

PASSION's TORRENT

an original work of fiction by Larissa Dahroug

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I wrote this book as part of my Annual Lenten Artistic Practice in 2019.

I dedicate this book to the insufferable and those who suffer them.

Torrent

Torrent lived in a mediocre three bedroom condo in an overpriced neighborhood with his younger brother, Kodo. They only had one parking space. So, that meant one of them had to park on the street. Usually, it was Kodo. Torrent worked strange hours and had frequent down-time which meant he regularly arrived home before Kodo. Kodo didn't care. Most nights he slept at his girlfriend, Gina's house anyway. Her bathroom was cleaner, the walls weren't as thin and *she* lived alone. Neither of them cared if her upstairs or downstairs neighbors could hear them. Besides, they usually left the TV turned up to drown out the buzz of the florescent lights her cheap-ass landlord insisted on installing in every room. Gina also had a fully stocked kitchen, so there was that too.

It was a Thursday afternoon. Torrent had been on the road for two weeks and was encouraged to have his first jet-lag free day...and a day off. He prided himself on his nonsense, drama-free, low-maintenance lifestyle, and smirked to himself as he settled down on the couch with his laptop, granola bar, and a protein shake. He planned to hit the gym later and log some time on the elliptical but first he had an itch to scratch. It *was* Thursday and he was dying to see if *she* had updated her page with a new video. He had denied himself looking at her page while on the road and was feeling proud of his self-discipline, but he recognized he felt a little apprehensive. What if he had missed something important? What if she was somehow now totally different and he had missed it?

When Torrent arrived home two days earlier, Kodo was sitting on their living room couch cutting his toenails and watching one of her videos. He slapped his laptop closed quickly, but not quickly enough. Torrent had heard her voice. Kodo looked at him apologetically, almost fearfully.

"You didn't tell me when you were landing. No spoilers. I promise." Kodo liked her videos but he wasn't *into* her. He wasn't hooked on her. Kodo was not Torrent.

Torrent now brushed a toenail clipping from the couch cushion as he shifted his weight and arranged himself. He tore open the granola bar and found it stale. Sniffing it he made a face then tossed it at the basket in the corner of the room. It hit. Nothing but net. The crowd in his mind went wild. Her page was open two tabs back on his browser. He couldn't believe he had kept himself from peeking that whole two weeks even with the tab right there staring at him every morning as he scanned his emails and surfed news. The arrow hovered over the tab on the screen. He hesitated for only a moment, took a slug of the lumpy protein shake and clicked.

How anyone could name their kid Daisy he didn't know, but that was her name; not a stage name, not a character...but her Christian name. Daisy. Daisy! Nothing about this woman invoked this flower for him. She wasn't tall or stringy in build. She didn't have a giant head. Nothing about her had anything to do with a common weed in Torrent's humble opinion. The only congruency he could discern between this heavenly creature and her Christian name was the freshness of her Spirit...and the freshness he presumed of the flower between her thighs he so ardently but unconsciously coveted. To Torrent, Daisy was nothing short of a prize winning rose. Every word that came from her lips was his Gospel. Every movement of her body was his Psalm. Without knowing, she fed him with her smile and healed him with her eyes. When she expressed hurt of any kind he was ready to kill for her. She was his Daisy, *Torrent's* Daisy. And in the two weeks he had denied himself of her online publication she had released three new videos. Three! It was as though God had rewarded him for delaying his gratification. The look Kodo had on his face when Torrent had mentioned her the day he left for his trip had taken him aback. He knew he needed to check himself.

"Dude, you've never met this woman. For all you know she's a dude in a girl suite looking to slip her sausage to some poor nut-sack like you crying-game-style." Kodo said.

"Um...those tits look real to me." was all Torrent replied before closing his bedroom door and turning to look at himself in the mirror.

Torrent was a young man just entering his first full Saturn Return, but something in his auric field told folks his soul was no newbie. No one ever was sure just how old he actually was unless he told them, and usually there was an awkward comment of surprise. While quite comfortable in his skin, looking at his physical self was always confronting. Torrent didn't feel connected to the image in the mirror, though he recognized himself. He *wasn't* crazy after all. Well, he was pretty sure he wasn't crazy... but, if he was going to be honest with himself, this Daisy thing *was* getting a little out of hand. It had to be for Kodo to say something. Looking in the mirror that day he rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, pressed his face close to the mirror so his nose was only an inch or so from the glass. Spitting at the out of focus reflection, he smeared his saliva across the mirror with his right hand as he turned and picked up his jacket and travel case from the bed and headed for the door. Grabbing his keys from a hook on the wall he turned to say something to Kodo before he left but changed his mind and just gave his little brother a half-hearted salute instead. Kodo started to say something but Torrent didn't stick around to listen. He closed the door behind him and headed for his car. "That's it." he thought to himself. "If I can go for the entire trip without looking at her page I'll know I'm not crazy." His cousin, Sandra, had a scary experience with a stalker a few years back and it had effected their whole family, so he was sensitive. He knew he wasn't *that* bad, but you could never be too careful in these matters and no one wanted to be *that* guy.

Sitting on the couch and staring at the video thumbnails of her face in an assortment of odd and out of context expressions he was struck by how silly it all seemed. He only watched her videos. She's the one who published them for anyone to see. He didn't know where she lived or anything like that, and it's not like she was even very pretty. Then the butterflies in his stomach started to flap their wings and he quickly corrected himself. No, she wasn't pretty AT ALL. Torrent's Daisy was BEAUTIFUL. It was hard to say right off the bat what was so compelling about this woman and her videos. She wasn't a superstar by any stretch of the imagination. She was short and a little plump. Her lips were slightly crooked and the lines in her forehead reminded him of his Aunt Bunny. She looked nothing like the girls he dated; tall leggy gym rats with Botox faces

(for their migraines, of course!). Daisy's channel only had fifteen subscribers and he and Kodo were two of them. She didn't use fancy tricks. It was obvious she had little to no computer technical skills. The videos were just unscripted ramblings about her life, her Art, her family, her pets, her hobbies, her health, and most disconcertingly to Torrent, her husband Darren. Daisy referred to her and Darren as The Double D. In a couple videos Darren was there and whenever Torrent saw him he wanted to rip Darren's throat open with his bare hands. He knew this wasn't quite rational, but his mother had assured him it was a natural human emotion.

One night, Torrent's mother had watched a number of Daisy's videos after her son had mentioned her for the third time over their monthly dinner-date. She saw it immediately. She got it. It was no surprise to her that her son was enamored. In a world of plastic, smoke, and mirrors, Daisy was a real person. She wasn't trying to get clicks or likes or be someone she wasn't. She wasn't beholden to sponsors, shareholders, or fans. She didn't feign enthusiasm for trendy ideas or fads. Daisy was just being Daisy. She said what she meant and didn't care what others might think or how many views her videos received. Betty thought Daisy was brave and a lot like Betty when she had been that age. Betty was also pretty sure her son wasn't aware of something significant about Daisy and it made her laugh to herself. Betty was *pretty* sure Daisy was a good decade older than Torrent. She looked good for her age...but Betty knew it would be a surprise to him if and when Torrent found out. He had never encountered another person with that same ageless quality as himself and Betty thought it would be a good learning experience for her son. Later that evening, when they got into bed, Betty affectionately told Torrent's father about what she called "Torrent's crush". Stan was not as amused as Betty.

"I have a feeling about this, Bette." he said. "That boy of ours isn't a boy anymore and the rings of Saturn can have a strange way of changing the course of a person's life. Look at my sister Bunny." He rolled onto his side watching his wife in profile consider the weight of his words.

“What about Bunny?” Betty replied wistfully. “Torrent is nothing like Bunny. And, I only watched a few of the videos, but I don’t think Torrent’s Miss Daisy is either. It’s not fair of you to chastise your son’s emotions. Like you said...he’s not a boy anymore.”

Stan mumbled something Betty didn’t listen to under his breath then reached over the nightstand turning off the last light in the room, he kissed his wife on the cheek and they both fell asleep without issue.

On his couch Torrent was having trouble bringing himself to click on the the first of the three unwatched Daisy videos. He found he had an ache in his heart...and a growing erection. It was a new confusing experience. While Daisy from time to time made a suggestive joke or wore clothes accentuating her proportionately over-sized breasts, her videos were not porn. Even that one video where she danced bare-breasted wasn’t pornographic. It had been Art and her breasts an appropriate choice of costume for the piece. He hadn’t gotten hard watching it, only mesmerized. In fact, this was the first time he had gotten an erection while looking at her page at all, and he was kind of freaked out. He closed the laptop and set it hastily on the coffee table spilling some of the protein shake in his lap. “Fuck!” he spat while setting the sticky glass next to the computer and grabbing at his shorts to keep the funky mess from getting on the couch.

Torrent was no prude. He was quite accustomed to viewing porn from time to time and jerking off. Those girls with their legs spread wide and all their hair removed inviting the viewer with teasing smiles to pretend for a moment about shameful gratification were satisfying like McDonalds. But this was Daisy, for crying out loud. She wasn’t like that. He couldn’t do that to her. As he clod clumsily to his closet for a fresh pair of shorts his penis continued to harden. As he flung the soiled shorts onto the pile spilling out of the hamper he caught sight of his unmade bed and a flash image of Daisy asleep on the pillow next to his stopped him in his tracks. He fell into the rumpled sheets face first. In the last video he had watched before his trip, Daisy had mentioned she needed to pick up another bottle of her perfume. While on the road he had passed a store window and saw a bottle of the fragrance in a display. It had struck him as odd because he had

never until the video even heard of the perfume. The girls he dated wore Victoria Secret spritzes; scents he had come to associate with flimsy panties and acrylic nails. His Mom wore Channel. When he saw the bottle in the window it was like a beacon to him. He walked in the store and a light, delicate scent of rose filled his nostrils. He must have been staring at the bottle directly because a salesgirl wearing too much makeup approached him to inquire coyly if he had a sweetheart who might enjoy smelling like a fresh cut rose. Embarrassed, he stumbled back out the door and down the city street. Now, face down on his pillow the memory of the scent overwhelmed him, permeating his soul. It was like no fantasy he had ever entertained before. There was no lewdness, no dirty innuendo, no sloppy fumbling, no flimsy panties. It was just the scent of the rose and her face, her eyes locked with his, and her laugh. She'd never wear flimsy panties anyway. Torrent was sure Daisy's panties would all be sensible white cotton. He came with a force like nothing he had felt before. Laying back on his bed, his hand covered in warm fresh semen, he looked over at the empty pillow where Daisy's image had appeared to him and began to sob. It was a first.

Walking into the gym Steve at the front desk greeted Torrent warmly. "Back from your travels, Gulliver?" Steve inquired.

"What? Naw...yeah...I mean, how you been?" Torrent stammered.

"Whoa there buddy. You OK? Jet lag still got you?" Steve chided.

"Yeah. That's it." Torrent replied in a distracted manner. He didn't stick around for small talk. He wasn't quite sure what the problem was and he wasn't in the mood to explore it with Steve.

"Have a good workout!" Steve chirped as Torrent disappeared into the locker room.

A couple guys in the locker room nodded in Torrent's direction when he entered. He saw someone was using the locker he liked to use. "Par for the course today." he thought to himself as he settled for the locker next to his usual spot, #011. Staring at the locker

door and spinning his lock he wondered out loud, "Why do they bother putting the 0?". A voice he didn't recognize answered.

"Right? Like, isn't it implied?" Torrent turned, finding a solid looking guy with wide set features and bulging calves and forearms smiling a toothy grin.

"Pfsh. Whatever man." Torrent said as he brushed past him heading for the elliptical machines, towel draped over his shoulder. The guy proceeded to open the locker Torrent preferred to use.

All the elliptical machines were in use and Torrent was getting discouraged. "Shit. Maybe God's trying to tell me something. Maybe I should just go home." he was thinking to himself when the guy from the locker room appeared beside him. His hands were firmly placed on his hips and he was slightly nodding his head up and down while surveying the scene before him and the now visibly distraught Torrent.

"Those dudes are machine hogs." He said to Torrent without looking at him. "I've been waiting for an elliptical for over forty five minutes now. Shit, we all want to get a little cardio in, right?"

Torrent looked at him with annoyance. "To each his own. There's a Zumba class about to start if you're that hard up." he said to his new friend. To his surprise, Torrent's new friend ignored the insulting tone in his voice and answered him like an old buddy.

"Yeah. Right? The bitch teaching that class has a moose knuckle. I think *she's* tucking if you know what I mean." Torrent relaxed a bit and introduced himself.

"I'm Torrent. You been coming to this gym long?" As he extended his hand in greeting the other guy jumped a step back, hands in the air laughing.

"Hey man, I'm not like that. Don't try pickin' *me* up with any smooth lines."

Torrent withdrew his outstretched hand and winced.

"Dude, not my style." The guy just laughed and extended his hand to Torrent to shake.

"Sorry man. I was just joking with ya. They call me Corn. I joined up a couple weeks ago."

Torrent's expression spoke without him speaking. The guy sighed heavily shrugging his shoulders and rolling his eyes.

“Geez. They call me Corn because when I was a kid I was fascinated with corn fields. Used to spend hours walking in my Grandfather’s fields. They started saying I thought I was an ear of corn...so they started *calling* me Corn. What can I say? It stuck. Besides, who are you to make a face? I mean...Torrent?”

Torrent realized the absurdness of the conversation and dropped his attitude.

“Yeah. I know. I don’t know where my folks came up with that one.”

Just then one of the ellipticals opened up. The guy who had been using it turned the machine off and wiped his face with his towel flinging sweat all over the machine’s control panel. Corn headed towards the machine saying over his shoulder, “Rude as fuck couldn’t even be bothered to wipe his stink-ass off the machine. Bet he also waxes his nuts.” Torrent gave a short chortle and headed in the direction of the treadmills.

After a quick shower, walking to his car Torrent saw Corn again. He was leaning up against a red vintage MG with an ivory rag top parked a few spots over from Torrent’s fresh off the lot black Tesla X. Corn was on his phone and gesturing in a very animated way. Torrent laughed to himself thinking Corn looked like a giant clown with a clown car. He had his keys in hand as he approached his car and he could hear some of Corn’s conversation.

“Baby, I told you. I don’t know the woman. I just watch her videos, like you and that guy with the cooking show. That’s it!” Corn was impatiently quiet while listening to whom Torrent presumed was Corn’s girlfriend respond on the other end of the phone. “So what if I left a comment? You comment on Chicken-finger’s videos ALL THE TIME! And besides, you LIKED the perfume didn’t you?! She’s where I learned about it!” Corn responded incredulously. “Well your shit doesn’t smell like roses either, but at least you do now.” With that he hung up the phone and tossed it angrily on the passenger seat of his ride.

Torrent froze. Did he hear that correctly? Was Corn talking about HIS Daisy and HER Tea Rose perfume? It was possible, not probable, but possible. She only had fifteen subscribers and that video only had ten views the last time he watched it and five of

those views were from Torrent. What were the chances this clown-car driving oaf knew about Torrent's Daisy?

Torrent snapped out of his freeze hearing Corn's voice.

"Hey Torrent? Dude? Man? You OK? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Torrent shook his head.

"Yeah, no. I'm fine. I just realized something I forgot."

"Yeah man, I feel ya. I get stuck in my head from time to time too. There's all kinds of forgotten shit up there." He nodded toward the cell phone on his passenger seat.

"Fuckin' women. I can't do anything right. She finds fault with everything. Who knows what goes on in their heads? Right?" Corn was back to laughing. Torrent was still processing the idea that someone other than he and Kodo might know about Daisy.

"Um, yeah. Women."

Corn approached Torrent at his car.

"Dude, nice ride. Must have set you back. These things are no joke. Hey, any chance you'd be down for a drink? I'm not welcome at home right now. But trust me. Give her an hour or two. She'll be callin' me, talkin' all baby talk, wanting to know when I'm gonna come home and give it to her."

Torrent didn't have any set plans. He didn't usually drink during the week but at that moment a drink sounded great. Plus he was curious to find out if Corn knew his Daisy.

"Yeah man. That actually sounds great. Oh, and hey, it's not a big deal but everyone at the gym knows #011 is kinda my locker. I've been out of town for a couple weeks. If it's not a big deal...you see, eleven is kinda my number." Torrent was surprised he said anything about it to Corn. He knew someone else would probably say something to him if it happened again, but for some reason he was feeling a little territorial with this guy.

"Sure man. It's no thing. You know Duke's on 5th? Meet me there." Corn was pretty easy going, but guys packing his kind of muscle bulk didn't need to act mean. The forearms spoke for themselves.

"Yeah. I know the place. See you there in a couple." And with that the two men got in their cars.

Duke's was old school. Leather covered bar stools lined an antique wax-polished solid oak bar behind which was an impressive selection of liquor and beer...but no wine. A hand written sign hung above the cash register. It said, "We do not wine here. If it's wine you seek there's a Catholic church across the street or go home and listen to your wife." The wall opposite the bar was the front of the building. It was comprised of floor to ceiling reinforced tempered glass and a single panel door off to the right, the entire outside of which was covered with steel bars. Above the door a blue neon sign of no significant size said *Duke's*. A heavy velvet stage curtain of an indeterminable color was bundled on the left of the window. When unfurled it covered the entire front including the door...or so the owner, Toothless Gil said. The last time Gil had closed the curtain was during the riots in the 70's. In the bottom right-hand corner of the door a hole with radiating cracks from a stray bullet was taped up. It had been there since the riots. Gil left it as a reminder to everyone of what had happened back then, but the truth was he was one of only four fellas regularly in the bar who were old enough to remember first hand. The wall to the right of the bar was covered in TV screens featuring whatever sports matches were happening, and *sometimes*, a Lifetime movie...if it was a sexy story, or if Gil's sister Maxine was covering the bar for him. The wall to the left of the bar had two dart boards and a juke box. A couple tall bar tables with out chairs were arranged in front of the TVs and a pool table was centered in the room. There were two single occupancy restrooms, one on either side of the bar. Neither said "Men" or "Women" on the door. There was just a big neon sign above the jamb flashing the word "HEAD" with an arrow pointing down at the door. In addition to the standard toilet and sink, both had urinals. Both had condom machines. Both had a full length mirror, tampon machine, and purse hook. The tampons in the machines looked like the original Kotex used to fill them in the 70's. Every now and then Toothless Gil thought it was funny to drop one in a Bloody Mary instead of a stalk of celery. No one but Gil laughed at this joke but he would do it anyway.

Duke had been Gil's father's nickname. Gil opened the bar in '62 with money his father left him when he died. Both the death and the money had been a surprise. No one, not even Gil had known Duke had any money. He had lived his life as if he were nearly destitute. Gil had no idea where the money had come from and he didn't want to know. All he had really known about his father was the man had many secrets and no one, not even the cops, messed with him. Gil was toothless because he was a retired Marine prize fighter. He only bothered to put his teeth in when he needed to eat something or a woman happened to wander in. Usually his teeth rested in a glass of vodka on top of the register. He also was partial to wearing a three piece suit. He had been wearing the same three piece suit as long as Torrent had known him and he was also wearing it in the three photos hanging on the wall with the no-wine-sign from years before Torrent was even old enough to drink. No one knew for sure, but it was rumored that Gil slept on the floor behind the bar.

Torrent hadn't been to Duke's in a little over a year. It had used to be his regular haunt. The last time he was in he had broken his own rule and taken a date to the bar: Kora, with her long almost to the floor hair, sharp wit, and fake tits. He thought she was different than the others. He thought she was special. He thought she was into him. He was very wrong. By the end of the night she was drunk with her skirt around her waist in the restroom with some out of town businessman who had stumbled upon the bar through dumb luck walking down the street. When Torrent had finally gotten the door open Kora's hair was damp on the ends with toilet water and lipstick was smeared all over her face and the out-of-towner's 'head'. Gil yelled at Torrent the way a father would a son, sick of watching him cycle through worthless sluts and cheap flings. Gil told him to come back when he was man enough to date women and not trappy gold-digging girls. Torrent had said something about Gil being able to give him advice on women when Gil's teeth grew back. Gil was still toothless and Torrent wasn't sure if he was a man by Gil's standards yet or not, but currently he didn't have a girlfriend and it *had* been over a year.

There was an empty space right in front of Duke's when he pulled up. Corn's MG was already there too. Torrent gathered himself for a moment trying to imagine Daisy in a place like Duke's. Daisy would *never* go into a restroom with a perfect stranger off the street. Right? He locked his car, set the alarm, took a deep breath and opened the door. The smell of gamey men, money, old leather and whiskey filled his nose. Everything looked the same, even Toothless Gil in his three piece suit. Corn was at the bar chatting it up with Gil. Both men were smiling. When Corn saw Torrent he slapped Gil on the arm saying, "Here's my buddy now!"

Gil looked at Torrent with pleased surprise.

"That ain't *your* buddy, man! That's my boy Torrent."

Torrent smiled with relief.

"Or are you a man now, Tor?" Gil asked affectionately.

"I don't know, Gil. You'll have to tell me, but I'm not seeing anyone right now so..."

Torrent trailed off. Sitting on a stool behind the bar was Kora, her hair cut to her chin. She was rolling pennies, nickels, and dimes into paper tubes. She didn't even look up. Gil laughed uncomfortably.

"You remember Kora, right?"

Torrent nodded.

"Yeah."

Kora looked up at Torrent and Corn across the bar.

"I knew I liked you. You know these folks?" Corn asked Torrent.

Torrent just nodded and addressed his ex.

"Kora."

"Oh. Torrent. How are you? I guess you didn't hear. Gil and I got married a month ago." She extended her hand showing him an obscenely large diamond.

Torrent's head started to fog a bit. He sat down at the bar at a loss for words.

"Um, congratulations, I guess?" He was dumb-founded. Gil was a certified old man, and Kora, well, Kora was three years younger than Torrent. "Whatever." he thought.

Corn was drinking a stout beer and was already half way done with the glass. Torrent thought for a second then ordered an old fashioned.

“Comin’ right up, old boy.” Gil chimed. “And your drinks are on me this time. I owe you. No hard feelings?” Gil said nodding toward Kora who had already gone back to rolling coins.

“No feelings at all.” Torrent replied, and he meant it. As far as he was concerned Gil was more than welcome to the restroom-fucking tramp, but still, he had to admit, she did look good with her hair cut that way. If he didn’t know her already he’d turn to watch her walk down the street.

“Hey Kora.”

“What, Doll?” she replied.

“What’d you do with your hair?” Torrent asked.

“Oh, this?” she asked, softly patting her head. “The day after I saw you last, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She lost her hair in chemo. I had a wig made for her.”

“Oh, I see.” said Torrent, now feeling kind of bad for calling her a restroom-fucking tramp, even if it was only in his own head. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Kora laughed replying, “Don’t be. She’s in remission right now and besides, she’s a real bitch, and I still look good.” Torrent didn’t feel bad anymore. Kora was still a restroom-fucking tramp. Gil slapped him on his arm as he handed him his drink.

“It’s nice to see you. We would have invited you to the wedding but I didn’t have a number for ya and besides, we didn’t do anything special, just the Justice of the Peace and a bottle of Boones Farm. I’m too old for all that church bullshit and Kora doesn’t care.”

Corn finished his beer and ordered another. Gill swung it at him and Corn grabbed Torrent’s arm motioning to the dart boards asking, “You play?”

“Not really, but I’m down.”

Kora grabbed two cases of darts from under the register and tossed them up on the bar without looking up from her coins. Torrent swept them up in one hand and the two men headed to the boards. Torrent hated pool, but was indifferent to darts, and he was really hoping to find out if Corn knew about his Daisy or not.

