

Abstract

WALKER, JENNIFER ELIZABETH. *Barely Audible and Other Stories*. (Under the direction of Dr. John Kessel)

This collection of short stories explores the psychology of a range of characters: a disappointed aging music teacher (as found in “Carol”), a group of self-help mavens (“Escape from Elba”), an ambitious young professional (“Politics”), a disgruntled housewife (“Nudge”), and an overly-social butterfly (“Barely Audible”). The different stories look into the implications of denial and perseverance, as each of these characters struggle with their self-delusions to find the truth, or to keep hiding from it.

**BARELY AUDIBLE
AND OTHER STORIES**

by
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my grandmother, Elizabeth Caroline Brock Murdock, who never stopped believing it would happen, and to Tom, who made sure it did.

Biography

Jennifer Walker has spent the last ten years working in mass media and advertising. She has written for well-known companies and organizations such as NBC, Glaxo, The Arthritis Foundation and Citysearch.com.

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This is a work of fiction. As in all fiction, literary perceptions and insights are based on experience; however, all names and incidents are products of the author's imagination. No reference to any person, dead or living, is intended or should be inferred.

Contents

Carol.....	1
Escape from Elba	13
Politics.....	32
Nudge.....	57
Barely Audible	68

Carol

Mrs. Betts walked home from class, her head throbbing. Teaching music had moments of reward, like when the class finally realized true harmony or a soloist hit that elusive high note. This Monday had not been one of those days.

The kids had been off-key and unfocused. School would let out soon for the winter holidays, and the concert next Friday was just one more obstacle standing between them and freedom. Their restlessness had channeled itself into chattering and mischief. Mrs. Betts had tried to ignore the substitution of dirty words and lyrics, but when the giggling disrupted the carefully structured rounds of “Carol of the Bells,” she’d had to tap her baton for almost a minute before she got the class back into order.

Every streetlight that lined Mrs. Betts’s path home was choked with greenery, and strands of colored lights strangled the skinny young trees. Signs of the pending Christmas holidays had begun sneaking into her periphery since just before Halloween. Even while popular stations were still playing “Werewolves of London” and “Monster Mash,”

television commercials promoted another Bing Crosby Christmas album. By Thanksgiving, decorated trees, colorful display packages and even the occasional menorah had sprung from every crevice and dangled from every rafter of the shops and offices she entered. Years ago, a young Ellie Brock would take off her glasses when she walked at night so the lights blurred into colorful, fuzzy dots. Now Mrs. Betts left her glasses on and wondered if she still had some aspirin in the medicine cabinet.

Soup heated quickly on her tiny stove. Cheese melted into the bread in the toaster oven. The radiators hummed as her apartment building's old furnace competed with the chill outside. On the radio, NPR reported another bombing in Israel. She shoved aside a stack of books and sheet music to find a place to sit at her kitchen table. The phone rang, startling her so much that her spoonful of soup ended up in her lap. With a sigh she answered the phone.

It was Mrs. Massey, the school's art teacher. She was also widowed, her grown kids scattered into different areas of the country. She would occasionally call if she'd heard of an interesting lecture or concert. This time it was a movie. How about Friday night?

The Christmas pageant was Friday night.

That's right. Mrs. Massey had forgotten. How was Saturday, then? Maybe at seven?

Saturday, it was.

Mrs. Betts hung up and finished her dinner. The news on the radio had given way to an assortment of holiday music. Mrs. Betts considered changing the channel, but finding this particular station again was difficult. She turned the volume down to a low

buzz instead and flipped through some sheet music. Eventually she abandoned that for the trashy romance novel Mrs. Massey had lent her, settling into the faded pink floral armchair. When she first got this chair, she could sit sideways in it, her back against one arm, her knees curled up and resting against the other. Now she sat with her feet kicked up on the ottoman, the chair arms pressed comfortingly against her hips. Even when she wasn't in the chair, the seat cushion maintained a sagging curve, a permanent reminder of the backside that had sat in it throughout the years.

She half-skimmed through the arguments and discussions until she found the next steamy part. After a few dry chapters, she closed the book and stretched, wondering if it was time for bed. The furnace stopped with a shudder that rattled the house, allowing Mrs. Betts to hear the radio again. David Bowie and Bing Crosby were finishing their duet of "Little Drummer Boy." Mrs. Betts closed her eyes, listening to their voices swirl around each other—Crosby's rich baritone, Bowie's keening tenor. The last note, and the announcer came on. Why did they always sound as if they were speaking at a golf tournament? Such smooth, soft whispers, afraid to ruin someone's putt.

"This band ran the club circuit in the late '50s and early '60s," the announcer murmured, "and reviews said they could bring the house down. We have a rare radio performance from 1962, broadcast from the Club DeLisa in Chicago. We bring to you, once again, the Murray Harlan Group, featuring the lead vocals of Ellie Brock."

Mrs. Betts dropped her book.

A sultry voice smoked through the speakers. A standup bass thumped a slow beat, and after the first verse, a soft trumpet rose above the music.

"I'll be home for Christmas...."

#

The smoky room was small, but crammed with hot bodies that swirled, dipped, stomped and shook in time to the music. The horn ripped, the trombone slid and the bass thumped until it was hard to tell if it was a heartbeat or the rhythm in your chest. There was barely room on stage for Murray's upright piano, which pounded out jazz after rag and back again, and it all quieted down just enough so you could hear Ellie Brock sing.

She didn't just sing, she taunted. She flirted, she promised, she lied and she was sorry. But most of all, she would grab the microphone and hold the note as long as the passion dictated, impossibly long, impossibly clean. And then she would skip back down the scales as effortlessly as tossing her hair. When it was done, the crowd would scream for more, and she would give it to them. The whole band did, two sets each night with an hour break in between, traveling from Chicago's south side to Kansas City to New York and back again. Packing their equipment after the shows, they would smoke and drink beer, exchanging congratulations and good-natured ribbing.

Murray played piano. He also played horn, sax, guitar, and if you asked him, the banjo. He wore shiny shoes and his fedora hat cocked at a rakish angle. Ellie had met him in a bar outside of Richmond. He was playing out a two-week gig; she was a nineteen-year-old cocktail waitress. She had shyly approached him about singing, and, after a slow look up and down and a quick audition, he agreed to let her sing a couple of songs each night. It wasn't long before she discovered the holes in the socks hidden by his shiny shoes. Three years later she still singing with the band at night and hoping to become Mrs. Harlan by day.

The rest of the band was a blur of session musicians who would stick around for a few gigs, then move on when something better came along. Except for Vernon, the trumpet player. Quiet, sober and reliable, he was a subdued contrast to the brassy voice of his horn. He and Murray worked up the arrangements, changing them as each set or season or new song dictated. It was Vernon who polished Murray's manic bop, adding the sophistication of the Duke and the blues of Armstrong.

Each night, the band divvied up the night's pay. Ellie and Murray had agreed to live on part of their cut, and save the rest. One day they might want to settle down. But until then, it was the music. They wanted to make it big. Carnegie, Murray would say. One day, baby, we'll knock 'em dead at Carnegie.

And it was time to move on to the next town.

It was in Philadelphia at Orlieb's Jazz Haus that the band became acquainted with Charlie Rigsby. He had slick hair and waved a cigar when he talked, and it was rumored on the band circuit that he had connections: radio, recording, clubs. "You name it, Rigsby can get it," Murray would say. Murray wanted nothing more than to have Rigsby hear them play. They had a gig that night, couldn't he stop in for a minute and listen?

Rigsby looked them over as they set up for the night's show. He couldn't hear them play tonight, but he'd catch them soon enough. He gave his promise with a wink and walked out, leaving a trail of cigar smoke and ash behind.

For the next several months, The Murray Harlan Group would occasionally see Rigsby out on the circuit. Sometimes he would just watch the show, sitting away from the dancing crowd that jostled around the stage. Other times he would chat with the band after the show, enthusiastically waving his cigar to emphasize his point. And his point

was that Murray Harlan and his group were hot. They were going places. They needed to step up their shows to the next level. He knew some folks; he'd call them. And he was gone in a puff of smoke and ash, not to be seen again until Kansas City or DC or Baltimore. After awhile, Murray said it was just a con, but that didn't stop him from jacking up the intensity if he knew Rigsby was in the audience.

They were breaking down after a show in mid-December, Chicago's Club DeLisa, when Rigsby and his cigar reappeared. He knew some local radio people, he said.

"I told 'em you'd be great for their radio program. They're going to record your gig. You want to be on the radio, right?" They couldn't let as many people in to see the show with the additional equipment needed for the recording, but Rigsby said they would hardly notice the difference. They could set it up for tomorrow night.

The entire band was thrilled, but Murray was manic. That night, Ellie watched from the bed as he paced, working out new set lists, muttering ideas, noodling riffs on his guitar. When the window began to glow with early-morning light, Murray left the room to roust Vernon out of bed.

Ellie saw little of Murray or Vernon throughout the day, but walking by Vernon's room she could hear bursts of sound; a blare of horn, a guitar riff, Murray's excited, "yeah, like that!" or Vernon's rumbling suggestions. That afternoon, Murray called a rehearsal so the entire band could practice a new arrangement and go over the new set list. And then, it was time for the show.

Working all day on little sleep hardly suppressed Murray's energy, which he released by cranking up his tempo. He choked up on the four-four beat until it was so

tightly wound that a burst of horn was a relief. The band kept up with enthusiasm and the crowd was wild.

Ellie's voice rose above the pandemonium—begging, swearing, giving up, and coming back again. Between songs, the sweaty dancers fell, panting and exhausted, but enticed by Ellie's voice and Murray's thumping beat, they came back for more.

Then came the new arrangement, the one Murray and Vernon had worked out earlier in the day. It was a holiday arrangement for the Christmas season, but with an easy, sultry rhythm to heat up a snowy night. The brushes slid over the snare to create an easy, swaying beat in the resting quiet of the club.

Ellie's voice purred from the stillness. "...please have snow and mistletoe and presents under the tree...."

The standup bass thumped a steady beat, and after the first verse, a soft trumpet rose above the drum. Murray's sax wrapped around the trumpet, and the trombone slid in between. Ellie swayed, eyes closed, listening to the intertwining horns. When her eyes opened, she only saw fuzzy lights in a mass of black shapes. One by one, the horns faded, the last note melting from the air. Her voice lifted in the stillness "...if only in my dreams..." The high hat shimmered, taking her last words away.

The crash of applause startled her. Catching her breath, she smiled and bowed her head as if that's how they planned it all along. "Thank you ladies and gentlemen!" She had to yell to be heard as she introduced the band. "Bill Winston on drums." The applause surged as Bill twirled a drumstick over his head.

"John Paxton on trombone." Another surge of applause. Pax nodded with a shy grin.

“Buddy Hicks on bass.” Buddy spun his standup under his arm and bowed, which won him a couple of whistles and whoops.

“Vernon Reeves on trumpet.” The cheers increased to a roar as Vernon raised his trumpet. Ellie had to shout to be heard now.

“And of course, Murray Harlan!” Ellie could feel the stage rumble under them as the cheering surged with stamping feet, piercing whistles and long whoops. A grinning Murray stood and waved one arm and, as the applause showed no signs of dying, swept off his hat and fell forward into a bow. The cheers continued even after he’d straightened up, slicked back his hair and settled his hat back on his head. Murray turned from the audience to face the band and applauded each man in turn: Vernon, Buddy, Pax, and Bill. When he got to Ellie, their eyes caught. *This is it.* Ellie could almost hear him say. *We’re going to skyrocket.*

In two strides he was beside her, his soaked arm around her waist. Sweat trails ran from his temples and drops beaded his forehead. “The beautiful Ellie Brock!” he shouted into her mike. He gave her cheek a moist peck, his nose blotting her eyelid, and stepped away to applaud her along with the audience.

Ellie bowed again, deeper this time, then Vernon was beside her, his arm around her waist, his other trumpet slung over Pax’s shoulder. Murray hugged her other side, his free hand holding Bill’s arm over their heads. Buddy stood next to them, applauding the applause. Looking out into the audience, the stage lights glared into her eyes, a blurred band of hot light blotched with red, blue, orange, and green, that melded the bobbing heads and waving hands into a dark, roiling mass.

Rigsby approached the band as they were breaking down their gear for the night. His chortles almost popped the cigar from his wide smile, and he gleefully rubbed his hands together. They had been great, just great. Murray, come over here so we can discuss some opportunities. Murray and the band exchanged excited glances. Murray gave Ellie a hard kiss and then disappeared with Rigsby.

Ellie, Vernon and the rest of the band were left to pack up and wait in the hotel bar, speculating what the offer might be. Recording deals, new equipment, a managed tour, a decent hotel for once. And the best gigs, maybe even Carnegie.

The gear had long been packed and still no sign of Murray. One by one, the members of the band drifted off to their rooms, exhaustion winning out over excitement. Vernon was the last to go, chucking Ellie's chin.

“Wake us up when you know something.”

With only the leering bartender left for company, Ellie finally gave up as well, returning to the hotel room she shared with Murray. She stripped down to her slip, crawled into bed, and only realized she'd drifted off to sleep when the sound of the turning doorknob woke her.

Murray was easing himself into the room, trying not to wake her. Ellie sat up in the bed. The window shade glowed faintly pink; it was morning.

“Well?”

Murray sat on the side of the bed, his eyes locked on the hat that was turning in his hands as he talked. Rigsby had made a pretty good offer, a tough one to refuse. Murray'd thought about it for a long time. He figured it only fair to put it up to the band for a vote. After all, it involved all of them. Well, almost all of them.

“Rigsby has another singer.”

She was a girl on the brink of making it big, Rigsby had said, really big. With Murray and his band, they could push her to the top, and them along with her.

“She’s probably just a flame of his,” Murray said. “You know, some no-talent floozy that he’s got his eye on. After a couple of months, Rigsby’s going to see we need a real singer, and we’ll get you back. So we’ll just go out and pave the way. You’ll be back with us soon, I promise.”

The message began to register. “So you’ve already put it to a vote.”

Murray nodded.

What else could she say?

The band left the next day. Rigsby had a gig for them over in Milwaukee. Vernon was the only one who sought her out, but even he had trouble meeting her eyes. “Sorry about this Ellie,” he said. “A chance like this might come again some day, but I can’t wait for that kind of maybe.” He gave her a quick hug.

