy’s favorite—then for her Mrs. Clause sweater—May’s favorite—leva chuckled. Both sweaters blazed crimson with Christmas spirit. Poor Marianne; she picks almost nothing but red yarn because it’s the only color she can still see! Fortunately for Marianne, and, leva reluctantly acknowledged, for herself too, Eastcastle Place hired companions to stop by and spend time with the residents. “Which reminds me…” leva murmured, contrarily pulling the blue Winter-Wonderland sweater—Liva’s least favorite—off the
shelf. Because of helpful companions like Lily, the trees on the sweater thankfully had brown trunks and green needles. Is Lily the one working today?

Ieva shuffled back into the kitchen and peered at the bright pink Post-it on the freezer. “Oh, it is Lily! Wonderful.” The giant, ugly clock with its over-sized numbers and hands softly chimed 7:30. Ieva hated to admit she needed the damn thing, but Liva had given it to her, mailed it from Florida for Christmas last year instead of having to pack it. She didn’t want to have to pay for checked luggage. Ieva scowled at the memory of that particular conversation, which had prefaced their big argument by only twenty minutes.

“What do you mean, you won’t move to Florida?”

“But all of my friends are here in Milwaukee, Liva.”

“There are so many more people your age in Florida than there are here. You have one building here; down there, you’d have an entire community!”

“But here is where the Latvians are. You would have said if you’d come across any Latvians in Florida weeks ago when you first mentioned this; don’t try to lie to me now.”

“Why do you always think the worst of me, Mama?”

“How dare you say such a thing to your mother!” Ieva had heard a hiccup and had turned to see May and Tommy peering at them from the living room, The Muppet Christmas Carol completely forgotten. Still in Latvian, she’d continued more quietly. “Why can’t you come celebrate Christmas here in Milwaukee with me and the rest of the Latvians like always?”

“You can celebrate Christmas in Florida with us,” Liva had explained in her most patronizing tone. “Winter is so hard here in Wisconsin; traffic is awful, the cold is unbearable, and everything is grey after two days. We have green grass all year round in Sarasota.”

“I could never have Christmas without snow.”
“Are you choosing the Latvians who you see once or twice a year over your own family?”

“The Latvians are all I have left of home,” Ieva had tried to explain.

“It’s either the Latvians or us, Mama. There’s not the money for both. The Latvians or us?”

Fortunately, no decision had to be made; Ieva got to keep the Latvians, the snow, and her grandchildren. “So much like Liva to make it an all or nothing situation,” Ieva muttered, gradually returning to today.

Today. What would she do with her morning hours? Lily wouldn’t come in until the afternoon, and the staff had made it clear they didn’t want her cooking alone.

The side of her mouth tugged in with perversity, Ieva pushed her crock pot to the center of the counter with one knobby hand, the other clutching her cane for balance. Then, she had to switch the cane to her left hand so she could open the refrigerator. Time was, she could have used both hands to do the tasks simultaneously, but that was before Dr. Shultz had given her the wretched cane. He’d said she should slow down and not move as fast, that she was asking for a fall. This was the first piece of “elderly lifestyle” advice he’d given her. And, very suddenly—probably because people saw her using the ridiculous cane—it was buried under boatloads of advice that sounded more and more like what Ieva’s mother had told her before they left Latvia when she was six. “Don’t touch the stove; it’s hot,” “don’t clean the floors; you’ll hurt yourself,” “don’t use that old gas oven; you’ll asphyxiate in your sleep.”

Dr. Schultz’s most recent advice, concerning Ieva’s use of her crock pot, had similarly contained the word “don’t;” however, he’d upped the ante by adding “without supervision.”

Screwing up her face, Ieva pulled a quart of apple cider from her refrigerator and popped its cap off. Adding mulling spiced from her tea drawer, cinnamon from a plastic jar in a cabinet, and a chopped orange from a container in the refrigerator’s door, Ieva set her cider to simmer in the crock pot. Both
Tommy and May loved their Grammy’s mulled apple cider. With one last delighted sniff before she put the lid back on, Ieva crossed into her living room.

Her apartment was rather modest, but she didn’t need much room. There was plenty of light; though she kept her blinds closed to decrease the painful glare, she had plenty of lamps. Her plastic Christmas tree could fit next to her TV and she had enough seating for Tommy, May, and Liva. The best part was that she’d had Lily help her arrange the living room so it opened on to the center hallway, where Tommy and May could show off their caroling. Humming “Ak tu prieceja,” Ieva settled into her glider and peered into her basket of books. Poking out from behind a collection of Robert Frost’s poems and The Little Match Girl was Dickens’ A Christmas Carol. Pulling it from its hiding place, Ieva leaned back into her rocker and opened the worn cover.

“Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial...”

Ieva fell into Dickens’ familiar words, letting their soft caresses bear her away to a world of soot and ghosts, a world where Christmas magic was miraculously just a little more tangible.

“... and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, ‘God Bless us, Every One!’”

