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Solitary

Anita Ellen Schuck
University of Northern Iowa

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SOLITARY

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Anita Ellen Schuck
University of Northern Iowa
May 2014

ABSTRACT

This novella explores the themes of isolation and captivity. Millie Canfield feels isolated and held captive by her family. She dreams of freedom and beauty, only to see her attempts to achieve it repeatedly undone. She flees from family to marriage, only to experience isolation and captivity in a different form. She wants to be rescued, but she is oblivious to outside attempts to help. Millie also holds herself captive, torn between her perceived wants and obligations. She feels isolated, but she has isolated herself. When she at last achieves a measure of freedom, it is more a case of outlasting her prison than of actually escaping.

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This Study by: Anita Schuck

Entitled: Solitary

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Date _____ Dr. Grant Tracey, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date _____ Dr. Julie Husband, Thesis Committee Member

Date _____ Dr. Jim O'Loughlin, Thesis Committee Member

Date _____ Dr. Michael J. Licari, Dean, Graduate College

Dedicated to God, without whom I would neither have attempted nor completed this adventure.

Millie went out and bought a five-piece luggage set during her senior year of high school. Graduation ignited in her an excitement for escape. She fantasized during study hall about living in an apartment of her own, with a few plants growing in its large, sunny windows: maybe some African violets, definitely some ivy and a variegated philodendron trailing along the sills, the lush leaves filling every available space and spreading to embrace the light. There would be a room set aside especially for books, crafts and plants. There would be plenty of light, space and openness where she could find a haven, relax and feel free. She felt a warm glow at the thought of the peace and quiet she would have. There would be privacy. The future looked exciting and full of hope. She stood taller than she had in years, and her eyes sparkled as she lifted them to look to the horizon.

She came home to the sight of her father seated in his recliner, watching a news report about a volcanic eruption in the state of Washington. It sounded like nobody in the area had expected Mount St. Helens to cause such great devastation. Her father stared unwavering at the screen, apparently oblivious to anything around him.

“Why did you buy luggage? Are you planning on leaving me?” Her mother’s voice rose to a high, tight pitch when she saw what her daughter brought home. Her face paled.

It seemed odd to be that upset over something most parents look forward to with their children. Millie hesitated before answering. “Well, I planned on getting an apartment of my own after I got a better job to support myself.”

Her mother leaned forward to glare threateningly into Millie’s eyes. “You can’t abandon me. If you move out, I will leave your father and follow you and move in with you wherever you are!” There was a tinge of hysteria in her mother’s emphatic voice.

The vehemence of the outburst shocked and bewildered Millie because it had never happened before. Then again, she had never mentioned moving out before. She had just assumed that she would as a natural matter of course.

“So that’s the gratitude and consideration I get for raising and looking after you all these years! You leave the first chance you get. I hadn’t realized that I had raised such an ungrateful whelp.”

Millie was speechless for a moment as her mind spun between confusion, hurt and outrage. She had always tried her best to please her mother. To be insulted and called ungrateful was hard to swallow. She wanted her mother to understand why she was doing this, that it was not an insult or a personal attack. “I am not ungrateful! I just want to have a place of my own.”

“You want to be on your own, huh. Just wait and see how much you like it when you don’t have your old mother around to protect you or do for you anymore. Then you’ll be sorry. If you desert me, you can just forget about ever having anything to do with me ever again.” Her voice sounded cold and hard and her eyes flared angrily, but the corners of her mouth turned downward and quivered.

Her mother meant what she said. Millie looked into her eyes and did not doubt it for a moment. She had held a feeble hope that maybe she could move out without a battle or at least with a lack of resistance, but that had obviously been a fantasy. If her mother acted this upset already, what would happen if Millie tried to carry out her plans? She could not bear the thought of hurting her mother, and confrontation scared her. Even though she knew that her mother’s tactic was unfair, and even though she knew that moving out was possible if she did not care about the consequences, the fact was that she did care. It caused an almost physical pain to imagine a life where she and her mother were dead to each other while they were still alive. Lullabies had been about the two of them against the world, and pleading for nobody to take her daughter away. Millie had few friends and none were very close: She had been forbidden to leave the house or back yard without her mother, except for school, which left her isolated unless someone came specifically to see her. Her mother hovered on the rare occasion when

someone did talk with Millie, taking over the conversation. Every waking moment seemed dominated by her mother's presence and authority. Millie had never experienced a different way of life, and her mother seemed to be all that she had. The dream of privacy and independence was no match against losing the central person in Millie's life. There would be no escape. All of her excitement and hope faded into a sick sludge in her stomach. What was the use of moving out? At least she wouldn't have to pay rent if she stayed. She tried to convince herself that living rent-free was worth the cost. She stood frozen for a moment before drooping like a seedling in a drought, and then carried her luggage up to the attic, where it collected a thick layer of dust over the years.

Her mother kept a close eye on her after that. Millie could not glance at a house for sale as she drove by or even skim through the classifieds without her mother's strident warning that any attempt to move out would end badly. Her world seemed to shrink down to a dimly lit sphere walled in by her mother's will. Millie gradually curled into a fetal position inside and resigned herself to her existence.

* * *

A couple of months later, Millie stopped by the grocery store to pick up a few things for her mother, which happened fairly often. Foot traffic was becoming more crowded with shoppers looking for last-minute supper items, so she hoped to get her business done quickly before

checkout lines became too long. She grabbed what she needed and headed quickly for the nearest checkout.

“Excuse me! Miss?” A tall, dark-haired man with a few strands of silver glinting in his hair bee-lined to stop her. She would have considered him somewhat attractive if his thick glasses hadn’t given him an aura of goggle-eyed, mildly creepy astonishment.

“Yes?”

The goggle eyes blinked above a gaping mouth. “Could you show me where the produce section is?”

Millie mentally sighed at the delay, but was pleased to be helpful. “Sure, it’s over this way.” She walked briskly past him, noting his Vikings sweatshirt and sweatpants. “Are you fixing up a veggie tray for the game?”

“What game?”

Oops. “I just thought—never mind.”

Along the quick walk to the produce section, he managed to find out her name, her employment situation and that she lived with her parents. The only thing she had the presence of mind to find out was his name, Scott Huff. He hovered at her elbow, touching it and murmuring her name in her ear with every sentence. This seemed far too familiar for someone she did not even know. She tried to put a little more free space

between them, but he closed the gap and kept murmuring in her ear. Her uneasiness grew, and she was relieved to leave him at his destination.

“Goodbye, Millie. Thanks for all your help! Maybe we’ll meet again soon!” His smile looked vacantly hopeful.

“Goodbye, Scott. Have a good rest of your day!” Lord, she hoped she didn’t run into him again.

* * *

“Come over here and sit with me.” Millie’s mother patted a spot next to her on the couch. “Bring my glass of iced tea over with you.”

Millie grabbed the tea and obediently sat next to her. The glass was slippery with condensation, so she used her pinky finger as security so that it wouldn’t slip out of her grasp. In hot August weather like this, she was glad to be wearing a light pair of seersucker shorts.

“Are you going to the dance tonight, Millie?” The Fantasy Ballroom had been in operation since the fifties, and it was still in full swing thirty years later.

“Sure, I suppose so.” It was a good opportunity to get out of the house and get a change of scenery.

“Even without me?” Millie’s mother Irene had been going with her before this evening, supposedly as a chaperone, but Irene had decided that it had become too boring.

“Sure.” Not having her mother hovering over her as if she were a preschooler made the outing even better.

Irene’s hand flew over and slapped Millie’s bare thigh. The sharp crack of the blow punctured the stillness of the room.

“OW! That hurt!” Millie’s eyes watered and she rubbed the reddened skin on her leg.

“Oh, that didn’t hurt at all. Stop making such a fuss.”

“That did so hurt.” *You’re not the one who got hit.* “Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to see what it would do. Take your hand off of it and let me look.” She pried at Millie’s protective hand until it reluctantly came away. The reddened handprint remained on the pale flesh and was starting to rise up slightly. Her mother peered at it admiringly. “That’s really coming up nicely. I can see each individual finger! Let me see if I can do that again.” She raised her hand.

Are you crazy?! What’s the matter with you? “Stop!” Millie jumped off of the bed and moved to escape.

Her mother took a swipe at her daughter’s bottom as she left. “Come back here, I wasn’t done with you yet!”

Oh, yes you are.

* * *

Millie's glass of flat soda sat in a puddle of stale sweat. Millie wasn't feeling much fresher herself after sitting in the crowded ballroom all evening. The buzz of conversation and the blare of the band left her head feeling pummeled and sore as if someone had tried to break out of it with a rubber mallet. She shifted stiffly on the cracked vinyl bench and cautiously slid her feet out of her second-best black pumps. Pain flowed into relief as her feet seemed to expand in the open air. She wiggled her toes and spread them experimentally, letting out a soft, controlled sigh as she flicked her gaze around the room. The Saturday night single mixer had brought out the usual people: loners, losers, the predatory and the desperate. Occasionally some man would ask her to dance, and she'd spend a few minutes with him on the dance floor. Sometimes her partner danced well, and she thrilled to the controlled grace of moving in unison with a man who was considerate of the woman in his arms, who gently guided her with an awareness of what might be enjoyable for her as well as for himself, who was willing to release his hold on her enough so that she could spin free and fly, but gently pull her back in again without crushing her. Those men never lacked dance partners, and single men of that caliber were in scarce supply. Bad breath, body odor, overdone cologne, groping hands, propositions, crushed toes, no personality, psychotic personality: regardless of her partner, Millie danced with each and tried to give them a chance, wanting to believe there was some

hidden prince waiting to be discovered who would whisk her away to a better, happier future. Her mother had initially come with her to the dances and had driven away any friends she had tried to make, so Millie ended up sitting awkwardly alone between her turns on the floor. Each week she kept asking herself why she came to these dances and each week she thought about staying home, but then she put on her dancing shoes and jumped in her car to spend another Saturday night at the ballroom. Each week she went home alone.

The usual men made the rounds at the end of the dance to see if any ladies wanted to go somewhere with them “for a nightcap and a few laughs.” Millie refused as usual, squeezed her swollen feet into her shoes and gingerly walked across the unpaved parking lot to her car. Sometimes the odd lump of limestone gravel underfoot would twist her ankle and send her flailing off balance for a moment, but she recovered and went on. The hot summer night seemed to press against her skin like warm quilt batting and made it hard to breathe. She heard the voices of the other dancers fade and the gritty skid of tires in gravel as the parking lot quickly emptied, leaving a pall of dust in the air to coat her red sedan and her little black evening dress in a gray haze. As she slid into her car and closed the door, the hollow boom as it shut sounded secure but absolute, as if sealing her inside forever. She sat still and listened to the almost palpable silence for a moment before rolling down

the driver's side window and starting the engine. She drove slowly out of the parking lot, and the pops of gravel under her car tires echoed in the darkness.

Her mother might be waiting up for her, but there was nothing to go home to, not really. Millie considered driving around for a while, but knew she would have to account for her late arrival when she got home. She had considered moving out any number of times. *I have something to run from, but I need someone to run to*, she brooded to herself.

* * *

A local insurance company had finally responded to one of Millie's many resumes that she had sent out in the year and a half since she had graduated, and contacted her for an interview as an insurance processor. She had passed by the newly renovated red brick building ahead of time so that she would be able to find it easily for the meeting. A look through the large front windows showed her a brightly lit, organized office with people sitting at their desks either talking on phones, sitting at computers, or bending over paperwork. A number of desks had lush plants or flower bouquets sitting on them, and Millie had a feeling that she would enjoy working there. Her navy business suit still fit, and she had spent the night before preparing her responses and questions for the meeting. Her hair was behaving itself for once and her complexion wasn't

completely overrun with acne. Her stomach was churning a little, but nobody could see that. She was ready for the interview. It was time to go.

A demanding voice called to her from her mother's room. "Millie, come in here!"

"I've gotta go, Mom. My interview is in twenty minutes." She dreaded what was almost certain to come next, but she automatically moved toward her mother's voice, even as she desperately hoped for a different outcome.

"Get in here NOW." The voice sounded angry and intolerant of defiance.

"I'm coming, I'm coming. What did you want?"

"Come here and let me look at you. Now turn around." Her mother sat on the corner of her bed in a rumpled bathrobe and slippers that were pulling apart at the front seams. Millie made a note to herself to buy a couple pair of slippers as a Mother's Day gift.

"Mom, I've really gotta go. I don't want to be late."

"Don't talk back to your mother. Is that really what you're going to wear?"

Duh. What else am I going to wear to an interview? "Yes, this is what I'm going to wear."

"I don't know why you picked THAT to wear. It makes you look fat. Nobody's going to want to hire someone if they look fat. And look at your

hair. Couldn't you do something with that? It looks lank and dirty. Didn't you wash it? I would have thought you'd have made an effort to at least look RESPECTABLE for a job interview. Go back in your room and change immediately!" She lifted her chin and her eyes gleamed fiercely.

You watched me getting ready for hours, and you wait until I'm ready to leave before you say anything? Millie's anger, resentment and hurt flared up. "I DID wash my hair, it looks nice, and I don't have TIME to change my clothes. I've gotta go Mom, 'bye." She spun around and fled from the room before her mother could reach out and grab her.

"Come back here and give your mother a hug goodbye!" The woman had picked up her own comb, which had been lying next to her, and held it in one hand while reaching out to her daughter with the other hand.

You are NOT going to mess up my hair. "I don't have time! Gotta go! Goodbye!" Millie sped down the stairs, ignoring her mother's shouts and trying not to think about what she was going to face when she got home.

Millie couldn't stop thinking. *You DON'T look fat. Besides, any worthwhile employer will hire you whether you're fat or not. Your hair doesn't look terrible. Does it?* Her thoughts switched from all the past times that her mother caused her to be late to interviews, plastered her hair down with spittle, and made belittling comments, to all the interviews that didn't pan out. What was it about her that employers

didn't like during all of those interviews? What was it about her that seemed substandard? By the time Millie arrived at the interview, she felt deflated and merely went through the motions. When the interviewer asked why the company should hire her, she couldn't come up with a single reason.

* * *

She had been out of school for two years, and she still couldn't find a job. Millie stopped by a telemarketing call center to fill out a job application before heading home after another failed interview. Telemarketing sounded dreadful, but it was a job, and being rejected there was easier to take than being rejected somewhere that mattered. She had not finished filling out the form yet before a gentleman in a sharply tailored black business suit came out to the empty reception area from further inside the building, shook her hand, introduced himself as Jonathan. His voice was resonant and deep, with the timbre of a string bass.