And they were gone. Ellie went back to Richmond, taking the money she and Murray had saved to live on until he came back for her.

Letters came less and less frequently, until nearly a year passed without hearing anything at all. By then she was teaching music at a small high school just outside Richmond. A couple of years later, she got a call from Vernon, who was passing through town with a different band.

Ellie went to the show, and afterwards she and Vernon swapped updates of their lives over a couple of beers. But Vernon avoided mention of Murray until Ellie pressed him for news, and only then did he reluctantly tell her what she’d already guessed—

Murray had taken up with the new singer. Vernon said he and the rest of the band had tried to discourage it, but when Rigsby heard about the affair, he dropped his interest in the entire band. After limping through small clubs, the Murray Harlan Group as Ellie had known it had splintered.

Vernon was recruited to a different band, and he said he wasn't sure what ever happened to Murray. Wasn't sure, or more likely wouldn't tell, was Ellie's guess. But that was fine; she'd heard enough. Vernon went off to the next town, and she accepted a dinner invitation from Arthur Betts, who taught history at the high school.

#

A voice brought her out of her reverie. "Bill Winston on drums. John Paxton on trombone. Buddy Hicks on bass. Vernon Reeves on trumpet. And of course, Murray Harlan." The applause sounded so tinny and canned. And her voice! So much enthusiasm. Could she ever have sounded like that? Had she really been that young?

She looked around her apartment. A photograph from her honeymoon sat on the end table next to the sofa, nearly obscured by a pile of old *National Geographics* and *Music for Beginners*. She picked up the picture and ran her finger through the dust, clearing her own image. Such a serious face for a honeymoon. With the glasses, lower hems and sensible shoes, you could hardly see the performer she'd been just a few years before.

She wiped off her husband's image. Poor Arty. Such a quiet, solid man. He'd been a good husband and provider. He'd deserved more than the passionless marriage that she had given him; a life sentence for a crime he didn't commit.

She wondered briefly if Murray was still alive. She couldn't picture him old. No, Murray would be the eternally roguish musician in a cocked fedora, shiny shoes, and holey socks who could bring an audience to its feet with any instrument he touched. But it hadn't been just him. It had been all of them, Vernon and the parade of session musicians that rode the circuit together, that made every nightclub they played jump. And Ellie had been a part of it, too. Even the announcer had said so, years after the train carried her out of that distant Chicago station, "...featuring the vocals of Ellie Brock."

She put the picture down. She never made it to Carnegie with Murray Harlan and his band. But they never made it to Carnegie without her.

She thought about New York and all its clubs hidden below the soaring skyline. Perhaps Vernon or Buddy or Pax or any of the other musicians might still be found in one of those clubs, still living the musician's life.

She chuckled at the idea that was budding in her mind. It was ridiculous. Ludicrous. But yet....

Maybe Mrs. Massey was free during the holidays.

Escape from Elba

We stumbled through the cow pasture laden with our bundles and knapsacks. There was little talking, just the occasional grunt as someone readjusted her burden or wrenched a stiletto heel from the soft ground.

“Where is this place?” Melynn grumbled. She balanced on one leg trying to replace the shoe that had been pulled off by the mud. In her pink evening gown, clutching her overnight bag over her shoulder, she looked like a precarious flamingo.

“It’s just on the other side of the pond, on top of that hill,” Lena answered. Our attention turned from Melynn to follow Lena’s finger. A second full moon floated in the pond that lay at the foot of a sloping hill.

“Why so far away?” groaned Raven, her name a contradiction to her blonde curls and Rubenesque figure. She hiked up the front of her purple strapless gown.

“Well, if you want to be eaten alive by mosquitoes, stay right here,” Lena said, trying to tuck a fallen lock of brown hair back into her rhinestone barrette. She gathered up her trailing skirt and trudged on as best she could, the loose lock already slipping out of the barrette.

I held up my own hem and headed after her. I’d figured out that tiptoe-ing kept my heels from sinking in the soft ground, but it was murder on my toes. Pick your pain, I thought.

I hadn’t told Trent that we were coming out to a cow pasture in the middle of the night. I knew what he would say: ‘Hey Lottie, pick me some mushrooms.’ All he cared about was getting high, even if it meant eating hallucinogenic fungus picked out of cow poop. No one else in this group seemed to know about the recreational pharmacology found in cow pastures, and it was kind of nice to hear other topics of conversation for a change.

“I am ruining a great pair of shoes for this,” Raven moaned behind me.

“It was your idea to dress formal.”

“Oh, shut up, Lena.”

Though we walked on in silence, the pond was far from quiet. Cicadas made high-pitched, whirring chirrups. Fish leapt up to catch bugs, falling back with little plops. Cows lowed in the distance. An out-of-tune guitar twanged close-by.

Raven grabbed my arm. “What was *that*?”

“It was just a bullfrog.” Lena said. Another twang came from farther away.

“That’s no bullfrog! Bullfrogs make *ribbety* noises.” Raven’s manicured nails dug into my skin.

“Raven,” Lena said. “It’s a bullfrog. Haven’t you ever been in the country before?” *Twang*. I patted Raven’s hand on my arm, more to release her grasp than to comfort her.

“That is not a bullfrog,” Raven insisted. “That is someone with a guitar.”

“Oh, sure Raven,” said Melynn. Her bracelets and earrings sparkled in the moonlight. “Crazy psychopaths sit out in cow pastures waiting for girls in evening gowns to come out so they can twang guitars at them. Happens all the time.” *Twang*. “See? There he goes again.”

I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. The thought of some crazy guy hidden in the shadows twanging a one-stringed guitar was so...actually, kind of scary. I hurried to keep up with Lena and Melynn.

Another twang. Raven let out a loud “Eeep!” and scurried to catch up.

“Would you please keep quiet?” Lena hissed. “My grandfather is going to be out here with a shotgun if he hears us.”

“They don’t know we’re out here?” Melynn said. “You said you were going to set this up.”

“Yeah, well,” Lena said evasively, “I got busy, you know.”

“Ah, jeez Lena,” I said. “We’re going to get arrested by your own family.”

“Well, it won’t be the first time for some of us,” Raven said, cutting her eyes slyly at Lena.

“Hey!” Lena exclaimed. “Why don’t you go home and see if Dave and Karen are going out tonight? Maybe you can pass him a note.” She held an imaginary letter in front of her face. “Dear Dave. Do you still love me even though you’re dating someone else? Check one: yes or no or maybe.”

I tried to disguise my laugh with a cough.

“Lay off, you guys,” Melynn cut in. “We’re supposed to be dumping this baggage, not dredging it up again.”

The ground started to rise as we approached the hill, and tiptoeing became impossible. The smooth soles of my slingbacks found little traction on the dewy grass.

“Stupid heels. Next time, I’m bringing shoes for the walk over,” Lena muttered, her hands touching the ground to catch herself as she fell forward.

“If we do this right we won’t need a next time,” I said, hanging on to Raven, who had nearly tumbled back down the hill. I only let go when she nodded that she was steady. I looked at the striped pink and purple blanket she had bundled in her arms. “But if we do, bring a backpack. It’s easier.”

Melynn walked up the hill backwards, stabbing her heels into the ground like a mountain climber using grappling hooks. “These shoes are goners anyway,” she said, “Might as well get on up the hill.” Easy enough for her, I thought. With her alimony, she could afford to ruin a pair of shoes.

A few more slips and stumbles and we made it to the top. Looking back, the hill seemed a gentle slope, mocking the struggle we had made to climb it. But it had been worth the effort. Moonlight glittered in the pond below us, and the pasture stretched away into the darkness. Off in the distance, dark shadows spotted the field, the only indication

of the cows that lived there. That, and the patties that we had dodged on the way. We were far enough from the city lights that we could see stars, tons and tons of stars.

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It was after one of our weekly group therapy sessions that we had gotten the idea. We were at Nick's Tavern, a bar near our counselor's office. We'd started going Nick's together after our group sessions. A couple of drinks helped to soothe the wounds that had opened during our Exercises in Self-Awareness.

"I wonder how big Allen's wife is now. She's supposedly due next month," Lena had mused aloud. Lena had lived with Allen for almost two years when she discovered his infidelity. The news had come from (surprise!) his other girlfriend who called to announce (surprise, surprise!) her pregnancy. A couple of weeks later, Allen told Lena to move out (which was fair, Lena grudgingly admitted, since he'd bought the house they shared before they'd started dating). When Lena read their engagement announcement in the paper a month later, she tried one last-ditch effort at reconciliation: she broke into the house, stripped naked and waited in the bed for Allen to come home, hoping for her special sort of "negotiation." Unfortunately, the pregnant fiancée arrived instead, screaming herself into hyperventilation. Apparently, she had already moved in. Soon afterwards the police and Allen arrived, and Lena was slapped with a restraining order.

"Oh, knock it off," Melynn said. "You spent the whole group session talking about ways to quit obsessing over Allen. Now you sit here like you're in Lamaze class with his wife!"

“Calm down, Melynn,” I said. “What is with you tonight?”

“What’s with *you*?” she countered. “You’re actually considering getting back with Trent. What are you thinking, Lottie?”

I was stunned. “Well, he really sounded like he wanted to clean up this time,” I said. It was all I could come up with.

“He took your jewelry and hocked it,” Melynn began the mantra, and soon they were all chanting. “He maxed out your credit cards, lived with you for eight months without paying rent, strung out on drugs. You’re so much happier since he’s gone.”

I sighed. “I know, I know. He just sounds so sincere sometimes.”

Melynn finished her beer and slammed the mug down. “Listen to us. It’s the same thing every week. ‘Trent’s really quitting drugs this time.’” My face grew hot. “‘Dave’s going out with Karen tonight. Let’s go see what they’re doing.’” Raven shielded her eyes. “‘I wonder how pregnant Allen’s wife is now.’ All we do is complain, but nothing gets better.”

“Well, you don’t go to therapy because of all the fun you’re having,” Raven said with a pout.

Raven was twenty-three. She was considered the baby of our group, though sometimes it was hard to decide if it was because of her age or her behavior. She’d started therapy after being dumped by Dave, her high school sweetheart. From what I could tell, he’d simply grown out of the relationship, while she still trying to be homecoming queen. But it was probably more complicated than that.

“We’ve been coming to this group for over six months now,” Melynn continued, “and I’m not seeing much improvement. You guys are great and all, but I really don’t want to spend the rest of my life whining about how some man done me wrong.”

“Yeah, well what do you suggest we do?” I said. The Trent comment had hit a little too close.

“Let it go,” Melynn said. “Just get rid of all this baggage we’ve been carrying around.”

“Easier said than done,” said Raven. “No matter where I go, Dave is there with...” her voice took on a sneering tone, “*Karen*.”

Lena hit her playfully. “Maybe if you tried going some place other than his favorite sports bar.”

“Oh, look who’s talking!” Raven retorted. “The one with a restraining order!”

As Raven and Lena bickered, I leaned towards Melynn. “Alright, Miss ‘Just-Let-It-Go.’ What have you got in mind?”

“Well, I think we need to make a dramatic statement for it to really resonate,” Melynn said. “So I think we should burn it.”

Raven and Lena dropped their squabble. “Burn what?” Lena asked.

“Burn everything that makes us hang on to these guys,” Melynn said. “Burn their pictures, burn their gifts...”

“Except the jewelry, of course,” Raven interjected.

Melynn continued, “Just burn all the residue in one blaze. Get it all out. A clean slate.”

“What about you, Melynn?” Lena jumped in. “Are you going to burn down that big fancy house you got from your divorce?”

“Well, yes,” Melynn said. “In a manner of speaking. I just put it on the market.”

“Oh, Melynn!” Raven wailed. “You love that house!”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Melynn said firmly. “And I’m looking for a part-time job starting tomorrow. All I do while Missy is in school is feel sorry for myself.”

“Geez, you can have my job,” Lena said. “You play babysitter to those corporate execs, and I’ll hang out at your house and wait for Missy to come home.”

“Really,” Raven said emphatically. She looked at me and rolled her eyes. I had to agree. Melynn was nuts to work when she didn’t have to.

“Come on, you guys,” Melynn protested. “Missy’s gone all day, and all I have to do is sit around, surrounded by all these reminders that I’m supposed to be living happily ever after. I’ve got to get out of that house and do something for my self-esteem.”

Melynn had invited us over to her house a couple of times for pizza and movies when Missy was spending the weekend with her dad. It had seemed like a big echoey museum compared to my one-bedroom apartment. Her built-in bookcases were filled with leather bound books and framed vacation photos of her and Gary and Missy: tropical backgrounds, chic ski outfits, Roman ruins. I started to get her point.

After all, right after Trent and I broke up, my job was my sole reason for getting out of bed. As a high school teacher, you just can’t show up weepy and emotional. It had become a game, to act composed and in control while I lectured to the class. Though I had to admit, the play-acting was getting tiresome.

“All right, I’m in,” I said.

“Yeah,” Lena chimed in. “Let’s make a night out of it. I’ll bring some wine.”

“Oh, there’s a surprise,” Raven said, nudging Lena with her elbow. “Hey, let’s dress for it!” she added. “Full-length formal dresses. Let’s look really hot!”

“Good Lord, why do you have to turn everything into a prom?” Lena groaned.

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said, and Raven smirked at Lena. “Melynn’s right. We’ve felt bad about ourselves long enough. Let’s look good for this, really do it up. And let’s all bring a bottle of wine.” Lena smirked back at Raven.

Melynn nodded. “The question is, where do we do this?”

“What about your backyard, Melynn?” Lena suggested. “It’s bigger than anything we have.”

“Inside city limits,” I said shaking my head. “The police would be on us pretty quick.”

“Don’t start,” Lena said as Raven opened her mouth.

“I was just going to say,” Raven said with a huff, “that I wish we could get out of town a little, out in the country.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief. “That way, it could be, you know, kind of witchy!”

“My grandparents have a farm about thirty miles out of town,” Lena said. “They have plenty of pasture land out there. Even if it is illegal, no one would see us.”

“You think they’d mind?” asked Melynn.

“I don’t think so, as long as we don’t burn the place down. I’ll call them this week.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“I’m game,” Raven added.

“Name the day,” Melynn said.

