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### Assisted Living

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ERIN FLANAGAN

## Assisted Living

The call was from Brighton Gardens, the assisted living facility Carol had shoved her father into five months ago. It was Sonya, the residential manager, whom she'd gotten to know on a first-name basis, although everyone knew Sonya that way. She held that first name out like a hand you had to shake, insisting everyone there be on convivial terms, as if they were there of their own free will. Some were, Carol guessed, but not her father.

"It's the drinking again," Sonya said. This was the third time Marty had been caught with alcohol in his room, and Sonya was quick each time to point out that alcohol itself wasn't the problem. "Our guests"—like it was a hotel!—"are free to live the same lives they always have only in a safer environment, which means we can't tolerate certain behaviors." How to tell Sonya that her father *was* living the same life. He'd been a drinker since his teens. Carol remembered the parties her parents attended when she was a kid—loud, raucous affairs from which her father would drive them home with one eye squinted shut. It was before DARE and MADD, before anyone thought boo about drinking and driving.

"What happened?" Carol asked, and Sonya told her an early morning delivery person had found Marty passed out in the commons area in his underwear. "All those disoriented old people? I bet that happens every other day."

"We've received more than one complaint," Sonya said.

"I'm sure you have." Marty had been her father for a long time now; Carol had heard her share of complaints too, and had a few of her own. "Listen, I'll talk to him, but he's a grown man, he'll do what he wants. Isn't that what you're always touting out there at The Gardens? Individuality and autonomy? Or is that only if they behave the way *you* want?"

Carol listened to the hum of the phone lines—the static-y sound of two landlines connecting. She was at work at Children's Hospital, a medical coder converting all the terrible things that happened to kids into numeric, billable data. Broken arms, suspicious bruises, chest infections, sexual abuse: all of it was coded and sent to the insurance companies for verifiable payment. "I see the apple didn't fall far from the tree," Sonya whispered and Carol laughed.

"It's true. I'm a pain in the ass, just like my old man."

"I know family can be trying," Sonya continued, "believe you me, but there are rules to follow. Regulations for the guest's own safety." She paused. "And I'm sorry for the apple comment. That wasn't very professional."

"Can't we let this slide?" Carol asked. "Just one more time?" She hated to say it, to be in anyone's debt, but it was a familiar plea on her father's behalf.

Sonya clicked her tongue. "One more warning and he's out."

They hung up and Carol kept her finger on the hook a long moment before releasing it to the dial tone. She punched in her sister's number and Laura answered on the first ring. "Hey," she said. "I'm almost to the studio to get Corey. What's up?" Corey was her boyfriend, a much younger artist whom Laura supported. He was in his late thirties, Laura almost sixty.

"It's Dad."

"Let me guess," Laura said, and went on to relay a scenario very similar to what had happened.

"Close," Carol said. "In the entryway. No pants."

"Nice."

"We're going to have to figure something else out. My guess is he'll burn through his welcome in another month." Carol heard the car door open and close. "Laura? Are you listening?"

"I want to talk about all this, I do, but it's not really the best time." And then the sound of a kiss. "Work's been a nightmare and Corey's gearing up for a new show through the holidays." There was a pause. "Corey says 'hi.'"

"Tell him 'hi' back," Carol said and Laura relayed her hello. "Fine, listen. I've got to go, too. Kids are getting bones set at the hospital as I speak. Those injuries aren't going to code themselves."

"Were you always this morbid?" Laura asked and Carol admitted, "Probably."

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At home, Grant was in his shop working on a metal turkey. He'd taken up yard art seven years ago, once the kids were old enough to busy themselves after school. Two of their boys were in college now—a senior and a sophomore—while the youngest, Pat, was still in high school. Grant sold the pieces at the local farmer's market for ridiculous amounts of money; people who bought anything and heavyset women in holiday sweatshirts were his biggest customers.

He was at his worktable, two twenty-inch plain disc blades leaned together for the body, a piece of corrugated iron cut in the outline of a waddle. "How goes it?" he asked and she put her chin on his shoulder.

"Dad's harvesting more ill will at The Gardens," she told him, and Grant twisted a thin piece of wire through one of the disc's middle. He leaned to the left and kissed her on the cheek.

"What did Sonya say?" he asked, and Carol told him: one more and he's out. "And then what?"

She shrugged. "We could convert Jeff's room . . ."

