

LUXURIOUS: CONNECTED STORIES

By

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Luxurious: Connected Stories

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This collection of 7 loosely interconnecting stories revolves around a Philadelphia bar named The Luxurious, or the Lux, and its regulars and those connected to the regulars between the years 1985 and 2012. The South Philadelphia Neighborhood is changing and this bar is at the center of its controversial gentrification, and so the characters include both the new Millennials and the old timers who meet at this watering hole.

The lead character is Declan, bar owner, who must make a decision to either keep the bar (which is paid off), or sell it as part of his divorce settlement. Additionally, there is Shaiful, an Indian-American colonial impersonator, Sandy, a widow, Rick, a drag queen, Bo, a new transplant from Chicago, and several other characters whose lives loosely interconnect in the style of novels such as *Olive Kittredge* or *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. These are the first 7 stories of what will eventually be a longer collection.

## **The Barman**

**August 2012**

We provide shelter, mainly. It's what we do. We have rules here. We stay open until 2A.M., every single night. Even holidays, even on unseasonably humid Tuesdays, even after the slack-tied happy hour leftovers are gone and it's just the usuals. Even when it's just me.

That's always been my motto. I never want somebody to come to my bar during legal business hours and see a locked door. But even I have my limits. You've probably heard the snake story, the latest in adventures at Declan's bar, hopefully the last one involving a snake, and maybe even the last big one ever. If anybody asks, that fucker is alive and hanging in South Philly someplace, maybe he's even met somebody. And they will ask, people always do. That snake is a legend already, if you can create a legend in three months. Sometimes I wish they'd all just shut up about it, but they won't, and why should they? It gives them something to talk about, to bond over, to speculate on. It's how the bar – the world - used to be before the internet - arguments that couldn't be shut down with the swipe of a phone. But there's the story, then there's the truth and the truth is never as good as the story.

But the truth is, I killed it. I think.

It was midnight that night when we heard the scream – ear-piercing! Christy barreled up the stairs, chasing her own banshee sounds. She caught her breath and Josh, the troublemaker and the thirty-something political analyst, helped her on a stool.

“What? What?” he asked her. She took a deep breath and out it came -

“There's a snake in the bathroom.”

We laughed at her, of course.

“A snake?” I pulled out a rocks glass. She's always Jameson, neat.

She nodded and tucked her gray bob behind her tanned ears and took it as shot.

“Now, what would a snake be doing in the ladies' room?” I scratched my graying scruff. “And on a bloody Tuesday?” I teased.

Christine gave me a look and motioned for another. “Joke if you like, Declan,” she said to me. “But it's curled around the goddamned toilet.”

I poured her another. Christine is short and a little chubby with dark wrinkly skin like a comfy leather couch. She's a bit younger than me, mid-forties and has lived on block away since she was born. Literally, she was born in the house. She's part of this building as much as at the taps. She even used to waitress for me for a bit, even though this place has no need for one. It's too small, just mostly a long bar with a couple of booths lined along the smudged windows and a whole lot of junk.

Besides us, there was Angela. She's that young brunette girl from South Philly with that shithead boyfriend.

“Like a little garter snake?” she asked, with a quick glance up from her iPhone.

Christine sighed. “No. Like a boa constrictor or something.”

I dipped two pint glasses in soapy water. “Well, go down there and deal with it. I don't know what to tell you. I don't feeling bouncing snakes.”

She shook her head no. “Are you crazy?”

“Come on now,” I said. “Don't be such a priss. I once saw you pull a pigeon out of the deep fryer.”

“That pigeon was dead,” she scoffed.

Josh laughed. He'd only been recently un-banned after he got into it with a parking authority guy here seven months ago. He's a short and scrappy guy, so he didn't do much damage. He's a good tipper. I kind of like him, even though he can be a real prick.

"All right, all right." I gave Josh another beer. Then a rum and coke with two straws for Angela. "Lemme get a smoke first."

I know they laughed at my supposed cowardice as I exited the side door. I stood on the corner, a few feet from the entrance. It's been strange tending the bar so often. For about ten years there, while my daughter was little, I had taken a bit of a backseat. But since the separation and JD, my main bartender, has been DJing more, I had been here. I grumbled about it now and again, but I will tell you the truth. I liked it. I do like it. Running it was the only thing I was ever mediocre at. Karen liked to remind me of this truth.

Karen. Arguably the reason I've become this drunk, nostalgic sloppy mess. She was my soon-to-be ex-wife. She used to love this place, then she hated it, now she's gunning for it. Figures. I'm not a bad guy, I told her to take the car, the house, even our rental properties above the bar. Even still, with all the fighting, and all we did wrong to each other, it still feels strange going to our meetings with the lawyers. Once, I was Declan or Deck and she was Karen or Babe. Now she's Ms. Klein and I am Mr. Malloy. Ms. Klein requests....Mr. Malloy rejects...Like I didn't spend half my life with the woman. Like we weren't once in love, back when we were poor and the neighborhood was shit.

I am starting to think my lawyer is a shithead. I have no mortgage. This place is worth ten times what it was in 1990. I could sell it, give Karen half and never work again.

Move to St. Thomas. Aruba has sunlight, real sunlight, not just the kind filtered through dirty windows. When I say that, my customers roll their eyes.

I think what I liked about it was the routine of it all. I still do, always will. The physicality it involves. Putting up the barstools every night. Mopping the floor in sloppy figure eights. I like the kind of tasks that have a definite beginning and end because it's rare in life to get that kind of closure every single night of your life. I also always liked the routines of my customers. Not their schedules, I mean, but their drinking routines. The way they might absent-mindedly crossed their legs and kick the old mahogany bar. They way Josh tends to hold his pint glass with two hands, like how my daughter used to hold her sippy cup. They way Angela tongues her straw or how Vanna the cook recoils at the site of ice or how Sinister Pete always cracks his bony knuckles before picking up his Stoli Orange. How Sandra smells of smoke and lifesavers and sometimes-children. How the women keep their drinks close and the men slosh them about like Romans. I liked the smell of it all – the smell of people and beer and wine and mixed drinks all mixing together.

But yes, the snake. I was almost done my cigarette when Christine came outside to join me and bum one. She only does that when she's stressed. There's not many smokers these days, especially since they went and banned cigarettes from the entire solar system.

“You okay there?” I lit her cigarette with the grill lighter. She nodded yeah.

“Just shocked.” She smiled. “How's it going with Karen?”

“Usual bullshit.”

“Don’t give up. You need this place, Declan. Besides, where would I watch Jeopardy!?” she joked. Well, maybe she was joking.

“It’s not just her, you know. I’m not thirty-five anymore,” I told her. We finished our smokes in silence.

Back inside, Angela had shimmied down the bar and was having a laugh with Josh

“We have decided to name the snake!” announced Josh. “It shall be called...SAM!”

Angela raised her glass. With booze, comes quasi-creativity, and soon they were making up stories about the damn thing, its back-story, how it got itself in a bar.

“I think it was jonesing or something-clearly this snake is an alcoholic,” said Angela with a shake of her long brown hair.

“It seems more likely it escaped from the zoo,” said Christy. Josh put his hand on her arm and shook his head. “It’s clearly a worm, which was exposed to radiation. Like Spider-Man.”

“Fuck all that,” I said, taking a sip from my whiskey. “I bet Karen put it there.” I think that made everybody a little uncomfortable, but they laughed right along with my conspiracy theory. These days, I wouldn’t be so sure she didn’t do something like that. I think they thought the same thing.

Christine laughed and returned to her usual routine of sipping her whiskey painfully slow, barely wetting her lips and putting the glass back down.

“We’re getting off-topic,” she said. “You need a plan.” She pointed to me with a short red fingernail.

Nobody wanted me to kill the snake except Angela. Angela always reminded me some of my daughter. A little loud and a little bit of a smart-ass. My daughter isn't around much these days, she moved to Boston for college, fell in love with a woman and now roots for the Red Sox. Christine assures me it's a phase.

"We can feed it some Banker's Club, then stab it with a big fork. Throw it down 21st street. A car is bound to run it over," Angela said.

Everybody else found that barbaric.

"If we let it live, it could come back. Or terrorize another bar." Angela grimaced at the thought. She was small enough she could sit cross-legged on the barstool and did so, and looked at the gritty tile floor nervously.

I must admit, I kind of liked the idea of the snake slithering down to the next corner to visit the bitchy couple that owns the douche gastropub. They did marathons - the kind of people who had no business owning a bar.

"I wouldn't mind if it terrorized some of the neighbors."

"Oh, that place isn't too bad," Angela said. She'd heard me complain before about our new competitors.

Christy made a face and said it was fine if you liked \$20 dollar hotdogs.

"But they are fancy – they put avocado on it," Angela said, I suspect only half joking.

Josh, for once, decided to try and be reasonable and got us back on track. "Call animal control?"

"At this hour?" I wondered. "What are they going to do that I can't?" By this point it was nearly one in the morning and I'd procrastinated long enough. Time to investigate. I refreshed the drinks on the house.



“Look, this isn’t a democracy. I will make the decision. It’s my bar. I own it,” I said, although as I looked around, I wasn’t so sure. “Now, everybody stay put,” I commanded in my most dad-like tone. I went into the kitchen and grabbed some weapons: a large knife, a rolling pin, tongs, and a garbage bag. I grabbed some latex gloves, too.

“Looks like you got some master plan, there,” Josh said with a bit of a slur.

“Looks like he is going to play Mouse Trap,” said Angela.

I grumbled.

“Why the knife?” Christine asked nervously.

“Relax. Just in case. Look, I will grab it with the tongs, throw it in the bag and toss it down the street, well away from here.” I hit the bag with the tongs like a gong.

Everybody seemed satisfied. “He will be fine. Promise. I’ll save him.”

I started down the steps, my knees creaking more than the shitty stairs with uneven runs. I never get why going down stairs hurts more than going up. I forgot about the paint bucket at the bottom of the stairs collecting a leak and nearly tripped over it. I’ve cleaned up a lot of stuff in this place. Rats, piss, more vomit than you’ve seen in your life. But I was about to possibly encounter a snake and I can’t say that didn’t worry me a bit. I’m a city guy, the kind of man for whom muggers and homeless are the creatures here, to be slightly feared and respected. Not wild animals.

“Hurry!” Christine yelled down. I looked up and saw them gathered at the top like the goddamn Brady Bunch. Youngest one in front, Josh and Christine behind.

“Get back!” I shooed them with a tong-ed hand. They each moved back exactly one stair. I sighed.

I slowly opened the door that said “Women” in faded gold letters.

Sure enough, there it was. I was a bit surprised. It was certainly no boa constrictor, but impressive none the less with silvery-green scales. It was as thick as the belt that help up my pants. The snake looked eerily content somehow, sleeping casually as if this cool yellow-stained toilet was its natural habitat. It was hot in the bathroom and smelled faintly of urine and mold.

I’d seen enough of those nature shows to know this could all be a rouse. He could wake up and strike at any moment. I had to be careful.

I stepped back silently and hissed out the door, “It’s here!”

“I told you!”

I pivoted back to my nemesis. I had not been in the ladies’ in a while. The ceiling was chipped away worse than I remembered and I noticed little bits of plaster on the floor. The toilet tank was cracked. The amount it would take to fix up just the bathroom could get me to a Greek island.

I poised my tongs in one hand and my knife in the other - and then I saw it. A two-inch piece of brown plaster started to fall from the ceiling. It fell slowly, fluttering like an ugly snowflake, and landed gently right on the snake’s face. I braced myself. The snake didn’t seem to feel it. But then - it opened its eyes wide. I swear, it unraveled from around that toilet within a millisecond. It had vampire fangs and its body somehow engorged, like it filled with anger from being disturbed.

I had the knife in my hand and with a force that surprised even me, I stabbed it.

Hard.

I stabbed it right where its neck would be. It twisted violently and I heard it scream. Except, the scream, I realized as I felt my throat vibrate, was me. Everybody galloped down the stairs.

“It’s fine!” I called. “Stay back!”

I grabbed the scaly creature with the knife that was still sticking out of its back and I held it up like an unruly stand of pasta and threw it in the Hefty bag. I tied the tightest knot. Double, then triple knotted it. I threw some bleach on the floor torching the evidence, then grabbed the bag.

“Move out of the way,” I called and my patrons quickly clunked back up to the bar. I trotted up the stairs with my arm outstretched, keeping the still slightly twisting bag as far away from me as possible. It thrashed a bit harder, and everybody jumped.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Christine, watch the bar.”

I went right out the door. I walked further than I meant to, nearly six blocks away even though it was a little chilly for spring and I had no coat. I passed a few dumpsters, but they didn’t seem right. I passed the new restaurants that had popped up where empty parking lots or people’s homes had once been, I passed the Monopoly condos and the construction and my favorite coffee shop. When I came upon the shiny new Rite-Aid parking lot, I was shivering and so I knew this would be the final resting place. The bag was no longer thrashing, I don’t think, and so I swung the bag into the dumpster. I was surprised that the dumpster was empty, and Sam the Snake landed with a thump that echoed for a few moments.

