Because This Is All That’s Left

by

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PART ONE

Dolores never meant for it to happen. She had seen the kid sitting there by the side of the road clutching a guitar case that looked much too big for him and a dark purple backpack that was far too small. He was a scrawny one, the result of either neglect or a kind of cultivated unhealthy look. His skin was meant to be a dusky tan, but it seemed washed out and oddly colorless. What with that scruffy hair bleached to a sickly yellow and the bits of glinting metal that lined his ears, he looked as though he were heading back from either a rock concert or a homeless shelter. Maybe that look was what was in vogue these days.

Picking up hitchhikers was not something that Dolores did. She considered herself a sensible woman. She was forty, but could pass for five years younger if she so chose. Her hair was a dull auburn and her skin naturally pale and freckled furiously from the sun. Her face was on the thin side, with a pointed chin and a large mouth that did not seem to fit quite properly. With her oversized sunglasses on, she looked fairly pulled together and conservative, not like the type to do anything terribly irresponsible. But there was something about that damn kid that sucked her in, drew her over, made her slide her foot on the break and ease down ever so slowly, not fully committing to stopping, but getting just close enough to give him hope.

God, he was even holding a cardboard sign. Hand-lettered: Will go wherever you’re going. Please help. The penmanship was too good for the
medium, giving her a sense that he wasn’t someone who made a habit of the vagabond lifestyle. Besides, hardly anyone ever hitchhiked anymore, and when people did, they didn’t carry signs, or stick their thumbs out as he did. Anyone who knew what he was doing would realize the practice had been illegal for a good decade or so. Cops seldom arrested anyone for hitchhiking, but the fines were stiff enough to make most people think twice before loitering by the side of a highway so obviously.

And what was he doing way out there anyway? There was no town for fifty miles in any direction. The land was a patchwork of scorched ochre soil and grey sagebrush stretching out to mesas on the horizon. The sky was that merciless white-blue without so much as a whiff of cumulus for protection. Anyone standing out there for long was going to fry.

The kid waved frantically when he saw the car, and for an instant Dolores made the fatal mistake of looking at his face. His eyes were uncommonly large, giving him a rather feminine look, and they were wide and far too desperate to ignore. The moment his gaze snapped into contact with hers, she felt as though she had already made a silent pact with him. She could no longer pretend she had not noticed or cared.

Dolores slammed on the accelerator. Her eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, and she could still see him standing there, a dark stain receding in the distance. The radio offered nothing but static to distract her, and the sweltering car—she was getting that air conditioning fixed any day now—had reduced her iced coffee to a watery, tepid sludge long ago. She shook her
head. She thought about stopping, ignoring the fact that she was on a bit of a schedule, that she was a lone woman, after all. Dolores’s mother’s Missouri-accented voice echoed in her brain: *Don’t you go talkin’ to strangers, now,* her mother used to say in that stern voice of hers. *You’re problem is you’re like I was when I was your age: trusting. You think everybody’s a good soul who slept with a Bible under their pillow at night, but that just ain’t the truth. Do you know what happens to nice girls who trust people too easily? Do you want that, Dolores Hutchinson?*

Of course, Dolores was never going to hear that voice again. From what Dolores had heard, her mother’s funeral had been short, tasteful, and emotionally flat. The priest had done his part, said something about ashes and dust. It had rained that day. Dolores could picture it perfectly, her Uncle Jack strutting about in the cowboy hat he always wore, and Uncle Louis, dragging himself along the slick pavement into the church with the same look of bitterness he had worn on his face for the last thirty years. The children would have been there too—all five of Dolores’s brothers and sisters sitting faithfully in the pews, listening to a sermon about a woman who had found God just as Alzheimer’s had started to eat away at her brain.

Though she should have been there, Dolores had opted out of attending at the last minute. It was her work, she had explained to everyone. There was no way her boss would let her take the time off. Things had been busy lately, and this was so unexpected. She was sorry, so sorry, and she would be thinking of everyone and of Mom.
Dolores’s lie was so transparent she was certain someone must have seen through it. If people did, they made no comment. There were no scathing, guilt-inducing emails or messages on her voicemail, although she might have preferred them. Hearing her siblings she had not seen in years try to console her over the phone was akin to torture. Their kindness was brutal.

It was not as though she had been completely false when she said she could not make it. The trip would have been inconvenient of course. What was far more important was that Danny had not wanted to come with her. He had been in the middle of what he called a creative roll and had not wanted to leave his writing.

“Of course I’m sorry she’s dead,” he had said, tossing a piece of raw pasta into his mouth. He had been in the middle of making dinner. What had it been that night? Carbonara, maybe? Whatever it was, Dolores remembered that the steady metallic thump of the knife hitting the cutting board had hung in the background as he chopped carrots for a salad. “But you have to understand—well, I guess you can’t really understand. You can’t write when you feel it’s convenient. When inspiration strikes, you really need to go for it, seize the moment.”

“You could bring a journal,” Dolores had suggested.

Danny had sighed and scraped the carrots into a bowl. “Do you really need me to come?”

She had wanted to say yes, of course. She had wanted to scream it, to cry it out until she could no longer breathe. But somehow in her mind
sounded selfish, childish. She had not wanted to have to ask. “No…I mean, there really isn’t much the family expects me to do. Jack’s taking care of everything. I just have to show up.”

Danny had stopped what he was doing finally and turned to face her. “Look, I can come, if you think it’ll help. I don’t see a whole lot of point to it. You know I’m not religious.”

“It’s not like they’d throw you out of the church.”

“I don’t know. I half expect some maniac brandishing a giant wooden crucifix to come running up to me and say, ‘Get thee gone, liberal atheist spawn of Satan!’”

“Please don’t joke about this.”

“I only met the woman a couple of times, and one was at our wedding. Besides, it’s a hell of a trip to get out there, and it’s not like we can spare a whole lot of money right now. It’s at least, what, three days driving? That’s an awful lot of gas, you know.”

“She’s getting cremated. That was what she wanted. I don’t know when she decided that…The service and everything are next weekend, since all of her kids live so far away. They wanted to give us a chance to get there.”

“I still don’t see what the point of the service is at all, really. I mean, it’s not like she knows whether you go or not, right? People throw funerals to feel better about themselves, not for the deceased. It’s all phony anyway.”
“No, I guess you’re right. Mom didn’t even go to Church most of her life. It was funny; that was one of the things everyone disliked about her. The neighbors used to talk about her like she was a prostitute or something.”

“There you go. So this all wouldn’t mean much to her anyway. If you need to go, by all means, go. I don’t think I’d be much help. And it’s not like you two are particularly close. I mean, dodging her invitation to come out for Christmas is like our annual holiday tradition. You go weeks without returning her phone calls.”

Dolores had dumped the box of ziti into the boiling water. He was only stating the facts, though they sounded like accusations in her mind. They made her seem like a callous, ungrateful daughter.

“Wait, honey, don’t throw the pasta in now—everything else isn’t ready.”

“It’s okay. We can heat it back up in the sauce,” she had said weakly.

“Great, and have it overcook? You can’t eat pasta past al dente, I’m telling you. It’s just not how you’re supposed to do it. Here, let me get that—”

After that one brief conversation, Dolores had not mentioned the funeral again. Danny’s arguments had stung, but they also had made her feel self-conscious about walking into that church. Besides, that long drive alone verged on unbearable.

It turned out she was not the only one to have such sentiments. Hardly anyone had shown up to the funeral, save for relatives and close neighbors.
Her sister Libby had reported on the service in far greater detail than Dolores would have liked. Dolores could not tell whether or not she imagined the edge of resentment in Libby’s voice as she reassured Dolores that people were simply busy that time of year, away on vacation or whatnot. The truth was crueler. Few people had liked Dolores’s mother, and even fewer had known her. She had never been what one called a respectable woman. Well into her late sixties and early seventies, she still dressed like white trash. She wore tight tops and push-up bras to hide her sagging breasts. No one remembered seeing her without her fake eyelashes and blue shadow, or the peroxide cloud that had nested on her increasingly frail head.

Dolores had always blamed the clothes, the makeup and the absentee husband for the fact that the town had never accepted her family, but their town would never have taken her mother in anyway. Her mother was from the Ozarks. It was a standing joke about the area was that if you threw a rock on one of the aluminum roofs down there, you would see little kids running out of the door for the next twenty minutes. The neighbors could practically smell the trailer park stench. Even if she had wrapped herself in chi-chi dresses, all anyone would imagine looking at her was a mobile home swaddled by extension cords and Christmas lights. That was how she lived, and that was how she would be remembered after she died.

Almost exactly a year had passed since the funeral. For six months Dolores had sat catatonic in front of the television, in front of the computer, in front of the sink washing dishes in scalding hot water until her hands were red
and chapped and shriveled. The absence of grief hit her more than grief itself, the hollow where there should have been overwhelming sadness or pain. She felt nothing, and that made her the most horrible, wretched bitch to ever walk the earth.

Though she couldn’t seem to let it out, the strain had started to show in subtle ways. Sleep-deprivation left her a wan reflection of her former self and the quality of her work had begun to decline. She had been an executive organizer for an office building, which sounded impressive until one realized that it was a glorified secretary job. The position had been mind-numbing and the work monotonous, but it had paid decently well. After a few months or so of her sliding performance, the company had given her two weeks notice. The manager had told her to seek professional help. Internally, she had told him to go to hell. Instead of uttering the words aloud though, she had walked meekly through the door.

Not until she found herself in the grocery store, utterly incapable of choosing a brand of peanut butter, did she start to cry. A store employee had to come over and ask her what was wrong. She had replied in hoarse, strangled breaths that her husband wanted non-hydrogenated peanut butter and all they had was Skippy and Jif.

And now Dolores was finally driving back, as she should have on that day one year ago. Only this time it was not for the funeral. No, apparently her mother had left her a set of fine china. Dolores knew the one. The plates were white with pale lilies painted around the border. Every good southern
woman, no matter how humble her origins, absolutely had to have a set of fine china on hand. Because, God forbid, what if company should come over and they should have to eat off of ordinary plates?

If Dolores had asked Danny, he probably would have pointed out that he had seen similar plates at Crate & Barrel when they were at the mall, and that her sentimental attachment to material goods was really just a means of emotional transferal. She no longer asked Danny about much anymore.

“It’s the least I can do to take the dishes off everyone’s hands,” she said aloud. There she was, all alone in the middle of the desert, talking to herself already like a crazy lady.

Shit. She wanted to do something, anything that would take her mind off the road. The radio was long dead, with nothing to offer but the steady drone of white noise. She fingered her metal cigarette case and wished that it contained cigarettes. Some days were not made for quitting.

If she could call someone, anyone really, that might help. Just pick up the cellphone and dial a number and start talking to hear the sound of another human voice. The combination of the beads of sweat soaking into the back of her neck and the sound of her asthmatic car huffing in the vast silence were enough to make her half crazy. She felt hard and brittle.

There was no one to call though, even if she somehow miraculously got reception out in this great crater of a landmass. Danny was simply out of the question. Her friend Julie back home was already “concerned” about her and had hinted on more than one occasion that Dolores might wish to consider
seeking some professional help. Any of her relatives would butcher her with their well-intentioned reassurances.

Worse, she would feel compelled to mention the hitchhiker kid. The more she thought about it, the more she felt personally responsible. No one could survive long out there, and the road was hardly well-trafficked. If he did get picked up, it would probably be by some junkie, rapist or murderer. Odds were though that he’d pass out from dehydration in the middle of a godforsaken wasteland with no one to see him slump onto the dirt. Chatting about the weather, or sports, while knowing she was partially responsible for the boy’s fate would feel like a lie, and she was a terrible liar. She would crack. Confess.

_Goddamnit._ With a screeching, very illegal U-turn, she swung back up the road, thinking back to how long ago she had seen the kid. She tried to tune out the voices of both Danny and her mother telling her that she was too indecisive, that her problem was that she did not follow through on things, that she should have either picked the kid up ten minutes ago or moved on with her life. Scanning the road, Dolores had a panicky thought that something might have already happened to him.

After anxiously scanning the roadside, she saw his dark form standing every bit as forlornly as before. Wary, he backed away from the road a bit when he saw her, crossing onto the cracked earth just beyond the asphalt. She stopped the car and rolled down the window.
“What the hell are you doing out here?” That wasn’t the most comforting question, but the phrase sort of slipped out. The kid’s body relaxed instantly and he smiled broadly.

“Oh man, thank God you came along. I thought I was gonna keel over any second. Thanks, lady, you’re an angel.” He opened the car door casually, as though he had been expecting this all along, threw his backpack and guitar case in the backseat, and plopped down beside her before she could protest.

“Now, hold a second…” she began. “Look, you should know I don’t normally do this.” Why did she feel he should know that? Was there something disreputable, unsavory, about people who would pick up a strange hitchhiker, let alone a male one? The kid couldn’t have weighed over a hundred and thirty pounds, and he looked about seventeen.

“I don’t normally do this either, lady. Trust me, I wasn’t asking to get stuck way out in the middle of nowhere. Hell, I’m not even sure which part of nowhere I’m in right now. Does this little patch of dirt even have a name?”

“I think they call it Arizona.” He had a habit of fidgeting while he spoke, alternately twisting the gauge in his left ear and toying with a strand of sweaty, yellow hair. It struck her that he was remarkably good-looking, though not in a conventional way.

“Okay, cool, I didn’t go too far then. I was coming out of Phoenix. At least I haven’t left the state yet.”
“Are you from Phoenix?” Even as she asked the question, Dolores knew the answer. A faint, unidentifiable accent inflected his words. He certainly hadn’t been born and raised in Phoenix.

“No, no, Texas actually. One of the suburbs of Houston.”

“Which one? I have some family down there.” Dolores kept her fingers wrapped tight around the key, still planted in the ignition. The metal felt hot, and sweat was seeping into the cracks of her index and thumb.

“I was born there, but only lived in the area ‘til I was two. I’ve got family, but they’re in the city itself and we don’t visit often.” He did not appear to notice the ‘we’ slip off his tongue, despite the fact that he was clearly not part of any ‘we’ at the moment. “Are we going to go? Hey, you’re not having second thoughts about this, are you?”

“I’ve never…I just want some idea of who you are.”

The kid smiled. It was a disarmingly broad, face-splitting grin entirely devoid of anything underhanded. It made him look even younger than she had first thought. “Name’s Kevin Henri.” He pronounced the last name On-ree—was that French? She took the proffered hand, and he gave her a good, solid handshake. Not too firm, but not too loose. It felt practiced. “Pleasure to meet you.” She finally turned the key, and the engine rumbled back into life.

“Okay, well, I’m Dolores,” she said. No last name. Her husband’s seemed the most natural choice, but it no longer felt entirely right to her.

“Just call me Dolores,” she added unnecessarily. “I can drop you at the next city I hit. I don’t feel comfortable leaving you out here in ninety-degree heat.
You wouldn’t make it through the day. How long were you out there anyway?”

Kevin looked down at his wristwatch. It was either a fake or fantastically expensive. Dolores could never tell the difference. She found herself staring at the slightly faded tattoo on his wrist, a heart made of coiling snakes.

“You like it?” he asked, as he caught her looking. “Got it a couple years ago. See, you don’t have to be suspicious of me—I wear my heart on my sleeve.” He smiled to show he knew it was a dumb joke.

“Cute,” she said, and in spite of herself she thought it was.

“You got any?” he asked.

“Any what?”

“Tattoos.”

She hesitated. “I do have one, but I got it when I was just a dumb kid.”

“Funny, that’s exactly when I got mine,” he said. He was fiddling with the dials on the dashboard. “This thing get AC?”

“It’s been busted for the last six months. It works, but only sort of.”

“Damn, lady, how do you survive? Sorry—I cut you off though. So, where’s this tattoo? Or can you not tell me?” She saw him glance up with a smirk. Cheeky little bastard.

“No, no, nothing like that,” she said, though not defensively. “It was the day I turned eighteen—my birthday present to myself. My best friend and I were only four days apart—I was the younger one—so we promised
ourselves we’d have to do something. I smoked my first cigarette that day too. Like I said, I was a dumb kid.”

“You smoke now?”

“I quit a year and a half ago,” she said, then added. “But yes, I do. It’s a terrible habit.”

“The worst,” he said cheerfully. “I try not to much anymore, but they’re so good sometimes, you know? Like, at the end of the night, doesn’t everything feel more complete if you have one? Nonsmokers don’t get that, see. They don’t understand that sometimes a cigarette feels so fucking great. Especially if you haven’t smoked in a while and you get that little bit of a head rush that makes you wanna swoon and man.”

“You look much too young to be smoking.”

“I look young for my age. Hey, is that where you keep ‘em?” He pointed to the antique metal cigarette box her hand was reaching for yet again. “I’ve never even seen one of these. It’s like it’s from the 1920s or something. It looks really valuable.”

“Something like that.”

“Where’s it come from? And how’d you get this? It’s so cool.”

“Funny, I don’t remember. I couldn’t even tell you how old it is for sure. It’s sort of been in my family for a while. It’s special.” She did not know why she had bothered to add that last part.

“Can I hold it?”

“You talk about it like it’s a child.”
He grinned. “And you talk about it like it’s your baby, so I guess that makes sense. Seriously, do you mind?”

Dolores hesitated. “Okay, just don’t open it. And be careful.”

“Hey, hey, hey, don’t worry. I won’t let anything bad happen.” He picked it up and looked it over admiringly. “Damn, well, someone in your family had class.”

“You’d like to think so. Can you put it down—I don’t like people playing with it.”

He gave her a funny look, “What if I opened it right now. Would that be bad?”

“Don’t do that, kid.”

“What if I—” He moved his hand to the clasp.

“Don’t!” she almost shouted, startling them both. Recovering some semblance of composure, she said, “Just give it back to me. Please.” She took one hand off the wheel and held it extended.

After a moment’s hesitation, he forked it over, then said casually, “What brand’s your poison?”

“God,” she said. She hadn’t had a cigarette in a couple weeks now, and she still found her fingers curling around that box. They seemed to have a mind of her own sometimes, and no matter how much she told herself she enjoyed the clean lungs and the satisfaction of knowing she would live past fifty, those fingers kept right on caressing the box lovingly. She missed the sharp intake and heat deep down in her lungs and even the taste. “Lucky
Strikes, but I was never picky. Honestly, at this point I’d smoke anything. Even Newport.” What was she saying? There were times when she wanted to kiss someone just to suck the smoke out of their throat.

“Well, I’ve smoked, I was never picky. Honestly, at this point I’d smoke anything. Even Newports.” What was she saying? There were times when she wanted to kiss someone just to suck the smoke out of their throat.

“Newports are disgusting,” he said. “They’re like a ghetto cigarette—and they’re so, so, I don’t know, crunchy, almost, you know? And that menthol taste…”

“They’re so bad for you. I don’t even want to put in those things.”

“That’s why I use straight tobacco. Rolling your own is way cheaper anyway. The cigarette companies really screw you over.”

“But not as safe.”

“Hey, they’re cigarettes, it’s not like they’re ever good for you. Besides, I use filters. And Bali Shag is the best stuff. Really, it’s so good. I swear it’s almost worth it. Hey, you’re getting all sneaky. You changed the subject and never told me about your tattoo.”

“It’s not important or anything. There’s no good story to go with it.”

“Don’t hold out on me now. I really want to know.”

In the rearview mirror, the road stretched out behind them, exactly identical to the image in front of her, a black line fading into the shimmering, liquid mercury of a mirage. There were no landmarks anywhere, no other signs of people save the dark silhouettes of telephone wires against the cloudless desert sky. It was going to be a long trip, and the kid chattering away next to her made surprisingly pleasant company.
“Why don’t you tell me how you got yours first?” she asked. “You definitely don’t look old enough to have a tattoo.”

“Why do most people get heart tattoos?” he answered. “It was for a girl.”

“Someone special?”

He shrugged. “She seemed pretty special at the time. Enough to permanently mark up my body anyway.”

“Just curious, what’d she think of it?”

“I don’t think she thought about it much one way or the other. We broke up a month later.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. You think everything’s so much bigger and more important at that age.” He said this as though he were recalling the distant past, rather than something that must have happened a year or two ago at most.

“Do you wish you hadn’t gotten it?”

“Occasionally, yeah. But it’s a part of me now. My skin wouldn’t look right without that little patch of ink there. Besides, tattoos are fun. Once you get one, it’s hard to stop. It’s like your whole body’s this canvas you didn’t even know you had.”

“Until you realize that you don’t want them anymore and you’re stuck with ‘em.”

“Which brings us back to your tattoo—how do we keep getting so sidetracked? Spill.”
Dolores switched her left foot onto the gas and twisted her ankle slightly to show him the back of her leg. She seldom wore shorts, even in the hottest months of the summer, and the skin was still a shocking white compared with the rest of her body. There was a blueish undertone to her pallor that matched the faded green of the lettering.

“Amistad,” he read. “Hablas español?”

“Poco. I used to know more, but never enough to justify having it on my body. My best got an identical one on her hip. It was a stupid decision. We both hated them after a while.”

“Did you have a falling out or something?”

“Not exactly. We…the tattoos didn’t make sense anymore, really. We outgrew them faster than we thought. She started getting hers removed almost immediately. I started the treatments, but they’re so expensive. I had seven at almost seven hundred bucks a pop before I threw in the towel. As far as I can tell, they only made it look worse. Maybe I’ll finish someday.”

“It’s not a terrible one. There are definitely more embarrassing things.”

“That’s true. It could have been a dragon or Chinese characters.”

“Aw, don’t say that,” he replied. “I have a Chinese character.”

“Do you speak Chinese?”

“A little Cantonese and a few phrases in Mandarin. I worked in a restaurant for a bit. More than half the kitchen staff had been smuggled in through Canada.”
“What’s it say?”

“One of the only phrases I know: ‘Go fuck your mother.’”

“You got that printed on your body?”

“Actually, it doesn’t really say that,” he answered. “It’s just that no one can read it, so I tell everyone something different.”

“What does it really say?”

“‘Spicy beef and broccoli.’”

“Okay, seriously, what does it say?” Dolores asked.

“Ah, that’s a secret.” The car hummed softly in the pause. “I told you all about my first tattoo. See, we made a clean swap, one for one. You’d have to tell me something else interesting to learn about this one.”

“What do you want to know?” she pressed.

“Got any horrible, deep, dark secrets?”

“No.”

“Then no deal.” Kevin leaned back and pulled on a pair of aviator sunglasses. “Alright, I’m going to take a nap, I think.” With that, he slumped back in his seat, tilted his head up, pulled a pair of aviators down over his eyes and went silent. The conversation was over as abruptly as it had begun.

For the next hour and forty-three minutes, Dolores drove on with only the sound of the engine wheezing along. Occasionally, she caught herself looking over to make sure that he was still sitting there. Save for terse pleasantries with cheerful, blonde waitresses bringing her the essential morning mugs of coffee, Dolores had kept mostly to herself on her trip. The
thought crossed her mind that she was hallucinating some punk kid hanging around the heart of nowhere.

It was strange; she hadn’t needed to take this trip alone. Julie, ever the melodramatic, had offered to come with her to provide some sort of moral support. This had been a slightly tempting offer, but Dolores knew that Julie’s vision of the trip was quite different from her own. Dolores had not wanted long days of healing and bonding time over margaritas. She knew Julie probably secretly would be on her own private suicide watch and would feel that she was saving Dolores.

For Dolores, the trip had a purpose that had nothing to do with therapy. She had envisioned her trip as a kind of necessary journey, a spiritual voyage that ought to be conducted in solitude. Or maybe it was nothing more than an offer of repentance. Maybe this was her pitiful, inadequate way of subconsciously apologizing. Or maybe it made no sense whatsoever—they could have just mailed the damn plates with a airplane’s worth of bubblewrap—but she was tired of listening to other people’s advice. She had told everyone that she needed time alone to hear herself think. The reality was that she was afraid she might break down, and she didn’t want anyone around to see it.

By now she and Danny were a full two months into their separation. Neither of them wanted to use the word “divorce,” because it sounded so final and definite and inescapable. Divorce was forever, even more so than marriage. Divorced husbands or wives suddenly took on an entirely new
status. Their former spouses would stop referring to them by name and instead simply refer to them as “my ex.” Reducing Danny to such a title made it seem like he wasn’t even a person.

While on the road the last few days, she had found herself thinking of him more fondly than she normally would have allowed. Back when they had first met he’d been a scruffy grad student straight out of your stereotypical Philosophy 101 class. His beard had been on the messy side, his round, rimless glasses were slightly askew, and he had had that distant, dreamy smile that had made her want to ask him what he was thinking and then listen to him talk about it for hours.

And that was exactly what she had spent the last five years of marriage doing. It turned out that Danny thought himself even more brilliant than she had. He wrote poetry in a moleskin that he kept beside his bed. On occasion, he would read it to her, those long, winding pages that aped T.S. Eliot shamelessly and spoke of how the ignorant masses sleepwalked through life, blind and dumb like animals. He used words like “solipsist”. Many of their conversations, in retrospect, were more like lectures Dolores attended. She would sit with the quiet obedience of a child and listen to him blather about Nietzsche to her blank, receptive face. She was not ignorant, but these great thinkers were not her domain, and she never felt she had the right to interject.

Even so, over the last two months away from home she had found herself missing him terribly. She woke up every morning with one arm stretched out to the place where he should have been. Despite everything that
had happened between them, she still kept her wedding ring in her pocket at all times. When no one was around, she would slip the ring on just because the cool metal felt right on her knuckle.

“I don’t think I’m in love with you anymore.”

It was so easy to forget that he had said that. How could he have said that?

“It’s not that I don’t love you. I’ll always love you, but not in the way that I’m supposed to.”

What did that even mean? That was what high school students told each other. He had said it gently, tenderly even, but he might as well have stabbed a screwdriver into her gut for all the good it did. He hadn’t meant it, of course. Because no matter how suffocated she sometimes felt, no matter how closed off and trapped and isolated and desperate, she had known that they loved each other in some warped way. They did. She was sure.

A fork shimmered behind a faded green sign. It read “River Falls,” as if the area had seen any significant body of water in the last two centuries.

“Hey, kid—kid, wake up?” Kevin Henri stirred with an almost theatrical laziness, making her half-wonder if he had ever been asleep at all.

“Look…I need to know where you’re heading. It looks like there’s a town in another forty miles but it’s probably not going to be very big. Are you going to be okay?”

“I can’t exactly ask more of you, can I? I mean, you didn’t have to take me in the first place…you were the only car I’d even seen.”
“What would you have done if I hadn’t stopped?”

“Waited, I guess.”

She wasn’t sure what to say, so she asked, “How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Seriously? You look awfully young to me.”

“How old did you think I was?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, you look pretty young…”

“And like I said before, I look young for my age. Everyone says so. I have a baby face. Not my fault. I can take care of myself, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ll be fine. You’ve been great. Really.”

Clearly he had no concept of how far out of the way they were. The town of River Falls was likely to be a dive, and if they found so much as a gas station and a diner there, they’d be lucky. Leaving him there would be like throwing him into the open ocean and hoping that he could swim.

“Look…” she began. What she was about to suggest next seemed absurd. “I have to find a place to sleep for tonight anyway. I’m not looking to spend a lot of cash here, but if I find a place…I could get you a room. I don’t like the idea of you sleeping on the street. I’d feel irresponsible.”

Kevin raised an eyebrow over his sunglasses. Dolores took her eyes off the road and saw her own face, stretched and tanned and slightly flushed from the endless heat, looking back at her.
“Lady, did you just ask me to go to a motel with you? That’s a little fast, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t mean—“

“I’m teasing you. It’s cool.” He smiled.

“I don’t want to feel responsible if anything happens to you. You do have people you can call, right? Someone who knows where you are?”

“Not especially, no.”

“Doesn’t anyone know where you are?”

“I mean, people know I’m gone. I wasn’t exactly planning on ending up where you found me today. You’ve already helped me a lot though—I’d feel bad asking you for anything else, to tell the truth.”

“It’s not like charity,” she said quickly. Her mother had always had an intense disdain for charity. The fact that they never accepted it somehow distinguished them from others in their financial situation. “And I understand if you don’t want it. Motels are cheap out here—I bet you could get your own room for less than forty bucks.”

“Yeah, I could use a place for the night. I was half planning on sleeping under the stars though, you know?” Dolores envisioned this scrawny city kid huddled up by a sagebrush in his T-shirt, shivering the night away with the lizards and the scorpions.

“I bet you’ve never been camping a day in your life.”

“You don’t know that. You just met me.”
“I’m guessing,” Dolores told him. “Somehow you don’t look like someone who goes camping a whole lot. You don’t even look like someone who goes hitchhiking a lot.”

“You’re right about the second one, but wrong on the first. I’ve slept outside too, plenty of times. I used to do it all the time when I was little, you know? My family used to be into that whole s’mores and kumbaya singing and all that shit.”

“Alright, so you went camping in some cabin where they probably have flushing toilets and running water and a microwave to fix oatmeal in. Not the same deal.”

He didn’t answer her, but instead asked, “What did you make of me then, when you first saw me? Be honest. I can take it.”

Dolores inhaled deeply. “I wasn’t really sure what to think of you. Mostly I thought you were a little crazy. Or in a lot of trouble. Or both. There’s no good reason for you to be out here, and you don’t look like you belong in this area.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

“I guess I still don’t know much about you really. Except that you’re technically Texan.”

“Hey, there’s no “technically” about it. I was born there, right? That counts as much as anything.”

“But you don’t have a Texas accent. Or a Texan sounding name. On-ree? Isn’t that French?”
“Right you are.”

“So I don’t think I understand you.”

He held up his wrist again with its heart-shaped tattoo. “I told you: heart on my sleeve. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Fine. Why were you out in the middle of the desert?”

“Funny story, that. See, I’ve been hitching rides for the last two weeks now. I’m doing the whole solo adventure, crossing mountains and borders and all of that. It’s something I’ve wanted to do ever since I was little. The last ride I got was with this truck driver named Curly. At least he said his name was Curly. I suppose I should have known better. Never take rides from a guy named after one of the Three Stooges, right? Anyway, so Curly seems all right at first. He’s a little weird, sure, with his Civil War sideburns and this big ol’ handlebar moustache. Looks exactly like you’d picture your stereotypical trucker to look like, like the kinda guy who doesn’t get out of the driver’s seat much and survives on Twinkies and coffee. But an okay guy. The longer I rode with him though, the weirder he started to get. He kept eyeballling my stuff and asking if anybody was looking for me, if anyone knew where I was. I told him sure they did—and they’d know if anything happened to me.”

“And?”

“And he was making me nervous. Last night I was pretending to sleep, and he was just staring down at me, kind of breathing hard and…I don’t know. It made me uncomfortable. So later today I told him I wanted to be
dropped off at the next gas station, that I wanted to get out. He asked me what the hurry was. We passed two gas stations—and you know how far apart they are out here—and he kept right on going. I freaked and told him I wanted to get out, and he started getting real strange. He was asking who I was going to tell on him to, if I was going to the police, if I was going to tell Annie, whoever Annie was.”