Grant was shaking his head before she could finish the sentence. "No way. We're saving that for my mother, the pacifist." Maybe they were, but god knows

that wasn't going to be any kind of picnic. Carol would have to tiptoe around the house if Agnes moved in, a woman who slept like a cat—eighteen hours a day but just under the surface. At any moment, Agnes could pounce with irascible kindness: a meandering chat when Carol was settled on the sofa with a book in her hands, emptying the dishwasher when she knew where nothing went, another pair of knitted wool socks that made Carol's feet sweat-itch. As Carol said to Laura, she's annoying, but at least she's persistent. Her father might walk around in his underwear—a vision burned into Carol's brain throughout her entire childhood—but at least he'd be interesting to have around.

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Her oldest son, Jeff, called on Saturday to say the religion stuff was getting worse with Drew. While most kids went to college and discovered atheism and beer pong, leave it to Drew to find Jesus. He and Jeff were at Ohio State an hour and a half away and Jeff said when he was walking to class on Friday, he saw Drew with a megaphone on the campus quad. "They're harassing people about abortions and premarital sex, telling everyone they're going to hell. Becky said one of the guys spit on her sorority sister. Not Drew, but still."

"It's just a phase," she assured him. "No one can believe in god for forever. Remember when you got into paganism freshman year?"

"I don't know. I smoked a lot of pot and bought some crystals. I never had a megaphone. This feels different. More serious."

"I'll talk to him in a few weeks when you come home for Thanksgiving."

And then the call from Laura: "Any updates?"

"No news is good news," Carol said.

Laura exhaled into the phone; she was a mouth-breather like their mother. Carol was convinced it was the reason her sister had never married. "I just don't understand it. I mean, he can't be *that* bad. Don't they deal with old people for a living?"

Laura had moved to Menlo Park twenty-some years ago, and in the interminable years had lost track of what it was really like to be around Marty Shea. When their mother was alive, she and Marty would make the trek to California to visit Laura at the holidays, but Mom had been there to keep him in check. When she died of leukemia three years ago, their father had come unmoored. Drinking more, socializing less, renegotiating the expectations of appropriate behavior. He'd shown up at the hospital for lunch one day in boxers and tried to convince Carol they were regular shorts. This at eleven-thirty in the morning with alcohol on his breath.

After the insurance company contacted her about a kitchen fire, she and Laura decided it was time to move him to assisted living. But it was Carol who drove the six hours to have the talk with her father. It was Carol who found the place, made the arrangements, insisted they sell their father's car. All Laura had done was pay. It reminded her of when they were both still living in Dayton, Carol a poor college student and Laura at her first salaried job at Teradata. They'd go down to Cold Beer and Cheeseburgers and Laura would hand her a twenty. "I buy, you fly," she'd say, and Carol would head to the bar to get the beers.

"Dad's coming for dinner tomorrow," Carol told Laura. "I'll talk to him about it then." Although what was she going to say: Quit drinking? Don't cause trouble? She might as well tell him to stop being who he was altogether. She wondered what those campus crusaders would have to say to her father. She knew what her dad would say to them: pray in one hand and shit in the other and see which fills up faster.

"You've always been able to get Dad to listen to you," Laura said. "He never listens to a word I tell him."

Carol paused. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

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When she picked him up at The Gardens at 4:45, he was waiting for her at the curb, a Miller can in his hand and capillaries burst over his nose like a red net. "You can't just drink on the street," she said as she helped him to the minivan. "You know people can see you, right?"

"What are they going to do?"

"Take away your beer. Call the police. Kick you out."

"Bah." He handed her the beer as he climbed in, a two-handed job. One of the waitstaff was smoking a cigarette at the employee entrance and she saluted him with the beer. He smiled in return—another blonde towhead like Sonya, The Gardens overrun with cheery Scandinavians. As she drove out of the cul-de-sac, her father rolled down the window. "Get back to work, you bum!" he shouted, and the boy laughed. "That's Milo. Half-retarded but a good kid. He feeds all the women's cats for them."

She remembered now from the brochures and home tours that cats were allowed. "Do you think you'd like to get a cat?" Maybe her father missed having someone to care for, someone who needed him to get out of bed and remain reasonably sober.

"That's just what I need. To replace your mother with a cat."

"That's not what I meant."