I’m not really sure if that snake was going to attack me or terrorize the neighborhood, or if it was going to sit there for a while then leave, but yeah - I killed it. I

don't know what he was doing there to begin with, and though we've had a lot of theories in the months since, we still don't know. So I can't feel bad for what I did. That snake tale got around quickly and so when people wonder if the snake is going to come back and visit, I let them wonder. When they argue about how he got there in the first place, I let them argue. But I also tell them, however he got in the bar bathroom that night, it didn't really matter. He probably had a hell of an adventure. That's the true part.

When I got back to the bar that night, I was treated as a hero.

"He's okay?" asked Emily.

"He is probably a bit shaken up, but he'll be all right." Everybody sat together near the far corner of the bar, smiling of the thought of a snake roaming the streets. And then, I told them that the snake started to slither away, slowly towards the deeper South, down the sticky black street. I said it turned around, I swear to God, before it continued its journey. My friends sighed with their own romantic dreams. Christy especially liked that idea. "I'm glad he's safe, for now."

Pete came in from his apartment upstairs then to play songs on the jukebox before bed, as he tends to do and he listened quietly as the girls related the story once again. I locked the doors and turned off the neon Yeung-Ling light at two, but we stayed there until the sun rose and then I made coffee and we stayed even longer. It didn't really matter, anymore if the cops came by and saw us. Shutting me down was no longer a threat.

"Our savior!" Christine toasted.

"To Declan!"

"To Sam!"

But before the celebrations, when I had thrown the snake in the dumpster, I sat on the curb, resigned, not a savior, a coward. I thought about Philadelphia. I thought about Bora Bora. To be honest, I don't even know where Bora Bora is, exactly, other than far away from here. I know it has sun. I really did sit there for a long time, I think, just to make sure that he wasn't coming back, to be sure he wouldn't slowly slither away, injured. I needed to be sure that he was dead.

## Clowns

Confetti was pissed. She was explicitly told there would be only 12 children, but at last count? 15. It was only early June, yet sweat dripped from beneath her blue wig and white make-up migrated into the deep lines of her face. Noodles had suggested moving to the minimal look - just some rosy cheeks, fake eyelashes and glitter, but Confetti resisted. Noodles always looked a little bit tarty and while that might be an okay look for a twenty-five-year-old clown, Confetti had not been that age for some time. She wasn't sure if she was ever that age. She had to be honest with herself though - in this heat, she couldn't help think perhaps Noodles was in the right. She resisted the urge to wipe her brow and do further damage. Instead, she looked longingly through the large kitchen bay window at the vanilla ice cream cake, thawing around an arch of green and silver balloons each shaped into a bubbly "7".

Seven. The worst age.

The parents booked Confetti for three hours, an ungodly length when quantified in child- birthday party time, especially solo. Noodles wasn't bright, but she was company. But for \$300 how could she say no? The Party Network gossip chain said the Hess family had money, although Confetti knew darn well that did not always translate into a hearty tip. But while the family never hired a clown before, they did once employ a Snow White for one of the younger one's christening and she said that they were generous.

Mr. Hess was a doctor at Cooper Hospital, Mrs. Hess was a lawyer. Their wealth was apparent but the decor was not gaudy. The immaculate home housed leather couches and dangerously light- beige rugs. In the yard sat a large but simple play set. Likely the kind of parents didn't pay much attention to their children, Confetti figured.

Confetti continued to twist a balloon and dreamed of retiring to Florida, like Bernice and Mary. She worked for fifty years already. It was ironic, wasn't it, since her friends always told her in jest she was lucky to not have kids, she would be able to retire earlier than them and enjoy her money while they were tucking an extra \$100 in their child's checking account away at college. But, no. Instead of sipping on wine spritzers on the beach like her other nearly seventy-five-year-old friends, she was working in the Macy's stockroom during the week. Instead of playing golf on a Saturday afternoon, here she was making a purple monkey for a cocker-spaniel-looking girl in pigtails. Ashley, she'd said, beaming, as if simply having a name was some kind of accomplishment.

Confetti knotted the monkey and shooed a delighted Ashley away. She stretched her neck out a bit. Looking down at children constantly took its toll not only on her mental state, but her decaying body. Her neck was the worst, but her lower back, her feet were bad too, and they didn't make orthopedics for clown shoes. The blessed reprieve was short – the birthday boy appeared from nowhere and demanded a new sword. Silver, this time. His sister popped his balloon, he whined. He pointed at another grubby blonde child. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph - How many children did these people have?

“Sure thing, birthday boy”, she said with a smile. She couldn't for the life of her remember this child's name – though she recalled it sounded like a cracker. She wrote it

on in the side of her wrist in ballpoint pen, like always, but her sweat smeared it across her wrist like blood. Why couldn't parents name their kids normal names anymore? Biblical names like Ruth or Mary or Mark or John. Or Michael, like her late husband. Sure, she called him Mickey affectionately, as did a few close friends, but that was in private, of course. That's not the kind of name you would write on a birth certificate. Last week, Confetti met a four-year-old Kyle. Not a boy Kyle. A girl.

She kept her plastered smile on her face and made small talk with Ritz or whatever-his name-was, as she pumped the silver balloon. She preferred to make swords and hats to monkeys and dogs. Swords were practical. The children would pretend to be pirates, hunting for hidden treasure or would fight to the death. That is until the inevitable POP! Instantaneously, their fun disappeared. Scattered around the floor in little pieces. One of the parents would make the kids scavenge and clean up the pieces "before the dog eats one and chokes."

Yet another white-blond little boy with big ears and freckles waited with the birthday boy impatiently, his un-popped blue sword poised. She finished the last knot and handed it over with a flourish. He cheered. No 'thank you' - no surprise.

"Come on, Tristan!" the big-eared boy yelled. That was it - Tristan.

"Mutiny!" cried the birthday boy, sword in the air.

They battled. They ran circles around Confetti, a piece of scenery, jumping over her oversized faded red shoes. She put her thumbs in her rainbow suspenders, which held up her baggy purple parachute pants and laughed heartily. Just once, she'd want to trip



them as they ran around her as if she didn't even exist. She never did, but it helped her stay in character and smile when she imagined the kid falling. He'd be fine, he'd simply bounce on the perfectly manicured green grass and cry a few crocodile tears. Sure, his balloon would pop. It must be nice for a lost balloon to be the worst thing in your life.

So far.

When did she start to hate this job so much? Not that it was ever her dream job, but it was okay. Mickey worked as an appliance repair man and Confetti worked part-time during the week at Bell Telephone. Clowning came later, when her job no longer existed and she wanted something to do on the weekends while Mickey had to work. They were never rich, but with one-and-a-half incomes and no children, they were comfortable. Mickey took her out to dinner once in a while, even, and split dessert with two forks.

But five years ago Mickey had a heart attack. Confetti had no idea how much debt he had racked up on their joint credit cards. No life insurance. Her husband, quiet, reserved and a secret gambling addict. Clowning went from something she did four or five times in the summer, to as much as she could every weekend. Sometimes four or five parties a weekend, if she could get it - and it was hard to get. Clowns weren't "cool" anymore, and most clowns these days had to work as other characters, too, just to make ends meet. Confetti was far too old to be a princess. She was too old to even be Mary Poppins. Mary Poppins, the manager at the Party Network, noted, needed to be youthful and exude a certain type of nanny-sexiness and so the 19-year-old who played Snow White and Belle took her over, too.

But instead of tripping the children as she thought of this, she said appropriate clown-like things from her mental script. She kept one eye on the few parents across the yard, gathered around the oak tree. At this particular party, the parents didn't bother to hide their wine coolers and light beers in solo cups or "World's Best Dad" hand-painted coffee mugs. Though, it appeared Mrs. Hess was holding a bottle of water. Confetti watched Mr. Hess sneak up behind Mrs. Hess and smack her bottom. Confetti tried not to gasp and stare. Really. There were no children around them, but still. What was odder was that Mrs. Hess laughed at his childish behavior and swatted him playfully. Confetti shook her head at the obscenity. Thank goodness Mickey never did anything like that.

In fact, they hadn't made love in nearly five years before he died. He just wasn't like that, that was all. He was a gambler and a liar, but he wasn't some sex-crazed pervert at least. Her other friends complained of their husbands wanting that kind of thing all the time, but not Mickey. He was quiet, a real and true gentleman in that regard. She just couldn't imagine what it would be like to have such a brazen and hedonistic husband. One who smacked your bottom in public. One who had such overwhelming and insatiable desire for you. The attention might be nice once in a while, sure, perhaps alone after a nice romantic dinner, but not at a child's birthday party.

She thought about that night sometimes, though, the last time they shared intimacy. It was their anniversary and since it had been awhile prior, she put on a pair of silky pajama pants and her hair, longer then, she curled. She didn't talk about her escapades the way her girlfriends did, but still, she thought she'd do what they'd suggested to each other and put some effort in, because isn't that what husbands wanted?

Weren't they supposed to lust after their wives, long after menopause, long after their women wanted it, long after their equipment stopped working and they wanted it so bad, they'd resort to medication? She thought perhaps Mickey thought these things, but he was too good of a man, too kind of a man to tell her. She wanted to be a good wife, so she traded her usual billowy nightgown for a silky tank top and silky pajama pants. The costume was the closest Confetti would ever get to lingerie, or at least since the nightgown she wore on their wedding night. Mickey barely looked up at her from his historical fiction while they made love. Confetti felt dirty, like she was seducing a stranger in night.

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The birthday boy's shoelace was untied. Sooner or later, he would trip. The other boy would fall on top of them. Both their swords would pop! There would be tears. Confetti smiled,

“You two better be careful! Confetti's shoes are awfully big. You might trip!”

The big-eared boy stomped on her foot and laughed. It wasn't her foot, not really, it was just shoe, but Confetti faked pain.

“Ouch! You've made Confetti really sad!” she said. She frowned. Tristan didn't care. He laughed and stepped on her other foot, following his friend's lead.

Confetti sighed as the boys ran off and climbed on the swing-set. She was used to those kinds of antics. Parents not paying attention, the party clown being abused. Nobody

cares. Suddenly, she felt a tap on her broad shoulder. She turned. It was Mrs. Hess with a bottle of water, which Confetti accepted.

“If you need a break, Confetti, please take it. Whew. It’s disgusting out.” Mrs. Hess pulled her white shirt out from her sticky tan skin, exposing the rounded tops of her breasts.

Confetti just offered a close-mouthed smile. “Clowns don’t need breaks! I am having so much fun! Besides, it’s time for the magic show!”

Mrs. Hess laughed and pivoted. Her bright red heels sunk into the grass and she stumbled a bit. Dr. Hess quickly ran over to help her and doted on her as if she would break. Both probably drunk.

The parents all started to yell, “Magic show!” to the children and they ran over by Confetti’s impromptu stage on the shellacked deck.

Confetti actually still enjoyed performing the magic show. She had been working on a new trick where she pulled a stuffed bunny out of a hat, then made it disappear again. She was excited to finally try it in front of an audience, though part of her was angry she had to debut such a great trick for such a bratty birthday boy. Nevermind. It wasn’t really for him, anyway. She’d start with the coin tricks, then the knots, then the bunny. By then it would be time to go home and watch the soaps she missed this week while at work.

Confetti took a long and satisfying gulp of water as the children gathered. A little girl with wide eyes sat cross-legged and patiently in the front row. Confetti had not seen before. She had red hair and wore a light blue flowery sundress. Her hair was matted down with sweat, but she had dimples to kill for. Confetti found herself compelled to speak to her, to ensure her the show we start soon, when she felt a pulling sensation on her pants.

What was happening?

Tristan and freckle-face had unhooked her suspenders and in one foul swoop, and pulled down her over-sized parachute pants. She turned around, her nude control-top underwear for the world to see. She heard laughter and something bright flashed. The stuffed bunny once tucked in her waistband had fallen to the ground. The boys doubled over in laughter. Confetti was exposed for everybody. She couldn't move for what seemed like a lifetime.

"Look at all the hair sticking out!" Tristan said. There were echoes of laughter and words hit Confetti's ears like bursts of air - weird, gross, ugly, fat, old, hairy.

"Tristan Michael Hess!" Confetti heard Mrs. Hess yell. It snapped Confetti out of her trance and she struggled to pull up her pants. She couldn't get the suspenders, they were twisted around themselves and the more she pulled the more twisted they became. The children laughed behind her. She ran to the back door, doing her best to keep her trousers up, ran into the kitchen, and right past the expensive ice cream cake, past the Ethan Allen furniture to the upstairs bedroom where Mrs. Hess told her to store her

things. She slammed the door, collapsed on the bed and tore off the pants and shoes. Her legs, stick thin, hairy and bare, hung off the edge of the bed.

That was it. She'd had quite enough. \$300 was not worth this. She'd been peed on, pooped on, vomited on, made fun of, but this was the first time she had ever been exposed physically. She pulled off her wig, exposing wild salt-laced auburn hair. The bedroom window overlooked the backyard and she could hear some muffled commotion through the light-green curtains: Mrs. Hess' yells, a boy's cries. Confetti pawed through her bag and changed into capri pants and a white blouse. She yanked the floppy shoes off her boomerang-ed feet and replaced them with flip-flops.