“Oh God.”

“I know, right? Scared the shit out of me. Then—get this—he finally has to stop to take a piss by the side of the road. I started throwing my stuff together the second he was out the door, but before I ran for it, I looked in his glovebox and guess what I found? Fucking meth. The guy was jacked up on amphetamines the whole time while he was driving. I’m just glad I survived the experience.”

“You’re incredibly lucky. You shouldn’t even be doing this. Not everyone is nice out there.”

“Now you know my story at least. Give me something else.”

“Okay, how many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Two. One older sister and a little brother.”

“Any pets?”

“Used to have a golden retriever mutt, but it died.”

“Where does your family live now?”

“Depends. They sort of move around a lot. They’re way out in Georgia at the moment.”
“I can’t think of any more questions right now.”

“Come on, that’s the best you’ve got? And I was looking for a challenge. Like, most people would’ve at least asked what kind of music I listened to.”

“I don’t see why it matters.”

“So why does it matter how many pets I have? Or you could have asked what I thought the meaning of life was, or whether or not I believe in God. Gimme your best shot—seriously, sock it to me, baby.” He rolled his eyes and dropped his voice to ape some movie star from far before his time.

“Do you believe in God?”

He smiled and pulled a silver chain with an unadorned cross from under his shirt. “Never take it off my neck. Haven’t since I was fifteen.” He kissed it, with an expression that could have either been ironic or deeply sincere. “Do you feel like you know me better now?”

“I don’t know. I’m curious though—what’s your impression of me?”

“I’d say about five four, red hair—auburn? What do you call it—and slightly freckled.”

“No, you know what I meant.”

“You wanna hear it?”

“Would I have asked otherwise?”

“You’re driving alone in the middle of nowhere. There is a very specific reason you are trying to get to this place and there is an equally specific reason that you’re alone. I bet not many people even know you’re out
here. You’ve been alone a lot recently, even if that hasn’t always been the case and it makes you sad. You have a southern accent, but you try to hide it, so I’m guessing you moved at some point and I’m guessing you don’t talk much about where you came from. You don’t belong here either, but you don’t know where you belong anymore, so you feel like this limbo-nothing place fits as well as anything. You think you don’t care what other people think, but you’re wearing makeup. Not a lot, but enough, even though you probably haven’t said more than two words to anyone for at least a day or two and weren’t expecting to see anyone today. Red isn’t your real hair color—it doesn’t match your eyebrows. Most people don’t know that you used to smoke. There’s a lot most people don’t know about you, and you like to keep it that way because keeping secrets makes you feel safe, like no one can get to you. When I asked you about God, it made you uncomfortable, because you don’t believe.”

“That’s not true,” she interjected. She felt a small twinge of relief that at least he was wrong about something. “I pray.” Sometimes. They were never prayers of thanks or grace or exultation though. She never felt inclined to throw up her hands and praise the Lord. The only time she entered into conversation with the Almighty was when she needed to plea bargain. It was a stupid habit, one of the remnants of childhood that had never quite gone away. Even though her mother had never bothered taking her to Church save on the sporadic Easter, she would catch herself begging silently in times of need. *Please God, I’ll be good if I can pass this test, if Dad will come back, if*
Mom will stop crying, if Jake Swatinsky likes me, if Katie forgives me, if no one finds out, I’ll be good, I’ll be good, I’ll be so good. Her prayers were selfish and, for the most part, unanswered.

“But are you sure someone’s listening?”

“No.”

“I bet you wish you were. That’s why you gotta find religion—it’s a beautiful thing to be sure of something.” His voice lightened in tone and he turned back toward her. “So, how’d I do? On a scale of one to ten?”

“Not too bad,” she said guardedly. “You’re quite the little head-shrink, aren’t you?”

“I do my best. I think you’re interesting though. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you enough to know you’re special.”

“Don’t say that—that sounds ridiculous.”

“Suit yourself. I’m not going to force compliments on you. I’m just saying I’ve met a lot of people and I’ve never run into one quite like you. I’m not sure what it is about you yet, but I think that’s a good thing. Hey—you hungry, lady?” They were coming up on the first real signs of civilization in ages. Faded billboards advertised Dick’s General Store, and the familiar golden arches glowed high in the distance. After countless miles of changeless, unmarked scenery, the tacky, chain-store neon beginnings of a
strip were a welcome relief. Dolores’s eyes drank them in like a piece of home uprooted.

“Stop calling me ‘lady,’” she said. “You make me sound old. It’s Dolores.”

“Dolores.” He emphasized the name, playing with the sound with a kind of reverence, as though he had never tried it out before. “That’s so formal. You didn’t have a nickname or something when you were little, did you?”

“No, I’ve always been just Dolores.”

“It’s pretty. Okay then, Dolores, what do we do now? It looks like we’ve finally gotten somewhere.” River Falls wasn’t much of a somewhere. Granted, it provided a visual break from the monotonous desert, but there was not much of a town. Virtually every building had a faded, washed out look and most of the windows were dark. They passed a schoolyard full of colorful dinosaur statues that had rusted over from neglect. Though they must have been cute once, the combination of peeling paint and missing pieces gave the prehistoric monsters a ghoulish appearance. In the dull orange glow of streetlights and blinking signs, they seemed to stare at the strangers from out-of-town with a menacing air.

“I’m not leaving you out here,” Dolores said with sudden decisiveness. For all his feigned bravado, the kid was still only a kid. “Don’t argue.”

“Yeah,” he replied, looking around nervously. “I might have to take you up on that hotel offer. The playground doesn’t look too comfy.” Dolores
nodded, though she was not sure if the kid even noticed the gesture in the dim light. She turned the car around and drove in the general direction of somewhere else.

*** ***

The hotel was, as one might expect in such parts, not a hotel but a motel, and of the cheapest variety at that. The sign outside read, “We rent rooms for four hours. $30.” The place reeked of that piquant blend of floor cleaner and stale smoke. The man at the desk was a scrawny specimen of humanity, his face and body defined by the angular planes of his bones. He peered out at them with myopic eyes set deep in his skull. Dolores half-wondered what the clerk thought of them. Did he think it odd to see them traveling together? Did he think Kevin was her son? They certainly didn’t look alike. The clerk, however, did not bother to glance up from his small television set as he handed them their room keys.

The two travelers went to their separate rooms without so much as a word. Dolores found herself apologizing that the place was such a dive, but Kevin seemed uncharacteristically laconic. Maybe he felt tired.

After such an absurdly long day, a little privacy was just was well. For some reason though, she could not quite manage it. After the requisite ten minutes of tossing and turning, she gave up and looked for a distraction. The room offered no visual relief. There were the requisite two prints of generic sunsets on beaches far away from Arizona, and white-washed walls with a grey-blue carpet. A scalding shower helped rinse away the feeling of
accumulated sweat and grime, but only made her more awake. The book she had brought along—Danny had been telling her to read it forever—couldn’t hold her attention for more than a minute. Before long she was flipping through TV channels, scrounging about with increasing urgency for something in the usual late-night drivel. Nothing but some godawful Meg Ryan movie from the nineties, an *I Love Lucy* rerun and an infomercial. Dolores settled on the latter, simply because there was something comforting about the feeling of superiority she got from listening to some perky, plastic woman talking about a super-duper mini-blender that could change your life with only three monthly installments of $19.99.

Dolores was on to watching perky, attractive women spill hot spaghetti water all over themselves for being foolish enough to use a plain, old colander rather than the super “All-in-One Pasta Super Cooker,” when she heard a tentative knock on the door. Hauling her body off the bed, she padded over to the door and undid the two locks.

It was Kevin Henri, of course.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, a little uncomfortably. An old T-shirt adequately covered her, but she still felt caught off-guard.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean—I wasn’t trying to intrude,” he said, averting his eyes slightly. “Maybe it’s stupid, but I didn’t really like being in the room by myself. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for the place to sleep. The toilet drips though, and it’s a little creepy in there.”

“I’m sure we could get you a different room—“
“No, no, it’s fine. Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you. I wanted to say thanks again, that’s all. I wanted to do it properly.” He smiled with sheepish triumph and pointed to a paper grocery bag.

“What—”

“We never got dinner, and I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.” It might have been the power of suggestion, but as soon as he mentioned food Dolores felt her stomach twist. The familiar smell of salt and hot grease emanated from the bag. “Dinner’s the least I can do. I owe you. Big time.”

“No, it’s not like that. I only did what any decent person—“

“Hey, I’m trying to be all gracious here. Let me have my moment, okay?” He grinned again. “Besides, the stuff I got is awesome. You really don’t want to turn this down.”

“Well, all right, I guess you can come in for a little bit. I’m going to sleep soon though.” She moved aside to let him in.

“Um, no offense, but you might want to get some clothes on.” He looked as if he might be blushing, though he still wore that smile. “I mean, people would think you were trying to pull something here.” Dolores felt her face go hot.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was about to do that.” She closed the door harder than necessary. There was only one clean shirt left, and she pulled it on with her lone pair of jeans, feeling inexplicably flustered.

Kevin was still clutching his paper bag of goodies when she let him in. He hopped into the door and vaulted onto the bed to sit cross-legged. For
some reason, she noticed that he had uncommonly good posture. The adolescent
slouch in his back she had seen when he had hunkered down by the roadside
was gone. He patted a spot on the comforter across from himself.

“I feel like I’m at a teenage sleepover,” she said.

“Yes, but this is way better than Truth or Dare or any of that crap. Behold!” He cheerfully pulled out two burritos wrapped in translucent paper.

“I think I found the only place open at this time. Hope you can handle Mexican.”

“You went out there? By yourself?” Once again she couldn’t help but think he looked vulnerable.

“Hey, I can take care of myself okay. Besides, it was just down the block. I barely had to leave the building. And, the piece de resistance—”

With a smug look he withdrew two six packs from the bottom of the bag. “I wasn’t sure which type you liked, but I figured with two something had to work. I went high and low end—we’ve got cans of PBR and a Harpoon IPA that should actually be pretty decent. Pick your poison.”

Dolores stared at the mix of bottles and cans first with disbelief, then a kind of amusement. “I don’t really know if I should be drinking. It’s been a hell of a day.”

“So it’ll help you get to sleep. C’mon. A beer’s not gonna hurt anything. Especially not with food. Plus, I can tell you’re a beer drinker.”

“What makes you say that?”
“I mean that in a good way,” he added quickly. “Some women are so stuck up about these kinds of things. You go to a bar with them and they’re all like, ‘Oh, I just want the Pomegranate Martini or a white wine spritzer.’ You’re not a wine snob or someone who only drinks froofy, girly shit.”

Though Kevin had no way of knowing it, he was right. Danny had tried for years to convince Dolores of the merits of a fine chianti or whatnot. He was the type who insisted on asking the sommelier—or waiter, as was more often the case—an extensive list of questions. He would hold his glass up to the light, swirl the burgundy liquid around to let it breathe, and comment extensively on the tannins or the fruity bouquet. Dolores liked wines well enough, but the array of terms Danny used to describe them mystified her. Try as she might, she had never been able to detect the caramel, oaky undertones in her chardonnay or the floral, honeyed notes in a rose. She tried to order well, but usually she left the task to him. Danny would give her such a look of pained embarrassment when she ordered a Riesling that it wasn’t worth the hassle.

“Yeah, sure, why not,” she said. “Wait, this is dumb, but I want to show you something.” With one quick jerk, she took a bottle of the Harpoon and slammed it down against the side of a nearby end table so that the top caught. The cap flew off neatly.

“Well, damn,” Kevin said, eyebrows raised. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“I was a kid too, you know.”
The burritos were terrible, soggy and flaccid from sitting too long in the bag. Kevin wolfed his down anyway, while Dolores picked at hers and sipped on beer. The conversation came easily, naturally. Though a total stranger, Kevin somehow felt vaguely familiar. She found his strange combination of naiveté and worldliness endearing.

“Wanna hear a crazy story?” he asked after they had been there for a while. Dolores was well into her fourth beer by then and feeling more relaxed than she had in days.

“Sure. Go for it.”

“So, this happened to a friend of a friend, but I know for a fact it’s true. Now, it’s going to sound completely insane, but you have to trust me that it actually happened. Do you trust me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“All right, here goes. So this girl Jane was housesitting for some family friends in New York and taking care of the family dog. I think it was a basset hound or something. Anyway, this dog was seriously decrepit, like old as shit and probably had one foot in the grave before she even got there. She did everything she was supposed to and all, but one day she showed up and the dog was lying dead on the carpet.”

“I’m not sure I like this story.” Dolores shifted her head from side to side. It felt heavier than normal, but that might have been fatigue.

“Wait, it gets better. Okay, Jane freaks out, obviously. She calls the family to tell them what happened, and they tell her not to worry about it
because the dog was fifteen anyway and she shouldn’t blame herself for it.

Unfortunately though, she has to dispose of the body so that it doesn’t stink up
the house before the family gets back. She isn’t sure how to transport this
poor, dead animal through Manhattan, so she finds the biggest briefcase in her
house and stuffs it in. She gets on the train and is all nervous that someone is
going to find this thing and think she’s fucking crazy. While she’s on the
train, she starts talking to this guy, and they really hit it off. Like, there’s
serious chemistry there. They get to the end of the ride and she turns to him
and says, ‘Hey, I never do this, but can I have your number?’ He says he’s
flattered, and of course. He sees her struggling with her suitcase in the
overhead bin and offers to give her a hand.”

“Oh no, no, no, no.”

“Do you know what happens?”

“Oh God, the dog falls out, doesn’t it?”

“Nope, the jackass punches her in the face and steals the suitcase,
basset and all.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that absurd?”

Dolores laughed in spite of herself. “I probably shouldn’t find that
funny, should I? I mean, it’s sort of scary, right?” A giggle escaped her.

“Wait, if you think that’s freaky, wanna see something way weirder?”

“Than that? I don’t think you can get much weirder than that.”
Kevin leaned over the edge of the bed and picked up his bag. From the side flap he extracted a small ziplock bag with a fine, white powder inside. Dolores recoiled slightly on the bed.

“What is that?”

“Remember the sketchy-ass truck driver I told you about earlier? And how I said I found meth in truck? I took one of the bags of it.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked. The powder was so frighteningly innocuous looking, like sugar.

Kevin studied the bag in his hand, “I don’t know. I just took it.”

“What if you’d been caught with that? What if he’d caught you?”

“I wasn’t exactly thinking things through at the time. I was terrified. It just seemed like the thing to do at that moment.” He stared at the bag some more with a kind of intense fascination. “I wonder what this stuff even does. I’ve never tried it. Wouldn’t be crazy if we both took a hit right now?”

Dolores could feel her body tighten. He saw the look in her eyes and stuffed the bag away. He grinned again.

“Whoa, whoa, easy there. I was just kidding. You didn’t think I was serious now, did you?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“Aw, hey, I’m sorry. Don’t be like that. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’d never touch that shit.”

“Good. I’ve just never seen it before.”

“God, you really did take me seriously, didn’t you?”
“No, I mean...”

“Here, I feel bad. I’ll make it up to you.” Kevin reached into the bag again, but this time withdrew a battered packet of tobacco. “Bali Shag—I told you, this stuff’s my favorite. I don’t share it with just anybody. It’s my way of saying thanks for saving my ass out there. I’ll be a little offended if you don’t take it.” Dolores was still feeling rattled, but less so now that the offending drug was out of sight. Tobacco was familiar, probably not the best idea, but hardly intimidating.

“I don’t know how to roll my own,” she said. “I’ve always had—” she nodded towards the bedside table where her antique cigarette case rested.

“Nah, I don’t want to make you share those. This is my present to you.” He pulled out a piece of paper and fished the white stub of a filter from the tobacco. Before she could offer any sort of protest, he sprinkled the contents into a neat line down the side of the a paper, positioned the filter, and rolled the whole thing up so efficiently that she was a bit impressed in spite of herself.

“That’s a neat trick,” she said.

“Comes in handy,” he replied. He held it out to her. It was a near perfect cylinder, smooth and white and even end to end. One more fluid motion, and it was lit.

“You know, I would’ve been real impressed with you when I was sixteen,” she said. A curl of smoke slid out from between her lips as she spoke. That familiar dull, dry heat was burning somewhere down between the
back of her throat and lungs. She felt her whole body relax instinctively. “I
would’ve thought that was just the coolest thing.”

“And I was sorta hoping you’d be impressed now.” When he smiled
he looked dramatically younger. The suave façade dropped away, leaving a
kid trying a shade too hard. He was more innocent than he looked. He knew
nothing of the life she had been through or where she was going next.

“How old do you think I am?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Does it really matter?”

“I’m not sure. Does it?”

He laughed a little nervously. “You can’t ask me another question like
that.”

“Just take a guess,” she said.

“No.”

“Are you afraid to?” More smoke coiled up and around the ceiling
fan, twisting in between the constellations.

“I was told it was rude to ask that sort of thing.”

She shook her head and took a long drag. “I’m forty.” No matter how
many times she said it, Dolores never quite got used to the number. When she
had been younger, ‘forty’ had sounded like having one foot in the grave. It
was absolute and finite, a death sentence to any sort of spontaneity or hope for
an interesting life. It was the height of cliché, but somehow at thirty-nine she
had still felt a lingering sense of possibility, that she was desirable and could
do what she wanted, if she knew what that even was. She had expected that to
change at forty, for ambition to die and the body to dry up. When the dreaded birthday had come, she realized that she did not feel any different than she had the day before. Beneath the perfectly ordinary, accepting façade, there were still vestiges of the creature she had been long ago, the one who hovered somewhere in the grey zone between girl and woman. There was still a part of her that craved raw sensation above all else, and wanted to strip bare the wires and grip the copper with her fingers just to feel the current.

“Okay.” He popped open another beer and handed it to her.

“Okay?” She took the proffered can unthinkingly, and allowed herself to savor the bubbling sensation on her tongue. It felt good to unwind. She could not remember the last time she had.

“Okay, so you’re forty. I was going to say you looked younger, but I really don’t care. Age is a number, just like anything else. It doesn’t define who you are unless you let it.”

At that moment they heard the sounds of shouting from the parking lot. There were two voices: a woman’s, increasingly shrill, and a lower, guttural one that must have been a man’s.

“Jesus Christ—what’re they doing out there?” Kevin asked. Before Dolores could hazard a guess, he sprang up from the bed and went to the window to peer out. He propped open the window ever so slightly to hear better. Unable to resist, Dolores followed him. Through the slats in the blinds, she could see a woman huddled against the hubcap of a Chevy. Her platinum hair caught the streetlight and glowed like an orange blaze.
“I said fuck you! That’s right you son of a whore, you can go blow yourself for all I fucking care, because I have fucking had it with your fucking shit and if you ever fucking touch me again—” she was screeching.

“You goddamn slut—you’re nothing but a piece of ass. Don’t you talk to me that—” The man grabbed the woman by her thin shoulders and flung her against the car door. Her body struck with a faint thud. She crumpled to the ground. Kevin slammed the window shut and jerked backwards.

“I feel like we should call someone,” Dolores said.

“Who?” Kevin asked. He looked surprisingly shaken.

“I don’t know…I don’t know who could help out here. I guess they must see shit like that all the time.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” he said. “There’s no excuse for treating a woman that way. I would never, ever…Just the thought of it makes me feel a little sick.”

“You’re not like that. You’re a good person.”

“You really think that?” He looked at her in a way she could not quite understand. There was something almost pitying about it.

The couple outside seemed to settle down for the moment, though Dolores could not convince herself that they were all right.

“This is surreal,” Dolores said after a few minutes. The silence was a comfortable one, but she had had so much silence lately that she did not know if she could take it. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“Sure you should.”
“I have a life, you know. Elsewhere.”

“Husband, two kids and a dog, right?” Kevin asked. Once again she could not tell whether he was being sarcastic or not.

“No.” No kids anyway. She could have specified, but for some reason chose not to. It was not as though she were being dishonest. No one could accuse her of lying. There was no need to bring Danny into all of this. She rather liked the fact that he was over a thousand miles away by now and oblivious to where she was or what she was doing. She was tired of talking about him. She had been talking about him nonstop for months and months.

“That’s cool.” In another context, those words might have come across as flippant or dismissive, but there was a touching sincerity in the way he said them.

“Cool?” Dolores cracked open the last beer in her six-pack.

“Yeah, you never managed to get tied down. See, someone once told me that there are two types of people in this world. There’s the eighty percent who settle down somewhere with a white picket fence and a neatly trimmed little lawn and have two little kids and a dog. They aspire to be the best soccer mom or PTA member and upgrade to a slightly nicer car or house or to be able to afford a team of Brazilians who can keep their lawn looking pristine. Or they throw themselves into a nine-to-five and let it suck away their soul until they retire. And those people are happy like that, and that’s fine for them.”
“And what about the rest? The thirty percent…no, that’s stupid, the twenty percent…God, I can’t believe I just did that.” She heard herself giggle.

“They’re special. They have this spark or spirit or something you can’t quite put your finger on that keeps them from settling for less. They want adventure and aren’t happy unless they’re really living.”

“So which am I?” Dolores asked.

“Do I even have to say it? I think you know where you fit in.” There was that look again. “You’re top twenty percent, just like me. I knew it when I first saw you.”

Dolores did not know what to say. She felt guilty, as if her life didn’t measure up to the potential he had imagined for her. “I need to tell you the truth—I’m not really that exciting.”

He shook his head vehemently. “See, you think that, but you’re wrong.” He reached out and brushed back a piece of hair that had fallen across her eyes. “Someone held you back, tried to turn you into something you’re not. But no matter how much they tried to trap you, you were meant to be an original, and you still can be.” He was so sweet, so earnest, it was disarming. She wanted to buy into his vision, but he was still too innocent to know how things worked. She laughed sadly and reached out to touch his face. “Hey, don’t do that,” he said. “You’ll make me all self-conscious.”

“Sorry…you have so much to learn. I’m probably feeling a bit sleepy.”
Kevin hopped up with remarkable coordination. As he reached the door though, he paused and turned back to face her.

“On second thought, I don’t feel right leaving you here.”

“That’s supposed to be my line,” she said. “You’re the one I’m supposed to be looking after, kid.”

“I don’t think you let people look after you enough,” he said, shaking his head. “You try to be strong all the time and sometimes that isn’t what you need. I don’t think it’s very safe here. I don’t like the thought of people like that around.” He nodded towards the window.

“They stopped fighting.”

“For now.”

“Okay, fine, what’re you gonna do?”

“Could I just stay here and keep an eye on things? I’m not pretending I’m all that strong, but we have to be better off if we stick together. I can sleep in the chair over here.” He patted the rock-hard upholstery of the cheap armchair in the corner.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll never sleep in that thing.”

“Hey, I’m adaptable. It’ll be fine.” He made an attempt to curl up on the tiny seat and ended up with his feet hanging awkwardly off the side.

Dolores laughed, “You look ridiculous. There’s no way that can be comfortable.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Stop being stupid. You can share the bed. I trust you.”
“You sure? You don’t mind me crashing here?” She waved her hand in a kind of vague approval. After he flipped the switch, Kevin crawled back to bed. She could just make out his features, an interplay of shadows over lips and nose and cheekbones with two eyes somehow catching what light there was.

“Now it really feels like a sleepover. I feel like my life never happened, you know? Like I made it up or dreamed it somewhere very far away.” She could not read his reaction.

“Hey, if this is a sleepover,” he said, “we ought to tell each other a secret.”

“I thought we were skipping Truth or Dare.”

“This isn’t a game; it’s a deal. You tell me a secret and I’ll tell you one.”

“I can’t think of anything.”

“You’re such a bad liar. You’ve got a whole bunch of secrets I bet. Like what’s really in that fancy cigarette case of yours.”

“How did you—”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Please. It’s so obvious. You wouldn’t freak that badly if you just had little old cancer sticks in there.”

“It’s not really…” she started to say, and then stopped herself. “Okay, but no one else knows this. I mean, no one.”

“This should be good then.”

“It’s ashes.”
“Not as exciting as I’d hoped.”

“No, not cigarette ashes, human ashes. I keep my mother’s remains in there.”

He sat upright. “Whoa, whoa, really? There must be story behind that…”

“I…look, it would only make sense if you knew my family. They’re not…I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Let me guess: they’re fucking nuts.”

“You could put it that way,” she said. “My sister sent them to me because Mom didn’t want to be buried and the rest of the family was going to put her in the ground. Lily—my sister—went ahead and had my mother cremated and sent me some of the ashes even though I didn’t go to the funeral. I didn’t know what to do with them and I didn’t want them in some hideous urn sitting on my mantel place. For a while they were just in a ziplock back, then for a day or so it was an Altoids container. This seemed like the most appropriate thing—she loved it—so I stuck them in there one day and I’ve never really moved them. I don’t feel right leaving them lying around. It’s stupid, I know.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid to me. Why didn’t you go to the funeral?”

“Now that really is none of your damn business.”

“Sorry,” he said. He looked like he meant it. “I know this is getting kind of personal, but that’s a good thing. I get the feeling you don’t tell people this stuff often. You need to let it out.”
“What are you, a shrink?” she asked.

“No. I give a shit, that’s all.”

“How can you give a shit? You don’t even know me.”

“I know this is gonna sound strange, but I feel like I do. And everything I do know makes me want to know more. You can trust me Dolores, really. You can tell me anything.”

Dolores closed her eyes and focused on the light patterns still dancing over her eyelids. “Okay. I’m a bad daughter. Sometimes I don’t know if I loved my family at all.” He said nothing. She could feel her throat closing up in the dark. To clear that awful sentence out of the air, she said, “That was a big one. Yours had better be good.”

He propped himself up slightly so that he was looking directly at her. “I like to keep things fair, so I’ll give you two. My tattoo—remember, the Chinese one?—means “Know thyself. My friend did it to me when I was a stupid kid.” His smile was gone now. “And I think you may be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. No lie.” With that, he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. It was a tender gesture, just the barest brush against her skin.

The younger Dolores, the one who had ridden in the backs of cars at night never looking beyond a way out, the one who had professed to believe in nothing even though she secretly wanted to, the one who still smoked and dreamt and made love on the floor of her room, biting her own wrist raw to
keep her mother from hearing her cry out, that Dolores would have fallen for a line like that. That Dolores would have eaten that up. *God, I would have—*

And before she could think what she would have done, what she might have done, she had leaned her body upward and planted a tentative, cautious kiss on Kevin’s lips. It was a suitably adolescent moment, awkward and sincere, tender and slightly uncomfortable. He had not quite been expecting it, and their teeth touched against each other briefly. She pulled back and laughed nervously.

In the dull light of neon signs and streetlights, she could make out his face, his eyes bright. He looked at her like he had never seen anything so fantastic in his whole life, as if she were beautiful and sexy and a hundred other things she had long since stopped believing she might be. She thought he might say something, and it scared her. Any words coming out of his mouth right then would only make all of this real and remind her that she was not the person she had been eighteen years ago. But he just smiled that smile again and touched his fingers to her cheek, running them along the curve of her ear and the line of jaw and then brushed down her neck. She reached foreword, and nothing mattered anymore. She was Dolores, just Dolores, who kissed boys in cars in the dark without giving a damn what anyone thought.

* * * * *

It was still dark when Dolores awoke. The digital clock spelled out 5:43 in red letters on her bedside. What the hell was she doing awake anyway? There was a dull throbbing in the base of her skull that was just
noticeable enough to be unpleasant. Squinting, she looked around the room, slowly remembering where she was. The same dusty illumination tinted orange from the streetlights, and the flickering neon signs filtered through the slats in the motel blinds. For a moment, the room seemed unfamiliar, and then pieces of the night before began to drift back to her. Though the room was dim, she could see all too well that the bed was empty, save for a tangle of sheets.

“Kevin?” She regretted even saying the word as soon as it slipped out. There was no one in the room, and the slightly desperate note in her voice only made the place feel more deserted.

_Don’t be stupid. He just went back to his own room_, she told herself. She felt physically sick, and not only from the alcohol. The previous night was hazy around the edges, but the glimpses running through her mind did not promise anything good. What had seemed so natural, so perfectly right only hours ago looked a lot worse in the approaching light of day. Bodies twisting in a silent, frantic embrace, clinging to each other with increasing urgency—she saw the images play through her mind in slow motion, as though they were something she had seen on film. And yet, as removed as she felt from what they had done, she remembered feeling more fully present, more flesh and blood, than she had in a long, long time.

His bag was gone.

She was afraid to face him, but the kid was the one person who could somehow make this right. If she could just see him, maybe they could laugh
about this, or agree to brush it aside. Maybe they could go get breakfast at some cheap local diner serving hash browns and pancakes faintly flavored from the old bacon grease caked on the griddle. Maybe they would figure something out.

There was a knock at the door, then another, more insistent.

“This is the police—open the door.” Dolores noted in an oddly detached way that the voice was flat, devoid of any of the anger or emotion one heard on television shows. Whoever had spoken was simply stating the facts, doing their job.

“Open the damn door or we’re coming in.” The actual content of the speaker’s words finally registered. Dolores felt her spine snap upright and her body go rigid. She felt instinctively guilty, though she couldn’t think of any actual laws she had broken. Beer cans and bottles littered the floor, but other than that there was no sign that anyone else had even been there. She looked at the bedside table. The cigarette case was gone too.

“I said open the goddamn door—this is serious!”

All at once she flew into a full on panic. She stood up, barely covered by the coarse, starched sheets. Her hands started moving of their own accord, tearing through her bag, unzipping the pockets and flinging out the few possessions she brought carelessly. Nothing. She opened the drawer in the table and found nothing but the standard Bible. No help there.
As she tossed the long-abused book aside, a single ziplock bag of crystalline powder fell out and landed on the bed. The knocking intensified, and she heard the sound of the doorknob turning.
PART TWO

Danny was in the middle of cooking when he got the call. The meal was elaborate, the kind of concoction that should be made for an anniversary dinner or an intimate group of friends, not for the lone diner on a Friday night. He was standing over an enameled cast-iron Dutch oven, his glasses slightly askew and his brown hair in its customary state of dishevelment. The pot contained a dish called *Poulet aux Quarante Gousses d’Ail*, more commonly known by its banal English name: chicken with forty cloves of garlic. He already had procured the necessary ingredients by the time Sophie called—something with a friend had come up, damned if he could remember what this time—and wasting the food seemed a shame. The leftovers could always be reused; it was only a stew, after all.