“Weekends are better for me,” I said, opening my day planner.

“We work late on Fridays. Banks, you know. A Saturday is better for me,” Raven said.

I suggested the coming Saturday.

“Can’t,” said Lena, looking at her calendar. “My mother’s birthday. What about the next weekend?”

“My daughter’s recital,” said Melynn, flipping the pages of hers. “The next?”

“What date is that?” Raven fumbled through her purse to find her organizer.

“Nope. Company softball game. How ‘bout the next?”

“Good for me,” Melynn said. “Missy will be at her father’s that weekend.”

“I’m clear,” I added. “And the weather should still be warm enough.”

Lena nodded. “I’m penciling it in.”

“All right, it’s a date.”

#

We stood on the hill overlooking the pond, resting after the climb. I wiped my forehead and wondered if all my makeup had sweated off. Melynn rested her weight on one hip, breathing hard and pressing a stitch in her side. Raven, her energy never flagging, bobbed on her toes in her excitement. Lena knelt and began to rummage in her knapsack.

“After a hike like that, we need refreshments,” she said, pulling out a bottle of wine. “I hope you don’t mind plastic cups,” she added, holding a short sheath of small plastic cups, the kind that come free with a keg of beer.

“I have a present for us,” Melynn said in a singsong voice. She opened up her designer overnight bag, part of a matching set, and pulled out something wrapped in tissue. Pulling the tissue away, she revealed a wine glass cut with geometric designs in the bowl. “Waterford crystal,” she added, handing it to Raven.

“Fancy,” Raven said.

While Melynn unwrapped three more glasses, Lena found a corkscrew, uncorked the bottle and walked around to each of us, carefully pouring the wine. “To us!” she said, lifting her glass.

“To us!” we countered, clinking glasses, then took a sip.

“Well,” Lena said, handing her glass to Melynn. “Let’s get started.” She pulled a DuraFlame log out of her bag.

“Hey, good idea!” Melynn said. She pulled out a portable stereo-CD player. “Care for a little music? I borrowed this from my daughter.”

Lena stepped a couple of feet away and lit the log. Melynn played an Enya CD, and an ethereal tune played into the starry night. It was mystical, or as Raven wanted, kind of “witchy.”

We started to unpack our bags. Raven opened her blanket, revealing a magnum of wine and a small packet of folded papers wrapped in a ribbon.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Raven smiled. “Dave wrote a lot of love letters and really bad poetry,” she said. She spread the blanket near the fire and sat on it.

“This I gotta hear,” Lena said, sitting next to her. Melynn and I joined them. Raven opened one of the letters and skimmed it.

“Oh, this is terrible,” she said and started laughing. ““Oh fair Raven, one look at you and my heart was enslaven.””

““Enslaven?”” Melynn groaned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Wait there’s more.” Raven read on. ““Though your name is dark, you are the light of my life...””

Lena snorted into her glass, choking on the combination of laughter and wine. I patted her on the on the back. “This guy is no Shakespeare,” I said as Lena continued to sputter and giggle.

Raven chuckled, “I guess not. Now he’s probably writing this crap to someone else. Are you okay?” she asked Lena, who still coughing. Lena nodded, clearing her throat and giggling.

“Poor girl,” Lena managed to say. ““Enslaven.”” And she burst into another fit of coughing and giggles.

Raven crumpled up the paper and tossed it into the fire. The flames jumped higher as the paper ignited and burned. She sighed. “You want to hear another one?”

“Must we? I don’t think I can stand another one,” Melynn said.

Raven looked down at the stack. “Me neither,” she said, and tossed the rest of Dave’s literary homage into the fire. Her grin faded as the paper started to blacken.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked softly.

“Actually, I am,” she said. She absently took a sip of her wine, staring into the growing flames. “I was just wondering what rhymes with Karen.”

“I hope you’re not barren?” I suggested.

“That sounds like something Allen would write,” Lena said, her choking subsided. “How about, ‘I think we’d make a good pairin’?’”

Melynn sat up and struck a classic bard’s pose, one hand to her heart, the other raised in front of her. “Karen, fear not to run with me into the night. Raven’s right behind us, she’ll be our light!” Her tone was sonorous, her Rs rolling in exaggerated trills.

Raven laughed. “You’re better than he is.”

The flames started to grow as the papers caught. “Whoo-hoo!” Raven whooped. “This is starting to be a bonfire! Who’s next?”

“I’ll go,” I said, “though I don’t really have all that much. I only got this one card from Trent the whole time we were dating. It was for my birthday, and it was late.” I handed it to Lena. A cartoon dog with a lolling tongue was pictured on the cover. Its glued-on plastic eyes had jiggling black discs, making the dog leer goofily. I didn’t need to read it again to recall the printed message: *You can’t lick your age...but you can lick me*. There was an inked scrawl underneath; the only letter you could make out was the initial T.

Lena flicked the card open to read it and rolled her eyes. “Jerk,” she said, passing the card on to Raven.

“What did you ever see in this guy?” Raven added, passing the card on to Melynn.

“No fair judging,” Melynn said taking the card. “None of us are towers of strength here.” She read the card. “But geez, Lottie! You can do better!”

I was embarrassed. I took the card back and stared at the dog’s jiggling pupils. I wanted to defend Trent. How funny he was, how he would roast artichokes, real ones with the spiny leaves, and show me how to eat them...

Lena nudged me gently. “Ignore them. So what else you got there?”

I showed her the photograph. Trent and I stood in front of a Christmas tree, his arm draped heavily over my shoulder; my cheek pressed against his. He never liked pictures to be taken of him, but I begged for this one. His expression was sullen and exasperated while a tense smile spread over my clenched teeth. “It was at one of his friends’ Christmas parties. The police arrived about fifteen minutes after this picture was taken and he was busted on drug charges.” I shook my head to clear the memory. “I didn’t realize he was the party connection.”

“Oh, lovely,” Raven said. “Let me see this guy.”

I passed it to her.

“You look like hell,” Melynn said, passing it to Raven. “In the picture, I mean.”

“Cute outfit,” Raven said. “But wow. Look at those dark circles under your eyes,”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I slept for two days straight after he finally left.” They passed the photo back to me. I took one last look, then tossed it, and that stupid card, into the fire. “To a good night’s sleep!” I toasted, as Lena, Raven and Melynn cheered and clapped. I tried not to notice the photo bubble and curl into a blackened ash.

“Okay, okay, my turn.” Lena jumped up and held out two newspaper clippings. “Presenting the engagement announcement that tells everyone that Allen Thompson has plans to marry someone besides me.”

“You actually cut that out of the paper?” Melynn said in disgust.

Lena laughed. “And as a double feature, here’s the wedding announcement.” She handed Raven a larger cutting that included a black and white image. “Look at the picture. They photographed her from the chest up, small surprise. Didn’t want to show that she was already in her second trimester.”

We passed the clippings around. Raven handed them back to Lena. “A toast, to the double feature!” Raven said, and started to chant. “*Burn it!*”

“*Burn it! Burn it!*” Melynn and I joined in.

Lena laid the two clippings into the fire as we whooped encouragement. The fluttering newspaper caught quickly. Within moments they were nothing but ashes.

“Wow,” Lena said quietly. “That was fast.”

“Yeah,” I said, understanding a little how she must feel. Silly remnants like my photo and her newspaper clippings were physical souvenirs of our pain, reminders that we were justified in hurting. Within just a few seconds, they no longer existed, but I couldn’t say that I felt any better. And now I didn’t even have a token to hold onto that explained why I still couldn’t just move on.

Raven jumped up and hugged Lena’s shoulders. A lump rose in my throat. I wanted a hug too, but thought I might cry if I opened my mouth to ask for one.

Lena hugged Raven back for a second and then shook her hair out of her face. “Okay, Melynn, you’re up,” she said with a rueful smile.

Melynn reached into her bag. She held up a pink jacket and skirt.

“Wow,” Raven said, reaching over to finger the fabric. “Great outfit. Is that silk?”

Melynn nodded. “It’s what I was wearing when Gary told me he was leaving. I thought it was just a nice evening out at our favorite restaurant—we hadn’t been out like that in ages. But, halfway through the baked Alaska, POOF! He asks for a divorce. Seven years and a daughter, then gone. Just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “I thought I could wear this again, but every time I pull it out it reminds me of that night. I just can’t.”

“I could,” Raven said hopefully. Lena smacked her arm.

Melynn went to the fire and dropped the dress in. Raven whimpered as it began to smolder.

“Hey, Melynn,” I said, trying to cover Raven’s dismay. “How’s your new job?”

Melynn brightened. “Oh, it’s really great. They only need me part time for now, so I can still be home in time to meet Missy when she gets home from school. But they say there’s room for growth, so we’ll see where it goes from here. It’s just nice to be busy. I don’t have any offers on the house yet, but I feel like it’s a start.”

She raised her glass in a salute and said, “To moving on!”

“To moving on!” We replied, and we all drank. Melynn drained her glass, and then threw the glass into the fire.

“Christ, Melynn,” Lena yelled. “That’s crystal!”

“Yes, I know. My wedding crystal. Don’t worry, I’ve got eight more at home.” She grabbed the bottle and pulled a swig off it. “And get this sappy music off. It’s time for something a bit more snappy!” She pulled out another CD. Soon Abba was blaring

out into the night sky. “My, my, at Waterloo Napoleon did surrender...” We drained our own glasses and, following Melynn’s example, threw them in the fire.

“What a perfect night,” Raven sang, looking up at the sky as she twirled.

Lena kicked off her shoes. “It is now,” she sighed, wiggling her toes. “Mmmm. Much better.”

“You’re ruining your stockings,” I laughed, feeling a little dizzy.

“You’re right,” Lena replied, and she bent double and grabbed the hem of her dress. She hiked her skirt up to her waist and shimmied out of her stockings. She whirled them over her head like a flag. “Liberation!” she whooped.

I looked over at Melynn, who shrugged and said, “Why not?” And she too hiked up her hem. Before long, we were all dancing barelegged around the fire, laughing and waving our stockings in the night. Abba continued to sing, “Waterloo, finally facing my Waterloo...”

A loud, sharp crack cut through our laughter. We all froze, staring at each other. The guitar-twanging psychopath had come for us at last.

“What the hell is going on around here?” a deep voice boomed behind me. A figure came over the hill and stepped into the light. An old man squinted at us, clutching a shotgun. The top of his round head was smooth, but thick tufts of white hair sprang out around his ears and over the neck of his tank undershirt. His skin was pale and loose on his thin upper arms, but grew harder and darker down his forearms, ending in leathered, ropey brown hands. Hands that still firmly gripped the smoking rifle.

A small eternity passed before Lena’s voice called, “Grandpa, it’s me!”

“Me who?” he said, peering at each of us trying to find the speaker.

“Lena. Over here,” she said, giving her stockings a feeble wave. “These are some friends of mine.”

Lena’s grandfather finally spotted Lena and lowered his gun, much to my relief. He didn’t say anything for a moment, just assessed the scene. What a sight we must have been for that poor old man. Four women dressed in evening gowns, stockings and wine bottles in hand, dancing like a bunch of Salomes around a bonfire. When he finally spoke, it was to Melynn, who stood next to the CD player.

“Would you mind turning that noise down? You’re scaring my cows.”

“Oh, right,” she said and quickly complied.

He addressed Lena. “Do you and your friends plan to make it a habit to set fire to my pasture in the middle of the night?”

Lena cleared her throat. “Uh, no sir. Just tonight.”

“I see.” He glared around at the blanket, the fire, the half-empty wine bottles in our hands, but he kept the gun barrel pointing to the ground. “All right then,” he said at last. “But you just make sure you clean all this up before you leave,” he said sternly, taking another hard look at each of us.

“Yes, sir,” we each said, meekly, Raven adding her “sir” after hearing ours.

He nodded toward the wine bottle in Lena’s hand. “And if you girls drank all that, you don’t need to be driving home tonight. After you clean all this up, come on back to the house. Your grandmother will make up a little breakfast in the morning. And don’t sleep all day, we got to get to church.”

“Okay,” Lena said. “Thanks, Grandpa.”

“Looks like you all could use a little church yourself.” Lena’s grandpa took one last look around and shook his head. He turned and we watched his round head slowly bob down the hill. I could hear him muttering as he went, “Crazy kids, middle of the night, setting fires...” before his voice faded.

We were left staring at each other. Raven snickered. Lena started to giggle, and then we were all trying to stifle our laughter.

“Oh my God,” Melynn gasped. “Thirty-two years old with a kid, and I’m getting scolded for scaring cows!”

Still giggling, we settled back on the blanket and passed the remaining bottles between us.

Lena stared up into the sky. “You know, you just can’t see the stars back home like you can out here.”

“Yeah,” Melynn sighed, looking up as well. “Sometimes you forget the sky can look like this.” For a while, no one said anything as we craned our necks upwards.

Politics

Anne had a lovely singing voice. That is, as long as no one else offered another opinion. For her drive to work today, she had selected a classic: “Gypsies Tramps and Thieves” from *Cher’s Greatest Hits*. She was now imitating Cher’s throaty moan: “Grampa’d do whatever he coooooould....” Her car was her sold-out concert hall; her tape deck was her backup band.

Today, Anne didn’t mind the heavy traffic of her commute to WKBS, the television station where she worked. On the contrary, Anne felt she was driving towards her victory—she had single-handedly landed an interview with state senator Robert Chalmers’s notoriously private wife, Beverly. The interview was scheduled for two o’clock today.

“Gypsies, tramps and thieves,” Anne sang, and noticed the man in the car next to her was staring. She pointed at him and sang, “You’d hear it from the people of the town they called us gyp-SEES, TRAMPS and THEEVES....” And the light was green.

The news had broken two weeks ago as competitor Channel 3’s lead story: Senator Chalmers’s mistress had given birth to their illegitimate son. Anne and other WKBS cast and crew had watched the newsclip in open-mouthed shock. What a scoop to get during an election year! Most of the footage accompanying the story was obviously from Channel 3’s archive—shots of the Senator heading off to state dinners, making speeches, walking to the Legislative Building, clad in shorts while participating in a walk-a-thon for charity, sometimes waving and smiling, other times ignoring the cameras. However, a new clip, a shaky shot of a hospital that Anne didn’t recognize, showed a furtive figure walking quickly to his car. A quick zoom revealed the unmistakable features of Bob Chalmers.