“Would you come over here and read this script out loud so that we can get an idea of how you'd sound over the phone? You can finish filling out the application later.”

She twitched one shoulder in a shrug and moved over to a cubicle where a typed page rested on the desk next to a headset. She put the headset on at Jonathan's urging and skimmed the page, which turned

out to be a description of features for a casino of some sort. With phrases like “come play in our playpen,” “Carnival Kingdom Nightclub” and an entertainer called “Little Giant Sugar Bear,” it sounded more like a casino for preschoolers instead of adults.

“All right, begin,” Jonathan said with a smile. She obediently began, pausing at the commas and stopping at the periods. She read halfway down the page before he stopped her.

“That’s fine, you can stop now. Thank you! We have some very good benefits to offer you for working here, including 401k and health insurance. This job will involve inbound calls only. You’ll be booking event and hotel reservations for FunTime Casinos, as well as answering any inbound calls from customers with queries about FunTime Casino properties. If you’d like to step this way,” and he extended one hand toward a nearby doorway, “one of our trainers can show you the call floor and have you sit with one of our agents to monitor a few calls so you can hear how it’s done.” He paused at Millie’s expression and added, “Can you start work tomorrow?”

What?! Did I miss something? Are they offering me a job just like that? There’s no interview? I haven’t even finished filling out the application! Millie feared asking any questions in case she had misunderstood, and ended up looking stupid. She mutely nodded, followed his direction and crossed the threshold.

The call floor was an expansive, well-lit room filled with a maze of cubicles, each with a seated person wearing a headset in front of a computer screen. The general hubbub was punctuated by an occasional raised voice as someone shouted. Sometimes it seemed they were angry at a customer, at other times it sounded like their computer was at fault. When someone shouted “piece of shit!” she wondered, *person or computer?* Millie was introduced to a trainer named Tony, a heavy-set, middle-aged man with no hair on top of his head and a long, graying ponytail hanging down the back.

“Looks like a zoo, doesn’t it,” Tony said as he rolled his faded blue eyes in amusement and jerked his head toward his coworkers. “Believe me, it gets a lot worse than this. This call center handles several other clients beside FunTime Casinos, and we’ve been backed up in queue so bad that the clients are penalizing us for not servicing the calls in a timely manner. Once we hire on a dozen or more additional, though, things should smooth out. Don’t worry. You’ll be sitting with me today, but you’ll get to listen in on some other agents in the next few weeks.”

So that’s why they didn’t interview me. They’re just taking any warm body that walks in off of the street. Millie’s gaze took in the chaos around her. *At least it’s a job. At least somebody wants me.* But as she sat down next to Tony and slipped into a headset, she still felt empty.

* * *

Millie spent the first eight weeks learning the reservation procedures, restaurants, games, events, hotel features and area attractions of all sixteen FunTime casino locations across the country. She then was assigned to shadow several coworkers during the last two weeks of her training. Most of them ignored her as if she weren't there, even looking past her to gossip with someone about what they did last weekend.

When she was told to sit with someone named Angela Gallagher, she wondered if the supervisors had made a mistake in her assignment. This heavysset older woman sprawled in her office chair in sweatshirt and sweatpants, which rode up to expose her white crew socks and bare, hairy legs above her worn brown loafers. A large burgundy canvas tote bag sat on the floor beside her, out of which a long strand of purple yarn extended to a pastel pink aluminum crochet hook in her hand. A multi-colored square was forming beneath the hook in what Millie thought might be called a "granny square" pattern. A large sport bottle half-filled with a greenish-yellow liquid sat on the floor underneath the desk. The headset had disheveled the woman's shoulder-length bob, the creamy white hairs looping and sticking out at odd angles above her gray roots.

Millie approached her tentatively. "Are you Angela Gallagher?"

The woman glanced at her computer screen before speaking. "Yes, I'm Angela. Are you the trainee who's supposed to shadow me today?"

“Yes, I’m Millie.”

Angela stretched out her foot to pull a nearby desk chair closer to her station. “Come on over and have a seat. How do you like ‘the Zoo’ so far?” She resumed her crocheting with barely a glance at it.

“It’s all right.” Millie slid into the empty chair and plugged her headset into the monitoring phone jack. The burgundy tote bag was gaping open, revealing several balls of yarn in different shades, a romance novel, and a small, transparent zippered case holding a small pair of scissors as well as other odds and ends.

“You’ll get used to it in time. It’ll grow on you... like a fungus.” Angela’s deadpan expression didn’t change as a double bonging sound over the headsets signaled an incoming call. She swung immediately into the scripted patter. Her crochet hook zigzagged and twirled during her opening statements and questions as she finished a series of stitches and placed the project in her lap. Her fingers then flew to the computer keyboard and began tapping away there. Once completing the call, she picked up her crocheting and resumed as she turned to face Millie.

“Do you have any questions so far about call procedure or technique?”

“Not yet.” Millie hesitated. “I do have a different question, though.”

“Oh?”

“How do you manage to crochet without looking at what you’re doing? How do you do it without messing up?”

Angela’s expression was noncommittal. “Practice. Years of practice.”

The rest of the day was spent listening to Angela handle calls and talking with her. There wasn’t much opportunity to talk since the incoming calls were in queue, but Angela took advantage of the “ACW” button on her phone base to fit a few words in while filling out reservations on her computer.

“So, Millie, are you looking forward to going solo on the call floor?”

“I’m a little nervous about it yet, but I hope I’ll do okay.”

“You’ll do fine. If I didn’t have my crochet work, I’d go bonkers with boredom.” Angela punched the “Ready” button for the calls to resume, and was rewarded with the familiar double bong of an incoming call. “Thank you for calling FunTime Casinos, how may I assist you today?”

A nasal voice came through Millie’s headset as she listened. “Yes, I wanted to book a room at FunTime Laughlin for July nineteenth for two adults and one child.”

“Thank you. In order to better assist you, may I have your last name, please?”

“Wainwright, George Wainwright.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wainwright. And may I have your Wonderful Winner card number please?” Angela poised to type in the number.

“No, I don’t have that. What’s a Wonderful Winner card?”

Angela then proceeded to explain how he could sign up for the card in the casino, use it when he gamed, and then receive event tickets and hotel room discounts based on his rate of play.

“Wow, that sounds pretty good! And you can’t give me any of those discounts now?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Wainwright, but those discounts are based on the rate of play that you earn while you game at the casino. What brings you to FunTime Laughlin, Mr. Wainwright?”

Millie marveled at how smoothly Angela was able to keep the call moving. She didn’t have to go to a different computer screen to look up the features and benefits that she was required to promote, and had entered all of the reservation and billing information before the call had ended.

Angela pressed the “ACW” button again. “I noticed that you looked puzzled at one point during the call. Did you have a question?”

“Yes. You mentioned that the room had a ‘garden tub’ as one of the features. What’s that? It sounds like it should have some geraniums planted in it.”

Angela chuckled. "I'm not completely sure, but I think it's a tub that's bowed out along the sides, so that it's more spacious than the usual tub."

* * *

Millie sought out Angela on her first solo day on the call floor. "Hi, Angela! Is it all right if I sit next to you today?"

Angela smiled and waved her over. "Sure, grab a seat! So this is your first day on your own, huh? Are you nervous?"

Millie grinned. "Very. I suppose it's like stage fright. Suddenly that 'bong bong' goes off, and you're ON!" She tried to ignore the tense queasiness in her stomach.

"It can be nerve-wracking, can't it? But just imagine how you'd feel if they didn't have that warning and someone came on the line!" Angela's eyebrows raised above her widening eyes.

"Ack, you're right! And especially if you happened to be burping or blowing your nose."

"Charming. Maybe I'll have to try that sometime when things get too dull."

Millie snorted and logged onto her computer. She laid out her notepad, reservation sheet and property reference materials before slipping the headset onto her head. The time had come. Her stomach

tightened and her hand quivered as she held her breath and reached for the “Ready” button. She felt a light touch on her arm.

Angela was holding her crochet hook along the far side of her nose so that it looked like it was inside of her nose instead. With rolling eyes and a droll expression on her face, she pretended to pick her nose vigorously.

Millie choked back a laugh and pressed the “Ready” button.

* * *

Payday had finally arrived, and Millie quietly slipped into her room. She stuffed about one hundred dollars’ worth of the bills into her bra and stashed a couple of twenties for spending cash in a shoebox at the back of her closet behind some stuffed toys that she hadn’t had the heart to get rid of when she grew up. They had been good friends to her and kept her company. It seemed disloyal somehow to abandon them when she was too old to cuddle them without looking childish. She gave her old teddy bear a passing stroke across his soft head, the fur thinning and matted from years of caresses. “Hi Sweetie,” she murmured smiling, “guard my treasure for me, will ya?” With the closet door closed on her secret, Millie looked for an opportunity to get her mother alone. It wasn’t always easy to do with her father around. He seemed to have a sixth sense about when Millie had something that she didn’t want him to discover, especially when it came to money.

Her mother, Irene, was in the laundry room ironing sheets. The smell of humid, scorched cotton floated in the air over a layer of thickly sweet fabric softener, with a base note of mildewed masonry and a pungent whiff of fouled litter box. A short-haired red tiger-striped cat lay sprawled on its side by her mother's feet in a patch of sun cut in slanted window rectangles, the white tip of its tail idly tapping against the linoleum floor. The rumble of the clothes dryer was punctuated by the hiss of the iron and the creak of the old, heavy, wooden ironing board. The undersides of Irene's arms sagged and wrinkled in fleshy flaps, which wobbled back and forth as she bore down on the iron with one hand and steadied the shaking board with the other. Her permed, steel gray hair quivered with the force of her work.

Millie knocked on the doorframe to get her attention. "Mother?"

Irene ground a few more wrinkles out of her sheets before looking up. "Well? Come on in. Don't be a stranger." She resumed ironing. "What did you want?"

Millie looked out in the hall to make sure her father wasn't around before stepping into the room. She withdrew the cash from her bra and offered it to her mother. "I got paid today, so I wanted to pay you my rent."

Irene abruptly stopped ironing to take the slightly damp bills and stuff them down her own cleavage. With her husband Hal as the chief

breadwinner and controller of the house finances, it was understood that any extra cash would have to be guarded if they did not want him to snatch it. “You don’t have to pay rent, you know.” She started ironing again, glancing up briefly through her eyebrows at Millie.

“I know. I just want to do my part.” In reality, her reasons were twofold: she wanted to feel like a responsible adult by paying her own way to some extent, and most importantly, she wanted to provide her mother with some semblance of financial independence so that she wouldn’t have to beg her husband for every cent she needed for her own wants or needs.

“Your father was still drunk this morning.” Irene stared fixedly at the blue-edged pillowcase she was now ironing. “He sat down on the stove and didn’t realize it was on until he smelled something burning and discovered it was his pants.” The grim line of her mouth had an upward quirk at one edge, as if she didn’t know whether to laugh or be angry.

“Oh my! Is he all right?”

“He’ll live. He’s got a red mark on his backside now and he’ll be sitting carefully for a few days, but it’s nothing serious.”

* * *

The “Zoo” still fielded back-to-back calls despite adding several new agents. Over a year of handling calls had polished Millie’s technique

and call routine. She especially enjoyed when customers expressed gratitude for her help.

“Thank you for calling FunTime Casinos. This is Millie. How may I assist you this afternoon?”

“Yes, I’m on the Strip in Las Vegas trying to find your casino. I’ve been up and down this street several times and I still haven’t seen it. I’ve found the Keno Casino, and I’ve heard that FunTime is near it, but I can’t find it anywhere.” The man sounded tired and frustrated.

Millie had received this type of information call many times. Fortunately, part of her training had included a sketchy map of the Las Vegas Strip. The street was marked as a line, the main casinos were marked with red dots and FunTime was marked with a big red star, but it gave her a good idea of where they were in relation to each other. She had double-checked online after her first information call to be certain. Although minimal at best, the map was accurate.

“Thank you, sir. Are you currently standing in front of the Keno Casino?”

“Yes, I am.” The man was starting to sound irritated.

“Are you facing the Keno Casino, or do you have your back to it?”

Millie knew the question sounded irrelevant, but her next question depended upon his answer.

“I’m facing it!” He snapped at her.

“All right then, please turn around so that your back is to it.” She tried to maintain as soothing and calm a tone as possible and smiled as she talked, because training had taught her that people are able to hear a smile in someone’s voice over the phone. “Do you see that building across the street?”

“Yes?”

“That building is FunTime Casinos.” She grinned a little more as she spoke.

Millie heard a muffled “Huh?” followed by a low groan. There was a slight hesitation before he replied. “Thank you so much, ma’am.” The anger and frustration had deflated to tired embarrassment.

Millie kept smiling to reassure him. “That’s quite all right, sir. Was there anything else I could assist you with today?”

“No, I think that’s it.” His voice still sounded embarrassed, but relieved.

“Thank you for calling FunTime Casinos, sir, and have a lucky afternoon!”

The double bongs of incoming calls rang in her dreams every night. In those dreams there were no breaks or opportunities to catch her breath, only an ever-increasing and urgent din that woke her up with the breathless and heart-pounding panic of trying to claw her way out of quicksand.

Apparently, she was not the only one. One of the young men in her row exclaimed one afternoon as he packed up to leave at the end of his shift, “Man, last night I was hearing those bells in my sleep!” The headset had disheveled his spiked, orange-tipped hair, and he carefully ran his fingers through it in an attempt to revive the style.

Heads bobbed and several people smiled with weary, knowing eyes as they continued taking calls. A few punched their “ACW” buttons with expressionless faces and turned around to talk with each other, ignoring the increased buzz as their unhandled customers were shunted to the rest of the call floor.

Suddenly Millie’s computer monitor went black. Whoops and cheers erupted throughout the building. In a few minutes, one of the supervisors came to the main aisle and called out, “Our systems are down right now. Please remain at your seats and we will get everything back up and working shortly.” A few jeers and boos mingled with laughter and a more relaxed chatter on the call floor.

“So, Millie, we haven’t had much of an opportunity for a gabfest. Tell me about yourself.” Angie swung her chair around to face her, and already had her crochet hook busily engaged.

Millie drew a blank. *What’s there to say about my life? I have no life.* “Uh, there’s not that much to tell.”