Unsurprisingly, Corn was killer at darts. He called every shot before hitting the mark. Torrent lost the first three games of Cricket, but then somehow got lucky in game four. "I think you just needed to warm up a bit, dude." Corn seemed a little too gracious a loser and Torrent wondered if he had let him win.

"Yeah. That's probably all it is. I don't really play. I used to play more...before my older brother left for the Service. He played and I liked hanging out with him. Ya know?" Torrent hadn't thought about Sagar in a while. It wasn't his favorite thing to think about and he was good at putting things out of his mind that brought him distress. That, in part, was what was bothering him about this whole Daisy business. He definitely felt distressed about the whole situation but wasn't able to put it out of his mind like he usually could with things. Right now the thought of Sagar was a welcome break from his present state of mind. Corn's interest was piqued.

"What branch?"

"Branch?"

"Yeah...branch...of the military." Corn seemed amused.

"Oh. Yeah. Right. Army. Infantry."

Corn was excited now. "No shit? Where's his deploy?" He pulled his shirt up and out of his creased dark blue 501s to reveal a giant American flag with the silhouette of a tank in the center across his chest. "Two tours in Iraq!" Corn exclaimed proudly smacking his hand over his heart for emphasis.

"So that explains the muscles and general badass-ness." Torrent let slip out of his mouth before thinking better of it. Now he was embarrassed.

"Badass-ness? HA! That's a good one. Hardly. But that's a story for another day. What's your brother's name? Where's he serve?"

Torrent now was sorry he brought it up. He realized this was not a story he felt like rehashing with anyone, particularly Corn.

“Um. Sagar Boldons Sergeant First Class. But you probably didn’t know him. He was supposed to make it to Iraq, but never made it out of Turkey.”

“Fuck, dude. That sucks. Turkey? What the fuck took him out there?” Corn had his hand over his chest now in a sincere gesture of sympathy.

“The Army took him out there.”

“No. How’d he die?”

Torrent shifted his weight from left to right and Corn felt bad.

“That’s alright. You don’t have to tell me. It’s none of my business.” Corn put his arm around Torrent’s shoulder and gave him a quick bro-squeeze and pat on the arm. It was the most physical affection Torrent had from another human being other than his Mom in some time and it caught him off guard. He stepped aside a bit.

“No. No. It’s OK. He was in Turkey waiting to ship to Iraq. He and a couple buddies were at a club one night and a fight broke out. He and his buddies tried to pull some locals off some trans-girl and my brother got stuck with a blade. The guy ran off. They never caught him. Sagar bled out before the EMTs could get to him. The guy cut his jugular.” That was the end of the story, but not the whole story. What Torrent didn’t tell Corn about was the argument he and Sagar had the day before he shipped over seas; the last time the two brothers had spoken. That was the worst part and he was still kind of mad at his big brother. It had been over a girl, of course, Tara Modalta. God, Torrent had been in Love with her. As it turned out, Sagar had been as well. Sagar was dead and Tara ended up a Hooters waitress with four kids by three different guys, none of them a Boldons brother. Corn looked like he might vomit.

“Dude. That’s harsh. Some fag-hater took him out. Not cool.”

Torrent didn’t know what to make of the comment but that was the least of his worries right now. He desperately wanted to change the subject. Between Kora behind the bar and the memory of his big brother in the face of Corn he wanted to run out the door, but that’s not the way a man behaves, particularly when hanging out with a ‘general badass’

like Corn. Torrent decided now was the time to find out if Corn knew anything about his Daisy.

“Yeah. So anyway...”

Just as he was going to bring up Daisy and her videos Corn’s phone rang. It was his lady. Corn looked at his phone and showed the screen to Torrent, a picture of a very large black woman in a mermaid costume on the screen. Her name was flashing with the ring of the phone: Toni. Torrent was shocked. He wasn’t sure how many more surprises he could handle, but at least this one was amusing. Not that there was anything wrong with Loving a large woman. He thought, “Daisy’s a little plump too, right?” Toni just wasn’t the kind of woman Torrent had imagined as Corn’s type and the thought of them both sitting in the MG coupe rekindled his earlier vision of Corn as a clown with a clown car. “Wait. Do I Love Daisy?” Torrent thought to himself almost horrified. Corn broke the spell once again.

“Wha’d I tell ya?!” he laughed and took the call. “Ye— —s?” Corn slurred slowly as he answered the phone and waited for her reply. “Yes, Baby. Of course! Give me an hour or so. I’m in the middle of something right now and can’t get away just yet. I’ll call you when I’m on my way, OK?” Corn was silent for a second then made a series of kissy-noises before saying, “Love you too Big-momma. See you soon. Bye.” Corn turned to Torrent triumphantly.

“See? Big-momma can’t stay mad at Big-poppa for too long. Sooner or later she needs the sugar.” He made an exaggerated hip thrusting motion as he said this. Torrent was very amused.

“Well, I guess not. You gotta take off now?”

“What? No. That would be irresponsible. I need a glass of water and take a piss before I can drive. I had a shot of Jager before you got here. What took you so long, anyway?”

“Oh, I just hit every light. That’s all. Hey...I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“I wasn’t trying to eaves drop but I heard some of your conversation in the parking lot.”

“No biggie. I know I have a big mouth. Not much small about me or my wife.”

Torrent smiled. It was the first time he had smiled all day and it made his face feel strange, like trying to do the splits for the first time and almost pulling a muscle.

“Yeah, so the perfume you were talking about. Was it Tea Rose?”

“Dude! Yeah! How’d you know that? Your Moms wear it or something?”

“No. I just heard of it recently myself. There’s this chick with a vlog...” and before he could finish the sentence Corn cut him off excitedly.

“Daisy and the Double D! Right?!”

Torrent’s heart sunk in his chest. So Corn *did* know about *his* Daisy.

“Yeah. Daisy. She sure is somethin’, don’t ya think?” Torrent asked in a probing way.

“Yeah she is.”

Corn was almost drooling, unconsciously running his tongue over his wide mouth. Even his lips looked like they could bench more than most men. Torrent felt heat rising to his face and washing over his whole body. Looking down he found he had clenched his fists at his sides.

“Dude, that bitch is some dish. I mean, she looks like a run of the mill Girl Scout, but damn. You know *those* girls are the wild ones in the sack. If I didn’t have Big-momma I’d tap that in a heartbeat. A little pudge makes a nice cushion when you pushin’ if ya catch me.”

Oh, Torrent caught him alright and he wanted to pull his obscene tongue out of his face and use it to lick Corn’s asshole, but he caught himself first. All of a sudden Sagar’s voice was in his head.

“Look man, I didn’t know you guys even knew each other...” were the last words Sagar had said to Torrent before Torrent had ripped the phone out of the wall and stormed out of their parent’s house. Betty had tried to stop him from leaving but Stan had told her let him be; that he’d come back when he had collected his thoughts. Stan had been right. He also made Torrent pay for repairing the phone line and hole in the wall. Torrent was snapped out of the memory by Corn, his strong wide hands on either shoulder shaking Torrent slightly.

“Look dude, are you OK or what? What’s your deal? Where’d you go? I haven’t seen a guy space out as much as you since Iraq. Do you know this chick or something? She an

ex like Kora?” Corn was genuinely concerned. Torrent saw this, unclenched his fists and slumped into a squat on the floor.

“Gil! We need a glass of water over here!” Corn gestured frantically at Gil with both arms. Gil came over promptly with a glass of ice cold water and a shot of rye. Torrent took the shot and tossed it back ignoring the glass of water and stood up shaking his head and squinting his eyes closed tight. Gil laughed and turned back towards the bar.

“Well if he ain’t a man yet, he’s about to become one. Looks to me like my old boy Tor has found himself a real woman.” Gil bellowed and smacked Kora on the ass as he poured himself a shot of Apple Pucker. “I propose a toast!” he continued in a mock Master of Ceremonies tone. “To Torrent’s manhood and the discovery of a real woman’s twat!”

Torrent noticed for the first time that Gil had his teeth in his mouth. The small crowd in the bar all turned towards the two young-old-men by the dart boards and raised their glasses. A not as old as the others old-timer-regular whom Torrent recognized but didn’t know his name slapped his hand on a table in proclamation.

“To Torrent’s man-dick and the wonders of a grown woman’s pussy!” he toasted.

Everyone but Torrent and Corn laughed. Torrent threw the shot glass on the floor and it shattered; at which the old-timer yelped, “Mazeltov!”

Torrent’s being filled with an emotion he had no name for as his field of vision began to narrow and he turned to look at the old man. The last thing he heard was Gil’s singsongy voice, “Torrent’s a man!”

Torrent woke to bright lights, blurred vision, and a very dry mouth. He squinted at the harsh light and tried to shield his eyes with his hands but found them bound. He started shaking his arms trying to free his hands from their unknown captors. Two sets of large forceful hands found their way to his shoulders and torso and an unfamiliar voice was telling him to be still, a doctor would be in to see him soon, now that he was awake.

“Wait? What? What is this?” Torrent’s initial panic started to subside as he told himself

this must be a dream and he'd wake up any time now. He tried willing himself to wake up. It didn't work. He was awake.

Torrent looked to his right hand and saw it was secured to the side of a hospital bed with hand cuffs. Looking to his left he found the same. Something was very wrong. His eyes were having trouble focusing. He could see there were two people in the room and someone just outside the slightly ajar door, but he couldn't quite make out features. He squinted his eyes and focused hard in concentration trying to will his pupils to work properly. Slowly the two figures at the foot of the bed came into focus. One was a cop and the other was Corn. "What's going on? What happened?" he finally managed. It wasn't just his sight that was off. Forming words was a challenge right now too. His left ear and jaw were throbbing and he now could tell his left eye was almost swollen shut. "Dude! Torrent! I'm not surprised you don't remember. It was a hell of a show." Corn blurted. The cop stopped him with a slight hand gesture and Corn settled down. The officer informed Torrent that he had attacked the old-timer. Torrent was a young virile man of considerable stature, but it turned out the old-timer, though slightly long in the tooth, was Ira Bronstein, retired IDF and a Krav Maga Master. Torrent never even landed a punch. Ira had taken him down with one graceful move and knocked him unconscious. Kora had called 9-1-1 and Corn had come along for the ride. No one was pressing charges, but they had restrained Torrent in case he had woken up and was still aggressive.

"Are you able to control yourself?" the officer scolded.

"Yeah. Of course." Torrent assured him and the officer released his hands from the cuffs. They clanged against the side rail of the bed.

"Can you tell me what happened?" the officer asked in a cool manner.

Corn started to say something but the cop cut him off.

"Mr. Johns, I got your statement. If you can't be quiet and let Mr. Boldons answer for himself you can step outside and wait with the other Mr. Boldons."

"Is my Dad here? Please tell me my father isn't here."

"Your father isn't here Mr. Boldons. It's your brother."

At the sound of his presence being discussed Kodo half stepped in the room, his right hand still on the door knob on the hallway side of the door. He smiled a forced looking toothy grin and stepped back in the hallway tossing, “already too crowded in there” over his shoulder. Torrent lifted his left hand to his pulsing head and found his hair was damp and slightly crusty around his ear. He winced at the touch.

“Can I have a glass of water please? My mouth is so dry.” Torrent said through teeth clenched in discomfort. Corn reached over and handed him a small plastic cup with a bendy straw. Torrent sipped gently. It also hurt to pucker his lips.

“Thank you.” He hoisted himself up so he was more upright in the bed. Looking down his legs he saw he was dressed in a hospital gown and was missing his underwear.

“Where’s my drawers?” he almost shouted.

“Pardon me? Calm down, sir. Where are your what?”

“My underwear. My drawers! Where are they?”

Corn answered him. “There was a lot of blood. Head injuries tend to bleed a lot. But they said it looked worse than it is.”

Torrent let out a guttural groan and a little person in a regular sized lab jacket pushed through the door. A stethoscope was around his neck and a pen and clip board were in his hands.

“That will be enough for right now...if you two gentlemen wouldn’t mind stepping out of the room for a moment, this man still has doctor/patient privilege.”

Torrent didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The events of the day were starting to flood back and the absurdity of it all was tragically funny to him at the moment. He began to laugh and regretted it immediately as it doubled the ache in his head. Corn and the officer stepped out closing the door behind them careful to leave a small crack they could listen through. The doctor approached the bedside and pulled something out from under the bed. Torrent assumed it was a step of some sort because in a moment the tiny man was eye to eye with the much larger Torrent.

“I’m Doctor Moran.” he said flatly. “I know. It’s probably odd to you. Yes. I’m a midget... but I’m also a doctor and I happen to have a very beautiful regular sized wife. Now... let’s see how we’re doing here.”

Torrent said nothing as the tiny man reached across the bed turning Torrent's face by the chin gingerly so he could see the aching side. Torrent winced.

"Ah the folly of youth!" Doctor Moran sighed as he made a note on the clip board. Then he put the stethoscope in his ears and proceeded to listen to various parts of Torrent's giant looking body. Doctor Moran took the stethoscope from his ears and crossed his arms across his chest.

"So? Are you a regular bar brawler?"

"First time." Torrent answered. He had duked it out with both of his brothers a few times growing up and one time he had to defend himself at a truck stop along the turnpike, but other than that Torrent had always considered himself a lover not a fighter.

"I see." Doctor Moran continued. "Well, nothing is broken, but you have a couple stitches under your ear where we had to reattach a little bit of your ear lobe. Evidently you caught the corner of a table when you went down. You also have a pretty good concussion, and a shiner. You're going to be OK but we need to keep you over night just to be on the safe side and monitor your concussion."

"Why is my mouth so dry?" Torrent rolled his tongue in his mouth and over his lips.

"Well, you had been drinking...and we also gave you oxygen and some pain meds. That can do that sometimes. You can drink as much water as you want." and he handed Torrent the small cup of water once more.

"Oh." Torrent looked at the cup as the doctor handed it to him. In his hand it appeared to be a regular sized cup while in Torrent's hand it looked as though he might crush it.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now if you're ready, I see no reason why you can't answer whatever questions they have for you. You are lucky. You have a very good friend there." Doctor Moran nodded toward Corn who was laughing with Kodo in the hall. The officer was looking through the window at Torrent and Doctor Moran. The doctor motioned for him to come back in. "I'm going to stay to observe the patient if you don't mind, Officer Graham."

"Certainly, doctor. Not a problem."

Torrent looked up at Officer Graham and recognized him from a work event a few months back as one of the officers on detail for the City that day. If Officer Graham recognized Torrent he did not let on.

“So, Mr. Boldons. Can you tell me what happened today?”

“I’m not really sure. Corn and I went to Duke’s for a drink and to throw a few games of darts after the gym. There were some people there I hadn’t seen in a while and some very rude comments were made. I don’t know what came over me. That guy who hit me...what’s his name?” Torrent was having trouble getting his pupils to focus again.

“Ira. Ira Bronstein. Ex-IDF. Krav Maga Master. Did he instigate the altercation?”

“Yeah, I mean, sort-of. It’s been a really strange day.”

Doctor Moran was uneasy. Torrent was starting to sweat in an air conditioned room.

“That’s enough for now.” the good doctor told the officer. “Mr. Boldons needs to relax. His brain is bruised.”

II

Daisy

The mid-morning sun was filtering through a gauzy panel hanging from the slightly rusted cafe rod on Daisy's kitchen window. The sink was still dripping. The sound was driving her mad. It was like that for Daisy sometimes. Her senses were considerably acute and when she was feeling overwhelmed or stressed, for Daisy small things most folks would filter out and ignore became like banging gongs, blinding lights and festering sewage to the average person. She had tightened the fitting on the sink three times already since she woke up and even wrapped half a roll of plumbers tape around the damn thing. The sink was enameled and Daisy could hear the splash of each drop clearly. She finally decided to try to make peace with the sound through meditation. She set the sound of the water as her Drishti. Focusing all of her awareness to the sound as hard as she could, she then withdrew all awareness into her third eye and hara. It worked. It always did. There was sanctified bliss. But, it is not a practical way to spend all of your time all day when there is laundry to be done and a dog to take to the vet. The ONLY way she could be in her house right now was if she was sitting in practice. Nine hundred square feet isn't that big a space and for whatever karmic reason on this occasion it was the sound of this dripping water that her brain was choosing to focus on excessively. Besides, she had found using this technique could be a bit habit forming. There was a price she paid for sitting too long. "You're not a yogini or nun in some monastery on a mountain top. Life has to be a balance." She reminded herself of that a lot.

Balance.

Externalizing her awareness once again, the drip of the water sounded twice as loud as it had before. She was officially ready to scream. She told herself to shower first and then just get Loops to the vet. Loops was chasing his tail in the living room. The only thing he liked to do more than that was hump everything. It was time for Loops to have

his *procedure*. Most people assumed Loops got his name because he liked to chase his tail but that wasn't it. Daisy named her puppy Loops because for the first week he lived with them he had the poops constantly and she and Darren spent a lot of time talking about it. They talked about it so much that the dog began to respond to the word 'poops' like it was his name. Until that point he hadn't responded to any of the names they had tried and Daisy was displeased with the idea of being reminded of the pooping experience every time she called her canine companion. The vet said to try calling him something that rhymed with 'poops' and see if he would respond. He did. Loops it was. Loopy-Loops. And Loops was indeed very loopy. He frequently would get his head stuck in things like disposable flower pots or cereal boxes from the trash and then not be able to figure out how to get it back out. He'd run around frantically backwards crying until he fell over and Daisy could finally catch up and help him out. Loops was a mutt that kind of looked like a cross between a Golden Retriever and a Boxer...if anyone could imagine that. He was an odd looking dog with an odd personality. Daisy and Darren often joked that Loops was actually an alien creature from another planet that was doing secret alien tests on them while they slept. Daisy made a note to her self to pick up more dog treats after she dropped Loops off at the vet. He was going to deserve them when he finally came home. "My brave boy." she thought to herself as she turned the water on in the shower.

Daisy had been asking Darren for weeks now to look at the shower head. Their water was hard and a number of the shower head's holes were obstructed with scale and calcification. She wasn't sure how to remove the head so she could soak it clean. It appeared to be seamless with the shower and could not be removed without damaging the entire thing. Darren had been saying he'd take care of it but hadn't. As the shower irregularly splotched blobs of water over her body she found there was at least a brief reprieve from the annoyance of the dripping kitchen sink. With the shower going she couldn't hear the drip, drip, drip. That early Cure song, 10:15, started to play in her head *'...10:15 on a Saturday night...and the tap drips under the strip light...and I'm sitting in the kitchen sink...and the tap drips drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip...'*

Oh the humanity! Darren was going to get an earful about the shower *and* the sink later in the evening. Loops was barking outside the bathroom door. As she dried herself off she looked in the mirror and passed judgement on her reflection. In the past four years she had picked up more weight than she would have liked but she wasn't officially fat... yet. It didn't really matter to anyone other than Daisy. For her it was less about how she looked and more about how she felt. She had an old injury from a car accident that became difficult to manage the more weight she carried on her small frame.

Daisy's tininess was a common topic of conversation when she met new people. She wasn't a little person, only short, just barely over five foot, but in addition to this she also had very very small hands and feet. Darren joked that she had cut the hands and feet off a doll and used them as her own. Mostly it meant it was hard for Daisy to find grown-up looking shoes or open jars of pickles. There were a few things about Daisy that were not tiny: her eyes, rear-end, boobs, and personality; all four of which were hard for anyone to miss. Daisy jostled her giant breasts into her bra and sighed. Was this one now too small too? She had only purchased it a month earlier. Why her boobs seemed to be growing she didn't know. It's not like she was gaining anywhere else. This was getting ridiculous. Bras aren't cheap...especially in size 34 H. Loops managed to push the bathroom door open somehow and started to lick stray drips of water from the floor and tub. Daisy pulled a simple cotton shift dress over her head and finished getting ready. The drip was still there. She needed to get out of the house.

Getting Loops into the car was always a production. He didn't like going bye-byes like every other dog Daisy had ever met. Loops hated the car. The only thing he liked less than the car was the vet, so today was going to be a real hoot. She hooked the leash to Loops' collar and he knew immediately they were heading for the car. The only time Daisy used a leash on Loops was when they were getting in the car. The dog started to pant heavily and try to pull away. Daisy flung her purse over her shoulder and dragged Loops out the front door. He was biting at the leash growling at Daisy. She pulled the struggling dog over to the car, opened the door then bent her knees and scooped the

distraught animal up in her arms awkwardly dumping him into the back seat of the eight year old Honda Civic. It was such a practical little car. The previous night Daisy had covered the backseat with pee-pads, towels, and a big blanket to catch any mess Loops might make. Before she even had a chance to settle into the drivers seat Loops peed on the blanket. “Well, Loopy. You’re just going to have to deal with it. You’re not getting out of the car until we get where we’re going.” The dog paced back and forth on the seat frantically, but knew it was no use. They were going bye-byes whether he liked it or not. Once on the road for a mile or so Loops curled up in a ball and softly whined in an attempt to soothe himself. “It’s Okay Loopy-dog. You’re Mommy’s brave boy. Everything is going to be Okay.” she tried to assure him. Loops knew better.

The waiting room at the vet’s office was packed. Loops was more upset than ever now. He didn’t mind cats but he really didn’t like other dogs and there were three very silly and very large Newfoundland Hounds with their person waiting their turn with the doctor. They just wanted to play and were trying to be friendly but Loops was scared. He wasn’t even half the size of one of these giant beasts. There was slobber everywhere. Loops quickly became a slimy mess as the dogs sniffed and licked him into a corner. In a surprise move Loops jumped straight into the air and into Daisy’s arms almost knocking her over. A vet tech offered an empty exam room to Daisy to sit in and wait with Loops. She and the dog both gratefully accepted the offer. The person with the Newfies apologized profusely, to which Daisy assured him it was fine. Her dog was the weirdo.

In the small room Daisy sat on a naugahyde covered bench. Loops was on top of her with his head buried between her boobs. He was shaking slightly. Daisy stroked his slobbery shaggy back and made soft shushing sounds. He knew something bad was going to happen because he didn’t feel sick so there was no good reason in his dog-mind why they should be at the vet. A little part of Daisy agreed. The humping *was* annoying, but she didn’t expect Darren to cut his guys off when he was grabby and she was on her moon. But a dog is not a man, and the humping was out of hand...and embarrassing.

Last week someone had hit the fire hydrant across the street from her house. She and Loops had been in the front yard playing frisbee and saw the whole thing. The driver stumbled out of the totaled IROC-Z, shook his head and ran off. Daisy had thought to herself, "Looks like an '85...*was* nearly cherry. What a waste. Probably stolen." Water shot fifty feet in the air and all over the car. The front end was bent at an angle to the rear end. The T-top was open. The interior was flooded. At least there wouldn't be any flames. When the fire truck and police cruisers arrived forty-five minutes later her neighbors's yard was a mud puddle and a crowd had gathered. Loops was barking at people to keep them out of his yard. Daisy had been correct. The car had been stolen and used for a side show and joyriding. This was unfortunately a fairly regular occurrence in her neighborhood these days. Everyone was sick of it. That hydrant had been hit three times in the past six months in similar situations. An officer took her statement. Loops humped him and his partner both and to Daisy's chagrin climaxed on the leg of the latter. The officer made a guttural sound of definite disgust and the one taking Daisy's statement stammered mid-sentence, awkwardly asking her to contain her animal. Daisy took Loops in the house and returned with a package of wet wipes and a roll of paper towel. After it was over, she called the vet to make the appointment.