The screen returned to Channel 3’s six o’clock anchorwoman, who had an image of a smiling Bob Chalmers floating above her right shoulder. She raised her eyebrows, animating her other otherwise neutral expression. “So far the Chalmers have made—no comment.”

Cher’s voice was fading in the speakers. “Thank you, thank you.” Anne ejected the tape and tossed it into the backseat. “More? You want more?” She rummaged in the console for another tape. “This is a sentimental favorite,” she announced, popping in the next cassette. A piano plinked out the opening bars, and Anne started to sing with Billie Holiday as her backup singer: “All of me...why not take...all of me....”

The last two weeks had brought an onslaught of Chalmers news. Every local newspaper and radio and TV station reported every detail of the senator's life in addition to the official statements that came from Senator Chalmers's office—an attempt, thought Anne, to make amends for not breaking the story themselves. Anne was gratified that WKBS had not reduced itself to such tripe. They reported only the official statements with a floating photo over the anchor's shoulder and live coverage during Bob Chalmers's press conference. But Anne had to admit, they'd replayed the same clip from the press conference so many times that Anne could quote his speech: "It is not my intention to forget my responsibility to my office and my constituency, regardless of any rumor." However, with all of the fuzzy photographs, jostled shots, and even the press conference, many editorials, reporters and anchors had commented that Beverly Chalmers had been notably absent.

A yellow light was flashing up ahead. Anne slowed and downshifted. Traffic was merging into one lane. "Your goodbye...left me with eyes that... HEY!" A red car zipped by her on the shoulder and cut in front of her. "Way to go, jackass!" She flipped off the driver, hoping he could see it in his rearview mirror. Anne fumed for a moment, then realized Lady Day was singing without her. Anne do-bee-do-bee-do'd until she figured out where the song had gotten and joined in again. "So WHY not...take ALL of MEEE...."

Last week, Anne had talked to her boss Martin about calling the Chalmers's house. After all, he was a state senator, not a congressman; his number was there in the phone book. And Martin often said she had a silver tongue when it came to getting people to agree to interviews. "What the hell?" he'd said. "Can't hurt. But I doubt

anything will come from it. In fact, I doubt you talk to a human at all. They're probably getting pounded with phone calls. But if you call, tell her she can talk to Marnie." Marnie Caple was their award-winning anchor who had quit the six o'clock time spot to do special reports and occasional news series—their own local Barbara Walters. Martin had been right: Anne had gotten the machine, but she had a message prepared.

"Hi, I'm trying to reach Mrs. Beverly Chalmers. This is Anne Deyton from WKBS." She had made her voice warm and sincere. "Mrs. Chalmers, I realize that in this time of controversy, you may be angry at the media for discussing very personal issues. I would like to offer you the opportunity to use the media to your benefit, to offer any retorts, to make any requests, to say anything you would like to say. As a producer at WKBS, I can help you schedule some time with Marnie Caple..." Anne paused, then added, "...or with any other reporter you trust and feel comfortable with. It's time, Mrs. Chalmers, time for the people to hear something positive about your family, and we would like to offer you that outlet. Please give me a call, Mrs. Chalmers. I want to work with you in hopes of giving you some piece of mind." Anne repeated her name, the television station and her telephone number. And then heard nothing in reply.

Nothing, that is, until two days ago. The receptionist Liz had beeped her phone: "I don't believe it!" her excited voice came through the intercom. "Beverly Chalmers is calling for you!" She patched the call through, then must have paged the entire station, because before Anne could say "How are you, Mrs. Chalmers?" her office was crammed with anchors and producers and the smoked glass walls revealed shadowy figures of interns and crew, all who waited to hear what was happening.

“I can meet Wednesday at two o’clock,” Mrs. Chalmers said briskly. “I believe you said Marnie Caple will be available?”

Anne had barely repeated the date and time before Mrs. Chalmers was saying, “Thank you. Good-bye.” It was a brief conversation, and with so many witnesses, Anne had little opportunity to embellish the experience to her co-workers. But there was immediate excitement, and Anne could hear people leaving her office announcing: “We got Chalmers!” She was a little stung; after all, *she* was the one who’d gotten Beverly Chalmers’s attention. She was actually impressed with herself. This was a long way from those days as a coffee-fetching intern, or even the thankless grunt work of an assistant producer. With all the witnesses, Anne felt sure her name would be carried up to executive levels. But just in case, she thought letting her boss know would be a good idea. She picked up the phone and called Martin’s extension.

“Hello,” Martin said. From the hollow, echoey sound in his voice, Anne could tell she was on intercom.

“Martin! It’s Anne. I got Beverly Chalmers!”

“Yeah, Marnie and I just heard about it in the hallway. When is the interview again?”

“Wednesday, two o’clock.”

Martin’s voice grew fainter. “Can you do that, Marnie?”

Annie could just barely make out Marnie’s voice in the background saying, “Yes,” and something about “...wish I’d known someone was setting up my time.”

“Sounds good, Annie.” Martin must have turned back to the speakerphone because his voice was louder again. “Have you scheduled the studio to make sure it’s available?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m doing that now. Just wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks, Anne. Good job.” And Martin clicked off.

#

The song on the tape deck was winding down. “Thank you, thank you...” Anne called. She had arrived into the WKBS parking lot. There would be no time for encores today.

Walking toward the glass entrance, Anne caught a glimpse of her reflection. She liked the way she looked, determined and very professional in a designer suit and shoes that cost more than the monthly salary she’d first made at WKBS. Five years ago, she was an intern in jeans. She’d put on a few pounds (but she thought they made her look womanly), and her brown hair was clipped back into a neat bob rather than hanging loose in long flirty waves. Even her posh leather dayplanner looked like an accessory capable of serious business dealings, though most of the calendar notations in it were her manicure and dentist appointments; her office calendar was on her desk computer. Still, she looked sophisticated and capable, maybe even...dare she say it? Executive.

Anne entered the station. “Morning, Liz,” she called to the receptionist and stopped to watch the television monitors that flanked the receptionist stand. Slick-haired Ray Winston was reporting the nine o’clock news show.

“Hey, you’re here early,” Liz said. “Ready for the big interview?”

“Yep,” Anne replied. “Which reminds me—you called the florist about getting an arrangement for the green room, didn’t you?”

“Yes, they should be here within the hour. If they’re not here by ten, I’ll call and find out what’s the holdup.”

“You’re the best,” Anne said.

She looked at the TV screen again. It had been a while since she had seen the morning newscast, and Anne noticed Ray had moved to the left side of the anchor desk. It was a subtle but radical move in news. Viewers were resistant to change. Anne remembered the storm of letters and phone calls that flooded the station when an evening anchor changed the color of her hair.

“So when did Ray switch to the other side of the set?” she asked Liz.

“When he noticed the camera angle made his part look wide. He thought it made him look like he was getting bald.”

Anne rolled her eyes. What an egocentric bunch the talent could be. It took a really sharp producer to make anchors look bright.

“So when are you going to let me do a spot on the noon show?” Liz asked. Liz played up to all the producers, vying to get on-camera as a reporter, anchor—anything, really. “She’s sharp,” Martin had said once, “but unless you shoot her from the neck up, nobody’s going to notice. I mean, look at her. Her tits go up to her chin.” It was a sexist remark, but Anne couldn’t help but agree. Liz was just too voluptuous. What news could she possibly cover that anyone would notice?

But, Annie thought, on some sort of regular feature, Liz *would* get a regular audience of viewers. Maybe she would be good in presenting community stories, stories

that could use a little latent sex. Anne would bring that up to Martin. Another initiative could be another point in her favor.

“I have some ideas,” Anne said, and for the first time it was true. “Let me talk to Martin and see what we can do.”

Giving a wave and grabbing a newspaper off the stack on the reception desk, Anne headed back to her office, passing the anchors’ workstations on the way. It was rare to see anchors at their desks at this hour. They were either on the air, in meetings, or not in yet. Marnie’s workstation was by far the most cluttered, crowded with reporting awards, civic achievements, statuettes and various trophies, and photographs of her standing with rock stars, politicians, advocacy leaders, celebrities, and every other important person who had passed through town. Even if Anne hadn’t offered Marnie as the reporter to interview Beverly Chalmers, Marnie probably would have done it anyway. Marnie got the big interviews, period.

But Marnie wasn’t the one who scheduled the interviews, planned the sets, edited the roll-in footage, researched background information, or discerned how to pronounce difficult words and spelled them out foe-NET-uh-lee so she and all other anchors could look intelligent as they read from teleprompters. Those awards should also be given to the twenty other people who made everything Marnie did seem easy. Anne liked to come up with different ways of revealing that Marnie was nothing without a crew, but couldn’t figure out a way to do it without jeopardizing her own reputation. Still, it was a fun way to pass the time in boring staff meetings.

Once at her office, Anne realized there was actually little to do now but wait for the regular noon show, which pretty much ran itself, and then the Chalmers interview at

two. She began looking through the paper for any new developments in the Chalmers story. The latest story headlined the Local/Regional section—a report detailing the number of people working in Bob Chalmers’s office and the amount of money they spent on office supplies. Yes, Annie had thought, nothing more sinister than misappropriation of paper clips. But there was nothing else, and no new reports from or about the elusive wife. So far Anne still seemed to be cornering the market on interviews with Beverly Chalmers.

Anne was humming to herself as she turned pages. She found her horoscope in the next section: *Capricorn. See people, relationships in realistic manner. Pisces individual attempts to deceive. Utilize extrasensory perception to ward off evil people.*

“Euw. That sounds unpleasant.” She tossed the paper aside. “Good thing I don’t believe in this stuff.” She headed to the break room where she could get a cup of coffee and a dose of morning gossip, and maybe even some back-patting from her colleagues.

In front of the break room coffeepot, Anne ran into Marnie Caple herself. Standing next to Marnie and her sleek on-air persona, Anne felt dowdy and wilted, even in her designer suit. Today Marnie was absolutely electric in a hot pink jacket and matching short skirt. The colors looked plastic and unreal in natural lighting, but showed up well on TV. Marnie’s hair was perfectly set in a chic halo of waves and swirls. As soft as it looked, Anne knew it was shellacked firmly in place. A chisel couldn’t alter its shape.

“Guess what?” Marnie beamed, capped teeth flashing. “Beverly Chalmers refuses to talk about the affair.”

“Excuse me?”

“She refuses to talk about the affair. She said she’ll walk off the set if it’s mentioned.”

“Where did this come from?”

“Martin just told me.”

“Oh, for crying out loud.”

“For crying out loud, what?” It was Wayne, the college intern, walking in with two mugs in hand. Anne recognized one as Martin’s; at one time, she was the one filling it. Interns didn’t need to wear a shirt and tie, but Wayne made an effort to dress neatly in case he ever got to go out with a crew for an interview. With his dark-haired good looks, Anne wagered he’d be on camera shortly after he graduated, if not before.

“Martin says Beverly won’t talk about the affair,” Marnie said with glee. Oh, put a sock in it, Anne thought. But Marnie continued, “I figured it was just a matter of time before she went on a goodwill tour to clean up the good name of Chalmers.”

“Yeah,” agreed Wayne. “By tomorrow she’ll be everywhere.”

“That can’t be true,” Anne protested. “If she’s planning a media blitz, why didn’t she start with a press conference?”

“She wants that velvet Caple touch,” Wayne said with a grin, winning a flashing white smile from the electric-pink anchor. Wayne basked in the attention. “So what are you going to do, Marnie?” he asked, “You going to let her off the hook?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Marnie said lightly, “You never know what comes out of these interviews.”

Had it been too easy? Anne wanted to believe it was her smooth-talking message or maybe even the studio’s reputation that had helped convince Mrs. Chalmers to come

on board. Anne grudgingly realized that Marnie, and even Wayne, might be right: Beverly Chalmers would hit all the media stops. But Anne still had her role.

“Well, we need to have something on standby,” Anne said, getting the situation back under control. “In case, you know, it gets awkward or something.”

“I’ve never seen Marnie get awkward,” Wayne said, and he received another white flash of teeth from Marnie.

“Wayne, you have to plan for the unexpected,” Anne said, realizing her tone sounded a bit prim. She saw Marnie roll her eyes, which bumped her irritation to anger, but as a calm and cool producer, she wouldn’t show it. Something could always go wrong, and it was Anne’s job to use foresight to figure out what it might be and have solutions on hand. Marnie might be picture-perfectly polished, but keeping the show afloat today would require Anne’s quick thinking.

Now if she could only quickly think of something.

“So what do we do?” Wayne asked with a conspiratorial glance at Marnie.

Anne’s mind raced back over the mound of recent media flack she’d heard about the Chalmers family: misappropriation of petty funds, office workers, interviews with other political types, flashes of Bob Chalmers walking from the hospital, the press conference, leaving the legislative building, state dinners, the walk-a-thon...charity! Didn’t Channel 12 run a personality piece on Beverly Chalmers last summer, something about her charity work?

“Doesn’t Beverly do volunteer work, like with AA or mentoring rehab kids or something?”

Wayne looked doubtful. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Look up all the charities she supports. Go into archives and pull any footage of her and her charity work, or just of the charities themselves. Anything.”

“Okay, but...”

Anne was feeling confident now. “And call Brad Billings over at Channel 12. He did that story on charity last summer—he’ll have some good stuff. And he owes me one for getting him some hurricane disaster footage. Get one of their couriers to get it back here.”

“But, the affair...Marnie...” Wayne trailed off.

“You don’t have long to get that footage ready for roll-in,” Anne said firmly. Wayne opened his mouth then closed it. You’re too ready to assume a role bigger than you are, little man, Anne thought. You’ve got to prove yourself one day at a time, just like I did. He left, making no effort to hide his audible “tsk” of disgust. Anne could just imagine his protests to the guys in archives. He’ll spend more time bitching than putting the segment together, she thought.

Marnie was looking at her, sly smile quivering at the corner of her mouth. “Is this what Martin wants?”

“I’m the producer, Marnie.” Anne heard herself say. Oh, that sounded dumb, she thought. “I’m the one who has to make sure the show runs smooth.”