But, oh, even as he told himself that, he knew he was wrong. Chicken with forty cloves of garlic was a quantum leap above anything conventionally labeled a “stew.” This was a great fragrant, stinking mess, a perfect example of brash, excessive ingredients somehow melding together into something impossibly harmonious. The dish began with a whole chicken—he would not dream of purchasing separate parts—which then had to be hacked into bits and massaged with sea salt, freshly ground pepper, and a sprinkling of thyme and tarragon. The latter ingredient was not traditional, but he felt that tarragon accented the floral, herbaceous quality of the vermouth, and he was fond of telling people so. Then came shallots, that critical splash of wine,
chicken broth, and finally the seemingly absurd quantity of garlic for which the
dish was named. After nearly twenty minutes of peeling each individual
clove, the odor had permeated his fingers and everything else in range.
Somehow though, as if by magic, as those wretched little things braised
slowly, they transformed into lumps of velvet that liquefied on the tongue
with the buttery sauce.

So perhaps that was why he felt a bit odd to be eating it alone, he
thought as he sipped a particularly dry Sauvignon Blanc. The final
presentation seemed unceremonious, anticlimactic. Something that looked
plucked straight from the cover of a magazine ought to be appreciated by an
admiring audience who could congratulate him on his efforts.

He had hoped that Sophie would give him proper credit for his efforts.
She was such a difficult woman, so maddeningly emotionally unavailable and
impossible to impress. More often than not, he found himself bending over
backwards to accommodate her whims. At times her particular mystique was
intriguing. Sophie was striking, but in an uncommon and sophisticated way.
She had a powerful, hooked nose and deep-set eyes below slender, arched
brows that made him think of a Russian poetess. Her hair, which fell down
below her waist, was dark, thick and wavy in that way women insist is
unattractive but which men find irresistible. Only five years ago, she had
been a ballerina and had drifted with eerie, spectral grace through *Giselle* and
a postmodern ballet adaptation of *Tosca* that the critics had adored. Though
she hardly had received top billing on the programs, a ballerina was still a
ballerina. Her body was long and thin and sharp with the hardened intensity of something that had been driven to its natural limits again and again. She exuded a kind of charisma he found difficult to pinpoint, but which made him crave her approval.

Still, there were those times when her temperament was just plain aggravating. The lengths he went to in order to please her were absurd. And now she had abandoned him once again to run off to some other engagement, leaving him with his damned pot of chicken.

No matter. Her loss. He plated the dish beautifully, first by depositing a shallow puddle of the sauce all around, then layering on a scant number of potatoes crisped in his special-ordered supply of duck fat from Dean & Deluca, then finally topping the whole thing with a chicken leg, all gleaming rich and dark, and garnishing it with a sprig of tarragon. He poured himself a new glass of wine, only to realize that he was well over halfway through the bottle. As he was wondering precisely when that had happened, his cellphone scuttled across the table, vibrating irritably.

Sophie.

“Hello? Hello? Danny? Is that you?” The voice on the other end was almost unrecognizable. It was shaky, barely containing an obvious panic. Dolores had lost her distinctive southern twang a few years before, but now it was back in full force.

“Dolores? What is this?” He did not know what else to say to her.

Static crackled on the other end of the line, then, “Danny?”
“Yes, I’m in the middle of something. I’m having dinner with someone.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t want to interrupt.” He could not tell whether Dolores was being sarcastic or sincerely apologetic.

“You already did,” he said. “So you might as well say well say whatever it was that you wanted to say. Be quick though. Sophie’s waiting for me.”

“Right. Sophie. I forgot her name.”

“She’s the ballerina.”

“We only met briefly.”

“I remember.”

“She seems fine.”

“She’s great.”

“Good.”

“What did you want to say?” Danny asked. Dolores made far too much of everything; she had something of a hysterical disposition. What was strange about her, though, was her tendency not to show emotions until it was far too late to correct whatever their original source might have been. He had told her repeatedly that this was her problem, and that if she would just kindly get over her neurosis, they would all be a lot better off. Now here she was calling him out of desperation, probably having one of those feminine moments of regret over an ex. Typical. He had forgotten how high strung she could be, how needy. He did not miss it one bit.
“I just wanted to call,” she said. “I have a little bit of a problem here…”

“Yes?”

“Nevermind. It’s not that important.”

“That makes no sense at all. You’ve already disrupted my dinner. Do you know what I made? It’s called Poulet aux Quarante Gousses d’Ail, and it’s absolutely stunning. It’s a French peasant classic.”

“That sounds nice.”

Nice. She would say ‘nice,’ something bland and noncommittal like that. “It’s an incredibly complex flavor, goes beautifully with wine. I’m drinking an ’87 right now, you know. Really goes with the notes of anise in the tarragon. I know you’re not big on licorice flavor, but I think even you’d like it in this dish. It’s very subtle, but adds a lot of depth.”

“I don’t want to keep you from it.” The southern accent had dropped out of her voice again, and she sounded colder, more resolute.

“It’s not that much trouble. I always like trying to broaden your palate. One day you’re going to wake up and fall in love with all of these things you’ve been ignoring over the years.”

“You should get back to your girlfriend.”

“Yes…yes, of course.”

“Goodbye, Danny.”

“I guess I should go—” But Dolores had already hung up the phone.

Unfathomable. These clingy women.
The chicken had cooled to room temperature. He shoved the plate in the microwave for a minute and a half, and then sat and at the kitchen counter with the rest of the wine.

* * * * *

Dolores felt a curious sense of satisfaction as she hung up the phone. Far too often, she had been the person at the end of the call who stood with the phone still pressed to her ear, listening with numb denial to the dial tone on the other end.

Without Danny to distract her, she turned her attention back to her surroundings. The prison was not what she might have expected. It had the sterility of a rundown hospital waiting room and was mercilessly awash in fluorescent. They had left her in her normal clothing rather than offering the clichéd orange jumpsuit she had half-anticipated. She was wearing the same jeans and T-shirt as when they had arrested her. The clothes were beginning to reek, and she felt strangely self-conscious of her own body odor even though it did not matter in the slightest. Her cellmate had scarcely acknowledged Dolores’s presence since her arrival. The other woman had grey skin stretched taut over a thin frame. Her teeth were exceptionally bad, but Dolores had seen them only once since the woman did not bother to open her mouth much. She mostly slept, a lifeless, formless lump lost in a mass of grey blankets.

Why the hell had Dolores called Danny anyway? He had never managed to offer advice without simultaneously lecturing about something or
other, and there had been no reason for her to think that this time would be
different. To be fair, she could not think of another soul who would have
been more helpful or whom she would want to tell about her circumstances.
Her essential one phone call was laughably useless.

Calling Danny might have been a diversion, a means of passing the
time. Her initial panic had faded by now into a dull nausea. A human body
was not capable of sustaining that initial level of adrenaline for long. The
waiting was almost worse than whatever her final outcome might be.

She had tried to explain herself to the police officers, and it had done
little good. “It’s not mine!” had been all she could think to blurt out. “Listen,
there was this kid with me—I mean, he wasn’t with me, he was only here for a
while. I picked him up hitchhiking—I know that’s illegal of course, but it was
so hot out and…and it wasn’t even his. It was this truck driver that he…I’ve
never seen that before in my life! It’s not my fault!”

The two officers had regarded her with cool eyes jaded either from
habituation to such excuses or a lack of coffee at five in the morning. The
shorter of the two had told her, “Ma’am, you’ll need to come to the station.”

“You don’t understand. I know what this looks like, but I can
explain—” Dolores had known instinctively that nothing she could say right
then would help her, and that talking probably would hurt her. Yet the words
had kept tumbling forth of their own accord, an unstoppable torrent digging
her in ever deeper. The officers had exchanged a knowing look. She could
not remember either of their faces now, but the taller one had taken several
steps toward her and slipped a pair of handcuffs over her wrists without so much as a word. The metal had felt cold and surprisingly heavy against her skin.

“You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you by the state.”

“Please, listen to me, please just listen for a minute—” She had been growing pathetic by then, begging.

“Lady, shut your goddamn trap and put your clothes on!”

Had she actually been naked? Her face had grown hot as she had looked down at her body, all of its flaws and defects covered only by a thin veneer of cotton-blend sheets. She had been at a complete loss for words. She could not have changed right in front of them. The police officers had seemed to understand her hesitation and had grudgingly averted their eyes.

The treatment had felt disproportionately harsh for a decidedly non-threatening forty-year-old woman. Protocol was protocol, but surely they could have tailored it to fit the actual subject of arrest. Slamming her against the side of a police car her had been excessive. They had acted as though she were a common criminal, no different than the screaming prostitutes on the street corners. They had acted as if she was nobody. It had taken her a good six hours sitting on that cot in that tiny cell before she fully comprehend that as far as they were concerned, that was who she was.

Now, as she fidgeted in her cell, a guard appeared at her door. He wasn’t the chatty type, and he used the minimum number of syllables possible
to convey that Dolores should follow him. He led her to a Spartan area with a single table and set of chairs. Save for a few generic framed photographs on one of the walls, the room might as well have been another cell.

A man in a tweed suit strode in. He was a dowdy-looking fellow, clearly not a police officer. His head was pink and round and shiny like a plastic Easter egg, with a few remaining wisps of hair slicked over the top. His bearing verged on portly, with the paunch of middle age beginning to creep over the top of his belt. There were sweatstains at in random patches on the front of his blue dress shirt.

“Dolores Lockery?” he asked.

“Actually, it’s ‘Hutchinson’ now,” she responded.

The man shrugged, as though this was of no consequence whatsoever. “You haven’t offered any form of legal representation, so I’m the public defender you got stuck with. Name’s Robbie Benson.” He sat his rather impressive girth down on a chair that would have been uncomfortably small even for Dolores.

“Thank you, Mr. Benson,” Dolores said. She kept her voice as neutral as possible, hoping that she came across as far less concerned than she actually was. “But you should know that this is entirely a misunderstanding. People have to see that. I mean, I have no criminal record. I even pay all my taxes—I’ve never done anything wrong.”
“So you’re saying that the crystal meth they found on your person wasn’t yours?” The public defender asked with a raised eyebrow. She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to take the question seriously.

“Oh of course it wasn’t,” she snapped. “Do I look like the sort of person who gets involved with that kind of thing?”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned on this job, people usually don’t look like they’re ‘supposed to’. I met a pretty little thing the other day who couldn’t have been more than fifteen and cute as a button. She was dealing. Not just smoking or snorting or what-have-you, but standing on streetcorners selling all kinds of shit. And you’re not from around here—how am I supposed to know what your background is? The fact that you don’t have a record don’t mean shit.”

Mr. Benson was a smoker. Dolores could tell because he had that particular twitch where his hand would gravitate every so often towards a bulge in his breast pocket, and then casually drift away. Smoking always struck her as a form of punctuation in moments like this. A cigarette conveniently filled the spaces in conversation and eased the transition from one thought to the next. That drag provided the perfect dramatic ending, an unhurried beginning, and forced you to slow down in between. She imagined that up until a few years ago, she probably would have been puffing away right then, letting the haze of smoke create a soft filter between the two of them. She wished she could ask him for a cigarette.

“I never even saw that stuff before last night.”
“Listen, I’m your lawyer, or the closest you’re gonna get. My professional legal advice is that you’d better be straight with me, because it doesn’t look like anybody else is coming to help. You’d better tell me exactly how a supposedly nice, law-abiding citizen, such as the one you claim to be, could wind up in this situation.”

“I don’t even know…It’s so insane.”

“Wrong answer. You tell that to a jury, and you’re looking at a minimum of five years.” His hand floated over to his pocket again, but he swept his fingers up and slicked back his almost nonexistent, sweaty hair instead.

“That can’t even be possible. I didn’t even know him…Okay, I picked up a hitchhiker. I know that’s illegal, but it’s not that bad, is it? He was a kid. I mean, not a kid… he said he was in his twenties. But he was out in the middle of nowhere, and it was over a hundred degrees out. It practically would have been murder to have left him there.”

“Go on.”

“By the time we got to town, it was late at night, and he didn’t have a place to go. So I got the poor guy a motel room. And at some point he stopped by to say thanks for everything. And…and he must have left it then.”

“Which completely explains the alcohol all over your floor.”

“We had a few drinks.” She looked away. She did not like the way the lawyer was looking at her just then. There was something grimly satisfied in his face, as if to say, I’ve got you now.
“More than a few.” Mr. Benson leaned back in his chair, only to have it teeter dangerously.

“It wasn’t supposed to be that many. I wasn’t drunk…well, maybe a little. I don’t even know when he left. But I know they were his. He said he’d been hitchhiking with a crazy trucker beforehand, and that the man had had crystal meth in his glove compartment, and that he’d just taken it. I don’t know why he left it. But he took a cigarette case and thirty dollars with him. I looked in my wallet. I don’t understand it at all.” Dolores wished desperately for some kind of distraction in the room. She scanned the near-barren walls, the sterile tile floor, for something to stare at. A cigarette felt more appealing by the second.

“You’re not telling me the whole truth,” the lawyer said. His eyes flicked to her finger with its single gold band. “You a married woman, Dolores?”

“I was…I am still, I guess. I’ve been separated from my husband for several months now.”

“Interesting.”

“I don’t see why that’s relevant.”

The lawyer smiled in a way that made his fat cheeks puff up even more. On another person, the expression might have seemed jovial, but it only increased Mr. Benson’s cynical air. “Let me tell you something, lady. I believe your little story.”

“Thank God someone in here isn’t crazy.”
“But I know for a fact that you’re fucked, pardon my French.”

“Excuse me?”

He waited for a minute before answering, letting her squirm. “You’re still not telling me everything, but I can guess some of the rest. You don’t seem like a junkie to me. But you’d better not go before a court, because the D.A. will crucify you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, you clearly don’t,” Mr. Benson said. “Here’s the thing: they can nail you right now for possession, which already carries a sentence. Worse, it was a fair amount, so if they want, they can stick you with ‘intent to deal’ and then you’re really up shit creek.”

“It didn’t seem like that much. I mean, I only saw the bag for a moment, but—”

“Not ‘that much’? Lady, trust me, it’s enough. To top it off, they’ve been having a big problem with meth in the area lately. I don’t know where you come from, Dolores, but this is redneck country here, and we got a lotta bored people with nothing better to do than cook this shit up in their basements. The police haven’t been making enough arrests lately, and people are getting sick of this problem. Now, here comes this lady from out of town—that’s one strike against you—in a dirty motel with a strange man, or boy, caught red-handed with a good ol’ bag of drugs. By the time they’re done with you, there won’t be much left.”

“What do I do?”
“If you’ve got the cash, I’d say get yourself a real lawyer. Then you tell them everything about this kid. Spill your guts.”

Some combination of guilt and shame made her reluctant to bring Kevin into the matter. The thought of talking about him, let alone doing so publicly in front of a jury of ‘her peers’ produced a twisting sensation in her stomach. “I already told you everything I know about him…I don’t even think it was his. I have nothing useful for them.”

The lawyer withdrew a single Marlborough from his pocket and seemed to study it, turning it over and over like a baton in his pudgy fingers. Still staring at it, he said, “Listen, can I give you some advice? Because I think you could use it. What did this kid do when they showed up? He bailed, that’s what. He ran for the hills and left you holding the bag, literally. You obviously aren’t going to tell me everything, but you don’t need to. The bottom line is that he left you and you don’t owe him jackshit. The best you can hope for now is to save your own skin.”

Dolores started to protest, but he made a dismissive gesture with his cigarette.

“If he’s a dealer, and they can nail him, they’ll let you off the hook, or at least take it easy. It’s all you got. Think about that.”

With that, Mr. Benson left. The guard returned to escort her back to her very own one-room hell. As they walked down the corridor and Dolores struggled to maintain composure, it struck her that underneath his uniform and gleaming gun, the guard was probably not much older than Kevin. He was
nothing more than a kid himself, dressed up to play soldier. Her imagination might have been playing tricks on her, but she swore she saw the barest traces of a smirk on his face.

_You were probably the biggest bully on your playground, you little shit_, she thought. _And now you’re here to push someone like me around just for the hell of it. Do you even care how I ended up here?_

She found her cellmate exactly where she had left her and as taciturn as ever. Dolores welcomed the silence right now, but wished desperately for some kind of privacy. Crying had never come easily to her, and the presence of a witness made it downright impossible. She turned away to face the wall, hoping her cellmate did not notice the choking sounds coming from her side of the tiny room. Dolores reached in her pocket for the silver cigarette case, only to remember that it wasn’t there. Her hand hung suspended in the air, frozen in a gesture that had no purpose. Finally, she curled up on the hard cot and lay there, eyes wide and dry and hollow.

* * * * *

Lulu, who worked at the Ford Diner, was cracked, and everybody knew it. They knew it by her walk, by the swing of her frizzled, grey hair which she kept in long, sloppy Pippy Longstocking pigtails, and by her prematurely dentured smile. They knew it because she was not afraid to talk about her run-ins with the law. She liked to show anyone who revealed the slightest sign of interest the green and purple flower inked onto her thumb and forefinger.
“Used to be a pot leaf,” she’d say. “But after the second time they arrested me for smoking reefer, I thought I’d better do something about it. I didn’t want to wait forever for that one to fade out, so I just plopped something down over it. Looks pretty, don’t it? I like organic-looking patterns. I was thirteen when I got that shit—the pot leaf, not the flower, I mean. And they didn’t care. Not a hoot. ID—pffff, that’s for sissies, some bullshit the cops cooked up in the 90s. Back then if you had the money, they’d write FUCK on your forehead in bright red without so much as a peep. I was drunk when I got it too, you know. Thirteen years old and drunk as a skunk.”

Right around this point, most people would start smiling and nodding in an excessively, as if wishing they had somewhere else to be or something that they ought to be doing.

“Oh just the check, please,” they’d say. But they were no match for Lulu, and she knew it. When she had a captive audience, she went to town.

“You sure y’all don’t want some more coffee? We’ve got another pot brewing right on the stove. You got somewhere to be?” she’d demand, an accusing gleam in her eye. More often than not her listeners fled, begging off with a muttered excuse. On occasion, a person would stick around and take that cup of coffee with a splash of half-and-half, perhaps out of pity, or fascination, or maybe simply because the lemon meringue pie, that long-forgotten cliché of diners everywhere, was shockingly good. Whatever the reason was, when someone stayed he was inevitably there for quite a while.
Lulu had been known to throw her waitressing job to the side for a half an hour or more and sit down at the table with a customer. She would have a slice of that pie regardless of the time of day and always offer to share.

Kids liked to call Lulu the Scorpion Lady because of one of her more conspicuously removed tattoo which had featured a particularly nasty looking specimen of the insect. Though some of Lulu’s tattoos were clearly the work of an amateur under less than optimum circumstances, whoever had given her the scorpion had known what he was doing. It had been a vicious little creation, a cluster of spindly, pointed lines with a wicked tail. The creature practically dripped venom from the freckled arm on which it sat.

Maybe Lulu had grown tired of the nickname, though that was hard to fathom. Everyone knew that she reveled in her own notoriety. No one understood everything about Lulu, but bits and pieces of her life had come out over the years. People knew she practiced jewelry-making and metal-smithing, because she had once brought a handmade copper chainlink G-string in with her to work. For whatever reason though, or perhaps for no reason at all, she had decided that the scorpion had had to go. Over the course of ten months, lasers had leached toxic pigments into her bloodstream until there was nothing left but a pale patch of naked skin from which spindly lines radiated.

No one knew exactly how old Lulu was. The false teeth she wore in her upper jaw normally might have suggested age, but guesses ranged from mid-forties to late sixties. Her face had an oddly compressed look to it, as
though someone had smashed all of her features slightly too close together.

There weren’t many wrinkles, save for a few creases around the eyes. Her body was short and stocky, yet moved with a curiously utilitarian grace that seemed entirely out of character. There was a sense of efficiency to each of her gestures, built up from a good long while of doing what needed to be done.

All of the regulars knew Lulu, of course, and she knew all of them. This wasn’t difficult; there was very little traffic that passed through the town. The place was not on the way to anything, and offered more or less the same set of faces each morning. Lulu might not remember names exactly—she called everybody “Hon,” more to cover that fact than out of any particular affection—but she knew customers by their orders. There was the one elderly couple who came in every Saturday; the woman was a frail creature, stretched and gaunt, her rouged, flabby skin hanging loose over hollow cheeks and her body completely obscured by drapes of clothing. Her husband was a good six inches shorter than she, round, and deaf but with a tremendous capacity for lengthy soliloquies. The pair would sit over their respective breakfasts, he with a Belgian waffle a la mode and a steak cooked until it had the color and texture of shoe leather, and she with a strong, black coffee.

There were the two teenage girls who would order French toast slathered in Aunt Jemima—real maple syrup was an extra fifty cents—and whipped cream, and then eat no more than a third of the order. And of course there was the quiet, polite fellow—Indian, by the look of him, maybe Cherokee?—
who said next to nothing, but would sit for well over an hour each morning, reading the paper and breaking off pieces of an apricot-jam Danish bit by bit.

So when the kid came by one morning, Lulu noticed him before he even sat down. She had never seen him before, not even once. He stuck out right away. His blonde, bleachy hair and dark clothes seemed too big for him, too old, too city. He looked as though he had woken up that morning and slipped on the wrong person’s life. Everything about his manner of dress suggested someone who wanted attention, but everything about the way he carried himself made it look as though he wanted to shrink out of sight. He stood in the entrance hauling a backpack and hiding behind a pair of aviator glasses reflecting the formica jungle around him.

“Hey there, honey, I’ll be with you in a sec,” Lulu called, before bustling over to a table to refill a coffee mug that had been languishing empty for some time.

“Excuse me, I asked for decaf,” the man protested.

“Oh, grow a pair and drink it already,” Lulu snorted without so much as looking at him. The customer did as he was told. “Kid! Hey kid, right over this way.” She gestured to one of the two-person tables over by the window. He slunk over and sat with his skinny frame hugging the backpack as if it were a life-preserver.

“Coffee?” she asked, the pot at the ready as always. He nodded.

“Could I get a cappuccino actually?” he asked softly.
“Honey, I ain’t Starbucks. We don’t do Caramel Macchiatos or whatnot here.” She jerked her head pointedly to the stack of Sweet n’ Lows and plastic cups of coffee creamer. “That stuff’s good enough for everyone else.”

“I guess I won’t ask you to throw a little Maker’s Mark in then.” At that, Lulu broke into a grin.

“Well, now you’re gettin’ closer to my language. Now, there’s no sense in throwing that stuff in coffee, but we’ve got Jack and CC.”

“That would be great.” She expected something, a smile or a motion, but the kid was eerily serious. Lulu paused. “What? Think I’m too young?”

“You know what I should be asking you now,” she said. Like who’re your parents and where the hell are they, or what’re you doing out so far from where you belong.

“I can think of a couple of things you might be thinking of.”

“You wanna tell me what they are?” Lulu asked.

The kid shook his head vehemently, causing his septum ring to quiver. Lulu shrugged and hid a bit of a smile. “Well, good, because I don’t give much of a damn anyway. I always say if someone wants to keep something to themselves, why, that’s their business. Of course, it never hurt anyone to tell Lulu anything, if you do feel like comin’ clean. I can keep a secret to the grave. I’ve seen and done just about everything—nothing surprises me much anymore. You can tell me anything.”

“Could I just get that coffee?” he asked again.
“Sure thing, sure thing. Like I said, I don’t ask questions people don’t want to answer. I respect privacy. I’ve got my own checkered past, like I said,” she confided, with no small amount of pride. The kid only squirmed a bit in response. He had an odd habit of tugging on the small stud in his left earlobe. “I’ll go get you that coffee now—you still want Jack in it?”

“Do you need to see I.D.?” From a battered wallet he withdrew one of the most blatantly false driver’s licenses she had every come across. Someone had even smeared the ink. The I.D. said Peter Johnson, October 29, 1986. Lulu snorted.

“How much did you pay for this thing?”

“You mean at the DMV?”

“No, ya little dumbass, I mean whoever sold you this piece of crap. Because you should go back to them the first chance you get and ask for your money back. You hand this to a bartender, and they’ll just be insulted.”

He blanched. “Wait, please don’t go to the cops. I didn’t—I mean, I only have it because—“

“Aw, hell, kid, don’t worry about it. I took my first swig of whiskey when I was eleven years old. I could out-drink most men by the time I was thirteen. Worked out for me just fine. I don’t judge others. Besides, I like you.”

“Why?”

It was not the question she would have expected, and the tone was curiously serious. “For one thing, that’s some nice ink you’ve got on your
arm there. I’ve got mine—look, it’s a vagina flower. You know, like that
Georgia-what’s-her-name always painted. Had to use it to cover up an old
one. What’s yours mean?”

The boy looked confused for a moment, then lay his forearm on the
table and pointed to the tangled snakes woven into a crude heart. The tattoo
had faded and stretched badly, as though someone had done a poor job or he
had once attempted to have it removed. Maybe he had been too young when
he had first gotten it; there were tiny flecks of skin showing through like the
skin had stretched underneath it. “It means I wear my heart on my sleeve. It’s
all out there for everyone to see.”

“I like that. Straightforward and honest. Tell it like it is. That’s the
way to be. One Irish coffee coming up. ”

Just as Lulu turned to head back to the kitchen, she felt a hand tug on
her sleeve. The kid snapped back, aghast at himself, when she turned around.

“Sorry, I—look, can I tell you something? I need to tell someone.”

“Sure thing. Once I get you that coffee, we’ll have a nice, long chat.
That’s it. You wait right there for one minute. Just gotta go take care of a few
things first. Manager’s been breathing down my neck lately. Wayne here is
this crazy bastard—won’t give me any space at all.”

Lulu made her way to the chef’s station. It was nothing but a string of
heat lamps above steam tables that kept all of the standard breakfast add-ons
at least slightly above room temperature. Piles upon piles of home fries sat
glistening in their own grease next to the sausages lying submerged under
simmering water. Just above one of the heat lamps, Lulu kept a pack of cigarettes stashed away. Though she could be seen sporting a nicotine patch almost every other week, tobacco was one vice she had never managed to kick. She withdrew one of her Camels, wedged it behind her ear, and lumbered out back for a drag.

“Heyya Lulu,” someone called. “You still on those cancer sticks?” It was Megan, a waitress with a penchant for excessive eyeliner and hair that wavered between slightly orange and full-on firefly yellow. Lulu thought the girl looked and often acted as though she had sprung straight out of a neon-pink Mattel box.

“You bet, honey,” Lulu said. “And they’re just as good as ever. Better, actually. You know, sometimes I think I quit so often because I enjoy it that much more when I start back up again.” Megan giggled, as she did in response to most things. Looking at her, one would never guess that she was the same scrawny teenager who had showed up at the diner with a lone duffle bag and a plea for “no questions asked” two years ago.

“Oh my God, I know, right? That’s so true. Say, did you hear what they’re saying on the news?”

“Not so much.”

“They arrested some crazy lady last night. Just down the street.”

“Eh, this town’s just going to shit these days. Don’t surprise me one bit.”
“I heard it too. This morning. I saw the police sirens go by and everything. George woke me up just so I could see.” George was Megan’s latest beau. “It was pretty exciting. Like a TV show or something.”

“You’re gonna have to tell me all about it later, hon. I’ve got a customer waiting.”

Megan tittered yet again and flounced off to some other distraction. Lulu just shook her head and headed back out, armed with her steaming pot of coffee. She was dying to know just who this kid was. When she went back to the table though, she found it empty, save for thirty dollars pinned under a sugar shaker.

* * * * *

The ride to the courtroom had the muted quality of a dream. Dolores was intensely conscious of the sound of her own breathing, the fact that the seat was uncomfortable, and the hum of the van, but everything else seemed muffled and far away, as though she were viewing the scene from underwater. She wondered what would happen if she made some mistake on the stand. Would the judge accuse her of lying? Would the prosecutor spin around and point the damning finger at her, eyes gleaming with the triumph she had seen in so many movies?

She found herself fading out of the scene in the van, slipping away from whatever was going on and whatever was going to happen. Her body felt drained, exhausted, despite having barely moved for several days now.
She let her thoughts drift away from the scene around her toward the familiar image of her mother.

* Dolores’s mother stood leaning against their empty fridge, taking a drag on one of her many daily Virginia Slims. Her platinum curls were clustered tight around her head, like coiled springs, and her eye shadow was its usual shade of electric blue. The bony hand clutching at a lighter had its usual arsenal of bangles and long nails painted a vapid shade of red. 

“Sugarpie, what have you done this time?” her mother asked. She flicked away a bit of ash.

“Mama, I didn’t mean to. I don’t even know how all this happened—”

“Dolores Hutchinson, don’t you go tellin’ lies to your own mother. You know, my mama would never have put up with crap like that—it ain’t how it’s supposed t’be.”

“I never planned to sleep with him.”

“You did what? Oh, honey, you little slut. I didn’t even know that part. Why, if I weren’t dead, I’d slap your face right now. What were you thinking? You know how men can be. Your problem is that they just walk all over you. You were too easy in high school. I saw that, and I should have put a stop to it sooner.”

“It’s not like you followed your own advice,” Dolores muttered. Even to her ears, the words sounded like a peevish adolescent’s. Something about her mother’s presence made Dolores feel as though she were sixteen again.
Her mother turned that look on her, the one that still made Dolores cringe years after she had become a grown woman. Beneath all of country singer makeup, there was a hardness to her mother’s face that hinted at the life she had lived. “And you think I don’t regret it? You think I don’t want something better for you? I told you to keep your head in them books and get the hell away from this town. I told everything you had to do, but you never had the spine to follow my advice.”

“Neither did you! Just listen to yourself—just \look at yourself!” Was she crying? Was Dolores, a woman of forty, actually crying like an impotent child?

Her mother’s face softened instantly. She snuffed the cigarette on the kitchen counter and left it slouched there in a parody of poor posture.

“Honey, honey, don’t do that,” she said, but in a more forgiving tone this time. “I know I was tough on you sometimes, but I only did it because I gotta. You understand that, right? Tell me you understand?”

Dolores was still choking, her throat seizing and clenching too tightly to let a response through.

“Listen to me now,” her mother said. She pushed herself away from the fridge and placed one hand on Dolores’s face. Gently but firmly, she pulled her daughter’s chin up so that their eyes met. “This is important, okay?”

“Okay mama.” The tears were still coming, dribbling out of their own accord.
“I had two things of actual monetary value in this world. I owned a set of china, because no self-respecting southern woman would serve company off of their everyday plates. And I owned a silver cigarette case, which I always thought was a damn hoot, but I was proud of it. I left both of those to you because you were always my favorite. You were the most like me, and that’s why I’m scared for you. You don’t wanna end up like mama, now, do you?”

She smiled, pink lipstick and coffee-stained teeth all sad and a little wistful.

“I miss you.”


“I don’t understand—I don’t know what to—”

Her mother waved a hand dismissively. There was already another cigarette in her fingers, though Dolores could not remember her lighting it.

Dolores jerked upright as the van came to an abrupt stop. Two policemen with expressionless faces led her up the steps and into the building, where more expressionless men in suits ushered her toward the courtroom. Her body followed their lead with docility. She kept her head down, her eyes focused on the fluorescent reflections in the linoleum tile. She would have kept shuffling indefinitely, unquestioning and without protest, if a familiar voice had not wrenched her from her daze.