Now sitting in the examination room Daisy hugged Loops and weighed whether to take him home or make him go through with the castration. It seemed so final. On the other hand, she considered herself lucky the cop hadn't given her a ticket or something. Could he have done that? Was there an official penal code for your dog jizzing on a cop? Just then the door opened and Dr. Auchter entered the room. Daisy pressed Loops from her lap to the side of the bench and rose to greet him. She hadn't realized she had been sweating so much and a hot flash was starting. As she stood, her plump legs made a suction sound on the naugahyde. The two adults now looked at each other in a candid and awkward moment. Daisy felt as though she was cooking from the inside out.

“My fat legs are just sweaty. I didn’t fart.” Daisy blurted then laughed. Dr. Auchter laughed as well and told her to relax.

“And how are you Mrs. Forczek?”

“Fine.” Daisy was smoothing the front of her dress and straightening herself out. Loops was now cowering wrapped around her ankles. “I’m fine, but Loops is just as you can see.”

“And quite understandable. Mr. Loops. How are you?” Dr. Auchter bent toward the poor pooch with an out stretched hand and a small treat. Loops gave it a half hearted sniff but declined the offer. He wasn’t really into cookies. He preferred cat poop to dog cookies. It made Daisy gag.

“He’s been humping everything and then last week...”

The priest-like veterinarian interrupted her before she could finish.

“So I heard. So I heard. Yes. We all had a good laugh over that for a few days.” he turned back to Loops, “You are lucky you are an average mutt and not a Pit Bull or you might not be here with us today, buddy.” and he rubbed the dogs ears. Loops couldn’t resist this. It was his favorite expression of affection to receive and he pressed his head into the doctor’s hands.

“Well, unless you have any questions for me, I will take him back now and we will weigh him and prep him. He hasn’t had anything to eat since last night?”

“No. I gave him lots of treats yesterday morning but his last meal was lunch yesterday. Nothing but water since.” This wasn’t exactly true, but Daisy couldn’t imagine the last bite of Darren’s hot link last night was anything significant enough to mention.

“Okay then, Mrs. Forczek. Mandy at the front desk will call you when he is ready to be picked up. You can settle the bill then. Probably about four thirty or so. If for some reason you are unable to pick him up at that time, the office closes at five and it is an additional two hundred dollars to keep him over night.” he smiled benignly.

“Oh no. Picking him up will be no problem. It will probably be Darren on his way home from work.” Daisy finished.

“Okay then, Mrs. Forczek. It was nice to see you. Don’t worry. Loops will be just fine and unable to sexually assault any more police officers.” He reached forward and patted

Daisy on the shoulder. Daisy smiled with half her face and turned to Loops. Squatting down and grabbing his face in both hands she rubbed his cheeks and ears. He licked her face and hands.

“Be a brave boy and when you get home Mommy will have special treats all for Loops!” Daisy cooed at her frightened pup. Loops whimpered and tried to squeeze out the door with Daisy but she was too quick for him. As she closed the door of the examination room behind her she could hear Loops barking a high pitched yip she knew meant, “Wait Mom! Don’t leave me here!” It was breaking her heart.

“Either me or Darren will see you later, Mandy.” She said as she was walking out the door.

“Oh. Okay. I hope it’s Mr. Forczek. It’s always nice to see both of you.” Mandy chimed as the glass door closed.

‘That was an odd thing to say. I wonder what she meant by that.’ Daisy thought to herself getting into her car that now smelled like dog urine. “Ugh. I hope that didn’t soak through onto the seat.” she said out loud, and snapped on the radio before throwing the car in gear and backing out of the parking spot. It was time to hit the market and pick up some treats and a big knuckle bone. She figured a nice big bone would keep Loops from licking at the incision for at least a day or two; long enough for the wound to start to knit. Pulling out of the vet’s parking lot she noticed another car hastily pull out and follow her out of the lot. She hadn’t noticed a person had been sitting in the car when she came out of the office. The lot wasn’t that big, only five spaces or so, and she had scanned it as she headed to her car. She always did. It was second nature. Ever since the mugging four years earlier she always scanned her surroundings. She hadn’t seen anyone sitting in that car when she came out. A chill ran up her spine and the hairs on the back of her arms were raised. Not a good sign.

The mugging was just one of many creepy things to have happened to Daisy over the course of her life, but it was among the worst in recent years. The guy had grabbed her from behind as she was unlocking her car one evening after leaving yoga class. She

was the last one out of the studio. She always was on Fridays. She taught the weekly Nidra class. He must have been crouched behind the shrub just beyond the curb next to the spot her car was occupying. The light in the parking lot had been out. Later the police told her it looked as though it had been tampered with and the perpetrator had probably cased her and planned the attack. It fit the M.O. of a number of similar muggings in a ten mile radius over a six month period. He had wrapped one hand over her mouth and the other around her arms groping her breasts as he restrained her and spoke slowly and deliberately in her right ear. He forced himself up against her back and pressed her to the side of her car running his hand down the front of her then flat tummy and over her pubic area. It was weeks before she had been able to fall asleep or let Darren even kiss her. Sometimes she still had problems with that. In some ways she thought the whole thing had been harder for Darren. He took it personally.

“Don’t scream. Do exactly as I say and you won’t be harmed...” the guy had said.

Daisy nodded her head yes in agreement and began to sweat.

“You have your keys out already. You can keep them. I’m going to take your purse and then I’m going to let you go, okay?”

Again Daisy nodded her head in agreement.

“I have a knife and a needle full of something dreamy. If you don’t do exactly as I say you’ll be taking a little nap and I’ll slice off this firm little clit.” He pressed his index and middle fingers down hard between her outer labia over her yoga pants and rubbed.

Daisy was frozen. She couldn’t believe just twenty minutes earlier she had been guiding her students through blissful relaxation. Now her nervous system was coursing what felt like gallons of adrenaline through her veins. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She felt as though she might faint. He continued to molest her and she felt his erection pressed between her buttocks as well.

“You like it when I do this. They all do. You know it feels good. Yeah...right there.

Mmmhmm. It’s getting hot and wet. I feel it.”

Daisy’s mind reeled. She was in a state of disbelief and for some reason she had been frozen, totally unable to move. He then slid his hand under the waistband of her pants

and it slipped further down between her legs. Continuing to rub her he inserted a finger into her moist vagina.

“I want to feel the power when you cum.” He whispered licking the back of her ear, his other hand still over her mouth. To Daisy’s horrified surprise her body accommodated him and she came. Tears silently ran down her cheeks. He had laughed.

“See. I told you. I could tell you needed a man to show you some good love. Now I’m going to take your purse off your shoulder and let you go. Everything has it’s price. Stay facing your car and count to fifty real slow before you move, okay?”

Daisy nodded her head yes as he slipped his hand out of her pants sliding his finger slick with her moisture across her face before taking her purse and running off. She listened to the hollow thud of his foot falls and counted to ten before sliding down the side of her car and passing out briefly. When she came to, the side of her face was leaning against the driver side front tire. Sitting up she began to cry. Her Grandma’s Rosary had been in her purse. She knew she would never forget the smell of this man and the sound of his voice but she never saw his face. She picked up her keys and got in the car and drove the three quarters of a mile home.

Once home, Darren had been already in bed. She took a shower and crawled in next to him. He rolled over away from her snoring. She knew she should probably call the police immediately, but had waited until the morning. At that moment she just wanted to be still and quiet as her attacker had instructed. Three more assaults happened near the studio over the next four months. Darren still couldn’t understand why she couldn’t “just get over it”. The man still hadn’t been caught. So, Daisy was now always on the look out.

Pulling into the shopping strip Daisy checked her rearview mirror. The car, a beige mid-90’s Mercury Sable Sedan with heavily tinted windows had tailed her the entire way. It had stayed two cars back but now was directly behind her pulling into the parking lot. Her heart started to thump. She pulled into an open spot in front of the super market. The other car slowly passed by. She sat stone still in her car and contemplated just

going home. No. Loops deserved a treat and besides once she got home she could stay there and not go back out. Darren would be picking Loops up for sure. She took out her phone and texted him telling him as much then dialed the vet's office. Mandy answered in her fake sugar voice.

"Dr. Auchter's office. This is Mandy. How can I help you?"

"Mandy, this is Mrs. Forczek. Please call Mr. Forczek when Loops is ready to be picked up. I believe you have the number on file." Daisy stated matter-of-factly.

"Certainly Mrs. Forczek, dear. I will look forward to seeing him."

Daisy started to say something about not calling her dear but Mandy hung up the phone before she could finish. Daisy was now irked. She was definitely going to say something to Dr. Auchter when she took Loops back in to get the inevitable stitches removed.

Tucking the phone in her purse she opened the door and stepped out into the sunshine. As she looked up from closing the car door the Sable approached once more. The car slowed to a stop behind Daisy's parked Civic. The driver side window rolled down to reveal a clean shaven man of around thirty or so wearing dark sunglasses. His hair was cropped close to his scalp and there was a small scar indicating he had been born with a cleft pallet. His skin was otherwise smooth with a rudy tone. It was difficult to tell how tall he was since he was seated and the seat appeared to be positioned back so he was kind of slouching forward to reach the wheel of the vehicle. He didn't take his hands from the wheel as he addressed her with a creepily familiar voice.

"Well it's driving Miss Daisy!" he exclaimed then puckered his lips into a misshapen kiss and drove off.

Daisy turned and ran into the market. His voice, it had been so familiar. Was it him? Could it be? She knew it was. She began to hyper ventilate while the automatic door continued to open and close behind her. As she fell forward onto her hands and knees two baggers ran to her side. Someone shouted, "Dial 9-1-1!"

An older woman cashier handed Daisy a small paper bag and instructed her to breath in and out into it while guiding her to a stool to sit on. By the time the paramedics arrived she was no longer hyperventilating and was sipping from a bottle of water.

“We need to check your vitals. What is your name?” a fresh faced boy of no more than twenty asked her.

“Daisy Lee Forczek. Really, I’m fine. But I need to speak with an officer I think.” Daisy stated as forcefully as she could manage.

“Yes Ma’am. But first I need to check your vitals and ask you a few questions.” The EMT proceeded to ask Daisy a range of annoying questions from what she has eaten that day to who was the President. Satisfied she was not out of her mind, the young man motioned to a uniformed officer who was standing a few feet away. He approached gently.

“Mrs. Forcheck, is it?” he asked mispronouncing her name.

“It’s For-zik.” Daisy replied emphasizing the proper phonetics.

“My apologies, Mrs. Forczek. I’m deputy Colton. Now, can you tell me what the problem seems to be?” he asked patiently.

“Well, it hasn’t been the best day. My plumbing is making me nuts at home and I just dropped my dog off at the vet to get neutered. I was coming here to get some treats for him when he gets home and I was followed from the vet’s office here.” She stopped and took another sip from the almost empty bottle of water.

“I see. You were followed you say? How do you know you were followed? By whom?”

Daisy detected a slightly accusatory tone in the boy’s voice.

“I don’t just say I was followed, dear. I *was* followed. He approached me just before I came in here.” Daisy said calling to the young cops attention that she was in fact his elder and was deserving of some amount of respect.

“Yes. Ma’am. I understand. I didn’t mean to imply you were lying.”

“Well, it sure sounded that way. Look, I am an assault survivor and I think this was the same guy who assaulted me four years ago. I’m not the only one. It was in all the papers. You may not have been a cop yet.” Daisy was now ready to cry. Hot tears were welling up in her eyes but she forced them back.

"I see. Four years ago? Do you recall the case number?"

"Are you kidding? You're going to ask me for a case number? Can't you just call into your office or check my name in your data base or something? There were like eleven cases in a ten mile radius. He was never caught. None of us ever saw his face. But I saw a face today...and I'm pretty sure it was *his* voice when he spoke to me." Daisy was almost yelling.

"Mrs. Forczek, you need to remain calm. I understand this is stressful."

"Stressful? Stressful?! Stressful doesn't even begin to describe what I've been dealing with."

"Okay Ma'am. I can sympathize. Now, I know it might be unpleasant, but can you please tell me a little bit about what happened four years ago. You are right. I am new to the force." Deputy Colton stood poised with a pen and pad ready for her reply. Daisy took a deep breath.

"Well, at the time I was teaching a Friday evening yoga class at Yogidream about five miles from here. It was the last class of the night and I was alone closing up. When I got to my car he grabbed me from behind, sexually assaulted me, then took my purse and ran off. I never saw his face but I could smell him and I will never forget it or his voice. *THAT* voice." Daisy hung her head and the officer looked down at her with an expression of helplessness on his face.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to hear this. What did he smell like?"

"What? Oh, he smelled like shea butter, saffron, and pine."

"I see. That's pretty specific. What did he say to you?"

"Then or today?"

"Today, Ma'am, today."

"He said something about Driving Miss Daisy. My name is Daisy." Daisy described the man and the car and how it had been parked at the vet's office to the young deputy.

"Do you feel like you need to go to the emergency room?" he asked finally.

"No. No. I'm okay, but I am a little concerned about being followed home. I don't know how he could have known I was going to be at the vet. He must be watching me some

other way. And what about the other women? I'm scared for them as well." Daisy implored the young officer.

"We will look into it. Try not to worry yourself. If you would like an escort home, I can do that. In the mean time, you guys can head out." Deputy Colton motioned toward the crew of EMTs impatiently standing by.

"No. I think I'll be fine. I have some shopping here I need to do before I head home." Daisy replied. The EMTs left, another call coming in over their walkies.

"Suit yourself, Ma'am. This is my card. If anything seems off or you see the car again feel free to call me."

"We have cameras on the outside of the building and in the parking lot." the older cashier offered to the deputy.

"Thank you. Yes, we may ask to see those."

Daisy looked at the time. It was getting on in the day and she still had laundry to do at home.

"Am I free to go now?" she asked.

"Yes Ma'am. I have your information. We will call if we have any more questions for you. And please, be careful."

This last comment irritated Daisy...as if she had somehow asked to be assaulted. How was she not being careful? It was always the same. It felt as though everyone somehow blamed her for the assault. What was she supposed to do? Stay in her house all day and never leave unless she was with Darren? Last she checked she was still in the United States, not Saudi Arabia. Daisy put the deputy's card in her wallet, stood up and headed for the isle with the dog treats.

Pulling into her driveway Daisy was feeling apprehensive. The tap would still be dripping when she got inside and she was hoping the days events were going to be enough to distract her brain from the echo of the insipid drops of water. Then she saw it. The window to the right of the front door was open. The screen was popped out and the

curtain was pulled through the opening. Someone had been in the house. She put the car in park leaving it running and pulled her wallet out looking for Deputy Colton's card. It rang twice. He picked up. Daisy exhaled.

"Deputy Colton."

"Deputy. Please. It's Mrs. Forczek. Someone has been in my house and might still be in there. I don't know." she spat breathlessly.

"Hold on Ma'am. I'll be there as soon as I can. Are you in the house?"

"No. I haven't gone in. There's a window open and the screen is broken."

"Okay. Got it. Stay in your car. Keep the doors locked. If anyone comes out of the house, leave immediately." and he hung up.

The smell of Loops' urine was now overwhelming. She stretched over the console into the back seat and grabbed at the balled up blanket. She rolled the window down and threw the stinking rag onto the driveway. Looking back at the seat she saw with relief the urine was contained to the blanket and a pee pad. Thank God for small favors. Then she took out her phone and texted Darren:

crazy day...don't forget about Loops...extra \$200 if he stays overnight...at home waiting for the cops...hope your day is better...I Love you.

In the place of the word *Love* she used a purple heart-shaped emoji. Darren texted back almost immediately:

What?

She replied:

too much to text...just get home asap after you get Loops plz

Darren texted simply:

OK

The lights of a cop car flashed in her rearview. Daisy farted and opened her door. She stepped out as Deputy Colton approached her car.

"Mrs. Forczek..."

"This is silly. Please call me Daisy."

“Daisy, please remain in your vehicle but first give me the key to your front door.”

Daisy handed him the key. It turned out he didn’t need it. He found the door was already unlocked when he approached. Daisy had her windows down. He drew his weapon and called over his shoulder.

“I assume you did not leave your front door unlocked?”

“Never.” Daisy hollered back.

Weapon raised near the side of his face he pushed the front door open and spoke from his diaphragm into the small house, “ Police. If anyone is in there come out with your hands in the air.”

He stepped back a couple yards from the door and waited for thirty seconds. No one came out.

“I’m armed and I’m coming in.”

The young cop disappeared into the house. A few minutes later he came out, weapon holstered, and approached Daisy’s car.

“Well, it looks as though someone has been in the house but they are gone now. If you wouldn’t mind coming in with me and telling me exactly what all has been disturbed or is missing.”

Daisy felt ill. This was turning out to be a horrible day.

“After you.” Deputy Colton opened the door and ushered Daisy into her living room. It was a mess. Everything was a mess. The pillows from the couch were torn open and on the floor, stuffing spilling out everywhere. Every photo or piece of Art that was on the walls was now on the floor with the exception of the wall sculpture she had recently finished. It was bolted into the corner in a permanent fixture. There was no way that thing was coming down without a crow bar. Daisy gasped.

“I gather you are a better housekeeper than this?”

“I can’t believe it. My paintings!” Daisy ran to a larger piece lying face down and picked it up to examine. There was a message scrawled in what appeared to be Sharpie marker across the mandala like pattern. It said:

I Love You

They were all like that in every room. Daisy was stunned silent. When they entered her bedroom it was the worst of all. All the drawers in her dresser were dumped out on the floor and all of her under garments were gone. Then there was the bed. Daisy had left it neatly made. It was still neatly made but Darren's side was covered in what appeared to be blood of some type and a paper target with a long stem red rose and a single daisy. Daisy covered her mouth and turned to Deputy Colton, eyes glassy and internal temperature on the rise.

"I need a glass of water." She managed to sputter and pushed her way into the kitchen. Opening a cupboard propped up against her favorite water glass she found a small Valentine card like the ones they used to exchange in elementary school. Two cartoon deer were pictured in profile touching noses with a heart above them. In the heart it said:

U R DEER

Daisy grabbed it and turned it over. On the back scrawled in black Sharpie marker it said:

I Love You

Daisy grabbed the glass but dropped it in the sink shattering it. The faucet had been replaced. There was another note in the bottom of the sink. It said:

Everything has it's price

Daisy crumpled to the floor. Deputy Colton approached her cautiously feeling he may have underestimated and mishandled the entire situation.

"I'm going to radio for back-up." he offered to Daisy apologetically. Daisy just continued to sob uncontrollably, her arms wrapped tightly around her own shoulders.

Back-up arrived at the same time as Darren and Loops. Darren held the door open for Loops and a female officer around Darren and Daisy's age. Poor Loops let out a howl and clumsily came running into the eat-in kitchen where Daisy was now seated at the dining nook with a shot of vodka. The plastic cone around his neck smacked the corners of the table and walls as he wiggled trying to get close to his Mommy. Daisy dropped her hand to the dogs nose and he frantically licked her fingers.

Darren followed the female officer into the kitchen. Officer Colton was taking photos of things with a disposable camera and a cell phone. Darren took one look at Daisy.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he asked perplexed. Daisy tossed back the shot of vodka she had been considering and shifted her gaze to meet Darren’s.

“It’s him.” Daisy got up and walked into the living room. Loops followed looking around confused at the disheveled house and after effects of anesthetic. The female officer approached Deputy Colton. Darren stood still looking around in bewilderment.

“I guess we’ll get a pizza tonight?” he asked no one in particular. No one answered him.

Deputies Colton and Purdina continued to take photos, ask questions, take notes and dust for prints. They also took samples of the blood from the bed. It took a little over three hours. Daisy sat silently on the couch with Loops laying with his head in her lap. Darren vomited when he saw the bed. Officer Purdina asked the Forczeks if there was some other place they could stay for the night.

“Not really. All our family is out of town or over seas and I don’t want to put this on any of our friends. We’ll need to find a hotel room I think.” Darren replied hollowly.

“Well, there’s a hotel we can recommend. There will be a detail on it all night. You aren’t the only ones hit. Two of the other original victims have had similar things happen. We have a serial offender on our hands. I can’t say for sure, but the FBI usually gets involved in this type of thing.” Purdina offered Darren a business card for a motel he recognized from his commute to work. It was a little independent place set back from the highway. Usually there were a few rigs in the parking lot. Darren accepted the card extended toward him between her index and middle finger.

“Thank you.”

“It’s nothing fancy, but it’s clean and you’ll get a discounted price. We reserved a block of rooms. Loops is welcome, but you will need to pay extra for any mess he may make. I think there’s a \$50 pet deposit. They will be expecting you.”

All Daisy could think was, “Loops isn’t going to be happy about getting in the car again.”

III

Corn & Toni

“Baby, I told you. Towels, drawers, socks, and undershirts in this hamper. Everything else goes in this one!” Toni angrily pulled a wool sweater out of the towel hamper and flung it at Corn’s bare feet.

“Shit Babe. I’m sorry. We were both a little lit last night. If I remember correctly you tried to eat that Butterfinger with the wrapper still on.” Corn retorted.

“Fuck you. Like you ain’t never been that hungry. Besides, I saw you put this in here this morning NOT last night so you can just shove a Butterfinger up yo ass.”

“If I shove a Butterfinger up my ass you best eat it out there.”

Toni breathed heavily a couple times rocking back and forth on her feet. Corn got a little nervous. She out weighed him by at least seventy-five pounds. Toni read Corn’s thoughts on his face and began to laugh.

“So tough, drivin’ a tank and now here you are...afraid of little old me.”

Corn approached his wife and wrapped his arms around her as much as he could. Her tits were up under his chin. Large as Toni was she liked wearing platform shoes. Her podiatrist kept telling her she had to drop a few pounds or stop wearing the stupid things, but no one told Toni what to do.

“Baby there ain’t nothin’ little about either of us.” and he stuck his face between her gigantic breasts and blew a long hard motorboat. Toni squealed with delight stomping her feet.

“Let’s do this!” she said, and grabbed a Butterfinger that was sitting on a near by table and ran into the bedroom with Corn following her like a puppy.

The bedroom was disheveled. Toni didn’t like making the bed and Corn wanted to change the sheets and just hadn’t gotten to it yet. Corn pulled the belt from his jeans and snapped it on the bed. Leaving her shoes on, Toni pulled her dress over her head

and took a running jump onto the bed slapping the candy bar on the night stand. The candy cracked in half.

“You don’t really expect me to shove that up my ass do you?” Corn asked pensively.

“Of course not! When have you ever known me to eat shit?” Toni answered. Nodding toward the candy bar she added, “That’s just dessert. Now come over here and get this oyster while it’s fresh.”

The hands of the clock on the wall across from the bed had been stuck at 10:15 for over a year now. Every time Corn looked at it he thought of that early Cure song ‘...10:15 on a Saturday night...and the tap drips under the strip light...and I’m sitting in the kitchen sink...’ Rolling over onto his left side he gazed at Toni who had also been looking at the clock. She turned her round face toward him and finished his thought out loud.

“And the tap drips drip drip drip drip drip drip drip...” Toni opened her mouth wide and laughed her whole-body laugh. Corn could see some Butterfinger still stuck in her molars.

“You know me so well.” he told her. More than him finding her beautiful, more than him buying her gifts, more than all the fancy-pants pampering in the World, this is what turned Toni on about Corn: when he told her she knew him. She knew it was true. Toni knew Corn and Corn knew Toni, inside and out, blindfolded and taste tested. Toni knew Corn better than she knew herself sometimes and it made her feel special. No one, not even Corn’s plain-jane-corn-farmin’ Momma knew Corn as well as Toni.