She then walked into the giant master bathroom and closed the door. In spite of herself, she admired the elegant Roman bathhouse Jacuzzi tub. It was big enough for two, if not more. If she had a tub like that, she'd take long bubble baths every morning and eat expensive cheese. She washed her face over the pedestal sink and scrubbed every last trace of Confetti from her face. There wasn't much to wash off – the sweat and the sun had already melted most of her make-up off. She half-smiled into the mirror. She looked so tired. Why was her world coming to this? She didn't care anymore. She'd find another job. She'd move to a smaller apartment. Anything. Are you happy, Mickey? She thought. Is this the life you imagined for me? The sarcastic thoughts made way for another, more somber one – something that she'd thought deep down, but never articulated. That maybe Mickey never cared. Maybe he never thought what would happen to her.

She half-expected it, and sure enough, there was a soft knock. Instead of Mrs. Hess though, she heard a male voice.

“Trudy? It’s Rick. Can I come in?” Confetti didn’t respond, instead she loudly threw her make-up tins and hairspray can into her bag. Mr. Hess opened the door. He was red from the sun and his dark hair was slicked back with sweat. It made him look like James Bond. Roger Moore. Confetti swung her bag over her shoulder and faced him. Her tall and broad frame nearly matched his. She was sure he was there to tell her to get back out there. The show must go on and all that. He wasn’t paying her \$300 for nothing. Like Mr. Miller when she fell at that little fat girl’s fifth birthday. She clenched her fists at the thought of that jerk, just one of many.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Hess, but I’ve had enough. Enough. I am sure you won’t pay me, but guess what? I don’t care. I don’t. I’d rather, well, shit in my wig than go back out there.”

Confetti’s foul language even shocked her. She almost laughed and her mouth twitched into a genuine smile. She’d never said anything so crass to anyone, especially a man. She had two insults at the ready for the next round. But instead, Mr. Hess came into the bathroom and closed the door. What was he doing? He was supposed to yell back. She had said the S-word! To a client. A doctor.

“I’m so, so sorry. That is really not like Trist. He is in deep, deep trouble, I assure you.” He perched himself on the edge of the oversized tub. Even though he was tall, his feet didn’t touch the ground. Confetti was confused. Had she not been scary? Did she not sound serious?

“Mr. Hess, I have to say-“

“You know, I barely recognized you without your make-up. You look nothing like Confetti,” he joked. “There’s a lovely lady underneath there.”

Confetti looked down, caught off-guard.

“Please, sit down,” he graciously motioned again to the closed toilet as if it was a recliner. “I can’t even imagine having to deal with those kids all day.” He placed his hand on Confetti’s knee and patted it. “At your age. No offense.”

Confetti was far from offended.

“Do you know, Kim’s pregnant, again? It’s very exciting, but I don’t think Tristian is taking it well. Especially since it’s another girl,” he continued.

Confetti tried not to snort. Of course she was pregnant. She thought about the way Mr. Hess manhandled his wife earlier, the way his wife giggled with delight. She not only wasn't embarrassed, she seemed to revel in the public affection. Perhaps she was not drunk after all. She wondered how people with children even had time to make more. Even child-free, after working all day, it seemed she and Mickey couldn’t get it together.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hess, but I really need to leave”. Confetti stood up and walked back into the bedroom to find her keys. Mr. Hess followed her. She dug through her patchwork purse. She was always losing her keys, the bag was like a giant black hole.

“Call me Rick, please.”



“Okay, Rick, I- Argh!” As she quickly looked up from her bag, Confetti felt an agonizing stretch in her neck. She took a deep breath. “Oh, sweet mother of God.”

“What happened?” asked Mr. Hess, putting a hand on her back.

Confetti winced. “Nothing. I’m fine. I just seemed to pull something in my neck.” Despite the fact it was the last thing she wanted to do, she sunk down on the bed. “I just need a moment, that’s all.”

“Oh, no. You can’t drive home like that.” Mr. Hess stood. “I was a massage therapist before I went to medical school. Let me help,” he said. He put a warm hand on her neck.

“Oh, no that’s really ok - “Confetti protested. She started to get up but let out a yelp.

She sunk back down like a resigned teenager.

“Just five minutes. You can’t drive if you can’t move your neck.”

Confetti felt her neck grown warmer, slightly more pliable just from his touch. He was right. She couldn’t drive if she couldn’t even move her neck. She felt his knuckles push into her muscles, slowly and gently at first. She felt her muscles warming up. She had not realized how tense her neck had been until he then put a finger into a pressure point. Confetti drew in her breath.

“Just let me know if I am hurting you, Mrs. Anderson,” he said.

“Trudy is fine...” she murmured. It did hurt, a lot, but she didn't say anything. His hands were large and strong, but smooth, unlike Mickey's calloused workman's hands. The bedroom was quiet except for a few muffled sounds from outside of children screams. They sounded miles away. Mr. Hess asked her how it felt.

“That's fine, thank you.”

He laid his large hands on her neck without massaging it and let his heat transfer.

“Will you be ok?” he asked, his hands still on her shoulders, his fingers tapped her collarbone lightly.

“Huh?”

“To drive? I can drive you home if you like.”

“Oh. Yes, I will be fine.”

Rick moved his hands off her shoulders slowly.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Hess said quietly. “I really must go.”

Mr. Hess nodded. “Again. Truly sorry. I will make sure Tristan apologizes before you leave.”

Trudy carefully walked down the stairs, where Mrs. Hess gave her check, plus a generous tip and hurried apologies for her troubles. Trudy felt her cheeks turn red and she took the check without looking Mrs. Hess in the eye as she mumbled some, it's okays and

thank yous. She scurried through the front door. Parents were picking up their children, their little proofs of love. They hugged the little ones tightly as if they'd just returned from war instead of a birthday party. They kissed the tops of their heads and oohed and ahhed over their goody bags. She trekked to her white Corolla and placed her tote bag in the bag. She carefully placed her clown shoes next to it. She wasn't in trouble. She'd do it again next week. She ran her fingers down her neck as she started engine and, after a brief debate, drove the long way home.

### **Ambiguous**

Full-time Thomas Jefferson is a real prick. The part-timers are okay, but this guy is just the worst. And he can't act his way out of a paper-bag. Plus, he is from South Jersey and sounds like it. I think he only has the gig because he is lily-white, almost pink, and is nailing the executive director on the side. I'm brown and I'm only nailing my girlfriend. My agent says it's good to be racially ambiguous, but tell that to the casting director for Historic Philadelphia.

Danielle thinks I'm crazy for my aspirations. She's not an actor, so I can see how she doesn't understand what it's like to have a dream role. She works as a clinical researcher, so she travels around a lot and often works odd hours, too. It is kind of nice – neither of us have to feel guilty for not being home most nights. We moved in together last fall in a place she bought in Fairmount. She keeps saying, “Shaiful, forget that Colonial crap, anyway. Just go Equity, do real acting,” as if joining the Actor's union is the road to riches or even happiness.

I do appease her and my agent and audition for regional stuff. I temp at the Convention Center. I want to propose to my girlfriend, so I am doing anything I can to save. She makes more money, but I hold my own. There's the perfect ring on Jeweler's Row I have my eye on. I'm almost there. I host Quizzo at the bar, where I've been going since I graduated from University of the Arts. It's fifty bucks a week, and I get a free meal and get to talk about history. You see, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin – those guys make the better money, plus get all the glory. Of course, Ben Franklin isn't the dream for

me quite yet. That's a long ways off. I'm only just thirty-one. It's funny how we mythologize historical figures at a particular age. I can't be Ben Franklin because the Ben Franklin in our memory is old, potbellied, mullet-ed, and syphilis-free. Jefferson is young and viral. I'm Thomas Fucking Jefferson. Not Mike from Marlton. For now, I'm just a generic storyteller, but I'm the best one and I get the best tips. People request me. They talk about me on Yelp! – I'm kind of famous.

I tell all that to my boss' boss, Glory. She's a petite black woman in her early thirties with bright red hair and thick glasses. I thought she'd understand, us being minorities, but she doesn't want to hear it.

“Shaiful, give it a rest,” she says. “Thomas Jefferson was white. Mike has been doing it for five years. He is good at it.”

Yeah, I bet he is, I want to say, but I don't.

“Besides,” she continues, “I just saw you at the Arden in Hamlet. You were amazing. I know you're gonna jump ship, soon. All the best ones do. Go move to New York. Aim higher.”

“No,” I said. “This is what I want to do. This is my dream.”

Glory groans. “This job is not a dream, Shaiful, you're killing me. I got work to do.”

“Hey, Look. I am thinking of proposing to my girlfriend. Could us some more cash,” I say. “I’m madly in love.” I am, and I guess she believes me because her face softens a little bit. She bites the tip of her pen and faces me for the first time.

“Ok. I’ll tell Derrick to try and get you some extra shifts this week.”

I sigh.

When I signed up with my agent Leroy, the first thing he asked me as he looked over my headshot was, “What ethnicity are you?”

“My parents are from Bangladesh. My mother is half-British,” I had said.

“I guess that’s why you’re not too dark. I like that. I got one Bangladeshi guy, dark as night. Can’t cast him in nothing. You’re good and racially ambiguous. I like that. You might even pass as Italian. Good monologue. Nice and solid. You’re on.”

Today, I go to the non-equity West Side Story auditions at the Walnut. I’m pretty close to having enough points to go Equity, which I guess is why Danielle always bugs me about it, but I don’t really see myself doing that any time soon. I have heard horror stories of actors joining the union and then never getting roles because they weren’t actually that good – and now they are too expensive. Before, they had appeal as being mediocre, but budget-friendly for small roles. That’s how I got Rosencrantz. I’m okay, but I’m not that good.

They separate our particular cattle call into men and women and then into two groups. One group is all-white and the other consists of me, two tall and thin black men,

two Latinos, and a vaguely Semitic-looking guy. Today, we are all Puerto Rican. I know one of the black guys, Hank, from the audition circuit and he nods his head in my direction.

“Always a Jet, never a Shark,” he says, stretching a calf with pointed toes in jazz-shoes.

“I’ve got bigger fish to fry than sharks,” I say. He laughs, not knowing what I mean.

“Nice job at Assassins callbacks, by the way. Man. I was sure you had the Balladeer. You’re amazing,” he says. It’s the typical bullshit we actors like to feed each other. He doesn’t mean it.

“Oh, wow. That was a rough one. You were great, too,” I respond in kind.

Afterwards, I get home and walk Mr. Muffin and do the thing that you’re not supposed to do after an audition: I replay the tapes. You’re supposed to let it go, move on, prepare better next time. I can hear my acting teacher from college telling me this. It’s not worth it. But my voice wasn’t at its best this morning, and my knee still aches from when a little kid kicked it in Franklin Square last weekend when I was explaining how to be a Colonial serf. Dancing is my weakest area. I’m no triple-threat like Hank. I once was told by that same professor, that if you can do anything else besides acting, you probably get on with your life and go do it. But I can’t. I like history, but I’m not a very good writer and I wasn’t very good in school. I imagine that will be me one day if my aspirations get too big. Jaded, lonely, and teaching hopeful undergrads and destroying their dreams. But

I won't ever be like that sad professor, because I'm a realist. I pride myself on it. I'm not like those other losers spending every waking moment at auditions. It's just sad.

It takes Mr. Muffin forever to go. He's still a puppy and his bowel movements are fickle. I would just bring him back to house, but then it's guaranteed he will shit the moment we walk inside. It's like he is too good to go outside, he wants the warmth. Needless to say, the training is slow-going. My little rescue Chihuahua mix. All the dog-training books say he should be ringing the bell by now. Nope. He's a fucking idiot. But he's cute. I offer him some encouragement. "Nobody's looking, man. You got this. Come on. Everybody else is doing it." It doesn't work and I give up. Maybe I wasn't meant for dog-ownership.

When I get back from walking Mr. Muffin, Dani is home. She's cooking dinner – a rarity – and it smells delicious. She greets the dog and me with the same loving tone, hey babe, how are you, did you enjoy your walk, and then Mr. Muffin shits on the rug.

"For fuck's sake," I say. "Bad dog!"

Usually this kind of thing annoys Dani, she's got less patience with the dog and life than I do, but she just sort of smiled and asked me, "How was your audition?" as I clean it up.

I motion to the shit in my bagged hand and groan. "I don't want to talk about it."

She rests the spoon and gives me a hug, which I passively receive and my cell vibrates in my cargo shorts.



It's the Walnut. I got the callback. Callback. Dani sequels and tries to hug me again.

“Stop. They probably gave one to half the people there,” I say.

“They don't give callbacks to everybody, asshole,” she smiles. “You always say that.” She smacks my butt and returns to her sauce. She chops basil into perfection and tells me about her day at work - about how a quarter of the participants in the placebo trial are convinced the pill is giving them hives.