“I’d like a word with my client first,” a man said. She looked up to see Mr. Benson, tweed suit still wrapped tight around his impressive swell of a gut. Though his face, slicked with excess perspiration, hardly inspired
confidence, she was glad to see him. He guided her into a side room and once again she found herself sitting across from her temporary champion with a nondescript table between them.

“Dolores, listen to me,” he said sternly.

“Everyone seems to be saying that these days,” she mumbled.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Sorry, please go on. I’m just very tired…Don’t mind me.”

Mr. Benson shuffled a stack of documents unnecessarily. “Now, you understand what’s going to happen, don’t you? Tell me you understand?”

“Yes, of course.”

“They’re going to arraign you and set bail. I’m going to do the best I can, but odds are that it’s going to be pretty high. If you have anyone, and I mean anyone, you can call for bail money, and you’d better do it soon.”

“Isn’t it a little premature to be thinking of things like that? I have some money saved away.” Surely a more competent lawyer would have something at least mildly encouraging to say.

“Some? How much is ‘some,’ Dolores?”

“I don’t know exactly…it’s a bit confusing with the divorce and all that right now.”

“I’m betting your ‘some’ isn’t anywhere near enough. You need ten percent of whatever your bail is to get out of here. So, unless you and your roommate are getting mighty cozy, I suggest you make the proper arrangements. When we get in there, don’t admit to anything. Just say ‘not
guilty’ when the judge asks you how you plead, got it? Nothing else. If we’re gonna make a bargain, we’ll have to do it after this hearing. Let me do all the talking.” He reshuffled the papers and put them back in his briefcase. “Oh, and try not to be nervous or anything.”

Dolores allowed herself to be whisked into the courtroom. It was a far less grandiose setting than she had pictured. Somehow her mental image contained a good deal more mahogany and less formica. This place had clearly never seen the likes of pomp or circumstance, and everything from the inoffensive furniture, to the flat-out ugly grayish speckled floor had an unapologetically utilitarian quality to it.

Dolores took her place in a line of rather miserable looking specimens of humanity. One by one, she watched them file up before the judge and take their appointed seats. The prosecutor decried them as the scourge of humanity, the kind of scum that was poisoning the community and leading the youth astray. He argued that they were dangerous criminals who were certain to try and run and who could not be released on bail. The defending lawyer countered, asking for mercy, saying that the men and women in question could not afford to run and would not risk it. After the third or fourth person, Dolores could no longer remember which story went with what face. She felt simultaneously bored by the formulaic proceedings and terrified that they might end. Eventually, her turn came and she was there before the near vacant room awaiting her fate.
The prosecutor wasted no words. In contrast to the lumbering Mr. Benson, the prosecutor was a wiry man with the kind of comically thin moustache and oily hair that had never been in style. He started with a long tirade about the moral decay of their town’s children, about the insidious spread of drugs and its pernicious influence of their whole society. He gestured to Dolores and asked how an outsider, a drug mule who had come in hauling this vile, corrupting poison, could be allowed to walk free. She was a danger, a public menace.

Mr. Benson countered that she was nothing more than a pawn of the fiends of whom his esteemed colleague spoke. She was nothing more than an innocent bystander caught up in matters far, far outside her experience or control. She posed no threat, and should be released with minimal bail or none at all. The debate raged on in such a manner for some time, but nowhere near as long as Dolores would have expected. Though the words spoken were dramatic, perhaps even overly theatrical, neither lawyer seemed worked up about them. In the end, she was nothing more than another face they would soon forget.

In between the rapid-fire banter and the speeches, something finally caught Dolores’s attention enough to drag her from her mental fog. There, in the very back of the courtroom, sat one skinny, solitary figure with a tangle of dirty-blonde hair. Maybe it was a trick of the light, her mind simply crumbling, but she would have sworn that it was Kevin.
“The defendant’s bail will be set at $100,000,” the judge’s voice boomed. Dolores almost yelled aloud. She glanced over at Mr. Benson, but he shrugged and wiped his damp forehead. Frantic, she looked back to in time to see a figure slinking out the double doors. With nowhere left to turn, she followed the guards out of the room, not knowing where she was going.

* * * * *

“It’s your wife.” Sophie handed Danny the phone with excruciating nonchalance. She flipped her dark hair over one shoulder and slunk off into the other room with an amused look. At first, Danny had imagined that any mention of the woman to whom he was still technically married would drive Sophie half-crazy with jealousy. He had avoided talking about Dolores out of respect for his new lover’s feelings.

Over the last month though, he had come to realize that Sophie’s indifference on the subject was not a façade, but completely genuine. The thought that she was technically a ‘the other woman’ carried no negative stigma for her. If anything, she seemed to find it appealing.

“Please,” she had laughed when he had timidly mentioned it. “I’ve done nothing wrong. Besides, even if you were still with her, infidelity is hardly anything new. How many of the great women of the past have been somebody’s mistress?”

Danny had not quite known what to say to that at the time. He quite easily could have pictured Sophie as the love and muse of some brooding poet or playwright.
“If anything,” she had continued. “It adds a certain cache—monogamous relationships inevitably lead to stagnation, boredom. And boredom is one thing I absolutely cannot abide. I just hate it.” Her eyes had flashed dangerously, daring him to contradict her.

After that conversation, Danny had gone so far as to drop his wife’s name into conversation—with the utmost tact and subtlety, of course—just to see what sort of reaction he might get. Sophie had not so much as blinked her false eyelashes. While he told himself he should have been thrilled to meet a woman so mature and devoid of petty jealousy, a part of him found her apathy cold.

“Where are you going?” he called after her, covering the receiver with his fingers.

“I told you I had plans,” she said. She did not have to yell from the other room. Her carefully enunciated, accented words had a way of carrying through space effortlessly. “I only intended to stop by for a minute.”

“I thought that was tomorrow? Didn’t you have something tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course, opera tickets. Well, I thought I told you. I can’t be bothered to mention everything.” He could hear her putting on her heels as she spoke. Sophie always wore heels, even though at five-feet-nine she was already tall for a ballerina. With her stilettos, she stood a good two inches over him.
“Right, of course. I’ll just take care of this then. You know Dolores—she sometimes has a hard time letting go. You understand how upset she is by all this. I just need to talk to her for a bit...calm her down, you know. Will I see you later?” But Sophie’s imposing heels were already clacking down the hall and out the door.

“Is this a bad time?” Dolores’s voice asked over the phone. Her question had a tinge of the southern accent she had tried to hard to quell. It only seemed to surface when Dolores was upset.

“No, no, it’s fine,” he said. He braced himself for the inevitable. She was going to tell him how much she missed him, how things just weren’t the same without him in her life, how she needed to see him. The other phone call obviously had been leading up to this confession. So predictable.

“This is kind of awkward,” she began. “But you were the only person—”

“It’s okay,” he sighed. “I assumed you would call about this.”

“Wait, what? How did you know?”

“Dolores, I know you.” He tried to keep from sounding smug.

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“I’m just saying I knew that something like this would happen sooner or later,” he said.

“What are you talking about? You couldn’t possibly—”

“Nevermind. Just say what you wanted to say.”

“I need bail.”
Danny almost dropped the phone. “Wait, I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Yeah, you heard me,” she said. “Look, it’s not my fault, okay? I just ended up in this crazy situation…It’s ridiculous really."

“Bail?”

“Yes, Danny, that’s what I just said.” Her voice was harder now, and the southern accent was coming out stronger than ever.

“How could you need bail? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything, okay? It’s a complete misunderstanding, and it’ll be cleared up in no time. I just have to get out of here for now.”

“How much are we talking?”

“I’ll have to borrow some money for a hotel once I get out, since I don’t really have a place to stay. The motels around here…” she paused. “They should be pretty cheap. I mean, I would assume. I’m sure we can find something under fifty…”

“Dolores, how much do you need for bail money?”

“They set it at $100,000, so apparently I need to give them $10,000. Cash.”

“$10,000? Are you crazy? I mean it—have you completely lost your mind? Because you can’t possibly ask that of me. I don’t just have that much cash on hand—you know that. You don’t think about these things—do you have any idea how—”

“Danny, will you just shut up for a second?”
He stopped, hand still halfway raked through his tangled hair. Dolores almost never spoke that way to him. Even in their most horrendous of fights, the screaming matches that went on into the dark hours of the morning and ended with unnecessary door slamming or a car screeching off to drive in circles, she seldom displayed the controlled anger he heard now.

“I can’t do it,” he said more quietly. “I work at a small, independent literary publication.” That was still true, but it wasn’t the whole truth. The fact was that *Exquisite Corpse* didn’t make enough to cover even the most basic of expenses. It barely even paid for its own printing, let alone the welfare of its employees. So Danny had taken up a position with a small insurance firm doing paperwork. It paid the bills and allowed him to take Sophie out to see a play or for the two of them to sip a particularly fine Bordeaux from time to time.

“I know damn well what you do.”

“I barely make enough money for myself. I have next to nothing saved up right now.”

“Writing not going so well?”

“It’s going great, actually. I’m right about to get something big published. Just putting on the finishing touches.” Another white lie. He had been neglecting his latest project for nearly two months now. At times he would glance over it guiltily, but for the most part he avoided it. “But that doesn’t mean I have that kind of money just floating around. Believe me, it would be nice if I did.”
“Danny, I don’t think you understand me.” There was a rising note of hysteria in her voice, and the control was slipping away. “I have to get out of here. I have to get the fuck out of here. Now. That’s not negotiable. I am going to lose my fucking mind. Do you get that?” She articulated each syllable as though taking great effort to restrain herself.

“I’m sure it’s bad, and I’d like to help, but—”

“You’d like to help? Do you know what it’s like here? There is nothing, absolutely nothing all day, just hours and hours of silence and a cellmate who won’t speak to me. She keeps running her grimy fingers over the iron bars of our beds, making this clanking sound. I can’t think straight. I can’t just wait here.”

“I’m sorry.” He heard what sounded like a snort on the other end of the line.

“You’re sorry. Well, that’s just great. I guess that just clears all my problems up. You know what, Danny, if you’re not going to help me, I’m just going to have to do whatever it takes myself.”

Danny knew she was eluding to some other threatening possibility, but could not quite grasp what it might be. “Are you going to be all right?”

“No, no, I’m not. But…Alright, I’m just going to say this.”

“For God’s sake, Dolores, what?”

“I have to put our place up for collateral.”

“What?”

“That’s how these things work apparently.”
“That can’t be right.”

“Apparently it is. And that house you’re living in? That nice little two bedroom on the Upper East Side? That’s half mine.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I sure as hell would.” She laughed harshly. “I have every right to. I helped pay for it, remember?”

“But…but you moved out.”

“Because you wouldn’t. The place belongs to me just as much as it does you.”

“You didn’t even want to live in New York. I thought the apartment was going to be in my part of the settlement.”

“No piece of paper can prove that. As far as the law is concerned, we’re still married, and really, the law is all I care about right now.”

“Dolores, this isn’t fair. You can’t just call me up out of nowhere and threaten me. I live here. I need this place. Besides, I’m not even sure you can do use the apartment without my—”

“I have a lawyer here. I’m sure he’ll tell me how to take care of it.”

“I must have to sign off on it or something though. It’s in both of our names.”

“Then I need you to do that for me.”

“Dolores—”
“I’m not asking you to give it up,” she said, her tone softening suddenly. “Trust me. I’m not even thinking of running off here. There’d be no point. It would just make me look guilty of something I didn’t do.”

He had the sudden urge to shake her, hard, for being so impulsive, and so absurdly reckless. “Where are you?”

“Arizona. A little town about an hour and a half from Phoenix.”

“I’ll be on the next flight.” He hung up the phone with more force than necessary. Sophie was nowhere to be seen, which was probably just as well. She was the last person he would want to see him like this.

* * * * *

To say that Arizona was not Danny’s type of place would be putting it mildly. He was a creature of his environment, and without knowing it a lifetime of living in the concrete jungle had shaped and molded him. He belonged in a world where people only mentioned Jesus ironically, where everyone wore his pretenses on his sleeve, and where a shot of the best espresso and croissant this side of the Atlantic could be found on every other block.

It was this desire for his ritualistic shot of caffeine that took him to the local diner after arriving bleary-eyed at the airport from a 7:00 a.m. flight. He shuffled his way over to the rental car place, where a large, dreary woman with carrot-orange hair and severe librarian glasses took an eternity to do whatever it was she did. She wore enormous false nails and derived pleasure from tapping the keys one at a time. The rental car office smelled of illicit
cigarettes, the peeling upholstery of chairs, and the sweat of too much humanity in too little space. Grim, dull faces lined the seats, staring blankly ahead as if resolved not to show any sort of emotion. Nearly two hours later he was in a midsized, beige vehicle speeding towards a place he would just as soon have avoided.

He chose the diner because it was the first recognizable dining establishment he saw on his way into town. If located in New York, the building would have been a retro-chic throwback. The place was unsettlingly earnest in its kitsch. The outside had the kind of aluminum siding that hadn’t been seen for decades, and the inside was painted in pastel shades of blue and pink like an androgynous baby’s room. Route 66 memorabilia littered the walls, and there in the glass case sat an honest-to-God lemon meringue pie. A generous mound of whipped egg whites crowned it in snowy perfection, edges just barely caramelized. The dessert belonged on a magazine cover or in an advertisement from some forgotten era.

Danny was not entirely sure whether to be charmed by the quaintness of it all or repulsed. By the time he sat down, a waitress was filling his mug with steaming hot coffee.

“How I get a cappuccino, actually?” he asked. The waitress looked disgusted. She was probably one of the least attractive women Danny had ever seen. Her body was squat and her face had a compressed, wrinkled quality. Her hair hung in great frizzy pigtails and there was a large, oddly shaped scar along her arm like the imprint of a giant insect.
“What is it with everyone and these damn fancy drinks all of a sudden? Do I look like a fucking bar-ee-sta?” she said. “You want cream and sugar? We can do that. Anything else, get in your car and keep driving.”

“It was a perfectly reasonable question,” Danny sniffed. “But sorry, cream and sugar would be great, thank you.” He felt both irritated and self-conscious. Of course a place like this wouldn’t serve such things. “You’ll have to forgive me. I’ve just had a very long trip and I’m not feeling entirely myself just yet.”

She tapped a finger to her nose. “I could tell you were from out of town the second you walked in here. Old Lulu’s got an eye for these sorts of things. I been around and seen it all. I used to be a bartender, you know. You get real good at reading people real quick in that line of work, let me tell you.”

“I would imagine so,” Danny said cautiously.

“Honey, that ain’t nothing. Before I was a bartender, you know what I did? I was a goddamn cage dancer. That’s right. Me. Jell-O wrestling too. I used to make ‘em go crazy, but that’s one profession where you really gotta watch your customers and make sure they don’t try to pull anything funny.”

“Did they?” Danny asked in spite of himself. Imagining this creature before him dancing on a stripper pole held the same sort of morbid fascination as a particularly gruesome car crash.

“Sure. Sometimes those assholes would try to jerk off and shoot it in the cage and I’d just yell at ‘em that even if I were down there, they weren’t
big enough for me anyway. *That* always put ‘em in their place.” She let out a
chain-smoker guffaw.

Lulu was so astonishingly coarse, so impossibly vulgar, that Danny
could not help but find her intriguing. The uncultured people of the world
held a certain bizarre appeal for him. They were so oblivious to their own
ignorance, that there was a refreshing naivety in their direct statements. They
were too simple to veil their meanings in layers of sarcasm or double-
entendre. Instead, they laid everything out right up front like children.
Dolores had seemed like that when he had first met her, direct, open, blunt to
a cringe-worthy degree. She was incapable of deception. No finesse to
anything she did. He had liked that about her once.

“I said where you from, honey?” Lulu demanded loudly.


“You said that already. Honestly, people these days don’t have the
sense to keep their mind on what their doing. You take a minute to let that
coffee kick in, then we’ll chat.” She turned to bustle off, but Danny stopped
her.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he began.

“Lulu, honey, just Lulu. We don’t go getting’ all formal around here.”

“That lemon meringue pie, Lulu, is that actually made here?” he asked.

She puffed up indignantly. “You damn well better believe it. We
don’t make fancy stuff here, but what we do, we do right. That pie is made
from scratch every single morning with real lemons. I’ve helped roll out the crust myself from time to time.”

The image of Lulu dropping cigarette ash over the pie didn’t exactly make it sound more appetizing, but Danny went ahead anyway. How often did one sample Americana straight up? “Could I get a slice of that?”

“Sure thing. Tell you what, I’ll have one with you. You look like you got a story to tell.”

Danny was never sure if it was the length of his trip, the stress of the last twenty-four hours, or simply the need to talk to someone, but the moment that hideous woman sat down in the booth, everything just came tumbling out. He told her about Sophie’s mood swings and how nothing ever seemed enough to please her. He told her about the hysterical phone call from his ex-wife, who had just been thrown in jail in the town, for reasons he didn’t even understand. By the time he was done, he was holding his head in his hands over a custard and crumb-flecked plate.

Despite her harsh appearance, Lulu was a perfect audience. She clucked sympathetically at just the right moments, and though she would occasionally interject, she mostly let him talk.

When Danny finished, she shook her head. “Women are strange animals, hon. Men too, for that matter. You gonna be in town for a couple days then?”
“It looks like it, unfortunately. I don’t know what I’m going to tell Sophie. Did I mention that? I didn’t even say where I was going. I didn’t want to upset her.”

Lulu shook her head again and headed off to the kitchen, saying something about the pie being on the house. Danny rarely tipped above ten percent, but he paid for the slice anyway and emptied his pockets of loose change. It wasn’t often that one got to feel generous for spending an extra four dollars or so.

On his way out the door, Danny nearly ran directly into a kid hunched under the overhang for a smoke. He was a relatively clean-cut youth, save for his slightly shaggy blonde hair. The kid had an adult’s dress shirt and pants that did not fit properly, as if he had stolen his father’s clothing.

“God, sorry, kid. Jesus, I didn’t see you. I must not be thinking straight.”

Startled, the kid looked up, eyes wide. “Oh no, don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

I must be losing it, Danny thought as he staggered off down the street. The sun was beating down in full force now, and surreal haze coated the desert landscape. It looked as though it came from the brush of an impressionist painter, or some sixties pop-psychedelic visionary, a collaboration of Monet and Hunter S. Thompson. He felt sick all over again.

* * * * *
“Peter, hon, whaddya think you’re doing?” Lulu called. He was such a strange boy, sweet, but distracted and a little lost sometimes. She had not been surprised when he had returned the very day after he left his rather spectacular tip. Lulu had been around long enough to know a cry for help when she saw one.

The next morning the kid had looked as if he had been through holy hell. His sleepless eyes were puffed and rimmed with a dull red. His blonde hair had turned an oily shade of brown from fingers run through it too many times. Lulu had never been a mother, or a wife for that matter. Family hadn’t been a big part of her experience growing up, and it had never occurred to her to factor it into her life later on. Still, she had a soft spot for broken things, and the kid was clearly one of those.

After two coffees, each loaded with a little nip of the Jack Daniels from Lulu’s personal stash, the kid’s story had come tumbling out. Peter had said his father was a bear of a man, big and burly and grizzled, with a salt-and-pepper beard. He was the type to come home late at night and alternately strike Peter’s mother across the face or fuck her—the kid used the word “fuck,” which surprised even Lulu, though she didn’t show it—right on the living room couch. Peter heard his mother crying in the bathroom when she thought no one was listening. When Peter and his little sister asked what was wrong with Daddy, she always told them that Daddy just had a very frustrating job and that they needed to try harder to please him. The man was a fucking respected member of the fucking community, a real upstanding
citizen, a teacher loved by students and parents alike. His wife stood by him in
defense and loved him fiercely. At a young age, Peter had tried to be better, to
meet his father’s impossible standards, but he never could. No matter how
fucking hard he tried, there was always some way that it could have been
better. The older he got, the more often his father’s hand or belt turned on
him. Finally, Peter had run away from home and he had been trying to make
it on his own for the last few weeks. He had said that a trucker had dropped
him off in town, someone named Curly who had been passing through.

A lot of stories had gone through Lulu’s life over the years, and she
had an uncanny knack for guessing their veracity. There was something a
touch off about Peter’s, though she could not quite put her finger on it. If
there was one thing Lulu knew though, it was people who had messed up bad.
She recognized the look of them anywhere, and she was never one to point
fingers or judge. So she let the poor boy think that he had sold his sob story
and that she had bought the whole thing. No one liked to be called a liar, least
of all someone who was actually lying.

“I spent the other night behind Walgreens,” Peter had told Lulu,
burying his face in a stack of paper napkins. “How do you even get to that
point where shit like that happens? I mean, I was curled up like a fucking dog
in a pile of cardboard boxes and empty milk crates and I almost wanted to
laugh because it seemed so crazy and melodramatic and just so fucking awful
that for a moment I actually thought I wanted to die. Then I realized that if I
died there in that parking lot, no one would even care. They’d find my body
and stuff it in a black bag and there’d be one more seventeen-year-old body to
toss in the morgue. No one gives a damn about me. No one even knows me.
I’ve never had a real home, but I’ve always had at least a roof over my head.”
The boy shuddered as though his body were trying hard to cry but didn’t know
how.

Lulu saw only one decent thing to do. Despite the kid’s protests, she
had taken him home with her the second her shift was over. She had told him
that he could repay her by doing dishes and helping out in the kitchen. The
workload had seemed to reassure him somewhat; he did not want to be a
charity case.

Lulu’s home was not much to speak of. You couldn’t call it big or
fancy, but it was all hers and that made it just right. There was a garden out
back that produced approximately six perfectly wonderful tomatoes and
handful of zucchini every year. She had decorated the interior with magazine
cutouts of pinup girls, postcards from places she had never been and bits of
sea glass she had bought because she always had wanted to live near the
water. There was a small, otherwise useless room that she had converted into
a makeshift art studio where she did practiced amateur metal-smithing and
jewelry making. She fashioned earrings and necklaces from twisting metal
wires and the occasional bit of turquoise. Her creations were mostly for
herself and occasional friends, though she never wore jewelry anymore, and
all of her piercings had long since healed over. She was enormously proud of
her most complex piece: the chainlink g-string. It hung suspended by two thumbtacks on her wall like a plaque or a trophy.

“Now, I know my place ain’t not too roomy,” she had said apologetically as Peter had stared at her studio with mouth slightly ajar.

“No, no, it’s perfect. It’s beautiful,” he had answered quickly. “I love this jewelry. You really made it all yourself?” He had fingered a favorite piece of hers, a woven flower broach.

“Damn right I did,” she said proudly. “And you’d best put that down. You take something or try to pull a fast one, and old Lulu here will make sure you wish you’d stayed back in the dumpster behind Walgreens.” The kid had bitten his lip and carefully returned the flower to its proper place without so much as a peep. If he had felt threatened or upset though, he certainly hadn’t shown it. Within twenty minutes, he had curled right up on the studio couch with Butch, her white German Shepard, and within ten minutes he had looked as if he had belonged there his whole life.

Lulu had thought of trying to wake him up, but he was too damn cozy nestled into the dog. The two fit together like two scruffy pieces of the same puzzle, and it didn’t seem right to disturb something that natural. Lulu couldn’t help but feel a touch of affection for the new little stray she had picked up. Standing in the diner, looking down at him now, she held the image of his scrawny, sleeping body in her mind. Cleaned up and calmed down, Peter looked like a good kid. Despite her sympathetic leanings, she
knew a troublemaker when she saw one and maintained a healthy level of distrust.

“What?” Peter asked. He looked back at her with those wide doe eyes of his.

“Kid, what in the hell do you think you’re doin’ staring off into space like that? And what’s that you’ve got there?”

Peter made a move as if to hide the object in his hands, but Lulu was too quick. When she walked towards him, so he shrugged and held it out to her. The item in question was a slim, plastic card marked “American Express.”

“That man who was in here earlier must have dropped it,” Peter said. “I found it outside in the parking lot just a few minutes ago and I figured I should try and give it back to him.”

Lulu shot him her best skeptical look, the one that made most customers wither. “You were going to give it back, right?”

Peter looked a little hurt. “Of course I was. I didn’t have a phone number, so I figured I’d ask around and see if anybody had noticed him. He’s from out of town, so I want to make sure I catch him in time.”

“Maybe you’d better hand it over.”

“Are you ever gonna trust me? There’s no way I could use this thing. What would I even buy around here anyway?”

“Well, all right then. But you’d better be straight with me.”
The kid grinned. “Fuck, Lulu, I couldn’t pull one on you if I tried. Besides, don’t you remember?” He held out his forearm with the heart-shaped coils of ink.

“Yeah, yeah, ‘heart on my sleeve’ and all that bullshit. Cute, but I heard that one already. Your tattoo’s a fake, ya little runt, and don’t think I don’t know it.” Lulu said, smiling in spite of her attempt to be gruff. “Stop spacing out and get your ass back to work.”

Peter gave her a mock military salute and big wink before pivoting and swaggering back to the kitchen, the silver cigarette case he always carried clasped tight in hand.

* * * * *

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Danny said aloud, though no one was within earshot. The bail bondsman’s office defied all possible expectations he might have had, and in the worst way. Danny had not anticipated an appealing location, but nothing could have prepared him for what he now saw. The building was a squat structure made of red brick colored a dull grey brown. The widow was dirty, the sign faded, the interior dark and uninviting. If Lulu’s diner was clichéd in a pleasant way, this was the opposite end of the spectrum.

The bondsman looked like someone who had needed bail himself at some point. He was a burly man sporting a shaved head and a football player’s mammoth shoulders. Technicolor tattoo sleeves ran down both arms. They consisted of the requisite flaming skull, the gambler’s dice, the pin-up
girl winking seductively, the yellow-eyed snake, and what appeared to be a unicorn jumping out of a purple-and-red vagina that resembled a gaping wound. One of the bondsman’s ears was badly mangled, and Danny had to refrain from staring.

Danny had imagined that the man would start up some small talk, but he had no such luck. The stranger sat behind his desk and regarded Danny with a cool wariness. The man did not blink.

“So, I don’t know exactly how this is supposed to work. I’ve never done this before,” Danny began. He imagined how he must look to the bondsman: a pale, bespeckled outsider from the city with a mess of curls and a sweat-stained dress shirt. The bondsman was a thug, the type of meat-headed plebian who barely scraped through high school in order to bounce at a club, or perform security, or maybe just steal cars. He was a simple creature, no doubt, driven by primitive motivations and incapable of understanding the finer elements of high culture. Still, for all his contempt toward the man, Danny could not shake the uneasy awareness that the bondsman was exactly the kind of person who had shoved heads like Danny’s into toilet back in school. “I mean, obviously, I’ve never done this before. I’m a law-abiding…nevermind, that’s not important. The thing is…well, it’s my wife, you see. Not my wife exactly. My ex-wife. Soon-to-be ex-wife. We’re separated, not divorced. She still needs me though, you know? The woman can’t do anything for herself. We still talk.”

At precisely that inopportune moment, Danny’s cellphone rang.
“I have to take this,” he told the bondsman, who answered by continuing his silent stare.

“Hello?” It was Sophie’s voice on the other end, and she sounded less than happy.

“Darling,” Danny choked. The word always sounded natural when she said it, free-flowing and affectionate, but somehow with a touch of sophisticated irony. Coming from him it seemed stilted. “How are you?”

“Never mind. Where the hell are you?” she snapped.

“I’m just out of town for a bit…nothing too important. I didn’t want to bother you. I hope you didn’t miss me too much.”

“We had plans. We have tickets. Tonight. For the ballet, yes? Did you forget that? I told you a friend of mine is the lead. Well, the understudy for the lead, but she ought to have the part.”

“I’m so sorry, love. Listen, I can’t make it—”

“And you didn’t even warn me?” He could see her tossing her dark hair back as she spoke. “So you won’t mind if I go with someone else then, will you?”

“No…I mean, we were going to do that together, of course, but if you want…”

“We can’t very well do it together now, can we? The extra ticket will just go to waste.”

“Certainly. Of course. How thoughtless of—”

“Thanks. Goodbye.”
Danny looked up at the bondsman and said, “Women,” with what he hoped was a masculine shrug.

“No shit. Now, let’s talk business.”

The phone rang again. The caller ID said it was Dolores’s number. The bondsman maintained his unnerving gaze while Danny fumbled, trying to look simultaneously apologetic and dignified.

“Man,” the bondsman grinned. “You got all kinds a’ trouble, dontcha?”

* * * * *

“Heyya Lulu. I got something for ya,” Peter said.

Lulu heard the boy’s voice and forced herself to look exasperated. Although she herself had no problem spending twenty minutes or so chatting with a customer, she was ruthlessly pragmatic in the kitchen. She tended the younger staff members with the gruff love of a disgruntled mother goose, shoving them back into line when she saw them loafing around.

“Kid, I don’t hear you washing dishes,” she said without turning around.

“Sorry, ma’am.” He sounded so chagrined it was hard to tell if he was faking it or not.

“Don’t you ma’am me.”

“Sorry, but don’t you want to see what it is?” he asked.

“All I want to see right now is you taking care of those dishes. I know you think you’re pretty damn clever, but you can’t weasel out of this.”
“How would you even see me doing the dishes if you’re not looking at me?”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Lulu spun around. The first few days, Peter had been so meek it had bordered on pathetic. As he grew more accustomed to his surroundings though, the tiny shell of bravado she had seen the first day seemed to grow stronger. Now she found she had to check his cockiness regularly to keep it from getting out of hand. She was about to tell him off, when she saw that he was holding something in his outstretched hands. Slightly taken aback and more than a little suspicious, she asked, “What’s that?”

“A present.”

“I don’t get it,” Lulu said flatly.

Peter gave her a grin, “It’s just a small thank you. Nothing major…I don’t know, I just really appreciate what you’ve done for me. It doesn’t seem fair that I can’t do anything for you.”

Without dropping the scowl from her face, Lulu accepted the bundle and peeled off the tissue paper. Inside was a necklace, a slender silver chain with a tiny scorpion pendant.

“I know you could probably make better things than this,” he said apologetically. “But I saw it and it just seemed so perfect. Besides, you have to get tired of making your own jewelry. Sometimes it’s nice to get stuff, you know?”
In spite of herself, Lulu felt something thaw inside her. The mild irritation she felt towards the boy evaporated. He might be a little faker, but it was still the first time anyone had given her anything in longer than she could remember. “You know, kid,” she said. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know. I wanted to. That’s all.”

“No, really. I like you. I know I’m kinda rough around the edges sometimes, but, hell, that’s just how I am and I’m too goddamn old to change now. I appreciate the gift, but you don’t have to give me shit for me to keep liking you.”

Peter did not seem to know what to do with the comment. “I didn’t…I wasn’t trying to buy you off or anything.”

“Weren’t you? Maybe a little bit?”

“I don’t know. You’re one of the few people that seems to actually like me…I’m kind of a fuck up.”