“Baby, I known you since before I was born. The Lord made us for each other special.” Toni was now smiling while also trying to lick the candy bar from the grooves in her molars.

“You know what my favorite part is?” Corn asked her.

“Yeah...but I like to hear you say it.”

“My favorite part is the look on everyone else’s face when we’re together.”

Toni howled in satisfaction.

“Sure ‘nuf. That *is* fun, ain’t it? You know what I like best?”

“Yeah, but I like to hear you say it.” Corn mirrored back.

“When we pretend to fight in public just to make bigots uncomfortable.”

Corn brushed the hair from his wife’s eyes gently with the back of his hand. She pressed her mouth to his fingers as he passed over her cheek and lips.

“What would I do without you?” he whispered.

Toni heaved herself to her right side to face him. “We don’t think about that. We’re just grateful we’re together.” Corn picked a candy crumb from between her cleavage and licked it off his thumb.

“Yes.” was all he replied.

Toni hoisted herself up and plodded into the bathroom. While she used the toilet and freshened up she left the door ajar so they could continue to talk to each other. Corn grabbed a pile of folded fresh sheets from the dresser and started to make the bed.

“So, who this dude you took a trip to the hospital with?” Toni hollered from the cavernous tile covered bathroom. Corn was tucking corners of the flat sheet at the foot of the bed.

“Oh, he’s just some guy I met at the gym. I used his locker.”

“You used his what?”

“His locker. I’ve been using it for a couple weeks.”

“How it his locker if you been using it for a couple weeks?”

“Oh, he was out of town. Guys told me the day I signed up I was gonna have to give it up when he got back. So I was just waiting to see what kinda guy he was that he had other fellas guarding a sweaty box for him.”

“What? I don’t get you guys sometimes.” Toni was now using a washcloth to wash her face and wipe between her rolls.

“Naw, he seems like a decent person and guess what?”

“What?” Toni was now spritzing her wrists with her bottle of Tea Rose perfume.

“He know ‘bout that perfume you’re takin’ a bath in, in’ere. He’s got a thing for that Daisy chick.”

“You’re kidding. Really? He watches The Double D? Does he watch my Mr. Chicken Fingers too? Is he married? Have a girl? Can we hang out together? Double date?” Toni was excited. They had only moved to town a couple months ago and she hadn’t met anyone yet that she was willing to bring home to meet Corn. It was hard making new friends. Toni didn’t like hanging out with single women. They inevitably ended up hitting on and hanging all over Corn. Though she knew she didn’t have anything to worry about it was annoying and she couldn’t be friends with anyone she couldn’t respect. Plus, the couple intimidated a lot of people with their unexpected pairing. Even Toni’s family was still adjusting to the shock. No woman in her family since her Great Grandma had ever been with anyone other than a black man. She had been surprised when she had met Corn’s family that they seemed to be un-phased by the match. It had been her family that raised all the uncomfortable questions. They all liked Corn, but at first her mother and sister had been really put off.

“No he’s not married...but poor fucker is sick in love.”

“Really?!” Toni squealed as she emerged from the bathroom adjusting the waist of her white cotton briefs and reaching for her dress Corn now had folded neatly at the foot of the freshly made bed. Corn was balling up the dirty sheets and stuffing them in the hamper.

“Yeah. But don’t get too excited just yet. He hasn’t even met her.”

“Wait. What the fuck you talking about? Sick in love with someone he ain’t even know? And he got into a bar fight and you had to talk to the cops...this doesn’t sound good, Baby.”

“Naw, it’s not like that. I know it sounds crazy, but trust me, the guy is solid. It’s just a right of passage thing.”

“Right of passage my foot. If you end up dealing with cops on a regular basis because of this guy I don’t want anything to do with him or whatever bitch he’s stalking.”

“He’s not stalking anyone. Just cool it. He’s in love with Daisy. Guys egged him on. It’s cool...I mean he’s cool.”

“Oh, well, okay. I can see a single guy being in love with that chick. She got that wholesome schtick down and her tits are nice.”

“Yeah, it’s more than that for him.”

“Well, when’s he gonna meet her.”

“I don’t know if he will. I was gonna give his brother a call and see if they sent him home from the hospital yet or not.”

“Why don’t you just call him?”

“Because I didn’t get his number...just his brother’s.”

“Oh. Well, I need to get going here. My shift starts in an hour and that bus gonna take me at least forty minutes to get there. You can tell me about it later tonight when I get home.” Toni worked for an old Chinese woman who had an ear piercing kiosk at the mall. It wasn’t a ton of money, but it was enough to cover groceries every week. Corn’s demolition and construction consulting work was lucrative enough to cover everything else. Plus, he had his settlement, but they had agreed to not talk about that ever again. It had been hard enough taking the military to court let alone get payment from them. The missing right testicle and half of Corn’s right foot were enough reminder for them both. To see him walk you’d never guess he had a prosthesis, but dancing was another story; and dancing was how they had met.

“Why don’t you take the MG? I feel like hoofin’ it today.”

“No. That would just be asking for it. Kids been keyin’ cars in the parking lot and I don’t wanna temp ‘em with that cherry red paint.” The MG was just like one Corn’s late father had when he was a kid. It was the only thing he bought for himself with the settlement money from the trial. Toni smeared a garish orange lipstick across her mouth and stuffed it in her Coach bag.

“Well, let me drive you then.”

“I thought you wanted to walk?”

“I can walk later. I just don’t want you to deal with that bus driver again.”

Last week the bus driver on the afternoon line that ran between their block and the mall tried to make Toni pay for two seats because of her size. Toni had been humiliated. The bus hadn’t even had that many people on it and he had demeaned and berated her in front of a group of high school aged boys who then taunted her all the way to work. Toni was a strong woman but this had been a bad day for the driver to pick on her. It was the

first day of her period *and* her first day at her new job. She had cried. Corn didn't take well to his wife crying. The next day he took off work just so he could wait for the bus and have words with the driver...and the driver's boss...and the driver's boss' boss. Corn did a fair amount of consulting for Public Works and knew some people. Toni now had a six month unlimited pass to ride all City busses.

"Really, it's okay, but if Big-Poppa wants to drive Big-Momma to work then who I to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"That's right. Who you to look in my mouth?"

"Baby, I like lookin' at every part of you."

"Ditto." Corn sat down and fitted what remained of his right foot into his prosthesis, slipped on a pair of socks and shoved his feet into a pair of thick-soled desert boots. Toni walked into the kitchen and grabbed from the shelf a brown-sack lunch she had prepared earlier. She was careful to never buy anything from the food court because people liked to stare at a big woman eat and none of the food court fare was what you'd call healthy. She had found if she brought something home-made rude men-folk were less likely to give unsolicited critique of her form. It wasn't that she cared what any of them thought, she just didn't want the hassle and besides, it cost less to make her lunch and she always had exactly what she wanted.

"I'll stop by later today after my meeting with the Planning Commission and let you know what I find out about T and we can decide what to do for dinner."

"T?" Toni questioned.

"Yeah...that's what I've been calling him. Torrent. T." Corn swept his keys off the hook on the wall and nodded toward the door. "Let's get a'movin'.

Toni smiled and did a little kind of dance in place. "Yes, sir."

Corn opened the door and ushered her out of their private paradise through the threshold and into the World.

They found the mall parking lot already packed at eleven in the morning. Sun light glared off the windshields. Corn dropped the visor of the car. A kid of around eighteen or nineteen wearing a far-too-big-for-him security uniform was stuffing fliers under

windshield wipers. A walkie hung heavily from his belt loop pulling his pants down enough to reveal a pair of gym shorts beneath. A belt was pulled tight around his waist but failed to keep the over-sized man-pants up.

“Get a load of that. He looks like he’s playing dress-up in his father’s hand me downs.” Corn nodded at the kid as they drove by and pulled up to the curb near the mall entrance. “What’s the deal here? I haven’t seen a mall parking lot this full since I was a kid.”

Toni was digging around in her purse looking for something.

“What? Oh well, that’s Skip. He lost a ton of weight evidently but is still wearing all his old clothes. A—nd, the lot’s full because people from a couple companies usin’ it like a Park-and-Ride station. Skip’s probably putting out fliers telling them the lot’s gon’ta be a pay-lot starting next week. I heard about it yesterday.” Toni was still digging through her bag. “The building management brought around a letter on letter head to all the open stores. They’ve hired four new employees to work the entrances. See...they’ve already built the little station houses.” Toni pulled a crinkled tube of hand cream out of her bag triumphantly and used it to point in the direction of a small kiosk.

“Oh. That will probably help with the keying as well.” Corn replied with satisfaction.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I think one of the kids keyin’ cars is Skip.” She rubbed some lavender scented cream into her hands.

“Well, why would you be worried about the MG getting hit if you know who the kid is and he know you work here?” Corn was confused. He thought everyone knew not to shit where they ate.

“ Oh...he and I had words my first day.”

“Oh?” Corn was interested.

“Yeah, I guess it was my fault. I was still upset from the bus and was out of sorts. When I saw him I was like: who this guy workin’ security in a mall lookin’ like he trying to get signed but can’t sing? Right?” Toni began. “So, I couldn’t keep my fat mouth shut and I just blurt out like at him: Who you workin’ in a mall and can’t even find clothes that fit?” She paused to give Corn a moment to nod in understanding. “So then he say to me: Who you to eat a whole Ronald McDonalds and not leave any for anyone else? And

then I say: Yo Momma. And he say: Bitch I worked long and hard for three years to loose weight enough so these clothes weren't tight and my heart would work. The mall gave me this uniform when I started working here and they refuse to give me a new one that fits so I make do." Toni pursed her lips in slight regret. "I felt bad. I wouldn't ask him no favors like watching your car."

"Oh." Corn said. He reached over and kissed her on the cheek. Toni smiled and kissed him back. "Well, have a good day. I'll stop by around four and maybe just walk some laps until your shift is done at five. Then we can decide on dinner"

"Okay. Sounds good." Toni got out of the car and Corn watched her disappear behind the twenty foot tall tinted glass doors. Then he drove over to where Skip was angrily stuffing fliers under windshields. He stopped and rolled down his window next to the kid.

"Hey. You Skip?" he said in the most friendly voice he could offer.

"Who wants to know?" the gangly youth replied.

"I'm Corn, Toni's husband."

Skip started laughing uncontrollably dropping the remaining stack of fliers on the ground where they scattered.

"*You're* Toni's husband?! Of course! Makes perfect sense Toni would be married to man named after pig feed."

Corn put the car in park and turned off the engine. Skip stopped laughing and started to awkwardly gather the scattered fliers at his feet.

"Now that was uncalled for. I know my wife was less than polite to you, but I just wanted to let you know she had a really bad morning and that wasn't really the way she is. She feels bad and I'd like her to feel safe. She told me she doesn't want to drive to work because she thinks *you'd* key the car. So...just do me a favor, as a man." Skip was now staring at Corns forearm resting on the edge of the window. "As a man, forget the momentary transgression of my wife, and if you see this car in the parking lot, know it's *mine* and she has driven it to work and don't touch it. Okay? You don't have to be her friend. Just don't be a chode." Corn flexed his forearm. Skip stammered.

"Yeah, sure dude. Whatever. Not a problem. Forgotten."

Corn simply replied, "Cool." then rolled up the window, started the car, and drove off.

Parking was limited in front of City Hall. Luckily the Planning Commission had given Corn a temporary pass so he could park in a City Employee designated spot. There were two remaining. He slipped his car in-between a utility truck with City logo on the sides and a late model ice-blue Toyota Camry with government plates and pulled out his phone. He still had an hour before the meeting. That should be enough time to check up on T and grab a coffee. Now, what had his brother's name been again? He scrolled through his contacts trying to jog his memory. There it was, right after his cousin, Kimmy, Kodo. He'd have to remember to ask Torrent what the hell that one meant. He hit send and listened to the ring. Kodo picked up after four ring tones. Corn was relieved. He never left messages. He only liked to speak to living breathing people, so, voice mail didn't count.

"Yeah." Kodo answered.

"Hey man. It's Corn. Zis-Kodo?"

"Yeah, Dude. How you doin'?"

"Decent. How's T?"

"Torrent? He's better. I just talked to him. Said his eyes are focusing properly again."

"Well, that's good."

"Yeah. I guess. I'm on my way to go pick him up. I'm glad you called. Where'd you say his car was parked? You busy? He's not supposed to drive for a couple days and it'd be great to have a hand picking up his car."

"Man, I'm sorry. I have some business I'm about to take care of and I don't know how long it's gonna be. I can't make it right now."

"That's cool...we could do it later if it's not a big deal for you."

"Um, it's right in front of Duke's. On Fifth. I could probably do it later. But don't T have other friends you could call right now? I wouldn't want to leave *his* ride in that hood as long as it's been there already."

"Shit. I know. Tor's kinda been a loner since the Kora thing and after yesterday I'm not about to ask any of those dicks down there to help."

"I see. Well, you might wanna do a drive-by to check on it and maybe move it if they haven't already put a boot on it."

"Shit. I hadn't even thought of that. Can I text you?"

"No. I don't text. I'll call you back when I'm done here and see where you at."

"Cool. Bye."

"See ya." Corn hung up the phone and shoved it back in the pocket of his 501's. He secured a Club on his steering wheel, grabbed his messenger bag and sunglasses and exited the vehicle. He was always cautious with the car. He didn't believe in having more than one car if at all possible after what he saw in Iraq and Kuwait and Israel and Afghanistan and Iran and Dubai and...and...and...*and*, the City would always be the City. A patrol car passed by as he locked the car and headed toward the doors of City Hall.

This City Hall was a lot different than City Hall in Corn's home town. It was multi-floored and surrounded by other multi-floored buildings. Almost every part of the City was different than the Rural town where Corn had been born and raised. One thing, however, was the same: people. Growing up on a farm, Corn understood in a very visceral way that human beings were only slightly different from *animals*. AND...If there was one thing he had learned from his travels with the military, it was that Cities, on no matter what continent you found them, were nothing more than people-ranches. To Corn, Rural Folk were like wild animals, Suburbanites were like house pets, and City Folk were like live stock. Of course, there were also Hillbillies/Mountain Folk, Gypsies, and Natives...but they were more like mythical and endangered species. No one really knew anything about them; not even scientists. These people were even more stereotyped and fantasized than Black Folk. Corn and Toni shared this reckoning. They had discovered this on the dance floor ten years earlier.

Ten years ago, Corn had been State-side for a family visit and R&R after his first tour in Iraq. It had felt strange to him touching American soil after having killed another human being for the the first time; and not just one. Growing up on the farm he was

accustomed to the sight of blood. His family's cash crop was corn sold to VALERO but they also had a sizable kitchen garden and produced and consumed their own poultry, eggs and dairy as well. Once he turned seven, Corn's Momma always sent him to choose and kill the chicken for Sunday dinner. The first time had been very hard for him. He was the one who had been in charge of feeding the family chickens and gathering their eggs. This task required the chickens trust him, and they did. He was their friend. Corn brought the chickens cracked corn and gravel. Corn washed out the water dishes. Corn raked the chicken manure into the compost and spread fresh hay. On his seventh birthday Peggy informed Corn of his new duty. When he had cried, she told him to put himself in the shoes of Judas Iscariot and consider where he'd be as a Christian if Judas hadn't done his job. It was this same reasoning he had used when he wiped the blood from the brow of his first hand to hand kill in the desert. The *chickens* had forgiven him, but they never forgot his betrayal. After his first chicken-kill he knew it was what they were clucking about every time he entered the coop. The pitch of the sound they made was different. Sharper. It cut him, but eventually he had grown an emotional callous that was able to deflect the sting of the wound somewhat. None of them would come sit on his knee anymore, but they did allow him to check them for infirmity. He was in a similar point of personal development when he and Toni collided.

Toni was a self-proclaimed military brat. Her father had been a Conservative and joined in reaction to the Black Panther Party. The Jackson's were not related to Michael Jackson. Toni's Momma had done genealogy to make sure. Toni's Daddy had passed away when she was fifteen. He had been volunteering helping to remove land mines in Viet Nam. He had officially retired from the military the year before and promised the whole family they wouldn't have to move ever again. Toni remembered sitting at the kitchen table with her Momma, sister Tania, brother Anthony, and her Daddy that Valentine's Day. He explained that they now were exactly where they always wanted to be, together in a house where they could stay until they died. Everyone was safe and he was never going to war again. Toni's Momma started to cry and Toni had been confused because she could tell they weren't happy tears. Then her Daddy surprised her. He said he regretted having gone to war. He said he felt he needed to make a mends to the

Country where he had seen so many people die for what he now felt was a lie. He and another Veteran buddy of his had organized a trip for Viet Nam Vets to help locate and remove land mines remaining in Viet Nam. He never made it home. He stepped on a land mine the second day of the trip and was killed immediately. She and her family had gotten the news the day of Toni's fifteenth birthday party. All of Toni's friends were there to see her family's pain. Years later, Toni was out with friends celebrating her birthday when she met Corn.

The Chub-Club wasn't really a club. It was more like a BBQ pit with outdoor bar in someone's decked-out back yard. That's why it was so popular; you really felt like you were hanging out at a good friend's house and not a bar. That's because it *was* someone's house...and also a bar. Sally, the owner, was a plump little grey-haired lady who had weathered the 60's and 70's and 80's by not getting caught up in free love or drugs, living in an RV and saving every penny, nickel and dime she came across. For her 50th birthday she surprised her RV community when she bought in full - in cash - ten acres with a cabin and a water tower. In exchange for rent-free parking, three of her RV neighbors helped her fix the place up, building the out door BBQ kitchen, bar, dance floor, and shower house. Once the place was up and running it quickly became a local-yocal favorite. Sally was an excellent cook and drinks were reasonably priced and if you drank too much you could always camp out over night as long as you weren't an asshole. Her RV family had unanimously decided to stay on and help her run the place. Since they all were on the plump side they voted to call the place *The Chub-Club*. A year after they opened the local paper had done an article on the unique establishment and had run the head-line: *Getting the Skinny on The Chub-Club*. The coverage made business boom and it had been going strong ever since.

Toni and her friends were long time regulars at The Chub-Club. The first time Toni saw Corn, Sally had just put a drink in her hand and a pointed birthday hat on her head. Corn was approaching the bar with two buddies flanking him. The two locked eyes and Corn stopped dead in his tracks. Later in their relationship both told each other the

same thing about locking eyes that night...they just knew. At the time Corn's buddies had thought it was all a joke.

"Look at that one over there!" Burton had said.

"I can't see anything else! She covers the whole bar!" Dan replied.

Toni blushed and looked away from Corn's stare. Her girlfriends pulled her onto the dance floor with their margaritas. A three piece band had been playing Jimmy Buffet covers. Toni knew Corn and his buddies were soldiers. They had the look. Corn approached Sally.

"Looks like you have a birthday party going on here. If I'da known I would have brought a present. Who's the birthday boy or girl?"

Sally's smile was wry. "It's a family birthday. Look, if you guys are here to make trouble you can just go someplace else. Anyone who hangs here is family. You understand me?" Sally didn't have patience for arrogant soldiers. She had written letters to the base telling them as much. Corn knew this. He had been the one who read the open letter to his crew. That's why they had decided to check the place out. They hadn't even heard of it before.

"Yeah. I know. We're not here to make trouble. Just wanna have a couple drinks and try this BBQ I've heard is the best secret in town."

"Well, you're S-O-L on the BBQ. It's chili on the menu today. Chili, corn bread, chocolate cake and potato salad." Sally only made one meal to serve every day and if you didn't like it you were S-O-L, as she put it: *shit outta luck*. She also let her favored regulars choose the menu for their birthdays and Toni was one of her favorites. Toni LOVED Sally's chili, corn bread, chocolate cake, and potato salad.

"Well, OK. That sounds just fine to me. Three shots of Jager and three PBRs."

"I need to see ID." The three soldiers slapped their military IDs on the bar. Sally snorted.

"That's fine. \$5 each. If you're eating that's another \$12 each. All you can eat."

Burton was ecstatic.

"Are you kidding?! That's a fucking deal." and he slapped a twenty dollar bill on the counter. "Keep the change." The other two men did the same. Sally took the bills and turned from them momentarily returning with three shots and three sweaty looking cans.

“Food is buffet style. Here’s a stamp.” She extended her hand with an ink stamper towards the men. They presented the back of their fists to receive a stamp in the shape of a star. “Show Chapman your stamp and he’ll hand you a plate.” She nodded toward a dumpy old man half asleep on a stool next to the buffet table.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Corn replied.

The three men clinked the shot glasses and tossed back the disgusting liquor. It was a feat of toughness. Who could throw back the Jager without making a face, that was the challenge. If you made a face you bought the next round. Burton had never played before, nor had he ever had Jager. He came from a Suburban family with money. He bought the next four rounds until he was drunk enough to not make a face.

After the shots and a bowl of Sally’s chili the fellas were on the dance floor whooping it up and drinking their beers. Corn bumped into Toni.

“Excuse you.” she had said.

“Excuse me? Excuse yourself.” He had replied, and it was on.

“Now how you gone talk to a lady like that on her birthday?”

“If I bump into a lady I’ll let you know.”

“Now I know you’re not talkin’ to me.”

Burton and Dan took a step back. The band finished Cheeseburger in Paradise and decided to take a chili break. Toni’s girlfriends closed in tight behind her. Samantha was a short but curvy East Coast Jewish girl. Mallory was as tall as Toni but built like a bean pole and looked every ounce of her Mohawk ancestry. The three women worked together bundling tea towels at a local textile factory. It was boring work but good company and decent pay with benefits. The women had become fast friends. Corn caught sight of Chapman and Sally just behind the women. Chapman didn’t look so dumpy now that he was alert and standing and Corn didn’t want any trouble. They were watching the situation closely. Corn considered his words carefully.

“My apologies. You’re right. I’m not talking to you.” and he turned away from Toni and began to leave the dance floor. Burton and Dan followed. Sally and Chapman relaxed. Corn approached the bar.

“Another PBR, please, Sally.”

"You know, it's her birthday. You could have offered to dance with her." Sally said as she handed Corn the cheap beer. "This one's on me. You guys are alright."

Corn looked at Sally quizzically. "Dance with her?"

"Yeah." Sally said. "Dance. You know move your body in time with the music. I saw you look at her when you came in."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Corn replied a little too quickly. Burton and Dan were now trying to talk to Samantha and Mallory.

"Aw come on. I might be old, but I'm not blind. And a woman like me knows there are plenty of men out there who appreciate a woman with something you can hold on to."

Sally swept her hands in front of her ample body. Chapman giggled. Corn was embarrassed and could feel his ears getting red.

"I..I..I don't know how to dance." He had stammered.

"Oh come on now. That's a load of horse shit and you know it. I saw you out there doing it just a minute ago."

"That's not what I mean. I don't know how to partner dance."

"Nonsense." Sally snorted again. "You just do what you were doing but while looking at her and her looking at you. Now go ask her. I saw her look at you too."

Toni was standing by herself eating a piece of chocolate cake. Corn chugged the beer and walked up to Toni with both hands free.

"I hear it's your birthday. Toni, is it?"

Toni licked some of Sally's moist cake from between her front tooth and incisor. She was apprehensive.

"Mmmhmm. You heard right. Why you care?"

"I don't...I mean...I just wanted to say Happy Birthday and.."

"And what?"

"Damn it. Ask you to dance. That's all."