“Oh sure there is. We’ve all got a story to tell. Let me get the ball rolling, then. I’m fifty-four, married for twenty-five years to my husband Ray, with four sons and two grandchildren. If the system is down for much longer, you’ll get to see photos of my grandkids whether you want to or not.” She grinned mischievously. “I’ve worked here for eleven years, which means I get paid at the higher rates they used to have before they started the wage cap. You don’t think I’d hang around here this long otherwise, do you?” she asked at Millie’s startled expression. “I like soda,” and she gestured to her sport bottle, “crocheting,” and she lifted up the project in her hands, “and reading,” nodding down at her tote bag. “Now it’s your turn. Spill.”

“Wow.” Millie still couldn’t think of anything interesting about herself. “I’m twenty one, single, no kids. I live with my parents. I graduated from high school. That’s about it, I guess.”

“Any hobbies? Did you go to community college? What did you do after high school?” Angela reached down with one hand for her sport bottle. “Where did you live before you moved back in with your parents? I’m just spit-balling ideas, but feel free to chime in with anything that comes to mind.” She gestured vaguely with her sport bottle before taking a long pull at it.

“I’ve always lived with my parents.”

“Oh?”

Millie nodded. “I was going to move out after high school, but Mom said that she’d leave Dad and move in with me wherever I went, so I figured that I might as well stay at home.” The tip of her thumb worked under the clip on the ballpoint pen that she had been holding and worried it back and forth.

Angela leaned back slightly and looked sideways at her. “Oh, she must not have been serious. I mean, sure, she would undoubtedly miss you, but she wouldn’t desert your father, would she?”

“She looked like she meant it at the time.” Millie looked down at the floor and realized that her right foot was wiggling violently back and forth. She pulled it in and tried to keep it still.

Angela noticed what Millie was doing with her pen and foot. “Your mother must be really afraid to lose you.”

“I guess.” Millie stared into space. It was as if her mother’s presence had invaded the call center. *You’re the one who brought her into the conversation, so you did it to yourself*, she brooded.

This conversation had not gone as Angela intended. “Do you get out and do anything on the weekends?”

“I go out to dance on Saturday nights sometimes.”

At that comment, a couple of nearby female coworkers slid their desk chairs a little closer and perked up. The severe hairstyle of the older woman was so immobilized by hair product that not even her headset

had been able to disturb the faded auburn strands, which hung motionless as a unit while she scooted her bulky form toward the conversation. She jostled the slender teen who had also been moving closer, and they scuffled briefly as each tried to make the other get out of the way. The teen finally gave way slightly with a dramatic flip of her blue-streaked shag.

Angela brightened. "There you go! A chance to go out and have some fun. Are you seeing anyone special there?"

"No. It's all right, and it gets me out of the house for a while. Mom used to come with me, but finally she got tired of sitting around out there and decided to stay home."

"That was nice of her to give you some space. I'm surprised that she didn't insist you stay home with her."

"She did. She does each time I go out. I have to go home right afterwards or else she yells at me when I get back."

The severe, full-bodied woman sitting nearby couldn't restrain herself any longer. "You're a grown woman! Why do you let her treat you like that?" She stared incredulously at Millie as if daring her to argue about it.

"Yeah, if I was you, I'd say 'fuck off' and tell her to kiss my ass as I moved out!" said the teen as she raised her middle finger to back up her statement.

Millie understood their indignation and concern for her, but felt overwhelmingly appalled. *She's my MOM! How can you even suggest I disrespect my Mom like that?! Would you talk to your Mom like that? And you talk that way about Mom to my face?!* When Millie finally found words that she could say aloud, she finally murmured, "I don't have enough money to support myself."

Nobody answered her. There were a few low mumblings, but Millie wasn't sure whether people were talking under their breath, or whether it was the sound of conversations in nearby aisles. To her, everyone seemed to have lost interest in the discussion and found other things to do.

"Millie." Angela's crochet hook took a few swoops into her work, hesitated, and then swooped again. "Do you like how your mother treats you?"

"What?"

"When your mother yells at you and makes demands . . . are you all right with that?"

Do I have any choice? She's my Mom. She's all I've got. "I'm not happy about it, if that's what you mean. Would I like to have a life? Sure. Do I wish she'd let me go so I could move out and have some peace and quiet? Every day. But I can't. I have to stay there. I don't have any choice." Her throat tightened up and her eyes stung. The lighting of the

call floor seemed dim and distant as hopelessness buried her again under its weight.

Angela looked intently at her. "There's always a choice."

The computer monitors blinked back to life to a chorus of groans from the call floor. A supervisor stood up at his station and shouted, "We've got the system back online, and you should be receiving calls shortly." A chorus of boos and groans answered him.

That's easy for you to say, Millie looked at Angela's back as the woman turned to face her computer screen. *You don't have to live with her. You don't have to face what will happen if I don't do what she wants. The one person that you've loved and trusted all your life won't be raging at you and cutting you to the core. Nobody seems to understand.* She slipped her headset on and tried to focus on a world of garden tubs and people with problems no more serious than turning around and looking across the street for their destination. If only her solution were that easy and painless.

* * *

Payday. At last. Two years of working in the "Zoo" had added enough seniority bonus to her paycheck, that there was enough left after rent for a small splurge. Millie strolled through the mall swinging her bright yellow shopping bag containing the clothes that she had worn when she started the day. The new dress that she now wore skimmed

what few slight curves she had to swish gently around her knees as she walked. Her freshly cut hair swung in a shiny, silky bob, and her new patent leather shoes twinkled in the overhead lights as she stepped briskly along. A small polished tile that had somehow escaped the wear of its neighbors in the floor created a slick spot that sent her flailing awkwardly for a moment before recovering with a flushed face and a furtive look around her.

The mall sparkled. Bright lights reflected off chrome, steel and polished windows filled with jewelry and expensive clothes. Classical piano music tinkled through hidden speakers to lay like diamond dust over the hush of a small waterfall surrounded by lush tropical plants. A few well-dressed people strolled here and there to peer in store windows or quietly chat with each other, while others rested on carved wooden benches comfortably contoured for lingering. Everything seemed to shout elegance, peace and tranquility. Millie wished that she could live there. She took a deep breath and let out a long sigh that seemed to flush a massively heavy gray cloud from inside her. It seemed as if it had been there a lifetime.

Her new wardrobe took quite a chunk out of her paycheck. Thumbing through her billfold revealed enough cash to fill her gas tank, with a little left over. She wandered over to the food court to see if she could buy herself a few more minutes before going home.

Fortunately the food court was less expensive than new clothes. A hot, buttered pretzel and a soda left enough for gas money, and gave an excuse to loiter a little longer without demands or stress. *Dining at the oasis*, she mused to herself.

“Millie!” A man’s voice exclaimed breathily by her left shoulder. Scott Huff, who seemed to pop up out of nowhere, pulled up a chair across from her at the tiny table and sat down. “How are you, Millie?”

“Fine. How are you, Scott?” Millie stifled a sigh and resigned herself to be polite. She had been enjoying the solitude and tranquility, but a short, friendly chat might be nice. At least he was across the table today instead of touching her and murmuring in her ear as if they were intimately acquainted.

“I’m okay. You look nice today, Millie. Did you just buy those clothes, Millie?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Did you just get your hair cut, Millie?”

“Yes.” Millie went to take a bite of her pretzel. Her teeth only got to scrape the surface.

“Did you get a job, Millie?”

On and on the questions went. He did not give her a chance to respond with any questions or conversation of her own, no mutual give and take of thoughts, no offering of himself in exchange for what he was

taking from her, but merely taking to satisfy his own curiosity. By the time she had answered one question, he had another ready. This had gone from a short chat to a twenty-minute non-stop interrogation. Her hot, buttered pretzel lay cold and uneaten on her napkin. She had been tempted to go ahead and eat anyhow, ignoring him until she was ready to answer, but years of berating from her mother compelled her to answer when she was spoken to. She wanted so badly to tell him to leave her alone, to tell him that she felt verbally invaded, but it seemed rude to snap when he didn't say anything offensive. Scott was like a spider web: seemingly harmless, but hard to scrape off once he clung.

“Can I have your phone number, Millie?” Scott's nearsighted eyes stared at her from his thick, black-rimmed glasses.

“No.” *Enough is enough.* She gathered her pretzel into its napkin and picked up her soda to prepare for escape.

“Let me know where you live then, so I can drop in on you any time I want to.” His face brightened as he perked up.

WHAT?! If I don't want you calling me, why in the world would I want you “dropping in on” me? And any time you want to?! Her panic and alarm flared into blazing life. “NO. I really have to go. Goodbye, Scott.” She bolted for the mall exit, ignoring his closing “goodbye, Millie” and anything else that he might have offered.

* * *

A group of Millie's coworkers had decided to go on a road trip to Mall of America in Minneapolis over the weekend that autumn. They chattered excitedly about what they planned to get and the stores they intended to visit. Angela Gallagher had tried to coax her into joining some of the after-work group activities. She hadn't been successful so far.

Angela looked sideways at Millie. "Are you sure that you don't want to come along? It's going to be a blast hitting all the shops and having a few laughs with the girls. You don't even have to buy much of anything if you don't want to. It's just a chance to get away and relax."

Millie was mildly interested, but it didn't seem like anything she could even remotely consider. "No thanks. I can't go." It sounded abrupt to even her own ears, but nothing better came to mind. She had chores that needed to get done, not to mention the accusations and insinuations that she would have to endure from her mother if she was gone for even an overnight trip, let alone a whole weekend. At that, a wall in her mind slammed down and she turned back to her lunch. "I don't have a choice," Millie explained again. That sentence seemed to crop up a lot in conversations for her. "I have obligations at home that I can't ignore." It would be a relief if she could ignore them. There were many activities that did not interest her, but it was missing out on the ones she really

wanted that reminded her how short a leash her mother kept on her. She wished someone would help her break free and escape.

Angela looked at her a moment longer before turning away and talking with the other women at the table about their weekend getaway plans.

I need to get serious about finding myself a husband, Millie thought with a sigh. *Maybe I shouldn't have been so rude to Scott. Maybe he doesn't realize that he's creepy.* She shuddered briefly. *There must be somebody out there for me. There must be someone I can run to, someone who will love and be there for me so I'll never be alone.*

* * *

Millie kept thinking about the shopping getaway all weekend. Images played in her mind of everyone laughing and smiling while showing off their trophy bags full of beautiful clothes and trinkets, relaxing in restaurants with soft music playing in the background, and finally falling exhausted but happy into their soft hotel beds with nothing but peace and quiet surrounding them. Millie sighed wistfully as she sat eating supper with her parents.

“What are you sighing and looking so moony about?” Her mother’s sharp voice cut through her thoughts like a razor through tissue paper. “Are you seeing some boy at work? I bet you are, and you’re trying to

hide it from me. But you can't hide anything from your old mother."

Dread pinched in her chest. *Someone's already taking her away from me.*

"Mom, stop. I'm not seeing anybody." Millie's stomach clenched.

Why can't I even eat supper in peace? Why can't I even think to myself without her trying to crawl into my head?

"Don't lie to your mother. I bet he's got a whole string of girls on the side besides you. Don't believe anything he tells you, because he's only interested in you for what he can get out of you. And that dead-end job isn't enough for either one of you to live on, so don't think that you can make it by moving in with him. Are you listening to me?" Millie's father jumped slightly at his wife's last sharp sentence and paused in his eating long enough to grunt questioningly before resuming. His silver-streaked head bent over his plate in absorbed attention while his fork stabbed and scraped at his meal.

The skin on Millie's face felt hot and tight, as if it stretched to the breaking point. *Apparently, you're not listening to ME!* "Mom, I told you that I'm not seeing anybody, and I resent you calling me a liar. You know me better than that."

"I *thought* I did, but there's always a first time. Don't get involved with any of those boys at work. Men can't be trusted. You can't trust anybody these days, actually. Except your old mother, of course. I'm the only one who *really* loves you."

Millie struggled against a growing deflated, sinking feeling as she pecked at what was left of her supper.

* * *

The women in the “Zoo” who had gone shopping that weekend were still talking about the trip that following Monday, and a few had even brought some of their purchases to show off to friends who had not gone. Angela was at her station in a new fern green wool hooded sweater when Millie logged onto her computer, and nodded with a smile when Millie waved briefly. The two women pressed their ACW buttons at the first opportunity.

“That’s a beautiful sweater, Angela! May I . . . ?” Millie reached out as if to finger the sleeve.

Angela nodded permission. “Thanks! When they crank up the A/C in here, sometimes a sweater comes in handy.”

“And it’s so soft! It’s not cashmere, is it?”

“Heavens, no. It’s alpaca.” She affected a glamorous modeling pose, lifting her chin and spreading her arms dramatically. “If I wear it long enough, I might even learn to spit like one.” She winked once before pressing the button to continue working.

Millie approached Angela again later in the afternoon. “Angela, I was wondering . . . are there going to be any other outings anytime soon? Anything that’s not going to be an overnigher?”

“Not that I know of right now. Are you interested in hanging out with us wild women sometime?” The older woman’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Yeah, I suppose so. I’m willing to at least give it a try.” Millie smiled slightly.

“Fair enough! I’ll keep my feelers out, and let you know when anything turns up.”

“Thanks!” Millie felt driven to get out of the house, but the thought of facing her mother still paralyzed her. *Little steps, girl, little steps.*

* * *

It was several weeks until Angela came to Millie with another invitation. “Some friends of Ray’s and mine are coming in from out of town this weekend, and I wondered if you would be interested in going bowling Saturday evening with us. It may not be this crazy bunch,” and she gestured with a wry expression at the coworkers around them, “but I think we’ll be lively enough.”

Millie pictured herself being the outsider in the group, the one everyone noticed but no one acknowledged. “I don’t know, won’t that make things a little awkward with me being a stranger in the group? I’ll be like a party crasher.”

“Nonsense. Believe me, they’ll have no problems whatsoever with you being there. Just show up and be ready to bowl. We’re planning to meet at ThunderBowl Lanes around seven, will we see you there?”

Millie hesitated for a moment. She would have to tell her mother that she would be out for an hour or two, but there shouldn’t be any problem with that. “Sure, I guess so. See you around seven!”