"I can see me and Garfield playing scrabble, or having other couples over for dinner." He mimed petting a cat in his lap. "I'll teach the little scrapper how to use a crockpot."

"I get it. You don't want a cat."

"Maybe a dog," he said, but they weren't allowed. She turned to tell him so but he was grinning like an asshole, still stroking the invisible cat.

"I looked around," she told him for the hundredth time. "This was the best place I could find. Living with Grant and me is not an option, and an apartment with no added care just isn't feasible anymore." When she had finally screwed up the courage to tell her father what needed to be done, he'd agreed easily enough. It was before he realized he would have to eat lunch mid-morning, that his only social options included ice cream happy hours and chair fitness and book clubs and Wii bowling. Only then did he piece together a resistance.

"Listen, just stay at The Gardens through the holidays. If you're still miserable in January, we'll look at other options. How's that?"

"So my goal is to stay miserable. Your empathy is remarkable."

At dinner, Grant and Pat sat on either side of her father, giving Carol some breathing room and a seat in front of the liquor cabinet. She'd bought a six-pack of Miller so Marty could have a few, knowing things didn't get ugly until he hit the hard stuff, a three-finger tumbler of Windsor Canadian and Sprite his go-to.

Their dining room was still filled with the massive table for eight they'd had when the boys all lived at home, squeezed full back in the day when this or that son brought friends home for dinner. Now, most nights it was just she and Grant marooned in a corner, Pat off at basketball practice or theater club or band practice with his buddies. She felt for him, the youngest child, abandoned here with his parents and now his doddering, drunk grandfather, while the other boys had moved out and on. When she and Laura left for college, each passing year meant fewer and fewer trips home. She'd hooked up with Grant in college; Laura had moved on with her career. Their lives had become so big, so all-consuming, it was hard to get away.

Pat moved his chicken around the plate, his head down as he shoveled mashed potatoes in his mouth. "Can I be excused?" he asked at the end of the seven-minute meal. Grant acquiesced and Pat dropped his plate in the kitchen with a clatter before heading upstairs.

Her dad cracked another beer. "My grandkid's on something," he said.

"What're you talking about?" Carol asked, but she knew damn well Pat smoked pot.

"I smell it on that kid at The Gardens, the retard."

"Maybe you could work on being a little nicer to the people at The Gardens." Her father looked at her, confused. "Not call them retards? Maybe be a little nicer to Sonya? Instead of ruffling everyone's feathers, maybe you could try being polite. Turn on a little bit of the old Shea charm." Even though Sonya acted like a hundred-year-old administrator, she was a woman in her mid-twenties, and there were very few women immune to the Shea charm, at least at the outset.

Her dad snorted. "Flirt with that shrew? There's not enough booze in the world."

"Oh," she said. "I bet there is."

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Word came back a week later that Drew, the prophet, was failing three of his classes. "I shouldn't even be telling you this," Jeff said over the phone.

Carol was stunned. Drew had always been the most academically disciplined of her children, too scared of disappointing a teacher. "How did you find out?"

"He told me he's thinking about dropping out and joining a missionary group."

"What, in Africa?"

"Just around here, I think. Like, with other dropouts."

After she hung up, she found Grant in the kitchen eating mixed nuts from the can.

"Well, I've got news about your middle child," she said, and in that moment heard her mother's voice. How Gayle would always refer to Carol's father or

Carol's sister as if they were Carol's problem, not hers. "Your father's started drinking again," or, "Your sister's dating a doozy this time."

"What is it?" Grant asked, and she told him about the failing grades, the talk of missionary work, the megaphone in the quad where he yelled at sorority girls in short skirts. "That doesn't sound like Drew," he said, sifting out the Brazilian nuts.

"Of course it does. Remember the sea monkeys? Or the Gandalf phase with the robes? That boy will believe in anything."

"But Jeff is an exaggerator," Grant reasoned. "Maybe Drew just failed one paper. Maybe this is about Jeff, not Drew." She hadn't considered that, but it did fit the bill. Jeff who told them he was getting married when all he'd done was buy the ring. That had been an embarrassing night. Carol had hugged Becky at the door and asked to see her hand, and then they'd all had to sit across from each other over an undercooked pork loin and pretend she hadn't spilled the beans that Jeff had bought a ring. That had been three months ago, and as far as she knew, Jeff still hadn't proposed. God, she bet Becky was about to split her teeth over that one. It almost made Carol laugh to think about it.