Toni turned her face to look at Corn discerningly with one eye. The two were about the same height but she was a good 75 to 100 pounds bigger than the strapping soldier.

"Well, okay, but you better not step on my toes."

And that was it. Corn and Toni spent the rest of the night together dancing, eating and talking about everything, and then spent every free minute either of them had for the next three months humping like bunnies until Corn got the news he was going to be redeployed. The night he told Toni of the redeployment they had decided to get married immediately. It took a couple days to put together. Corn had to call in a couple favors and pull a couple strings, but they tied the knot on the base with minimal fuss and celebrated after at The Chub-Club with the same family they were with the night they met. Sally made the same meal as well.

As Corn scanned the lobby of City Hall he spotted the coffee cart and headed toward it like a man on a mission.

“Americano.” he ordered.

“\$3.50.” the barista replied and started to prepare the drink.

Corn placed a five dollar bill on the ledge of the cart adding, “Keep the change.” as the barista handed him the hot paper cup.

“Thanks.” she said.

There was a covered information desk in the center of the lobby. Corn approached the desk where a young woman in a wheelchair was seated behind bullet proof glass. A small speaker was eye level in the glass and a microphone was positioned in front of her mouth. She pressed a big black button and spoke into the microphone.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. I’m looking for conference room 1123A?” Corn asked it like it was a question.

The woman pointed to her left and spoke dryly, “Down the hall and to the right just before the elevators. Please sign in on the clip board.” Momentarily sitting his coffee down on the ledge, Corn picked up a pen on a chain and obliged her request then sauntered down the hall to his meeting.

Most of the Commission Members were already present when Corn entered the room. One of the florescent lights was flickering above a long mahogany table. A pot of coffee

was percolating on a counter next to a box of pastry. Corn looked down at his Americano and sighed to himself.

“Good morning Mr. Johns. We’re glad you could join us today. Please help yourself to some coffee and pastry.” Danielle Sorenson, the appointed Lead, motioned toward the counter. “We’ll give Trent and Victor five more minutes to get here and then we’ll start with or without them.” The Planning Commission was a special council appointed by the Mayor and was technically a volunteer position for the City Employees. Everyone on the Commission had other jobs in other departments. Trent Ellis was from Public Works and Victor Coronado Esq. was from the City Attorney’s office. They were always late. Madison Dogran was from Parks & Recreation. Officer Sid Conway was from Public Safety. And Danielle was Mayor Eddlestein’s Executive Assistant. Corn was the only one receiving payment for working on this project. He was an independent consultant the City was growing fond of calling upon. He had come highly recommended.

Corn chose a generic looking croissant and sat down at the table. As he riffled through his messenger bag for his notebook and pen the lawyer and civil engineer burst in the room in an animated conversation.

“I told you, I need a work order with pay code to do that. They’re really cracking down on that shit and I can’t afford anymore points in my file this quarter. That shit eventually pulls money out of my check. I don’t care if you *are* from the City Attorney’s office. If nothing else, you should know better then.” Trent was saying to a red-faced Victor.

“Fine. But you just remember this next time your sister has a warrant issued for too many parking tickets again.”

“Shit. I should have known you’d throw that in my face. You make me sorry I ever asked. For the record, she’s got a 4.0 right now and is looking at Med schools.”

Danielle was not amused. She cleared her throat in an overly exaggerated way. And pointed to the clock.

“Look guys, this meeting is scheduled to be no more than forty five minutes. All of our time is precious around here.” Victor took a seat to the right of Corn and knocked over what was left of Corn’s Americano. Corn scooped up his note book just in time but the

pile of agendas Danielle had sitting in the middle of the table did not fare as well. Victor started to apologize but Danielle just shook her head in annoyance and sighed through parted teeth.

“Victor, you’re such a jerk sometimes.”

“Let’s not start with the name calling, Danielle. None of us really wants to be here today.” Victor replied. Trent was now extremely irritated.

“Fuck you Victor. Speak for yourself. My department is counting on these meetings for this project.”

Corn was a little surprised. He had never seen Danielle agitated before. The impression he had from the last three meetings was she was quite the Stoic. Danielle was now throwing the spoiled agendas in the trash and wiping her hands on a wad of napkins. Victor got up and poured Corn a fresh cup of coffee. Corn graciously accepted. As he settled back into his seat Danielle started the meeting.

“Victor, will you please act as secretary for today’s meeting?” Victor nodded in agreement. “Good. So, I have the agenda on my laptop. I’m going to project it on the screen.” Trent got up and turned off the lights so the projection would be more visible. Corn was grateful for the flickering of the florescent lights to stop. Danielle continued.

“Thank you Trent. Now as you can see we have three orders of business. Since we are starting late and can all see we are all present let’s skip the role call and just let the record for today reflect the Commission is present in entirety. So, next, Trent is going to report briefly on his Department’s concerns and issues with the retro-fitting of all the brick and mortar structures in all City Parks. Trent...” She turned to Trent who appeared to be taken off guard.

“Was I supposed to have something formal prepared?” he asked embarrassedly.

“It would have been nice, but no. Just tell us what you have to say.” Danielle tapped her long manicured nails on the table.

“Oh. Well, last month we lost three more guys to retirement and had to fire another. So, I’m down one sixteenth of my work force. That might not sound like a big deal to you guys, but that’s one entire crew and we have sixteen parks to look at each with at least two structures. Five of the structures are multi-level and one of them is five or six stories

tall. Four of the building's foundations are cracked so badly we've been forced to close them for public use and it has been leading to lots of other problems, including squatting. No one from Finance wants to hear about it, but I believe at least one of those buildings is going to need to come down completely at this point. It's been closed for over eight years now and is a mess. The foundation crack spiders the entire east wall. I need a second opinion consultation and evaluation on each structure to submit for budget approval...AND I need to hire four new employees ASAP." Trent stopped and took a bite of a stale looking bagel. Corn had been scribbling notes furiously and now chimed in.

"That's why I'm here. All I need is a list of all the sites you want evaluated and if there is a specific form I need to use that would be great too." Trent relaxed a bit. He had only met Corn once before but he trusted him right away. Most people did.

"Well, they are all listed on the City website. Each park has it's own page." Danielle offered. Corn pursed his lips.

"You mean you can't offer me a list of addresses? I will bill for any extra time I need to spend doing web research. I need to know which sites have which buildings. Really, it would be easiest if you could email me a list of longitude and latitude coordinates and I can just pin a map." Corn told Danielle. She was visibly annoyed.

"Pin a map? Are you kidding..." Madison interrupted her inane chastisement of Corn.

"I don't have coordinates, but I do have a comprehensive map that has all the parks and structures marked already along with gas, electric, water and sewage lines. I can get you a copy of that. It's like a book, a binder actually."

All the members nodded in agreement. Officer Conway added, "I can have a car accompany you when you go. Some of the sites are pretty sketchy and are surrounded by encampments."

Danielle was now more like the woman Corn had previously met. "Thank you. That's all very productive."

Madison slid a business card across the table to Corn. "Stop by my office tomorrow afternoon around one. I'll have my assistant run off a copy for you." Corn took the card and offered her one of his as well.

“Call me once you have had a chance to look over the maps and we can schedule an escort for you.” Officer Conway handed Corn a card as well. “That’s my personal line. Please don’t share it with anyone else.” Corn nodded in understanding and offered his card in return.

“I guess my agenda was unnecessary. If no one has any additional questions or comments we can get out of here now. Mr. Johns, I do have a form for you to use. I will email you a pdf file. Please use one form per structure.” Danielle turned to Victor who was just putting the cap back on his pen. “Please type your minutes and email them to me by the end of the day.”

“Yeah, I’ll have Stephanie get them to you.” Stephanie was the current intern Victor was fucking. Everyone knew, but no one said anything because she seemed to be okay with it and she still got her work done. The truth was, Victor should have been fired, but he had tenure and was good at paperwork. Corn thanked everyone and backed out of the room while the others chatted and bickered over other unrelated City business.

IV

Torrent

The phone on the end table rang three times. It took Torrent a second to grab it even though it was right next to his head. He was still finding it difficult to sit up because he got dizzy. Doctor Moran said it would probably be a few days before that went away totally.

“Be patient with yourself.” he had instructed. “Your brain is bruised and a little swollen. You should follow up with your GP in a week.”

Torrent said he would but had no intention of going to see anyone about this anymore if he could help it. One night in the hospital was enough. He’d had a couple concussions in high school playing soccer and wasn’t that concerned. He knew what to expect. As he brought the phone to his ear he was reminded of his stitches and quickly switched the receiver to the opposite side of his face.

“Yeah.” he answered. It was Corn.

“Kodo?”

“No. It’s me, man.”

“T!”

“Yeah.”

“How you feelin’?”

“My head hurts, but I’m fine. Just get a little dizzy when I sit up or stand up is all. Should be back to myself in a couple days.”

“Dude, be careful. You don’t know what’s been shook loose up there. You had a couple screws rattlin’ before anyway.”

“Yeah. Whatever. You gonna help Kodo get my car?”

“Yeah. That’s why I called. Isn’t this Kodo’s number?”

“It’s our house line.”

“Oh. You roomies?”

“Yeah. Hold on...I’ll get Kodo and you guys can figure this out. I need to lay back down.” Torrent put his hand over the mouth piece and gave a yell for Kodo. “Yo! Ko! Corn’s on the phone man.”

Kodo was washing his hands in the hall bathroom. “Yeah...I’ll be right there.” He was shaking his hands dry as he sat next to Torrent on the couch and grabbed the phone. Torrent leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes listening to his brother’s end of the conversation.

“Hey...Corn...Yeah...Cool...That works...See you there in about twenty minutes then... Thanks. This is a huge help. See ya.” Kodo hung up the phone and slapped his big brother on the thigh.

“So, you up for a ride-along?” he asked him.

Torrent wasn’t up for anything. He knew Corn was going to want to see him when they got back with his car and he wasn’t really in the mood, but some things are unavoidable.

“Naw. I just want to rest right now.” was all he said.

“Suit yourself. You know Corn’s gonna want to see you.”

“Yeah. He can come in when you guys get back here.”

“Okay. Where are your keys?”

“On the hook.”

“Alright, man. I’ll see you in a bit.” Kodo jumped up and rubbed his hands together before snatching the keys from the hook next to the door. As he closed the door behind him a sense of relief washed over Torrent. He was finally alone. After spending the night in the hospital with strangers he was happy to finally just have some quiet space around him and be alone with his thoughts.

The first thing Torrent had done when Kodo brought him home was brush his teeth and take a shower. Now, lounging on the couch in clean sweats and T shirt he saw his laptop still on the coffee table where he had left it the day before. He grabbed it and flipped open the screen. There she was again, her face dotted across the screen in little thumbnail boxes. He clicked the first unwatched video. It was a short one, only five minutes. Daisy’s face was like a balm to his bruised body. There she was sitting at her

vanity table putting on her morning make up just talking like she was having a conversation with him. She even paused at exactly the right times when he would want to ask a question or make a comment and when she began speaking again it was as if she had heard his thoughts. How did she do that? In this video she was saying Loops was going to have “his procedure” in a couple days. He laughed at the thought of the poor unsuspecting guy going to the vet. He knew Loops hated getting in the car. Daisy was tired of Loops humping her and that incident with the cops the week before he had left was very funny. She was finishing up applying her lipstick and puckered her lips into a kiss. Torrent paused the image and imagined kissing her lips. His heart started to flutter and he got a little light headed. Then all of a sudden he had to empty his bowels. What the hell was going on? He sat the laptop back on the table and jumped up to go to the bathroom.

It was too fast. His head started to spin as he stumbled toward the open bathroom door. Leaning forward he grabbed the door jamb and tried to shake the dizzy from his head. Finally positioned on the ceramic throne he found some relief. Geez. What had he eaten? He couldn't remember if he had eaten anything since yesterday morning's protein shake. Washing his hands he looked at himself in the mirror. He hardly recognized himself. The bruise around his eye was significant and ugly. The stitches at his ear lobe were thick and black. They had shaved a little of his hair behind his ear and there was still a bit of iodine stain visible. It wasn't that bad, but he really was a sight to see. He splashed some water on his face and pat it dry with a damp hand towel. He was hungry.

In the kitchen he found half a dozen eggs and some cheese and an unopened loaf of rye bread. That would do. He grabbed his laptop and opened it on the counter next to the stove and clicked the second video. The pan on the stove was heating up. Torrent dropped a pat of butter in the center and it sizzled. He turned the volume up on Daisy's video. He popped two slices of bread in the toaster and cracked three eggs into the pan. With a fork he broke the yolks and slightly scrambled the yolks with the whites. Wait...

what was wrong with Daisy? She was crying. Why was Daisy crying? This video was a longer one, a little over twenty minutes. So far she hadn't said anything. She was just crying. And where the heck was she? It looked like a cheap hotel. Had she finally done it? Had she finally left that wishy-washy husband? Torrent moved the eggs around in the pan. Satisfied they were cooked almost enough he placed a slice of cheese over them, covered the pan with a lid and turned off the heat. Daisy was finally speaking. She couldn't say where she was. It was a secret. Torrent buttered his toast and put it on a plate and slid the now cheesy eggs next to it, then took the plate and laptop to the dining table where a place setting was still sitting out from an uneaten past meal.

As he ate his toast and eggs he listened in horror as Daisy recounted the events that had occurred. She had never spoken so candidly before about the sexual assault she had experienced four years earlier, and now Torrent felt that same emotion that rose up in him in the bar the day before. Now he knew what it was. It was rage. Loops was sitting behind Daisy on the hotel bed where she sat making the video. A cone was around his neck and he was sleeping. He was probably on pain killers like Torrent. That was why he was so tired; but now he was both tired and fully alert. He started a new fantasy in his mind...beating the shit out of Darren for being so neglectful of *his* Daisy and then finding and killing whomever this sick-o was that had hurt Daisy so badly. Just then the front door burst open and Kodo and Corn were there laughing. Corn slapped Torrent on the shoulder.

"Dude! Did you make enough for all of us?" Torrent winced a little. "Sorry man, still sore?" Corn asked.

"Man, this is the first thing I've had to eat since yesterday morning."

"Well don't let me stop you. Don't worry, I'm not gonna stay long. I know you probably just want to chill. Just wanted to say hi and see how that shiner was looking. Ugly."

Torrent was a little surprised. So Corn had a sensitive side too. He smiled gratefully.

"Thanks man. Yeah, I just need to rest I think." Daisy's video was over but her image was still on the screen. Corn saw it and laughed.

“Double D! Hair of the dog that bit ya, I see. Rest. Yeah. I bet that’s what you need.” he joked while making a masturbatory motion with his left hand. Torrent grimaced. Kodo’s eyes got wide and he simply said, “Ha!”

“Don’t look so glum dude. It’s just some good natured ribbin’ I’m giving you. A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

Torrent shoved the last bit of toast in his mouth and closed the laptop. “Whatever man.” Still chewing on the toast, Torrent pushed himself up from the table abruptly and brushed past Corn and his little brother heading for his bedroom. Kodo was laughing. Torrent wasn’t amused. He was worrying about Daisy. Kodo stopped laughing and called after Torrent.

“I’m taking Corn back to his car. Here’s your keys.” He tossed them at Torrent’s back. They fell on the ground with a jingle. Torrent didn’t even turn around. He just left them on the floor and closed the door behind him with a swing of his arm. Corn was still laughing and called at him through the closed door.

“You’re welcome!”

Torrent had to watch that video again. The laundry was still spilling on the floor and was starting to smell. He’d have to take care of that soon. It was pure laziness because they had a stack unit in a closet in the hallway. Torrent didn’t even need to take any stairs. His bed was still unmade. He straightened the sheets a bit and propped all four of his pillows against the wall and situated himself in a sitting position with the laptop in his lap. He grabbed his earbuds from the nightstand and watched the video over again... four more times. Then he remembered there was one more he hadn’t watched yet.

In the last video Daisy was sitting on a bus stop bench on a City Street holding a new box of her favorite perfume. She wasn’t crying but it looked like she had been recently. The video had been uploaded the day he had arrived home. That was less than a week ago. The video was just over one minute long. Most of it was hard to hear because of wind interference and the sounds of a busy City street. But Torrent heard one thing loud and clear. Daisy said she wished she were alone. Alone! If she were alone that would

mean no Darren. Then he noticed something about the location where Daisy was sitting. Behind her was a store front window with a Tea Rose display. He recognized it! It was the same store he had stumbled into while traveling! What were the chances? He could even make out the same sales girl who had approached him. Torrent knew where to look for Daisy and as luck would have it, he was scheduled to travel there again in a couple days. It wasn't even that far, only an hour plane ride, though he did need to cross a time zone. He decided to add a few extra days to his stay. This was the best thing about working for himself. He made his own schedule, plus since the trip was already for work he could write the whole thing off. His parents had been skeptical when he had first told them he was going to start doing this work, but it turned out there were lots of companies looking for what he had to offer. Companies contracted with Torrent to eavesdrop on employee conversations to help remedy workplace discord. Torrent was good at listening and even better at keeping a secret. Evidently that is hard to come by, and companies paid him handsomely. He called his business Burning Ear Active Listening LLC.

He closed the laptop and set it on the night stand, rearranged his pillows and settled onto his back crossing his legs at the ankles and placing his hands on his abdomen. The afternoon light filtered lazily through the blinds on his window. All of a sudden, it was like it happened before...he was enveloped in the smell of her perfume. But this time it was also different. There was the scent of roses and the hazy sun light across his legs and he felt warm and like he was sinking but there was no fear even though he could not move his body. He felt awake, aware of being in his room and on his bed but it was also like a dream, like he was asleep at the same time. He didn't see her this time, but he could hear her voice. It was almost like she was in the next room having a conversation with someone. He couldn't make out exactly what she was saying, only a word here or there, like when he was a little boy playing in his bed room and would try to listen to his mother talk on the phone in her room next door with his Aunt Bunny. He missed his Aunt Bunny. Bunny wouldn't talk to anyone any more. But this time it was Daisy's voice for sure, soft and comforting. Soothing. He felt safe, and warm. So warm, but not too warm. It was like the story of Goldilocks when she slept in Baby-Bear's bed,

just right. His ears strained to hear what Daisy was saying...I'm here? We're here? Come here? Come here. That's what she was saying. And he did. He came all over himself without ever even moving his hand.

The front door opened and Torrent heard Kodo come in whistling to himself. Torrent struggled to wake up fully. Slowly he pulled himself into an upright sitting position. The puddle in his sweatpants now just felt cold and sticky and was starting to soak through and made a dark spot in the front. Torrent heard the jingle of his keys being picked up from the floor in the hall. Kodo knocked once as he opened the bedroom door. Torrent's face flushed red in embarrassment. Kodo tossed the keys in the room. They landed in the laundry.

"Dude, man...I'm sorry." Kodo backed out of the room and closed the door shielding his eyes apologetically. He now spoke to Torrent through the closed door.

"I guess Corn was right after all. Man, you need to either get a grip or loosen your grip. You feelin' okay in there? You need anything?"

"Yeah. To be left alone."

"Okay, well, I have to go to work. Gina and I are coming back here later tonight. Don't worry. We won't fuck. I'm gonna bring home a pizza and we'll probably watch some Netflix. You're welcome to join us if you want."

Torrent didn't answer. Kodo waited for a few seconds, sighed and left for work. If he was just going to work now it meant he was probably closing that night. Kodo waited tables at Benvenuti's on 32nd. Best pizza in town and the best looking waiters. Gina was the owner Raul's oldest daughter. They'd been together now for just over five years. Kodo had told Torrent Gina recently said that her mother was getting antsy. What Torrent didn't know yet was Kodo had bought a ring while he had been out of town. Kodo hadn't told anyone but Raul. He knew Raul expected to be asked first. Raul was bursting with happiness but promised to not let on to either Gina or his wife. Torrent could cover the rent by himself anyway. Kodo didn't think it was any of Torrent's business but he suspected he wasn't going to take the news well. Kodo was two and a half years younger than Torrent.

Torrent got up and changed his sweats wiping up his mess with the soiled pants. At least it wasn't on the blankets. He had one more pair of clean sweats left on the shelf. His old reliables; the gray ones with the thick draw string that he cut off at the knees. Those would do. He fished his keys out of the laundry and broke the stinking pile into three piles, lights, darks and oxfords to go out. He shoved a pile of two weeks worth of white, cream, light blue and pale yellow oxfords into a plastic bag and gathered up the pile of darks. Kodo hadn't closed the door tight so Torrent used his big toe to pull it open and shuttled the laundry to the machine eight feet down the hall. The door covering the laundry was a pocket door. He used his big toe again to slide it open and dumped the laundry into the open machine. The soap was in a box on top of the stack. There was a big clump of powder on the top. Torrent grabbed it and dropped it on top of the clothes and ran the oversized load on warm. His phone was ringing on his dresser in the bedroom. He didn't make it back in time to answer. He looked to see who it was. It was his Mom. That's right they were supposed to have dinner together that night. Shit. He picked up the phone and called her back. It rang once. She picked up.

"Sweetie." Betty answered.

"Hi Mom."

"How are you? Are we still on for tonight?"

"Yeah but..."

Betty interrupted her son, "But what, Sweetie. Is something wrong? What's going on over there? I tried to get a hold of Kodo last night and earlier today but couldn't get a hold of him. Is he okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. Ko's fine. I'm the big mess."

"Oh Honey, it can't be that bad."

"You tell me when you see me how bad it is."

"Well, we'll just see. Same time? Same place?"

"Yeah. I might be a couple minutes late though."

"That's fine. You know I'll wait. Love you. See you later."

“Love you too, Mom. Bye.” Torrent hung up the phone. This wasn’t going to be fun but his Mom was probably the best person to talk to about this, and what he really needed was a hug.

The Harbor had been the spot Torrent and his Mom had been meeting for dinner once a month since he had officially moved out of the house after graduation. She had chosen the spot. Four years of business school had been more fun than he had expected and she had been good about not smothering him. However, once he was moving into his own place and not coming home for the summer to work anymore she demanded a monthly check-in. She did with Kodo as well. Torrent called the driving service he used for the guys who came in to meet him from out of town.

“This is Torrent Boldons. I request a car for tonight.”

“Mr. Boldons,” a woman with a smooth even voice replied, “Welcome home. How can we serve you?”

“I need a car and driver in one and a half hours to pick up one passenger, transport to one location, wait for up to three hours and transport back to pick-up.” Torrent responded.

“Of course Mr. Boldons. I assume we will be charging this to your account?”

“No. The passenger will pay cash.”

“Yes, Sir. Please provide the pick up address and the passenger’s first name.”

“It’s for me, Belinda.” Torrent had spoken with Belinda almost exclusively when dealing with his account.

“Oh! Of course, Sir. Not a problem. Would you like Frank to pick you up.”

“If he’s available, but I’m not asking for a favor. Please don’t take him off another job just for me.”

“Yes, Sir. Understood.”

“Thank you. So...”

“So, you can expect a car at five PM at the address on file?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

“Any time, Sir. Is that all?”

“Yes, Belinda. Thank you. Good bye.” and Torrent hung up the phone. He was careful with his business. He didn’t tolerate anyone. Either, you were a team player or you weren’t...and if you weren’t, Torrent had no time for you. He could have Belinda any time he wanted. He knew that. She licked her lip every time he saw her. She was attractive but he would never take advantage. His Father had taught him well. You don’t shit where you eat. The washing machine beeped in the hallway. Torrent swapped loads; colors in the drier and whites/lights in the washer. He added the soap and a cup of bleach. It was more than usual, but the stink from his cum was more than he could handle. He wanted to be sure it washed out.