ThunderBowl Lanes was busy that Saturday evening. The crash of pins and chatter of bowlers clattered against Millie’s eardrums as soon as she walked through the double glass doors. The smell of beer and cigarette smoke hit her moments later. It was going to be hard to spot her group when she was familiar with only one person in it, and Millie’s gaze started to dart frantically from face to face down the lanes. She didn’t notice the waving hand at first until several others joined it, followed by calls and whoops of “Millie!” “Over here, Millie!” “HEY! WOO HOO, MILLIE!” She hustled down to the lanes where the group was getting ready to bowl.

Angela stood and took a couple steps to greet her as she arrived. Turning to face the others as she placed one hand on Millie’s shoulder, she made official introductions before steering her around to face one last seated man.

“Millie, this is my husband Ray. Ray, this is Millie Canfield, one of my co-workers who wanted to walk on the wild side with us tonight.”

The seated man leaned forward to shake Millie's hand in his warm, calloused one. "Nice to meet you, Millie. I can't speak for these jokers, but I'll try to be on my better behavior. I've had lessons, you know." Someone nearby gave a bark of derisive laughter.

"Play nice, you guys. Millie," Angela turned to her, "If you need to rent a pair of shoes, the front desk is over there." She pointed. "If you want something to drink, the lounge is over there, and the restrooms are way down at the end of the lanes. Don't worry about rushing, because we're not competing in teams. We're here just to have a good time."

Millie nodded. "Is there any lane you want me on?"

"You can bowl on any of these three lanes that we have reserved, although I'd recommend picking whichever has the fewest people on it."

Millie felt awkward at first among these strangers, but the relaxed atmosphere and their good-natured encouragement of her bowling efforts gave her a warm, welcomed feeling. Angela would check with her occasionally during the course of the evening to see how she was doing, but otherwise sat with her husband when it was not her turn to bowl.

Angela and Ray sat next to each other on one of the green and orange benches that bracketed each lane. Ray sprawled slightly with one arm on the fiberglass back behind his wife, and his other hand rested around the now empty bottle of beer sitting on his thigh.

He slid forward on the bench and moved to stand up. "I'm gonna pick myself up another beer. Can I get you anything, Angie?"

She smiled up at him with one eyebrow raised.

Ray smiled back with a twinkle in his eyes and gave a nod. "Just thought I'd ask."

He slid his gaze over the rest of the small group. "How about the rest of you? Is there anything you need while I'm up?"

There was a chorus of "no's" mixed with one quip of "more money!"

"Sorry, can't help you there," Ray teeth flashed in a quick grin.

"Okay, I'll be back in a bit."

He brought back another bottle of beer and a tall plastic glass full of yellow-green soda and crushed ice. He gave the soda to Angela before sliding into place on the bench, leaning back and laying his arm once again along the back of the seat behind his wife. She leaned backwards and nestled against his shoulder.

Millie watched and sighed to herself. Ray seemed so nice, so kind and considerate. He and Angela even bowled in adjoining lanes so that they could spend more time sitting together between turns. Why couldn't she find anyone like that? The only guys who were interested in her turned out to be ones more interested in taking than giving. It seemed like the old saying was true: All the good ones were already taken. Millie sighed again.

“Hey, Millie! You’re up!” One of the men bowling with them reached over and lightly touched Millie’s shoulder. He smiled beneath his thick Tom Selleck mustache as her confused look changed to startled surprise. “Come on, you can do it. It’s strike time!”

That’s an optimistic thought. Millie stepped up and took her turn. *Not even a spare. At least it wasn’t a gutter ball.* She walked back to her seat to sit down.

“You got some good pin count there. Nice job!” The man who had spoken to her earlier called out again.

“Thanks.” She didn’t feel like she had done a good job, but it was only polite to thank someone for a compliment. What was his name again? Josh?

Some of the men teased each other while they bowled as the evening progressed, and Millie laughed along with the rest of the group. One woman bowled three strikes in a row after struggling most of the evening, and Millie joined everyone in cheering and congratulating her for scoring a “turkey.” It felt so refreshing to be around a group of supportive, positive people that it was like living a different, better life. Millie was too busy enjoying the change to notice time passing.

The bowling alley loudspeakers crackled with a loud announcement. “Millie Canfield to the front desk please, Millie Canfield to the front desk. You have a phone call.”

Millie was baffled. Who would be calling her at a bowling alley? She approached the front desk and told them that she had been paged.

“Millie Canfield? Your mother is on the phone.” The expression on the man’s face at the front desk seemed strange, at once immobile yet somehow contorting under the surface in a disturbing way, as if trying to hide his thoughts and not quite succeeding.

“Mom? What’s up? What happened?” Did something happen to her father? Was there some kind of emergency at home?

“MILLIE! DO YOU REALIZE WHAT TIME IT IS?!”

“Uh, no?” She glanced over to the digital clock perched on the front desk. It was 9:34 pm.

“IT’S AFTER NINE THIRTY! YOU SAID THAT YOU WERE ONLY GOING TO BE GONE AN HOUR!”

“Actually, I said an hour *or two*.” Millie knew that it didn’t make a difference at this point, but felt compelled to try to tone down her mother’s exaggeration somehow. “I apologize for not calling to let you know I’d be later, but I lost track of time.”

Her mother continued to scream and rant at her over the phone for several minutes more while Millie’s resentment and anger grew. Here she was, a grown woman, and her “mommy” was treating her like a truant toddler. More than that, she was yelling at her in a way that was far out of proportion to what was called for, if it was called for at all. She was

insulted and belittled in scathing and sarcastic tones so that it was like being verbally backslapped over and over.

“Who’s keeping you out there at the bowling alley? Is it that boy from work?”

“Mom, I’ve already told you that there’s no boy at work.”

“Wasn’t he the one that you were meeting tonight?”

“NO, Mother. I TOLD you that it was my friend Angela from work, with her husband and friends.”

“Don’t trust her, Millie, she’s got some ulterior motives for getting you out of the house and away from your mother. Keep an eye on your purse and don’t get anywhere alone with her or her husband.”

“Mother, STOP. She does not have ulterior motives. Angela is just trying to be a friend.”

“You’ll never believe your mother, will you? You’ve always been so stubborn and never listen to me. You don’t care how much you worry me, do you?!”

“Mother, I’m almost done bowling. Is it ALL RIGHT if I stay just a half hour MORE?!” Millie clenched her jaw and bit off each word in an effort not to shout back. She was not entirely successful.

“Do you have to? I suppose so,” her mother grumbled grudgingly, “but you’d better come straight home right after! Bye-bye, I love you!”

Well, I'm not so thrilled about YOU right now. Millie went back to the group with her jaw clenched. Several of them started to ask her what the phone call was about, but saw her expression and kept silent.

Angela waved her to come over and murmured, "What was it, Millie?"

"Mother. She yelled at me because I haven't come home yet." She glanced at Angela but avoided looking directly into her eyes because she didn't want her anger and humiliation to flash out and scorch anyone else.

"Are you going home now, then?"

"No. I've been 'allowed' to stay for a half hour more, but then I'm supposed to go straight home." The words left a bitter taste in Millie's mouth. "She even accused you of having 'ulterior motives' for inviting me here! And she had the nerve to say 'I love you' at the end like she hadn't just been biting my head off and treating me with total contempt."

Angela seemed dumbfounded. "Why would she think that I would have ulterior motives?"

"Oh, she gets that way with anyone I start becoming friends with."

The next half hour was quiet in the group. Even Angela looked thoughtful. As Millie returned her bowling shoes to the front desk, she felt as if she were leaving in disgrace. Any feelings she might have had

earlier of being a free, hopeful, normal human being seemed like a delusion now. Reality had returned with force, and there was no escape.

When Millie arrived at work Monday, Angela took one look at her, dived into her bag, and handed over a large paperback book. Millie had expected it to be one of Angela's romance novels, but instead was puzzled to see that it was a book about Borderline Personality Disorder.

"If you have any spare time, I thought you might like to look through this and see if anything sounds familiar to you. If not, just give it back when you're done with it. You might want to make sure that your mother doesn't see it."

"Okay" Millie could not imagine why Borderline Personality Disorder should interest her at all, but she trusted Angela's judgment. The warning about her mother tweaked her curiosity as well. She set the paperback on the floor underneath her station and prepared to begin her workday.

* * *

It was a couple of days before Millie had time to open the book. She was expecting some dry, incomprehensible scientific jargon, but instead it described behavior and situations in everyday language. Some of the criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder, or BPD, were alien to her, but others sounded very familiar: frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment, a pattern of idealizing and devaluing others using rage,

blame, criticism, and accusations among other things, disregarding other people's personal boundaries, and inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger. *This could describe Mother, but it says that she would have to be officially diagnosed to be certain. Good luck getting her to go to a psychiatrist.*

The book also described the effects of this behavior on those closest to the person with BPD, especially a child raised by that person: fear of losing the relationship if they assert themselves, isolation, low self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness, trust issues, feeling trapped and helpless, codependence The more that Millie read, the more that her life started to make sense. It was as if a fresh, cool breeze was starting to blow through the haze and cobwebs of her mind.

But how was she going to get unstuck if her mother didn't change? The book said that the only way a person with BPD would get better was if that person wanted help badly enough that they actively pursued treatment and therapy. It also said that they had to come up with the idea themselves because they would reject any suggestions to seek help. Millie felt baffled. How was her mother going to ask for help for BPD when she didn't even know that she had it, and nobody was supposed to tell her?

* * *

An announcement was made at the turn of the year that the call center was going to be closed, outsourced to a center in the Philippines. The closing date was scheduled for the end of May. As the news spread throughout the building, the call floor became increasingly quiet except for a soft undercurrent of anxious murmuring.

One of the supervisors came up to Millie during her shift, pressed her “ACW” button and told her to log off. “Would you come with me, please?” The woman said in a low voice.

Millie logged off and followed her, wondering anxiously what error she might have done on her calls that would require this private meeting. The supervisor led her to the conference room, where several more co-workers, including Angela, sat around the large oval meeting table.

What’s going on? This can’t be a reprimand if Angela’s here. Could it?

The head supervisor firmly and quietly closed the conference room door after the call representatives had been seated and their names checked off on his list. He turned to face his audience. “As you all know, this call center is scheduled to shut down at the end of May. We are gradually going to shift our workload to the new call center in the Philippines and phase out our workers here. Many are going to leave immediately on their own in search of new jobs. Others will be released if their work does not maintain the standard of excellence that we expect at this company.” He looked around the table at the men and women seated

there. “You have been called to this meeting because you are the best that we have. All of you have excelled at your work and demonstrated quality consistently in your job performance. What this company is willing to offer you is an incentive to stay on here until the call center finally closes its doors. You are in no way obligated to accept, but if you do, you will receive an incentive bonus of five hundred dollars, on the condition that you maintain your quality of service for the duration.”

There were a couple of muffled whispers in the group. Stunned, Millie looked over at Angela’s thoughtful expression.

The head supervisor continued. “As you may guess, it might not be received well by anyone outside of this room if they found out that they were not considered for this bonus. That is why you are being asked to not mention this to anybody else. If you do and conflict results because of it, you may jeopardize your opportunity to receive this bonus.”

The number of workers on the call floor thinned out as May approached, aided by service standards that progressively raised and by so doing provided an excuse to fire workers who failed to keep up. Millie didn’t have much opportunity to talk with anyone still remaining because she needed to stay focused on completing calls as quickly as possible without any errors. The call center closing was beginning to look more and more attractive.

Millie received a letter from the company in her paycheck envelope toward the end of April. In it the letter revealed that the call center closing was delayed until the end of the year due to complications in transitioning. If Millie chose to remain until the December closing, she would receive a one thousand dollar bonus contingent upon her continued level of performance. The same demand of secrecy applied to this bonus.

When Millie came to work the first week of June, the call center looked almost deserted. A couple dozen workers still remained scattered around the call floor at their stations, staring coldly at their screens and saying their lines devoid of emotion. The next several months gradually slowed down until only a handful of people remained, and Millie could read almost a whole chapter in her book on borderline personality disorder before she received a call. A partially completed afghan rested in her tote bag for when she wanted a change of pace, and she downed a quart or two of cola from her sports bottle during her shift in order to stay awake.

She completed the afghan on her final day at work. Spread across her lap, the vivid multicolor chevron stripes popped against the black background stripes, and she admired how evenly the edging and overall stitching turned out. Angela noticed it immediately when she came in that afternoon.

“Wow, that’s stunning!” She stopped abruptly with eyes widened in appreciation. “Beautiful job, Millie! You have a great eye for color,” and she reached forward to finger the afghan, “and you maintained a nice, even stitch tension. A lot of people have trouble with that, but it looks like you’ve mastered it.”

“I had a great teacher.”

“Well, thanks, but it takes a great student to learn and master it.” Angela smiled at her slightly. “Now you have a beautiful memento of your time here.”

Millie sagged a little. “I’ll miss working with you.”

“Aww, I’ll miss working with you too!” Angela smiled fondly. “I’m going to be cruising around the country with Ray in our RV as soon as he retires in a few months, but I can give you my email address if you’d like. That way we can catch up on what’s going on in each other’s lives. How does that sound?”

“Sure, that’s fine.” They exchanged email addresses and Millie thought to herself, *but it’s not the same thing.*

* * *

Reading the book on BPD had helped Millie become more aware of the situation that she was in with her mother. She could see now the buttons that her mother pushed and the strings she pulled to keep Millie under her control. It was one thing seeing them, but it was a completely

different thing trying to uninstall the buttons and cut the strings, especially when the one who installed them in the first place was still there striving to reattach them. Add to that the fact that Millie had never known a different way of living, and each attempt to break out of captivity seemed like trying to crawl up a loose rockslide with someone hanging onto her ankles.

One afternoon Millie noticed a new message on the answering machine in the dining room. She played it and discovered that it was a salesperson from a magazine to which she subscribed. He wanted to know if she were interested in renewing her subscription. Millie deleted the message.

“Who is that? I hear someone’s voice.” Millie’s mother called out from the laundry room.

“That was the answering machine. It was a message for me.”

“Who was it?” the older woman was advancing into the dining room with a demanding tone and a stern expression on her face.

In the past Millie would have automatically told her mother whatever she demanded to know, but now her tone of voice felt overbearing and intrusive. “Why? What difference does it make? The message was for me.”

“Because I want to know!”

“Wanting to know doesn’t mean you’re *required* to know.” Millie held firm against the anxious quivering in her chest. She had to stand firm against getting steamrolled over again.

