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CHRIS OFFUTT

Second Hand

My prize possession is a pair of ostrich skin cowboy boots standing by the bed. I never keep my boots in the closet because a part of me suspects that this house is haunted. There is one room in particular, the family room, that I stay out of. Maybe it is haunted by a failed marriage that is now interfering with me and my boyfriend.

He is talking to someone on the phone in another room. His voice lowers slightly, and I'm not sure if he has shifted his body, or doesn't want me to overhear. He says, "I don't know, I just don't know. Lately, she's just so, you know."

I'm still half asleep and wonder if he is talking about me or his eight-year-old daughter. She's a lonely kid, a little withdrawn, and very smart. She doesn't call me "Mommy" which is understandable, but sometimes I wish she did.

An acorn hits the roof. Our house is at the end of a country lane, surrounded by white oaks—not a bad house, but still a rental. People don't take care of rentals the way they do their own house and I am no exception. Eventually someone will buy this house after an advertisement says it's a fixer-upper. It's definitely not a starter home, nor a golden years home. It's a dump is what it is, and I decide to remain in bed the rest of the day and maybe my life. I'll tell my boyfriend it's cramps. I'll never own a house or be a real mother. I'll become a bed person.

Six months back, I moved here on a temporary basis for a secretarial job that went bad fast. I can't remember ever having a job that didn't go bad fast. I either get mad and quit or get mad and get fired. Most bosses think that having authority is a license to treat you poorly, and I won't let anyone do that to me.

Another acorn hits the roof. I used to like that tree until nuts covered the driveway, and last weekend I asked my boyfriend's daughter to dump them in a groundhog hole near the door. She did it for about ten minutes, then wanted to get paid.

"Paid," I said. "What about family chores?"

She held the bottom of her shirt high on her chest to make a pouch for the acorns. She didn't say anything but I knew what she was

thinking—the same thing I was thinking—that filling a hole with acorns wasn't much of a family chore. Still it ticked me off because she didn't know the first thing about a mean boss or a bad job, or some guy brushing against your backside while you're leaning over the water fountain, or straining his neck to peek down your shirt when you bend forward. I wanted to tell her all this but I didn't. For one thing, she's in the third grade. For another, she already knows some things that aren't so hot. She's an only child to a single parent. Her mother is on parole in another state.

I am a new presence in this girl's life, one who made her fill a hole with nuts. I wondered if a real mother would do that. It occurred to me that she was probably wondering the same thing, and I told her to drop the acorns. She looked as close to happy as she'd been in months. Right then I knew things were not just going bad, they'd already got there.

Lying in bed bores me until I have no choice but to rise and dress. I can't even stick out staying in bed. I pull on the cowboy boots that were a gift from a man in Colorado with twins—one boot per kid is how I look at them. Payday just went by, and after the bills, I am sixty bucks to the good and there's a thousand things to do, chief among them taking that money to the beauty parlor and going for the makeover—haircut, manicure, mud wrap. Maybe buying my boyfriend a new belt buckle will make him feel better. On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't worry so much about making him feel better.

I fix coffee and the girl shuffles through the house, head down like a crippled dog. Her clothes fit loose. For a minute I consider moving on down the road until I find a new man's life to fit into. I've done it before. I don't need much of a push.

Every man I find seems like he needs more than one woman—one for money, one for sex, one to cook and clean and raise his kids, and one to make him feel better at all times. Each woman is supposed to wait at home while he stays out all night or serves jail time or goes fishing for a week. I'm good at picking the wrong man, or maybe they're good at picking me. One trick is to sit by the TV in a bar and they can't help but notice you. I know the right guy's out there, but then again, I thought my boyfriend was. He's a good man, just out of work, and his kid needs a mom. The problem is, I don't know if I'm fit for the job.

“Let’s take a drive,” I say to her.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Just a drive. That’s what living in the country means. Follow back roads and see where they lead.”

“They don’t lead anywhere.”

“Maybe we’ll find a road that leads to a new place.”