“Ah, yes. Ratings are all about a smoothly run show.” Marnie smiled, all her teeth flashing. “Well, I’d better get to makeup.” Anne imagined pounding those shellacked curls with her coffee mug.

“So, Annie,” a voice boomed behind her. It was Martin. He was nearing sixty, Anne guessed, slightly overweight, with gray filling into his beard and thinning scalp, but

Martin was still a long way from retirement. He was still sharp minded, always knowing who to interview, whatever the story was. Always ready with a contact who was willing to help out. “I hear you have Wayne pulling charity footage.”

“Yeah, I heard Beverly wouldn’t talk about the mistress and baby thing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. Marnie can work it out of her.”

“Do you think so?”

“Sure! How do you think she earns that kind of money? Hot pink suits don’t come free.” He shook his head and chuckled. “That damn thing should come with batteries.”

Anne smiled, but knew better than to comment. Martin was crazy about Marnie; bad-mouthing the studio pet, even by agreeing with Martin’s playful insults, was not smart. “It’s not a bad idea to have the footage on hand, though.”

“You’re right,” Martin agreed. “It could come in handy. So when does the beleaguered Mrs. Chalmers get here?”

“One thirty.”

Martin nodded. “Good. I’ve got meetings, but I trust you can handle the meet and greet?”

“Got it covered.”

“I knew you did. See you at sound check.”

#

Usually at 1:30, the energy in the studio from the noon show was dying down, but today it was just getting keyed up. Beverly Chalmers and her cavalcade of assistants and secretaries had arrived, right on time. Anne met her in the guests’ dressing room, traditionally decorated in soothing green tones. Anne noticed Mrs. Chalmers was dressed

in a bright royal blue suit, one of the best colors for the TV camera, though Anne was suddenly conscious that she hadn't suggested the color as she normally did to guests. The phone call setting up the appointment was too short.

Mrs. Chalmers stood up to shake hands. Even with her high heels, the frosted tips of Mrs. Chalmers's carefully teased hair barely came up to Anne's chin.

"Mrs. Chalmers, it's an honor to have you today. Anne Deyton." She stuck out her hand.

Mrs. Chalmers took Anne's outstretched hand, gently covering their clasp with her other hand like a blanket. "Hello, Anne," she said, earnestly looking into Anne's face and giving her hand an extra squeeze under the handshake blanket. "It's so nice to meet you in person."

Anne fumbled. She hadn't expected such a warm greeting. She was aware of Mrs. Chalmers eyes intently looking into her own. Though the aging skin was slightly creped, the extra crinkle came from her welcoming smile. The makeup was subtle and unnecessary to showcase the blue-green eyes.

Those eyes took Anne into some intimate place, some place that belonged just to Anne and Mrs. Chalmers. With that look, Mrs. Chalmers was telling her that they were on the same team, she and Anne, regardless of their different places in society.

Anne blushed and tried to regain her sophistication, fighting the urge to give this woman a hug. "Do you need anything before we go on air?" Anne stammered, but it was an empty question. She'd already made sure the room was well-stocked with fruit and cheese trays, bottled water, juice and flowers.

Mrs. Chalmers dropped their clasp and looked around. “No, no thank you. I think we have everything.”

“Good, good. Just let me know if that changes. Marnie will be here in just a moment to meet you. We’re all very excited about having you here today.”

“Well, thank you. I appreciate your interest.” Mrs. Chalmers’s tone took on a business edge. “It is understood that I will not be talking about personal issues today.” It wasn’t a question.

“I heard you had made that request,” Anne replied, matching her tone. They were two women of business, and Anne liked the feeling that they were peers. “I have made arrangements to get some footage of your charity work.”

Mrs. Chalmers relaxed somewhat. “Wonderful. I wish I’d known, I could have provided you with some.”

At first, Anne was disappointed. Wow, exclusive footage provided by Beverly Chalmers herself.

“Oh, that would have been...” But Mrs. Chalmers’s words sank in and Anne’s irritation flared, breaking the intimate connection between them.

“...nice,” Anne finally said, lamely. Maybe if you didn’t pull this last-minute crap we could have used it, she fumed. What did you think you’d be talking about today, your dress at the inaugural ball?

“My husband and I keep a good deal of that footage on hand for interviews like this.”

Her husband. Her husband was State Senator Robert Chalmers—the philandering Bob Chalmers who had knocked up his mistress. Yet, he was a husband—*this* woman’s husband. Sunday dinners and pictures on the mantel and honey-can-I get-you-something.

“The children are involved, too.”

“Really?” Anne said idly.

“Listen to me, I say ‘children.’ I guess a mother always thinks of them as children, no matter how old they are.”

Anne smiled. “Yeah. My mom is the same way.” Mrs. Chalmers was not quite as old as her mom, but there was something about Mrs. Chalmers that brought her mom to mind. Maybe that warm crinkle around the eyes....

“Rosemary tutors physics, and Robbie is a Big Brother,” Mrs. Chalmers was saying, with obvious pride. “They’ve had great success with the kids they’ve worked with. One of Rosemary’s kids was just accepted at the School of Math and Science on a full scholarship.”

Marnie bustled in.

“Mrs. Chalmers! What an honor to meet you! Marnie Caple.” She reached out both her hands. Anne’s carefully planned introduction was no longer necessary.

“Marnie, it’s a pleasure,” Mrs. Chalmers replied. “You’ve done some lovely work.” The two shared a four-handed clasp, though Anne noticed Marnie took care to have her hand on top. Would Anne ever master the two-handed shake? Did she want to? It had its charm, but tough executives needed straightforward firm handshakes, right?

“Mrs. Chalmers was just telling me that her kids are involved in the mentoring program as well,” Anne interjected.

Marnie barely glanced in Anne's direction, keeping her grip on Mrs. Chalmers's hands. "Really? What a family endeavor!" Marnie did have a way of not sounding like she was gushing. "That's Rosemary and Robert Jr., isn't it? Would you mind if we mentioned that? I know how you like to keep your kids out of the spotlight."

"Oh, no, as I was just telling your secretary here, we're very proud of their work."

Secretary?

"I can imagine!" Marnie was saying, flashing a smile at Anne. "Well, Anne, I think Mrs. Chalmers and I will talk for a minute before we head to the set." Marnie had excused Anne from the room.

"Uh, right." But Anne didn't want to leave. She wanted to hear Marnie explain that she, Anne Deyton, was the producer, one of the key players in making sure the show went on the air, the one who coordinated the guests, initiated ideas—that she was important. But it would look awkward to stay any longer, as neither woman was paying any attention to her at all.

"Oh, I was telling Mrs. Chalmers we have a video clip of her volunteer work," Anne said, not wanting to be so easily dismissed.

"Right, right," said Marnie. "I was just down with Wayne," Marnie continued talking to Mrs. Chalmers. "He's our intern who put it together. He did a really great job. I think you'll be pleased."

Wayne had done a good job? *Wayne?* Wasn't it Anne's idea in the first place?

"And Mrs. Chalmers," Marnie continued.

"Beverly," Mrs. Chalmers interrupted.

“Beverly,” Marnie repeated, beaming, “Did I see I shot of you in designer jeans? I wish I had your figure.”

“Oh, go on....” said Mrs. Chalmers, obviously pleased.

“Sound check is in fifteen minutes,” Anne interrupted. After all, her role in this program was just as important. “We’ll see you there?”

“Of course, of course,” Marnie said, beaming at Mrs. Chalmers.

Anne had no choice but to make her exit. “Mrs. Chalmers,” she said as a goodbye, but no one replied back.

Anne headed to Martin’s office. He was on the phone, but he waved her in. She entered and stood behind one of the leather chairs that faced Martin’s desk. “Look, I need to run,” Martin was saying. “We’ve got Chalmers here for an interview. No, the missus. Yeah, our silver-tongued producer managed it.” He gave Anne a wink. “I’ll call you back this afternoon. Righty-ho.” He hung up. “So I see the entourage has arrived.”

“Yeah, Marnie’s talking to her now.”

“Good, good” Martin said distractedly, rummaging for a pen on his strewn desk.

“Martin,” Anne fingered a seam in the leather. “I think we should stay away from the scandal.”

“Why do you say that?” Martin continued his search.

Anne thought of Marnie’s smug smile. “Well, she’d said she’ll walk off the set.”

“She won’t walk off the set.”

“I think she would,” Anne persisted. “How would that look for the studio?”

“She won’t. It’s a bluff. She knows if she walks off the set it looks just as bad as talking about it. She’s not walking off.”

“She’s just asking for a bit of dignity from the media...”

“Nobody gives two craps about her dignity,” Martin interrupted. “Even less about her charity work right now. You should know this, Anne. Aha!” He found his pen and held it up in triumph.

“But Marnie...”

“Marnie knows exactly what to do,” Martin interrupted, tucking the pen into his shirt pocket. “That’s why she has her job and why you have yours. Sound check in five.” He rose out of his chair. “I’d better make sure Marnie gets to the set on time. How the hell can she win the Junior Leaguer’s Woman of the Year Award but not be able to get to the set on time?”

#

The control room was always full of cutting banter, but today it was particularly caustic. In the studio, Marnie and Mrs. Chalmers settled into their chairs on the set while Marnie continued the carefully planned pre-show chitchat. The floor director discreetly attached lavalier microphones to the women’s lapels and ran the wires out of sight. In the studio, Dick, the technical director, was setting up last-minute camera angles. “Stand by, Camera Two.” He pushed his black-rimmed glasses up on his nose. “Camera Three, push in for a close-up on Bev. Whew, not that close. No wonder the Senator went roaming.”

Phil, the audio director, emitted a howl of laughter. With the headphones resting like a collar on his lanky neck and plugged into the audio board, Anne thought he looked like a tethered hound.

“You ain’t kidding, buddy,” Wayne said, entering the control room. “What a bowzer. Oh, here’s the roll-in.” He handed the tapes to Dick.

“You know, they can hear you in the studio,” Anne said, pointing to the soundproof door, which was useless when it was open, like it was now. Through it, Anne could see Marnie and Mrs. Chalmers live in the studio. It seemed surreal juxtaposed to their image preview screen on the control panel in front of her. Marnie and Mrs. Chalmers, engaged in conversation, didn’t seem to notice the remarks. Hopefully, their chat masked the noise in the control room.

“Oh, sorry.” Wayne dutifully closed the door. It shut with a *boom* that Anne felt more than heard, then the quiet click of the latch.

“Stand by in the studio,” Dick was saying. “Thirty seconds. Camera One, check your focus. Marnie looks fuzzy. Good, that’s better. How’re the audio levels?”

“Good,” Phil replied, putting his headphones on his ears. “Set to go.”

“Stand by, One. Stand by, Studio. Roll the music.” Marnie had her own theme music to introduce her interviews, and its bouncy trumpets filled the control room. Dick, Phil and Wayne bobbed their heads in time with the horns in mock appreciation. Wayne flung himself into an enthusiastic air guitar solo. “Freebird!” Dick called as Phil held up his lighter. Every time, it was the same.

Dick returned his attention to the monitors as the music neared its end. “Ready to cue the talent. Three, two, one. Cue Marnie.”

Marnie’s face appeared on the screen with just a hint of a smile. “We’re pleased to have with us today one of the state’s leading women, Mrs. Beverly Chalmers. Mrs. Chalmers, it’s an honor to have you today.”

“Take Two.” The TV image blinked to a wide shot, including both women.

“Thank you for having me.” Mrs. Chalmers said, nodding with a gentle smile.

“Take One.” Shot of Marnie.

“I understand you have done some remarkable work with some very special kids,” Marnie said, looking up from her “notes.” Anne knew Marnie used the index cards in her hand more as a prop than actually as a cue. “Tell us a little more about that.”

“Take Three.”

Mrs. Chalmers’s face flashed on the screen, serene and confident. “Well, we started working with high-risk kids about ten years ago, and after a couple of years, I realized everyone was doing prevention work, but no one was helping the kids that had fallen into hard times. They were left to the jails and juvenile halls. And I wanted to focus some attention there, on those kids that society had, well, given up on.”

“That is truly magnificent,” Marnie beamed. “I think we have some footage of that. Don’t we have a roll-in?” Marnie squinted beyond the cameras.

“Oh, she picked that up from Kathie Lee,” Dick muttered. “Cue the roll-in.”

“This segment is thirty seconds long.”

“Roger that.” Dick readied the timer.

The screen dissolved from the studio to Wayne’s roll-in: images of happy kids swinging from monkey bars, painting, and playing softball filled the screen. They looked to be at some sort of woodsy summer camp. There was Mrs. Chalmers, looking awkward in blue jeans and a CARING FOR KIDS T-shirt. Wayne had added a bed of schmaltzy music, violins and French horns, under the images.

“You play a mean heartstring, kid,” Dick said to Wayne.

“Ah, shucks,” Wayne replied, grinning.

Mrs. Chalmers continued to talk in the studio, off camera, narrating the images she saw on the studio monitor.

“Most of these kids are coming from underprivileged backgrounds. A lack of opportunity leads to a lack of future. What we hope to do is give these kids more chances to have a wider range of opportunity.”

“Stand by to come back to the studio,” Dick said. “Camera Three, tighten up on ol’ Bev. That’s right. Good. Hold that shot. Cue Marnie. Take One.”

Marnie’s face filled the screen. “What wonderful work, Mrs. Chalmers. That’s really some amazing stuff you’re doing over there.” She glanced down at her notes. “But has it been difficult, in light of recent events, to keep up with your work with Caring for Kids?”

“Take Three.”

And there it was, for a brief moment. Lips pressed so tightly together that no lip color showed.

“Bingo! The money shot!” Dick crowed. “That’s right, baby! Show off those charm school lessons!”

“Whoo-hooo!” Wayne hooted. “She almost lost it! She didn’t, but almost!” Wayne and Phil high-fived, careful to keep it behind the monitors.

But the interview must go on. “Why, no,” Mrs. Chalmers answered, trying to redirect the answer. “Priscilla, whom you saw in the clip, has really come a long way. I heard that she’s just made honor roll for the first time ever.”

Marnie’s smile showed no teeth. She was going back in.

Martin grinned at Anne and pointed up at the screen. “That’s why we get the ratings. She’s ruthless but tactful. The esteemed Mrs. Chalmers may be mad, but she’s still there.”