Looking at his closet Torrent realized he needed to go shopping. For work he had a basic uniform, dark wash Levi 511s, a thick brown leather belt with modest brushed brass buckle, white Hanes v-neck undershirt and boxers, assorted-color medium-starched Oxford shirts, tweed, grey, or brown wool blazer, and brown three hole Docs with assorted argyle socks. If it was cold, he added a solid color fine gauge cashmere sweater vest. If it was very hot, he wore a solid color Ralph Lauren Polo. Other than that he had his gym clothes: holy sweats and t-shirts, and NewBalance, only for home or the gym. At home he wore flip flops. Years of Catholic School had shown him the benefits of practicality, consistency and Sacrifice. When was the last time he had been to Mass? He couldn’t remember. No. That was a lie. He certainly did remember. He just didn’t think about it anymore, and his Mom had finally stopped asking about it. ‘Please God, don’t let her bring it up when she sees my face.’ he thought to himself, choosing a sea foam green Polo and the last clean pair of jeans. It was warm enough out he shouldn’t need a jacket tonight, and the color of the shirt would compliment the emerging green-purple-black tones on his cheek, nose, forehead and temple. His Mom could at least appreciate that.

Frank arrived exactly on time. Torrent placed a pair of black dark tinted Ray-Bans over the bridge of his nose before answering the door. They at least obscured some of the atrocity on his face. Frank brought his fist to his mouth to stifle a laugh when Torrent opened the door.

“Torrent. Pardon me.” he said.

“I know. It’s okay. You can laugh, but don’t ask me about it.”

“Thank you. I will laugh.” and he did, a high pitched squeaking noise that surprised Torrent. It sounded like a late model Chevy pick-up trying to turn over. Somehow, Torrent felt relieved.

Torrent fastened his seat belt and Frank asked him for the address.

“The Harbor on...”

“Oh, I know the place.”

“Yeah. It’s popular.”

“Yeah for old ladies and their momma’s-boy-sons.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead.”

“Now what in the World is wrong with me having dinner with my mother?”

“Nothing, but is your Daddy alive?”

“Yes.”

“Are they still married?”

“Yes.”

“Is he going to be there?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go. As I was saying.”

Torrent furrowed his brow and said, “Look, I’m paying cash tonight so just do what I’m asking, please. I need you to park near by and I will text you ten to twenty minutes before I think I’m coming back out. I don’t really even want to be out, but this is my Mom.”

“Certainly.”

“And I don’t want to talk on the way there or way back.”

“Understood.” Frank turned and continued laughing. Torrent stared out the tinted window back at the condo. Kodo wasn’t home yet. He probably should have left a note.

Frank pulled up to the curb. It looked busy tonight. Usually it was quiet. This was going to be twice as bad as he had anticipated. Torrent waited for Frank to open the car door for him. He stepped onto the pavement and nodded at Frank who nodded back, giggled, and got back in the car. There was a place a couple blocks away he knew cabbies sat and waited for calls or ate brown bag lunches and swapped stories. He could go sit there and listen to the game. The Dodgers were playing. He was hoping they would loose. He had \$5K riding on it.

Torrent approached the door of the restaurant. As he reached for the door it swung open and a woman about his mother’s age and her son about Torrent’s age came out bickering. Not even looking where they were going the son bumped into Torrent. The two guys looked at each other for a moment and then the son and mother went back to bickering and walking down the side walk. Evidently there were still people who judged folks for living together before marriage, and the mother wasn’t having it. Her son told her she could kiss her invitation to the eventual wedding good bye. Torrent opened the door and saw *his* Mom immediately. She was seated at their regular table looking at a menu and not at him. He took a deep breath and walked up to the table.

“Mom.”

Betty looked up from the menu and dropped it on the table making the place setting clang. She clasped her hands to her mouth and gasped standing up from the table in one graceful motion.

“Oh Torry! What on God’s green earth has happened to you?” She was now removing the sunglasses from his face and gently touching his hair, ear and cheek. Tears welled up in her eyes. Torrent knew it must look bad.

“It looks worse than it is. I swear. Nothing’s broken. Just a concussion.” Torrent let his mother hug him, her face buried in his shoulder. He could still remember when he was

small and his Mom felt so tall to him. Now, the five foot six woman seemed short against his six foot nine frame. He let her hold on longer than usual. He needed that hug, but now others were looking at them. He pushed her away gently and sat down at the table. She did the same. Leaning over the table she hissed softly through her teeth.

“Did Kodo do this? Is that why he’s not returning my calls?”

“No. No, Mom. Kodo didn’t do this.” Torrent reassured her. She relaxed slightly. “Kodo has just been busy drivin’ around for my ass since yesterday afternoon and is at work right now.”

“Oh. Well, what happened? Does it have something to do with *your* work?”

“No, Mom. Nothing like that. No one ever knows who I am except the executives that hire me. It happened at Dukes.”

Betty slapped her hand on the table and became stern. “You were fighting in a bar?!” She slapped him across his unbruised cheek. “I raised you better than common trash.” Torrent touched his cheek where his mother had struck him. Two old women at a near by table were still watching but for the most part everyone had gone back to their own meals and conversations. Torrent shot a stare in the direction of the nosey old women and they looked away. Then he turned back to his mother and apologized.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He began.

A waiter interrupted them with two glasses of water.

“The specials today are lobster bisque, caesar salad, and poached farmed salmon on wilted greens with saffron rice. The pasta of the day is buccatini in red wine marinara.” He made no indication of having any judgement or awareness of their conversation, though everyone had seen Torrent come in. Everyone knew everyone at *The Harbor*. It was that kind of place.

“I’ll have the bisque and the caesar and a Bloody Mary.” Torrent ordered.

“And I will have the same.” Betty added.

“Certainly. I’ll be back with your drinks and a bread basket momentarily.” and he turned crisply toward the bar. Torrent and Betty always did the same thing. They had what ever soup and salad were on special then split a banana split. They’d been doing this now for almost seven years.

“So what were you doing down at Dukes? I thought you said you never wanted to go there again?” Betty was confused. Torrent thought he had been in Love with Kora.

“I met this guy at the gym, Corn.”

“What kind of name is Corn?”

“It’s funny you should ask that. He wanted to know what kind of name was Torrent.”

“Certainly a better name than Corn.”

“Yeah, well, Corn’s not his given name. I don’t know his given name.”

“So this Corn got you into a bar fight?”

“No. Not exactly. He seems like a decent kind of guy.”

“Well, just what happened then? You met this Corn at the gym and?”

“And we struck up some conversation. He knows Daisy too.”

“He KNOWS Daisy?”

“Well, not knows Daisy, but follows her vlog as well.” Torrent clarified.

“Oh. And?”

“And, after my workout I ran into him in the parking lot and he asked me if I wanted to grab a drink with him?”

“In the middle of the day?” Betty asked. Just then the waiter arrived back with the drinks and bread basket. He positioned them on the table without a word and walked away.

“Yeah. In the middle of the day.” Torrent continued to tell his Mom about Corn and his clown car and fat black mermaid wife. Betty listened intently. The waiter brought the soup.

“So when he asked me if I wanted to go have a drink I said yes. Mom, I don’t know what’s happening to me. There’s other stuff too. I think I’m in Love. For real. It’s either that or I’m loosing my mind.”

“Aw, Sweetie. Yes, Love can look and feel a lot like crazy. But you still haven’t told me what happened to your handsome face.” Between the soup and the end of the salad and a second round of Bloody Marys Torrent told his Mom about Gil and Kora, the memory of Sagar and Ira’s lewd toast. Betty was disgusted.

“Men can be such pigs. Are you sure this Corn guy didn’t set you up?”

“Naw, he seemed genuinely concerned. He helped Kodo pick my car up this afternoon and everything. I think he’s alright.”

“I don’t know, Torry. But I’m even more concerned over you and this Daisy. You say this woman is married?”

“Yeah, but she wants to be alone.”

“Well alone doesn’t include you.”

“I know. She doesn’t even know me. Neither Kodo or I have ever commented on or even liked any of her videos. We just watch them.”

“Kodo’s watching this woman too?!” Betty was shocked and now a little irritated. “Let’s not have a repeat of what happened with Sagar. You’re not pulling phones out of walls again are you?”

“No, Mom. It’s not like that. Kodo doesn’t give a shit about Daisy. He just thinks she’s funny.” Torrent thought she was too. Daisy was funny, and sweet, and kind, and smart, and sexy. God, was she sexy. Dear God, she was so...Torrent was horrified to find he had a semi under the table thinking about her right now, in front of his mother. Him! A grown man with a boner while talking to his Mommy. He forced his thoughts back onto his mother’s face and willed his penis to obey. Thankfully it did.

“I don’t know what’s going on Mom. She’s all I can think about. Everything around me reminds me of her. And now...”

“Now what?” Betty was on the verge of panic. Maybe Stan was right after all. “Now what?!” she demanded.

“Now I think I know where to find her.”

“What? Where? How?”

Torrent explained the last three videos and cryptically told Betty about what had happened earlier that day.

“It was like I was awake in a dream. I could see the room. I could hear her voice, but I couldn’t move my body. My legs, feet, arms, *hands*...everything was frozen. Paralyzed.” he emphasized the word ‘hands’ to help his mother understand exactly what he was saying. “And I felt so warm and comfortable. So safe. I never even moved. It just happened on it’s own.”

Betty couldn't hide the smile on her lips. It was like when the boys had been little and were first discovering themselves. The first time it had happened to Torrent he had been panic stricken. He had woken up thinking he had peed the bed. He had run into their bedroom crying. When Betty figured out what it was she and Stan had laughed. While Betty changed the sheets, Stan explained what had happened and gave Torrent some pointers on how to deal with this kind of thing in the future. First things first. Stan said Torrent could no longer go to bed wearing only a T-shirt. He had to make sure he had a pair of drawers on before getting in bed. When Betty had tucked him back in he couldn't look at her. It had been sweet.

"Oh, Torry, I'm sure it just has something to do with the concussion."

"Maybe." Torrent had thought as much himself, but didn't believe that. He hated it when his Mom called him Torry. The waiter came back with a smug look on his face.

"Shall I bring a banana split and two spoons?" he inquired out of only one side of his mouth. The other side was trying to grin.

"Mom? Do you have room?"

"I do if you do." Betty replied.

"Yes. Please. And don't look so pleased with yourself." The waiter just laughed at Torrent and walked away. Betty addressed Torrent with a disciplining look in her eye.

"Now Torrent, there's no reason to be rude."

"I know Mom. I'm sorry. Now, can we just talk about something else for a while? What's going on with you and Dad? Has anyone heard from Aunt Bunny?"

Betty exhaled heavily through her nose and crossed her hands on the table in front of her.

"No. No one has heard from Bunny. But she's still alive."

"How do ya know?"

"Because your cousin Angie saw her working at the Pak n' Save. She said she walked right past her and didn't even acknowledge her with her eyes."

"Wow. That's harsh."

“Perhaps, but I think I understand where she’s coming from. I can’t say I would be any different if I were in her shoes. Your father was heartbroken when Angie told us.”

“Mom, what happened?”

“You know what, I don’t even really know. Besides, your father asked me to not discuss it with anyone anymore. Just let Bunny have her privacy and dignity. I think he felt responsible for the whole mess.”

“From what I could see he was. I miss Aunt Bunny.”

“Well, you’ll just have to ask your father about it some time, but if I were you I’d wait until your face heals.”

The waiter arrived with the banana split and two spoons. The one he sat down in front of Torrent had some lipstick on it. He walked away before Torrent could say anything to him.

“There’s lipstick on this.” Torrent complained to his mother.

“Well, it’s probably clean. Just didn’t come off in the machine. I told you not to be rude to him. Just use your napkin and wipe it off.” Betty took a big scoop with banana and strawberry ice cream. Torrent grabbed one of the cherries from the top and popped it in his mouth. While chewing on the cherry stem he rubbed the lipstick off of the spoon then took a scoop of chocolate and banana.

“What’s Dad been up to? Is he really going to retire the end of this year?”

“That’s what he says.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you going to throw a party or anything?” Torrent asked just as his phone started to beep with a text notification. He took out his phone and saw it was Kodo. He was mad and wanted to know “where the fuck” Torrent was and how he got there. Kodo showed the message to his mother.

“Oh...tell him he better call me.”

Torrent replied simply:

Sorry. Dinner with Mom. Call her later. Called the car service. Home soon.

Kodo replied:

Oh. OK.

Then Torrent texted Frank to let him know he was about ready and took a couple more bites of the now half melted ice cream.

"I'm sorry Mom, but I need to get going. I'm exhausted and just want to go home and go to bed." he took out a \$100 bill and slid it on the table.

"This should cover it." Betty tried to protest but he pretended he didn't hear her, stood up from the table and kissed his mother on the cheek. She patted him on his rear end and kissed him back then watched him disappear out of the restaurant. Stan was not going to be pleased. Maybe she would just keep it to herself and let Torrent figure this one out on his own. After all, he was now a man.

When Torrent walked in the condo Kodo was stuffing his face with a slice of pizza and Gina was folding Torrent's clothes that had been in the drier. Before he could protest she held up a hand to his face.

"Don't. It's not a big deal. I told Kodo he needed to take care of the nasty pile in the room and when he went to throw in a load found your stuff still in there. The other load is in the drier. I'm almost done folding these. I think you need some new T-shirts you grimy boy." She waved a very well worn and hole ridden T-shirt Torrent usually saved for the days he lifted free weights. Girls at the gym seemed to like to watch him particularly when he was wearing that one. Gina's comment now made him think maybe they found the shirt more of a spectacle than a turn on. He'd save it for the house from now on.

Kodo held up a slice of pizza in the air.

"Feel like a slice?"

"No." Torrent answered. "I ate with Mom. Call her." then walked directly into his bedroom. Gina called after him.

"You're welcome."

Torrent turned around sheepishly. "Yeah. Sorry, Gina. Thank you. I'm going to bed."

"Call Corn." Kodo hollered.

“Why?” Torrent shot back.

“Because he called about twenty minutes ago looking for you.”

“It can wait. I’m tired.” and Torrent closed the door behind him. He really was exhausted. He peeled down to his boxers and crawled under the disheveled covers without even brushing his teeth and drifted off into a fitful slumber. Kodo and Gina fucked on the couch.

V

Daisy

The hotel room was starting to drive Daisy crazy. Loops was confused. He didn't understand why they weren't at home and why he had to stay in this little room for so long. Daisy had to go back to the house. She needed to deal with the blood on the bed. It turned out it wasn't as bad as it could have been. The blood had been identified as deer blood. It was creepy but at least it wasn't pig, chicken, dog or human. Deer blood was easier to live with. There was a large deer population in the area and lots of guys hunted. Daisy was calmed somewhat by the thought that the deer was probably not slaughtered just for its blood. It probably wasn't witchcraft. The police agreed. The perp was probably a hunter.

The police sent a squad car to accompany Daisy for the clean-up. Entering the house she was struck with the acrid smell of decomposition. She thought about William Faulkner and his frequent use of the word 'fecund' in his work. This was definitely not fecund. This was acrid. She could taste a mix of sweetness and putridity in the back of her throat. It made her gag. Walking into the bedroom, it was still shocking. The blood was almost entirely black like a scab. Daisy picked up the corner of the bedspread and found it was slightly jelly-like underneath. The scab jiggled. 'Well,' she thought, 'I could just bag it all up and throw it away.' Darren's vomit was still on the floor in the corner. She'd have to clean that up too. The police had given her the number of a forensic clean-up crew but they wanted over \$5K and the Forczeks just didn't have it right now. They had used a credit card to pay for Loops' procedure. Under the kitchen sink she dug out rubber gloves and pulled them over her hands. She dug out a garbage bag and some rags and a roll of paper towel and a bottle of bleach and a bucket. She filled the bucket with hot water then dragged everything into the bedroom. On the back of the door one of Darren's old hoodies hung on a hook. She pulled it over her head and clothes. It came to her knees. Perfect. Daisy rolled the bloody bed linens into a ball and shoved them in the garbage bag. The pillows didn't seem to have anything on them, but

those were going too. She didn't want any of this in her home. The blood must have already been somewhat coagulated when it was spread on the bed. It hadn't soaked totally through. There were only a couple spots on the mattress, no more than the time she had a miscarriage and bled in her sleep. There would be a stain and she wanted to get a new mattress for sure, but at least she probably could get the trash hauler to take the distasteful thing away. The bloody bedding was another story. She didn't want to put it in the washing machine to see how it washed out. With the bedding contained she turned to the dried pile of vomit and attacked it with bleachy hot water and rags. Thank God the floor was tile and not hard wood or carpet. She had fought with Darren over the tile. He wanted the tile, but she had wanted hard wood like in the living room. He argued it would be easier to tile since they were tiling the kitchen which connected to the bedroom with big wooden double doors. She had eventually given in. Some of the splatter on the wall left a yellowish stain. She was pretty sure there was some paint left in the garage, but that could wait. When she walked out to shove the bag in the trash her police escort protested.

"Whatchu got there?" he asked.

"The bloody bedding." Daisy called back to him.

"No. Not in the trash."

Daisy was ready to cry.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with it then?" she sobbed. The cop felt bad. He removed the camera pinned to his lapel and approached her gently.

"Look, the best thing would be to incinerate it. I have a buddy with a burn pile in his back yard. He can meet you here tomorrow and pick it up in his truck. Just don't tell anyone."

"Okay. Thank you." Daisy took the bag into the garage and left it next to the deep freeze. The cop escorted her back to the motel where she collapsed on the bed with Loops and cried. Loops was trying to lick his incision site. The cone was doing its job. He had pooped on the floor while she was gone.

Daisy cried herself into a waking sleep and had the strangest dream. She was aware of where she was and knew Loops was there with her, but she couldn't move. It was like

she was awake and asleep at the same time. She would have panicked but she felt so warm, so safe, so comfortable. Then she saw him, a youngish man she had never seen before. He was smiling at her. It was like he was both in the room and somewhere else at the same time. He was very handsome, tall and creamy complected. His hair was brushed back away from his brow. His eyes were like Belgian chocolates. He began to walk toward her. He knelt down beside the bed where she lie. Loops rolled over and offered his belly. He touched her cheek and she smelled the light scent of sandalwood. She had never felt so safe, so comforted. He gently kissed her forehead and disappeared. Slowly Daisy's mobility returned and she hoisted herself up on the bed. Loops was sleeping on his back with his legs stretched out. She rubbed his belly and he stirred. She needed to get out of the room again. Daisy took a shower and decided to take Loops for a walk. They walked for a few hours in no particular direction. When she got back to the room Darren was back from work.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he asked.

"Just walking Loops. I couldn't stand being in this room all day."

"But you know this is the only place I can know for sure you're safe."

"Why do you care now? It's not like you've cared for the past four years!" Daisy threw back at him.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It can mean what ever the hell you want it to mean. Besides, Loops can't stay in this room all day either. It's cruel."

"I'd rather you be safe and bored than entertained and dead."

"Whatever. You're just mad because the blood was on your side of the bed this time."

The police had instructed Daisy to stay in the room as much as possible. The other two women had been told the same. Of the three, Daisy's case was the worst. There hadn't been any blood involved in the other two B&Es. Under garments were taken and notes had been left. None of it had been offered to the news and Daisy was happy about that. She had done a vlog entry but had been careful to not include details or say where she was staying. Daisy didn't want to talk to the other two women. They'd been hanging out

together in the dingy motel restaurant with one of the cops on detail for most of the day. One of the women had remembered Daisy from passing at the police station four years earlier and tried to get her attention through the window when she left with Loops. Daisy had ignored her entirely.

“What’s wrong with hanging out with Layla and Sarah?” Darren asked Daisy.

“Nothing. But nothing’s right about it either. I don’t know those women and I don’t want to know them.”

“That’s just silly.” Darren said.

“You know what? I’m sick and tired of being told how I’m supposed to act, feel and look.”

“Who’s telling you how to look?”

“Oh for crying out loud. Didn’t you ask me what I was wearing when I told you what had happened?”

“I told you I was sorry about that.”

“Sorry for what? You aren’t sorry for anything. Your comment just told me loud and clear that you think I deserved to be assaulted because I looked cute in my yoga pants. Well, now I’m fat and the mother fucker is still after me. So much for your theories. So much for all you men. You just don’t get it. Neither of those women have had the experience I am having. I don’t want to know them. I don’t want to be bothered listening to them whine.” Daisy’s voice raised an octave every couple sentences until Darren was wincing.

“Just remember the blood was on MY side of the bed.”

“Fuck you.” Daisy spat at him, grabbed her car keys and pushed past him towards her car. The daydream from earlier was on her mind. It was a very pleasant distraction. As she headed to her car the officer on detail called out to her.

“Mrs. Forczek...come back. Where are you going? Mrs. Forczek...”

Daisy just ignored him and shoved the key into the ignition. The car sputtered to life.

Daisy drove no where in particular for hours, music blasting in the CD player...The Smiths: Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others. ‘Ain’t that the truth!’ Daisy thought to

herself. The young man from her daydream loomed in her mind. 'A man like that would never want me. Darren doesn't even want me.' she thought. But still, he was nice to think about. What would his name be? Daisy couldn't even imagine, but the feel of his lips on her brow was warm on her face and it was wonderful. If only...

When Daisy returned to the motel it was dark and Darren was asleep with Loops wrapped around his feet. A half eaten pizza was in a box next to the TV. Daisy ate a piece of congealed pizza then took a shower and brushed her teeth. Loops whimpered and Darren stirred as she got in the bed.

"Where'd you go?" he asked still half asleep.

"Nowhere."

"You were gone a long time to be nowhere."

"You never even asked how my day was."

"How was..."

Daisy cut him off mid sentence.

"Don't ask me now. If you didn't care then you don't care now."

Darren sighed and went back to sleep. Daisy rolled over and thought of her daydream boyfriend. Between her legs became warm and moist. It felt amazing.

The next day Darren left for work before Daisy woke up. He left a note:

Hope today is better. Gave Loops his meds. Call me if you need me to come home early. Love, D

Daisy sighed and crumpled the note into a ball tossing it in the wastebasket. Nothing but net. The crowd in her mind went wild. Loops went to check out what she had tossed away. Daisy freshened up and dressed and headed back over to the house. The cop's buddy would be there soon to meet her and she wanted to be there first.

When Daisy pulled up to the house the yellow crime scene tape was broken and flapping in the breeze. It was probably nothing but she waited in the driveway anyway. She wasn't taking any chances. About twenty minutes passed before a big black Dodge dual exhaust pick-up pulled in the driveway. The side was labeled "HEMI". A stocky man about ten years Daisy's senior hopped down out of the cab and knocked on her window waving. She smiled uneasily and got out of her Honda.

"Hi. I hear you need some help with a clean-up?"

Daisy relaxed some.

"Yes. Thank you."

"I'm Roland." he extended his hand to Daisy to shake. It was strong and callous but friendly.

"I'm Daisy."

"Allen said you had quite the mess in here to deal with."

"Allen?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, um, Officer Perron. My buddy. He said you have a mess in there."

"Well, it's not so bad. Most of the blood was just in the bedding."

"Deer blood he said?"

"Yeah. Deer."

"Creepy."

"Yep. Creepy and stinky."

Daisy took out her keys and unlocked the front door. It still smelled a little but now the smell of bleach was stronger. Roland made a face.

"Wow. That's strong."

"Yeah. I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"About?" Roland asked. Daisy thought for a second.