“Why won’t you tell me? It must be something you don’t want me to find out.” Her mother’s voice took on the familiar accusing tone.

“No, it wasn’t anything important.” Millie felt like it was a potential risk to her self-defense revealing even that much, but took the chance.

“Do you have a new boyfriend? I bet it was your new boyfriend calling you.” Her voice took on a taunting tone.

Millie almost laughed. “No, it wasn’t a boyfriend.”

“THEN TELL ME! WHO WAS IT?! WHAT WAS IT ABOUT?!”

STOP! “None of your business.”

“You’re mean!”

“I’m sorry that you feel that way, Mother.”

Millie walked quietly and firmly out of the dining room and into her bedroom, shutting the door. In the distance she could hear the answering machine beeping as her mother checked the messages. Millie regretted being rude to her mother, especially over something that seemed so trivial on the surface, but she couldn’t stand being treated as if she had no rights, not even a right to privacy or a right to say “no.” She may not have followed the suggested techniques in the BPD book very

well, but she did the best that she could. She was certain that she would have far too many additional opportunities to get it right.

* * *

It was a new year, and once again, Millie was unemployed. Without having a job to go to and with Angela out of town living her new life on the road, Millie was feeling an overwhelming drive to get out of the house. She tried going back to the bowling alley a couple of times, but she felt alone and out of place in a building filled with teams who did not need anyone else to join them. She soon found herself returning to what was familiar: the ballroom. She still sat awkwardly by herself much of the time, but there was a better chance of not being completely alone since partners were frequently changed.

One Saturday night Millie sat sipping her soda at a ballroom table between the restroom and the garbage barrel. Someone had scratched "JC + IK" inside a heart on the table's varnished surface next to a lumpy gray wad of chewing gum. A sudden dimming of light made the graffiti harder to see, and Millie looked up to see a man standing next to her table. He was tall, thin, stoop-shouldered and stringy in build, with a short crew cut that looked almost military in style. His large, humped nose resembled a hawk's beak, and that combined with his sunburn almost made him look like a Native American except for his pale blue eyes, which seemed to stare vacantly at her. His elbows bent out to the

sides, and he had the tense stillness of a grasshopper the moment before it springs.

He jerked downward slightly and brayed, “Hi there, cutie! Want to take a spin on the floor?” A beer-scented draft blew in Millie’s face.

She tried not to inhale too deeply. “Shouldn’t we be introduced first?” She did not want to sound sarcastic, but an edge slipped into her voice. Something about him seemed to grate on her nerves. Maybe it was because his joviality seemed fake and forced. Maybe it was just because he seemed like a jerk.

The man jolted upright for a moment with a blinking, open-mouthed expression before brightening. “Oh, yeah! I’m Jack, Jack Canfield. What might your name be, Tootsie Pop?”

Millie bit back a retort about candy making her sick. “Millie. I’m Millie Hewitt.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Millie!” Jack extended his hand to vigorously shake her reluctant one. “How about it? Ready to take a spin?” He jerked a lumpy, purple thumbnail toward the dance floor.

She darted a furtive look around for any other possible partners, and then stifled a sigh. “Sure. Let’s go.”

Jack knew the basic dance styles, but moved stiffly and jerkily, steering Millie in a constant reverse across the dance floor. She looked past his shoulder to watch the other dancers as they enjoyed themselves.

It could have been worse, she supposed. He hadn't stepped on her toes, and he'd kept his warm hands where they belonged. In fact, she felt a small measure of relief because he didn't try to dominate or disrespect her. They danced silently around the floor and stared out into space until the song ended. Jack froze momentarily and stared at the applauding dancers around him before clapping himself, raising his eyebrows and coughing out a surprised guffaw. Millie began turning away to sit back down, but paused to make sure that her partner was thinking the same thing. He started and then slid sideways over to her. His warm, sweaty hand pressed between her shoulder blades, inches above the now cold and soggy spot where it had rested during the dance.

"Did you want to sit the next one out?" He steered her over to the table where she had been sitting and pulled her chair out from the table with a stiff and awkward formality, sliding it back in after she sat down. He dragged out the chair across the table from her and dropped into it. He made a big show of wiping his brow, rolling his eyes upward and pursing his lips in a silent "whew." "It's another scorcher, isn't it?" he exclaimed as if he were excited about the idea.

"Yes, it is rather warm, but not as bad as last week." She fiddled with her soda. Her fingers slipped on the sweaty glass, sending it shooting a short distance across the table before it slid to a halt. She froze for a moment, expecting it to tip over and spill, but felt slightly

disappointed when it stayed upright. Jack didn't seem to notice. He continued to sit with her the rest of the evening, watching the other dancers and fidgeting. A few men wandered by, glanced at her grim expression and the man sitting with her, and then moved on to ask someone else to dance. Millie scowled across the table at her oblivious tablemate. "Don't let me keep you from asking someone else to dance."

"Oh no, I'm fine here taking a load off. I've been on my feet all day."

He yawned loudly and stretched until the chair made a cracking sound.

"I'm surprised that you came out here to dance tonight then."

He snuffed noisily before pulling out a stained handkerchief and honking into it, and then rubbed his nose vigorously before returning the fabric to his rear pants pocket. "Huh?"

"Never mind."

Jack started coming out every Saturday night and having at least one turn around the dance floor with her. Sometimes he'd even buy her a soda. The number of other men asking her to dance plummeted to zero since her uninvited companion was constantly present. Millie rankled at this, but at least she could be certain of never sitting alone any more. Eventually he started escorting her to her car at the end of each dance night, instead of simply walking away with a wave in her direction. She appreciated the courteous gesture. There might be more to him than it appeared.

“That’s a nice little car.” Jack strolled around her sedan with his hands on his hips, admiring it from every angle. “I’ll bet that wasn’t cheap!” He peered closely into the dim interior. “Are those leather seats, or vinyl?”

Millie half expected him to kick the tires and ask to take a test drive. “Vinyl.”

He snorted. “Didn’t want to spring for the quality, eh!”

Had she thought that he might be nice after all? “Apparently not!” Her face felt hot and tight, as if the skin was going to split and burst with her indignation. “Does *your* car have leather seats?”

“No, it doesn’t. I go fishing every week, and vinyl’s easier to clean afterwards.” At her puzzled look he added, “Fish slime, scales, crap, lake water, that sort of thing.”

“Oh.”

Jack guffawed at the expression on her face. “Have you ever tried fishing, Millie?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.” *And I’d rather not ever try it, thank you.*

“You don’t know what you’re missing! Some time I’ll have to take you out to Beard’s Lake so you can give it a try.”

Millie’s stomach turned a little. “There’s no rush.”

Jack cackled with glee.

* * *

Millie didn't know what to wear for her first fishing trip with Jack. Somehow her usual dresses seemed inappropriate for fish slime, scales and crap. She shuddered at the thought and finally settled for a faded pair of blue slacks that she often wore when she gardened, added a chambray blouse and slipped into a pair of flats. She looked ruefully at herself in the full-length bedroom mirror. It wasn't what she would prefer to wear on an official first date, but it was the only thing possible given the circumstances. She grimaced at herself and turned away.

"Millie! Is *that* what you're wearing?" Her mother's strident voice rasped Millie's ears like tearing sheet metal. She hesitated before continuing to the front door.

"Yes, Mother. This is a fishing trip, so it's not something I'd want to dress up for."

"And you call that a date? How are you going to get a man interested in you if you dress like that?"

Millie's lips tightened. "Apparently he's already interested in me if he's asking me out. Besides, I'd hope that a man would be interested in me as a person instead of just for my looks."

"You're not going to keep him if you don't make an effort. Go back in your room and change into something decent right now!"

“I’m twenty-four years old, Mother. I’m not a child anymore that you can order to her room.” A sharp “shave and a haircut, two bits” rap on the front door announced Jack’s arrival. “Besides, it’s too late to change now. See you later, Mom!” Millie slipped out and shut the door before she could hear any more arguments, and almost ran up against Jack’s plaid flannel chest. Her hands flew up to brace herself, and felt the beating of his heart underneath the fabric.

“Whoa!” His surprised smile broadened to a toothy grin as he gripped her upper arms.

“Sorry, just trying to make a quick getaway.” She stepped back and wrenched her shoulders away in a feigned attempt to adjust her purse strap before walking around him down the sidewalk to the curb where his silver gray station wagon sat. Corrosion was setting in around the wheel wells and nestled in some dents on the near fender. The back of the car was crammed full of what appeared to be trash: branches, logs, newspapers, a tarp, a covered metal pail with holes in the top of it, what almost looked like a plastic milk jug with a perforated trap door near the top, a tool chest and some fishing rods. Millie turned to him as he came up to the car. “Your car’s not looking so high-class, either!”

“Huh? Oh, I get by. I’m about due to get a new car. This one’s a few years old now.” He opened the passenger side door with a dramatic flourish. “This is the Silver Bullet!”

Looks like a rusty trash can to me. “The Silver Bullet, huh? That’s original.” She slid into the musty, dusty interior. The window rattled loosely in the door as Jack shut it.

* * *

Millie gradually found out more about Jack as the weeks went by. He worked as a mail sorter at the local post office, had previously married immediately out of high school, and then had divorced from a woman who he said had taken him for every dime he owned. He had three sons between five and fifteen years old. He had custody of them during the summer and at Christmas, and grudgingly paid child support. According to what his sons told him, their mother used the money to buy things for herself and take vacations with her boyfriend of the moment, leaving the boys to fend for themselves in the apartment.

Millie felt appalled. “How could she leave young children all alone like that?”

Jack shrugged. “Keith’s fifteen. He’s old enough to take care of the other two. Brad has gotten pretty good at fixing mac and cheese.”

“All they have to eat is mac and cheese? That’s no way for them to live.”

“Oh, they have dry cereal and oatmeal, too.”

“That’s no diet for growing children. Where are the fruits and vegetables? The meat?”

“You seem awfully concerned about something that has nothing to do with you.” Jack looked her over for a moment.

“Well, who wouldn’t be concerned? Those boys need someone who’ll look after them properly.” Millie envisioned three young boys wandering around a desolate apartment looking for stray scraps of food to eat in order to stay alive, desperate for someone who would care if they lived or died. She tried to shake the image out of her mind, but it kept swirling along the edges and threatened to drift back in again like a persistent fog.

“Are you volunteering?”

“What?” The fog collapsed in on itself and suddenly disappeared in a final muddle of confusion as the jolt of what Jack had said sunk in.

“I said, are you volunteering to be their babysitter? They’re big enough to take care of themselves, you know.” His face grinned around the derisive tone in his voice.

* * *

Millie wasn’t sure how she felt about Jack. Granted, he wasn’t a handsome man by any stretch of the imagination. In fact he had an odd and homely quality that reminded her of Alice the Goon from the Popeye comic strip. He was uncultured, uncouth and vulgar to say the very least. But he didn’t criticize her, yell at her or treat her with disrespect. He didn’t demand to know her every movement and thought like her

mother did. He pulled out her chair for her when she sat down. He took her out and shared his interests with her, such as they were. Most importantly, he got her away from the house and her mother. She wasn't tremendously attracted to Jack, but she felt safe. Safe was a good thing, wasn't it? It definitely beat being alone for the rest of your life. And it wasn't as if men were lining up to even talk with her, let alone date her. It looked like she was lucky that Jack would care about her. She knew from reading the book on BPD that she probably had low self-esteem, but knowing it did not automatically make it go away, especially when the world around you seemed to encourage it.

Millie stared into her bedroom mirror as she prepared to go out on another date with Jack. The face staring back seemed unfinished somehow, unprotected and unready. She picked up the makeup puff on the dresser and swirled it around repeatedly in her compact until a heavy drift of pale beige powder stirred up. Rubbing the smooth powder into her face felt soothing, like a silky caress. She pressed harder, pushing the flesh around on her facial bones until the motion formed deep wrinkles and folds that appeared and disappeared, again and again. She could still faintly see her pores and tried to rub in more powder to bury them. The pale skin of her hairline caught her attention, and that too became smothered with facial powder. Soon the puff ran out of powder and she had to repeat the process. That reminded her that she needed to

buy another compact soon. For some reason, she seemed to use them up quickly. "They must put less powder in them anymore," she mused to herself and shook her head. "Anything to make a profit."

* * *

Jack pulled into the gas station to fill up his car. Millie sat and gazed out into space, listening to the glug of gasoline as it poured into the tank. There weren't too many customers at this time of the evening, just a few passing motorists filling up before heading to whatever evening activities they had planned. The gas nozzle scraped metallically as Jack pulled it out and headed inside the gas station to pay.

He came out several minutes later carrying a medium-sized cardboard box, which he placed in the trunk of the car. It clinked and tinkled as he set it down on the station wagon's thinly carpeted trunk floor, and again when he shut the trunk and driver's side doors.

"What did you buy, Jack?" Millie wondered aloud.

"You'll see when I take you home. It's a surprise." The pleased expression on his face seemed to bode well for the surprise. He was usually so frugal that any expenditure seemed fraught with significance and extravagance, even if it did come from a gas station. Millie started to get fluttery in her stomach despite herself.

By the time they pulled up in front of her house, she was in a fair state of curiosity and anticipation, if not excitement. Even staring

straight ahead at the road in front of the car, she had become acutely aware of the clinking, rattling box in the back. She practically sprang out of the car when Jack came around to open the door for her. He offered her his bent arm and led her up the sidewalk and steps to her front porch. He turned to face her and cocked his head expectantly.

“Uh, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t you say that you had a surprise for me?”

He looked baffled for a moment. “I did?” He blinked for a couple of moments before his face lit up. “Oh, yeah! Hold on a moment.” He jogged down the steps and out to the back of the car. The box clinked so loudly as he quickly strode back to her that she hoped there was nothing breakable in it. He held the box out to her and proclaimed, “Here you go!”

Now it was Millie’s turn to blink. “I don’t have anywhere to set it down while I open it.” She shifted her head slightly to one side and another as if searching for a nonexistent table.

“Oh, here you go.” Jack thrust the box into her arms and reached into the box, pulling out a beverage glass. The facets in the glass caught the porch light and threw glints onto the side of the house. “They’re pressed glass, and they were selling for only ten cents apiece with any tank fill up. I got you an even six.” He looked very pleased with himself as he stuffed the glass back in the box with a muffled clink.