Anne’s stomach seemed to sink with every passing moment. Marnie kept jabbing, Mrs. Chalmers dodging. At one point, Marnie asked, “How has it been for you with all recent the press about your husband?”

Mrs. Chalmers paused, sighed, and then said, “It’s been very difficult for the family lately. But right now, I think the most important thing the children and I can do is support Bob. He has a responsibility to his family and to his office, and we want to help him uphold that, whatever rumors arise.” It sounded vaguely familiar: Bob Chalmers’s speech from his press conference.

Martin gave her a look and nodded at the screen. “See? She’s out on a goodwill tour. She’s doing cleanup work. It’s a campaign year and she’s got to make Bob look good. Got to get those ‘family values’ votes.”

Marnie’s face flashed up on the screen, looking very tender and concerned. “I’m sure this has been very difficult on the family. How is it affecting you, as a wife? As a mother?”

Anne couldn’t watch anymore. “I need to go to go check on a phone call,” she said to Martin, who barely noticed. She left the control room. She wasn’t needed. Martin, Marnie, the crew—hell, even that damned intern Wayne—had everything well under control.

She stopped by the break room for a fresh cup of coffee, no bustle or gossip in there now. Everyone was either in the studio or watching the monitors. Anne made her

way to her office and closed the door. Though the studio frowned on closed doors, she just needed a moment to collect her thoughts. Political types, Anne thought, swirling creamer into her coffee with a plastic stir stick. Beverly Chalmers was a wife and mother. But first and foremost, she was the wife of a state senator, and her role was to promote the senator's interests. Anne's shining moment of getting Beverly Chalmers to the studio would be forgotten after newspapers and other stations covered every aspect of Beverly Chalmers's suffering.

But they had gotten her first. And, as Martin said, it was because Anne's smooth talking. Well, that and dropping the name of Marnie Caple. Marnie needed a producer to make her persona seem real, but Anne apparently could use Marnie's name to get other interviews. Like...the mistress. So far she'd avoided the media, and none of the outlets had much on her except a few fuzzy pictures, jostled shots and what looked like her high school yearbook photo. Didn't Martin always say that Anne had a silver tongue when it came to getting people to agree to interviews? If she hurried, she could have her research done before Marnie could say, "Thanks for being on the show." She thought she would suggest something different for this interview, maybe an in-home setting, with cutaway shots of the bassinet and some mother-new baby footage.

Anne was flipping through her Rolodex when there was a tap on the door and Martin stuck his head in. "Ah, you missed some of the best stuff," he said, then noticed she was on the phone.

Anne covered the mouthpiece. "Mistress," she mouthed, briefly pointing the phone at him and bringing it back to her ear. "Yes, I'll hold," she said into the phone,

then began half-singing, half-humming, “All of me...why not take all of me...” She shooed Martin from her office.

Martin raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Good job,” he said, and left her to it.

Nudge

The blindfolded contestants lay on their backs on the white shag carpet, each clutching a rolled-up section of newspaper. The guests encircled them, creating an arena in the living room. The silence was broken by a nervous titter, then another.

From where Carla stood watching, the spectacle looked like a huge clock laid out on the floor rimmed by the watching crowd. The two men's heads met at the center, their bodies marking the time. Brad's stubby legs pointed to Carla; Alex's long body stretched away, pointing to the opposite side of the room. Five minutes after six, Carla thought.

Alex, the current champion, spoke first. "Are you there, Moriarty?" he crooned. Carla noted that his voice sounded playful, but tension held his body rigid and ready.

"Yep," Brad grunted, and *whap!* Brad punched his newspaper towards Alex's voice—and missed. His blow landed on the plush carpet, six inches from Alex's head. The crowd roared.

Twenty or so people—more professional than young, Carla noted—had gathered by invitation at Alex and Holly's downtown loft. They'd had a few drinks and some light and

healthy hors d'oeuvres—too healthy for Carla's taste. Then another guest, Mitch, pulled a small paperback book of cocktail party games from the 1920's out of the pocket of his baggy corduroy pants. Pages were flipped, games laughed over, and one decided on. This one.

After too many drinks tempered only by celery sticks and broccoli florets, the matching Scandinavian sofa, side chairs and end tables had been roughly shoved to the far edges of the living area with clumsy enthusiasm. The plush carpet remained pocked, revealing where the displaced furniture rightly belonged.

"Do you think people really ever played this?" Carla asked Holly, Alex's wife, who leaned on a nearby table.

Holly shook her head with a half smile, but she didn't take her eyes from the game—transfixed, it seemed, by the sight of her husband in combat.

And now it was Brad's turn to call, his tone sing-songy. "Are you thee-eee-eere, Moriarty?" he taunted. He jerked his head left, a ploy to dodge Alex's attack.

But Alex heard the shifting movement and aimed for the sound. "YES!" he yelled triumphantly. *Whap!* His newspaper connected with Brad's chin.

The crowd broke into cheers and laughter. Brad and Alex jumped to their feet and pulled off their blindfolds. Brad held out his hand to Alex, who took it with a firm shake.

"A worthy adversary," Brad declared to the crowd, rubbing newsprint off his chin with good-natured rue. "And still the reigning champ."

"So who's next?" Alex challenged the crowd.

Voices clamored to volunteer each other. "Take Roberts...he needs to be taken down a peg." "Ah, he couldn't hit the side of a barn." "Why don't you go, Jack?"

“All right, I’ll go,” called someone from across the room. Was his name Jack? Yes, Jack-in-Investments, or something like that. Jack’s tone sound more obliging than enthusiastic, but he grinned broadly as he stepped into the ring.

Mitch Corduroy-pants stepped up to tie Jack’s blindfold. An earlier contestant wearing a faded Elvis Costello t-shirt tied Alex’s. Mitch and the t-shirt guy guided Alex and Jack to the floor, making sure their heads were about six inches apart and their feet pointed in opposite directions. According to the clock they made, it was six o’clock straight up. Mitch and the t-shirt guy stepped back into the circle of watchers.

“So who goes first?” Jack called. *Whap!* Alex attacked in reply.

“Oh, that’s sporting,” a voice sneered behind Carla. Carla’s husband Rob had returned with three gin and tonics held triangled in his hands. “What a dick,” Rob continued. “That guy wasn’t even ready!”

Carla remembered a time when she would have been horrified by Rob’s rudeness. These days it seemed inevitable.

“Rob, may I introduce you to that dick’s *wife*, Holly?” she said, taking the drink precariously held by Rob’s fingertips at the front of the triangle.

Rob turned to Holly with mock surprise. “His *wife*? Then you’ll be needing this more than I.” He handed her a tinkling glass, inclining his body into a slight bow.

Holly didn’t seem to mind the slander of her husband. In fact, she broke her intense gaze on the match, turning her bright blue eyes happily towards Rob. She accepted the proffered drink. “Why, thank you, Rob,” she trilled. Her smile showed all her teeth, including, Carla noticed, two fillings on her back molars.

“My pleasure,” Rob replied warmly.

Carla took a sip. “Whoo, strong.”

Holly took a sip as well. “Mmmm!” she murmured, winking at Rob over the rim of her glass. “Just the way I like it.” Rob beamed.

“Aren’t you going to take a turn?” Rob asked Holly, nodding towards the match.

“What, wearing this?” Holly plucked at the short skirt of her dress.

Rob eyed the hemline with appreciation. “That would be a match worth watching.”

“That would make it a different sort of party, don’t you think?” Holly laughed, touching Rob’s arm, and Rob laughed, too.

Carla’s stomach twisted. She turned away to watch Jack and Alex, whose squirming battle continued on the floor. Carla guessed she and Holly were about the same age, mid-thirties or so, but Holly still had the figure of a college cheerleader. Carla reminded herself that Holly *would* have a great body—after all, she was an aerobics instructor. Her daily challenges revolved around spandex. She wasn’t an account executive, responsible for client relations, relying on her quick wits to advance her company as well as her own position within it. Carla’s feeling of superiority lasted until she looked down at her skirt and scoop-necked sweater. At home, this outfit had seemed daring and sexy compared to her work suits. But next to Holly’s chic and slinky drape and strappy heels, Carla now felt dowdy. Dumpy. Dull.

What kind of woman has time to get a French manicure for her feet, anyway, Carla fumed.

“Are you there, Moriarty?” Jack called.

“Sure am!” Alex yelled, dodging Jack’s blow. “How about you? You there?”

“Yes, I am!” Jack yelled, and he dodged—but not enough. Alex tagged Jack on the ear. The crowd cheered.

“Too bad this isn’t an Olympic event, Alex,” Carla called. “You’re pretty good!”

Alex pulled off his blindfold and gave Carla a grin and a small wink. Carla’s clenched stomach loosened a bit.

“So who’s next?” Alex called to the surrounding crowd. “Come on, just one more time. Otherwise I retire undefeated,” he teased.

“Arrogant bastard,” Rob muttered.

“It’s just a *game*, Rob,” Carla said, her smile fading. Typical. Finally a chance to go someplace and have fun, and Rob gets drunk and hostile. And Holly was just standing there, ignoring him. Or maybe she just doesn’t know that “arrogant” is generally considered an insult, Carla thought, swallowing a smile.

“Still the reigning champ!” Alex was calling. “No takers?” Alex’s eyes landed on a guy he’d defeated earlier in the evening. “Come on, Sammy. You want another go? Win back your dignity?”

Sam laughed. “No, you’ve humiliated me in front of my wife enough for tonight.” The blonde woman next to Sam put her arm around him with a laugh and gave him a warm peck on the cheek. How sweet, Carla thought grimly. Even as a defeated contestant, Sam is still man enough for his wife.

“All right, but you guys were an easy crowd to conquer.” Alex put down his rolled-up newspaper.

“Not so fast!” Rob’s shout startled Carla. “I’ll take you on.”

“Oh, Rob,” Carla said, mortified. “Don’t.”

“Good for you, Rob,” Holly giggled. “A big strong guy like you should be able to knock him off his high horse!”

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” Rob muttered, setting his drink on the table. A little sloshed out of the glass. “Cocky son of a bitch.”

“Rob, it’s a *game*,” Carla hissed. He was too drunk, too aggressive. But Rob didn’t answer, just took off his tie and tossed it next to his drink. Carla picked it up before the gin stained the silk.

Alex took a swig from his beer and reached his hand out to Rob. “Sir, it will be a pleasure to humiliate you,” he said, grinning.

“Ooooo!” Sam taunted, rubbing his hands with glee. “Them’s fightin’ words!”

Rob ignored the hand Alex offered. “So what-all do I have to do to kick your ass?”

Alex shrugged off his ignored hand. “Just tap me with the newspaper. That’s all. Just one little tap and you win.” He grinned. “Just gotta get me before I get you.”

“Don’t worry about me, *Champ*.”

Carla rolled her eyes. “I don’t even want to watch this.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t get hurt,” Holly’s eyes shone as she watched the competition.

No, but he’ll make an ass of himself, Carla thought. She and Holly watched as their husbands were blindfolded and guided to the floor. Mitch and t-shirt guy had barely gotten Rob and Alex in position when Rob started.

“Are you there, Morty?” he called. Carla recognized his tone. It was the tone reserved for telemarketers who called at dinnertime or bank tellers who insisted Rob had made an error in his meticulously kept accounts. It was the tone of furious rage dammed behind a thin

wall. One persistent solicitation too many, one contradiction of Rob's bookkeeping, and the dam would burst open with rushing torrents of profanity and insults, slamming shut only when the phone crashed into its cradle.

"Moriarty!" Alex corrected, whapping behind him. He missed. It was Alex's turn to call out, but...

"Are you there, *Marty*?" It was Rob's voice again, louder this time.

"Hey, I thought it was Alex's turn," came a whisper from the crowd.

Alex tried to correct him again. "Moriart—" *WHAM!* Carla could feel the floor shake from the force of Rob's blow. He just missed Alex's ear. "Are you *there*, Marty?" Rob was yelling now. *WHAM!*

"Easy guys, it's just a game," said another voice, maybe Sam's, from the crowd.

"You damn right I am!" Alex retorted. *WHAM!* He attacked with equal force.

Rob had rolled over, barely escaping Alex's blow. "You still there, Marty?" Rob was yelling now. *WHAM.* A miss.

"You better believe it," Alex muttered, taking a swing. *WHAM!* Another miss.

"What, you're *still* here, Marty?" Rob roared. *WHAM!* "I'm *surprised*, Marty!" *WHAM!* "You're not screwing around with someone else's *wife*, Marty?" *WHAM.*

Carla's blood turned icy. Holly threw her a triumphant look. So she'd known, too.

The two men got to their feet with a violent scramble, tearing off their blindfolds. They stood glaring at each other, newspapers clutched in their fists. "You're still here, Marty?" Rob muttered through clenched teeth.

"Damn right," Alex said.

Rob lunged. His shoulder slammed into Alex's chest.

“Oof!” Alex gasped.

Rob had pinned one of Alex’s arms behind his back. Alex used his free fist to pound Rob’s neck and face. Rob tried to block the blows, but gave up to sink his fist into Alex’s stomach.

The crowd finally broke into action. Most cowed away from the violence, men pushing women back from Alex and Rob’s flailing arms and legs. Jack leaped from the crowd and grabbed Rob around the shoulder. Sam was pulling Alex backwards, trying to free him from Rob’s grip, but Alex kept lunging forward, trying to punch Rob again.

Jack’s chin, now visible above Rob’s shoulder, took a misdirected swing from Alex. “Oh!” Jack groaned. His grip on Rob loosened, allowing Rob one more swing. *CRACK*.

It connected squarely on Alex’s jaw.

Jack resumed his grip on Rob’s arm, but the punch seemed to have subdued him. He allowed Jack to pull him back.

“Pity,” Holly said. She moved from her languid pose on the table and walked to the kitchen without looking back. “The party was just getting good.”

Carla felt like she was standing in the eye of a hurricane. The party buzzed around her in shock and surprise. Jack was earnestly beseeching Rob to stay calm, though Rob hadn’t moved since his punch. Carla watched Holly emerge from carrying a kitchen towel filled with ice. She carried it to Alex and held it out to him. Alex looked dumbly at it, and Holly shrugged and lifted it to his bleeding mouth. He covered her hand with his, and they stood close together talking softly.