“There’s nothing new here. It’s all just old.”

“What I mean is a new place we haven’t been to yet.”

“I get car sick.”

“On the school bus, you do. But we’re not taking the bus today.”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell your father.”

She looks at me a long time, as if realizing I am truly serious, and that despite her overall mood, it might not be a bad idea to roam the land in my company. My boyfriend waves from the couch, an impatient kind of wave like someone warding off bugs at a picnic.

Outside, the day is full of autumn with a sky so blue and clear that it’s not sky any more but water in a bowl. My old Chevy starts on the third try. The shocks are bad and the girl sits at the far edge of the bench seat. I ease down the road, hitting every pothole in sight. I tell the girl about hay stacks. I grew up in the country and it makes me feel good to let her know I have some knowledge that surprises her. I’m more than the newest woman to take up with her dad. I have worked on a farm. I own a car and can drive a tractor. I explain how hay is harvested in rounded rolls to shed water instead of the old-time square bales. Out west, I tell her, they still use square bales because it hardly ever rains and the sun is so clean you can see a bird a hundred miles away.

The girl looks out the window and says that she’s car sick. She wants to go home and read a book in which magic works. She believes in magic and who am I to tell her she’s wrong? People go to church, read the horoscope, and have lucky rocks. Sometimes I feel like I’m starving and everybody else has just finished a big meal and I’m still scratching holes in the dirt looking for a seed.

I park under a leafless willow beside a little dry creek bed that feeds into a bigger dry creek. I can’t recall ever being alone with my own mother in a car. It must have happened, but it was either so long ago that I’ve forgotten, or nothing occurred that mattered. She never left the house until she left for good. I was seven years old.

I want to speak to the girl, but don't know how to pierce her misery, so I just shoot from the hip.

"Do you ever get scared of the family room?" I say.

"I'm scared of the whole house."

This surprises me. I don't know what to say because all I can think is how children are more sensitive than adults and if she's scared of the whole house, not only must it be haunted, but she is sure messed up.

"How come?" I say.

"Just am."

"What is it that scares you?"

"All of it."

"Like it's haunted or something?"

"Maybe," she says. "Do you think it is?"

"Of course not. There's no such things as ghosts."

"How do you know?"

I put the car in reverse and have to hold the brake and give it gas until it jerks into gear. We drive along the road. The transmission slips, and I remind myself not to get in a spot where I have to go backwards. Always forward is my motto.

The trees look like somebody dumped buckets of bright paint out of a helicopter and I start thinking how that would be a cool job, one you couldn't get fired from, then jerk the wheel hard to miss a dead raccoon. The girl makes a face. She is a city kid who likes bagels, video stores, and pizza delivery. There is no life outside this car for her and roadkill is living proof of this.

"What will make you happy?" I say.

She shrugs and shifts her body away, the same motion my boyfriend has used on me for two months.

"How about a bike?" I say.

"There's not any good places to ride."

"A mountain bike, then. It's perfect for the country. You know how to ride, right?"

She looks at me as if I've given her the worst insult possible, then rolls her eyes. She's only eight. I don't know how to talk to her. When her life doubles, she will drive a car. In thirty years she might be me—a woman trying to get by. The problem is, as I get older, the love gets harder to find. Sex used to be important but these days I just keep an eye out for somebody to team up with.

The girl turns her head to me.

“What,” I say.

“What what?”

“What what what?”

“What what what what?”

A fragment of a smile flees across her face, and the rest of the drive goes smoothly. Town is town, full of people who went to town. I stop at a pawnshop, thinking that for sixty bucks, I can get a bike with three gears and tell her it's a mountain bike. The store smells like sweat and dust, which is really the smell of hope and loss. The small room is packed with guns, watches, video games, guitars, tools, stereo systems, fishing rods, cell phones, and radios. Cheap jewelry lies in a glass case with tape over the cracks. There is a row of leather jackets chained to each other through the sleeves, and if you wanted to steal one, you had to steal them all. This is a room of last resort, like a chapel before an execution. Everything in this place has been handled by people at the end of their rope, and that despair fills the air.