Millie was at a loss for words. “Only sixty cents, eh?” She didn’t know whether to feel angry and insulted that he thought that was all she was worth, guilty that she placed such a high value on expensive gifts, pleased with the beauty of the glasses despite the low price, or admiring of his frugality and keen hunter’s eye for a great bargain. “I truly don’t know what to say.” Memories of her mother nagging her about her manners echoed in her mind. *At least he thought of me. And what was I expecting from a gas station, a diamond necklace?* “Thank you, Jack.”

He beamed. “Isn’t that a great bargain? Of course it would have been a lot better if it was *free*, but still it’s not too bad a deal.”

“Yes, you sure have an eye for a bargain. And they *are* beautiful, the way they catch the light and sparkle.” She could feel a shield, almost a wall, descend behind her eyes as she forced reason and practicality to choke out any idiotic romantic notions. She ignored the small gristle knot of disappointment at the back of her throat and swallowed as he leaned around the box to give her a peck upon the lips.

After they’d said goodnight and she went inside alone, she wondered what she should do with the box of glasses. She didn’t want to face the questions and criticisms that her parents were likely to voice at his gift, but she didn’t care to store what were essentially kitchen items in her bedroom. Her father was usually in bed by this time in the evening, so she probably didn’t have to worry about him. Her mother, on

the other hand, could be a problem. She usually waited in her rocking chair in the front room and faced the front door waiting for Millie's return.

Tonight the chair was empty. Millie heard water rushing in the bathroom. She stepped as quickly, quietly and smoothly as possible through the kitchen and down the basement stairs with her box, carefully flicking the basement light switch on with her elbow. Her father's stash of old newspapers rose in yellowed and dusty columns to the ceiling around her. Careful to avoid bumping anything that would cause an avalanche, she wound her way through the maze of paper to a small nook that hadn't been filled in yet and tucked the box of glasses on the floor in a gap between one stack and the basement wall. With any luck, even she would have forgotten where the glasses had come from by the time her parents found them. Even if the glasses were discovered, her parents could possibly even think that the glasses were theirs and that they had forgotten about them. She sidled back through the maze and stealthily sped back up the stairs. She turned off the basement light and started through the kitchen.

"Who's in the kitchen?" Her mother's voice volleying in from the front room sounded angry and confrontational. Millie's stomach clenched.

"It's just me, Mother."

“What are you doing in the kitchen?”

“Just getting a bowl of ice cream before bed.” Millie opened the cupboard door and started getting everything put together so that she wouldn’t be telling a lie. *I really am not up for another battle with her.* Her mind was blanking on the phrases the BPD book had advised, and it was going to take self-control not to blurt out something that could trigger a shouting match. It seemed like it would be so much easier to fall into the old, ingrained habits.

“Ice cream? Didn’t that man feed you?”

Millie stifled a sigh. “Don’t we always have a bowl of ice cream before going to bed, Mom?” There was no answer. “I was just going to have a little bit. Did you want me to fix you up a bowl?”

“Well, sure, if you’re going to have some. I wouldn’t want to put you to any extra trouble if you’re not having any. I don’t want you to have to eat all alone, either.”

Millie took out another bowl and filled it with large, curling scoops of vanilla ice cream. She took a couple of mismatched teaspoons out of the silverware drawer and put one in each bowl before carrying them out to the front room and presenting one to her mother.

“So, how did your date go? Did you have a good time?” The older woman scooped a heaping spoonful of ice cream off the top of the mound in her bowl and engulfed it with her mouth. Bad teeth and not taking

care of them had left Irene toothless by the time Millie was a teenager. Irene had dentures that she only wore when she went out in public. She said it was because the false teeth hurt her gums. As she ate the ice cream, the spoon seemed to push her lips in with it, which gave the appearance of a sort of creased, slightly whiskered quicksand. She munched on the mouthful, her eyes unfocused in concentration and her mouth sucking in and out with a kind of undulation.

Millie stared absently at her mother's mouth and twirled her own spoon in her bowl. "Oh, it was okay. We didn't do much. We had supper, and he gassed up his car."

Irene started to speak, stopped to swallow her mouthful, and then raised her chin with a sharp gleam in her brown eyes. "You didn't do much? Then that means you did *something*." Her voice took on a sharp, demanding edge. "What are you hiding from me?"

A flicker of guilt about the glasses fluttered through Millie's midsection. Her eyelids lowered slightly as if to hide her secret. Hiding the box of glasses seemed silly now compared to what her mother probably imagined, but revealing that she hid them and explaining why seemed like a whole new can of worms that she didn't want to open. Why did it seem like everything had to be a confrontation with her mother? "It's no big deal, Mother. We just went to Bennie's Diner on the highway for supper."

“And then what?”

“And then he went to the gas station to fill up the tank.”

“And then what did you do?”

“And then he brought me home.” Millie was quickly becoming resentful.

“Then what was the big secret?” Irene narrowed her eyes and glared suspiciously. “What were you being *sneakin’* for?”

Millie glared back at her. “I *wasn’t* being ‘sneakin’.” *At least about what I was doing with Jack.* “Like I said, we didn’t do much.”

Her mother squinted sideways at her and then gave a brief sniff. “Not much of a date, if you ask me.”

Millie ignored her and stuffed a spoonful of melting ice cream in her mouth. She wasn’t all that enthused about her evening either, but it rankled to hear her mother criticizing her life like that. She scooped up the melted vanilla moat from around her ice cream mountain and drank it from her spoon. “What did you do with *your* evening?” She scooped up a softened gob and savored it.

“What did I do? I didn’t do anything except watch television and wash dishes. I don’t have a life, except to do the chores around here.” Irene crammed a heaping lump into her mouth. A creamy mustache appeared on her upper lip and dotted the tip of her nose.

Millie swallowed to clear her mouth and prepped another spoon load. “You could visit the neighbor ladies or invite them over here while Father’s at work.”

“What would I want to talk with those gossipy biddies about? They just want to snoop to see what dirt they can find on me so they can spread it all around town.”

“You don’t know that, Mom. Besides, it would give you company and people to talk to.”

“You’re all the company I need. You’re my only reason for living.”

Millie groaned to herself. *You don’t have much to live for, then.*

“What was your reason for living before I was around? You managed all right before then.”

“I was waiting for you.” Irene gave her a defiant look before stabbing her spoon so hard into her ice cream that it clacked against the bottom of the melamine bowl. She finished the dessert in three quick scoops and then scraped furiously at the inside of the bowl until Millie thought the finish would have been scraped off.

“I still think that it would be good for you to get out and see people more, Mother.” Millie took Irene’s bowl and spoon with her own out to the kitchen, washing them and leaving them in the dish rack to dry overnight. It gave an opportunity for the topic of conversation to end and

hopefully be forgotten by the time she went back out to rejoin her mother.

* * *

Jack didn't want to wait. "Let's go over to the county courthouse in the next state and get married. The waiting period here is too damned long, and I want to get this over and done with."

Over and done with. Another red flag waved in the back of Millie's mind, but at this point she tended to ignore them like tacky yard ornaments. "We've only known each other six months. What's the rush?"

Jack's face flashed a momentary deer-in-the-headlights stare, and then fell into an exaggerated, flirtatious expression. "I can't wait to have you all to myself." *The sooner I get you moved into the house, the sooner you can start getting it into shape, and the sooner I won't have to deal with the boys when they get here for visitations.*

Millie slid him a sideways glance and said nothing. She didn't believe him in the slightest, but at least someone wanted her enough to marry her.

* * *

"You're getting married already? He got you pregnant, didn't he. What did I tell you about that?!" Millie's mother was working up to another tirade.

“No mother, I’m not pregnant. You should know me better than that.”

“I *thought* I did.” Her mother glared at her from the corners of her narrowed eyes. “Are you sure you’re lying?”

Millie was going to answer automatically before she caught the question. *Eh?* “I am not lying, mother.” She spoke each word slowly and distinctly, as much to be sure that she was saying what she meant to say as to be emphatic.

“Then why marry him? Why do you want to treat me like this?”

“I’m not treating you like anything. I’ve found someone who wants to marry me, who actually wants me to be their wife and build a life with them. Don’t you want me to have a life, Mother? I love you, and I always will, but you are not enough. Who’s going to be with me when you’re gone? Who’s going to be with me when I’m old? Do you want me to grow old and die alone?”

Irene’s chin was trembling as tears welled up and trickled from her eyes.

Millie choked up as she gazed at her mother’s face, and struggled not to bawl and hug her in remorse. “I’m sorry if I hurt you Mother,” her voice quavered and she swallowed, “but I’m an adult now. I need you to let go of me.”

Irene tried one last time. Through her bleary-eyed tears, she blurted, “If you leave me, you can forget about ever coming back. If you’re so ungrateful that you can’t stand to be around me, then you don’t have to ever bother seeing me again.”

Millie felt a thud in her chest as if someone had punched her. Here was the moment that she had feared most of her life, and it was every bit as devastating as she had feared. It was as if a large fissure had cracked the ground between her mother and herself, and the split was growing wider. All she had to do was give in to her mother’s domination, and the crack would close . . . at least until the next time she tried to break free. If she took the terrifying step of walking away, the fissure would fall away into a chasm that she would be unable and her mother unwilling to cross. *Mom. Momma. Why can’t you just love me without doing this to me?* She knew the answer according to the BPD book, but it didn’t help any. Millie wailed across the growing chasm.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mother. I would have preferred that I have your blessing, but I guess that I’ll have to be without it. I’ll always still love you, even if you don’t love me anymore.” She choked as her own chin quivered. “I’ll pack and move out tomorrow.” Millie turned and went to the attic, trying to ignore the sobbing behind her. Her luggage set was finally going to see some use. She thought about leaving a note for her

father to say goodbye, but he probably wouldn't notice that she was gone anyhow.

* * *

Their courthouse wedding wasn't what Millie had hoped for, but it seemed like she had never gotten what she wanted, anyway. The pale light from the overcast April afternoon added to the subdued and indifferent atmosphere of the Justice of the Peace's office. The air was unexpectedly muggy due to a faulty ventilation system, and a slick of sweat coated her body, causing her to slide around in her cream knee-length cocktail dress. She silently cursed the day that polyester was invented, and wished that she had worn cotton instead. Her sweaty feet slipped around in her cream pumps, jamming her toes into the front of the shoes, and the resulting pain reminded her that she needed to take care of her ingrown toenail. Her damp palms clenched around the small bouquet of red dyed daisies she held, the now soggy green florist's paper starting to curl and wear along the edges, leaving little green paper bits and stains on her skin. She struggled to take a deep breath and wondered if she was getting asthma.

Jack was fidgeting in his navy leisure suit and dark red tie. Sweat was beading across his forehead and scalp as he huffed and snorted periodically in impatience. He pulled out a crumpled handkerchief to

blow and wipe his nose on it before wiping his face and stuffing it back in his pocket.

* * *

Jack had seemed like a nice enough guy before they married, but that changed almost as soon as the white gold band was slipped onto Millie's finger. It seemed to Millie that he no longer felt the need to keep up an appearance of congeniality or exert himself at all to maintain a relationship now that she was essentially a "sure thing". It wasn't long before nearly anything he said to her was either barked or snarled.

"Jack?"

"WHAT?!"

She flinched only the first few times. "What are you shouting for? I'm standing right next to you! I was going to ask about the boys' sleeping arrangements when they come. All you have is one double bed in the spare bedroom. Where are they all going to sleep?"

"In there, of course. Keith can have the bed, and the other two can use their sleeping bags on the floor. Either that or the two younger boys can share the bed, and Keith can sleep on the floor."

"All summer?" To Millie, that seemed like a small room for three growing boys to share, and it didn't seem right that any of them would have to sleep on the floor like a homeless person. "Couldn't you at least go out and get a bunk bed so they'll all have a bed to sleep in?"

Jack's face clouded up and he huffed. "If you have that kind of money to throw around, go ahead. I can't afford to waste what I'm earning on nonessentials."

Waste?! Millie looked around the small bedroom. Even with bunk beds, the room would be too small for three boys. *Where else can they sleep?* There was the bathroom, the master bedroom, and—

She walked across the hall to her sunroom . . . or at least she had planned for it to be her sunroom. It was about the size of the spare bedroom and had a window on the west side of the house with a larger, sunnier window on the southern exposure. Her dream had been to turn the room into an indoor garden with houseplants, flowers, herbs and maybe even a miniature orange tree. She looked at the sun streaming through the window and bathing the room in light. She sighed. It looked like her next unemployment check was going to be spent on bunk beds. And of course the boys will need bedding, a dresser

* * *

Each summer Jack's three sons came to live with them as part of his custody agreement. Keith as the easy-going oldest brother tried to help Millie keep the younger ones under control, but they ignored him, too.

“Who asked you, Crater Face?” Middle brother Brad punched Keith in the arm before thundering off to another corner of the house with young Matt in his wake. Something crashed and tinkled in the distance.

“If I ever have children, I hope they’re girls.” Keith’s heartfelt intensity as he said this amused her.

“Can I help you with that?” Keith reached for the overloaded laundry basket Millie was bringing up from the laundry room. A pair of boy’s briefs dangled precariously from one corner.

“No, I can manage, but thanks for asking. I’ve got to go see what got broken anyway.” She braced herself against the stairway wall as she went upstairs, the rough paneling seams snagging periodically on her blouse.

It was suspiciously quiet upstairs. Millie peeked around the corner into the boys’ bedroom. Matt was sitting relatively still for once, thumbing through his comic books but starting to fidget. Jack balked at spending money to treat the boy’s hyperactivity, so Millie did the best she could by limiting his sweets and caffeine. It wasn’t completely successful. She was about to ask about the crash she heard earlier until she realized Matt was alone in the room. The bathroom door down the hall was open, showing the room to be empty. Keith’s room was likewise empty, and his glass jar of change lay broken on the floor near the dresser missing the few dollar bills that had been in it. Brad was not in this room, either.

That left one other place to check. Millie marched swiftly down the hall to the bedroom she and Jack shared. The dark oak door that she normally left open during the day was partly shut. She held her breath as she carefully eased it open, hoping this would be one of the times it didn't creak.

Brad's back was to her. He was rummaging around on her vanity table against the far wall, lifting items up to look at them before dropping them back again and selecting something else. The lid of her jewelry chest was up. He tried to pry open the locked side drawers with his fingers but gave up and settled for a garnet necklace lying on top that had been given to Millie before she married. He turned around to leave and froze when he saw Millie barring the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" She figured that he'd have some far-fetched excuse, but hoped he'd be honest for once.