“What the *hell...?*” came a voice clearly above the din.

What the hell, indeed, Carla thought, and realized there was still a tinkling drink in her hand. She drank it in three pulls, leaving nothing but ice and a mangled wedge of lime. She carefully set the glass beside a coaster on the teakwood table, certain it would stain the wood before it was discovered, then went in search of their coats.

#

The car ride was silent.

Usually Carla couldn't stand the silence and flicked the radio on, restlessly searching the stations for songs she liked. Rob used to joke that "Scan" was her favorite radio station. Now she preferred not to make any moves that called attention to her presence. She pressed herself against the passenger door, resting her forehead on the window. Occasional streetlights flickered the blackness outside. The drone of the tires on pavement was broken by Rob's soft grunt as he tested his jaw and the occasional *whump-whump* as the tires hit rough patches on the road.

Carla hoped Rob was sober enough to drive, but thought now wasn't exactly the time to mention her concerns.

She felt the car slow down. "Great. Now what?" Carla heard Rob say under his breath. She glanced in his direction, and his face glowed in a blaze of red.

Carla recoiled before realizing it was only the brake lights of the minivan in front of them. The red light revealed Rob's rigid features. His entire body seemed coiled and waiting, as if one sound from her would alert him to where she was and where to attack, regardless of the fact that he was not clutching a rolled-up newspaper. The brake lights blinked off, and the car was dark again. They rolled forward.

Carla hunched herself further into the passenger side door by feigning interest in whatever problem lay ahead, craning her neck as if it would help her see around the minivan in front of them. She put one hand on the door handle, ready to spring from the car if needed. She tried to remember what she'd heard about jumping from moving cars...relax, tuck and roll. She was so prepared for the action that she was a little disappointed when traffic slowed to a standstill.

Roll. Stop. Roll.

Ready for something to relieve the heavy silence in the car, Carla began to get genuinely curious about the accident ahead. The car crept onward.

Finally they'd crawled to the source of the traffic jam.

A lump sprawled in the opposite lane, large enough that cars had to pull onto the shoulder of the road to drive around it. By the light of the headlights, Carla could see golden fur, a black muzzle, sprawling legs, a head lying at an awkward angle on the asphalt.

Slightly sickened, Carla turned away to watch their own lane of traffic. She never understood why an accident in one lane caused delays for both directions in traffic. After all, their lane was completely clear.

But their lane wasn't clear.

Something was moving between the slow-moving cars ahead of them. From the headlights, Carla could see it was another dog. She could make out the same golden fur, but the blackness had settled on his ears rather than his muzzle. This dog was frantically sniffing the ground, oblivious to the oncoming cars. He crossed over their lane towards the motionless body. He circled it, sniffing, nudging it with his muzzle, then stood back as if waiting for a response. Another sniff, another nudge, then he walked back into Rob and

Carla's lane of traffic, halting the slow movement of cars. He stopped and turned to look back, black ears alert, as if checking to see if he'd been followed. He turned and sniffed his way back to the body. Nudge. He sat down next to the body, looking blankly ahead. He turned to look down at the body, gave it another nudge, then stood and walked right in front of Rob and Carla's car. Rob slammed on the brakes, barely missing him.

Rob didn't blow the horn.

The dog didn't seem to notice them at all. He merely turned to look over his shoulder, and then made another trip back to the motionless body.

"Oh."

Carla was surprised the sound had come from her. She closed her eyes and didn't open them again, even after she felt the car slowly pick up speed.

Barely Audible

Robin curled her toes. The shadows were creeping in and had almost touched them. As long as the shadows didn't touch her, she wouldn't have to admit that she'd been sitting in the same spot for a long time. Just that one simple movement, almost an involuntary spasm, gave her reprieve for another fifteen minutes or so.

Another fifteen minutes of sitting very, very still. Almost not moving. Even her breathing was minimal. She hadn't felt like breathing. Or thinking. Or anything.

She was inanimate, just like any piece of furniture in the living room, listening to the house sounds. Hearing the refrigerator turn on and off. Hearing the ice drop. Listening to the wind blow through the screens. Listening to the strange whispering conversations between the rugs and the floors. Listening to the sounds of an apartment that was empty.

A shadow touched her curled toes. She lifted her head and sighed.

Empty. The apartment had never sounded so empty.

Not even the sound of a ringing telephone broke the silence. Well, it wasn't exactly the phone's fault. It huddled in the corner where it had landed earlier, next to the toppled lamp, which shielded the flowers that had spilled out of the vase that had fallen when it was hit by a flying wine glass that was launched when Robin brandished a fireplace poker and spun around and around, listening to the crashing and smashing that was unable to drown out the one sound she didn't want to hear.

It had been a very bad day.

#

The day had begun when the clock-radio, draped by a blue silk camisole, exploded with music and chattering. The time glowed through the silk: 7:00 a.m.

The clock-radio on the bedside table wasn't the only thing in the room decorated in tossed-off apparel. Clothes dripped from doors and doorknobs and snuggled into corners. Towels dangled from the dresser and jeans slouched in the chair. A mound piled three-feet above its surroundings differentiated the bed from the floor. Robin's arm emerged from the heap on the bed and, after snaking across the comforter, twisted sheets, and discarded clothes, fumbled through the camisole until it found the button that would kill the noise.

The day had been put on snooze.

But it would not last. The telephone clamored for attention, and Robin finally pried her eyes open. There was no chance of her roommate Cathy answering it. They'd gotten separate

lines a few months ago, when Robin had missed the final payment date by one lousy day and their service had been cut off.

Another insistent ring. Robin considered answering it before the machine picked up, but that would require leaping from the bed and frantically tossing clothes around to find the receiver.

Not worth it this morning.

What a headache! Robin reached for her head. She wouldn't have been surprised if she found the head of an axe buried there, but she felt nothing but a pulse. A throbbing, banging, *loud* pulse.

“Hi, this is Robin,” she heard her own voice coming from the answering machine. “I can't get your call right now. Leave your name, number, and where the drink specials are tonight. I'll meet you there. *Beep.*”

Robin squinted at the clock. The red numbers accused 9:17. She groaned. Late, again. With effort, Robin pulled herself into a sitting position. Her bra was unhooked, but still dangled from her shoulders—the loose cups attempting to support her clavicles. “How sexy,” she muttered, pulling it off.

“Robin, this is your dad,” her answering machine was saying as the bra landed on top of it. Robin headed to the shower. “I just talked with the doctor about your mom. Give me a call when you get a....”

The rest of his message was drowned out by the opening torrent of the shower. Robin rested her forehead against the cool white tile of her shower wall, letting the water hit the back of her neck. Hot, hot, hot water beating into her skin. Robin leaned her head back and opened her

mouth, hoping the spray, even of hot water, could help rehydrate her deteriorated body. What time had she gotten home? More importantly, had she driven herself? It would really be a bitch right now if she had gotten responsible last night and taken a cab, leaving her car at some bar downtown.

Maybe John had driven her. Since they started dating nearly two years ago, he'd been sure to drive Robin home, even if it meant leaving her car someplace and picking it up the next morning. He would joke that it was a good excuse to sleep over. But John hadn't slept over last night.

Robin turned off the shower and fumbled for a towel. Walking towards her closet, she peeked out the window into the parking lot. There was her car, although at an acute angle to the neat parallel lines. So, John must not have driven her home. Robin tried to think back over the course of the evening, recall when he might have slipped away.

There had been a big group at the restaurant—co-workers, a few friends, and some new faces. John had joined them for dinner, Robin remembered, and seemed to have a good time. Afterwards, they'd all gone to some sports bar, but after a few drinks, Robin's friend Steven had demanded "Gay Time" and loudly insisted on going someplace where he could scout out cute boys. Half laughing, half worried that Steven would be pummeled by the jocks at the bar, Robin and her new best friends from dinner (what were their names?) had pushed Steven out the door and headed for the gay club a few blocks away. But John always balked at going to dance clubs. Why hadn't he last night? Had he already left?

Robin racked her sore head. Yes, he must have left before then. And the angled parking was a sign that she'd managed to escort herself home. Not smart, but obviously no harm done.

Squinting to block out the stabbing sun, she shuffled towards her closet. She found her pink terrycloth robe wadded on the floor under an empty bottle of Gatorade. She pulled the wrinkled terrycloth into her mouth and sucked it, hoping some Gatorade had spilled into it and would now give her refreshing electrolytes. Instead, the cloth soaked up what little moisture was left in her mouth. “Pah!” she spat.

Coffee, Robin thought suddenly. She sniffed the air again. Was that the warm brown smell of fresh coffee? Yes! Robin said a quick thanks for roommates and struggled into the robe.

“You are a saint,” Robin groaned as she shuffled into the bright kitchen. Cathy was looking unbearably fresh and well rested sitting at the kitchen table reading the morning newspaper.

“Hmm,” Cathy replied without looking up.

Not surprisingly, Cathy was wearing a sweater Robin hadn’t seen before, black, with none of the white pills and lint that Robin’s black clothes all seemed to have. Cathy worked retail, which not only meant that she stayed outfitted in the latest fashions, she often didn’t have to go to work until lunchtime. New clothes, sleeping in late—Robin started to think a career change might be good for her.

“Mind if I get a cup of coffee?” Robin asked, already reaching for a mug.

“Go ahead.” Cathy’s eyes were still locked on the paper.

Robin mentally rolled her eyes. It wasn’t like Cathy was enthralled with the world news. Robin knew the only section Cathy read was the Lifestyle section. Advice columns and comics, that’s all. Cathy’s aloof behavior probably meant that she was bent out of shape about something... again. What was it this time? Another dirty dish left in the sink? Or had Robin been

too loud coming in last night? With Cathy, Robin could never tell. Her roommate always seemed testy lately.

“Were we too loud last night?” Robin asked, though she was not exactly sure yet if a “we” had come back to the house for nightcaps.

“Nope.”

Short answers were not a good sign, nor very informative. Robin decided she really didn’t want to deal with Cathy’s issues right now. They could work it out later. For the moment, take the coffee and run.

“Okay, then. Thanks for the coffee.” Robin turned to make her retreat.

“By the way...” Cathy began.

Robin prayed quickly. Please not a by-the-way, anything but a by-the-way. By-the-ways were never good. It was always “By the way, you left a red wine stain on my silk shirt,” or “By the way, the dishes in the sink are yours,” or “By the way, you still owe me for the electric bill.” Why wasn’t it ever, “By the way, you won the lottery”?

“...your rent check bounced.”

So much for the lottery. “Damn. That was supposed to clear. The Visa check was supposed to bounce.”

Cathy shook her head. “Whatever. I need to get that from you, because I can’t cover your half of the rent. I’ve already written the check, and if you don’t get that money to me, a lot of other checks are going to bounce on my account.”

“Oh. Ummm, okay. I’ll get it to you Monday.”

“Can you get me cash today?”

Robin hesitated. “Not really,” she said slowly. “But don’t worry. It’s Friday. Nothing’s going to clear before I get a check to you.”

Cathy looked at her stiffly. “First of all, you owe me the money, so I feel I have the right to ask for it whenever I want. Second of all, I don’t want you to party it all away this weekend, then come back Monday and say you don’t have any money.”

Robin rolled her eyes behind her closed eyelids. She hated the use of “party” as a verb. She hated Cathy’s self-serving attitude only slightly more.

“Gee, I’m sorry,” Robin said. “You see, when all my groceries get used for your little dinner party for eight, for which I did *not* get an invitation, I sometimes forget to budget for rent.” When she talked, Robin could feel the vibrations of her voice in her eye. She put a hand to her forehead to steady it. “And the power and water bills were a little higher this month because you think laundry is the way to your boyfriend’s heart. And, *by the way*, you keep forgetting to clean the lint trap in the dryer so the motor burned out, and that was a two hundred dollar expense I wasn’t going to bring up.” Her eye was pounding out of its socket. “So if you want your rent money right away, I guess I’ll just include a few deductions to make sure it all stays fair.” She picked up her coffee mug. “Is there anything else you want to mention, ‘by the way’?”

Cathy glared at her. “Yes. By the way, I’m moving in with Mark. You might want to fumigate the house before you think about getting another roommate in here. You’re a pig.”

#

Robin couldn’t help but notice that being late had its advantages. The drive to work actually wasn’t so bad. After starting her day with a spat with Cathy, it was nice to have a commute without the daily traffic jam. And, as an added bonus, she didn’t have to worry too

much about heavy traffic when she pulled over onto the side of the road in order to open the door, lean her head out, and vomit. When you're throwing up, she thought between heaves, the last thing you want to worry about is a semi taking off your head along with the open car door.

The breeze from passing cars was cool on her hot face, but she finally pulled herself into the car and tugged the door shut. A quick assessment into the rear-view mirror, a reach into the glove compartment, napkin, dab, done. Oh yeah, and a breath mint. She sucked it gingerly, her stomach threatening to heave again. But after a moment, the nausea passed and she resumed her drive.

She thought about Cathy moving out. No big deal, really. They'd barely spoken for the past few months. Lately Cathy had spent most of her time over at Mark's place. Robin loved the idea of living alone, but needed someone to take care of half the bills. Not John. John was sweet, caring, and had a good job, but Robin wasn't quite ready for the quiet domesticity that shackled-up couples inevitably fell into. Who could she find that wouldn't be around that much? Maybe she could find someone else in a really serious relationship, someone who stayed at a boyfriend or girlfriend's house most of the time. Or maybe even a flight attendant who was away traveling most of the time. Steven had dated a flight attendant once; maybe he could spread the word.

She pulled into the parking lot of Health Communications, Inc., a company that developed marketing materials for different health groups. It was dry work most days, but at least she was working in a field related to her communications major. Not many of her graduating class could say the same thing.

Her nausea had started to subside, but she was still a little queasy and her left eye felt like it was throbbing out of its socket. When would she learn red wine caused the worst hangovers?

She had some TUMS at her desk. Pop a couple of those, some Advil (not Tylenol—studies showed that if you had three or more drinks a day, Tylenol could be bad for your liver) and she should be back in business. She walked through the front door, and the air conditioning blowing on her face felt so good that it took her a moment to notice how quiet the normally bustling office was.

Valerie, the receptionist, was flipping through a catalog at her desk, a sure sign that Robin's boss Dennis wasn't around. Valerie looked up when Robin came in. "Where were you this morning?" she asked. "Dennis is pretty mad."