“Please, who ain’t?” Lulu said. She shook her head and her pigtails swung and slapped against the sides of her face. “And sure, you’re kind of a head case. I know that about you from the second I saw you. I can read people, you know.”

“Can you read me? Can you really?”

Lulu wasn’t sure if it was a challenge or a plea. “Well, I don’t know everything, but you’re okay.”

Peter slumped against the countertop and, looking away, said abruptly, “I must be a hard person to love.”
Lulu knew most people would be asking for simple validation when throwing down a phrase like that. Peter looked curiously reflective though, as if he were genuinely thinking about the possibility. He wasn’t seeking approval, he was acknowledging a fact. “You’re a complicated one, I’ll give you that,” she said.

“I guess so.”

Physical contact was not something Lulu often indulged in. She could talk for hours, but she had a tendency to bristle if someone so much as brushed her arm. Now though, she reached out and clumsily patted the boy on the shoulder. The gesture was awkward, and accompanied only by her uncomfortable, squinting attempt at a smile.

“Now c’mon, let’s get back to work,” she said, trying her best to sound gruff. She turned her back as quickly as possible, but not fast enough to miss the very small, very real smile on the Peter’s face.

* * * * *

The parking lot had to have felt a solid ninety-eight degrees in the shade. Dolores was shaky, standing there on the sweltering asphalt, but she felt calmer than she might have imagined. She was minutes away from seeing Danny and from having to provide some explanation as to her present position in the first place.

She had pulled herself together as well as an absence of clean laundry permitted. At first she had thought about wearing her blouse that he had complimented once, but she had thought better of it. The garment was dirty
and streaked with sweat and faint white lines of deodorant. Her auburn hair felt brittle and course to her fingers, so she pinned it back as tightly as possible. She wanted to look composed, collected, mature, the antithesis of how Danny made her feel.

The monstrous heat might have been a small mercy in disguise. Normally, she would have been close to hysterics. Maybe her brief stint in prison had left her numb, or maybe she was just too tired and sticky from her own perspiration. Either way, she could think only about her physical discomfort and not the scene that was about to unfold.

“Hello.” That was all. Danny was usually fairly collected, but this time it felt a little more forced than usual. A layer of stubble graced his chin well beyond the customary five o’clock shadow. He looked pale, perhaps thinner, though that could have been her imagination. He reminded her of the pictures she had seen of him from college where he had seemed endearingly bookish and far less pompous than the black-and-white photo on his book jacket.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. There was an uncomfortably long pause. “We should probably take care of the paperwork. They need both of our signatures. And I can get my car back, if you just take me to where it’s been impounded.”

“Right,” Danny mumbled.

“Thanks again.” She could hear the southern cadence creeping into her tone. “I appreciate this.”
Something visibly snapped in the man who had been and still technically was her husband. “How could you be so stupid?” he demanded. Danny was not the most direct individual under the best of circumstances. He had generations of neurotic Yankee genes running through his veins that rendered any transparent expression out of the question. Generally, their fights started with veiled accusations, insinuations, or subtle critiques that gnawed away at her flaws. Yet, there he was, looking decidedly more flustered than usual, accusing her to her face. Though intended to hurt, his words made Dolores feel secretly better. It was a relief not to be the emotional one.

“Excuse me?” Dolores said. She had steeled herself for the worst, and it was gratifying to be right about something for a change. “You have no idea what I have been going through the last few days. You have no idea. You can’t just show up and act like you—”

“Oh, what, am I intruding on your plans? Am I upsetting your life now, Dolores? Is that it? You know where I’m supposed to be right now? At a ballet. It’s one of Goutier’s first major starts, not that you would know who that is. And instead I’m out here in this…this…shithole town because you somehow went and got yourself arrested.”

“I told you it wasn’t my fault.”

“Really? Because I don’t care right now. If you just thought for-for two seconds—”

“Danny, that’s not fair—”
“Not fair? How can you say that to me? You know what? You know what, Dolores?”

“What? Go on—tell me that everything I do is wrong, just like you always do.”

He continued as though he had not heard her. “You’re like a child, Dolores. That’s right: a spoiled, infantile brat. You only think about now, now, now and have this tiny, narrow view of everything. I don’t know how your head works sometimes. My mind thinks about—”

“That’s not true.”

“You won’t even let me finish a sentence. I’m trying to—”

“Now you wait just a damn minute,” she snapped. “Your common sense ain’t worth shit, so don’t you come down here and spout off your intellectual bullshit like it means a goddamn thing. I don’t care if you know more about ballet or opera or Vivaldi or food than I do. This is life, and I handle it better than you do. I don’t need your judgment. I didn’t ask for any of this, you, you selfish...”

The words came barreling out of Dolores’s mouth in a thick accent before she could even think about what she was saying. They seemed to build up a momentum of their own, independent of her own thoughts or will. She scarcely recognized her own fierce, almost guttural female voice. It was as if she were possessed. She could feel the saline sting of tears waiting at the corners of her eyes and was suddenly glad for her aviators.
At that precise moment, a cop car pulled up, and an enormous human being struggled to get out. He was so absurdly oversized that the car door proved a major impediment. His great, fat face was puffed and red and his tremendous belly strained at his shirt. A button went whizzing off as he attempted to free himself. After about a minute of flailing, the officer burst out of the vehicle, still panting. Dolores and Danny stood awkwardly frozen, too self-conscious to continue their argument.

“Whaddya lookin’ at?” the cop snarled, then huffed past them into the station. The pair said nothing at first, having lost the thread of the argument. Now that the initial inertia was gone, the argument seemed sillier than it had just minutes ago.

“Anyway…Look, I don’t care if you made trouble or if it walked up and bit you because this is…is…unacceptable,” Danny said. Despite his best efforts, he sounded a bit taken aback, apologetic even. He tugged irritably on a wayward strand of hair. “Look…are you okay?”

Dolores felt her face soften ever so slightly. “Yeah,” she said. “But I’ve been better.”

“I would imagine so.” He smiled back in his rueful, irony-inflected way.

“Yeah…listen, that was uncalled for. I went too far,” she said.

“Same. I’m just a little stressed out right now.”

“How could you not be?” She cracked the faintest hint of a sad, forlorn smile.
“Hey, why do we do this?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

They stood there almost smiling, almost laughing in the heat like two dumb kids who had just met. And even though he could make her angrier than any person alive, for just that one moment it made sense to Dolores that she had fallen in love with this man once. Back before the years of sleepless nights listening to the hum of a white noise machine and feeling simultaneously abandoned and trapped by the body lying at her side, back before his lectures began to sicken her, back before lovemaking became a ritualistic chore performed in grim, determined silence, back before she started driving down unknown streets, half-hoping she might be mugged or raped or whatnot just so that she would not have to go home. Yes, back then before years of accumulated resentment, there had been a reason that she had been drawn to him and he to her. They had not started as nothing.

Then, “Anyway…” Danny scratched his head and looked away.

“Anyway?”

“I guess we should get started. These forms take a while to fill out,” he said.

“Right. Yes, of course. Sorry.” She jerked her head in a mechanical nod. They stepped inside and went back to being strangers. Yet as they spent the next hour and a half signing paperwork and deciphering legal jargon, there was a palpable thaw between them.

* * * * *
Lulu was making her usual rounds, brandishing a pot of coffee as if she might just throw it at the next person who looked at her funny. As she moved between tables with her usual speedy, if cumbersome, gait, she could not help but notice that the visitor from out of town had returned. He reeked of yuppie and looked as out of place as ever. At the very least his beard and moustache were more neatly trimmed than before, and he looked as though he might have slept sometime in the last week. Peering over at his table, Lulu could not help noticing that he was with a woman this time. This new guest looked to be about mid-thirties, slight build, auburn hair. In contrast to her uptight companion, the woman was an all-out train-wreck. Her dark glasses that made her look like a big-shot celebrity fresh out of rehab.

Unable to resist, Lulu lurched on over to their table, blatantly ignoring a customer signalling for her attention.

“Coffee you two?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Danny answered, gesturing to his mug. “Someone already got me.”

“I’d love some,” the woman said. She was hunched over her mug.

“Y’all know what you’d like to order?” Lulu prompted. “There’s no rush. Say, I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before…”

The woman smiled rather weakly, “I guess you could say I’m new. I’m just passing through.”

“I see.” Lulu was practically salivating to get the story. She already was reviewing mentally what Danny had told her. Which woman was this—
the wife or the new one? Or was this someone else entirely? Lulu knew better than to ask right out, at least until the pair had some much needed caffeine running through their veins.

“What did I have the last time?” Danny asked. “I’ll take that again.”

“Sure thing, Hon.”

“Bring me whatever’s good and homemade,” the woman said.

“Everything’s good. Everything’s homemade. What the fuck kinda place do you think this is, lady? At least tell me how hungry you are.”

A small slip of a smile appeared on the woman’s face. “I’m starving. I’m so…I’m so fucking hungry I could eat a horse,” her voice started out quavering and rose as she spoke.

“That’s more like it.”

Danny laughed, though not in a derisive way. The woman looked startled, as if bracing herself for something, then relaxed. The couple exchanged a glance that raised Lulu’s curiosity to an almost unbearable level.

“I want biscuits. And gravy. And cornbread—that’s not the sweet type, is it?”

“Hell no.”

“Good. And then…two fried eggs. With bacon.”

Lulu chuckled with satisfaction and made her way back to the kitchen. Once inside, amidst the usual clamor of pots and pans and hissing steam, she noticed Peter standing idle. He had proved himself useful in his last few days there, perhaps in an effort to earn his keep. If nothing else, he was good
staying out from underfoot. He seemed to have a knack with other people, and an intuitive sense of how to stay out of trouble. Lulu suspected something amiss when she saw him standing there right in the middle of everything.

“Kid,” she shouted. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Peter seemed to snap back to himself. “Sorry.”

“Get it together. We got busy, bitchy, hungry people out there and they ain’t about t’ feed themselves. What’s with you?”

“Nothing. Who’s that couple out there? Did you talk to them?”

“Out of towners.”

“What’s the deal?”

“Aren’t you nosy today? None of your damn business.”

“Just curious,” he said casually. “They look pretty cozy. I asked because I know you know everything about everybody—you’re so good at that.”

Lulu felt an involuntary flush of pride at that, though she would never let it show. “You can pass the time by doing your goddamn job. And I think that that’s his wife. They’re supposed to be splitsville, but if you ask my opinion, I think there’s something still going on there.”

“Really.” Something about his manner unnerved her.

“Why do you give a shit anyway?”

“No reason,” he said. He shrugged, but it felt just a little too calculated. He made his way back to the dish station, grabbing a tray of dirty glasses on the way.
Megan flounced by, her ponytail swinging behind her. “You seen Peter?” she asked through a wad of gum. She knew perfectly well that Lulu hated it when anyone chewed gum while they worked.

“You spit that thing out right now, Hon.”

Megan opened her mouth and let the pink gob land in her hand. The sticky wad trailed saliva and Megan made a face. “Gross.”

“Wash your hands. And whaddya want with him?”

“Just…just wanna talk to him about something,” Megan said vaguely. She looked slightly off to the left and played with a lock of hair while she talked. She was the worst liar Lulu had ever met.

“He’s working. You should be too—you ain’t paid to go chasin’ boys.”

“Aww, Lulu, it’s not like that,” she mumbled, still avoiding eye contact. She smiled that big, slightly guilty grin of hers. “Nevermind. It’s all good.”

Lulu shook her head. In her experience, that phrase was seldom, if ever, true. As usual though, there was far too much to do to worry about it right then.

* * * * *

“Look, all I’m saying is I think I should go with you. It’s still a long trip,” Danny reiterated for the third or fourth time. He and Dolores were sitting at Lulu’s diner yet again over a heap of pancakes smothered in flavored corn-syrup and nostalgia. Three days had passed since his arrival in town, and
the pair had had little respite from plowing through the layers of bureaucracy.

On more than one occasion, Dolores had joked rather darkly that she would never have bothered getting arrested if she had known just how much damn work it was going to be.

“And all I’m saying is that I think I would be better off doing this on my own. I can handle it,” Dolores answered, again for the third or fourth time. She had that look—jaw locked, shoulders scrunched up, head turned ever so slightly down as if she were getting ready to charge—that she used to refer to as her “Missouri mule” stance. There was no convincing her when she set her mind like that.

“You always say that,” Danny told her. “But that’s just because you’re too stubborn to take advice or help. I’m not sure I trust you not to get into more trouble.”

“And I think you should mind your own business.

“This is my business. I am financially involved at this point. It’s as much my business as yours.”

“Danny, what happened to me won’t happen again. I’ll be just fine.”

“You’ll be fine? You shouldn’t be making this trip at all right now. They’re only dishes, Dolores.”

“You know this ain’t about the dishes.”

“All the more reason someone should go with you.”

“Don’t you have things to get back to?”

“Of course, but that’s not the point.”
“Than what is the point?”

“That you think you can do this on your own, but that’s ridiculous. You need me.” There was a note of desperation in the sentence that he hadn’t intended. “I mean, you’re making too big a deal about this whole thing. It’s just pride—and that’s …” Danny forced himself to take a good look at the woman sitting across the formica from him. Something had changed in the months they had been separated, though it was difficult to pinpoint precisely what was new. She had lost a little weight maybe; her features were harder, sharper around the edges. Her hair was the same dark red it had been before, but she had stopped straightening or blow-drying or whatever the hell she normally did to it. The sunglasses she wore to cover her lack of makeup only made her look more like a fugitive.

“What, Danny?”

“I was going to say ‘idiotic’ or ‘childish,’ but I thought we were trying to maintain at least some pretense of civility.”

Dolores smiled, and her shoulders lowered by about a millimeter. She picked up a piece of bacon and chewed on it thoughtfully.

“We should’ve ordered the biscuits again,” she said. “Good, homemade biscuits with sausage and bacon and cream gravy.”

“Just like mamma used to make, right?” He rolled his eyes.

“You know my mom couldn’t cook for shit.”

“Figure of speech.” As a matter of fact, Danny had a particularly vivid memory of Dolores’s mother’s cooking. Dolores had managed to keep the
two of them from meeting even after months of dating. She always had some sort of excuse, some reason not to go back. Finally, when a wedding was looking inevitable, Ms. Hutchinson had made her way up to New York and waltzed into their apartment. She had insisted on cooking, despite Dolores’s protests, and had served the two of them some sort of casserole concoction made with Hamburger Helper and the plastic substance known as Kraft American Cheese Product.

Danny added, “You know, I’m just disappointed that the pancakes came with this Aunt Jemima crap. I mean, I would have expected better.”

“I like this stuff more anyway. Maple syrup’s too watery for me.”

“It’s not too watery,” he answered. “You’re just used to the processed junk because that’s what you grew up on.”

“Does it really matter why you like something?” she asked.

The Dolores he was used to would probably just have mumbled some kind of agreement and tried to change the subject. The woman facing him just regarded him coolly. “How’s Sophie?”

Danny hated it when Dolores asked that question, and he was beginning to suspect that she was well aware of that. It was her pointed way of reminding him that no matter how familiar all of this felt, things had changed.

“She’s fine. I talked to her last night.” And what a talk it had been. Sophie was a dragon when upset, and an ice queen when furious. She had been cold, almost ferociously indifferent to him.
“I can never really remember. What does she do now exactly? I know she used to be a ballerina and all. What do you follow that up with?”

“Odds and ends…” he began, then, “To tell you the truth, she still thinks of herself as a ballerina. I don’t think she knows what to follow it with.”

“I see.” Dolores took a sip of her coffee, set it down, and dumped in another container of creamer.

“She still…you know, she still tells people that’s what she does. I just don’t correct her.”

“And you just let her?”

“Is it that much worse than someone who calls themselves a ‘writer’ but hasn’t published anything in the last five years?”

Even through the sunglasses, he could feel Dolores looking at him hard. “Maybe we should go.” She slid to the edge of the booth and made a motion to get up.

“No, no, let’s just stay.”

She looked back at him questioningly. He wished he could read her face better. He wished she would take off the damn glasses.

“Just sit down—stay for a minute. Fuck it, let’s order something else. I didn’t really want pancakes anyway.”

Dolores hesitated before reluctantly sinking back into her seat. “I’m only doing this for the biscuits.”
Lulu swung by on one of her rounds, armed with a pot of coffee, steaming and jet black. She was uncommonly abrupt.

“Y’all good over here?” she asked.

“Lulu,” Danny said. “Will you please convince this woman that she’s crazy for wanting to drive all the way out to her family’s house in Missouri alone?”

Lulu gave the pair a searching look, as if she had just put something together but wasn’t about to let on what it was. “Now why would ya wanna do a thing like that?”

“It’s about my mother. She’s dead.” Dolores said it quickly, defensively, like someone who had offered the explanation a hundred times.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Hon.”

“She left me some china. I guess it’s not worth much, but she’d be mad if I didn’t go pick it up. My other family would probably just toss it in the trash—they all have their own anyway.”

“Could we get an order of biscuits?” Danny asked, diverting the subject.

“With gravy. And sausage,” Dolores added.

“With gravy and sausage. And keep the coffee coming.”

Lulu bustled off, and the pair were left on their own again. The conversation was surprisingly easygoing and pleasant. They steered clear of the more difficult topics, knowing that they would have to face them soon enough.
Megan was crying. When Megan cried, it was an involved affair that inevitably dragged the whole kitchen into the mess. She was not given to subtlety by nature, and a bad day involved great, gushing mascara-stained tears sloshing down her cheeks accompanied by half-stifled howls. Lulu saw her ferociously blow her nose into a wad of Kleenex and traipsed over to placate her.

“Hon, you get any louder and the customers are gonna start asking if the dishwasher is exploding,” Lulu said.

Megan only snuffled louder in response. She wiped a hand across her reddened eyes and managed to smear her eyeliner in a near-perfect horizontal line. Under other circumstances, it might have been funny. It was all Lulu could do to refrain from making a crack about Zorro.

“Alright, spill, who’s the motherfuckin’ no-good son-of-a-bitch this time,” Lulu sighed, setting her coffee pot down. “And why are they keepin’ you from doing your job?” The source of distress was almost always a boy.”

“It’s not just—s-some guy,” Megan sniffed. She took a deep, whistling breath in an attempt to compose herself. “I’m **fucked**, Lulu, I’m so fucking **fucked**.”

“You’re gonna have to use some real words if you want Lulu to understand what in the hell you’re talking about. And whaddya mean it’s not ‘some guy’? All your problems come attached to a dick.”
Megan tried to laugh, but ended up sobbing instead. “God, what am I supposed to do? I can’t call my parents—they still don’t even know where I am. They’d kill me.” In the two years now since Megan had shown up at the Diner, a seventeen-year-old rehab flunkie and high school drop out, Lulu could count the number of times the teenager had mentioned her family on one hand. “I can’t ask them for help. I’ll do anything before that.”

“Meg, babe, you’re still not making a goddamn lick of sense. What’s going on?”

“It’s Peter.”

“Peter? What happened to Peter?” Lulu felt her pulse jump more than she would have expected. “Wait, don’t tell me…were you two…”

“Were we what, Lulu?” Megan looked up. That might have been the first time since her arrival that Lulu had seen her look genuinely angry. There was a real hurt in her face. “Say it. You think I’m just some dumb slut, don’t you? That’s what everybody thinks. They all say it—I know it.”

“No one says it,” Lulu said patiently. *At least not out loud.* “Anyway, do you think I give a rat’s ass about any of that? You know my dirt.”

“Maybe they’re right,” Megan continued, as if she had not even heard. “Maybe I am just a dumb slut. I just feel like such a fucking idiot.”

“Meg—you have to tell me straight now: did you bang the kid?”

“Wha—No! No, that fucker stole my bike.”

Lulu had not been entirely sure what she had been expecting, but that was not it. “No, he didn’t.”
“The fuck he didn’t. I know it was him.”

“A lot of people come through here. I know Peter’s a little bit of an odd case, but he wouldn’t do shit like that. He’s not a bad kid.” She could hear the pleading note in her own voice.

“That’s what I thought. God, I actually…I felt like he understood me, ya know? That sounds so stupid now, but I thought…”

“Meg, you gotta slow down. We gotta figure out what really happened here.”

“We’ve just been talking a lot. I dunno, he’s just really easy to talk to. He’s been through all kinds of bad shit. His best friend overdosed on heroin when Peter was only seventeen.”

“That can’t be right. Peter’s only seventeen now.”

“Uh uh, he’s nineteen, just like me.”

Lulu chose to keep her mouth shut. “Right. I must’ve forgot.”

“The two of them used to deal together all the time,” Megan continued. “Peter didn’t really think anything of it at first—it was just some way for rich kids to ditch their money on blow and stuff. Then Peter went to the hospital and had to go under a fake name because he didn’t want anyone to know.”

Lulu had never heard the story before, but she had the good sense not to say so.

“Peter couldn’t even see him,” Megan continued. She seemed to have stopped crying for the moment, though her eyes had a dangerously liquid look
to them. “They wouldn’t even let him in because he wasn’t family. I dunno…he just started telling me stuff like that about himself. Real personal…said he didn’t feel like he could talk to anyone this way, that he could tell I was a—what did he say?—kindred spirit because I knew about this shit. We’ve been through so many of the same things. He just kept telling me he was such a huge fuck up, that he’d blown every chance at happiness and sometimes he hated himself for it…I’ve never met someone who really got what it was like to be in a clinic. Like, he knew, you know?”

“That don’t mean he stole your bike,” Lulu said uncomfortably. She did not like the direction this was going one bit.

“Well, I was cleaning late last night and he hung around since he said he didn’t really have anything else to do. Said he just liked spending time with me…that was all…”

“Meg…”

“And I kissed him, okay? That’s as far as it went though, I swear to God. He told me he didn’t want to rush into anything, didn’t want to screw something this good up. Besides, I’m trying to do this whole ‘second virginity’ deal, remember?”

“That still don’t mean shit about the bike.” Lulu was breathing hard now and there was a tight feeling in her chest. She had never understood how a mother felt before, but now she had an inkling.

“And….and he said he wanted to check out my bike, and it was a beautiful night out and we should go for a ride somewhere, just get away from
everyone,” Meg said. She had stopped crying completely now and her eyes had the unfocused of a person seeing something that had already passed. “It was a beautiful night. You could see every fucking star. The Milky Way looked so solid it was like we could have driven on it. He said he’d driven a bike before, but wanted me to show him exactly how to ride mine. We were just laughing and messing around…but you could tell he knew what he was doing with it. He was better on the thing than I was. And I showed him where I hid my keys…no one else knows that. He stayed after me, just because he said he wanted to finish closing up. And now he’s gone and he took my damn bike with him, and the cash I had stuffed in my locker.” He eyes started to leak anew.

Lulu turned to run, heart hammering. She descended into the basement and found Peter’s locker completely empty, save for a folded, yellow sheet of paper. She picked it up, fingers shaking in a way normally reserved for whiskey.

“Hey Lulu,

Thanks for everything—you’re the best. Couldn’t have done it without you. I’d love to stay, but I’ve got some things to take care of and it’s time for me to be moving on. Hope Meg doesn’t give you too much shit about the bike.”

-P”
Unlike Megan, Lulu was far too dignified to cry. She simply and quietly filled a flask she had not used in years and slipped it into her apron. By the end of the day, patrons were complaining about their waitress being even more foul-mouthed than usual. Slurring her words, she narrowly avoiding spilling coffee all over a man’s lap.

* * * * *

There was a knock on the door, but when Dolores opened it, Danny was not standing on the other side. In his place was a much smaller and unsettlingly familiar body.

“Kevin? What’re you—”

He looked about nervously. “Hey, let me in already, would you?”

“What do you think you’re doing here?” She wanted to say more, but could not to get the words out. Despite all that he had just put her through, all she could think of was the last time she had seen him. He was a near total stranger to her, yet she had a clear image burned into her mind of his body lying naked and vulnerable, etched out in the dim, orange street light. As furious as she was, she still felt embarrassed and a little flustered.

“I came to check on you,” he said, as if that were the most natural thing in the world. He smiled, right to her face, as if this whole thing were just an elaborate joke.

“How did you even know where I was staying?”

“I guessed. It’s practically the only place in town. I asked for you at the desk. Can I come in?” Without waiting for permission, he slipped past her
with a bit of a skip. There was that grin again, this time looking back at her from a room not unlike the one where she had last seen it.

“Kevin, you can’t—” Much to her shame, her throat was closing up. She could barely get the words out.

“Can’t what?” he asked. He hopped on the bed, letting it bounce a bit from the impact. There was a decidedly childish quality to his actions; it was like a parody of something an eight-year-old might do.

“You have to get out.” Insane though it might be, she could feel her control of the situation slipping away. “You have to get out now.”

“Dolores,” he said, shaking his head. “What are you going to do? You can’t make me leave.”

“Please…please don’t do anything,” Was she begging? What was wrong with her?

The smile finally fell from Kevin’s face, and for the first time he looked at least mildly repentant. “I just wanted to know that you were okay. Honest.”

“After what you did?” It came out as a rasp. “You fucking prick…do you have any idea what I’ve been through?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said softly. “I spent forty-eight hours in juvie once. It was just for weed, but they held me. Go figure, most of it wasn’t even mine. It was the first time I even smoked—I was fifteen years old and hanging out with a different group than I normally did. I thought I was so fucking cool. And we were just dumb kids, so of course we went and smoked
in a park behind a tree. When the cops came, the other two split and left me holding the dime bag. It was enough that I could have been charged with intent to deal. It’s a miracle that I got off as easy as I did.”

“So how could you do that to me? How could you just leave?”

He couldn’t meet her gaze. “I didn’t mean to. I felt terrible afterwards.”

“Oh, that’s great. You felt terrible. How the fuck do you think I felt?”

“Probably mad as hell.” He sounded genuinely sorry. If it was an act he was putting on, it was an awfully good one.

“You’re goddamn right.”

“I saw the police cars from the window and I panicked. I don’t know what came over me, but it was like my whole body just froze up and I thought I was going to be sick. I didn’t even remember the meth. I felt like they might come for me and had to run.”

Dolores said nothing. Silence seemed more dignified than breaking down.

“I am so, so sorry,” Kevin said. “I never meant to hurt you, and after you did so much for me. I would never do that intentionally, you know that right? You do believe me?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I went to your hearing.” He looked up at her with those uncannily large eyes.

“I saw you.”
“I just…I thought for sure they’d let you off. I mean, you have no record of any kind.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say something? You could have told them it was yours.”

“It doesn’t work like that.” Kevin hugged his knees to his chest and crouched unhappily on the bed.

“Sure it does. You say, ‘Hi, my name is Keven Henri, and these are my drugs and this nice lady here has nothing to do with them. It would save me a lot of trouble.”

“They weren’t even really mine, remember?”

“Oh, right, I’m sorry. You stole them off a truck driver. That’s so much better.”

“I don’t do that well in these kinds of situations.”

“There’s the biggest understatement I’ve heard in a while.”

“Dolores, you really don’t understand. They will let you off. They’re giving you a hard time now to make an example of you and to scare the shit out of you, but you have no track record. Me on the other hand…well, they’ll just take one look at me, and the fact that I technically have a drug history, and they’ll throw me in for at least five to ten years. I feel so guilty that you have to go through this.”

“I can’t believe you left.”

“You’re not going to turn me in, are you?” He stood up from the bed.

“Maybe I should.” She took a step back.
“I feel awful.” He took a step forward. “I know I said that, and I know that doesn’t make it okay, but I really do. Look…I can even offer to testify. I’ll get up in front of everyone and tell the jury exactly what happened. Of course…” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a credit card. He was standing right in front of her now, close enough that she could feel his breath. Dolores stared at the card, disbelieving. Danny’s name was written on it in plain, angular letters. “I don’t think this guy here would be too happy about it.”

“How did you—”

“Also, you’ve got to admit, it wouldn’t look too good. Technically, you did commit a crime.”

“I was never really in possession of the stuff though. I only held it for a minute. I would have turned it in. And if you’re talking about hitchhiking, I would rather have that than this hanging over me.”

“I’m not talking about either of those. Dolores, I’m seventeen.”

Dolores actually felt her heart seize up for a split second. She couldn’t remember what exactly the penalty or the age limits on statutory rape were. Was that a felony? Could she go to jail for that? And even if not, she would certainly lose everything in the divorce settlement.

“You lied to me.”

“I didn’t know you. It would look pretty bad. Getting a missing kid drunk and taking advantage of him?”

“You bought the alcohol.”
“I never intended it to lead to that. I seem to remember you coming on to me, though to tell the truth, it’s a bit of a blur. I was pretty out of it.”

“How much of what you told me was even true?”

“Most of it. I just thought a seventeen-year-old kid standing by the side of the road would seem weirder to you. To tell you the truth, I’ve never been hitchhiking before and I was scared. After Curly, I didn’t know what kind of person I was going to run into.”

“Kevin…”

“Listen, I know what you must think of me because of all this shit, but I’m not trying to threaten you. I like you, Dolores, I really do. I think there’s something between us, even if I don’t know what it is. I just want what’s best for the both of us.”

“Give me his credit card, at least.”

“How would you explain how you got it? No, no, I’ll make sure he gets it somehow.”

“You’re not…you’re not going to find him, are you?”

“Obviously, I already did. I’ll just hang onto this for now. Oh, I must have grabbed this by accident. Thought you might want it back. Mommy’s still in there—don’t worry. I didn’t touch a thing.” He tossed her the silver cigarette case. He walked through the door, leaving her paralyzed and gripping the doorframe. In an impulsive change of heart, he stepped back over toward her, put his hands on the side of her face, and planted a quick kiss on her forehead. “Don’t do anything stupid. I’ll see you soon.”
And then he was gone.

**Part Three**

“Honey, you know this is all going to bite you in the ass,” her mother said with a disapproving shake of her peroxide ringlets. Once again, she was standing in their barren kitchen. This time though she was holding a giant mixing bowl and rolling nubs of butter into a mound of flour. The white powder was forming a crust on her cherry-red fake fingernails.

“This isn’t real,” Dolores said. “I’m dreaming again.”

“Sure you are sweetie—I kicked the bucket, or don’t you remember? It’s not like you bothered to show up for the funeral.”

“You’re not going to bring that up against me...”

“Sorry, you’re right. I was going to try and avoid that one.” Leaning the bowl on her hip, Dolores’s mother turned and opened the fridge. It was spotless, more immaculate than it had ever been in life. The only item inside was a lone carton of buttermilk placed dead-center on the middle shelf. Her mother snatched it up, dumped the entire contents into the bowl, and stirred vigorously with a large wooden spoon that Dolores was fairly certain belonged to Danny.

“What’re you doing?” she asked her mother.

“What the hell does it look like I’m doing? I’m making biscuits.”

“Since when do you bake?”
“You keep imagining me in the kitchen for some reason. I might as well make myself useful—there ain’t a damn thing to do in here otherwise.” Dolores’s mother tossed aside the spoon and started blending the ingredients with her hand again.