"You're right," she said. "We'll see them in less than a week for Thanksgiving and get the story then." But the next day, Monday, they had bigger fish to fry.

"It's Sonya Garrett," the woman said into the phone, and Carol knew they were in big trouble. Sonya was not a last-name Sonya.

"What happened?" she asked, and it had been a fire—albeit a small one—that her father had set in the communal kitchen, the old party trick that landed him at The Gardens in the first place. Carol shook her head and talked over Sonya as she told the story. "You know as well as me he was just trying to heat up some pizza. It was an accident. Can't old people have accidents?"

"Not like this," Sonya's said. "Mrs. Clarin's cat was trapped in the oven. The cat didn't make it."

"What's a cat doing in the kitchen?" Carol asked. "Is that up to code?"

"Don't you turn this around. I told you when your father moved in that we had a clause about bad behavior. You can look it up in the contract."

"I really don't think you told me that. I would have remembered. Keep in mind: I've known my father a long time."

She heard a thwacking noise—a stack of papers hitting a cleared, metal surface—and imagined Sonya straightening her desk. She was a woman who needed that kind of closure. "Carol," Sonya said, her voice measured. "I appreciate this is difficult for you, the idea of taking in a loved one who, in his elder years, has become more spirited. Out of the kindness of my heart, I am willing to give your father one more chance—you're lucky that cat was so old—but so much as one wrong move, and I'm going to have to terminate his lease."

Carol looked out her office window. It took her six years at this job to get promoted to an office with a window, and even then it was only because more children were being injured, more children were at risk. "I think you know what you can do with your kindness," she said to Sonya, and then told her in case she didn't.

On Wednesday, Jeff and Drew rolled up for Thanksgiving in Grant's old Honda Accord, a silver jalopy with 200,000 miles and counting. Carol ran out to hug her boys, nervous that Drew the Christian would look different—have a terrible haircut or be dressed in a white oxford and plain tie—but he reached his arms around her like a blessing, looking the same as he had when he was a boy, only taller, further away.

"I've missed you," she said and held his face in her hands, the cheekbones a familiar landscape.

Jeff dropped his bag on the driveway. "What about me?"

She hugged him too and asked about Becky who was supposed to be with them.

"We broke up," Jeff said.

"Broke up?"

Drew nudged his older brother. "Over Facebook, can you believe it?"

Carol was confused; she'd been on Facebook just a few days ago, finding out about her children along with the masses, and hadn't seen anything about it. "What happened?" she asked Drew.

"She hooked up with some other guy and he posted pictures of them making out. A real Mary Magdalene-type situation."

She turned to Jeff. "Is this true?"

"It is."

"Good lord. You were going to get married! This isn't how you break up with someone you thought you were going to marry."

"Don't talk to me. I'm not the one who broke up."

They followed her in the house lugging duffel bags over their shoulders, her own boys carrying luggage into her house. They set down their bags and Jeff immediately went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, his arm slung over the door. She didn't realize it was an image she had stored as important until her throat began to constrict. "We need to get your grandfather," she said. "He's gotten himself kicked out of The Gardens." Drew opened his mouth and she held up her hand. "I'm not getting into the wheres and whys, but we need to pick him up today. He's going to be living with your father and me for awhile."

Jeff grabbed a few individually wrapped cheese slices and shut the door. "I'm not even hungry," he said, seemingly puzzled by the food in his hand.

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At the cul-de-sac, Marty was waiting for them, the retarded kid from the wait-staff at his side. Marty bent at the knees and peered into the van. "Good to see you, boys."

"You too, Grandpa," Jeff said and pointed. "Who's your friend?"

Marty clutched the boy at the shoulder. "This is Milo. Best busboy this dump has ever seen."

Milo looked at Carol. "Marty told me I could come for dinner."

"All righty then," Carol said, and pressed the button on the automatic door so he could climb inside, the energy in the van suddenly morphing into a kind of happiness as her father, with his bad knees, collapsed in the passenger seat.

She'd bought the minivan when all three boys were home and had grown used to the size, unable now to scale back to a more reasonable car.

"So what happened, Grandpa?" Jeff asked, and Marty told a similar story to the one Carol had heard from Sonya, only funny. Her father had been telling stories on himself as long as she could remember—it was the only reason anyone could put up with him. "You set *one* cat on fire," he said, and Jeff laughed. Drew too, although he tried not to.