Ieva sighed happily and pulled out her handkerchief to clear her nose. Things always seemed to work out in books. Even if it was only because the characters never grew old enough to have to deal with stiff joints or doctor-imposed restrictions.

Chuckling at the idea of any doctor telling the old Scrooge he wasn’t allowed to cook his own food, Ieva returned to her kitchen. The smell of cider wafted delicately through the apartment, wrapping Ieva in a blanket of fond memories and pleasant anticipation of Tommy’s and May’s faces.
Tommy always tried to drink his cider before Ieva got a chance to add ice and his ‘too hot’ dance with his puckered lips wrapped around an ice cube never failed to put a smile on her face.

Ieva’s enormous clock chimed— it was 11:30 already! She hadn’t had lunch, much less started baking the sugar cookies to frost with May.

Opting to make Tommy’s other favorite dish—pīrags—in honor of his bold character, Ieva assembled ingredients on the counter and, after presetting the oven, deftly started with the dough. Scooping and pouring the flour, bacon butter, and milk without double checking her measurements, Ieva made her batter and put it in the CuisinArt to mix. Next, she carefully pulled the bacon free of its plastic and neatly started dicing it. Once she’d finished half, she returned to the CuisinArt and pulled her dough free, setting it aside to rise. After she finished the bacon, Ieva turned to the onions scowling. Although she couldn’t deny their flavor-enhancing capabilities, she’d never liked them. “There’s no time like the present,” she said aloud, forcing herself to dive in. She sliced them much finer than the bacon, taking her time to make sure she’d never be unpleasantly surprised while biting into one of her pīrags. At six, May was starting to decide what she did and didn’t like; onions were on the latter list. Rinsing off her knife and dabbing her eyes with her sweater’s scratchy sleeve—she’d left her handkerchief in the other room—Ieva peered at her dough. Perfect.

Lifting the yeast-infused balloon of dough from its bowl, Ieva set it on the counter before briskly punching it flat. Next, she tore off pocket-sized bits of dough and wrapped a couple tablespoons of her bacon and onion salad inside. By 12:45, she had sixteen pīrags lined up on a sheet pan, ready for the oven, which, Ieva noted, with its gaping mouth looked only slightly hungrier than she felt. Stooping and sliding the pīrags into the oven was thoughtless, but trying to straighten again was anything but. Although she hadn’t once needed her cane in the past hour, she needed it now. Smile now gone, Ieva gripped the counter and gently pulled herself upright. One of these days, May would be old enough to
help her, Ieva realized, though Liva would surely try to interfere. Liva was always scolding and nattering at the three Christmas elves, as Ieva fondly called herself and her grandchildren.

Back stiff, Ieva turned to face her cane, which silently mocked her from the corner. Ieva stuck out her tongue in response, then sighed and grabbed the wretched leash.

Four VHS tapes sat next to the kitchen’s miniature television; gingerly poking them to clear their spines of glare from the overhead light, Ieva finally selected one. Neither May nor Tommy loved A Charlie Brown Christmas so, despite the fact that Liva did, the children would not be missing out on a favorite Christmas classic with Grammy. Popping it into the VHS player, Ieva hit the button Lily had colored green and, stomach growling, reluctantly pulled an Ensure from the refrigerator. As she settled into one of the kitchen chairs to rest her knees and lower back, Ieva twisted off the cap bitterly.

“It’s for your own good,” Dr. Schultz had said. “Ensure’ll help get you protein and keep your weight up.” He hadn’t even cracked a smile when Ieva told him she didn’t have to worry about her weight going down- she had bacon buns for lunch almost every day.

“Christmas time is here! Happiness and cheer!” Pig Pen, Marcy, Peppermint Patty, and other two-dimensional children skate around a pond while puffy snow falls.

“Who could stay mad with this on?” Ieva demanded, sipping her Ensure.

Ieva had finished wrapping most of her leftover pīrags for Tommy when she heard the strains of “Jingle Bells” followed by Lily’s voice, loud and clear. “Hello, Mrs. Pudjīns! It’s Lily!”

“Why, hello Lily!” Ieva tried to stand and, for one terrifying moment, she was worried she wouldn’t make it before Lily got to the kitchen. “How are you today, dear? Why aren’t you wearing a coat? It must be freezing!”
“It’s not so bad; I’m in the car most of the time anyway. And hey, I should be asking you how you’re feeling!” Lily laughed, setting her plastic bags down on the counter and starting to unload groceries.

“I’m doing very well. Would you care for hot cider? Or any pīrags? I think you’ve had them before.”

“Oh yeah, they’re really good!” Lily turned and picked one from the basket. Biting into it, she asked, mouth half full, “They’re just, like, bacon buns, right?”

Ieva let Lily’s manners slide as she took over putting away the groceries. “Yes; I guess the Poles have something like it, but ours are better.”

“I believe it! Oh, is this A Charlie Brown Christmas? This is one of my favorites!” then, seeing Ieva reach to put the new flour in the cupboard, she added “Mrs. Pudjīns, that’s my job!”