“You shouldn’t overwork the flour. You’ll make them tough.” Even before Dolores finished the sentence, she remembered Danny saying the exact same thing.

Her mother cocked an eyebrow at her. “Sweetheart, do I look like I care? The dead don’t eat.” She continued to beat faster and faster until the wooden spoon became a blur.

“Why am I here again? I don’t think we had this many heart-to-hearts when you were even alive,” Dolores said.

“No, because you never called.”

“That’s not true.”

“Don’t lie. That wasn’t how I raised you.”

“You can’t tell me now that you were a great mother.”

“Let’s just give it a rest, shall we?” She retracted one hand, looking mildly disgusted by the sticky mass that came out all over her fingers. She tossed a blob carelessly on a baking sheet slicked with Crisco. “Dammit, I was never any good at this.”

“Do you want me to help?” Dolores asked. Her cooking skills were no better. Danny had hardly let her near a stove for the entire duration of their marriage.
Her mother gave her a long, hard look. “You got more to worry about than biscuits right now. Let’s just focus for a sec, alright?”

In a humbled voice that surprised even her, Dolores said, “Please tell me what to do.”

“I can’t do that. I s’pose I oughtta tell you to tell that husband of yours the truth, but sometimes I think men are better off not knowing things.”

“You don’t really think Kevin…I mean, there’s no way Danny could find out, right?”

“Oh, there’s plenty of ways he could find out and you know it, but there’s not much to do, now, is there?”

“What about…”

Her mother flung the baking sheet into the oven and slammed the door with a loud bang. “Sorry, sweetie, didn’t hear you.”

“What I need to know is—” Dolores began again, only to be drowned out by the roar of the fan above the oven.

“I can’t hear you,” her mother said, casually switching off the fan.

“Why do I keep getting interrupted?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. This is your fantasy.”

“What about the family?” Dolores finally managed to get out. “How am I…I don’t know what to tell them. I haven’t seen them since you were around.”

“’Scuse me just a moment,” her mother interjected. There was a faintly acrid smell emanating from the oven. Through some minor perversion
of the laws of nature, the biscuits seemed to have cooked almost instantaneously.

They emerged from the oven craggy and misshapen, bearing little resemblance to the perfect, golden rounds from Lulu’s diner.

“Mama—”

“Open your mouth.”

“But—”

Before Dolores could utter her protest, her mother had shoved one of the lumps between her daughter’s gaping lips. It was too hot, and as Dolores’s teeth sank into it, the steam scalded her tongue. The heat spread through her limbs, trickling down from veins to tiny capillaries, until her whole body burned. She felt almost feverish, but more awake than she had in ages.

“There you go,” her mother said, sounding satisfied. “Only time I can get you to shut your trap. Now, you listen to me for just a damn minute: I am not here, so save that sass of yours, because you’re gonna need it soon.”

Dolores tried to respond, but the biscuit had dissolved to the consistency of cement and effectively sealed her jaw shut. Her mother put a finger with its absurd, lacquered plastic nail to Dolores’s lips, then leaned in and planted a soft, quick kiss on her cheek. Her mother smelled of cigarettes and asphalt in the summer and someplace far away.

“You’re going to have to navigate from here.”

“What?” Dolores said, jerking upright.
“I said you’re gonna have to take a look at a map—we’re coming up on actual civilization and I have no idea where the fuck we are,” Danny said irritably. “Oh, wait, don’t tell me you were sleeping again.”

“No.”

“Liar.”

Dolores thought she saw just a hint of a smile, though Danny sounded rather annoyed. She strained her body against the seatbelt and forced her mind into the present. The overheated Dodge and her technically still current ex-husband felt like another construction of her sadistic subconscious.

“Here, give me the map.” She sighed and attempted to make sense of the tangle of red and black lines.

She fiercely had opposed the idea of Danny coming, but after several days of arguing, he had worn her down. Her rationalization for taking him along was that she couldn’t risk Kevin revealing anything. The simple truth though was that the road ahead of her was looking longer than ever, and she was terrified by the prospect of all that time with nothing but her own self-doubt and her mother’s chain-smoker voice rattling in her head. Dolores did not trust herself to avoid making some fatal error again.

There had been moments in the last twenty-four hours when she sorely had regretted her decision to let Danny come along, but not for the reasons she had anticipated. She had imagined hours and hours of stony silence, of bursts of anger where all those bitter grievances and grudges flared into the open. Instead, the dynamic was far stranger. They bantered, and occasionally
bickered as though nothing had ever changed. The routine fit them like an old, worn shirt and Dolores felt somehow comfortable and safe. There was more of a bite to some of their squabbles then there might once have been. Danny’s comments often came accompanied by a cutting, sarcastic undertone, and there were times when Dolores could feel a similar edge behind her own words.

“I still don’t understand,” Danny said for what was easily the hundredth time. “What you were thinking when you saw her standing there.” By ‘her,’ he of course meant the supposedly female hitchhiker that she had picked up that had lead to all of the trouble. “You know better than that.”

“Could we not do this again?” Dolores said.

“It’s a perfectly valid question, and you keep avoiding it.”

Dolores fiddled with her silver cigarette case and stared out the window into the great, empty expanse outside. The squiggles on the map told her that they were somewhere out in Ohio, but it might as well have been western Pennsylvania, or one of the other states they had hauled themselves through. The defining characteristic of Interstates appeared to be their remarkable similarity. Dolores was vaguely aware that each of the regions they were blasting through at seventy-five miles per hour probably had a distinctive personality. When she had been traveling on her own, she deliberately had steered toward the smaller roads. She seldom had interacted with the towns she passed, but she liked to look at them. There was a certain
voyeuristic pleasure in peering in at all those other lives so utterly disconnected from her problems.

Danny had no use for winding roads bordered by corn or soybeans. Being born and raised in a place where the people were literally stacked on top of one another, he saw the Midwest as a criminal waste of space. He said there was nothing to see there. Much as Dolores hated to concede anything to him, she had to admit that the scenery was nothing spectacular. The farm fields were maintained with such mechanical precision that they felt utterly separate from whatever human beings must have tended them. For every farm house or sign of life, there were miles upon miles of vacant crops broken only by thin lines of trees to stop the winds. They felt deserted.

Besides, if she was being honest, Dolores hadn’t taken backroads before exclusively because of the vistas they afforded. She had followed her meandering routes before in part because she had been afraid to reach her destination, and she couldn’t very well admit that. Between her brief stint in jail, figuring out how to retrieve her car, and fixing the vehicle’s mechanical problems, she was already inexcusably late. She still did not know what she was going to tell her family.

“I already answered you,” Dolores said. “It was hot out—she would have died if no one had come by.”

“You’re exaggerating. If you were in New York and you saw someone who looked like a crackwhore standing by the side of the road, you wouldn’t say, ‘Hey, wanna ride? Hop in!’ unless you had a death wish.”
“She didn’t look like a crackwhore. She seemed pretty normal. Honestly…she seemed perfectly nice at first.”

“I thought you said she was all covered in piercings and tattoos and had purple hair. What part of that screams ‘normal’ to you?”

“Oh…right. I meant aside from that,” Dolores said weakly. “Look, let’s just change the subject. I’m going to try and find a radio station.” She twirled the dial absently but found nothing but static with some garbled voices straining through.

“We’re too far away to pick anything up out here, and you know it,” Danny said. “But back to the point…”

“Will you just drop it already? I screwed up, okay? At least the hitchhiker was better company sometimes.”

“It was just a question.”

“Yeah, and you already asked it, and I already gave you an answer.”

“You know, your problem is that you’re too trusting of other people.”

“You sound like my mother.” Dolores said this without thinking. The gravity of her words sank in only after they were hanging grimly in the air.

Danny played with the radio dial, cycling through all the various pitches and frequencies of white noise.

“You’re not going to find—” Dolores started irritably, and then stopped: he had managed to locate what must have been the lone station drifting out there in the cornfields. The raspy, guttural words of a Tom Waits song were straining their way through the speakers. The signal was feeble,
and the crackle in the vocals came equally from static and the singer’s longstanding abuse of nicotine. It was the first sound Dolores or Danny had heard aside from the muffled engine and each other’s voices in several hundred miles.

Neither spoke for the next half hour, until the station finally died away into nothing.

* * * * *

Dolores was in the process of lighting a much-needed cigarette—Danny had been adamantly against her smoking for the entire trip, even with the windows down—when Brenda opened the door. She was the wife of Dolores’s younger older brother, Paul, and in the decade and a half since Brenda had entered the family, she and Dolores had never had a conversation that lasted more than three minutes. Years ago, in her youth, Brenda had enjoyed a brief stint as a professional model. She had never attained any notable level of success, and she probably had made little more from the experience than Dolores had from waiting tables. Brenda’s family wealth had negated any need to pursue modeling as an actual career though. It had always been more of a bragging point.

Even now, years after her face had ceased to grace cosmetics ads, Brenda maintained her figure with the kind of discipline usually associated with military personnel. Her arms tapered down to almost nothing, then widened at the wrist with the curvature of her bones. Her cheeks were hollow, her long limbs spindly, her chest concave. When she was younger, her
emaciated body might have conformed to the standards of high fashion, but now it only served to age her prematurely. Coupled with her pale, surgically tightened skin and peroxide-saturated white-blond hair, her skeletal form gave her a spectral quality. She seemed to drift through her house, a fatless, fleshless, bloodless, creature.

She smiled her customary tight smile when she saw Dolores standing at the door. As usual, Brenda sported stilettos that made her tower over everyone else, and she wore the clothes of some designer Dolores had never heard of. Dolores was suddenly conscious of how she must look after all those hours spent in the car. She could sense her hair sticking to the back of her neck from the sweat, the damp fabric of her shirt. She also probably could use an extra swipe of deodorant, if Brenda’s wrinkled nose was any indication.

“Hi Brenda,” Dolores said. She suddenly remembered that she was holding a cigarette, a plume of smoke still drifting from the end. She flicked it away and ground the ash under her toe with a helpless look.

“Why, Dolores, it’s so nice to see you again. I do hope you had a pleasant trip. It wasn’t too hot, was it?” Brenda spoke through clenched, perfectly bleached teeth framed by lips painted a dark shade of mauve. The lipstick was the lone point of color on her face.

“Sorry we got held up,” Dolores said. “Car trouble. It was just about impossible to get the parts we needed. You know how these little towns are.”
Her story came out far too quickly, a sure sign that she had rehearsed it one too many times in her head.

“Of course. We’re just so happy that you could finally make it. You know, we were starting to wonder if something had happened. We hadn’t heard from you in such a long time…”

“We’re just happy to be here.”

“We”?” Brenda inquired, still smiling stiffly. Though she spoke with an accent, it bore minimal resemblance to the rougher dialect with which Dolores and grown up. To the unaccustomed ear, like Danny’s, a southern accent was simply a southern accent. Dolores recognized that her own harsh Miss-uh-ruh accent was a breed apart from the sharp, nasally Tennessee twang, the slow Mississippi drawl, or the subtly lilting, aristocratic cadence used by such women as Brenda.

“Yeah, Danny came too.”

“I see,” Brenda said. Her eyes narrowed slightly, revealing the tiniest lines where crow’s feet might naturally have been. Dolores wondered if Brenda’s face had frozen in that expression from excessive Botox. “Well, isn’t that nice. Please, come inside. Let me get you something to drink.”

With that, Brenda placed one hand on Dolores’s wrist and held her for just a moment. Brenda’s viselike grip was a bit too firm for comfort. Dolores could not help but notice that Brenda’s hands were the one sign of her true age; beneath a gaudy wedding ring and a French manicure, her thin fingers were knobbed, bony, and creased. Brenda glided down the hallway. Dolores
heaved her duffle bag over one shoulder and traipsed after her. The house was impossibly immaculate. As Dolores remembered, the lavender curtains matched the carpet, the covers on the end tables, and even the individual orchids in their matching, slender glass vases that seemed to litter all of the available flat surfaces. Generic impressionist landscape paintings and black-and-white photos from Brenda’s modeling days decorated the halls in identical silver frames. There wasn’t a single piece of clutter in view, not even so much as a magazine or a book carelessly left out. If the rooms weren’t so fastidiously free of dust, Dolores might have suspected that no one actually inhabited the place.

Dolores wished she had another cigarette, or something to do with her hands. She mentally cursed Danny for abandoning her right then. He had, naturally, decided that their arrival was the perfect time to call that ballerina girlfriend of his and update her on the situation. He had promised that he would be in very, very shortly. *Fucking liar,* Dolores thought. It might be ironic that she was seeking comfort in the presence of her former husband, but she would have taken almost anyone standing by her side right then.

The usual collection of people was waiting for her in the living room, amongst them Dolores’s brother Paul, his children, and her sister, Lily. At a young age, Paul had been one of those awkward-looking children with excessively large teeth and ears and a gawky, gangly body. He had grown into a surprisingly popular adolescent, thanks mostly to hours of secret practicing to join the football team. Now, he had the look of an older,
distinguished gentleman. Dolores recognized him as her sibling only on those rare occasions when he smiled and she could see that shy, gap-toothed boy peeking through the façade. Paul and Brenda’s children were two anemic-looking slivers, indistinguishable save for their different genders. Then, of course, there was Dolores’s younger sister, Lily. Like Dolores, Lily was a natural redhead, with the freckles to prove it. Unlike Dolores, Lily followed the prevalent choice of hair color in the region: a vibrant, unnatural yellow. Thick, black crayon liner surrounded her eyes. The makeup made her look a bit like a high school cheerleader, which struck Dolores as strange, since Lily had always been such a shy girl. She sat pressed against a corner of a couch, clutching an infant. Dolores remembered sending something for the baby shower, but could not for the life of her recall the child’s name or sex.

There were other people in the room too, as always seemed to be the case whenever Dolores visited. Several people were clearly relations on Brenda’s side. They were an attractive bunch, all well-coiffed and dressed in a generic way. There was a large, red-faced man with a ferocious salt-and-pepper beard, his fat fingers clasped around a double or triple shot of bourbon. There were several men in suits who looked to be business associates of some kind, and women who must have been their wives wearing hats that would have been more at home at the Kentucky Derby.

Each and every one of these people, these new strangers and these old ones related by blood, was staring at her. One by one the conversations dropped off and the whole room fell silent. Dolores began to realize that she
had stumbled into the middle of an event. She wondered how they must see her then, the long-lost relation storming onto their doorstep with her greasy hair and her reminders of death and loss.

And right there, at the far end of the room, was the last face she would have expected to see. Wedged between a woman in blue and one of Brenda’s offspring sat none other than Kevin Henri. He had managed to change his hair: an ordinary chestnut brown had replaced his old bleachy streaks. He was better dressed too, though his clothes still did not seem to quite fit him. His ears were free of metal, though she could still see the holes from the piercings. His only piece of jewelry was a simple chain with a tiny, silver cross.

Dolores had never fainted before in her life, but for the first time she wished she could. Melodramatic though it might have been, at the very least she would have woken up in a different scenario. Instead, the awful scene before her kept plodding relentlessly along. She could hear the various forced pleasantries of “so good to see you” and “my, it’s been such a long time!” but the greetings ran together.

Kevin smiled broadly, openly. Dolores knew she was staring at him too intently. She did not want to imagine her expression. Someone, Brenda probably, was saying something, trying to introduce them.

“Hi, I’m Jacob,” Kevin said in an absolutely perfect imitation of the accents in the rest of the room. “It’s so nice to meet you.”
Because Dolores had no idea what the proper reaction in such a situation would be, she automatically offered up her own limp hand. She felt the muscles of her mouth twitching. There was a chance she was smiling.

“Jacob,” she repeated stupidly.

“That’s right,” he said. Dolores stared long and hard at the boy: he looked back at her as though she were a perfect stranger, just another of his new benefactors. She realized that she had been holding onto his hand for too long by most social conventions, and that he looked slightly unsure what to do.

“How…”

“We are so fortunate to have this young man with us,” Brenda interjected. “He’s made the noble decision to embark on a better way of life, and we are doing our Christian duty to help him in that journey.” Brenda eyed her sister-in-law as though thinking Dolores should consider a similar transformation.

“Indeed, indeed!” cried the large, bearded man. He lifted his glass and downed the contents in a single gulp, then wiped his lips with his sleeve. With some effort, he raised his bulk from the chair and lumbered over to them. He clapped one hand on Kevin’s back and the other on Brenda’s. The impact almost knocked the spindly woman over. “This commendable young fellow you see before you was heading down the wrong track, living a life of sin and not knowing where he was going or what he was doing. Then he had
a change of heart and realized that it was time to change his ways. He did what so many of us sinners have done before and turned to God.”

“Really?” was all Dolores could manage. The shock was fading to a more manageable smolder.

“It’s a beautiful story,” Brenda murmured. “Dolores, this here is Reverend Thompson.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said. He thrust his hand out at her and she passed her own from Kevin’s delicate fingers to this man’s enormous, sweaty palm. Alcoholic fumes emanated from his mouth.

“You should really tell her all about it,” Brenda pressed. “It’s just wonderful—I’m sure she’d find it inspiring.”

“Well, now,” the Reverend huffed jovially. “It’s not my story to tell, is it? After all, my part in all this is just beginning. It’s young Jacob here who ought to tell it. He’s our little lost lamb after all.”

“But you started this whole program to help the troubled youth. You see, our Church is trying to reach out to those who need it, to do just as Jesus would have done. We cannot just preach to the faithful. We need to let the world know that everyone is welcome.”

“Really,” Dolores repeated. The idea of Brenda welcoming the rest of the world in with open arms was hard to believe. All that riffraff would destroy her lilac upholstery.

“True, true,” the Reverend said. “I was once a sinner myself, just like this boy here.” He gave Kevin another enthusiastic slap on the back, and a
shudder reverberated through his frame. Dolores hoped it hurt. “That’s why I can relate so well to the young folk—my own youth was a troubled time. Drugs, booze, women, you name it. A lot of women, actually—”

“Reverend,” Brenda said sharply.

He laughed cheerily. “But all that’s over and done now. That’s why I like to help the lost sheep, you know. You walked right into our fundraiser, I’m afraid. Gotta help all the lambs. Like this one here…Jacob’s been with us about a week now and already we’ve seen enormous improvements.”

“It does the heart good,” Brenda said in her icy tone.

“Jacob, my boy, you really should tell your story.”

“Yes,” Brenda said. “It’s so compelling.”

Dolores thought Kevin at least might have had the decency to look uncomfortable. Instead, he seemed perfectly at ease. He demurred a bit, looking down and blushing profusely.

“I doubt that would interest this nice lady here,” he said shyly. “To tell the truth, I’m so ashamed of my past…I don’t like to think about it much.”

“It’s all right, dear,” Brenda said. “There’s no need to dwell on the sordid details. That time is in the past.”

“I was baptized this week, and I like to think that that washed away everything from before. I’m getting a chance at a fresh start, something so few people ever get.”

“Amen,” Brenda said.
“I heard about your Church from a...from a friend,” Jacob said. “And I heard it was a place that would take even a screw-up like me...that they could forgive me. So I made my way over here. I spent the last of my money so I could get on a bus and ride for two hundred miles all through the night.”

“We found this poor kid literally on our doorstep,” the Reverend said. He chuckled, as though he had said something funny. “It was raining and he was huddled up under the awning on Sunday morning, soaked and shivering. It was a miracle that brought him to us.”

Brenda nodded solemnly. “That’s why we’re having all these nice people over—to show them the good work that we’re doing with this program, to show them that kids like Jacob have a future, no matter what their past.”

“That’s just beautiful, Brenda,” the Reverend said, beaming. “We’re so grateful that this child has come back to the fold, that he’s decided to accept God. Say, you don’t think I could have just a nip of that bourbon, do you?”

Kevin nodded. “I don’t know how I feel about God, but I want to believe in him, I really do.” His eyes were shining with such innocent hope that Dolores almost wanted to believe him.

“Don’t worry, son,” the Reverend said. He mopped his glistening forehead with a checkered handkerchief. “If you want to believe, you will believe.”
Danny chose that moment to stumble into the room, hauling an oversized bag. Even without turning to see him, she could sense his entrance by the collective intake of breath in the room, the flare of Brenda’s nostrils, and the way Kevin’s eyes widened, then narrowed almost imperceptibly. Various guests and relatives sized this newcomer up. The rules of hospitality were so thoroughly engrained though that no one was willing to cause a scene. Ten seconds after his arrival, the whole room burst into a clamor of greetings and pleasantries as each person strove to cover up the faux pas.

“My, my,” Brenda said. She raised an inquiring eyebrow at Dolores.

Yeah, that’s right, bitch. Let’s see what you make of that. But all Dolores said was, “Yes, he decided to travel with me.”

Brenda fixed her with a look that was both intense and inscrutable, before replacing it with another one of her clenched smiles. “Danny, we’re so glad to see you again. Don’t you waste a second worrying about those bags of yours—we’ll take care of them.” She shot a pointed glance at her husband, Dolores’s brother, and he moved to carry Danny’s luggage. “It’s so nice of you to come. We were sorry we missed the two of you at the service a few months ago.”

A remark that overtly cutting was not Brenda’s usual style, and it caught Dolores off guard. She felt it acutely, some place deep in the gut. She wondered if Danny felt it too, if he was aware of her pain at all. Why would she bring death into her own party? she thought.
“The memorial was lovely,” Brenda continued. “It was held in the chapel, just an intimate, tasteful affair. I’m sure she would have approved.” Brenda had never found anything remotely tasteful about her mother-in-law. “You might wish to visit the gravesite while you’re here. It’s by our family plot.”

“Gravesite?” Dolores repeated. She was conscious that she must sound slow, pathetic even, and impotent as a child. Lily had told her about the burial, but the whole idea of it still sickened her, even now. Contrary to familial traditions, Dolores’s mother had been quite clear that she wanted to be cremated.

Ashes to ashes, she had told Dolores in one of the last conversations the two had ever had. The disease hadn’t been far along at that point. Dolores had made a point of avoiding her mother in the cancer’s more advanced stages. Even then though, there were tell-tale signs. The blood and fat seemed to drain from her already thin frame, leaving nothing but folds of translucent skin hanging gently over blue-green veins and bones. She had kept her curls just a shade darker than Dolly Parton, as usual, but the hairs themselves were dry and brittle. Dust to dust. People all say that bullshit, but then when it comes time to let go, no one has the balls to just do it. You know, I saw what they did to my mother. They pickled her and fixed her nose with putty because she sat for too long before they got around to fixing her up. She looked fake—like someone stuck a mannequin from one of those fancy downtown department stores and dressed it all up in my ma’s clothing. I was
six at the time, and I saw her and I hollered like holy hell was about to break
loose...just started screamin’ and causing a ruckus right there in the church.

I don’t ever want them to do that to me. I won’t take up space in the dirt—no
thank you. They’d do better off to just burn me and send those ashes off to
travel the world. I don’t want anything to hang around. Your body don’t
mean a damn thing. It’s just the garbage leftover when whatever we are
finally flies the coop.

That was the last image Dolores had of her mother: sitting by the
window on the edge of her bed in a worn nightgown, frail and shockingly old,
silhouetted against a sky of brilliant blue, and smoking a Virginia Slim as if
daring all those doctors and relatives to take it away from her. Dolores
remembered feeling outraged that her mother would accept death so easily,
that she would give up. At that instant, Dolores had hated her mother. Yet, as
time went by, that one memory was the one Dolores most clung to. She hung
onto it with a fiercely protective tenacity, as though afraid that someone
would taint it or steal it from her.

Because the request was so unambiguous in the will, Paul and Brenda
had had to follow her wishes and have her cremated. That had not prevented
them from erecting a tombstone. Though Dolores had never seen the
gravesite, Lily had sent her a picture. It was an ugly, garish thing, excessively
large and utterly unnecessary. The stone was a mockery—a monument to an
empty patch of ground. It stood for nothing.
“Danny, you must meet Reverend Thompson,” Brenda said. Apparently she had decided to show some mercy and let the subject drop. “He’s our distinguished guest today.”

“No, now, you’re really too kind,” the Reverend said with relish. He gestured to Kevin. “The real star of the show is this young man here though. It takes real courage to make the decision he’s made. It’s hard to start over.”

The introductions began again, and once again Kevin told some abridged version of his tale of woe, alluding to but never quite specifying all sorts of dreadful things he had suffered. He was less loquacious than usual, keeping his sentences short and respectful. If experience had not told her otherwise, Dolores would have believed his shyness, his religious awe, and his seeming naivety to be sincere. As it was, the rest of the crowd was eating up every word he said. Every time he refused to reveal some detail about his past, they subtly pressed him harder. Curiosity was eating at Kevin’s audience, even if propriety kept them from begging him to tell them more.

Most disconcerting was the fact that even Danny seemed to be quite taken in. He harbored a certain fascination with what he called “real people.” He found the simplicity and honesty of “less refined” people to be compelling.

Something had to be done. Someone had to be told, and Kevin had to be stopped.

The initial commotion from their arrival gradually died down, and the guests returned to mingling as usual. The esteemed Reverend Thompson was in high spirits as he swaggered through the crowd, stopping only to pick up
another morsel of finger food or top off his glass. By the time mid-afternoon
rolled around, he was even redder than before, and the volume of his slightly
slurred speech was escalating. Brenda darted about, hawk-like, keeping an
eye on all the goings on. Dolores tried to catch Kevin’s eye, but he still gave
no indication that he even recognized her. The boy moved from group to
group with ease, instantly situating himself at the center of every
conversation. Just when Dolores thought she might be able to get him off by
himself, he seemed to latch onto Danny. The two were locked into what
appeared to be a close, personal discussion for a good twenty minutes.
Though Dolores could not make out the content of what they were saying
without conspicuously eavesdropping, she could see Danny lecturing on
something or other, and Kevin listening with rapt attention.

She tried to think of who would listen to her without prying into too
many of the details of her story. Brenda was not an option. Although she was
the principle source of authority in the house, she put no faith in Dolores’s
judgment. Paul would never dare argue with his wife. The only remaining
possibility was Lily.

The two sisters had been close once. A constant lack of finances and
space meant that they had shared a room growing up, and Dolores still clung
to a few fond memories of the two of them giggling madly under a ceiling
spattered with glow-in-the-dark stars. They were only a year apart, and
coming from the poorer side of town had rendered them social outcasts in
elementary school. They had tended to stick together with a kind of forced
solidarity. As soon as puberty had rolled around though, the sisters had headed in different directions. In retrospect, Dolores realized that they must have been a sad sight: two scrawny, ginger-haired children in clothes that were either two tight or laughably oversized.

With the onset of high school, Dolores had begun to feel the allure of anything other than the life she had. She had gone out nights looking for that elusive something she could never properly identify. She had smoked until her lungs learned to like it. She had stolen her mother’s whiskey from its less-than-discreet hiding place in the she closet, because she knew her mother would notice, but would be too ashamed of the bottle’s existence to object. Dolores had learned what to say and how to act to make a boy fall into her arms and pretend to care about her for a few hours. At times it all felt like a delirious, but hollow, parody of a clichéd rebellion. By the time she graduated, Dolores was done with it all. She had fled town, still seeking.

Lily had stayed. She had been the kind of girl who could melt into the social fabric of any setting without a trace. She had been pretty, but not strikingly so, and though she had had friends, she had never been popular. Her grades had been adequate at best. Dolores had become something of an embarrassment to her, a source of unwanted attention that interfered with Lily’s ongoing battle to blend. The two women had barely communicated beyond the obligatory annual Christmas letters. Still, if there was one living member of the family whom Dolores could still consider a potential ally, it would have to be Lily.
Dolores hunted her sister down by the hors d’oeuvres table. Unlike the other women in the extended clan, Lily tended to gravitate towards the nearest corner or source of food in social situations and stay there. She was munching on deviled eggs with compulsive nervousness when Dolores walked over.

“Sis,” Dolores began.

Lily looked up at her, her kohl-lined eyes immense and round, as though she had been caught in the middle of a minor transgression. “Oh, hi there,” she said. The traces of Ozark in her accent made the greeting sound like a parody of Brenda and the other belles.

“I need to talk to you,” Dolores said flatly. “And it’s important, okay? Can you just come with me for a second?”

“I don’t know…” Lily’s eyes darted around the room. She looked like a trapped squirrel.

“Lily, just come with me,” she hissed.

After more tittering and one more deviled egg, Lily followed Dolores over to a secluded corner of the room.

“Listen, it’s about that kid—Jacob? There’s something y’all—you all don’t know about him,” Dolores began. “For starters, Jacob isn’t even his real name. It’s Kevin. Actually, it might not even be Kevin. He was probably lying about that too.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I can’t tell you how I know all this…it would sound completely crazy. I just—I’ve met him before, okay? I know him. You can’t trust him.”
“I don’t know what you mean,” Lily said, looking off at the rest of the room as if hoping that someone would come and save her.

“He’s a liar and a fake. And he’s a drug dealer. Like, hard drugs, Lily, bad ones…”

“He told us he had been mixed up in some terrible things before. He’s reformed though.”

“Come on, you don’t really buy that, do you? That’s not you talking—that’s Brenda, or the Reverend, or whoever else has been feeding you this bullshit. What do you think?”

“I-I don’t know what I think.” Lily was twirling a lock of hair now, her hands searching frantically for something to do.

“Well, I do,” Dolores snapped. “And if I have to prove it, then fine. That’s just what I’ll do.” She turned rather dramatically and walked right into the other room to accost Kevin, who was embroiled in conversation with Reverend Thompson. Dolores excused herself as politely as possible to the drunken minister and dragged the boy back into the hall toward Lily, trying to ignore the stares.

“What’s going on?” Kevin asked her, squirming under her grip.

Dolores deliberately pulled him away from the doorway harder than necessary. If he was acting, he was doing an impeccable job of it.

“Don’t try that on me,” she warned in a low voice.

“I don’t under—” Kevin began.

“I’ve met him before, okay?” Dolores told Lily.
“Dolores…” Lily looked embarrassed, as if she were afraid to be associated with the unfolding situation.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but I really don’t—”

“Shut up,” Dolores said. It came out as a snarl. “Lily, just look at this. Now, there’s no way that I could know about this kid’s tattoo if I hadn’t seen him before, right? If I really, truly just met him in this room right now, I couldn’t possibly know.”

“Maybe we should head over to the other room,” Lily suggested timidly.

“Not yet. There’s a heart on his forearm—a heart made of snakes or dragons or whatever slimy animal they’re supposed to be.” She yanked Kevin’s right arm up to demonstrate, ignoring his cry of protest. “Heart on your sleeve, right kid?”

“Please stop, this is ridiculous—” Lily said.