Against a wall are two big touring bicycles with ram's horn handles and tiny seats. Beside them is a little kid's bicycle with training wheels. In the corner stands a mountain bike with shock absorbers on the front tire, fifteen gears, and a water bottle. It has no bell, no streamers, and no fenders. It doesn't even have a kickstand. It looks like a bike that got stripped by a thief, and I wonder if the guy is going to try and sell me the rest in parts.

The girl goes right to that bike like a fly to sugar. Her entire posture is full of desire, a feeling I know well. My problem is I keep getting what I want—a new man, another job, a fresh start in a different place. As soon as I get it, I don't want it anymore. I stand in a room surrounded by all this stuff that people are supposed to have, and I have no desire for any of it. There's nothing in this store for me, nothing in any store. Six months ago I told myself that life with a new man would be different. It must be true, because this is the first time I've ever entered a pawnshop as a buyer. Usually I'm trying to raise money to leave town.

I ask if the girl can test ride the bicycle in the parking lot. He pushes the bike across the dark carpet. The girl follows and I watch through the plate glass window. She rides in a circle with a joyous look on her face.

"It's sold," I say. "How much?"

"Three hundred."

"New, sure. But what's the pawn price?"

"That is the pawn price. New is eight hundred."

"That's a lot of money."

"I can see it's been a while since you bought a new bike."

I don't say anything because it's been a while since I bought anything new. Somebody else's body has already filled all my clothes. Even my boyfriend was married before. I wish I had a career and the same man for a few years, but I'm stuck with this life. Every wrong decision I ever made has led me here, to this place at this moment—standing in a room full of things I don't want, facing a man alone.

"Let's talk turkey," I say. "You can see the jam I'm in. She wants that bike but three hundred's beyond reach. I don't have anywhere near that. I'm in a pickle and you can help. Let's work something out."

The pawnshop guy looks me up and down like I'm something pawnable that he doesn't really want, but might hold for a while. I know what's coming, too. He'll say something that hints at paying the other way, and if I pick up on it, he'll be more direct. Men are predictable. The key is to head them off early. This place is guaranteed to have two things hidden—a loaded pistol near the front, and a mattress in the back. I look at him and think about his body naked. I start taking off a cowboy boot. He is watching me carefully. He's probably seen people pull everything out of their boots—a wad of cash, a switchblade, a gun. All that comes out of my boot is a foot.

I lower my eyes to look at him through the lashes. I wet my lips and speak low.

"Ostrich," I say. "The toughest leather of all. Seven rows of stitching on the uppers. Heels are in good shape. These are thousand dollar boots."

He takes the boot and I remove the other. It gets hung because that foot is a little bit bigger than the other, which has always been a problem. Once I bought a pair of pumps that were a half-size apart. They fit well, and I worry about the poor woman who bought the other two shoes. The pawnshop guy looks the boots over. He is a lucky man. People walk in his store every day and place valuable things in his hands.

Outside, the girl rides back and forth across the lot. She is smiling and when a girl smiles that way, her whole body is happy and she can't remember when it wasn't. The bike swerves. She jerks the handlebars for balance, and glances through the window, and I do the right thing and pretend as if I didn't notice.

"Straight up swap," I say. "The boots for the bike."

"You wearing a belt?"

"No."

"Got anything in the car?"

"Like what?"

"CD player. Pistol. Different people carry different things. Maybe a coat. I had a man show up with forty car batteries once."

I follow him outside. The pavement hurts my feet and I am careful to avoid walking on broken glass. He looks in the car windows, checking for something to sweeten the deal. The back seat holds a grocery bag and a math book. There is nothing else in the car. It suddenly looks old and ratty, exactly what you'd expect to see parked in a pawnshop lot. I wonder if people driving by think I'm the kind of woman they'd expect to see standing here. My feet are cold. None of this is what I had in mind today.