"I'm not doing anything." A guilty look flitted over his face before he scowled at her and jutted out his jaw.

"So what's that in your hand?"

He answered her with sullen silence.

"Brad, this room is for your father and me. You are to stay out of it from now on. If you need something, you ask either your father or me. Don't ever let me catch you sneaking around in here or taking anything of mine again. Is that clear?"

“Yes.” He grumbled something else under his breath.

“What?”

“Yes *Ma’am*.”

She didn’t like his tone but decided to let it go. As Brad moved to leave, she held out her hand for the garnet necklace. He stopped and glowered at her before dropping it into her hand and running downstairs again. Millie thought she heard a muttered “bitch”.

Jack was late coming home again.

“Is Dad home yet?” Matt’s lips silently repeated everything he said. Millie wasn’t sure if that was a symptom of his hyperactivity or something else going on in his young mind. He seemed so lost and unwanted. She wished that at least one of his parents would pay attention to him.

“No, he’s not home yet. He’s working overtime, but I’m sure your father will be back soon.” Jack only volunteered for overtime during the three months his sons lived with him. He usually managed to come home after the boys had gone to bed, and left for work before they woke up. The excuse he gave was that he needed the extra money.

Matt yawned and grabbed the stair railing to pull himself upstairs to the room he shared with Brad. Jack came home about an hour later.

“What’s for supper?” He headed directly to the kitchen.

“We had pork chops and green beans with baked potato about four hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” Jack snapped at his wife.

“You didn’t say what time you’d get home. How was I supposed to know? Anyway, the boys were hungry and it wasn’t right to make them go to bed hungry because you weren’t home yet.” Sometimes she wanted to pummel his head until she could knock some sense and decency into it, but settled for glaring at him. Acid burned the back of her throat. “I saved some supper for you. It’ll just take a few minutes to heat it up.”

He grumbled and huffed at the kitchen table while she reheated his meal for him. She considered asking about his day, but he was unresponsive at the best of times. This probably would be the only opportunity to bring up what his son had been doing in their room. She waited until he finished feeding.

“Jack.”

“WHAT?!”

“For crying out loud, Jack! When are you going to learn to be civil? I was just going to say that Brad was in our room today.”

Jack gave her a baffled look.

“He was in my jewelry chest stealing one of my necklaces. My garnet one.”

“Aw, you’re lying. You just have it out for him.”

Millie tried to control her outrage. “And why should I ‘have it out for him’?” She could hear her voice sharpen and get louder.

Jack did not answer.

“Look, I’m just asking you to talk to him. You’re his father and he’ll listen to you. He won’t listen to me. Brad needs to know that stealing is wrong before he gets into bigger trouble somewhere else and you won’t be there to bail him out.” *Be a father for a change*, she thought.

“All right, I’ll talk to him.” He shoved out from the table and stomped his way upstairs to the boys’ room, clicking the light on before shutting the door firmly. It was quiet at first, and Millie imagined the boys sitting up sleepy-eyed to see their father towering over them. Jack’s voice thundered sternly. Brad’s answered. The back-and-forth continued for a few minutes. At one point, “she’s not my mother!” punctured through the door and was buried under a lower rumble. After silence stretched out for several minutes, Millie locked the doors downstairs, turned out the lights and made her way upstairs. Jack was in bed facing the wall in the dark.

“Jack? How’d it go?”

Silence was all the answer that she got, but it was better than shouting. She quietly got ready for bed.

* * *

At first Millie called her mother every few weeks after her marriage to Jack, hoping to somehow regain the good part of what she had lost. Usually her mother peppered the conversation with insults, reproach and accusations, followed by a heavy layer of self-pity and pleading. Millie's calls came less often as the years passed, until the day her father died and Irene had to move into a nursing home. Millie made a point of visiting her mother on her birthday and on holidays, listening to her mother alternate between love and contempt for her daughter. The rare days when Irene was pleasant and agreeable brought tears to Millie's eyes, because then she saw a glimpse of what her mother could have been if she hadn't been afflicted with BPD. She practiced the techniques she had learned while reading about BPD until she became adept at interacting with her mother, who gradually learned a limited measure of self-awareness. When her mother finally died several years later, the only ones who attended were Millie, Jack, and the people who took care of Irene at the nursing home. Millie grieved for the woman that Irene could have been, and for the mother she never had. She hoped that her mother was finally happy and at peace.

* * *

It had been another overnight February blizzard typical of the last thirty winters that they had lived in the old house. A light scattering of larger, fluffy flakes still floated downward during the day. Icicles hung

thickly from overhead wires and transformers were encased in thick layers of ice. Although previously cleared, the sidewalk to the garage was now filled in to the point that it was only a lower groove in the drifts. Millie had to lean into the back screen door in order to force it open, which leveled off the top of the drift perched on the cement stoop and added a little more to the shoulder-high piles heaped on the ground on either side. The cold, sharp air caught in the back of her throat, and her breath cut short unexpectedly. The quiet hiss of snowflakes hitting and sliding off of the aluminum door and siding was briefly drowned out by the distant squeak and groan of car tires turning in the freshly fallen deposit. Somewhere nearby was the roar of a large truck along with the crack and tinkle of breaking ice. Twin furrows in the knee-high snow where the steps and sidewalk were supposed to be showed that Jack had left the house. The tracks ended partway out to the garage.

“Jack? Jack, where are you?” She knew very well that he couldn’t have flown away. “JACK?” She squinted her eyes and scanned across the backyard for a clue.

A muffled “Help!” floated out from the yard. A few crumbles of snow tumbled from a disturbed patch in a snowdrift not far from the last pair of footprints.

“Jack, is that you out in the yard? What in the world are you doing out there? Are you all right?”

“NO I’M NOT ALL RIGHT! I CAN’T GET OUT OF THIS ... DAMN SNOWDRIFT!” His full-throated roar came with a whine at the end of it, as if it had hinges that needed oiling.

“What were you doing there anyway?” She couldn’t help needling him. He was undoubtedly doing something incredibly stupid, and she wanted him to squirm and admit it for once.

“DAMN IT, WOMAN! STOP YOUR BITCHIN’ AND HELP ME!” His voice cracked and it sounded like he almost choked.

“Well, I don’t know how I’m going to get you out of there. I’m certainly not strong enough to hoist you.” She shivered in the doorway. “Let me get my coat and boots on, and I’ll come out there and see what I can do. It’s probably not going to be much.” There might have been some kind of muffled exclamation from the snowdrift as she turned to go back inside. She didn’t care. If her help wasn’t good enough, then that was his problem.

There were three men in bulky insulated uniforms standing in the backyard by the time Millie was dressed and ready to go outside. From the reflective tape and the dingy manila color of their outfits, she guessed they worked for either the city or the utility company. They were holding a wobbly, snow-covered figure by the elbows and were thumping him solicitously on his back. A drift of snow sifted off of the hat that Jack had somehow managed to keep on his head.

One of the men turned and saw Millie. “Oh, hello! Are you his wife?” He continued when she nodded. “We were knocking ice off of the transformers,” he gestured at the basket crane parked on the corner, “and saw your husband lying here. He seems to be all right, but you might want to take him inside and look him over for frostbite.”

Jack growled “oh hell, no” at about the same time that Millie thought it. “I don’t need anybody looking me over. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

The man looked both surprised and amused as he leaned back slightly and looked at Jack. “No? You’re sure? All right then. Well, you folks have a nice afternoon. Take it easy and stay warm!”

“See?” Millie said as she followed Jack back to the house. “It took three men to lift you. I wouldn’t have been able to do it all by myself.”

“Aw, shut up.”

“And what made you fall in the first place?” She smirked. “Did you have a shot of whiskey before you went out?”

“I just lost my balance and fell down. Stop nagging me!”

“I’m not nagging you. You’ve been losing your balance a lot lately. Do you think that maybe you should get that checked out?”

“No! I’m fine!” He grumbled softly, “the doctor couldn’t find anything.”

Millie considered gibing that the doctor couldn't find anything in Jack's head, but decided that she'd pushed him as far as she dared for one day.

* * *

Today was one of those days that Millie wished for hearing loss. Jack had the downstairs flat screen television blaring again as usual, and her head was starting to throb. She tried to concentrate on the romance novel she was reading, but the newscaster's voice leaked through the closed bedroom door. Millie took the stair lift down to speak to Jack.

"This summer is proving to be the wettest one on record, with an average of 5.8" per week in some areas. Rivers have surpassed their cresting stage and entire towns have been evacuated due to flooding. Local authorities have blocked off areas of downtown Elm Grove between Second and Eleventh streets near the river, and drivers are advised to stay clear of those areas." A car submerged up to its headlights in rushing currents flashed on the screen. The lenses of Jack's glasses reflected a blank glare in front of his pale blue eyes as he sat in front of the television.

"Jack. Jack! Could you turn down the TV? That's way too loud." Millie looked back and forth between her husband and the television for

a moment before grabbing the remote control and turning down the volume herself. "There, that's better."

Jack jumped slightly and looked at her. "What did you turn it down for?"

"I said that it was too loud. If you'd had it down to a normal level in the first place, you would have heard me." *If you'd had it down to a normal level, I wouldn't have had to come down here.* She took one more glance at him before making her way back upstairs.

Jack had resumed staring at the screen before she had even finished speaking.

* * *

"Jack. Jack! Jack, are you still down there?" Millie didn't hear an answer. It would be just like him to tune her out and keep watching TV. She hobbled to the stair lift, grumbling to herself as she descended to the first floor. She could envision him sitting there in the recliner either asleep or staring vacantly at the screen with his mouth hanging open. She'd like to get his attention by swatting him on the head with a rolled-up newspaper, but feared that she'd enjoy it too much to stop. Her fingers flexed in a fist with the thought.

The television was still on, but the recliner was empty. "Jack, where are you? You left the set on." It irked her that for as much as he lectured her about saving electricity, Jack thought nothing of wasting it

himself. Millie looked around the front room and peered into the kitchen, but she was alone. Her attention caught on a torn piece of paper lying on the kitchen table. She pushed her walker that she used in the house into the kitchen and picked up the note. Jack's nearly illegible handwriting scrawled across it in broad pencil strokes. *I'm going to have to sharpen that pencil soon*, Millie mused to herself.

M—

I'm going out to get my hair cut at the barber college. Back later.

J—

"The barber college?! Isn't that in the flooded area down by the river? Damn fool." Millie went into the dining room to the phone stand. She shuffled through the yellow pages for the barber college's address, bracing her forearms on the supports of her walker. The plastic handgrips had slid down the walker's metal tubing, and the discomfort of the hard metal against her arm bones reminded her that there would be more bruises on her skin later, one more indignity of old age. *Barber college, barber college . . . it's in the 700 block of Water Street . . . which is on the opposite bank of the river. How does he expect to get there when it's all underwater? Wasn't he watching TV? At least the barricades downtown should mean he'll be coming back home soon. He won't get far.* She stifled an irritated sigh. "Idiot," she muttered.

* * *

It had been three hours since Jack had left, and Millie was starting to worry. Even if by some remote chance he had made it to the barber college and they were open, they should have finished with him by now. Of course it wasn't unusual for him to run other errands on the way home, but still She peered yet again out of the upstairs window to see if his car was back in the garage. The dark hulk of Jack's old gray station wagon was still missing from its spot in front of the garage window. He had been regretting his vow made several years ago of not buying another car ever again, as his most recent "Silver Bullet" started to rust and slowly fall apart. Trips to the repair shop were becoming a monthly expense. Once when Jack had asked Millie to start the car for him while he finished loading up the trunk for a fishing trip, the key simply spun around in the ignition without resistance or effect. He had someone rivet the trim back on the passenger side doors when it started to come off.

A key turned in the house's front door lock. "Jack?" The door creaked and groaned as it opened, then slammed shut. The glass in the door rattled violently. "Jack? Is that you?" Nobody answered, but heavy footsteps slowly thudded upstairs. *It has to be him, nobody else has the house keys.* "Jack, what happened? How come you're coming in the front way?"

Jack came huffing to a halt at the top of the stairs. His normally stooped shoulders drooped a little more than usual, and his hands hung limply at his sides. He paused for a moment and took a deep breath before turning to go into his den.

“JACK! Do you hear me? What happened?”

“Huh?”

Millie took a deep breath and held it for a second until she could keep from snapping at him. “I said, what happened? Why did you come in the front way? Are you parked out front?” She couldn’t imagine why he would be, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d done something she didn’t understand. Jack rarely volunteered information, and getting it out of him was like pulling teeth at the best of times. Over the years Millie had developed unrelenting extraction skills.

“No, I’m not parked out front.” He scowled at her as if she were to blame for something.

“Well, where’s your car? I didn’t see it in the garage.”

“It’s downtown.” His feet started shuffling around as if they were either testing the carpet’s texture or becoming anxious to take off. “I headed over to the barber college to get my hair cut, but I found out that they had the roads blocked off downtown.”

“Well, I could have told you that. They had that on the news before you left. You were right there listening to it.” Millie wanted to chew him

out about not paying attention to the news, to her, but had a feeling she'd never find out the rest of the story if she did. She was pressing the limits as it was. "What took you so long to come back, then, since the roads were blocked?"

Jack scratched the back of his head, his thick, yellowed nails scraping audibly against his speckled scalp under his tarnished silver crew cut. "I kept driving parallel to the river until I got to Second Street. They didn't have it completely blocked off yet, so I drove around the blockade."

It was like watching a car crash in slow motion. Millie wanted to shake Jack and pull her own hair in exasperation at the same time. "Was the water very deep there?" Keeping a neutral tone of voice was getting even harder to do. She heard her voice rise in pitch slightly and quaver at the end.

"It was probably up to my doorframe as I turned onto Second. I got about halfway down the block before the car died. You wouldn't believe how strong the current was there! When I opened the car door and got out, the current about knocked me over. If it hadn't been for a couple of people from the credit union next door who fished me out, I would probably have gotten washed down to the river."

Millie decided that this was not the time to make snide remarks about his needing a bath. "How'd you get home, then? Did you walk all

the way home?” In his younger days he would often walk from one end of town to the other, but she didn’t think he had the strength for it anymore.

“No, one of the young men from the credit union drove me home. Nice SUV!”

“Was he able to manage Second Street, then?”

“He took an alley to First Street, which was still open. It looked like the credit union was all sandbagged and they were closing up early.”