Dolores ignored her and pulled the sleeve back roughly. There was nothing there. The skin was pale and empty. “That can’t be right,” she muttered aloud. “Maybe it was the other arm…”

But that one was just as blank as the first. Worse, the kid looked genuinely scared of her by now. He took several steps back, his shoulders hunched as though he were afraid she might strike him. He looked younger than she remembered, fragile even. Slowly, he walked toward the door and slipped into the other room, not taking his wide eyes off her until he was on
the other side. Lily looked at her as though Dolores were completely unhinged.

“Lily, I’m telling the truth. You have to listen to me…” Even as Dolores said it, she wondered if she had made a mistake. Walking into the room, she had been so sure of his identity. Now, she had the uneasy feeling that she might be losing it.

“No, you listen,” she said. The corners of Lily’s mouth were twitching and her eyes were moist, but there was a very real anger there, and maybe even a hint of backbone. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but I don’t want to be a part of it. Don’t drag me into your mess.”

“I know what I’m talking about. I’m not crazy—you have to trust me.”

“I don’t trust you anymore,” Lily said quietly.

“Sis, don’t you remember when we were kids? We used to trust each other at one point, didn’t we?”

“You left me, Sis.”

“Kevin, Jacob is—You have to believe—”

“I don’t have to do anything for you, not ever,” she said, quaking violently. “When mom died, you left me here by an empty grave while you ran off to your fancy city. So don’t you dare, don’t you dare tell me I have to do anything.”

Lily seemed to lose her sudden stash of nerve and made a dash for the buffet table. Dolores was left alone. The sounds of laughter and the hum of
casual conversation from the other room gave her the peculiar sense of powerlessness usually only experienced in dreams.

* * * * *

Danny had never harbored any affection for Dolores’ family. Over the course of his few interactions with them, he had received the impression that they found him borderline intolerable. He told himself that this was because he deviated from their small-minded, Bible-thumping mentality. They were unable to accept the level of erudite worldliness he brought into their home. The whole situation brought to mind all manner of stories of crazed, small-town Jesus freaks.

Yet, though he had generally looked down on them in the past, Danny found himself oddly charmed this time. They seemed so extraordinarily genuine and friendly. He was so accustomed to calculated, ironic detachment that these wide, open smiles were completely disarming.

He was particularly taken with Jacob, the wayward youth the family had adopted. The boy was so naïve. He had seen such a small part of the world, yet his hunger to know more was almost palpable. He hung onto every word Danny said, as though terrified of missing some crucial detail. Danny could not quite shake the feeling of déjà vu when looking at Jacob’s young face. Perhaps the teenager reminded him just a bit of himself at that age.

“You’re a writer?” the kid asked. He sounded as if Danny had just announced that he had toured with Guns and Roses back in the day.

“It’s not a bad job,” Danny said, feigning modesty.
“That’s so…how did you get to do that? How do you get to do that?”

His eyes were so wide he looked afraid to blink.

“You have to work really hard, and not give up.” Danny realized he was feeding Jacob the same lines that he teachers and mentors had always fed him. He lowered his voice and added, “You just have to be talented and make sure your work gets noticed. It’s not something everyone can do. Most people aren’t cut out for my job. I don’t want to swear in a Christian house, but you seem like a smart kid—I want to be honest with you. No bullshit.”

“No, I appreciate that,” Jacob said softly. “No bullshit. Bullshit is what I’ve listened to for so long. It’s not often that I get a chance to talk to a professional like you.”

“I just want to help.”

“I…no, it’s so embarrassing.”

“You can tell me, go ahead,” Danny encouraged.

“I used to write. For fun, you know. I was scared that if any of my classmates found out, they’d beat me up. That used to happen to me a lot—I was kind of the shrimp on my playground.” Jacob forced a smile, but there was obvious pain behind it. “And my Dad would never have been okay with it…he didn’t understand these things.”

“Jacob, you should never have to be ashamed of these things,” Danny said eagerly. He could picture the poor kid, misunderstood and abused. He was bright; Reverend Thompson had told Danny how remarkably well Jacob had done on placement tests for the local school. Jacob seemed to have a
knack for academics that belied some of the shadier details of his past. He must have felt so out of place, a diamond in the rough with no one to appreciate his potential.

“I suppose not,” Jacob said with a shy smile. “But…I don’t know, it’s habit. I used to have to hide books…didn’t want my parents to think that I was trying to be better than them. I wish I could have met someone like you sooner—maybe things could have been different.”

“Things are different,” Danny said sagely. “And if you need any advice, you can certainly come to me.”

“Do you think…I mean, if you wouldn’t mind,” Jacob began haltingly.

“What is it?”

“Could I read some of your work sometime? I don’t know if you brought any with you, but maybe…”

“Of course,” Danny said. In the back of his mind he was trying to remember the date of the last piece he had published. It was a short essay that had made its way into a little known nonprofit journal called *The Road*. How long ago had that been? Several years at least, but he tried not to count.

His cellphone rang, saving him from potential embarrassment. Sophie was on the line, and he did not dare let it go to the answering machine. He answered on the first ring, making an apologetic gesture to the kid.

“Danny?” he heard on the other end. The connection was bad, and her voice sounded cracked and far away. She sounded as though she had rolled out of bed only moments before, but Danny knew she must have been up for
hours. Sometimes she would do nothing at all in the mornings, shuffling between the bathroom mirror and the covers for a solid hour or two before going anywhere. On particularly lazy days, this routine stretched into the early afternoon. In his mind, he could see her face with its disdainful expression painted across her thick brows, wide mouth and prominent nose.

“Darling, I’ve missed you,” he began. He scooted off into the hallway for at least some semblance of privacy. “How are you?”

“I’m bored,” she said. She sounded disgusted even from this distance. “No one wants to have any fun as of late—all my friends are devolving into old bourgeois right before my very eyes. It’s such a problem. I really don’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be there with you.”

“That’s not the problem. I don’t know what’s wrong with them. I don’t even know why I’m calling. I’m just so tired of everyone being so infuriatingly dull.” She paused and Danny knew she was taking a drag off of a cigarette. Years of dance had trained her to smoke when she felt hungry or tired as a means of curtailing her body’s natural inclinations. The habit intensified when she had nothing else to do. “I just want…I don’t know. Sometimes I think this city’s lost its charm.”

“It’s New York—where else would you want to be?”

“Somewhere where the people are younger, sexier. God, I don’t know. Just somewhere else. I just want to go.”
“Where would we go?” Danny asked. He pretended not to notice that she had not used ‘we.’

“Paris maybe. Isn’t that the cliché? Isn’t everyone supposed to go to Paris at some point?” She laughed. It was an ugly sound. “I’ll buy a beret and sit around drinking coffee all day reading Sartre, and living some extravagantly depraved sort of existence while writing bad poetry about it. I suppose that last part’s more your department, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I hear Paris is nice though—good cheese.”

“Good wine.”

“And all the rest of it. What more does one need, really?”

“Do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“We could go. We could get plane tickets, just as soon as this is finished.” Even as he said it, he wasn’t sure if he was joking or serious. He wasn’t sure if she was either.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it right now,” she said dismissively. Danny could picture exactly how she must look right then. She would be leaning against the kitchen counter, her frame stretched languidly, perhaps one foot flexing lazily. Sophie almost never sat down, a quirk he initially had found intriguing, but which had grown annoying with passing time. She had learned how to sprawl and slouch without ever actual settling into a chair. She even read standing up with one leg. It made her look like either a yogi or a flamingo. He knew she would be wearing the flowing pants
and loose shirt she often stayed in while in the apartment. They gave her body an androgynous quality, completely obliterating her small breasts and tiny hips. Her dark hair was probably in its usual carefully organized disarray, and she was probably wearing makeup even though she was alone.

“Okay,” he said. “We can worry about all that when I get back.”

“Where are you anyway?” she demanded. “Is the magazine really that interested in you? You’ve been gone…oh, I don’t even know.”

“Things are just taking a bit longer than I thought they would.” Was that jealousy he detected in her voice?

“I might almost think you were having some scandalous affair.”

His pulse quickened even though he had nothing to be guilty about.

“I know better though,” she laughed. Again, the sound was strangely grating. “That’s never going to happen.”

“You know I love you,” he said.

“Right. Love you too—I should go now. I’m supposed to get drinks soon.”

“I’ll talk to you soon?” She had been the one to call him. Was she lying about having plans? He could never tell.

Danny had to admit, after spending the last few weeks with Dolores, he had grown to appreciate a female who at least occasionally spoke her mind. She came from these simpler, more open people, after all. She did not need to hide her emotions under the guise of jaded sophistication. No, Dolores’s heart was right out there in the open, maybe to a greater extent than she realized.
When she was angry, you could feel a palpable heat radiating from her skin. Her eyes would grow hot and bright and—he swore this was true—somehow acquire brilliant, green-gold flecks. After Sophie, seeing such a naked expression felt almost like an invasion of privacy, a minor transgression.

“Sure, whatever, Darling,” Sophie said.

“I—” But she had already hung up. She probably wasn’t even going out for drinks. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became. She was lying. She was going to go back to lounging about the apartment, fuming, and eating away at the daylight hours.

He felt tired just thinking about it.

* * * *

Maintaining casual, pleasant conversation was a near impossibility for Dolores right then. Lily was avoiding her and refusing to even make eye contact. Brenda, having done her duty as a hostess, left Dolores alone. So Dolores found herself trapped with the increasingly intoxicated Reverend Thompson. By now, the man’s skin tone was verging on a dark shade of magenta and he was swaying dangerously. Given his bulk, Dolores wasn’t comfortable with the idea of him toppling over on her. She excused herself, saying something about the restroom.

Though she had no need to go, Dolores headed toward the bathroom to get away from everything. As she walked through the perfumed hallways, she overheard Danny’s voice on the phone. He was speaking in that urgent, obsequious tone he only used when Sophie was on the other end.
Dolores wasn’t sure why she even cared who it was. If Danny wanted to talk to his twat of a girlfriend, there was no reason he shouldn’t. After all, why should she, Dolores, care what those two did together? They were a pair of neurotic elitists, and they deserved each other. Thinking about it gave her a perverse sense of satisfaction.

Then she heard him say it, “You know I love you.”

Such a stupid, stupid phrase. Dolores remembered exactly where and how she had first heard it. She had been fifteen years old and the words had felt like a revelation. The very idea that someone might say those words to her seemed so monumental, so adult. She had been so pleased with herself, and she had said it back, not because she had believed it, but because she had wanted to terribly. The older she grew, the easier those words came. They had flopped right off the tongue with enough habitual use. I love you. It was an easy way to quell an argument, to fill a silence, to stitch together something tattered.

What did it mean, anyway? I love you. I care about you? I want to be with you forever? I want to be with you for a while, or at least until we get sick of each other and one morning one of us wakes up and wonders why the hell she’s sleeping next to this other body?

Of course he said it to Sophie. Did he mean it? Did she? It didn’t matter. It shouldn’t.

Heartbreak was an equally stupid idea, doubtless invented by some foppish romantic poet now confined to stodgy English literature classes.
Whoever had come up with the concept probably wasn’t thinking of the actual organ, a great, pulsing muscle colored red and bruised, bloodied blue. If taken literally, it was about as disgusting as a metaphor could get.

Yet, Dolores felt a pang in her chest, right about where she imagined a heart might be. No matter how many times she swallowed and breathed deep, the constriction lingered, slowly spreading through her bodily cavities. If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought she had a physical ailment. She wished that were all it was.

* * * * *

The one glorious thing about travel was that it gave Dolores an airtight excuse to be anti-social. She would have preferred to just grab the wretched china that she technically had come for and slam on the gas. The afternoon’s social events gradually died down and the various donors bid their farewells, but members of the immediate family stayed on through the evening. They would have been glad to be rid of her, but they insisted on her staying. Thankfully, she was so genuinely tired from driving that she could escape to bed early.

She had half-hoped that Danny would take the hint and follow her. She desperately wanted a chance to talk to somebody sane, or at least someone who didn’t look at her quite so accusingly. To her surprise though, he opted to stay. He seemed to be having a marvelous time regaling her family with stories about his work and his oh-so exciting life in a city far away. Dolores couldn’t help but notice scornfully that he did not realize that
they were humoring him. He was preaching to them with the condescending voice of a European explorer speaking to an indigenous group in animal skins, while they viewed him as a future subject for gossip.

Though she had not been lying about her exhaustion, sleep eluded her. She rolled and thrashed about on a bed that was too plush and sheets too fine. No matter how many times she shut her eyes, the red numerals on the digital clock never seemed to move. Sometime after 3:44 but before dawn, she gave up and went downstairs for a nightcap.

Passing the parlor, she heard a thud that made her freeze. She stood rigid and motionless, trying not to breathe. Even though she was a guest, she felt like a trespasser. The source of the noise was only the Reverend though. Evidently, he had had the same idea about a nightcap, and was now passed out on the couch snoring loudly.

When Dolores had almost recovered, she heard a scuffle of footsteps, followed by the cautious squeal of a door. She peered around a corner into the kitchen to see none other than Kevin, or Jacob, or whoever he was, creeping outside. He had discarded the expensive pajamas Brenda had leant him in favor of a plain black T-shirt and jeans.

*If I could just get a good look at his face, she thought. I know I’m not crazy...*

Without thinking, she followed him out of the house. She felt ludicrously conspicuous walking alone in the dark. If the boy saw her though, he gave no sign. He seemed more intent on trying to figure out where he was
going, often pausing to consult a crumpled piece of paper. He did not appear to be worried though. There was an easy confidence in his step that he had lacked earlier in the day.

They quickly left the groomed lawns of the more upscale part of town and headed into strip development. The signs and buildings were identical to those of ten thousand other places sprawled out across America. There was the Steak and Shake, the Chick Fillet, Wendy’s, Burger King, and Walgreens. Maybe it was the contrast with Brenda’s house, or maybe it was simply the time of night, but the area seemed exceptionally derelict. Graffiti hung on the walls the way ivy might cling to more respectable buildings, and the letters in neon signs sputtered ominously.

Kevin finally stopped and swung into a gas station. Dolores waited by the door, trying to peer in without looking thoroughly ridiculous. He was talking to the man behind the counter, pointing to his card. As usual, he was an animated talker and she could tell from the combination of his gestures and the man’s expression that the two were laughing. A minute later, the man handed Kevin a pack of cigarettes.

_Hardly incriminating,_ Dolores thought, disappointed. But now he was turning, heading down the aisle, over to the right, and then—_Shit—he opened the door and poked his head out before she could hide.

“Oh, hi there. Didn’t see you stalking me for the last three miles in the middle of the night. Very stealthy,” he said with a smirk. His hair might have changed, but his expression erased all doubts as to his identity. Gone was the
meek repentant demeanor, and in its place was: “You wanna smoke? I’ll let you
bum just this once. I feel like I owe you one.”

“You knew I was here?” she asked.

“Please.” Kevin rolled his eyes dismissively. “Give me some credit.
It’s not like you blend in—we’re the only people crazy enough to be out
here.”

“What *are* you doing here?”

He waved the pack. “Kinda obvious, don’t you think? Besides, I
couldn’t sleep. All this acting like a goody-two-shoes had me craving this
stuff something fierce.”

“Why’re you putting on an act then, Kevin?”

“First of all, my name’s not Kevin. Second, light first, talk second.
Let’s do this right.”

“We’re not ‘doing’ anything,” Dolores said. “I need to talk to you
about the trial. And how the hell did you get here anyway?

He ignored the question and whipped out a lighter. Smoke curled out
of the corners of his lips and he extended the pack to her again. “You want?
Last offer.”

Even the small hit of nicotine helped soothe her jangled nerves
instantly. Then, “What’re you doing here, kid, really?” She blew a thin jet
into the night sky. It struck her as strange that she could resent someone so
much, yet have a perfectly civil conversation with them.
“I could ask you the same thing. Why’re you hanging out with that
dickwad husband of yours anyway?”

“That isn’t your business.” In her peripheral vision, she could see the
boy staring at her intently, but she pretended not to notice.

“Do you love him?” he asked.

“That’s not your business.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I don’t know,” she said. If Kevin had asked her that a few weeks ago
when they had first met, she would have said ‘no.’ It would’ve been a lie then
too, but at least she might have been able to convince herself of it. “I don’t
know if you can ever stop loving someone. We said that we had but…I don’t
know.”

“You could do better, that’s all I’m saying.”

“What, like you?”

“I didn’t say that,” he said. Then, after a pause, he added, “You
wanna know why I’m out here? I’ll let you in on a little secret. I might as
well after this afternoon—I’m sorry I made you look bad in front of your
sister.”

“You could just tell them.”

“Who?”

“My family.”

“Yeah, right. I am Jacob, repentant sinner, and I’ll swear to that on my
mother’s grave.”
“You didn’t tell me your mother was dead."

“Does it matter if she is or not?” He flicked his cigarette butt onto the pavement and let it smolder for a few seconds before snuffing it out.

“You’re so full of shit.” Dolores’s voice was startlingly calm.

“I am,” he said. It was not a question, merely an acknowledgement of fact. “But then, so is everyone else. At least I own up to it. Besides, you’ll never drag a confession out of me in public.”

“How do you know I don’t have a tape recorder or something on me?”

“You don’t,” he said matter-of-factly. “So, you wanna know why I’m here?” He looked enormously pleased with himself. “Fake I.D.s. I’m getting a new one as we speak. I heard that this guy was good.”

“Who told you that?”

“I don’t have to reveal my sources.”

Dolores wasn’t entirely sure why she asked the next question.

“Hey…could I get one?”

She had half-expected him to be offended, but he lit up. “What were you thinking of? You trying to pull something illegal?” His eyes were practically glowing now, as if nothing would have delighted him more.

“Maybe,” she said, playing along. She wasn’t sure if she was doing this for her own benefit or his. “How much would it cost me?”

“Fifty bucks, but it’s worth it. These things are supposed to be totally legit.”

She thought about it for a second. “Okay.”
“Okay, really?” he asked, seeming surprised. “That’s great. Who do you want to be?”

No one had ever asked her that question before. “I’m just used to being myself.”

“Fuck that—you can be anybody you want. Hey, can I name you?”

He lit himself another cigarette and offered her one before she could ask. He lit both with an unnecessary flourish this time.

“What would you name me?”

“What about Jackie? I’m big on those types of names right now.”

“I don’t think I’m a Jackie.”

“Victoria?”

“Too pretentious.” She thought for a moment. “I think I’d like to be Bonnie.”

“What, like Bonnie and Clyde? That’s such an obvious one.” He waved a hand scornfully.

“I don’t know. I just kind of like it. I’ve never met a Bonnie.”

“I still don’t think you look like a Bonnie.”

“It’s my choice, isn’t it?” She caught herself smiling.

“You’re right,” he said. He grinned back at her, misinterpreting her expression. “You’re absa-fucking-lutely right.”

“I think it’ll work out for me,” she said.
“Hey, it’s your identity. You’ll love it—trust me. Didn’t you once tell me you’d always been ‘just Dolores’? Well, you’ll never be ‘just Dolores’ again.”

Dolores said nothing, then added, “What’s in a name, right?” It wasn’t really a joke, but she laughed anyway.

“I know, right?” he said. “Changing things up is great. You really are gonna love it. Trust me, once you’ve done it once, you can’t stop. It’s like fucking Pringles or something—you remember those commercials, don’t you?” He laughed too, but sounded sad.

“Yeah, I remember,” was all she said.

They smoked in silence for several more minutes, until the embers burned their fingers. Kevin was starting to get anxious, his fingers twitching slightly. “I’ll get it for you in the morning. You can pay me later. You should probably go back now?”

“You’re not coming with?” Dolores asked.

“I need to finish things here. Don’t even think about trying to stick around and catch me at something. You’ll only get yourself into more trouble. You can find your way back, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

She would normally have argued, but for once she decided to lay low. The last thing she wanted was to have to explain to Danny where she had been. She nodded and started down the long road back.
The sun was still below the horizon, but the sky was beginning to lighten. Pale tendrils of cloud hung in the air like lavender smoke, and the one by one the stars were winking out. In the crepuscular haze, the streets felt less foreboding. The rundown landscape now felt tired, worn out. These generic signs and restaurant chains, these modern day icons, all seemed to be quietly decaying into nothing.

* * * * *

Danny could not help but notice that Dolores did not make it to the rather large breakfast spread that Brenda created the following morning. No one commented on her absence, but her family’s expressions rendered criticism unnecessary. Danny was still thinking over his conversation with Sophie the previous day, and it was bothering him more than he liked to admit. Though he didn’t have much of an appetite, he helped himself to a suitable mountain of food.

The only person with a plate to match his own was Jacob. The boy was apparently coming out of his shell. He seemed to be in the best of spirits, chatting animatedly with everyone. Danny found it remarkable to see the charming youth’s personality finally having a chance to shine. When comfortable, Jacob was polite, witty, and nearly impossible to dislike. He continually complimented Brenda on her cooking, which pleased her to no end. She smiled approvingly and added a couple extra bacon slices to his heap before sitting down to her grapefruit.
Nearly an hour and a half’s worth of small talk, cold cuts, and mimosas later, Danny saw his sometime ex-wife standing at the door frame, trying to catch his eye. Her eyes were enormous, and her lips pressed together, and her hair seemed to be unusually unruly. Some combination of stress and humidity had made it spring out in tiny, angry, auburn frizzles. She was a mess, but somehow she had never looked better.

Seeing as the brunch was already winding down, Danny excused himself and made his way over to her.

“I need to talk to you,” she hissed once they were out of view.

Danny shrugged and followed her onto the third floor of the house. They found a fairly secluded room that looked as if it might have been built for one of the children. The walls were that creamy shade of yellow typically seen in home decorating catalogues, and an obscenely cheerful pattern of sunflowers adorned the baseboards, curtains, and bed covers. Even the stuffed animals and dolls all seemed to be wearing varying shades of white, beige, yellow, and brown, as though someone had carefully culled any discordant misfits from the herd. The room connected to a larger playroom separated by a translucent curtain.

“Alright, what?” Danny asked. This came out sounding more irritable than he had meant it.

“It’s about that boy…Jacob?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t trust him,” she said.
“Wait—hold on—”

“Look, I can’t explain it, but I want you to stay away with him. I don’t think he’s who he says he is. I think he’s trying to take advantage of my family.” Dolores was an atrocious liar, probably one of the worst Danny had ever met. She had a distinct tendency to chew on her lower lip until it was almost white and her eyes kept flitting about the room. There was something she wasn’t saying, though he had no idea what.

“He seems like a perfectly nice kid. A little messed up maybe, but there’s nothing wrong with that.” Danny thought back to the breakfast table, and how Jacob had attacked his food as if he had never seen so much abundance before. He must have grown up under terrible circumstances, the victim of poverty and negligent parents. The boy was an innocent if Danny had ever seen one, the perfect picture of the down-trodden, misguided youth adrift in modern society.

“But don’t you think it’s a little weird? I mean, they have no idea who he is. He just showed up out of no where and they’ve just, I don’t know, taken him in.”

“You mean like nice people?”

“Listen, I know that this sounds crazy, but—”

“Then why are you telling me? Dolores, I’m so sick and tired of this. I can’t handle it all the time, all the time. I’ve put up with an awful lot over the last few weeks, and I don’t know if I can keep doing it.”
“I wouldn’t be telling you this if I didn’t think it was important. You’re the only person here I can trust.”

“Did you ever think that maybe I didn’t want to be that person?”

“What’re you saying?”

“I didn’t ask for all this, this mess you’ve created. Everything was going fine before you called me.”

“Everything was fine. Really?”

“Yes. Better than fine. It was great.”

Danny saw Dolores’s eyes were darting around in that almost animalistic way of hers. “Great. That’s wonderful. I’m sorry my jail sentence forced you to leave your perfect life, but don’t think you can come in here and act like you know my family.”

“I’m not. You’re not giving them much of a chance.”

“Why’re you defending them?”

“Why the hell are you accusing them?” There, he had said it. It had always been a sort of game to see who would throw down the gauntlet and swear first in one of their arguments. Once someone did, there was a subtle shift. The stakes were higher.

“They’re not your family,” Dolores answered. “You don’t understand how it is.”

“You barely see them anyway. You don’t even talk about them. You never wanted to introduce me to them.”
“Oh, for Christ’s—you didn’t want me to introduce you! You kept
telling me about how you couldn’t hold much respect for a place as prejudiced
and backwards as the South.”

“I never said ‘backwards.’ I wouldn’t say that.” Thinking back, he
wasn’t entirely sure on that point. Nevertheless, even if he might have once
uttered words to that effect, she must have been taking them out of context.
She always overreacted; the slightest thing could set her off.

“But you did. You just gave me this bullshit elitist speech and said
something about racism or whatever. You acted like they were a bunch of
uncivilized hicks or something just because they didn’t come out of fucking
New York.”

“That’s not fair. You know, they actually seem nice. Maybe if you
had given me the chance to get to know them—”

“Oh, great, you talk to them for ten minutes and decide that you know
them better than I do after a lifetime. You have no idea what this family is
like.”

“Maybe you just don’t want to see what your family is like. You have
a convenient scapegoat to blame all your problems on.”

“I took that class in college too,” she snapped. She started to pace
now.

“I’m only telling the truth. Look where you are, Dolores. You just got
out of fucking jail.”
She wasn’t looking at him. Instead, Dolores was staring out the window into the backyard where Jacob was walking with Lily. She looked as though she must have lost her train of thought. Danny wondered if she felt jealous of Jacob and that fact that he fit so neatly into the family where she did not belong.

“What were you doing in a sleazy motel with crystal meth? Why were you picking up some crackhead woman hitchhiker?” Danny wasn’t going to let her attention drift away from the matter at hand. “You weren’t thinking. You don’t think about things like I do.”

“I don’t—”

“Fuck it, Dolores, I’m wrapped up in your mess now, whether you like it or not. Do you have any idea what it’s doing to my life? Do you—”

“Oh, yes, because you keep telling me over and over, every goddamn fucking day. Poor you, poor, poor you. It’s all my fault, it’s always my fault!”

“You don’t even care. You don’t even care what a fucking mess you’ve made for everybody else. You know why I think you hate this kid, why you just can’t stand him?”

“Go on—really, I know you want to tell me.”

“You can’t handle the fact that your family, those people you like to blame for everything, are doing such a fundamentally good thing.”

“You think that’s it?”
“They’re trying to help this poor, lost kid whose just looking for some guidance. These people don’t have ulterior motives. They just want to do the right thing because they think it’s right.”

“Do you have any idea how hypocritical you sound? Do you even realize how many lectures you’ve given me on how religion’s a crock of shit and how much you hate these do-gooder Church-based organizations?”

“I wasn’t talking specifically about this sort of thing. Stop trying to put words in my mouth.”

“Since when did you get all high and mighty? What did you ever do for anyone else?”

“That’s not true. I give to charity every year and I do—”

“That’s such fucking horseshit! You do that to make yourself look better. You only care about your overpriced wines, and your Dean & Deluca food, and that goddamn ballerina you keep fucking.”

And just like that, Dolores crossed the line. There had been arguments in the last few weeks to be sure, accusations, exchanged insults, and old wounds ripped open. One or both of them had always managed to stop themselves before the words got too caustic and somehow or other, they had laughed about their spats, even if in a painful, slightly forced way. Through it all though, that one subject had remained staunchly taboo. The most Dolores had dared do was casually inquire as to how Sophie was doing. Even that was enough to sting.
Danny and Dolores looked at each other with a kind of mutual horror and regret. There was no way to retract that awful sentence hanging in the air between them.

“Don’t bring her into this,” Danny said. “That’s not your business.”

“You’re my husband,” Dolores said. Her eyes were sparkling, splitting and refracting light in the tiny drops gathering at the corners. “Or you were. I don’t even know anymore. How can that not be my business?”

“Dolores, if you still have—”

“Don’t say ‘if you still have feelings for me.’ Don’t you dare say it. Because I don’t. I’m done. I’m fine. But I can’t think about—” She was shaking now, spasms running up and down the whole of her frame and rattling her shoulders.

“Good,” he said savagely. “I’m glad you’re done, because I am too. Completely. And Sophie is fantastic.”

“Really? Do you love her—do you actually love her?”

“Yes.” He wondered if that were actually true. “Yes,” he repeated, as if to convince himself.

“Because do you want to know what I think of her?”

“I can’t wait.” Involuntarily, his memory dredged up an image of Sophie. He saw her disdainful expression, the cold, dull look in her eyes. She was beautiful to be sure, but as hard and unapproachable as the ghostly figures she had once portrayed on stage.
“I think that bitch is stringing you along. That’s right—for all your pretension and your crap, I think she doesn’t care about you in the least. What’s she doing right now, back in New York? Is she pining for you? Is that it? Is she sitting there moping around in a fucking tutu like a lovesick teenager?”

“That’s so out of line. This is childish and I will not indulge—”

“Oh, go to hell!” she cried. “Don’t tell me I’m a child. You’re no better—you just shove everything away and won’t acknowledge it and try to cover it all up with nice things. I’m done living like that, Danny. If you want to go back to your broken mess and that fucking ballerina—”

“Her name is Sophie.”

“Fine, Sophie. I’m done with this. I’m so done. After all this, this mess is over, I never want to see you again.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard yet—my life will be so much simpler,” Danny said.

“Mine too.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

They had reached a bizarre stalemate, both ready to kill but neither able to make the first move. The room was almost eerily still, save for the sound of their breathing. The general din of the party was two floors down and worlds away. They felt completely alone.
Danny saw that Dolores’s hair had taken on a life of its own by now, and the more she raked her fingers through it in frustration, the larger it grew. Her face was livid, and slightly sticky with sweat. She radiated an impossible umbrage, a kind of bruised anger that was so defiant and vibrant and alive it made her stand out in sharp definition against all her surroundings. It was as if she were the only real thing in the world, a piece of raw flesh and blood set against a hazy, muted pastel backdrop.

She was magnificent.

“Do you love her?” Dolores said. It came out as a low whisper in between breaths even though there was no one around to overhear.

“I don’t know,” Danny whispered back, automatically matching her tone. It was true; he didn’t. The realities he had taken for granted no longer made any sense at all. Sophie was an abstraction that came from somewhere off in that void beyond the confines of this one room in this one instant in time. Dolores was the here, the now, the blazing, screaming present all around him.

Looking back, neither could remember accurately who first broke the ceasefire. Dolores distinctly recalled Danny taking a step towards her and leaning down. Danny later said Dolores put her hand on his face. The details blurred in retrospect. All either of them knew was that somehow, some way, they wound up entangled in each other’s arms, bodies pressed against one another.

* * * * *
Dolores never meant for it to happen. But sex with Danny was so comfortable, so familiar, so easy to fall back into. She knew his smell—coffee and the generic cologne he used—and the knobbly feel of the vertebrae in his neck as well as she knew herself. She knew the way their hips interlocked, and the place just below his left ear that made him gasp softly. After a minute or so, her body moved of its own accord, following a ritual it had once known so well. Though she tried hard to avoid it, the phrase *Just like riding a bike*, popped unbidden into her head. She tried not to laugh.