The girl rides near. She's the most free creature in the world—a kid on a bike—and I envy her. She's only walked this earth for eight years. I've been here for thirty-eight and don't even have shoes to show for it. At this moment, to keep her happy, I will trade the whole car for the bike. I glance at the pawnshop guy to see if he can somehow read my mind and hold out for the Chevy, but he is looking in the trunk. The slot for the spare tire is empty. There is a dirty blanket and a jack. The pawnshop guy lifts the jack from the trunk. It is newish. It is the most newish part of my life.

"Your daughter," he says, "is very pretty. Just like her mother."

"Thank you. But she's not my daughter."

"I know," he said. "I was trying to be nice."

"How did you know?"

"Most people don't bring kids in here."

"I didn't have a lot of choice."

"Let me finish," he says. "Parents don't want their kids to see them in a tough spot. An aunt or a step-mom doesn't mind that much. Myself, I think it's good for children to see that grownups have it hard sometimes."

“Do you have kids?”

“Yes, but I don’t live with them. I’m a good dad though. And I make sure they see me vulnerable.”

“You don’t seem like the usual pawnshop guy.”

“It’s just a job.”

“Then how about leaving me that jack?”

“Can’t,” he says. “A deal’s a deal.”

He walks away and I realize that he didn’t come on to me and I’m grateful for that. This surprises me because in my younger days I never thought I’d feel this way. Maybe I’m maturing. That strikes me as funny, because if it’s true then I’m a mature woman with bare feet and no jack. I like to travel light.

I wave the girl over.

“Help me put it in the trunk,” I say.

She says nothing.

“It’s yours,” I say.

She doesn’t speak, and I wonder if she understands. The trunk won’t close all the way. Driving will make the lid bang against the bike and I don’t have any rope. I look at the pawnshop, but there’s no way I will ask that man for help. I search the weeds at the edge of the lot and find nothing to tie the trunk with. The girl knows something is not right, but doesn’t want to ask. I don’t know what to say to make her feel better. A real mother would, but I can’t think of anything. I just look at her and nod.

She watches me unsnap my bra under my sweater. I wriggle the strap off one shoulder, hook it past my elbow, and over my hand. The other side comes off easy. I pull the bra from my sleeve. As nonchalantly as possible I tie it to the inside of the trunk, and knot it around the bike like a bungee cord. The bra is ruined, but that doesn’t matter since it was used to begin with.

We drive out of the lot and the girl never shifts her eyes away from me. This is the most she’s ever looked at me. Her attention makes me nervous.

“Nice bike,” I say.

She shrugs.

“It’s yours,” I say.

She stares at the dark trees flashing past in the dusk. I suddenly remember endless trips to town with my father, looking out the window, counting telephone poles and mail boxes, seeing the same

houses and the same railroad tracks, all the time wishing I lived somewhere else. The memory is shocking because it runs dead against how I see my childhood now, one I hoped to give the girl, that of gathering wildflowers for a supper table and listening all day to the singing of birds. Instead, I hated where I grew up and resented my folks for living there. I was mad at God for having the gall to stick me in a world where I had no friends, nothing to do, and nowhere to go. It was a dead place. I left early.

I park near the house and get out of the car. The blacktop is broken into chunks like brownies. I untie my bra and remove the bike and place it on the road. The girl straddles the seat and pushes off. The bike wobbles until she gains speed, then she stops. She has to get off the bike to turn it around. Instead of riding, she pushes it back toward me. Her face is serious and I wonder if something is wrong—a broken spoke or a loose wheel. Maybe I got gypped on the deal. Somebody might already be wearing my boots and I am ready to get mad—at the girl, at the pawnshop guy, at myself. I didn't start going to pawnshops until I was an adult, but her whole life is secondhand, even me.

She looks at me and says, "Thanks, Lucy."

"You're welcome," I say.

She pushes hair from her face with shaking hands. I want to watch forever. It is the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, a child's hands trembling with delight. I can't remember my hands ever doing that. When mine shake, it is always with fear. She climbs on the bike and pedals away. I wonder if I'd have made the same trade for my own daughter.