“It's contagious. The fake hives,” she says. Sometimes I feel silly when I tell her about my day. I play pretend for a living, but then I remember that Dani knows better than anybody where imagination and lies will get you. Fake hives.

“Where are they getting the hives?” I ask

“Chest area, mostly,” she grins and empties the cutting board clean into the pot. “I love people.”

The next day on my break, Derrick comes into the break room and tells me to go to Glory's office. I stand up and brush the granola bar crumbs off my pantaloons.

“They say dream big,” she says. “They say no dream is unattainable. Well, the Indian-American Society is having an event in Franklin Square, and they want an all-Indian cast. I told them we only have one Indian. So you're hired. One day only. Indian Thomas Jefferson.

I sit down. “Seriously? That's amazing.”

“Don't get too excited. One day only. This isn't a thing. This Saturday. 2pm. Be there.”

I practically fly off the subway and home. And of course, because that is the ying and yang of relationships, I find Dani crying on the couch. She barely cries. She's the stable one in all aspects. Still, I'm selfish and I can't help but cry out, “I'm going to be Thomas Jefferson.”

She wipes her tears and pulls it together, “You're going to be a father.”

I don't understand at first. “No,” I say stupidly. “I'm saving for a ring.”

Dani laughs. She looks like a stranger with those red eyes and swollen lips. “You know that stuff doesn't matter to me.”

I sit down and put my arm around her. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be happy or sad or scared or what but I do know that I need to make up my mind, quick. My phone rings.

“Get it,” she insists. “It might be the Walnut.”

I kiss her on the lips, which seems appropriate, and I'm eternally gratefully for whoever is on the other end of the phone. I go into the bedroom.

Dani, as usual, is right. A final callback. They are only calling back two people for Bernardo. Saturday. If I take it, I have to go Equity, though. They will pay for my application. I tell them I will call them back.

“Was it them?” Dani asks.

“No,” I say. “It doesn't matter. Dani, this is amazing,” I say. I touch her stomach, as if there's already a bump.

“This isn't on our timeline,” she says. She pushes my hands away. The tears start again.

“It's okay. It will work,” I tell her.

“Will it? I mean, are you even ready? I will end it, I will end it, Shaiful, just tell me to do it and I will. I'll go right now.”

“No,” I say. “I will get the money we need, I promise.”

“I didn't mean money. That's not what I meant. We have money. God, you're stupid.”

I don't respond. We don't talk much after that. Dani wants to put on the West Wing and cuddle. I notice she pours a glass of her normal evening wine, but doesn't drink it. She falls asleep before the first episode is over. I call Glory and tell her I want to be Thomas Jefferson, but I think I need to try and be Puerto Rican first.

## Stargazers

Glitter and sweat-covered dollar bills paid my mortgage for a while in the early 90s. The girls would wedge them between two fake breasts and insist I ‘come and get em’ if I wanted money for gin and tonics. They’d watch me blush and grumble, but eventually it became a bit of a joke. I was in my thirties and still pretty handsome then, if only I knew it. There were three or four of them, all with silly names— Ginger Lee, Juana Domay, Flirt Cobang. Despite the fact they were men, I would be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the attention a little. I’d also be lying if I told you I was okay with it. See, a hole-in-the-wall bar up the road did little drag shows twice a week and some of the performers popped in afterwards for a nightcap. That bar still exists. Instead of boarded-up windows and a barely visible sign, daylight flows in floor to ceiling and a neon sandwich board advertises happy hour. The owners of the bar, Rick and Stephen, were some of my regulars. I was not one of theirs.

Rick was Regina Stargazer. She was usually the last to leave on those nights while she left her partner to manage their business. The only one without a punny name. She was also the only one who ever came in when not performing. Listen, I long stopped trying to figure out the ebb and flow of my bar. And actually, most of the time the odd mix of patrons feels perfectly curated. Drag queens, old farts, hipsters and all.

No, what annoyed me about Regina was that she was the reason my mother started smoking again. This was two years before my mother died. Dad was long gone by then, so it was just me and my brother to take care of mom. We all know Michael is useless, so mom lived with us in our brand spanking new house in Jersey. She was in

remission, retired, and bored. Karen started to drop her off at the bar Sundays and Thursdays on her way to the night shift at the hospital. Looking back, I bet it comforted Karen to know somebody kept an eye on me, at least two nights a week.

I'd let mom have one Guinness and she'd order dinner and spend two hours or so sipping on ginger ale, reading the paper, and arguing with me and some of the regulars about politics and celebrities. It was actually pretty nice, and took some of the pressure off Karen to entertain her as much at home. That is, until Regina.

After the other drag queens left, Regina and mom would talk. They were fast friends, and soon instead of our regular cab driver bringing mom home, Regina would run her over the bridge in her Dodge station wagon. I was nervous. I mean, mom wasn't old at the time, really, she wasn't even sixty yet—just about my age now - but she was the kind of woman who always looked like she should have a “Fragile” sticker on her back.

After some time, the two left me at the bar and began to sit at the front booth. That's when the cigarettes started.

“Mom, do you really think that's a good idea?” I did not add, “Given the colon cancer, and all?”

She exhaled and grinned, “Come on, Declan. Don't be a stick in the mud.”

I couldn't help but laugh - the phrase felt unfamiliar coming from her tight, bird-like lips. I shook my head, but did not replace their overflowing ashtray. The doctors were concerned but optimistic that she could live another 10 years. My mother knew

better – she always did - and so she smoked Kool Milds. They're not so bad, Regina would tell me. I barely said anything after that, and even if I did, they'd ignore me and lean their heads together to form a blonde tent.

That's another thing. My mother didn't have blonde hair until she met Regina. She had perfectly nice black hair, and when she went gray she dyed it back to black again. Regina suggested she go blonde – it shows the wrinkles less, Bar Mom. And so she did, and it washed her face out, yes, wrinkles too. It didn't fit her, mom was a woman of contrast. She didn't seem that she was a certain way, but then – there she was, being that way. Her practically translucent white skin paired well with black hair and bright blue eyes. A tiny thing with a large chest. My father's servant and his boss. She hated his bourbon, but loved her Guinness.

Regina, too, was like this. She was mainly Richard, a tall accountant and business owner with a chiseled face and overlapping flaps of brown hair. He had no interest in being a full-time woman and he usually wore flannels and sweatpants or old jeans. I once got the courage to ask him once if he was a transsexual like I'd seen on Dateline. He'd just laugh and say no, "For Christ's sake, Declan. I don't dress like a woman. I dress like a drag queen." and then chuckle to himself.

I stopped asking questions after that.

It was around this time that we upgraded the kitchen some and hired Vanna the cook. She was from Vietnam and didn't speak much English then. I could cook okay enough, but she taught me more. I'd just stand in the kitchen door and watch. After her

shift, she was invited to join the booth. It was quite a sight – a little Vietnamese woman, a chatty drag queen, and a tiny balding Irish lady. I was never asked to come sit with them on slow nights, though sometimes I'd plop down and take their order. Regina usually just got mozzarella sticks, and my mother, the burger- of-the-day with fries, though she never ate it all. Every time I'd suggest she get the salad special, or broccoli and I was usually met with a "For Christ's sake, Declan!"

Oh yes. The cursing was new, too. You know, it's odd. In her proper life, my mother was a rather conservative woman. Closer to death she loosened up some. Was it the Romantics who said young children and old people are the closest to God and nature and all that? Perhaps they were on to something, because after her diagnosis, even her accent slowly changed. She was always obviously Irish, but with a cleaned up brogue for American ears. It grew thicker – the accent I imagined she had as a child. It pained me to hear her talk like that and later I wondered if she was simply prepping for Irish heaven.

She didn't talk to me much during this time, those nights.

"We should go see Regina perform," was one of the only things she ever seemed to ask me directly. I always shook my head. "Too much excitement, Ma. You shouldn't even be at my place."

"Fine. I'll go myself," she said. But she never did.

Now and again on slow nights, I'd sit down with the three amigos and try and find out what was so great about these people. It was never very interesting. They'd talk drag queen gossip, or the latest from the Inky, or whatever was on the news. Things I could

talk to her about just fine. Regina rarely even talked about her bar business that I knew of, except for this one night.

“Frankie, that creepy old cobbler next door is retiring,” said Rick, no dress on this night. “Steve wants to buy the store and expand.”

My mother’s face lit up. “You could put in a real stage, not just those cheap platforms. Oh, Ricky that would be great.” She put her pale hand on his arm.

Rick frowned and held her hand, and I saw that he didn’t look as young as I thought. “I don’t know if we are there yet, and I don’t know if it makes sense...” He took a sip of his whiskey sour. “It is a beautiful building, but needs a lot of work.”

“Well, I guess you’re doing well over there,” I said. “I’m kinda of surprised...you know, your clientele, would come up this way.”

Rick played with the napkin on his lap. “Neighborhood will change soon enough.”

“It sure will,” said mom. “I have lots of ideas how to get more people.”

“I’ll cook, you can put in big kitchen,” said Vanna with a wistful look in her eye.

“Hey!” I said, and Vanna smiled and pushed me lightly, but I don’t know that she was joking.

The only idea my mother ever gave to me was to get a real job.



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I closed the bar early that night and drove us back to me and Karen's new house over the bridge in Jersey. "You know, Karen doesn't make that much money, mom. She's not even a nurse yet. I bought our house. This is a bar house."

"Of course, love," she said. She smiled, I think. I was driving and looking ahead. She did add, "Uncle Brian be proud of you."

Yes, I know. I turned up the radio.

"Oh, the Cure, is it? I like this." she said.

I pulled up into the driveway. "How do you know who this is?"

"Rick's always playing it on the Jukebox. Don't you notice a thing?"

Inside, she took the pills Karen set out for her while I reminded her about her doctor appointments coming up. She nodded as I talked, but she also sang softly under her breath as I did...Friday I'm in love....

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A few days after mom's funeral, I went into that little bar around the corner. I told Karen I wanted to thank them for coming to the funeral. Karen just said okay, and thought nothing of it. I don't even know if she heard me over the Law & Order theme song.

I paid my cover to the largest man I'd ever seen and stood in the back. The show had already started. Regina, somehow, even under the glare of the makeshift spot lights, caught my eye and winked. She spoke into the microphone with her sultry voice. "This goes out to my dear friend Margaret. I know she's watching me tonight." And then she started to lip sync Dancing Queen by ABBA and all of the patrons and all of the men pretending to be women started to dance.

I didn't see Rick again for a while. They did eventually buy the cobbler's store and they were busy renovating and making plans. But about a month after the funeral, Rick came in and sat at the bar.

"I have something for you," he said. He gave me a rectangular item messily covered in tissue paper. It was a plaque, a photo of me and mom. In Memory of Margaret: Bar Mom and Friend.

"I was thinking of putting up something at our place, but it seemed more appropriate here."

"Damn," I said.

"What?"

"You're good."

"If you don't want to put it up, it's ok."

I didn't. I wanted to keep it with me. "I will, maybe in a bit."

He put out his hand and I shook it, his hand shaking. Despite being 6-feet tall, he seemed small. In heels, he was macho and powerful, but that day, on a barstool, in Levi's, in sneakers, he was this pale little child. Yes, I know I was dumb. There were always whispers about him being sick, but nobody talked about that. I never asked. I hated that empty booth.

For me back then, for a thirty-something year old man, death was scary but still a make-believe character. The grim reaper was fully formed for them. Right there. Next to them. I thought anybody could be invincible if they just tried hard enough, took their vitamins, didn't fuck anybody, ate some salad.

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The casket was closed. Instead, there were pictures of Rick through his life, the years were he looked his best, handsome and broad-shouldered with bright teeth and dimples. His blonde wig sat on top, too, despite his family's initial protests, as well as some of his favorite music scores and his favorite ham radio, a calculator. I saw Steve and gave him a hug. Some of those drag queens were there, too, unrecognizable names in dark suits. I went to the makeshift altar to pay my respects and felt the blonde wig. It felt more real than I thought it would, not like straw but soft. It was real hair. I picked it up and lifted it up, put it above my head, as if I could put it on and reincarnate him. Or, if I put it on I wondered if I could disappear into it and become my mother. I put it back on the Styrofoam head and whispered thanks. The line grew long and I moved on. Afterwards, Steve came back to my bar and we toasted whiskey sours and we smiled and we cried and we were men

## Pub Letters

Though Bo's apartment was in a new city, it was familiar all the same. A high-rise in the center of town. Clean, but cave-like hallways. Instead of a studio, this was a small one bedroom, gloriously empty with freshly painted white walls. In Chicago, his apartment was furnished with his futon and a TV and a small shelf. He left most all of it behind and he had little nostalgia for the items- except for the futon. It was the futon that he thought fondly of when he considered the abandoned apartment's contents. He had had it for twenty years, since his college days, which seemed so far away now. His first major purchase, it was made with quality, pine wood slats and a thick navy blue cushion. It was both bed and couch, lounge chair and trampoline and nothing could ever replace it. Even still, a few months before he had left Chicago, Bo became painfully aware of its sagging middle – and his own, for that matter. Five days after New Year's, he'd be forty and his back wasn't going to let him forget it. It was time.