"Why? What's wrong now?"

"You had that meeting with Marketing this morning."

"Oh, no," Robin groaned. How could she have forgotten? Dennis had picked her to develop a sample reel of the company's work. This project would have been a big step in Robin's responsibilities, most likely leading to a promotion and raise. Not to mention it would be a big change from the boring everyday work. The nausea returned in a way that TUMS couldn't help. "Is Dennis still meeting with them?"

"No, he just called and said he was going to another meeting and would be back after lunch. I tried calling you this morning. I even tried your roommate's number. She seems to be a surly one."

"Yeah, she's got issues," Robin muttered. She felt an odd flutter in addition to the nausea in her stomach. What could she do? Develop an alibi? Come up with an excuse? "Is he around now?"

Valerie looked at her watch. “Probably not. I’d guess he’s in his meeting right now. But he’ll be back in this afternoon. You can catch up with him then.”

Relief. Robin had time to develop an excuse.

#

Dennis had always seemed more of an affable big brother than a boss. He wasn’t above an occasional drink after work, and when a group got together to go bowling or to a show, Dennis was always one of the first ones included.

But at 1:05 that afternoon, Robin heard a rare brusque tone in his voice crackling through her speakerphone. “Miss Ellerbe, may I see you in my office?” *Miss Ellerbe?* Robin cringed.

“Close the door,” was all he said upon her arrival. Robin’s head still felt fuzzy, which made sitting in his office feel like she was watching a television program rather than actually looking across Dennis’s massive desk. He sat hunched over a stack of papers, but Robin didn’t believe he was actually reading anything. When Dennis read copy, he leaned back in his chair, feet kicked up on the corner of his desk, holding the papers out where he could see them. His other hand absently rubbed the back of his head, a pen interlaced in his fingers, ready to snap into writing position at the first sign of a typo. Robin never felt that he was much older than she was. But now, his eyebrows were drawn together, wrinkling a thick fold of skin between them, and Robin felt his stern authority.

Dennis looked up from the papers on his desk. “Do you want to tell me where you were this morning, or should I guess?”

Robin couldn’t bring herself to tell the story of roommate crisis she’d developed as her excuse. Her eyes dropped to the old-fashioned tankard on his desk, filled with pens and markers

rather than ale. A thick pink highlighter, red and green pens, and blue grease pencils stood out from the ballpoints.

“I don’t care what you do in your off hours,” Dennis continued. “That’s your business.” Robin identified different logos jumbled together in the mug—HCI, Hilton, BIC, El Marko, Sharpie. Robin singled out a bright purple casing. Tired of her pens disappearing from her office, she’d bought a pack of brightly colored pens to help her keep track of them. This was probably not the time to ask for it back, she thought.

His tone lightened a little. “I know you’re a good worker. I also know you’re going through a rough time dealing with your mom.”

The pens blurred into a colorful swirl.

“If you need some time off, take it,” Dennis was saying. “But this is a business. I can’t have behavior like this. Not with this project, or any other project for that matter.”

“I’m sorry, Dennis,” she said to the tankard. “I didn’t mean to let you down.”

“We got it covered for today,” Dennis said. “I took Benny to the kickoff meeting this morning.” Robin looked up in surprise. “Yes,” Dennis said, answering her look. “He’ll be handling the Marketing project from here. You’ll go back to editing the newsletter.”

“The newsletter?”

“With Benny heading up the project now, we’re short in publications. After we get underway we may be able to pull you in, but until then you’re covering the newsletter. If you’d been here this morning....”

Robin cleared the lump in her throat. “It’s okay. I understand.” Great. Robin hadn’t done the newsletter in over two years. And what was worse, her first story would probably be to report

Benny was now heading up the Marketing project. And it wasn't her fault. Okay, maybe a little bit, but it's not like she did this all the time....

“How is your mom doing?” Dennis's voice cut through her thoughts.

Mom. What mom? Mom was gone, had been for months now. All that was left was a lingering wraith in a hospital bed who rasped instead of talked and sometimes couldn't even do that—much less with any degree of coherence or cognition. Last time Robin was up there, Mom didn't even know her.

“She's okay. You know. One day at a time.”

“I know it's tough, but you don't have to be a martyr.” Dennis said. “Why don't you take some time and go spend it with your family?”

Sure. Great. That sounded like loads of fun. Go sit in some washed-out hospital room and watch her mother's hands clutching the bed sheets as her body was wracked in coughs. Those withered hands that once could almost cure a feverish child with their cooling touch, hands that could cut row after row of hand-holding paper dolls or unwrap colorful Easter eggs in one long, flaking strip.

Robin pressed her lips together and nodded. “Maybe. We'll see.”

“At any rate, go home for today and get some sleep. Unless I get a call that you're on your way to spend some time with your family, I want your ass in here Monday morning at eight a.m. sharp. No red eyes, no stale booze smell. Got it?”

She nodded again and stood up from her chair. Dennis stood and walked around his desk, draping an arm around her shoulder. Her eyes were suddenly moist. She blinked rapidly.

Dennis's voice was kind. "I mean it. Take some time off if you need to. Come talk to me if you need to. Just...just get control of yourself." He guided her out into the hall and shut the door behind her.

Benny *would* be passing by at that moment. He paused, taking in her appearance. "Hope you're feeling better, Robin," he said with a smirk.

Robin swore, using every profanity that came to mind. She cursed the smug sycophant, *and* his mother, with every possible vile invasion, evisceration and eternal damnation possible.

"Yeah. Thanks," she muttered.

#

Robin crawled out of her clothes while making her way over the heaps of laundry and shoes to the mound that was her bed. The answering machine flashed insistently, its glow strobing up the adjacent wall. Pulling the blankets over her head, she curled into a ball, clutching a pillow to her stomach. This is where she'd been just a few hours ago. Why had she even gotten up in the first place? Maybe she could talk John into bringing some Chinese over after work tonight. Chances were good that Cathy would not come home; she'd probably go to Mark's and return only when Robin wasn't around, sneaking her things out like some chicken-shit thief. Who cared? Robin and John could have the house to themselves. They hadn't had much alone time lately. Maybe get a movie. She reached over the heaps of tissues and coffee cups to find the phone. His brisk business voice answered.

"John Lynch."

"Hey, stranger."

There was a pause before John replied, "Hey."

“It’s Robin.”

“Yeah. Hey there. What’s up?”

“Dennis sent me home on sick leave. You sound busy.”

“A little.”

“Oh.” He must have someone in his office, Robin thought. John was rarely too busy to talk. “I was just...just calling to see if you wanted to pick up some Chinese and come by later.”

“Um. Yeah, I guess. I’ll call you.”

“No need, it sounds like you’re...busy,” Robin said. “Just come by after work.”

“Um, okay. I’ll see you then.”

Pause. “Okay then. I’ll see you in a bit. Love you.”

“Okay,” John said. “See you.” There was a pause, and the line was cut.

See you? She placed the receiver back into the cradle, wondering at the conversation. Granted, John *had* sounded distracted. She finally shook it off. He was probably just busy or someone was in his office. No big deal; don’t overanalyze everything.

Ugh. Her head. Her stomach. She had a few hours before John would arrive. She drifted off to sleep.

#

“Robin, we need to talk.”

What now? Jesus Christ Almighty, for all the days she would have really enjoyed opening up for a heart-to-heart, why did it have to be today? The one day it would be nice just to sit quietly and watch a movie. Couldn’t he have just shown up with food? Was that too much to ask? Her head had finally cleared, and her stomach was ready to start accepting offerings.

According to the clock on the mantel, it was 6:45, over eight hours since her breath-mint breakfast. But instead of food, he came with talk. No garlic chicken, no lo mein.

“I don’t really have anything to say. My guess is that *you* need to talk.” She sat on the sofa, tucking her knees under her chin.

John must have come straight from the office. He was still in his charcoal suit, a bright watercolor tie hanging loosely around his neck. Robin had picked that tie out, tired of John’s subdued ties with their conservative prints.

“Well, it’s kind of hard to say.” John sat on the opposite end of the sofa.

A whole cushion separated them.

John cleared his throat. “I think I’ve met someone else.”

Robin looked past her own toes, locking on a spot on the hardwood floor, a place where the grain came together into an oval black knot.

“What kind of someone?” she heard a voice ask.

“I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to do it this way, not to you....”

“Do *what* this way?”

John sighed. “I’m sorry, Robin...”

“You said that already.”

“Well, what do you expect me to say?”

I don’t know, she thought. What are you trying to accomplish? But she got the feeling she’d rather not know, so she didn’t reply.

“I’ve tried to be supportive,” John began, “But I’ve also watched the way you treat yourself. I can only guess why you got sent home from work today. You went through I don’t know how many bottles of wine at dinner...”

“I believe you had a bit of that wine,” Robin interrupted.

“A glass,” John said.

“As did everyone else.”

“Robin, when I left last night it was after eleven and you were heading out to another bar,” John said. “And this isn’t the first time. How many times have I had to drag you out of bed to get you to work on time? It’s no wonder Cathy is always over at Mark’s. Unless you clean up, Dennis isn’t going to be sending you home just for the afternoon.”

John ordered bourbon and coke when he went to bars. And drank cheap beer when he watched football on Sundays.

“I’ve tried to talk with you about it, Robin,” John said. “We’ve had arguments. But nothing changes. I swear, I wasn’t trying to find someone else. But when I did, I realized that it didn’t have to be like this.”

Robin’s focus never left the black knothole on the floor. The beer festivals and wine tastings they’d gone to...they’d been his idea.

John sat for a moment. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

To say? Like what? Like how she stuck it out when he got laid off? That had been no picnic. John didn’t shave or shower for days at a time, speaking in grunts, if he spoke at all. Robin remembered he’d emptied several bottles of his own during that time: wine, gin and God

knows what else. After all those nasty months, still cheering him through interviews, finding job leads, taking him out for dinner when a lead fell through. And now, he'd

found someone else.

“Robin?” he prodded.

Robin wondered if he'd slept with this “someone” yet. She decided he had. He had that squirmy attitude people have when they're trying to be self-righteous but were really just trying to avoid the truth.

Eyes still focused on the knot, she shrugged and shook her head. She didn't want to look at him right now. It would look like John, with close-cut dark hair and dark brown eyes under caterpillar-thick brows. It even sounded like John. But it wasn't John. She didn't want to see this guy.

“If you don't have anything to say...”

You lying, cheating, sanctimonious bastard. Robin shook her head.

“Well. I'd better go.”

She nodded, eyes locked on the knot.

And still he sat. Through her peripheral vision, she could see him staring at the cushion that lay between them. Or was he looking at her? Just leave, Robin thought. If that's what you want, just. Get. Out. She mentally gave him a shove. Quit staring at me. What do you want? My blessing? My forgiveness? You can have a kick in the head. Just leave. Leave leave leave. Go away.

The cushions lurched when he stood, but Robin never lost sight of the knot. She heard his footsteps cross the floor, the door opening, a pause, and then the quiet latching as the door closed. *Click.*

Such a soft sound, but so loud. Oh, to drive out the sound, to somehow replace it with something else. Whenever she had a tune stuck in her head, she could always hum that cheesy song by the Partridge Family, “Come on Get Happy.” But it wasn’t enough this time. She could change melody with melody. She could drown out the sound of her father’s voice carrying bad news by turning on the shower. She could push everything deep, deep, deep inside until it couldn’t touch her. Except that *click*. It sliced through her ear, leaving an opening that let everything in—or did it let everything out?

The sound echoed through her head, replaying itself over and over again. *Click. Click. Click.*

She grabbed the pillow next to her and hurled it, trying to drown out that sound. The pillow fell harmlessly to the floor with a soft *whoomp*.

Click.

“*Damn IT!*” She screamed to the empty house, her voice ringing off the walls, her foot kicking the coffee table in front of her. A picture frame toppled from the table to the floor.

Crash.

Click.

And she was grabbing anything within reach. Cold leftover morning coffee arced from a sailing coffee mug, *spl-spl-splat* into a long puddle on the hardwood floor.

Click.

The mug thudded and rolled, coming to rest with a *gong* at the foot of the radiator.

Click.

CD cases clattered to the floor.

Click.

Tchotchke on the mantel cleared in one sweeping motion. *Smash, crash, tinkle.*

Click.

Hand on the poker and she was spinning and spinning, eyes closed, listening to the crashing and smashing sounds that wouldn't, couldn't, drown out that horrible *click*.

Gradually she heard only the soft whoosh of the poker and the force of wind in her ear. She slowed her twirl and opened her eyes. The room whirled and tilted a couple of times, but righted itself after a couple of blinks.

Click.

And she sank to her knees, pressing her hands to her ears, letting the shadows surround and close in on her.

Click.

Robin opened her eyes. That noise couldn't just be in her head. She got up and picked her way across broken glass, spilled coffee, and overturned CD rack.

Click.

It was louder over by the mantel.

Click. Click. Click.

She picked up a sprawled fashion magazine, subscription cards spilling out. Underneath was the mantel clock, no longer muffled by the magazine's perfumed pages.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The clock had survived its fall from the mantel with only a dent on its frame. Robin picked it up and turned it over. The engraving was still sharp and clear:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.

A small smile pulled at Robin's mouth. Her mother had given her this clock at a lunch celebrating her high school graduation, a prim attempt to remind Robin that she was going to college to study. Robin had teased her mother by singing loudly, "To every thing (turn, turn, turn) there is a season (turn, turn, turn)..." Her father had quickly joined in, exaggerating his voice into a deep bass for the "turn, turn, turn" parts. Even her mom had begun singing with them. Robin quickly dropped out, partly because she really didn't know all the words, partly to watch her parents sing together: *A time to la-a-augh, a time to wee-heep.*

She put the clock up on the mantel and began to pick her way across the strewn living room floor. First things first—clean up this mess, and then clean up this mess that was her life.

She'd have to get a new roommate pretty quickly or she'd have financial problems on top of everything else. The best person to call would be Steven; he always knew someone who needed a place. She found the phone huddled in the corner where it had been tossed, ripped from its socket. She reconnected the line and began dialing his number. Maybe they could talk about it over dinner and a beer.

No red wine this time. Too much of a hangover.