He fumbled a bit with the clasp of her bra. It was an older one, faded, nude-toned, and distorted beyond its original shape, but tightly bound in the back. She could feel him struggling and tugging at it too insistently even as he kissed her and tried to seem unconcerned. She reached a hand back and undid it for him. Danny had never been the smoothest of lovers.

Now they were still on their feet, unsure of how to proceed. His mouth kept reaching for hers eagerly, but he kept pulling back. Finally, growing frustrated with waiting, she wrapped her fingers gently around the back of his neck and sank to the floor, dragging him down with her. And then there she was, her back against a plush, sunny-yellow rug and his body on top of hers.

Now he was reaching for the top of her jeans. She shoved him off of her and started undoing her belt. It caught in one of the loopholes of her pants.

“Oh, shit, wait—” she said.
“What—oh, right, right, right, here, I can—”

“No, no, you’re just making it worse.”

“Sorry—”

“Okay, okay, got it…” She jerked the jeans down around her ankles where they stayed. She was a chagrined to notice that her panties were every bit as unsexy as her bra. They were black, at the very least, but had a hole in the side and a stretched elastic band saying JOCKEY running around the top.

“Wait—do you have a condom?” he asked.

“No. I’m still on the pill though so—”

“Okay, okay,” he said, and then again. “Right. Okay.” He took a deep breath.

_Why the hell is he so nervous?_ she thought irritably. And then, worse, _Is it like this with Sophie?_

He was still kissing her now, but Dolores was distracted, wondering what he was waiting for. She was practically naked. Her breasts were hanging out and in the harsh light of day they sagged more than they once had. Danny was still wearing all of his clothes. His shirt was damp under the armpits. She tasted hash browns with too much onion on his breath.

“It’s been so long,” he said. “But I don’t know why—people make such a big deal about sex. Society just overanalyzes everything and imposes all of these moral ideas on it that just stem from our puritanical—”
Shut up, shut up, just shut up, for God’s sake, she thought. She pressed a finger to his lips in what she hoped passed for a seductive gesture instead of a sign of annoyance.

Danny finally realized the discrepancy between them, and yanked his shirt off. He still had the scrawny chest of a bookish high school nerd, but time and a love of French food had given him the smallest of potbellies to go with it. The trail of hair bisecting his torso through his navel was going grey. She could feel his fingers running their usual paths, but somehow the movement felt clumsier than she remembered. They kept their lips tight on one another, but neither was really focused anymore. They were straining, trying just a little too hard for too long.

Then he was trying to get inside of her. Somewhere along the way he had pulled his pants down to his knees, and they had stayed there providing an uncomfortable constriction. She helped him, guided him towards her, but she was still too dry. The action felt abrasive, painful even. With one desperate push, he managed to get in part way and Dolores flinched in spite of herself.

Now he was inside and neither was moving, except for a slight rocking of hips. His mouth was set in a thin, tight line, as though he were concentrating too hard. She closed her eyes so she would not have to meet his gaze. The child’s room was silent as the proverbial grave. If there had been crickets chirping in the middle of the day, she would have heard them.

Had it always been like this? It couldn’t have been. She could not have endured years of this in the bedroom. It had been different, she was sure
of it. The actions were all the same, but some crucial, elusive element was absent. What had changed?

*Jesus, it was better with the seventeen-year-old,* she thought. She regretted the idea as soon as it entered her head. As much as she tried to shove it aside though, images from that night were playing through her memory with cinematic precision. For some reason, she could see everything from third-person perspective. It was as if she were hovering over her own body. She had no way of knowing whether what she remembered was part fabrication, a compilation of other nights in other beds merged with her general sense of allure. As much as she regretted that night with Kevin, she could not deny that there had been something attractive about it. On some level, she had liked it, and regardless of her veracity, the scene in her memory was still somehow sexier than the one playing out in the present. The realization made her feel guilty to the point of nausea. She felt suddenly sick.

Danny’s eyes locked with hers; both looked away. He stayed there for just a few moments more, motionless, before standing up. His penis lolled to the side, looking pitiful. He staggered for balance before pulling his pants up and reaching for his shirt. He dressed hurriedly, still evading her eyes. Dolores put an arm across her breasts to hide them.

“I should, you know, get back,” Danny mumbled and left the room.

Dolores lay back on the rug for several minutes curled in a fetal position, surrounded by flawlessly matching decorations and the menagerie of stuffed creatures. It seemed as though she should cry, but somehow she didn’t
quite have it in her. She was too worn out, and felt far too foolish. She wasn’t sure whether she ought to feel young, like the stupid teenager she had once been, or just very, very old.

And then situation veered sharply into the surreal.

“So, did you see that one coming?” a voice asked. There, leaning nonchalantly against the curtained doorframe into the playroom, was the last person on earth she wanted to see. Kevin, or Jacob, or whoever he was looking down at her with a strange mixture of what could be triumph and something she could not read.

Instinctively, Dolores hunched over to shield herself, hugging her knees to her breasts.

“Whatever, I’ve already seen it. But if you want…” he began. With an exaggerated flourish he put a hand over his eyes and turned around. “I am a reformed sinner, after all. It wouldn’t do for me to be in your company—you’re a corrupting influence.”

Too stunned to say anything right away, Dolores quickly snatched up her clothes. Even when her shirt was safely on, she continued to hug her legs tight, as if she were still exposed.

“Are you decent?” he asked from the other room. “I guess that’s a funny question, isn’t it? What does it mean anyway?”

She sat rocking back and forth every so slightly. Mentally, she was running over the last twenty minutes or so. Had he seen that? And that?
And, oh dear God, *that*? Much to her shame, she felt the inner corners of her eyes growing warm and moist. *Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t...Jesus...*

“Alright, Dolores, I’m coming back,” he announced. “You’d better be ready for me.”

“Wait,” she began, rubbing her eyes furiously.

“Too late,” he said in an unsettlingly cheerful tone. He spun into the room and crouched in front of her on the floor.

“Did you really see everything?” She thought back to Danny, to his body, his face, the strain showing in his eyes. The whole scene was something they had enacted out countless times before, but with different results. Somehow, nothing and everything had changed. No one should have seen that.

“To be sure, though it didn’t look like there was a whole lot to see.” Kevin looked around the room. “Gotta say, you don’t have much of a flair for picking locations. The kid’s room? That’s pretty nasty, don’t you think? Not that our place was much of a class act either. At least that was more appropriate though, don’t you think? A sleazy motel just off the highway, far away from prying eyes? Hey, it’s a classic. I don’t know where you’re trying to go with these guys.” He gestured vaguely to rows of plush toys.

She let out a groan.

“Oh come on, you can’t tell me it was *that* bad. If memory serves, you kinda liked it. You were all like *uuuggggghhhhh, oh yeah, oh my God, oh*
“yeeeee.....eaaaaahh.” He distorted his face, squeezing his eyes shut and opening his jaw wide.

To Dolores’s embarrassment, she started to cry. Once the first tear snuck by, the rest came tumbling out in rapid succession. Before she could do anything, she was sobbing so hard she had to cover her mouth to stifle the sound.

The boy, whatever his name was, scooted over and put his arms around her rigid shoulders. He stroked her hair. She felt him kiss the top of her forehead and hug her.

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I was just joking around. You know I like you.” He pulled her closer.

Dolores recoiled sharply. She jerked herself free and fell backwards several feet. “Don’t you—don’t you dare touch me! What the hell is—what do you even want from me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really know.” He seemed to be thinking about the answer. “I’m really not sure. I just like you, that’s all. You’re…I don’t know, interesting.”

“Kevin—”

“Oh no, it’s Jacob now. You’d better get your stories straight. Wouldn’t want to screw things up for me here, now would you?”

“How—”

“You know, I only came here because of you, but I kind of like this family of yours. I might just hang around. Who knows? I’ve got the time.”
“Who are you?” She kept staring at him, as if looking long and hard enough would somehow let her understand.

“Does it matter?”

She thought there was just a shade of wistfulness there. “It matters to me.”

“Okay, my name’s Gabriel,” he said. She noticed he said it gah-bree-el with a rolled “r” that seemed to come naturally. “That’s the name my mother gave me before she ran off. She didn’t speak English worth a shit, but she was apparently a knock out. She looks that way from the pictures. I guess she left me good genes at least, right?” He twisted out a smile, though he clearly didn’t find his words funny. “Anyway, being the dick that he was, my father hired her as his secretary because apparently tits were more important than actually being able to do a goddamn job. They had an affair, which his wife knew about the whole time but couldn’t do a thing about. She didn’t leave him because she was too weak and because she’d probably just latched onto him for money. My father rubbed it in her face every chance he got. He brought this gorgeous, Brazilian goddess home and would fuck her so his wife could hear. The two women hated each other and, for some stupid-ass reason, blamed each other instead of him. When secretary-lady got all fat and pregnant, she flaunted it. I’m told that she used to laugh about it and say that she’d won because he’d picked her over that other bitch.

“See, the only problem was that she didn’t realize just how much of a bastard the old man really was. She didn’t see it coming until they sent her
packing, eight and a half months pregnant. I hear she cried and screamed and
pitched a fit. Then she got her revenge one day. The second I popped out, she
wrapped me up tight and left me on curb by their house right next to the
recycling. My father might have been an ass, but he couldn’t just abandon
me. Too many people knew. So he brought me up with his two legit kids.
They were both blonde-haired, blue-eyed types. They looked like poster kids
for the fucking Hitler youth. And then there was me—the little brat they were
forced to take care of. They fucking hated me. Well, the funny thing is my
mothers didn’t. Dad’s little wifey used to give me candy after he hit me, like
that would just make everything better. And mommy dearest? She used to
send these desperate, cryptic cards on holidays in Portuguese, which I can’t
even fucking read. She tracked us down four years ago and tried to get into
the house. She was hysterical—shrieking and bitching and saying I love you
in her pathetic English over and over while security escorted her out. I am the
child of two spineless whores and a jackass. Do you understand why I left?”

“How much of that story was even true?” Dolores asked with a kind of
saddened amazement.

“Enough.” And he smiled in a way that looked so real she wanted to
believe it. “Just enough. Does it matter what’s real anyway?”

“Of course it matters. It’s the truth.”

“The truth is overrated. I’d rather stay where I am.” He turned he
head to the side, still running his fingers absently through her hair.
“It matters to me—that’s why…that’s why I’m going to tell it. I’m going to do the right thing and turn you in.”

“You won’t do that,” he said.

“Watch me.”

“I will. I have. That’s why I know you’re bluffing.”

“What other choice do I have? You framed me—I still don’t even understand why.”

“I told you I panicked,” he said. His voice was intentionally flat, but there was an edge to it.

“You also told me that your name was Kevin.”

“Name’s aren’t that important, remember? We talked about this last night. Sometimes you just get tired of one and have to move on, you know?”

“That’s sick.”

“Is it? You bought an I.D., didn’t you?”

“I’m going to tell the jury everything,” she said, ignoring the comment. “They can throw me in jail for statutory or possession or picking up a hitchhiker, or anything they damn well feel like. But I’m going to get up there and take the stand and tell them about the meth, so help me God. If I’m getting caught in this, you will too. It’s the right thing.”

“That’s all very noble of you,” he sighed. “But very, very stupid. You can’t beat me, Dolores, and I don’t want to see you get hurt trying. I wasn’t lying when I said I liked you. Why else would I put this much effort into
hanging around? Trust me, if you play your cards right, we’ll both get off and there won’t be any problems, I promise.”

“That’s just it: I can’t trust you,” she said. “And I can’t do this anymore. I can’t have this huge thing hanging over my head all the time.”

“Look at me,” he said. He held out his skinny arms for examination, and then returned one of them to the side of her face. She did not push it away. “Do you know what they do to guys like me in juvie?”

“Not exactly, but that isn’t the point.”

“Maybe not to you. The last thing I need is a correctional facility.”

“I’m going to tell the truth, whether you come foreword with me or not.”

His demeanor shifted slightly. There was a kind of wariness in his eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

“I will.”

“Dolores, I’m trying to stop you for your own good. I really don’t want to make this difficult for you, but if you don’t leave me a choice…”

“You’ll what?”

“Let’s see, I’ll tell Danny.”

“He’ll find out anyway.”

“Fine, I’ll tell the rest of your family what you just did on the bedroom floor. How do you think that would go over? They don’t seem like they’d be too keen on the whole matter. A bit dark for the whole Bible crowd.”
Dolores tossed her head back and shook him off as hard as she could. She had her face locked in what her mother would have described as her Missouri mule expression: jaw clenched, eyes narrowed to slivers. “No, they won’t, but I’ll do it anyway."

“I’ll tear them apart,” he said, his voice rising. “I don’t just know things about you—I’ve got stuff on half of them. Lily’s been telling me everything. Poor woman drinks too much and has no one to spill her guts to. Did you know her husband’s been banging someone else? Has for the past five years. He’s practically married to his mistress, but she puts up with it and turns a blind eye because it’s easier. Or Brenda? There’s a cocktail of antidepressants and tranquilizers in her cupboard like you wouldn’t believe. She keeps them hidden, away from the other prescription drugs in the drawer with her makeup, but I found them anyway. I’ve seen her when she thinks no one is watching. She collapses, just falls over on the bed like she’s been shot. It’s like the only thing keeping her from keeling over is that other people might see it. The list just goes on and on. I could break this little façade they’ve got going into a million pieces so small, they would never be able to pick them up.”

“You can keep threatening me all you like. It won’t change a goddamn thing.”

“Do you hate me that much?” he asked. His voice had dropped from threatening to that familiar kind of melancholy. And for the first time, she
thought she saw him for who he truly was. Under all the layers of cockiness and self-pity there was a terrible, destructive neediness and little more.

“I don’t know.”

He sighed, stood up, and extended a hand to her. She smiled sadly, shook her head, and bolted for the door.

* * * * *

Through some combination of nerves and bourbon, Dolores survived until dinner, where Brenda was kind enough to seat her next to Danny. Like any good Southern hostess, Brenda had decked the table with real silverware and an assortment of beautifully arranged food that had cooled to room temperature while being artfully arranged. Both she and Danny loaded up their plates, and then found themselves unable to do more than pick at the feast. No matter how many times she tried to catch his eye, Danny resolutely ignored her. Kevin purposefully sat next to Lily. He was being as charming as possible, showering attention on the one family member who seldom got it. Every so often, he would shoot Dolores slightly smug looks just in case she hadn’t noticed how Lily was eating it up.

After dinner, the family presented Dolores, with great fanfare, the china she had come for. Someone had embalmed the platters and bowls in bubblewrap and stuffed them in duct-taped boxes. Everyone exchanged a few meaningless pleasantries about her mother and quickly changed the subject.

Dolores insisted that she needed to put away the dishes, but there were cocktails on the porch. Danny weaseled out of the ritual, but which Dolores
had to suffer through it. Brenda sat in a rocking chair, staring intently at the
gathered crowd. As she sucked on the olives in her vodka martini, her
concave cheeks made her look gaunter than ever. Kevin drank a soda and
again perched himself next to Lily, while Dolores clutched a sticky-sweet
julep for dear life. The chatter persisted for what seemed like an eternity. By
the time she successfully escaped, it was well after dark and there were
fireflies winking in and out of the shrubbery.

Finally sequestered in her room, Dolores sat with her feet pressed
against the locked door, as if to stave off intruders. She played with the silver
cigarette case until her fingers had a faintly metallic smell. With a deep
breath, she opened the case. Inside were the fine, white flakes that had never
seen the inside of a Marlboro. For the first time in a month, she forced herself
to look at all that was left of the woman who had brought her into the world.

Kevin was the only one who knew the true contents of the cigarette
case. Not even Danny knew that she was carrying the ashes. Though there
was no legitimate reason to hide their existence, Dolores liked the idea of
keeping them a secret. This was the one small, solid remnant belonged to her
and her alone. It did not fit into the softened, idealized fantasy of her mother
that people had concocted and immortalized in eulogy. It did not belong
inside an empty grave.

“Mama, what in the hell am I supposed to do now?” she asked aloud.
No one answered, of course. Dolores had half hoped that her subconscious
would bring forth the phantom daydream she had been speaking to so
frequently as of late. She was on her own though, without even a deceptive memory for comfort.

She sat there for some time, drifting close to sleep, but never quite reaching it. Once she heard a quiet rapping on the door, and Kevin’s voice pleading at her through the crack. He said something about how he needed to talk to her, how it was important, how she didn’t understand. She crawled to the door and listened despite herself, hoping he could not tell that she was there.

“I’m sorry,” he whined. She said nothing.

“I know you can hear me,” he continued. “If you forgive me, just tap twice on the door.”

Nothing.

“Okay, but you can’t cut me out of your life. You’ll regret it. You need me, Dolores.”

A plastic card slid under the doorframe. For once, Kevin had been telling the truth: the fake ID was flawless. On it was an old photo of her under the name “Bonnie Dehoughn.” Under other circumstances, she might have wondered how exactly the little bastard had even found a photo of her in the first place, but by now she wasn’t surprised.

All the fear and shame that had dominated the last month faded, and in their place she felt a cold anger. The sensation slowly spread through her body, a numbing sheet of ice creeping from her lower sternum through the tips of her extremities.
And now, though she couldn’t hear her mother’s voice, Dolores thought
she knew what she would have said.

*How in the hell did a daughter of mine get to the point where she
needed any man?*

*Haven’t I always been this way? Dolores thought.*

*Aw, hell no. You used to have spunk, you know. You were a tough
little hellion once.*

*Was I?*

*Where did that ornery little girl I raised go?*

It was a good question. The only trouble was that Dolores didn’t quite
know the answer anymore.

* * * * *

When Mr. Benson called her the following day, Dolores knew exactly
what she wanted to do. She had known that this would have to come sooner
or later. Willfully ignoring her oncoming trial could not make it disappear. If
she had to face it, she might as well get it over with and take the moral high
ground. She let her cellphone ring three times, staring intently at the caller
I.D., before she answered.

“I want to tell the truth,” she said immediately. There was no need for
pleasantries.

“What?” was all he asked.

“At the trial.”
“That was why I was calling you. They still haven’t set a date—it’s been pushed back again.” He sounded bored. This phone call was nothing more than another item for him to scratch off his checklist for the day. He was probably sitting somewhere with his feet on his desk, smoking a cigarette, and rifling through his paperwork. She pictured him with his enormous belly pressed up against some cheap polyester suit with a novelty tie, a mundane, mid-level beurocrat in a nondescript government office.

“How long can they keep doing that?”

“Oh, a good long while, trust me. You aren’t the biggest fish they’ve got to fry, not by a long shot. No, they’ll keep you hanging around for a good six months or so before they haul you in.” There was a crackling sound on the other end as if he was eating something. Were those potato chips?

“Well, when they do, I’m going to tell them about the Ke—the hitchhiker,” Dolores said, somewhat taken aback. She had not been anticipating applause for her bravery, but she would have liked some acknowledgement of the sacrifice she was willing to make. Mr. Benson had to realize the severity of her situation. “And where the meth came from and how I met him. I think it’s time and I don’t care what it costs me. It has to be done.” She had rehearsed these words several times in her head beforehand.

“Lady, have you lost your fucking mind?” The audible crunching on the other end stopped for a second, and then resumed.

“I realize it looks bad, but I feel that I have to—”
“Looks bad? Looks bad? You have no idea what you’re talking about—no fucking clue. Your case isn’t entirely impossible as it stands right now. Technically speaking, all they have on you is circumstantial evidence.”

“But…I thought you said it was a problem.”

“Of course it’s a problem. But it’s not totally hopeless either. Yes, your fingerprints are on the bag, but that still doesn’t prove it was yours. And did they test you for crystal meth in your system when they picked you up?”

“I don’t think so. How would I—”

“Did they make you piss in a cup, sweetheart?”

“No.”

“Right then, so they have no solid proof that you ingested any. You didn’t, did you?”

“Mr. Benson, we’ve been over this story before. It wasn’t mine and I’d never had anything to do with the stuff in my life.” It was becoming increasingly difficult to remain composed.


“Doesn’t matter? It’s the truth. Isn’t that the whole point of this bureaucratic mess?”

“Not really. Listen to me and listen good, I don’t want you talking about this stuff. In fact, I don’t want you to say a damn thing. It’s only going to fuel the prosecution’s case. You already pled ‘not guilty’ and you’re going to stick to that and then you’re going to sit there and look pretty and keep your
goddamn mouth shut before you fuck this up any worse than you already have. I know how to do the talking. You let me talk.”

“I have a right to testify.”

“You also have the right to do what I say if you want to save your sorry ass.”

“Didn’t you say something about cutting a deal before? Like, if I told the prosecution about the kid with the drugs they might let me off?”

“Yeah, I did, but that’s not such a hot idea. I’ve been feeling out the situation, and they would only bite if you could give them something real.”

“But I can.”

“Let me ask you something: This kid you keep talking about, do you even know his real name or age? Do you know where he comes from? How about why he was out there in the first place? As far as anyone else is concerned, he might as well be a figment of your imagination. Unless you can get him to walk into that courtroom, cuffed and holding a signed confession, you are royally screwed. So just leave the thinking on this to me, okay?”

The man blathered on, but Dolores stopped listening by then. In her mind, she could picture him talking on the phone, a swollen leech of a human being with no more concept of morality than the common criminals he defended. To him, this was a job, no more high-minded than stamping papers at the DMV. He was just one more petty human being representing just one more mesh of lies. And somehow or other, he had ended up being chosen to be her voice.
Dolores imagined what the courtroom would look like, once she eventually found her way there. It would be another neglected public office, sterile and devoid of personality save for the odd coffee ring stains on the wood varnish. She would sit there obediently, a mute witness to her own defense. The idea was beyond repulsive. She felt trapped, driven down some path she had not chosen toward an end in which she would barely even have a part.

Sometimes you just have to say fuck ‘em, her mother’s voice echoed in her head. Sometimes ‘no’ is the best word you can know.

But I already screwed everything up.

Yeah, you made a mess. You’re not the first person to do it, or the last. But you gotta remember to look out for number one sometimes.

You say that, but that’s why people hated you. Look where your whole philosophy got you, Dolores thought.

I know—six feet under. Or, really, in that little box of yours. I never said my life was perfect, but it was mine, baby. It was all mine.

“Are you even listening to me?” Mr. Benson’s nasally voice demanded over the phone. “This is your life we’re talking about.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I know that. Thank you so much for your time.” He had clearly not finished speaking, but she hung up anyway. Her head felt numb, but clearer than it had in ages. There was just one more thing she needed to do.

* * * * *
Danny had been hoping to miss seeing Dolores entirely. He was hovering over his suitcase, mentally running over his checklist and trying to think if he had forgotten anything. He didn’t trust his brain at six in the morning. The bag was a good three quarters full before she walked by.

The early sun gave her tousled hair a crimson sheen and her eyes, though puffy from lack of sleep and still smeared with yesterday’s mascara, had never been more compelling. She propped herself against the doorframe and stayed there, saying nothing and everything by her presence alone.

“You going back to New York?” she asked.

“I just have a few more things to pack.” Even from where she was standing, he could smell the cigarette smoke on her clothes. He hated it when she did that. The odor seeped into the fibers of her clothes and lingered there for days. No matter how many times he told her it was bad for her, she still succumbed once in a while. Usually it was either a sign of stress or her passive-aggressive way of telling him she was angry with him. Force of habit almost made him call her out on it, but he stopped himself.

“Right,” she said. She made a move as if to leave, but stayed instead.

“She’s you know,” he said weakly. For the thousandth time, he thought of what he was going back to, if there was indeed anything left to go back to. Even in memory, their shared apartment felt sterile. The image of Sophie, beautiful, aloof, bored Sophie, languishing in her on self-imposed ennui made him cringe.
She flinched at the name as though he had physically struck her. “Yeah, I know.”

“Look…”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ve just got to go.”

Dolores turned and started to walk away, then stopped herself again. “Do you still…” Her voice trailed off.

“What?” He wished more than anything that she would finish that sentence, and at the same time knew that it would be better if she didn’t.

“Nothing.”

“I’m sorry I just…I just can’t.”

She nodded. “No, I know. I guess I just wanted…I don’t know. It’s pointless to ask about yesterday, isn’t it? If you’re leaving, you’ve already said everything you need to.”

“Then let’s not talk about it.”

“Danny…”

“I know, I know. You need me,” he said. Unnecessary though it was, he couldn’t help but add, “I know how you feel. You always need me.”

He had been half-hoping to pick another fight, to give her something to rail against. Instead of rising to the challenge though, she just smiled, which made her look sadder than ever. “No, that’s just the thing: I don’t. Have a safe trip.”
And then she left. There was a finality to it that all of their previous
goodbyes had lacked, a sense that this time there would be no going back. He
had never expected it from her.

There was nothing left to do but finish packing. What waited for him
in New York was not pleasant, but at least it was safe. Danny had come to the
grim realization that he would rather have the comfort of certain misery than
freefall into the unknown. He folded his clothes neatly, pressing the edges
into sharp creases. He wanted to look good when he stepped off the plane.
Sophie would like that.

* * * * *

The dew-sodden grass soaked through Dolores’s suede boots within
minutes of her entering the cemetery. The sun was still just barely clearing
the horizon and the heat of the oncoming day was still several hours away.
She breathed deep; the air was still fresh and cool and the place mercifully
deserted.

She knelt down by the headstone and ran her fingers over the
engraving. There wasn’t much in the way of an inscription.

Lou Anne Hutchinson
1944-2009
Devoted, Loving Mother

Dolores knew how much her mother would have hated that, to be
remembered for having children and nothing more. Lou Anne’s infants had
stayed on the periphery of her focus. She had cared for them in her way. She
would probably never have listed her parenting skills as her greatest achievement. That no longer seemed to bother Dolores quite so much though.

Someone had left a bouquet of red carnations by the vacant grave. They were the cheapest flowers at the grocery store, but they were fresh and must have been from the last few days. A soggy card sat wedged in the grass beside them. In it was a quote from the Bible, scrawled in Lily’s notoriously poor penmanship, “He is not here. He has risen.” It was both hokey and sincere.

From her wallet, Dolores withdrew her old driver’s license with its dated photograph. She slipped it into the card and tenderly placed the whole package back where it had been. She kissed the tombstone. The granite was cold on her lips. Then she turned, clutching the cigarette case in her pocket so hard that the metal grew hot.

“Are you ready?” Kevin asked. The sun was directly behind him, so she couldn’t make out his face, just a slim, dark silhouette leaning against her car. Somehow or other, he had acquired a cowboy hat. It looked only slightly less comical on him than she would have expected, and it made her smile just a little. He had come just as she had asked. “Saying goodbye?”

_In more ways than one_, she thought. Then, “Let’s get out of here.” She pulled on her sunglasses and blinked ferociously to dispel any oncoming tears. Without another word, she stepped into the car and nodded at Kevin to do likewise. No matter how vicious the gossip about Lou Anne, no one would have ever called the lady weak. If she had ever cried, she had hidden it
brilliantly both out of a sense of pride and a fundamental realization that life
would not allow her that luxury. It had not occurred to Dolores until now how
much Lou Anne must have held back for her children’s sake.

Talking without breaking down was too hard, so Dolores stayed
uncharacteristically quiet. The scenery passed by, the town rapidly giving
way to miles of flat, unchanging terrain. Dolores veered away from the signs
leading toward the familiar interstate, and opted instead for a smaller road
snaking out in some unknown direction. Feeling secure that police seldom
frequented these side ways, she let her foot push down on the gas pedal. The
longer and the faster she drove, the better she began to feel about her decision.

“I can’t believe you decided to jump bail,” Kevin said, after they had
driven for a half hour or so. He was starting to squirm in his seat every time
they hit a bend with increased force. The aging vehicle couldn’t corner the
way it once had, and the whole frame shuddered from the strain. “I didn’t
know you had it in you. I’m impressed, Dolores, I really am.”

“I didn’t know either,” she said, accelerating just a touch more. The
speedometer vibrated anxiously around 95.

“Your ex is gonna be pissed. Doesn’t he lose his house or some shit?”

“Apartment, but yes.”

“What’s he gonna do?”

“Damned if I know. He’ll get everything from the divorce though, so I
don’t feel too bad for him.” Her breathing was perfectly regular now, and her
pulse had slowed to a normal rate.
“Serves him right anyway. Douchebag didn’t appreciate you. I knew you’d come around,” he said. He tried to keep his voice level, but he was eyeing the dashboard warily and clutching the seat with bloodless knuckles.

She was quiet.

“Seriously, you went and got all badass on me,” he continued. “You should’ve been arrested way the hell earlier—it’s done you good. It’s kinda sexy, you know that?”

“It’s too early for crap like this, kid.”

“Aw, hey, I’m trying to pay you a compliment. And don’t call me ‘kid’—it’s demeaning.”

“I don’t know your real name.”

“How about Clyde? Can I be Clyde?”

“I’m not calling you Clyde.”

“Whatever,” he said, sounding suddenly peevish. “I’m gonna take a nap. Could be a while before we get to wherever the hell we’re going, right?”

He tugged the hat over his eyes and leaned back. His exaggerated breathing convinced her that he was awake still, but she didn’t press the issue.

Three hours of driving later, Dolores stopped the car.

Kevin stirred. “Where are we?” he muttered groggily. Mechanically groomed rows of soybeans stretched out to the horizon in every direction. Telephone wires were all that broke up the otherwise empty sky.

“Fuck if I know,” she said. “I need to stretch my legs and smoke though. There’s a pack in the glove compartment.”
“Couldn’t think of a better idea,” he said. He pulled out the cardboard box, still in its saran wrap, and hopped out of the car. Dolores reached across the passenger’s side, slammed the door, and clicked the locks down. She opened the window a crack. Kevin screamed at her, demanding an explanation.

“Hey kid,” she said. “Stay away from my family, and stay away from me. You can try to track me down, but you won’t want to.”

“What’re you doing?! You can’t leave me here! I’ll die!” he yelled.

“Open the door!”

“You’re not going to die. We passed a gas station a few miles back. They’ll figure out what to do with you.”

“But you can’t—you can’t—”

She pressed her foot gently down on the gas pedal. The engine rumbled back life, and the car rolled down the road at about five miles per hour. Kevin swore and beat his fist on the glass.

“Let go of the car—you’re going to get hurt,” she said.

“When did you—”

The rest of the sentence was lost to the growing roar of the passing wind. She threw her weight against the pedal and did not let up until the speedometer read 110 and the frame of the car rattled in protest. The uncanny calm Dolores had felt earlier had vanished. Her eyes were dry, but her chest throbbed. She was gasping now, swallowing great gulps of oxygen that
seared her raw throat and lungs. She felt as if she had never breathed before, as
if this harsh, beautiful sensation were something altogether new.

Only after several miles did the feeling of lightness in her head begin
to subside. She was dizzy and giddy, awake and alone. She rolled down the
windows and let the roar erase the sound of her own laughter. She resisted the
urge to take one quick glance in the rearview mirror. There was nothing there.

The End