Even though it was still the indecisive end of fall in Philadelphia, a few weeks after getting his new bed Bo found two Christmas cards in his mailbox. One was addressed to the former tenant and so Bo carefully wrote "return to sender" on the envelope in slanted script. The second one was a red envelope and to Bo's surprise, was addressed to him. He was purposely unlisted and didn't leave a forwarding address to the couple of acquaintances he had back in Chicago. The postmark was from New Jersey. Even though all signs pointed to no, he wondered briefly if it was from Vanessa. She and Eric used to always send him a card. The front was a collage of their year: posting under mistletoe in coordinating sweaters, on the beach in Bermuda, a silly one of them with

their dog. They were the perfect couple, at least on Shutterfly paper. After gazing at her wide smile and curly hair for a moment, the cards would go directly into the recycling bin, and then he would immediately take the recycling outside. Right now though, Bo would give anything to have one of those cards magically appear in his mailbox. At least that would mean he was in her thoughts.

When he sent her a simple email announcing he was transferring to the Philly branch of 24/7/365 Home Security Systems, all she wrote back was, “Don’t be dramatic. You’re really going to move half-way across the country because I broke up with you?” He deleted the email. In his new position in a new city, he wouldn’t have to brush by her in the hallway and wave politely to Eric, who’d smile at him from accounting in one of his stupid Jerry Garcia ties. He wouldn’t bump into her on the subway. In fact, since he moved to Philly, he’d barely seen anybody at all. He was starting to wonder if he was the only person who lived in the building and he was on some kind of reality TV show; the dim-lit hallways seemed perpetually empty and haunted.

In his apartment, he took out the red envelope and opened it.

“Happy Holidays!” From Alan at Mattress Barn. PS: Hope you like the Posturpedic! Go Mets!

Bo sighed, half-relieved. The front of the card had a reindeer wearing glasses and it made him smile, at least a little. He only had one magnet, which also doubled as a chip clip, and he carefully put the card on the refrigerator. He wasn’t much for Christmas

cheer, but he had to admit, it added a little color to the kitchen. He could throw it away whenever he wanted, he reasoned.

Plus, he quite liked Alan from Mattress Barn and was happy to hear from him. By the time he finished his research and actually went to the mattress store, Bo had been sleeping on the floor for nearly two weeks. He thought, briefly, about a new futon. He loved their functionality. One piece of furniture could act as both couch and a bed. But by the time he figured out what specs he wanted, he felt better about his decision. It would be a good thing, a good change. “A bed is not clutter,” Vanessa would say with frustration as they would cuddle at the Holiday Inn by the airport. “Curtains are not clutter.”

Mattress Barn was located on a long highway in Cherry Hill, dotted with furniture stores, chain restaurants and the multicolored flags of car dealerships. Alan greeted Bo at the door. He looked ten years younger than himself with a reddish-blond beard and wide jaw. Unlike Bo's soft body, Alan was trim and toned. Bo handed over a binder of information.

“I wish every customer was as organized as you,” Alan praised.

Bo beamed and shrugged.

“So, what are you on now?” Alan asked.

“Oh, well. I just moved.” Bo hesitated. “Before that, was on a futon. Real quality. They don't make them like that anymore.”

“Oh, I hear ya. My wife still has her college futon in the guest room. Thing is awful. I keep trying to get her to throw it away, but well, she’s all nostalgic about stuff. She has like, folders of movie ticket stubs from our dates. Bit of a pack-rat that way.” He took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead in mock concern and a dramatic sigh.

James laughed politely, “Yeah, I can understand. My parents were bit of pack-rats, too,” he said, trying to sound casual, but thought only of the pile of mattresses and couches stacked around the house, newspaper precariously on top.

“We’ll, we’re having a baby, so she’ll have to get rid of it when we turn it into the nursery.” Alan sighed.

“Oh, wow. Congratulations,” said Bo. He tried to keep his tone neutral.

“Yeah, well. It’s great and all. Bit of a shock. Why I picked up a part-time job here, too. Hey, have you thought about a Sleep Number?”

Within an hour, Bo found and ordered his Queen bed with full warranty as well as a bed frame that fit all of his requirements. As they signed the paperwork, the two discovered they were both originally from Brooklyn and even went to the same high school, albeit years apart. Alan ran track and cross-country.

“Do you still run?” asked Bo.

Alan nodded. “Sure do. 10K down in A.C. next week.”

“That’s great. I could never run.” Bo padded his stomach.

Alan shook his head, “You’d be surprised. I’ve seen guys much bigger than you do full marathons. Ultras, even.” Bo thought about that. Maybe one day. He never really had any hobbies before, other than Vanessa and watching sports. Alan finished filling out his paper work and started to hand him his packet of papers, then quickly jerked back. Bo jumped a little.

“Wait. Mets or Yankees?” Alan asked.

“Mets, clearly,” Bo said, gesturing to his hat.

Alan smacked him on the back playfully. “Nice! Okay. Then we can be friends.” He handed him the receipts as well as his card.

“Okay, great,” said Bo, slipping the card in the front pocket of his blue button-down. Friends.

“And it's your lucky day. For every hundred dollars you spent today, you get a chance to enter our raffle. Grand Prize is Five thousand dollars. Other prizes, too.”

Bo shrugged and figured, what the heck, so he quickly filled out the handful of raffle tickets. Five grand would be nice.

Alan also gave him the card for a furniture store up the road that sold couches.

“Since you said you just moved. Ask for Cynthia, she'll set you up with a couch or whatever you need.”



Bo bit his lip. A couch? His throat tightened. A recliner could be in the cards. Right now the barstool under the kitchen island was his only seat. Bo didn't say this, instead just thanked him as they shook hands.

Just three days later, as promised, the bed arrived. He held his breath as the delivery guys brought it in and set it up. They didn't speak to him much – just quickly set up the bed, left him a signed receipt and left. It fit perfectly into the allotted space, according to his floor plan, though still seemed to take up too much room. He dressed it with his new sheets and brown comforter and admired it. He took a deep breath. This would be a good thing. He starfished on his new bed, fully clothed. It felt strange. Yet, he soon curled up in the fetal position and fell asleep, shoes on and all.

The morning after the Christmas card arrived, Bo went to K-Mart to buy some toilet paper, bathroom towels and hand soap - the kind that pumps out - to replace the bar of Irish Spring that sat precariously on the sink. The scents all seemed so feminine and fruity until he finally found one called "Clean Cotton" that suited him. It smelled, well, clean-and unobtrusive. Satisfied with his choices, he headed towards the check-out. On the way, he nearly tripped near the seasonal section, which overflowed glittery wildfire into the main aisle. His feet were accustomed to this and he jumped over the mess with an expert squeak of his New Balances.

On the way home, elated yet anxious, he stopped into the local bar for a pint. He had been there only once before and had met the owner, Declan. He was an odd fellow – very talkative. Like his apartment building, it too was familiar and reminded him of his home base bar back in Chicago. He opened the red door to the bar and peeked in. Declan

was not there, which was a bit of a relief as he could be rather chatty if it was dead.

Today it seemed crowded and so he thought it would be okay. People huddled around the few booths and tables, which were covered with envelopes and crayons and pencils.

“What's going on?” Bo asked the bartender, who introduced himself as J.D.

“It's Pub Letters, man. New thing Declan is trying for Sunday nights. You come here and you write an old-fashioned letter to someone. Stamps and supplies on us. Or I guess a Christmas Card.” He motioned to the people around the booths, laughing and licking envelopes.

“Oh. That's kind of cool.” Bo liked letters, or at least the idea of them. Nobody wrote letters anymore. Hell, people barely wrote personal emails anymore. He liked how emails took up less space and could be organized into folders. Still though, he felt nostalgic for the romance of the forgotten form of the humble letter.

JD shrugged. “I wrote one to my mom last week. She got a kick out of it.”

“Where's your mom live?”

“Kensington.”

Bo laughed. “That far, huh?” He was starting to get familiar with the city neighborhoods. He glanced at the stack of papers and blank cards on the bar. He picked up a blank red card. He could write to Vanessa or maybe one of his old co-workers or maybe his father in New York. The only mail he'd received lately was from Alan. After a moment, Bo picked up a green colored pencil and wrote in his best handwriting:

Alan, Nice to hear from you. Thank you for helping me with the bed choice.

My back feels great, you were right.

He paused, and tried to think about what else one might say in a Christmas card, having never written one. He added:

Congrats again on the baby.

“Who you writing to?” JD asked with one elbow on the bar.

Bo covered his letter with his arm and hesitated. “Oh. Just a friend.” Everybody who worked at this bar seemed to be so darn chatty. He wanted to be alone, he just didn't want to be in his apartment.

After two whiskey and ginger ales, Bo walked home, the weight of his new purchases in plastic bags suddenly heavier.

He organized his new purchases in the bathroom and repeated his mantra, the one Vanessa gave him. “I am the master of my own domain. I want the towels. The towels have purpose.” He closed the door and put the new possessions out of his mind. He wondered instead, when Alan would get his Christmas card? How long was mail taking these days? And if he did, would he call him? Or write back? Should he have included his phone number? His email? Maybe Alan could show him how to run. Or invite him over to dinner with his wife.

The following weekend, James took Alan's recommendation and went to Marinelli's. Bo guessed that's where Alan had gotten the furniture for his house. Maybe even the crib for his new baby. He went just to look, initially. That was all, maybe scope out a few recliners or a small love-seat. The salesperson, Cynthia was a thin, short and squeaky woman in her late 60s. Bo stressed how small his apartment was and showed her his dimensions and scaled floor plan. Bo wondered why Alan would think she was a good match for him. She was a little pushy and did a double-take when she asked for his cell number and he said not applicable. "Jeez, even I have a cell phone," she laughed and pulled out her iPhone. "I'd die without it. So easy to keep in touch. Have my whole social and work calendar in here, too."

"Oh, I don't have much to keep up with, luckily," he said.

Cynthia's expression softened. "No family around?"

"Well. Just moved to the area. Starting over..." Bo trailed off, wondering why he shared.

Cynthia nodded and said, "Starting over? In that case, you might want a recliner and a coffee table."

Bo balked. One step at a time.

Despite that misstep, she was knowledgeable and could answer every question thrown at her. He warmed up to her a little, especially when she said she'd give him the

Friends and Family discount on account of knowing Alan. “He’s a good kid,” she said. “You’ll regret not having more seating once you start meeting people,” she said.

She showed him a brown micro-fiber couch. “This will be perfect for your bachelor pad,” Cynthia said. “The couch is what makes a house feel like a real home. You’ll really feel settled in now.” Bachelor pad. People often referred to his apartment like that. Bachelor pads had the connotation of containing young, virile men who a head full of hair, fridge full of beer and a bed full of women. He couldn’t help but laugh. His apartment was more like a nursing home.

“I’ll think about it,” Bo said.

\*

Sunday was Pub Letters Night at the bar again. It was bringing in customers, JD said and it was just the kind of thing the owner was into. “He’s real nostalgic about shit. He wanted to ban cell phones from the bar.” JD brought Bo his drink. “Whiskey Ginger Ale, right?”

Bo nodded, “Yeah, that’s it.”

“What’s your name again?”

“Bo,” he said and shifted on his barstool.

“Aw, yeah, man. That’s right. JD.”

“I know,” Bo said.

Bo sipped on his whiskey and ginger and doodled on the paper that lined the bar. He drew a stick figure on fire. Bo wondered if Alan got his card. He reasoned that it wouldn't be too strange to write again. There was free stamps and stationary. Stamps were expensive. Didn't Alan did say they could be friends.

JD, peered over. "You got a girl?"

"Huh?"

"A girlfriend. A lady?"

"Well..."

"Oh, just somebody you're boning?" JD nodded with approval.

"Oh. Nope. Not anymore."

"Man, I have like twelve. Can have one of mine." JD pulled out his iPhone and showed him a picture.

"That's Janice."

"Oh. Um. Those are just...breasts." Bo said, certain he made a mistake.

"Just breasts? Look at those!" JD turned his Sixers hat around backwards and leaned closer. "I mean, come on. This girl has nipples like fucking pancakes."

"Very nice." Bo looked away.

“Oh, my bad. Are you gay? Cause that's cool. Lots of gay guys come here. This place used to be filled with friggin' drag queens, Declan says. You know one time like back in the 80s or something he even performed in drag all drunk and shit, so I mean –“

“No, not gay. Just wasn't expecting to see that.” Bo looked back down at the bar. Perhaps those cell phone people were on to something.

“She's really cool, too. She has a kid, so I'm keeping my distance. We watch Walking Dead, then fuck and eat pizza or maybe ribs sometimes. I make really good ribs. I cook em up here sometimes when Declan lets me. The thing is, I'm not a one night stand kind of guy, I need a girl who I can hang with, too, you know? Getting too old for the one night stand. Sex is never as good, neither. You cook?”

Bo took a healthy gulp of his drink. “Not really. I don't really have a lot of cooking equipment.”