"I don't know. About anything, these days."

"Hmmm. I can't even imagine. It must be hard."

Daisy's eyes welled up with tears.

"It's not easy. Please, follow me." Daisy lead Roland to the bedroom.

“Here’s the mattress. I think the regular garbage will pick it up.”

Roland pursed his lips.

“Naw. Allen said I should just take it. That’s why I brought the HEMI. Bigger bed. The mattress should fit flush in the bottom for me. Where’s the bedding?”

“In the garage. I put it in a plastic bag.”

“Great. That should be easy to deal with. Do you think you can help me carry this out?”

“Yeah. As long as you’re the one that lifts it into the truck. I don’t think I can do that.”

“That’s fine. Not a problem.”

It took a little over forty minutes but they got the mattress and bag of stinking bedding into the bed of the truck and Roland tied everything down.

“It’s actually pretty lucky.”

“What?” Daisy asked confused. “Lucky?”

“Yeah, I mean, I have a pile ready to burn right now. I was just getting ready to light it when Allen called me. It’s perfect. The pile is big enough I shouldn’t need to use any accelerant to take care of this. But it’s gonna make a shit ton of smoke. You wanna come watch it burn?”

Daisy was horrified at the thought. She just wanted it out of her life.

“No. That’s okay. I think I’ll pass.” she said to him. Roland seemed to be waiting for something. Daisy hadn’t even thought of a tip. She was embarrassed.

“Look, I’m really sorry. I don’t have anything I can give you right now, but if you leave me your card or something...”

Roland looked a little disappointed but was apologetic.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to help. I will give you my card though and if you are in need of any yard clean up in the future give me a call. That’s what I do. Landscape clean up and retaining walls.” He handed Daisy an old wrinkled business card. Daisy took it from him gratefully.

“Certainly. You’ll be first on our list.”

Roland pulled out of the driveway leaving Daisy standing with his card in her hand.

It all was draining. Daisy felt like she needed to do something nice for herself and she needed to get the smell of rotting deer blood out of her nose. She decided to go pick up a bottle of her favorite perfume. She'd been meaning to do it for a over a month now.

Daisy drove into town to the perfume shop. She wasn't feeling very lucky. She couldn't find parking anywhere close to the shop and ended up parking ten blocks away and taking a bus. She hated taking the bus. Inevitably some creepy-creeper sat next to her. This was no exception. Daisy chose the seat closest to the door. The bus wasn't busy and no one was seated around her when she sat down but at the next stop a little old woman bustled aboard. There were three seats empty surrounding Daisy she could have chosen, but the woman decided to hassle Daisy.

"That seat. It's closest to the door and is reserved for elders and the handicap." she nodded toward Daisy and her seat. Daisy sighed in irritation.

"Look, there are three seats just as close to the door open here."

"But that is the seat designated for me. Now move your ass out of my seat little girl."

The bus driver closed the door and looked at the women in the mirror above the steering wheel. Daisy sighed heavily again, decided it wasn't worth the argument and moved. The old woman settled herself in the seat with a smug satisfied expression on her face. Daisy looked out the window. The old woman was still not satisfied Daisy had suffered enough.

"I ride this line everyday. Everyone knows this seat is mine. They post the signs for a reason you know. Or maybe you can't read. Maybe you're one of those little girls that got knocked up by the time she was twelve and never bothered to learn how to read."

The bus driver looked in his mirror. Daisy continued to ignore the woman but she went on.

"Oh, so you're deaf too? Deaf and dumb. And illiterate." Daisy had finally had enough. She turned to meet the gaze of the old coot.

"With all due respect, which is very little as far as I am concerned, you would do well to shut your mouth. You got your seat and really now, there is plenty of space here just as close to the door. You're just a lonely old crone and I don't feel bad for you."

The bus driver chimed in.

“And neither do I, Minerva. I told you if there was another incident like this I wouldn’t stop to pick you up anymore. Not everyone is out to get you.”

The old woman huffed and crossed her paper skinned arms across her chest. She glared at Daisy, but didn’t say anything else to her. Daisy went back to looking out the window. The next stop was hers anyway.

Stepping off the bus Minerva shouted something at Daisy that she didn’t understand. ‘Geez. I hope I don’t get like that.’ she thought to herself. She had Darren and Loops, but lately Daisy had been feeling quite lonesome. She didn’t really have any friends, mostly because she couldn’t bare dishonesty and didn’t know how to consciously tell even a small white lie. The few friends she had went MIA after the attack as if it were something contagious they could catch. Her family had pretty much disowned her because she didn’t have children and most of the women she met who were her age had children, and it was their life. Daisy couldn’t relate and wasn’t interested in being a babysitter. People were always telling her she would regret not having kids, but Daisy knew they were just mad because they had kids to worry about and pay for and misery Loves company, as her grandmother used to say. The only reason she could see anyone would really *need* to have children was to take care of them when they got old. But Daisy knew that was just a lie too. There’s no law that requires children are responsible for caring for aging parents. She knew from volunteering at a retirement home that there were plenty of children who never visited their parents...and with very good reasons. Having a child doesn’t make you a good person. People used the fact Daisy didn’t have children as a reason to ostracize and exclude her from activities and events and Daisy couldn’t be bothered trying to appease such ignorance. So, she mostly kept to herself. It had always been that way. Darren used to be enough, but over the years distance had grown between them and it was now like living with a stranger she knew really well. They had a common routine but no intimate connection and very little sex. Darren knew nothing about Daisy’s life and Daisy had stopped trying to know about Darren’s. All Darren cared about was his image. On more than one occasion he

had accused Daisy of being an embarrassment. That was when Daisy had started her vlog, the last time he called her an embarrassment.

Daisy was surprised to see the store had a big window display with her perfume. Until now it had been tucked in a back corner of the store, if the store had any in stock at all. Usually they had to order it for her. A couple times she had ordered it online, but last time she had done that the package had been stolen. So, to the store she went. Just inside the door there was a round table with a pyramid stack of boxes of Tea Rose. She plucked one from near the top and took it up to the counter. Half the pyramid collapsed on the table. Two sales girls came running from a corner of the store frantically picking up the fallen boxes.

“That’s the second time today!” one cried.

“I know. I told Colleen that was a bad idea to build the display this way.”

Normally this type of thing would have caused Daisy embarrassment but today she was amused. It was a small satisfaction to see someone else deal with a misfortune. Daisy took out her credit card and handed it to a woman about her age wearing far too much make-up and a name tag that said “Colleen”. Colleen smirked as she watched the two younger sales associates scramble to repair the display.

“I knew that was going to happen.” Colleen nodded toward the display. “I just like watching those two actually do some work. Usually they stand in the back and gossip about people they don’t even know.” Colleen laughed and Daisy joined her. It felt good to laugh. It was short lived.

Stepping back out onto the street Daisy stopped dead in her tracks. That smell! She was standing in a cloud of shea butter, saffron, and pine. Her eyes darted around scanning her surroundings. She didn’t see him, but she knew that smell, his smell. The bus stop bench was right there in front of the perfume shop. She sat down before her legs gave way. She took her phone out and took photos of her surroundings before turning the camera on herself and making an impromptu vlog entry. Cars, trucks, vans and busses zipped by. People on bicycles, pedestrians, and kids on skateboards rolled

by, all in their own worlds. Daisy held the cell phone in front of her face and forced herself to be as calm as she could. She was silent for a few moments and considered her face in the phone's viewing screen.

"He was here. He was watching me. I know it. I can smell him. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of Darren not caring. I'm sick of being pushed around and having my privacy invaded. If I'm going to be lonely I just want to be alone." Without reviewing the clip she clicked the upload button to her page. As she stuffed the phone in her purse she dropped the bottle of perfume on the ground. A homeless man picked it up and handed it to her.

"I saw him." he said.

"Excuse me?" Daisy replied.

"The man who was watching you. I saw him."

"What?"

"You were just saying a man was watching you. I saw him."

The homeless man appeared to be twenty years Daisy's senior, but living on the streets could do that. They might have been the same age. He was wearing two pair of jeans and a few layers of shirts. Over his right shoulder he had slung a back pack with sleeping roll and a jug of water. He was missing his front teeth and smelled of stale body odor and cigarettes. He pointed in the direction of Daisy's car ten blocks away.

"Just before you came out of the store he went that way."

Daisy was on the verge of hyperventilating again.

"What did he look like?" Daisy finally asked.

"I need five dollars."

"What?"

"Give me five dollars and I'll tell you what he looked like."

Daisy dug around in her bag and came up with three dollars bills and two quarters. She held it out in the palm of her hand towards the guy.

"This is all I have."

"Okay." He took it and shoved it in his pocket.

“He was like five foot ten or eleven, like my height, with very short black hair and a scar on his mouth.”

So, it was him! Daisy was ready to panic.

“What’s *your* name?” Daisy asked the homeless man.

“Howie. But I’m not talkin’ to anyone else.” and he turned and took off across the street almost getting hit by a mostly white ’88 Mustang. The front fenders looked like they were mostly Bondo. The driver stuck his head out of the window and swore at Howie who just smacked the hood of the car with his palm and kept going. The bus pulled up and Daisy got on. She needed to get back to her car. She swiped her transit pass through the slot and sat down in the first available seat. The bus was crowded with high school age kids. She pulled out her phone and looked at the time. It was about the time school would be letting out. The kids laughed and swore and threw things back and forth. At least she could see he wasn’t on the bus. The driver closed the door and the bus lurched forward.

When Daisy got back to her car there was an envelope on the windshield. She picked it up apprehensively. Thank God. It was only a parking ticket. Daisy had never been so happy to get a parking ticket. Clicking the seatbelt she closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back into the head rest. Her daydream boyfriend appeared in her mind’s eye. He was smiling. He was saying something. What was he saying? I see you? I feel you? I need you? I Love you? I Love you. That’s what he was saying. He was telling her he Loved her. Daisy’s eyes snapped open. She felt someone looking at her...a real someone. She scanned the street and there he was just at the corner, leaning on a light post staring at her. How could she be so stupid? She scrambled to get her phone out of her purse to take a photo but before she could unlock the screen he was gone. She shoved her key into the ignition and started the car. There was a loud noise as the car blew open and burst into flames. Daisy never felt any pain. Her death was immediate. He had installed the device below the driver seat.

VI

Corn & Toni

“Well, tell him to give me a ring when he has a chance.” Corn was saying into his phone as Skip approached him in the mall parking lot. Corn was holding the phone between his cheek and shoulder while using both hands to lock the car door.

“Yeah. I’ll tell him, but I can’t make any promises.” Kodo replied.

“Whatever. Talk to you later.”

“Yeah. See ya, dude.” Corn stuffed the phone into his pocket and looked up in time to see Skip pull something out of *his* pocket. It was a small caliber pistol. Corn’s military training kicked in as he dove behind an adjacent car and crawled on his hands and knees until he was in a position with a vantage point. Skip was shaking now, looking nervously for Corn. Corn could see where the bullet struck the side of his beloved car. Now he was angry. People didn’t like Corn when he was angry. Corn didn’t like being angry. He had spent a long time working on his anger.

Skip turned down the next row of cars searching for Corn. The gun shook in his hand. Crouched down, Corn circled behind him and snuck up quietly. In a swift movement he wrapped one strong arm around the stringy youth’s neck. With the other arm he freed the gun from his hand and threw it on the ground clear of their feet. It landed under a charcoal colored BMW S series. Corn tightened his grip. Skip struggled for a second then passed out. Corn used zip ties sticking out of Skip’s pants pocket to secure his ankles together and his hands behind his back. Then he reached for his phone. It had been one heck of a day so far. Toni was going to be mad. He was late. Now there was this.

Corn dialed 9-1-1.

“9-1-1. State the nature of your emergency.”

“A kid just tried to shoot me.”

“Is he still there? Does he still have a gun?”

“Yeah, he’s still here. I’m a vet. I subdued him.”

“Where is the weapon?”

“Under a car.”

“What’s your name? Where are you?”

“Gordon Johns. I’m in the parking lot of the Shady Hill Mall.”

“Is the suspect mobile? Is there injury?”

“No. He’s not mobile. He’s unconscious and zip tied. He’s one of the mall security staff.”

“A squad car is on it’s way. Please wait for them.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Corn hung up and dialed Toni. It barely rang once.

“Well, where the fuck are you?”

“Baby, not now. I’m in the parking lot. Skip just tried to shoot me.”

“What?! Why that little piece of shit. He’s been harassing me all day. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Baby. I’m just waiting for the cops now. Got him zip tied like a pig. Come on out when you ready.”

“Okay.”

Corn hung up the phone and leaned up against the BMW waiting for the police to arrive. Skip started to wake up. He was face down on the asphalt. A pile of discarded cigarette butts from someone emptying an ashtray was a few inches from his mouth. He started to rock from side to side trying to free himself.

“Do yourself a favor and just stay still. The cops are on their way.”

“Fuck you, man. Fuck you and your fat cunt wife.”

Corn stepped so he was towering above the kid. Skip spat out a tooth and a little blood trickled over his bottom lip and onto the asphalt. He spat blood onto Corn’s boot. Corn lifted his foot and placed it firmly on Skip’s neck.

“Just do yourself a favor and shut up.”

“I’m pressing charges.”

“For what? Not hitting me when you shot?” Corn laughed.

Toni came running through the parking lot. Her purse flapped against her wide spread hips and ass.

“Corn, Baby!”

Corn turned in time to catch his wife in an embrace. She kissed him all over his face and hands then turned to Skip who now had worked himself into a seated position. She lifted her purse above her head threatening to strike the kid with it.

“You little piece of shit.” Corn touched Toni’s wrist and guided her arm back to her side.

“Baby, it’s not worth it.” he said.

Toni walked over to the MG and touched the still hot bullet hole. She licked her finger.

“Baby, your car!”

“It’s okay. It can be repaired. Lives can not be replaced. We are safe.”

“Oh! I can’t believe he did this. He’s just mad because I told him to shut his face earlier. He called you pig-feed.” Toni began to sob as the police pulled into the parking lot.

It took a little over an hour to get everyone’s statement. The mall’s security manager, Telly, waddled out shortly after the police arrived and let them know there was camera footage of the entire incident, including the morning interaction. Skip really was a stupid kid. He had been the one who had helped Telly install the new cameras when the pay-to-park kiosks were being installed. One of the officers retrieved the Colt Mustang from under the BMW using a golf club he produced from the squad car. As Skip was stuffed into the back seat of the car, Corn and Toni turned toward the MG.

Corn opened the door for Toni. The bullet was lodged in the door, but it hadn’t penetrated the interior wall. Corn was surprised. The body was pretty lightweight, after all. Toni’s make-up was smeared all over her cheeks from crying and sweating. Corn was feeling pretty spent.

“So, whatcha feel like for dinner, Babe?” He asked as he put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking spot.

“I can’t believe you’re so calm. He shot at you!”

“Aw, you know that’s nothing.”

But they both knew that wasn't true. Toni knew there was a good chance Corn would have flashbacks or crazy dreams now. A few months ago they had been on a picnic at a park and some gang-banger teens were shooting cans off rocks. Corn went after them then had night terrors for a week. Toni had slept on the couch to give him space. He tossed and turned and screamed all night. Finally, after the sixth night they stopped and things had been pretty quiet since. Toni had taken great care to be quiet and gentle with Corn over that week and Corn had tried his hardest to not hate himself.

"Baby, we can do what ever you want for dinner tonight." Toni told Corn.

"You know what? I think I just feel like a bucket of chicken."

"You better make it two."

"That's what I Love about you."

"What's that?"

"You can eat your own bucket of chicken and leave mine alone." Corn patted his wife on the knee. Toni laughed.

"Well, you better not forget the mashed potatoes and gravy."

"Baby, you my gravy. You my gravy."

When they got home Toni flung her purse on the couch and ran into the bathroom. A long pink box fell out. Corn plopped down on the couch with his bucket of chicken. The box fell against his thigh. He picked it up and dropped the piece of chicken in his hand back in the bucket.

"Toni?!" he almost yelped.

"What's that Baby...I'll be right there...I have to pee like a race horse." Toni called from the bathroom.

Corn pulled a plastic wand out of the box. It was positive. Holding the thing gingerly in disbelief between his thumb and index finger he walked to the bathroom and pushed the door open. Toni was patting herself dry.

“Hey! I said I’d be out in a minute.” then she looked up and saw what Corn was holding out in front of her face. Pulling up her panties she brushed past Corn to wash her hands. She spoke to Corn while looking at him in the mirror.

“I was going to tell you.”

Corn’s eyes were wide and his breath was shallow.

“Is this what I think it is?” he managed to say.

“Mmmhmm. It sure ‘nuf is.” Toni took a deep breath, dried her hands and turned to look at Corn.

“I’m pregnant. I’ve missed two periods. I peed on the stick today.”

The couple stood in silence looking at each other. Toni was terrified. She had intended to keep her mouth shut until she missed one more period. She didn’t want to jinx anything. The doctors had told Corn he might not be able to have children. He had been crushed. Toni didn’t want to get his hopes up in case she miscarried. Miscarriage is pretty common and even more common in larger women. Corn spoke now in a whisper.

“It’s mine?” There were tears in his eyes.

“Oh, Baby. Of course it is.” Toni wrapped her arms around Corn who broke down into shuddering sobs. The couple slid to the tile floor holding onto each other for dear life.

“I was gonna wait until I missed another period to tell you. I know what the risks are and I didn’t wanna get your hopes up too soon.”

Corn looked into his wife’s round smiling face and wiped his own with the back of his arm. “I didn’t think I could Love you more than I already did, but I do. I do.”

Toni laughed and taking his face in both of her hands kissed him all over. “Now let’s go eat some chicken! The baby’s hungry.”

Still holding on to each other they clambered up and sat on the couch with their buckets of chicken and watched reruns of Cheers and threw around potential baby names. Corn joked, “If you have twins we can name ‘em Peas and Carrots. You know, to go with Corn.”

“We can get a dog then and name it Lima Bean and then we’d have a proper succotash!” Toni Loved succotash. It was a comfort food her Momma used to make

when she was small. Really, her Momma made it because it was a cheap source of quality protein, but Toni didn't know that when she was a child. She just knew she Loved it smothered in butter with mashed potatoes, biscuits and McCormick's brown gravy.

"Is there mashers in that bag?" Toni nodded toward the greasy white paper bag Corn had left on the dining table when they came in.

"Yeah. Let me get it." Corn disappeared into the kitchen and emerged with two spoons. He snatched the bag off the table and sat down next to Toni who was peeling the crispy skin off the last piece of chicken in her bucket and stuffing it in her mouth.

"That's my girl." Corn said. Toni just laughed as he handed her a spoon and a container from the bag. Toni sat the container on her knee and began to pull the meat off the chicken thigh and put each piece in her mouth.

"How old you think this chicken was I'm eatin'?" she said to Corn.

"I don't know. Probably under a year."

"What?!" Toni looked horrified. "It was just a baby? I'm eatin' a baby?"

"No." Corn replied. "That's full grown for a chicken. Probably more like an eight year old kid."

"Oh. Well as long as it passed the age of reason. That's reasonable. You think chickens go to Heaven?"

"Now you know that ain't no question for me. You know I don't think no one goes to any Heaven. Besides, all the Heaven I need is right here." Corn pinched the fat of Toni's upper arm.

It bothered Toni that Corn didn't believe, but she knew a lot of soldiers came back like that. Her Daddy had said as much to her when she was a little girl. The part that was really hard for Toni though was Corn had been a believer when they married. It was after *the incident* that Corn decided there was no God. Sometimes Toni had her doubts, but doubt wasn't the opposite of Faith. The opposite of Faith is certainty. She remembered reading that on a plaque in her Pastor's office when her Daddy died. She didn't know what it meant at the time and had rolled it around and around in her head for weeks before she forgot about it. The night Corn confessed to her he was now certain there was no God she remembered the plaque and understood what it had

meant. It was one of the worst arguments Corn and Toni had ever had. Toni cried hot angry tears and Corn had stormed out of the house and was gone over night. It was the only time that had ever happened. When he returned home the next morning he smelled of stale urine, beer and vomit. Toni hadn't asked any questions and they never discussed the argument again. Toni didn't go to Services anymore. Everyone was always asking where Corn was and she didn't like talking about it. Now a spark of panic flickered in her chest.

"I'm gonna want the baby Baptized." she blurted out.

The smile fell off Corn's face. "I know." he said flatly.

"I'm gonna wanna take the baby to church." Toni sunk her spoon into the container of mashed potato.

"I don't know Toni." Corn rarely called Toni by her proper name. She was a little surprised. It sounded strange coming out of his mouth now, almost as strange as when he had first told her he didn't believe in God anymore.

"What do you mean, you don't know, Gordon?" Corn's Christian name felt strange in her mouth and even stranger in her ear. It hung in the space between them like a hovering wasp. Corn's jaw tightened.

"I mean I don't know if I can deal with that, Toni."

Toni felt like the room was spinning, like the bottom had fallen out of her stomach, like she might shit her pants, or vomit, or crawl out of her skin and claw through the wall behind Corn's back. Corn considered the expression on Toni's face for a moment then got up silently and walked out the front door. Toni panicked. Her heart began to pound in her throat. Tears began rolling in streams down her cheeks. Her entire body heaved and shook. Finally she fell asleep on the couch, exhausted from the day.

When Toni woke up the sun was shining and the greasy chicken bucket smelled overpoweringly rancid to her. She got up and ran to the bathroom and vomited. She hadn't experienced any morning sickness up until this point and she wasn't sure that's what the problem was. The digital clock on the bathroom wall flashed 10:15. Normally this would have made her smile and laugh to herself, but this time it just made her cry

again. Where was Corn? And shit! She was never going to make it to work on time. Toni washed her face and brushed her teeth then dialed her boss, Mrs. Weng.

“A-rro?”

“Mrs. Weng?” Toni was trying to not sound upset.

“Tor-ni? Dat you?”

“Yes. Mrs. Weng. I’m sorry. I can’t make it today. I’m not well.”

“Tor-ni, it O-K. Take to-day ang call me tor-morrow. O-K?” Mrs. Weng was a very sweet woman. No doubt she had heard about what had happened in the parking lot the day before. Toni had found the job posting on craigslist. She had gone on a few interviews and was offered two other jobs. She hadn’t really been interested in working in a shopping mall, but Mrs. Weng had been so sweet when she met with her she couldn’t say no. Her Momma had taught her the value of liking your co-workers above and beyond holding any position of status.

“Thank you, Mrs. Weng. I will call you tomorrow morning.”

“Tor-ni?”

“Yes?”

“Dey fire ar security staff today. Telly rooking for new team.”

“Oh. Okay. That’s probly a good thing for everyone.”

“Yes. Maybe your hursband apply?”

“Oh, no. I don’t think he’d do that. He has lots of work right now, but thanks. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“O-K. Bye-bye, Tor-ni.”

“Bye.” Toni hung up the phone then scanned what had until last night been her and Corn’s paradise. Now everything looked different and there was no evidence Corn had come home last night. His car keys were also on the dining room table where he had left them. Now Toni was really freaked out. She grabbed her phone and dialed Corn’s number. His phone rang from between the couch cushions. He left on foot without his keys or phone and still wasn’t home? This wasn’t good. This had never happened before. Sure they fought sometimes, but he always answered her calls.