Carol looked at Milo in the rearview mirror. "And what about you?" she asked. "How come you're hanging out with such a bad influence?"

"I got fired today," Milo said, and looked out the window. She knew from raising boys he was trying not to cry.

"What'd you do?" she asked her father. "Did you get this nice boy fired?" but Milo said, no, he'd done it himself. Carol remembered as a young girl how her father had talked her into driving him to the bar one afternoon when she was twelve. He'd made the whole thing sound so attractive—the dart games, free refills on Coke, eating peanuts where she could just throw the shells right onto the floor. He'd almost convinced her it was her idea, and a good one to boot, and yet it had been nothing like that. She'd spent four hours watching her dad get drunk, finally scrounging change to use the payphone between the bathrooms so she could ask her mother to come get her. "Your father," her mother had said. "I should have divorced him years ago."

"You come down to Children's on Monday," she said to Milo. "I'll see what we have available. Maybe there's something in janitorial, or the cafeteria if you're lucky."

"Is there a drug test?" he asked, and she told him not to lead the interview with that question.

At home, Grant and Pat were waiting for them. She leaned in to hug her youngest child, his eyes white as golf balls. "What is it?" he asked.

"You're growing up," she said. "The most handsome of my boys."

"Hey," Jeff said, but he had to know it was true.

Her father set the men up with a round of beer, wine for Carol, and Drew came into the kitchen to see if she needed help. She slid the cornbread into the oven, two crockpots of chili warming on the counter. "What's this I hear about your grades?" she asked and Drew leaned back.

"School just doesn't mean anything, you know?" And he went on to tell her how college was so much bullshit, that he didn't see the purpose. "I want to do something more. I want to teach people what matters." He was warming up to tell her about Jesus. Save your breath, she wanted to say. Her mother had dragged the family to church every Sunday when she was a child, even her father, but Carol wondered at the end what comfort it had really offered.

"You're just bored," she said to Drew. "You're twenty and bored."

He shook his head. "It's more than that. When I think about God"—he pointed a finger at her—"don't laugh. When I think about God and all that, it's like. It's like I have a purpose. It's like, maybe there's a point to all this." It reminded her of her father, how he had talked at rare, honest moments, about drinking. Mrs. Clarin's cat flashed across her mind. She wondered what color it had been. She pictured a calico, like the cat she'd had as a child.

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They had another round of drinks, the cornbread burned, and by the time they sat down—only one empty chair—Pat had taken Milo and Jeff upstairs to show him his room, their eyes now washed with pink. She looked down the long table at Grant, her sweet husband, the only one to join the family of his own volition. It surprised her sometimes she'd ended up with someone so kind. Maybe that's what they all needed to balance each other. She thought of her father and mother, of Laura and Corey—an artist who donated 50 percent of all profits to a local shelter, profits being what they were for a shitty artist out in San Jose.

Jeff was tucked in a corner, the white glow from his phone settling on the planes of his face. "Quit it," she said, as his thumb scrolled down, checking Twitter or Facebook or email or texts. She thought of her connection to Sonya over landlines, the echo-y static almost a thing of the past.

"I can't," he said miserably. "She brought him to Cleveland. She posted pictures of them baking a pumpkin pie." Jeff, the best of her children, held in balance by a cheat.

"You don't even like pumpkin pie," Carol reminded him.

"I love pumpkin pie," Milo said.

She turned again to her father. "I can't believe you got this nice kid fired."

"All I did was encourage him to talk to Sonya about a raise. With me as ambassador."

She turned to Milo. "That was pretty stupid."

"I know that now." She wondered if he really was retarded, or worse, that trusting.

"Do you have a place to stay?" she asked Milo and he said he lived part-time with his girlfriend.

"Girlfriends are the worst," Jeff moaned from the corner.

"And the rest of the time?" Carol asked. Milo shrugged and said his sister took him in, his eyes glassy like Pat's. They reminded her of the taxidermied bobcat her father had brought home after he ran over the calico; any light in the room would reflect back in the bobcat's wet-looking eyes. As she and Laura got older, their father would hide behind the door at the end of their dates then thrust the stuffed cat at the boys, its fangs exposed. Each time the boys would scream, the girls laughing with their father. "How'd this happen anyway?" Carol asked Milo. "You getting fired."