“We can both do it, dear. You didn’t have to pick up more flour! I’ve got plenty.”

“Yeah, but you can never have too much.” As Lily slipped a six-pack of vanilla Ensures into the fridge, she asked “So what were you thinking for this afternoon, Mrs. Pudjīns? Would you like to bake cookies for May and Tommy tomorrow?”

“Oh, Lily, you remembered! I wasn’t sure I’d mentioned them last time you were here.”

“Don’t worry; I remember.” Lily’s open grin spread from ear to ear.

“I was thinking two kinds of cookies: pīparkuks and sugar cookies to frost tomorrow with May.”

Lily had left the bag of chocolate chips out; frowning, leva placed it in the cabinet and eyed the remaining ingredients that lined her counter. As Lily knelt to pull clean bowls from the drawers, leva sighed, grateful she wouldn’t have to bend over again so soon.

“All right. For the pīparkuks, put the entire bottle of Karo into that pot, then we’ll add a pound of brown sugar and a pound of butter. If you would measure out two-and-a-third cups of flour and then start beating those two eggs, I’ll mix the spices.”

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“I’m always so impressed you remember the measurements of ingredients so well.”

Ieva turned a stern eye on Lily. “Are you saying my Alzheimer’s is showing?” Lily blanched, but, before she could open her mouth, Ieva’s scowl broke and she smiled. “I may not be able to remember what happened yesterday, but I certainly remember how to make food.”

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas* was just reaching its conclusion when the cookies finished baking; Lily took a break from the dishes to help Ieva load them on to a cooling rack. “I love baking; it’s so peaceful.”

Ieva smiled; only a single girl who had never had a husband or children could say such a thing. Straightening, Ieva shifted uncomfortably. “Excuse me, Lily; I’ll be back in a moment.” Although Ieva could feel Lily’s eyes on her back as she slowly crossed to the bathroom, Lily didn’t ask where she was headed or if she needed help. None of the other companions understood; they’d demand to know where she was going and then insist on trying to help her take off her own pants. *Demeaning didn’t even come close,* Ieva reflected morosely.

When she emerged, Ieva heard Lily turn on the CuisinArt. As she rounded the corner into the kitchen, she saw Lily raise the opened bag of chocolate chips. “Nē, nē! Stop! Stop it this moment!”

Lily froze, two chips tumbling into the CuisinArt. “What’s wrong, Mrs. Pudjīns?”

“Tommy and I make chocolate chip cookies! I need to make them with him! Don’t make them yet!” Panic had risen in Ieva’s face as color drained from Lily’s.

“I’m so, so sorry, Mrs. Pudjīns. It’s just, you had an old bag of chocolate chips that was about to go bad and I thought, since I just bought you a new replacement bag today, that we could use up these chips instead of throwing them out.” Lily’s voice quavered on the last three words.

“I’m sorry, Lily. You may keep the old chocolate chips and make them at home, but I only make chocolate chip cookies with Tommy; they’re his favorite.”
“Okay, Mrs. Pudjīns; I’m very sorry.”

Ieva crossed the kitchen and tugged open a cabinet, reaching for something inside. “Here,” she said, offering Lily a Tupperware bowl. “You can use this to take the batter home with you.”

Lily smiled, tension lifting from her shoulders.

After the two women finished cleaning the kitchen, Lily strung their cranberry-popcorn chain around the tree at Ieva’s direction. By the time the ugly clock struck seven, Lily had made a bowl of alfredo tortellini for each of them and told Ieva all about the trials of law school and how her parents were doing, careful to include some detail of holiday planning.

“May said she wants to be a lawyer last year, just like my husband was.”

“That’s wonderful, Mrs. Pudjīns!”

“Yes; she said she would never want to rent apartments like Liva does.”

“Why are you so hard on Liva?”

Ieva looked hard, but there was no hidden meaning in Lily’s question. “She was always so disrespectful towards me and my husband and the church. She never took her lessons in Latvian seriously. She never even tried to understand what it means to be Latvian.”

“Maybe she just went about understanding it in a different way.”

“Hmmf,” Ieva shrugged, refusing to consider the possibility.

Finally, just as Ieva started to yawn, Lily stood up and asked “Is there anything else I can do for you before I head out for the night, Mrs. Pudjīns?”

“No, thank you, Lily. I’m just going to get a good night’s sleep so I’m well rested for Tommy and May tomorrow. They only come once a year, you know.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Lily gave Ieva a hug and headed for the front door, calling behind her, “Have a good night, Mrs. Pudjīns!”
“Have a good night, Lily!”

As Lily closed the apartment door, she sighed heavily. It was so sad, really. May and Tommy would not be coming tomorrow, nor the day after that. Liva had stayed true to her pledge that, as long as Ieva chose the Latvians over her family, she wouldn’t see her grandchildren.

Lily left Eastcastle Place with a frown, half-expecting a snowy breeze to devour her. But, the moment she stepped outside, she grinned.

July’s heat wave was holding; it hadn’t dropped below seventy degrees in weeks.