Toni dug Corn's phone from between the couch cushions where it was still ringing. The photo of her from last Halloween in that mermaid costume was flashing on the screen. Her breath caught in her throat. She had a very bad feeling. She hung up her phone to stop the ringing and flashing on Corn's phone. Before she could set it down it rang. The letter "T" flashed on the screen with a photo of some huge black futuristic looking car Toni didn't recognize. She answered it.

"Who this?" she answered defensively.

"Uh. Umm. I'm Torrent. Is this Toni?"

"Yeah. What'd you do to my Corn?"

"Uh. I don't know. Is he there?"

"No he ain't here. You seen him?"

"No. He called me last night. I'm just returning the call."

"Well, last night got crazy and I don't know where he at right now and I'm scared." Toni began to cry again. Torrent was very uncomfortable and confused. He hadn't known Corn very long, but it didn't seem right to him that Toni didn't know where he was, especially since she was the one holding Corn's phone.

"What do you mean things got crazy? Toni, where's Corn?"

Toni started speaking in a very high pitched voice Torrent almost couldn't understand.

"I donno where he at! Some little nigga shot at him last night when he pick me up from work and then we had a fight an he lef an din take no keys o' phone o' say nothin' an there's a bullet in the car do an I'm real scared."

Torrent was shocked. Surely Ira wasn't so mad he was going after Corn.

"What? Who shot at Corn?" he asked. He could hear Toni breathing heavily on the other end of the line in gulps between what he imagined were tears.

"Oh, just some little punk ass bitch that bin given me problems since the day I start work."

Torrent was relieved a bit. At least this had nothing to do with him. Toni was beside herself and a little annoyed with Torrent.

“Well, if he comes home, please let him know I called. Do you need anything?” he asked Toni.

“Yeah. I need Corn home right now! I donna where he at and I’m real scared. He a vet you know. He seen some stuff and he a good man, but the military dint give me back the same man I married.”

Torrent hadn’t thought of that. The idea that Corn might be vulnerable in any way hadn’t occurred to him until this point and now he felt bad.

“Toni, do you have any family you can call?”

“Fo what? My Momma live three states away and my sister is over seas. How they gone help me find my Corn? We only live here a couple months you know.”

Torrent didn’t know that. Corn had struck him as a regular fixture. He decided he needed to go out on a limb.

“Toni, would you like me to help you look for Corn?” His offer surprised Toni. She now understood what Corn had meant when he had said Torrent was cool.

“Um. Yeah. I mean, no. I wouldn’t even know where to look.” Again, Torrent was relieved. He didn’t really feel up to helping, but also couldn’t just leave Toni hanging after all the help Corn had been to him over the past couple days.

“Okay, well, now you have my number. Feel free to call me if you need anything.”

Toni thanked Torrent and hung up the phone. She was going to have to look for Corn.

Toni showered and dressed and piled herself into the MG. She took Corn’s keys and phone with her in her purse as well. She didn’t need to go far. A little over four blocks from their home there was a busy over pass. Cars were stopped and a crowd was gathered. Corn’s strong body was lying in the middle of the road below the over pass bent in a strange angle surrounded by a large puddle of blood. The boot from his right foot and the prosthesis were lying ten feet to the right of the body. Toni couldn’t see what everyone was looking at from where she was, but she had a feeling. She just knew. She parked the MG and ran through the crowd, covering Corn’s body with her own, kissing his bloodied face and screaming at God. He was still warm but not breathing. She had just missed him.

VII

Torrent

Torrent touched the side of his face. It hurt more now than it had the day before. The bruise was working its way to the surface and was changing colors. Some yellow that hadn't been there the day before now made a halo around the green, purple and black. He winced. Kodo and Gina were already gone. He could tell they had fucked. The couch cushions were disheveled and there was a condom wrapper on top of Torrent's neatly folded laundry. Torrent sighed and picked up the pile of clothes and carried them into his room. The conversation with Toni was on his mind. Something felt very wrong to him. So far he hadn't had any dizziness standing up or sitting down so he decided he was going to take a little drive. Maybe Corn had hit Dukes last night. Gil would remember, and if he didn't, Kora would.

When Torrent walked in the bar things were tense. Something hung in the air he couldn't name. No one was talking. The TVs were all on mute. Gil was behind the bar doing something he had never seen before. Gil was crying. Gil was crying in an unconsolable manner. Kora had her arms wrapped around his shoulders from behind holding on for dear life as though he might be falling off a cliff. Torrent approached the bar carefully. Kora looked up with stricken looking eyes.

"Torrent! You must have heard." Kora said somberly. Gil collapsed forward on the bar and sobbed even harder. It was a terrifying sight to Torrent.

"Heard? Heard what? Have any of you seen Corn?"

"Holy sweet Jesus! You haven't heard." Kora exclaimed. "Corn's dead."

Torrent began to feel dizzy. He grabbed at a bar stool to steady himself and sat down. Kora poured him a shot of rye. He took it.

"Corn is dead?! Did one of that little prick's buddies come after him?"

"Little prick? What are you talking about? Corn jumped off an overpass into moving traffic three blocks from here."

Ira happened to be walking to the bar from that direction and had actually seen him jump. He had stuck around long enough to see Toni find him. At that point he couldn't bare to watch any more and sprinted the rest of the way to the bar and told everyone. Torrent now saw Ira at a table in the corner slouched forward shuddering in silent sobs. What the hell was going on? Torrent felt out of control. As he sat perfectly still on his bar stool images of Daisy swam before his eyes. The sound of Corn's laugh rang in his ears. He felt as though he were falling. Kora saw it on his face and caught him. She came out from behind the bar and wrapped her arms around him like his mother, patting him softly on the back over and over cooing a soft "Shhhh" in his ear. He hadn't realized he was crying until her touch. Embarrassed, he pulled away and left the bar. As the door closed behind him he could still hear Gil's sobs.

The drive home was a blur. Torrent needed to feel contained. He needed the confines and familiarity of his room. He also needed to pack. His flight left that night for his next business trip. Tomorrow morning he was supposed to deliver an analysis of his findings from his last job. The presentation was not finished. He would have to work on the slides on the plane. Thank God he had made a template. All he needed to do was cut and paste from his notes to the slides. The hard work was done, but he didn't like leaving things to the last minute like this. But first, he needed to lie down for a few minutes. He set the alarm on his phone for forty five minutes then flopped down on the bed. When he closed his eyes she was there immediately. It was like a reflex. He didn't even need to imagine her, she was just there, like an other worldly presence. She lay next to him and buried her face in his chest. In his mind he stroked her hair and cheek. These fantasies were so strange to him. He wasn't thinking about what dirty thing he could do to her. What Torrent was fantasizing about was intimacy, real intimacy. He needed to feel her in his arms. He needed to hold her and keep her safe from all the creepy prying eyes that watched her videos. He needed her to touch his face and kiss his mouth and heal his bruised inner sanctuary.

When the alarm went off Torrent's eyes snapped open. He sat up and rubbed his face with the heels of his palms. Decisively he packed his bag. Thank God Gina had folded his clothes for him, otherwise everything would have been a wrinkled mess. He hadn't had a chance to drop his oxfords off at the laundry mat so he was going to have to stick to Polo shirts on this trip. He packed five polos, one pair of jeans, eight pair of socks, five boxers, eight undershirts and his flip flops. Normally he would have taken a set of clothes for the gym, but he knew the concussion was still an issue and didn't want to tempt Fate anymore than he already seemed to have done. He washed his face and brushed his teeth and stuffed his toiletries into his bag. He threw on his blazer, shoved his feet into his Doc Martins and grabbed his messenger bag with his laptop. The front door opened and Kodo came in just as Torrent was grabbing his keys from the hook on the wall.

"Dude. Did you call Corn?" Kodo asked.

"Corn's dead."

"Fuck off. If you don't want to talk to him just say so."

"No, dude. Corn is actually really dead."

"What? What the fuck. What happened?"

"Evidently he jumped off an overpass into traffic down near Duke's."

"What? He seemed fine. Why'd he do it?"

"I dunno. PTSD. Drugs. Who knows. I only just met the guy. Look, if you find out anything text me. But I gotta run. I have a plane to catch."

"Okay. But, um...when are you coming home?"

"Five days...so, what's that...Saturday."

"Mom's worried about you, man."

"Mom worries too much."

"No, she told me she's afraid to tell Dad something you said. She wouldn't even tell me. What did you say?" Kodo was arriving home from an early dinner with their mother at *The Harbor* and Betty had asked a lot of strange questions. Kodo had decided it wasn't the time to tell her about the ring in his pocket that he had bought for Gina. He was

going to give it to her later when he picked her up from work. Raul was keeping everyone late for a staff meeting, or rather, that's what Raul had told everyone. Really, Raul was giving Kodo and Gina an audience for their big news. Betty was going to be mad when she found out he hadn't shown her the ring first, but he didn't care.

"Nothing. Just text me if you hear anything from Toni." Torrent replied.

"Toni?"

"Yeah, that's Corn's wife...Toni...or if you decide to call her. I'd like to attend Services if I can."

"How do I call Toni?" Kodo asked.

"Just call Corn's phone. She'll answer. See ya in a couple." Torrent walked out the door leaving Kodo in a state of utter confusion.

The flight was uneventful. Torrent smashed his bag into the overhead and slid his messenger bag under the seat. The seat next to him was empty so it was easy to finish his presentation. There was no one trying to talk to him and the flight attendant got the message when he asked to not be disturbed. The only unusual event of the flight was they had to circle the air port a few times before they could land. It was raining. The city was engulfed in an unseasonal micro-climate storm. The rain was falling in sheets and there was thunder and lightening. Shit. Torrent hated driving in the rain.

Walking through the terminal Torrent spotted a vendor with umbrellas. Unfortunately they were picked over and he was forced to buy a clear umbrella covered in hearts and rainbows. They were all out of utilitarian black or blue. But Torrent didn't like getting wet. He didn't even like to swim. Going to the beach was okay but he much preferred to stay on the sand. When he got to the rental car desk there was more bad news. They had no record of his reservation and were all out of economy vehicles. All they had left were two Ford Mustangs. Red or white? White would be less conspicuous he thought, so white it was. Torrent had to fight with the clerk for over thirty minutes before they agreed to give him the car for the price of the economy reservation. The manager came out

once Torrent produced an automatically generated email from the company on his phone and a list of all the business he had given the company over the past twelve months. It's not that he didn't have the money to spend on the flashier rental. It's just that in his line of work he needed to be as inconspicuous as possible. You had to be good at blending to be able to listen. He liked to imagine himself as a houseplant when in the field. It helped get him in the zone.

"But I made this reservation four days ago," he argued with the manager. "Look here's the confirmation email...and for the record I am a high volume customer. That has to count for something." The manager was unable to refute the evidence and gave Torrent the car at the discounted price. Driving the thing in this rain was going to be a beast, but hopefully, since it was a rental, it wouldn't be souped up.

Walking through the parking lot he finally found the car. It wasn't souped up...and it also wasn't clean inside. Torrent tossed his bags in the passenger seat and sat down behind the wheel. The smell of rancid baby formula filled his nose making him gag. Gross. Looking over his shoulder into the back seat he saw some stains. Ugh. He marked the issues on the rental form and headed over to the parking lot kiosk. He wanted to be sure he wouldn't be charged for the cleaning, and he wanted an air freshener. A bored attendant made a couple notes and handed him a pine scented tree shaped air freshener. Well, it was better than nothing.

The perfume shop was just a couple blocks away from his client's headquarters which was also on the way to his hotel. He could drive by. It was late and nothing was going to be open, but it would be a comfort just to see where Daisy had been sitting in her last video. It was odd. Daisy usually posted a new video every couple of days but there hadn't been any new videos since the perfume shop. Torrent was craving news of his Daisy. No. Torrent was craving Daisy.

He slowed the car as he passed by the perfume shop. There was the bench. It was empty. She had actually been sitting right there. Right there! He wanted to park and

press his hand to the bench, but there was no place to park and besides, he was tired. As he continued down the street towards his hotel he passed a strange make-shift shrine of some sort. There were vases full of daisies drooping under the weight of the rain. There were tall Spanish candles and a cross with a wreath of roses. Only one of the candles remained lit. It was protected under the eave of the building behind the shrine. A photo of someone was in the center of the wreath, but it had only been a print out and not an actual photo and the rain had rendered the image completely indiscernible. Whatever had happened must have been bad. There were chunks of the curb missing and boarded up windows and a tree was snapped in half. Torrent didn't like the sight of daisies in the rain. They looked so sad. The hotel was only two blocks away. Maybe tomorrow, after the meeting, he would walk from the hotel to the perfume shop. It was around twelve and a half blocks, a good jaunt, but not too far. It would be good exercise. It wouldn't make up for the time he had been away from the gym, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully the rain would let up by morning. When Torrent finally opened the door to his hotel room he was exhausted. He pulled a bottle of water out of the room's mini fridge, washed his face hands and feet and crawled into bed in his boxers and undershirt. On the night stand there was an outlet. His phone was almost dead. He plugged it in and checked his text messages. There was one from Kodo.

Talked to Toni. Viewing is on Saturday. Funeral is Sunday at an Adventist Church...in Iowa. If you want to go I'll meet you there. Asked Gina to marry me. She said yes.

Holy shit! Kodo was getting married? That asshole hadn't even told him he had gotten a ring. Their mother was going to be happy. Heck, everyone was going to be happy. Torrent sighed heavily. He had thought about asking Kora. He had even bought a ring. It was in it's box in the back of his sock drawer. It had been in his pocket the night he took her to Duke's. He was going to make the grand gesture in front of all the men. That night hadn't gone the way he had hoped. He set an alarm for six AM and rolled over and went to sleep almost immediately where Daisy met him in a dream.

She was standing on a cliff overlooking a wide canyon of some sort. The sky was a fierce blue behind her and a hot orange sun hung low casting long shadows. Her hair was loose and blowing around her face and she was dressed in a simple white gown. Her skin almost glowed. Her green eyes sparkled like emeralds. Sagar stood on her left and Corn on her right in suits of natural linen. All three smiled at him and Daisy opened her arms. He ran to her and took her in his arms familiarly, as if he had done it a thousand times before, naturally. She raised her soft face to meet his and he kissed her feeling her heart melt into his. She ran her fingers through his hair and over his face. Sagar and Corn laughed. Then she whispered softly in his ear, "Don't worry. We'll all be together someday." Torrent awoke to the beeping of his alarm. It was still raining. Damn. So much for walking. The room smelled of dried roses and he felt a profound sadness. He picked up his phone, turned the alarm off then texted Kodo back.

Congratulations. Send me the info. I'll meet you in Iowa.

Breakfast was mundane Continental fare. Torrent chose a cup of coffee and a banana. He didn't like feeling too full before giving presentations anyway, and besides, he wasn't all that hungry. He was pretty sure there was a decent looking deli next to the perfume shop. He could get a nice sandwich there after his meeting. He was just about to turn the key in the ignition when his phone rang. It was his mother. He hesitated for a moment then decided to answer it.

"Torry?" Torrent hated when she called him Torry.

"Yeah Mom."

"Torry, are you okay? Where are you?"

"I don't have long to talk, Mom. I'm about to leave for a meeting with a client."

"You're not going to look for that woman are you? You aren't going to go looking for Daisy?"

"Mom, I have a meeting with a client and then I'm going to have lunch. Stop worrying about me."

“Torry, a mother never stops worrying about her children.”

“Did you hear the news?”

“What news?”

“Oh, I guess not.”

“What news? What news, Torry?”

Torrent weighed whether or not he should spoil his brother’s big news. Why not?

“Ko and Gina are tying the knot.”

“WHAT!?” Betty rarely raised her voice but she screamed into the phone.

“When? When did this happen? Did you know anything about it?” Torrent couldn’t tell if his mother was happy or angry.

“He texted me last night and told me. I didn’t know anything about it, the little prick kept it all hush hush.”

“Don’t call your brother a prick, Torry. Well, this is certainly some news. I think I’m going to wait and see when he decides to tell me.”

“Whatever. I need to get going. I’ll call you back later.”

“Okay, sweetie. Well, have a good meeting and when you get back in town we’ll have to have a family dinner and invite the Benvenuitis.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Mom? You know there’s like a million of them.”

“Oh, stop it. They’re just fine, and we don’t need to invite all her siblings. Just all of us, Gina and her folks.”

“Good luck with that. You know how Italians can be. Oh, and...”

“And what, sweetie?”

“And Ko is meeting me in Iowa on Saturday.”

“What on earth for?”

“A funeral. Remember that dude, Corn I was telling you about?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he jumped off an overpass yesterday and I guess he was from Iowa.”

“Oh. That’s awful. Why’d he do it?”

“I dunno. He was a vet.”

“Oh. well, I will say a Rosary for him and his family.”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you. Bye.”

“Love you too.”

Torrent hung up the phone and pulled out of the hotel parking lot. Rosary. He hadn't said Rosary since High School. The whole school had prayed Rosary on Wednesdays. The vice principal, Sister Bernadette, would lead over the school PA system. If you didn't have a Rosary of your own there was a box of blue and pink plastic Rosary beads in a basket on the corner of every teacher's desk; pink for girls and blue for boys. If a boy chose a pink Rosary or a girl chose a blue one you were written up for insubordination. After three offenses you got detention. Torrent had a set of black glass beads his Grandmother gave him when he made his First Communion. When was the last time he had taken Communion? That, he couldn't remember. The last time he had been to Mass was for Sagar's funeral, but he had refused to take Communion. It had broken Betty's heart. He remembered staring at the priest as he handled the wafer and resenting his words, “Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.” Sagar's body lie in the casket and all Torrent could think was, “What about Sagar?”. Betty had grabbed the sleeve of his shirt and tried to drag him to the altar but Torrent refused to budge. Kodo had kicked him hard in the ankle as he passed by hands folded in front of his solar plexus like a good boy. Now Kodo was going to get married. He didn't attend Mass regularly anymore, but his brother went with Gina on holidays. Torrent was going to have to face the altar once again and among everything that was going on in his life, that was the the thing upsetting him the most right now.

Torrent parked the car across the street from the perfume shop. He was very lucky. It was a busy part of town. The presentation went well. His efforts were fruitful for the company. He had been called in to find out why people from a specific team within the company kept asking for transfers. It turned out the manager and one of their subordinates were having an affair. The subordinate was married. The manager was giving undue favor to his paramour. No one wanted to say anything because the

manager had dirt on everyone. He made it his business to find dirt on every person who joined the team. If he couldn't find dirt on you he didn't let you join the team. So, it was a power struggle. He had eaves dropped on five different lunch conversations over the course of two weeks to gather the information. Both the manager and his paramour were going to be fired. The company was grateful for Torrent's discrete and efficient work. After the meeting the CEO invited him to lunch with the other executives. Torrent declined. He always did. If too many people saw him with the executives who hired him it would blow his cover. They understood, shook hands and told him he could expect a check from payroll sent via FedEx in five to seven business days.

Torrent stepped onto the street with pep. To the perfume shop! Standing in front of the display window butterflies beat their wings in his stomach. He felt so close to her right now. It was like she was there with him. There was that sales girl with all the make up on her face. He took a deep breath and walked in the door. He hadn't even thought about what he was going to ask. He now stood at the counter face to face with Colleen. Her eyebrows weren't drawn exactly symmetrical and it made her eyes look a little angry, but she was smiling. There was red lipstick on her teeth. She spoke first.

"Can I help you?" Colleen asked politely.

"Um...I don't know. Maybe. This is strange." Torrent began slowly.

"How's that? Do you know what she likes to wear or do you need a suggestion?"

"I know what she wears. That's not the question."

"Oh, well I guess I don't understand."

"It's okay. I don't either. I'm actually looking for a person. I think she shops here."

"Well, I don't know much of anything about any of my clients beyond what scent they like to wear." Colleen replied suspiciously. That wasn't entirely true, she just knew from experience that men could be really creepy.

"I'm in Love with a woman I've never met. She has this video diary and because of that I know she buys her perfume here at this store." Torrent decided honesty would be the best policy. Colleen's eyes got wide.

“Are you the one who did it?!” Colleen backed away from Torrent with fear on her face. With her right hand she was searching for a phone that was on the back counter.

“What? Did what? Am I the one who did what?” Panic had crept into Torrent’s voice.

“You’re looking for Daisy Forczek?!” Colleen cried out.

“Yes! I am! How’d you know?”

Colleen relaxed a little realizing if Torrent had been the one who had killed her he wouldn’t be looking for her.

“Oh it’s a terrible story. Don’t you watch the news or read the paper?” Colleen asked.

“What are you talking about? I’m from out of town. What has happened? Is she alright?”

“It’s a wild story. Last week she came in here to buy a bottle of perfume...” Colleen nodded toward the Tea Rose pyramid in front of the counter. “...and evidently some guy has been stalking her. He blew her car up that day. She died. Just down the street from here, ten or eleven blocks. There’s a huge shrine. You can’t miss it.”

Torrent’s heart was in his throat. Yes, he saw the shrine. All those Daisies. His Daisy! It couldn’t be. Rage flooded his being. His fists balled. He turned and sprinted out of the shop onto the street. The rain was back to falling in sheets. He didn’t care. He ran the ten blocks to the shrine. He couldn’t tell if he was crying or just soaking wet. The rain was falling so hard. About fifty feet from the shrine he ran out of breath and bent forward hands on knees. When he looked up he saw a crouched figure of a man next to the shrine. It was Darren. He caught his breath and approached slowly.

Darren felt someone looking at him and stood slowly as Torrent approached. Torrent saw the look of total desolation on the man’s face. This man whom he had fantasized about beating the shit out of now stood before him in the flesh and all he felt was pity... and guilt. Darren’s shoulders were slumped and his jacket was soaked through and clinging to him in a awkward kind of way. Torrent stopped a few feet from Darren and asked,

“Are you Darren? Darren Forczek?” he knew he was.

“Yes.” Darren replied.

Torrent began to cry angry embarrassed tears.

"I Loved her too!" was what came out of his mouth. Darren's eyes grew wide and a look of complete hatred washed over his usually flat face.

"You what?! Who are you? Did you do this to us?! Are you the one who took my Daisy from me?" Darren's right hand was clasped in a fist.

"What? No! NO! I didn't even know her."

Darren looked confused.

"What do you mean you didn't know her? How could you Love my Daisy if you didn't even know her?"

"I...I...I watched her videos. I fell in Love with her. She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Darren hung his head and began to cry. "I know. I know." was all he said.

Torrent touched Darren's shoulder; a shoulder a couple days ago he would have been more than happy to dislocate. Now he touched Darren as if he might break.

"Do you have any idea who did this?" Torrent asked desperately. They could kill him together.

"Yes and no. We know it's the same guy who hurt her four years ago, but we have no idea who he is or where to find him. Every lead so far had been a dead end." Darren looked at Torrent's face and saw his rage. "It's not worth it, man. Daisy's gone and killing him won't bring her back. The guy is a real sick-o. He left me a note." Darren finished. Torrent was incensed.

"A note? A fucking note?! He left you a FUCKING NOTE? What did he say?" Torrent was shouting but it was somehow muffled by the rain.

"It said: You didn't deserve her. She was too beautiful for this World. Everything has it's price." Darren said in a resigned voice. "He was right."

Torrent grabbed Darren and hugged him hard. It was the first time he had hugged a man like that since he was a little boy and his grandfather would take him fishing. The first time he had wrapped his own fly and caught a fish with it he had been so excited he

had grabbed his grandfather the same way. Darren allowed him the awkward intimacy. All Torrent could hear in his mind were the words of the priest, “Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.” Daisies were scattered around their feet on the side walk. Torrent released Darren and looked him in the eye. “I am so truly sorry.”

THE END