"It's that Sonya," her dad started, but she held up a hand.

"Milo?"

He sniffed. "I don't know. I might have screwed up."

"You were the innocent party," her father continued, ignoring Carol's attempts to quiet him. "He and I were talking about the paltry two bucks an hour he makes clearing dishes—"

"It's more than that," Mile interjected.

"So I convince him to go talk to Sonya, see if he can get that doubled to four. I go with him for moral support, and I testify what a good job he's doing, real top of the line, and she says that until he's put in his six months, he's not eligible for

a raise. And so I point out that *that's* an asinine rule and say again what a good job he's done—really accentuating the positive, like you told me to, Carolly—and point out he's even able to do this good of a job half-stoned all the time, and then she goes and asks him if that's true about the drugs—she calls them drugs, like he's shooting heroin in the dining hall—and she completely ignores the point I was trying to make." Her father paused and looked from person to person, his own face open and incredulous. "It was entrapment! She got this sad-sack kid to admit he's smoking just so she could fire him."

"She's a terrible person," Grant deadpanned and Carol squeezed her husband's hand.

Drew shook his head. "Even Jesus would have a hard time forgiving that woman." All of the Sheas—it was how she thought of her boys, even though they had Grant's last name—were willing to support Marty in a fight, no matter how weak the logic.

"I'd like to give her a piece of my mind," Jeff added. "Her and all the other terrible women."

Milo looked up, his eyes red and his face flushed. "We could do that. I know where she lives."

—

Drew ran upstairs and came back with his megaphone, the house erupting in cheers. Each of them clutched their cans or bottles, Carol's wine in a travel mug. They weren't drunk yet, not even Marty, just festive enough to think they could raise some trouble, all members of the same tribe.

"Maybe I should stay here," Grant said to Carol. "I can bail you out when you get arrested."

"Bah. It'll only be fun if you get arrested, too," she said, and Grant handed her the keys.

She climbed in behind the driver's seat, Jeff up front programming the address into his phone's GPS. "Only three miles," he said. "You're practically neighbors." All this time she and Sonya had been in the same neighborhood—buying stamps at the same post office, touching the same produce in the grocery store. It was the night before Thanksgiving and the roads were busy—families assembling and disassembling across the city, getting happier or sadder depending on the situation.

She reached forward and put a hand on Jeff's arm. "What happened? With you and Becky?"

He shrugged but didn't turn around. "She said I wasn't ready to be an adult. That I wasn't ready to commit."

She squeezed his arm. "We'll show her commitment."

Grant pulled to a stop in front of Sonya's and they loaded out of the mini-van like clowns from a car, one after the other—happy, jovial, bonded by a common prank, although no plan was in place. "I don't know," Milo said. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

The house itself was both nicer and worse than Carol might have expected. The porch sagged like the lip of a bowl. The paint, even in the dark, was visibly

peeling. Sonya has decorated with the stuffed scarecrows Carol found so irritating with their triangle eyes and embroidered smiles, their forced cuteness a totem for those who knew, but wouldn't admit, that life wasn't that great. Her mother-in-law had them in her front yard, too.

There was a light on in the living room, two recliners tucked in front of a lit TV. Sonya was sitting in one, her face without make-up moonlike through the window, her blonde eyebrows and lashes translucent, her pale lips skinlike below her nose.

"Maybe we should just go home," Milo said.

Marty slapped him on the back. "You don't have a home, remember?" He pointed at the house. "No job either, thanks to her." He grabbed the megaphone from his grandson and clicked it on, and the instrument let out a sharp, grating whine. "Sooooonya," he moaned in a ghost voice and Carol grabbed it from his hand.

"Stop that," she told her father but it was too late.

"Sooooonya," he said again.

Sonya turned to the man in the other recliner and he pulled the lever, slapping his feet to the floor and unfolding himself from the chair as he set his TV tray on a coffee table. He was extremely tall—duck-through-the-doorway tall—and as he slipped out of the window's frame, Carol realized he was heading toward the front door. "Hide!" she hissed. "Everybody hide!" Some of them headed toward the neighboring lawns; others darted to the side of the house. In a panic, Carol grabbed Grant's arm and pulled him behind the van. She heard the door open. "Hello?" She hoped her father didn't still have the megaphone, an opportunity he wouldn't be able to resist. "Milo?" the man continued. "Is that you?"