“Hold up,” said JD. He moseyed to the other end of the bar to serve two new patrons.

Bo nodded. What a weirdo. He turned back to his letter.

Hi Alan. Not sure if you got my Christmas card, I mailed it through this bar thing. Anyway, let me know if you got it. I took your advice and went to Marinelli's. I am still deciding. Is that where you got your furniture? Wanted to thank you for the advice. Hope all is well.

“You want another drink?” JD again peered over his letter.

“I better not. I'm going to start running in the morning.”

“Tomorrow morning is your first day?”

“Yeah.” Bo drank the last sip of his drink and let the ice numb his lips.

“Fuck that. You should do Zumba.”

Bo vaguely remembered seeing an infomercial about it. Wasn't it dancing?

“It's not just for chicks,” JD said. “I know it doesn't look it, but I lost 20 pounds on that shit. And the classes are full of women shaking their ass. Amber got me into it.”

Bo studied JD's physique, which could be described as Teddy-Bear-esque. “I think I will try the running, thanks.”

“You ever interested in going, you let me know.”

Bo nodded and licked the envelope.

The next morning, Bo took off to the Schuylkill River Trail. He wondered if Alan ran mostly outside or if he ran on a treadmill. He seemed like an outdoorsy guy. But once the weather got colder, Bo realized he might then be better off at a gym. He could flirt with the front desk girl, if there was one. She'd probably be petite and blonde and tan, but not too tan and not orange. In her late twenties and very single. It would start off that he would ask for an extra towel one day and then next thing you know, he'd know her name and soon, she'd greet him every morning with a cheery, “Morning, Bo!” and he'd say hi back. He imagined Vanessa watching him flirt with the gym girl. “I knew you were lying



when you said you liked brunettes,” she’d say. Eventually, blonde girl would ask him out for a drink and afterwards, she’d coyly ask to see his roof deck. She would be impressed with the micro-fiber, stain-resistant fabric between her thighs.

His heart rate raised. Before he knew it, he ran one whole mile. He slowed down to a walk for a few minutes. Not bad. Even Alan must have started out like this, right?

Next Sunday, Bo realized that Alan didn't have his phone number. That was probably why he didn't write him back. He thought he gave the number to him, but maybe he didn't.

*Hi Alan – just realized you probably can't call because of customer confidentiality. So, give me a ring sometime. I've been running, like you. Would love some tips. Go Mets!*

He added his phone number and just for good measure, his email and rarely used MySpace name.

JD handed him his whiskey as usual.

“So, who the hell is the Alan guy anyway?” JD asked.

“A friend.”

“Ah. So, how's that running thing going?”

“Every day,” said Bo

At home, he saw he had a message on his machine. “This is Wanda at Mattress Barn. You're a winner in our Mega Mattress Raffle!”

Bo took off his black jacket and moved towards the machine. Finally, things were looking up. Five thousand dollars!

Wanda continued in a high-pitched voice. “You've won our third place prize, which is a Sixers towel, calendar and wait for it...two courtside seats to Next Friday's Sixers game!”

Bo sat on his barstool. Not exactly five thousand dollars. He sighed and listened to the rest of the message and debated even calling back. He wasn't much of a basketball fan, unless it was collegiate. But didn't Alan mention he liked basketball, too? Maybe he'd want to go. It seemed strange he wasn't the one to call and tell him the good news. He picked up the phone and asked for Wanda.

The Mattress Barn was a little more crowded on this visit. Bo spotted Alan right away.

“Welcome to Mattress Barn. Can I help you?” Alan looked a little thicker around the middle, his red hair not as bright as James remembered in his memory, but more brown.

“Alan. It's Bo.”

Alan cocked his head.

“Maybe you don’t recognize me. I’ve lost a few pounds, sorry. You sent me a Christmas card. Postropedic, medium firmness. Mets fan?”

“Oh, of course, hey buddy. What can I do for you?”

“I came in to pick up the Sixers tickets I won.”

“Oh, great, man. That’s just great.” Alan motioned something towards another salesperson, a tall woman in a black pantsuit.

“And I was wondering if you'd gotten my letters. I responded to the Christmas card you got me.”

“Oh. No, I haven't gotten those. Um, where did you send them? Did you send them here?”

Bo nodded and Alan looked relieved.

“Yeah. So, I started running. Just wanted to thank you. Could use some advice, too,” Bo said.

“Sure, listen, shoot me an email any time.” Alan smiled and waved to an older couple who entered the door before the tall woman approached them.

“Listen, I’m still pretty new in town. Maybe we can get a beer, talk about running. Or you could come over. You could see how that mattress is holding up. I mean, not like

that. Tat sounds bad.” He laughed nervously. “And actually, I was going to ask you since I won -”

The tall woman came over, “Alan, I need to see you when you have a minute.” Alan nodded towards her and gave her the “one moment” sign.

“Listen, Bo, I better get back to work. Like I said, shoot me an email. I can send you some info. I’ve cut down on my mileage since the baby. Harder to get out of the house and all, you can imagine. Wanda at the front can get you your tickets.”

Bo nodded and tried to imagine – remember - when he had responsibility to another person. “That would be so helpful. Thanks.”

“Great to see you,” Alan said, as he shook his hand again. “Joe, right?”

Bo realized Alan had never given him his email address.

At home, Bo tossed the tickets in the recycling bin and went out for a run. It was mid-afternoon, but there were still plenty of joggers and cyclists on the path by the river. His legs felt weaker today for some reason. Perhaps all the running was finally catching up on him. The internet warned him about this. Don't go too fast, it echoed in his head. Take it slower than you think you should or you'll get planter fasciitis. He stopped for a moment and stretched his legs and looked back from West Philly to Center City skyline. He thought about the Sixers tickets sitting in his recycling bin. It occurred to him that he forgot to take them to the trash room. The tickets were just sitting in his

apartment, waiting to get more recycling on top of them and soon, would fill the entire kitchen. He took a deep breath.

And besides, wasn't that be being hasty? Just because Alan wasn't a friend, didn't mean he couldn't sell them to somebody. Even if they sucked, he probably could get a few bucks for them, right? Then they wouldn't be cluttering his kitchen right now. He started running again, back to his apartment. He ran the whole three miles straight until he was two blocks from his apartment. His legs were now likely on fire, he reasoned.

He limped into the apartment and found where the tickets still sat at the bottom of the blue bin. The blue and red shiny decal on the tickets reflected in his glasses and it reminded him of someone. Of JD. His hat. His Sixers hat. Bo leaned over and picked the tickets out, calves still burning. JD would go. Right?

## Drinks with Tiffany

The first time I walked into the bar I carried my backpack and three secrets.

1. I was nineteen years old.
2. I was wearing the same underwear for twenty-four hours and I was about to take it off in the bathroom, stick it a baggie, and hand it to a stranger.
3. I was [even more of] a huge, huge, pathetic lonely dork.

It was five years ago, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The men I interacted with on CollegeGirlPanties were much the same – they wanted a picture, a few sexy words and then they'd pay me fifty dollars for me to mail them my worn underwear. I often conducted my internet sales on Friday nights, when my roommate, Kennedy, was in the living room doing coke, or out with her friends at Frat party. I stayed up all night, making connections, and marketing. Some men enjoyed a bit of a cyber-chat before they sent me funds via PayPal. But most just sent me the money and sent a straight-forward email. “Pic?”

It started because I was poor and because I saw easily Kennedy made money doing this. She was funding a coke habit, yes, and I was funding college. At least, that's what I told myself at first. After I was denied federal work study, I asked for her help, so Kennedy showed me the website. She usually didn't talk to me much, but I think the fact I was interested in this line of work amused her. I think she was probably making fun of me and Livejournal-ing about how lame her roommate was, but I didn't care. I needed money for school. My parents refused to help me when I turned down every single full-

ride I got. They were lesser schools. They weren't good enough. I wanted Wharton – I needed it. In fifth grade, we went to a field trip to Philadelphia all the way from Lancaster and went to the archeology museum. I was completely enthralled. There were students talking about important things, they had books, there were nerdy people talking to cool people and I wanted it so badly I could taste it. The tour guide was a cute guy, not just a cute guy, but a cool guy with a chain wallet and a Green Day t-shirt and everything, and here he was, talking about Egyptian art with the passion the boys at school talked about the Flyers or the Penguins. The image of that college boy got me through the next eight years. One day, I'd be among them.

But it's not cheap. That's for sure, even with scholarships and grants, it left little money for spending money or extras. So by the end of fall semester, I was broke and I let Kennedy write my profile:

*“Hi!!!! My name is Tiffany... I'm a fun, flirty and single 19 year old college student with LOTS of expensive books to pay for ☹ ☹☹. I love school though, so I have used wet panties for YOU. Some of my interests include hanging out with my sorority sisters, working out on the elliptical machine and playing with my BIG sparkly pink vibrator ☺*

“That's pretty good,” I had said. “But are those really interests, or would say more like hobbies?”

She sighed at me and I believe she then insinuated that Wharton was teaching me little to nothing about marketing. Kennedy explained that men are buying a fantasy, not

reality. They want a smart, but not too smart, hot, but not too hot, college student. It made sense. Attainability must be part of attraction, I imagine. For example, I lost my virginity to a stuttering Bio major named Walt. He was nice-looking and smart, probably a similar league as myself. I found him fairly attractive, perhaps because of his assumed availability. It's a simple work versus reward kind of thing and I was lazy and just wanted to get it over with before I found my true love.

I suppose I should have known that.

Kennedy smiled. "Now you should take some pictures, but I can't help you, I'm going to a party with Carson."

"It's Tuesday," I said.

"Yeah?"

"We have that big history test tomorrow," I said.

"Oh, that's no big deal," Kennedy said. "That class is a joke."

"Wait – I can't show a picture. Nobody would buy from me. Let me use yours."

Kennedy sighed. "You're totally pretty. And honestly, looks aren't the point with this kind of thing, you'd be surprised. Put on some make-up." She leaned over and threw her make-up bag at me and left. I heard her laughing down the hall, I'm sure at how ridiculous this seemed to her.



That night, instead of studying history, I poured over the website's message boards to figure out what else guys wanted. They were very helpful. The other women delved into the psychological traits most of these men (and even some women) have. *Sometimes it's not even about sex. They aren't fantasizing about you, they are fantasizing about themselves. Don't get caught up in that Japanese Vending machine scam.* I grabbed my Nikon and took a couple of photos (no face) and did my best to make my hip to waist ratio look ideal with manipulative camera angles. It was weird. I don't even like to look in the mirror longer than a few minutes, but I spent the better part of an hour doing just that. The girls on the boards suggested doing a few squats before taking photos, so I tried that. I admired the photos. It was amazing what a good angle and a filter could do. I had an ass. It was the first time I ever looked at myself like that, like a sex object. It was hilarious. Even then, I didn't actually think I'd go through with it. I was simply procrastinating.

The thought of a strange man owning my DNA was frightening and I imaged some kind of scenario on Law & Order in which I am framed for murder. "Her DNA was on the gun!" In reality, I knew that was not very likely. At the same time, the thought of a man getting off on the thought of me, the thought of a man who knew nothing about me masturbating to me was rather intriguing. I know nobody was masturbating to the thought of me in high school.

Of course, even though I am nowhere near Kennedy status, objectively, I can tell you I'm not deformed or anything now. Long and thin blonde-ish hair, brown eyes, long, straight nose, a couple freckles. Average weight, average height, average boobs, not

much of an ass without some creative photo angles. My ears stick out a little bit too much, so I always wear my hair down. In elementary school, they called me the Fresh Prince. My favorite body parts are my shoulders. Even when I put up my profile and butt selfies, I didn't think I'd get any responses. Who'd want me? But then – I did. I was told I was pretty. Hot. Even Bio Walt didn't tell me I was pretty. I don't think those words had ever been used in the history of the world about a girl who used to spend Friday nights doing Sudoku.

The thought half grossed me out and made me uncomfortable, and half excited me. I had thought college, especially Penn, would be a place where I'd finally meet some like-minded individuals. Finally get a boyfriend. Finally be something besides, “that really smart girl.” It wasn't that I was bullied terribly or anything. Instead, at my giant Lancaster high school, save for a few acquaintances on the debate team, I was largely ignored. That's somehow worse.

What I didn't account for was that now, instead of being surrounded by good-looking stupid people only interested in cow-tipping and getting fucked up in the backwoods of Lancaster County, I was surrounded by good-looking smart people only interested in getting high in their ivy-league dorms. I no longer had any kind of advantage.

And here's the part that took all of my first semester to figure out. It wasn't just that everybody was smart and good-looking. They were good-looking and *smarter than me*, something that frankly, I didn't believe that was possible. Kennedy, for example. Yes, even her. Everything about her was effortless. Her natural bleach blonde hair, the

way she could flirt with boys, the way she got straight As without going to class. It was not fair.

It was those words that really did it. Even the creepy guys and the ones who made threats didn't deter me. I loved reading about the effect I had on these guys. Not one person said I was smart. Not one person said I was a genius. The first guy I mailed my underpants to was named PhilliesPhan69. He chatted with me on the online message chat one Friday night. But one of my favorites was a guy named Justin who told me every detail about his life. He was a college student, too, he went to Drexel, he missed his hometown in Oregon, and he was into leather panties and Tom Waits. I was under no obligation to talk to these guys – Kennedy rarely did – and the chat feature was optional. But I think it added to the overall product experience, and certainly market value, so I was quite happy to do it. Before I knew it, my brand was really expanding. It pleased me to see my rating go up and up. I owned a legitimate business, small scale as it was. Friday nights didn't suck quite as much now that I always had somebody to talk to.

Although I had no intentions to meet any of these men in person, Joshua caught my eye. He wrote in his profile that he liked Sci-Fi and politics. He messaged me through the forum and asked if I'd be interested in meeting. Someplace public, he made sure to note. He just found it more erotic if he got a sense who the underwear belonged to. He'd offer me an extra fifty dollars. That was a lot of money. No funny stuff, he promised. My hands hovered over the keyboard when Kennedy burst into our dorm suite with five people.

"If you can meet tonight, I'll do it," I quickly typed.

\*

At the bar, I knew it was him because he told me he'd be sitting at a booth reading *Stranger in a Strange Land*. In a different story, this would be romantic and I'd be quite charmed, but this was all business and I couldn't get excited.

He handed me an envelope. I peeked inside and quickly counted the money.

"So, should I -?"

"Wait," he said, lowering his voice. "Tell me about them a bit first. I like the build-up."

Despite English being my lesser subject (I only barely got a 5 on the AP exam), I quite liked the creative side of my entrepreneurial pursuits. I had come a long way in the short six weeks I'd been selling. Yet, I wasn't sure if I could come up with anything on the spot. I bit my lip and tried to look cute. I was much better behind a computer screen than in person, and it seemed Tiffany was the same way. I thought for a moment.

"Well," I said, lowering my naturally higher voice to a more sultry register. "They are really sexy. It's a lace thong and it's pink with bows. Not a light pink. A neon pink. Or, actually more like magenta." I let the word "magenta" come out of my red-lipsticked lips slowly. Men like it when women wear lipstick, because it subconsciously reminds them of vulva. I read that in a psychology journal, not on the message boards, so take it as you will.

Josh smiled. He looked like he was only a few years older than me, which was a little awkward. I had actually thought it would be mostly forty-five year old divorcees, but it seemed the market share was widespread and diverse. His hair was dark blonde and he had skin that glowed tan all year round.

“That sounds hot. Tell me the truth, are you wet right now?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “So very wet.”

Men also like it when they think their sexual prowess is so amazing that simply looking at them can make you self-lubricate. That I didn’t learn from the message boards - that just seemed more like common sense. We all want to affect people. Bio major Walt also seemed excited that he turned me on. I took his erection more a sign of his youth and health, rather than a sign of my skills. Still, I get it – it makes you feel good.

He murmured, “How wet?”

I had never been asked to quantify my imaginary wetness before with the men on the internet....usually they just asked yes/no.

“I’m quite wet. Like, um...” I scrounged for a sexy metaphor. “It’s like a... slip and slide down there.”

He sat up a bit and looked perplexed and so I explained in my best Tiffany-speak.

“Like, when you’re a little kid and you’re, like, too poor for a pool, you stick a hose in this long mat and it these, like, sprinklers and you run up and you, like, um, slide

on it on your tummy. It's very slippery and wet." I took a deep breath and hoped that would suffice.

He stared at me.

"Like my vagina," I clarified.

He nodded. "I grew up in Center City, so I never had one of those," he said. He almost looked sad about it.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Not even like a kiddie pool?"

He shook his head. "We went away most summers."

"Wow. What do your parents do?"

"My mother is a professor. My father is...well, a businessman I guess."

The sexy talk was not going well at all.

I cut to the chase. "Should I-?"

"Oh, yes. Please." He even seemed a little relieved.

I went to the bathroom and took off the underwear and put it in a plastic Ziploc bag. I giggled in a very Tiffany-like way, even though nobody was around to hear me.

I came back upstairs to the booth we were sitting in and I pulled the bag out from my skinny jeans waistband, like prison contraband. I felt guilty and a little dirty but also excited.

“Thanks,” he said. “Listen, I know this wasn't part of the deal, but do you want a drink? I had a long day and so I am going to have one.” He hesitated as he judged my response. “And you seem pretty normal,” he added. I thought it was strange that he was concerned I’d be the weird one in this scenario, but I still took it as compliment. I thought about my roommate at our dorm suite, with all her friends over, all of them doing coke with rolled-up scholarship bills and getting straight A's. I glanced at the bartender. He was an older man with a scratchy looking beard who looked boredly off to the TV. He didn't look like had any intention of carding anybody. My stomach fluttered.

“Ok. A bottle of beer.” I said, like my mother taught me. It's harder to roofie a bottle. Although, maybe Tiffany would have ordered a Long Island Iced Tea or something. I wasn't sure, but before I could make up my mind, Josh was back. He seemed overly caffeinated.

“Good choice on the bottle. I've been coming here since I was like 22. I don't think they've cleaned the taps since...well, ever.”

I smiled and twirled my hair. I could see that. The place was not dirty, exactly, but I would never have called it clean, either. The walls were dark brown which could hide a multitude of sins. The floors were tile with black grout. But the tables were clean and there were low-lamps that looked like artisan glass, the kind my parents make.

Among the random items displayed were a male skeleton, Phillies banners, and for some reason, a headless Jesus statue. The place smelled like a beer-soaked shower curtain. Yet, despite its appearance at first glance, it had its charm. It's eclectic and off decor somehow equaled into something comforting. I liked it here. I could see how it was Josh's favorite bar and I was honored that he invited me here.

"Where do you go to school?" Joshua asked.

"Community" I lied

"Oh, cool," he said. "I went to community for a year. Then undergrad and grad at Temple."

"You don't look old enough to have a master's," I said.

"Yeah. I get that a lot but I'm thirty." He smiled and I could now see his crow's feet. Still, the loose crinkles somehow looked like they could belong to a mischievous sixteen-year-old boy.

"Oh, wow," I said.

"Hey, is your name really Tiffany?" he asked.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."



We sipped on our beers in relative silence. He asked me how long I had been selling and I asked him how long he'd been buying.

I finished my beer and left, \$100 richer, I guess technically, if you included the beer, and subtracted the \$2.99 from the panties on sale at Target, I was \$102.01 richer. Not bad, and much higher than my usual hourly rate. I practically skipped the two miles home. I wondered if that was what it felt like to be high.

\*

The next time we met it was blue boy-shorts. Then bikini briefs. Regular briefs. A black string bikini. Then he started giving me an extra twenty dollars and asked me to hang out with him for another beer. I was only required to stay about half an hour, but I found myself staying longer, even having two beers sometimes, and playing the role of Tiffany: cute and flirty with lots of friends. Sometimes I thought I pulled it off, other times I could sense Josh questioning. I found out he was a political analyst and wrote articles for major news outlets. I found out his mother was from Prague and so he spoke fluent Czech. I met the old scratchy-bearded bartender man, Declan and I found myself slipping out of Tiffany to talk to him about Ray Bradbury once when Joshua was taking a particularly long time in the bathroom.

However, Joshua and I usually kept our conversations light and either somewhat sexual, or about current events or quietly observing the goings-on in the bar. But one night, after I handed him a pair of lime-green boy shorts, he ordered us both double-shots

of Jameson. And he didn't ask me what I did in the underwear for the past twenty-four hours, which was usually the ice-breaker.

He asked instead, "Do I seem like a good guy? Like, compared to the other guys you sell to?"

"You're the only person I've actually met. Most of them are on the internet. But yes, you seem pretty normal," I said. I didn't add, "For a man who has a panty fetish."

"It's just a fun escape, you know," he said. "I don't like porn or anything. It's my downfall, maybe, that I even want my fantasies based in reality, somehow. I don't think that makes me a bad person though, right?"

"No, of course not. You're not a bad person at all."

There was a pause and I could see him scrambling to fill the empty space.

"Hey, why are you asking all this now?" I asked.

"Eh, no reason. Just one of those days. Hey, did you ever tell me your major?"

"Oh, um, Business. Economics." I had forgotten to make up this part of Tiffany's backstory and this sudden personal admission through me off guard. I wanted him to tell me more.

"Oh, cool," he said. He rubbed his eyes. "You know, there's a really well - renowned economist that comes in here. She just won the Nobel Prize."

I stopped swirling my straw. "Shit. You mean Rayna Johansson?" I said. Damn. That was not Tiffany-Speak.

"You know her?" he asked. He didn't even try to hide his surprise.

Know her? I only was obsessed with her. I had thought she was still in New York.

"Oh, well. My professor made us read something by her..." I trailed off and slumped down to bring my mouth the beer bottle.

"Yeah, she comes in here sometimes, that's how we met."

"Really? She comes in here?"

"Yeah, she's a friend of mine."

"Wow. That's amazing."

"I think you would really like her. She's the smartest person I know. You're really smart, too."

Even though I'd heard it a thousand times before, from thousands of people, from professors and teachers and students and parents, it somehow felt better coming from his mouth. I wanted him to say that again.

"I'm not smart," I said with a drop of my Tiffany voice.

"What do you mean? You've made five-hundred bucks selling me your underwear." He smiled at me, so I knew he wasn't too serious.

I laughed. “School is just very stressful for me. It’s hard. I, um, I’m used to doing well in school. College is different. I thought the other students would be...different. But the sad truth you find out in college is that everybody is the same. Except now they sit around crying about how they didn’t get a full-ride to Harvard.”

“So instead of Harvard, they are in community college?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I lied.” I said. “I go to Penn...which to most of them, feels like a failure.”

“That makes more sense.” He didn’t seem upset I had lied. I wonder if he had lied to me or if he just knew. “Just so you know, community colleges don’t have sororities.” He winked at me.

“Oh. Good point. I’m not even in a sorority. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting that first day we met, really, your story didn’t really seem to fit you, though.”

I nodded and felt a bit like a failure. I took the shot he put in front of me all in one. I coughed. I wasn’t used to liquor and if I didn’t know it was impossible, I would have sworn my esophagus was on fire. Josh got me a glass of water, some napkins, a cider, and to my horror, another shot.

“You sip on Jameson,” he said, and he sat down next to me in the booth instead of across. “It’s too good to be taken like a shot. Here, the cider will help.” His leg was against my leg. pressed against my leg. It was uncomfortable and so I suppose I didn’t

“sip” on my whiskey the way I should have. Even though Joshua taught me how to drink, he also taught me the joys of being drunk, something I sometimes regret and sometimes I’m sure is the best thing that ever happened to an awkward girl from Lancaster.

“So. You don’t go to Temple. And let me guess – you’re name isn’t Tiffany.”

I laughed. “No. Can’t you tell? Tiffanys are hot and are the kind of girls who can sell their underwear without getting all sad about it and going out to meet them and who are slutty, but in a good way, like they just own it. And they get straight As, too, probably, while they are hot sluts.” I said the last part a little too loudly and I noticed some stares. I waved, as if I were apologizing in case they, too, were a Tiffany.

And that is the story of the first time I got drunk.

He laughed. “My wife’s name is Tiffany.”

My heart sank. Wife. I knew that was a possibility with my clients, and a likelihood even, but this was the first time it was confirmed.

“Sorry. I’m sure your wife is not a hot slut. I mean. I am sure she’s very nice-looking and all. Sorry.” I took a tiny sip of the whiskey. Joshua was right – it actually tasted kinda good and it tingled, rather than burned.

“It’s okay. Maybe you have a point. She’s my ex-wife, soon to be.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just swirled my drink like suited men do in the old movies.

“Sorry, ah. I don’t know why I said that,” he said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m sorry.” I did not feel so drunk anymore, as if my little diatribe cleaned me sober.

He ran his hand through his unkempt golden-brown and put his head in his hands for a moment.

“Anyway, listen, would you want to meet Rayna? She’s really great, very nice most of the time. I could introduce you...if you wanted.”

“Seriously?” I asked, “I mean, like seriously?”

“Yeah. Actually, I think you’d really get along.”

“I would really love that,” I said. I smiled, “Free underwear for you!”

“That’s really not necessary,” he said. “Although appreciated.”

I smiled. “You know, actually, I wrote a paper about her last semester, which discussed her empirical research of cause and effect in a macro economy,” I said in one breath.

He laughed a little. “Yeah, that sounds like one of her titles. I’d love to read your paper. So honestly, what do you think about her theories in inter-temporal trade-offs?”

I smiled. “By the way, I’m Emily,” I said. “My name is Emily.”

## Pillars

The bar was not untidy. It had clutter but with an attempt of organization. Photos and decor were hung with a vague sense of design. The light beige walls were lined with shelves and beer taps. There were oddities: An African mask, a signed photo of Lou Ferrigno, and old lithograph of the Art Museum. Bo found it slightly claustrophobic, but familiar. One knick-knack particularly perplexed him some. In the corner by the stairs was a life-sized statue of what appeared to be Jesus. His feet were sandal-ed and his arms were outstretched. This would have been already odd, but the statue had no head. The edges of his neck were jagged, although it seemed that somebody had sanded and rounded them off.