Carol poked her head out. There was another pause and then Milo, tucked ridiculously behind a drain spout, came forward. "Hey, Lance."

How had she not seen it before? The blonde hair, the blue eyes. Sonya was his sister.

"What're you doing here, buddy?" Lance said. He turned and yelled in the house that Milo was here and Sonya arrived at the door, an afghan around her shoulders.

She reached out and smacked her brother on the back of the head. "What were you thinking letting that asshole confront me?" she said and Milo shrugged, rubbing his head.

"You didn't have to fire me. Besides, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Of course it did. Bad ideas always seem like good ideas at the time. They're sneaky that way." She reached out and smoothed his hair. "How'd you get here anyway? And what was that noise? Do you have a bullhorn?"

"He's going to rat us out," Carol whispered to Grant.

Grant kissed her ear. "Give him the benefit of the doubt." She leaned against her husband, ever the optimist. When they were dating he told her a story about a dog he'd had as a boy, one that ran away then showed up five months later on the back steps with a dead rabbit in his mouth. She wouldn't have guessed at the time that she was built for that kind of loyalty, but they'd been married now for twenty-seven years.

"Can I stay here?" Milo asked his sister. "Please? Louanne said to not come home until I find another job."

"Seriously, was that a bullhorn?"

"I'm sorry," Milo said. "You're right. I shouldn't have listened to Marty. But he can be very convincing."

Sonya sighed. "Don't I know it." She held out her arms, the afghan like wings. "Here," she said and folded him in a hug. "We can call Mom and Dad after dinner and wish them a happy pre-Thanksgiving."

Lance looked left and right then closed the door, satisfied it seemed that nothing odd was afoot. Jesus, he was as dumb as his wife. Didn't he wonder about the minivan, the kid hiding behind the lamppost? What about that megaphone concern they'd talked themselves right out of?

Grant stood up slowly, rolling his shoulders back. "I'm getting old. I'm not cut out for the Shea shenanigans."

Drew snuck behind the van. Carol said, "Looks like everything's going to be okay. I guess you think we have Jesus to thank for that one."

"I don't know. I'm flunking all my classes. Maybe the Jesus-thing isn't working out so hot."

Carol put a hand on her son's shoulder. "We can talk about it tomorrow." She handed him her travel mug of wine. "Here," she said, and Drew took a long drink.

Jeff, Marty, and Pat tip-toe-criminal-walked from behind a neighbor's car, Pat with the megaphone. "What do we do now?"

"Let's just go home," Carol said, a headache starting behind her left eye.

"We can't do that!" her father said, but he was winding down, just bluster at this point. When she and Grant had told him it was time for assisted living he'd slammed down his drink and said, "The hell with that!" but by the next day he was packing. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving. Grant would drive to Springfield to pick up his mother and would oblige when Agnes insisted he drive back slowly as she balanced a double recipe of corn pudding in her lap. Her father would start drinking mid-morning. Jeff would spend the day on his phone. Pat would smoke pot in his room, tucked next to a cracked window, a steady stream emanating from the house. Laura and her checkbook in California would be at a crappy art exhibit with her boyfriend. "You buy, I fly," she'd said when they were young women just starting in the world, as if money were what mattered. Carol put her arm around Drew. Maybe come spring semester he'd be back home, working with Milo at Children's while he figured a few things out. She imagined them making up a bathroom schedule as they had when the boys still lived there, all of her men passing by in their underpants. Perhaps she should want better for her family, but what she wanted was right here.

"Thanksgiving is the worst holiday," Jeff said but she disagreed.

"Our country was founded on this holiday," she reminded him, thinking of all those pilgrims fat on turkey, the Indians still unaware of the shit about to hit the fan as they brought dish after covered dish as a sign of goodwill.

"Let's go," she repeated, and reached for Grant's empty hand.

"I'm hungry," Jeff said, and she reminded him of the food at home—their half-eaten bowls of chili, the cornbread perhaps still warm. He rubbed his belly like a little boy just learning the sign for hunger.

"I could eat," her father said and Carol reached for the megaphone in Pat's hand. She depressed the button just to feel its resistance and the megaphone let out a high-pitched whine before settling into white noise. Through the window, she saw Sonya come into the living room with a tray in her hands and stop, squinting toward the street. Milo said something from one of the recliners and she turned toward him, his hands held up to receive the tray, the food on the plate still steaming.

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