He stayed, even though the cracked vinyl barstool pinched his ass through his pressed Dockers. The bartender looked perhaps late forties or a young fifty, with a head full of straggly brown hair lined with gray, and he sported a likely permanent five-o'clock shadow.

"I'd like a whiskey and ginger ale, please," Bo said.

"Sure thing, boss," the bartender said as he scooped ice in a glass. "Miserable day out there, huh?"

"Terrible." Bo paused, debating whether or not to engage. "I moved today."

"Oh, where to? Where from?"

"From Chicago. To that building up on 16<sup>th</sup>. The condos they made from that synagogue that used to be a church."

The bartender tossed down a water-damaged coaster and threw the drink on top.

“Huh. I thought that was a church that used to be a synagogue,” he said.

Bo straightened his coaster with both hands so it was flush with the lip of the bar. He shrugged. “What's the difference?”

“Fair enough.” The bartender chuckled and looked at him with a cocked head. “What's your name?”

“Bo.”

“Declan. Good to meet you. I suppose I should welcome to your new neighborhood bar.”

Bo smiled just a little at the presumptuousness. He glanced at the Jesus. Even without a head, he felt like the eyes of the King of Kings were on him.

“I notice you're staring at my statue,” Declan said.

Bo nodded, “Er, yes. Sorry. Is that...Jesus?”

“How could you tell?”

Bo wasn't sure if Declan was being sarcastic or not. He just knew it was Jesus that was all. Just like how one would still recognize a decapitated Mickey Mouse. Icons.

Declan wiped up some condensation from the bar and chuckled. “I forget he is even over there sometimes. Blends in to the walls. He's sentimental value, more than religious. Want a shot?”

Bo looked at the clock. It was two in the afternoon. “Thank you, no. What happened to him?”



Declan poured two shots. He didn't shoot his, but did take a healthy sip and licked his thin lips.

“What happened to him? Well.” Declan looked around his empty room. “Do you have a minute?”

Bo made the classic mistake of saying yes to an Irishman when they ask you have a minute for a story.

“I opened this shitstorm in God- 1987? So I guess this was '85 or so. Before you were born, probably.”

Bo laughed. Declan was probably only a decade older than himself. “Not quite.”

Declan ignored him and continued. “I just moved back with my mother up in Port Richmond. She was pissed at me because I dropped out of college. Went to Penn State, main, for a semester or two and it just wasn't for me. I was an English major, of all things, which was already a problem for my parents. So, my parents' backyard butted up against this old Italian lady's backyard. Mrs. Gagliardi. I swear to god, this woman was a witch. She wore these long robes and was thin and frail and bony and she had this giant statue of Jesus in her backyard, which frankly, always terrified me. Her husband died and she had a 'late-in-life' baby as my mother would say, who was probably about my age, but I hardly barely saw him.”

“Anywho, this one night I'm outside smoking a spliff on my front stoop and I hear all this commotion. It was late - real late. This is like maybe three a.m. So, I run around the back and I see that a couple of punk kids are hauling this statue out from Mrs. Gagliardi's backyard. I am thinking, what in the hell? The neighborhood was going to shit

already. It wasn't the neighborhood that was around when I was a kid. And I found that damn statue scary and weird and all, but it's an old lady and, honestly, you are going to steal her fucking Jesus statue? So I run down the street and just start yelling shit – and they all stop for a minute. They just stare at me like Garfield in the park, and so I yell out at them again.”

“I say, 'What the fuck are you doing? Get out of here, assholes!' Then they yell back, 'Fuck you, faggot!' And that's when I get real pissed. So I start chasing him. They get scared and dropped the statue and – I see you know what's coming – the head broke off.”

Bo half-feigned surprise. Declan seemed pleased.

“I know. So one of the punks takes the head, and they all run off. I wasn't going to let them off easy – I kept chasing them for another couple of blocks. I won't lie to you, even at twenty, I've never been particularly athletic. It was a bit of a bruise to the ego that these kids got the better of me. So, I walked back with my tail between my legs. By this point it's twilight. I guess Mrs. Gagliardi and her son heard the commotion because I'm walking back down the block and there they are, leaned over Jesus like a Bernini sculpture or something.”

Bo felt his stomach sink a little.

“It was one of the creepiest and yet most heartbreaking things I've ever seen. The old woman isn't crying exactly, but weeping and I tell her what happened. I don't know how much she understood – even with her son translating. Then she says something in broken English and Italian and she gives me a hug. I was sweaty and a little high, but she still hugged me. For a bony woman, she was a damn strong hugger. My own mother never even hugged me like that. I remember that for some reason. It's funny the things

you remember, but I remember feeling the vertebrae of her spine and thinking about the weight they held. Then the son translates. He says, “my mother wants you to have this statue. She said it will save you now, since it saved me,” or something. And I said, 'how did it save you' and he tells me the backstory.

“ My mother put it in the yard to help look over me in the Gulf. I came back – I’m safe – He saved me and you saved him and now he will save you.”

“So I tried to say no, but this woman insisted. So me and Tony – that was the son's name – we hoist him up and bring him to the backyard of my mother's house. I was worried. My mother, may she rest in peace, was a wonderful, God-fearing Irish woman. But she was not sentimental and she did not like clutter or ornaments like other mothers did. She liked clean. I think she even threw away my high school diploma.”

Bo laughed. “Sounds familiar”. He fiddled with his straw. “And that's how Headless Jesus came to be.”

“Hold on, I'm not done yet,” Declan said. He refilled Bo's drink without prompting.

“That's okay -” Bo started to protest, but Declan waved it away.

“So the next morning she wakes me up, and she asks me about the statue and I tell her the whole story. I say, look I was out and I was having a cigarette and I saved the Jesus and then Mrs. Gagliardi made me take it, she shoved it at me and told me if I didn't take it that I was a bad neighbor and I'm - ”

“You don't have to tell that part again,” said Bo.

“I’m just emphasizing. So I tell her the story. And she says, ‘Ok, fine, I don’t won’t to get an old Italian lady mad at me, I’ve made that mistake before, but when you move you’re taking that thing with you’. I agreed. Of course, at the time I was thinking maybe she’d forget about it by the time I moved out, which I didn’t think would be anytime soon. So then, my uncle dies. He was at the Remembrance Day bombing. He lived in Philly but had gone back to visit my other uncle, his brother in Ireland. Anyway, he was okay, but he came back, and killed himself. Survivor’s guilt, they all said, but I don’t know. He was always depressed, I think. Deep down. And I was pretty depressed because he was my favorite uncle – I was never real close with my dad, you know? But Uncle Brian, he was kind of that for me. So I was sitting outside one day and smoking a cig, and Mrs. Gagliardi is outside. And I’m 20 and I’m angry because my uncle just killed himself, it was fucking traumatizing and I’m worried about my family and I’m worried about my mother and my father and I’m worried about my life’s purpose and all that bullshit. And of course, I didn’t know I was worried about any of this at the time. Because when you’re nineteen or twenty you don’t always know what the hell you’re worried about, just that you’re worried.”

Bo nodded.

“I was pissed. I kick the Headless Jesus really hard with my foot. I said to it, ‘Fuck you.’ Real loud. Right at the damn thing. Right up at it. It was giant, towering over me. I can’t even knock the thing over. It’s that fucking heavy. It really is. Go over there and give him a tug if you don’t believe me.”

Bo shook his head no. “I believe you.” It might have been Bo’s imagination, but he thought Declan looked a little disappointed.

“Alright, suit yourself. So it ended up I broke my fucking toe on the thing. How's that for Karma? And Mrs. Gagliardi just shakes her head at me, because she saw me flip out. She gives me this look, like, you can't break him. I felt bad, so I apologized to her and she just smiles and gives me some pizzelles and mumbles some jibberish or Italian or something at me. You know, I still think that woman was a witch. I'm stumbling around for a few days. My mother is angry at me still and yelling at me to go back to school or go to the police academy or something and I hate my life. And everything is shit. But then I get a letter. It's my uncle's estate. Now my uncle was a big real estate guy. Real savvy. He owned several buildings in the city, and he hadn't gotten around to flipping them all. Turns out he left me a corner building with three apartments and a bar space on the bottom. A complete shithole. The second apartment was livable- barely. The rest was downright apocalyptic.”

Bo gestured to the building they were sitting in with pert eyebrows.

“Yep. You're looking at it. So, despite the fact this place was in the ghetto and barely livable, it was something to do. Things were too real at home. So, I packed my things and I moved down to this very building. My mother didn't forget – yeah, good old Headless Jesus came with me. I just stuck him in the bar portion – at one point in the 50s it had been a gentleman's cigar bar, but hadn't been opened in ages. Then, I got a job in construction, learned some stuff and saved some money. Plus, my dad knew lots of Irish guys and a couple a Mexicanos that would work under the table. We worked on the apartments. So, I kinda forgot about him down in the bar part. I hardly even went in here. But one night I did come down because I was looking for a flashlight and swore I had left mine down there. So I'm rummaging around and I hear some rattling and tattling and I

realize that somebody is coming in. And they weren't breaking in, exactly. It was like they knew how to jimmy the door open. So it turns out there have been some people squatting there for ages. But anyway, I am naive and I forget that I can't be all brave – I'm not in Port Richmond chasing kids anymore. This area of Philly was real rough back then, believe it or not. So when a big guy comes bursting in, I'm stupid, so I tell the guy to get the fuck out, like it's nothing. I finally found the flashlight and so I point it in his face. Then, he pulls out, get this, a gun.

“You're joking with me,” Bo said.

“I wish. Getting a gun pointed at you is one of the most terrifying thing. I can't even explain it. I can't think. So, I say something stupid, like, 'Don't Shoot' and I try and make my way towards the basement stairs. I get almost there when it happens. The man yells some other guy's name, he thinks I'm somebody else, and yes, get this – sonuvabitch shoots.”

“Wow,” said Bo. He was standing at this point and his elbows were on the bar.

“Yeah. And you know what? That shot would have hit me, too. But I was right behind him.”

“Him? The shooter?”

Declan sighed. “No – *Him*”. He pointed to the statue. “I ducked right in time. It got right below his left nipple.”

Bo nearly snorted. “No way.”

“Go over there and look if you don't believe me. Bullet's still in there somewhere.

Bo couldn't help it. He stepped down off the bar stool and walked casually to the Jesus. There it was – or at least, there was a hole. “Shit,” said Bo. “So why did the guy run away?”

“I think he thought I was somebody else, honestly. Once I screamed out he bolted. Must have been a place he met people for drugs or something - I don't know.

“Amazing,” said Bo.

“Here I was thinking Mrs. Gagliardi meant Jesus would save my soul or give me direction or something. I thought she was talking in metaphors or prayers or spells. But, nope. He saved me, alright. So it's at this point that I decide that I can't keep letting drug dealing squatters living in my basement so I spent the days cleaning up the bar and I halted the renovations on the second floor apartment and started working down here. Got a camera installed. Can you believe this is the original bar? Oak. Saved it. Still smells like expensive cigars and old man bullshit if you get real close. So that's how this place all started. So my buddies and I we clean, we drywall, we get it in ship shop staff. But it turns out that we can't move the Jesus. Not me. Not the off the boat Irish guys. Not the Mexicans. Not my father. Not nobody. No idea why. It won't budge. So, there's some theories on what happened. Maybe some glue was spilled. I don't know. I can't say I'm real religious. I mean, yes, I believe in God. When you've seen some of the shit I've seen and some of the beauty I've seen, you believe in God. But I don't know about all the rest of it. But that statue is here and it saved my life and this bar has been more or less successful for twenty-three years, and the thing won't fucking budge. I'm not about signs. I'm not. People always ask me why that Jesus is here and I tell them the truth, I tell them the short version that it just won't move. I think sometimes I have a weird superstition

about it – don't tell anybody. Sometimes I think this place would collapse if it could be removed. Like it's a weight bearing beam or something. Like it's what kept me in business and sane all this time. Does that make any sense?”

To Bo, it did make sense. He wanted to tell Declan that he understood entirely, having uprooted his whole life to relocate – all to get away from a girl. That she was his pillar – and he was likely about to collapse. Instead, he just gave a small nod.

“You know, this is a real treat that I'm telling you this. We always bet new people, especially drunk guys, though some girls get their beer muscles, too, and we bet them they can't move it. They always lose. It's fun. So don't fall for that. You ever walk in here and see a man hugging Jesus for dear life, it's not because they are that drunk or because they are having a born-again moment or something, it's because they are being tricked.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Bo said and he pulled out his wallet. “I better get going. First day at the new job tomorrow.”

“I hear you. Hey - that's free advice,” said Declan.

Bo said thanks and good-bye and made a half-hearted promise he'd be back. He left a good tip in case he made good on it.

Declan walked him to the door and watched the new man leave and wondered, if he sold his bar, what would happen to Headless Jesus who couldn't be moved, and he was glad he didn't have to worry about that.