At least someone had sense enough to get out of the floodwaters instead of going into them. “So your car’s still there next to the credit union? *Unless it got washed into the river instead of Jack.*”

“Yep. The last I saw, the water was up to the bottom of the steering wheel.” Jack’s eyes widened in dazed amazement, staring off into space as if still seeing his car disappear under water.

“You should have known better, Jack. It serves you right. If you had listened to the news report and stayed home like you should have—”

Jack stood staring at her, almost despondently. “Please.”

Please. She stared back into his eyes. Had they ever looked at each other like this before? She knew the feeling that she saw there all too well. Her head drooped and she tentatively placed one hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Her husband nodded and then turned to shuffle into his den.

* * *

Jack was more considerate to Millie than he used to be, especially if he knew someone else was watching. He opened the car door for her and helped her up the stairs into the house when they returned home. On her worse days he'd bring a sandwich and cottage cheese to her in bed when she hurt too badly to walk. Certainly there were times when his younger self sparked up in all its ugliness, but on the whole he was almost meek. It puzzled Millie, but it was a mystery she was willing to live with rather than prod too deeply and risk losing the peace.

Jack and Millie's thirty-fifth anniversary was in two months on April second. April first would have been too obvious in Millie's opinion. If Jack was true to form, he'd take her out to either some fast-food fish place or a steak house. Personally, she'd prefer the steak. Her mouth watered just thinking of it. She'd treat him to the steak if he got her something else, otherwise it'd probably have to be a box of chocolates.

This evening he was helping her out in the kitchen. "What do you want for vegetable tonight?"

"How about some peas. Let's have some pork chops with them, too. The chops are in the freezer." Millie opened the can of peas while Jack struggled to get the foil off of the meat. "Run some water over the foil, Jack, and it'll come off easier." There would probably be foil in the food later, but it was the thought that counted. She put the peas in a

saucepan on the stove and moved to the front room to see what the evening news had to say about the weather forecast.

Millie heard a sound in the kitchen, a stumbling followed by the scraping of chair legs across linoleum. She bent forward and peered through the doorway in time to witness Jack slowly sliding down the wall, his legs sliding under the kitchen table, and with a blank look on his face.

“Jack? Jack, what happened?” He didn’t answer. His body slid down the rest of the way to lie flat on his back and he stared at the blank, white ceiling. Millie made her way out to the kitchen as fast as her body would let her, and sat on the chair closest to him. His left arm was clamped stiffly to his side. His right arm waved feebly above him, his hand clutching spasmodically at the air. Garbled sounds rolled out of his mouth like oversized marbles.

Millie feared what this probably meant, but she just had to make sure. She reached out and grasped his hand. “Can you squeeze my hand, Jack?” His grip clamped around hers with surprising strength and held on until she was afraid he would never let go. “How about your left hand? Can you squeeze my hand with your left hand?” His left arm remained at his side while his right hand gripped harder.

“Jack, I think you’ve had a stroke. I need to call an ambulance. Could you let go of my hand? Please Jack, let go of my hand.” Between

prying at his fingers with her free hand and pulling with her captive one, she managed to escape and make her way to the phone to call 911 and wait for help.

* * *

Jack rested in Intensive Care. Blankets came up to his chin and covered the top of his head, so that only his face showed. The bright overhead light that spotlighted his unconscious face emphasized the age spots blotching the skin pulled tight over his slack features. Tubes protruded from his gaping mouth. Millie sat in the shadows next to his bed and listened to the stillness in the room, surprised that the monitors didn't beep like they did on TV. It seemed strange at first that his right arm was so warm to the touch while his left arm was so cold, but it must have had something to do with the stroke being on that side, reducing blood flow. She wondered if Jack was aware of her presence, and if it made any difference to him.

A heavysset man in scrubs came into the room and introduced himself to Millie as the nurse in charge. "Oh, you're a nurse? I thought that maybe you were the doctor." Millie noticed that his name badge identified him as an RN named "Bob".

"No ma'am. The doctor should be in later. I just wanted to let you know that we have his DNR order on file. Do you know what the DNR order means?"

“Yes. It means Do Not Resuscitate.” As his spouse she had been given final say on when to “pull the plug,” but she had still called Jack’s sons to make sure that she had their approval. They all agreed that she should go ahead.

“That means that he wants no heroic measures taken to prolong his life.” Nurse Bob gestured at the tubes protruding from Jack. “Right now we have an oxygen tube helping him breathe and a tube in his stomach to keep any excess acid from accumulating and accidentally being aspirated. We wanted to give you time to say your goodbyes to Jack. Whenever you’re ready, just let one of us know and we’ll remove the tubes. After that, it’ll be up to him.”

“Is he in any pain?” Her concerned gaze followed Nurse Bob’s to the spotlighted body.

“No, he isn’t in any pain. He was uncomfortable when we put in the tubes and we had to administer a sedative, but then you’d be uncomfortable too if tubes were being pushed past your vocal cords.” Bob smiled faintly as if he were trying to make a joke. Millie wasn’t amused.

Nurse Bob gestured at the monitor behind Jack’s head and explained what the various blinking lights, numbers and lines meant. Millie tried to memorize it all, but something in the side display caught her attention.

“What’s this that says ‘Alarm’ and has the flashing light and those numbers? What’s that mean?” Her voice tensed up and sharpened.

He peered at it briefly. “Jack has an irregular heartbeat. That says his heartbeat slowed down low enough and long enough that it became a concern. We brought it up again.” He waved his hand at the equipment surrounding her husband. “Usually when families come in to visit a patient, they spend all their time staring at all this. I may glance at it, but that’s not my prime focus.” He lowered his hand to hover over Jack. “The patient is most important. I look at him to see how he’s doing. He’s who the family should be looking at.” After making sure that she had no further questions, Nurse Bob withdrew to the nurse’s station just outside the room.

Millie moved over to Jack’s right side and held his hand. It felt so warm and alive in comparison to how his face looked, which reminded her of photos she’d seen of mummies. “Jack, can you hear me? If you can hear me, squeeze my hand.” She didn’t think he could hear her without his hearing aids, but it was worth a try. She thought she felt a slight pressure from his hand and leaned back to call through the doorway, “Bob! Bob, he squeezed my hand! Bob?” He wasn’t out at the nurse’s station any more, only a couple of girls in their twenties. *Bob must have gone on break or something.* She studied Jack’s slack face and tried to coax another squeeze out of him.

* * *

“The scans we took earlier indicate that the bleeding in Jack’s brain is too massive for surgery.” The doctor seemed surprisingly bland about the prognosis, as if he were talking about a picnic being rained out. “The bleeding has pushed his brain to one side and pushed down into the brainstem. If we operated on him, he would just as likely die on the operating table. We can still operate if you’d like.”

“So there’s no way he will recover, will he.” She stared in the general direction of the bed railing.

“No.”

“He squeezed my hand earlier when I asked him to.”

“In cases such as this, involuntary spasms often occur.” The doctor’s tone was getting flatter.

Millie felt nauseated. “Is he in any pain?”

“No he isn’t, but we will give him a sedative if he shows any signs of discomfort.” The doctor jammed his smooth, plump hands into the pockets of his lab coat. “Just let us know when you’re ready to have us remove his breathing tube, okay?”

The man she’d been married to for thirty-five years laid helpless in front of her. One word from her, and he would cease to exist. She couldn’t understand why it was so hard to say, or why everyone else seemed more ready for it to happen than she was. *Probably because they*

aren't the ones who have to do it. The lines on the monitor jerked unevenly.

Millie took a deep breath and braced herself. "Go ahead. Go ahead and remove the tubes." She gave a decisive nod and looked at nothing. After the tubes were removed and she was left alone with her husband, she moved in closer and studied his worn-out face again. He seemed almost good-natured now. "Goodbye, Jack," she murmured. The monitor continued to draw mountains and blips. His chest continued to rise, although very slightly. She wondered if he was going to surprise them all and keep living just to spite them. It would be just like him. The silence became almost soothing as she sat with him and waited. It didn't seem right for anyone to have to die alone, and the rest of Jack's family either couldn't or wouldn't come.

The lines on the monitor spiked abruptly and an alarm went off. A ghastly cavernous gasping came out of Jack's gaping mouth as he partially rose and lay back down, again and again, lurching like a broken-down carnival ride. Millie froze for a moment, a hand clapped over her own open mouth, her eyes widening in horror. She jerked backwards and lowered her hand. "Help! Somebody help!" She shouted in the direction of the nurses' station, and soon a nurse bustled into the room with a syringe. Millie turned away and refused to look as Jack slowly quieted down. There was a click as the nurse turned off the alarm.

“The sedative will help him relax. Agonal breathing like that doesn’t bring in enough oxygen, which is why the alarm went off. Is there anything I can get you?” The nurse placed her free hand on Millie’s shoulder.

Millie knew what she’d like at that moment, but thought better of it. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

Surely it wouldn’t be long now. She sat facing the nurse’s station with her hand over her mouth again and stared fixedly at the floor. The image of Jack kept replaying in her mind. Millie had thought of having a DNR order for herself should the situation ever come up, because she didn’t want to have her suffering prolonged unnecessarily. Now she didn’t know what to think. She hadn’t expected it to be anything like this.

Jack had always seemed to be spitting phlegm, and now it sounded like he was accumulating some more. It started clacking harshly in his throat like a gargle. Millie half expected him to start clearing it like he normally did. Instead, a young blond nurse with her hair in a small tuft of ponytail came in and suctioned it out, crooning to him about how she was going to help him feel a little more comfortable.

He can’t hear you. He doesn’t have his hearing aids in. It was a pity he wasn’t awake. He’d love to have a sweet young thing fussing over him. The nurse left, and Millie alternated watching the monitor and Jack’s

face. His head was turned to the side, with his neck arched back, his eyes closed and his mouth still hanging wide open. Millie dreaded what other horror might happen next. She wished that Jack would just hurry up and die instead of going so hard like this.

After a while she just focused on the monitor lines. The one showing his breathing was a straight line now, but the heart kept beating. It was incredible how strong the body's drive to keep going was even when it was falling apart. The peaks became shorter and fewer until they were small pips on a base line. She couldn't look away.

A nurse walked in, switched off the monitor and turned around to face her gravely. "He's passed away, Millie."

Numb, Millie looked up at the clock on the wall. It had been only fifteen minutes since they removed Jack's tubes.

* * *

There were quite a few people at Jack's memorial service. His relatives laughed and talked about their jobs and families. His more distant acquaintances sat with Millie and tearfully offered their condolences. She nodded quietly and put on a brave face. Contacting Jack's relatives and making all the funeral arrangements had left her tired and looking haggard. Keith repeatedly came over to hug her and offer any assistance he could provide, should she want it. He was heavy now, and wearing a thick, blond beard. The wife that Jack had

threatened to disown Keith over was with him. Their daughter had brought her own little girl who sniffled with the beginnings of a cold and clung to her grandfather Keith. Millie was glad that Jack hadn't succeeded in messing up their lives.

Matt on the other hand was in the middle of his second divorce. His brothers called him Jack Jr. because he had become an exaggerated version of his father. His hair and goatee were already gray, and he fidgeted from one group of people to another. He hugged Millie briefly and asked how she was doing before moving on to another group of people. She watched him go and regretted.

Brad didn't come over right away, and that suited her fine. She noticed how he was grinning toothily when he talked, laughing outright at times. *And to think Jack favored him.* He waited to come over until there wasn't anyone nearby.

"Hi, Millie." His smile had retracted, but a hint still remained. He skipped the hug and made basic pleasantries before going further. "I just want to say that you're a real special lady for putting up with Dad all these years. If you ever need any help with anything, just let me know."

Millie nodded and thanked him, but decided that time would reveal if he was being sincere. It seemed too much of a coincidence that his attitude toward her would change with Jack's death.

Millie was allowed to be alone with Jack's body just before the service in order to pay her last respects. She made her slow and painful way to the flag-draped casket. He had never liked flowers much, but there was a nice assortment around him courtesy of acquaintances and medical facilities that had treated him. Millie admired the small floral pillow she had ordered to be placed inside his casket lid. The roses almost perfectly matched the deep red tie she'd picked out for him. She smiled a little.

The age spots on Jack's head were subdued, and a faint scent of makeup powder hovered around him. His gently closed lips were tinted a delicate pink and had a soft gloss. He would have hated it. His hands hadn't been touched: age spots there were bold on his pale skin, except for the large purple bruise that covered the back of his hand, caused by the intravenous needle at the hospital. Millie wished she had some makeup with her to cover up that ugliness.

"Jack, wherever you are, I hope you're happy." She leaned closer and accidentally bumped his arm. It was hard, unmoving and cold like a marble statue. A chill jolted her, sending her with a sharp intake of breath to the nearest chair. It wasn't long before other people started filing in to view the body and sit down, but all she could feel was the coldness.

Jack's sons stood up during the service to each give a speech about their father. Keith kept choking up, tears filling his eyes. "For all, for all he did for us . . . for all he tried to do for us, he did the best he could. And that's the most that any of us could expect of our fathers." His mouth opened and closed a few times as if he were trying to say more, but finally sat down. His wife and daughter hugged him from either side and squeezed his hands. Brad then stood up to give a matter-of-fact speech about the importance of war veterans like his father, and how he and his dad went fishing the last time Brad came to visit. He returned to his seat to be replaced by Matt, who shifted from one foot to another and mumbled that his dad was a great father before retreating once again. The pastor spoke vaguely about Jack's "eccentricities" that he had learned about from friends and family, which made Brad chuckle from his seat behind Millie. She thought the pastor was generous beyond reason, but surely everyone else knew the truth as well. The service concluded with two recorded hymns that Jack had pre-selected as part of his funeral service package. As "In the Garden" floated through the air with steel guitars and a Western twang, Brad snorted and snickered. A couple of other snickers echoed in the room. He muttered to someone that his dad liked old-style country music. Millie didn't see what was so funny.

The sons and their families decided to go out to eat after the funeral, and they brought Millie along. Since Jack's funeral plot was in a sparsely populated part of the state, restaurants were hard to find. They drove past pastures, shacks and shanties for an hour or so, until finally finding a franchise bar and grill that looked operational.

"Millie? Lunch is on me today. I've got you covered."

"Really? Thank you, Brad! You didn't have to do that." Millie was pleasantly surprised that he seemed sincere in making amends. Lunch was starting to look a little better. Keith and Brad held open the inner and outer doors for her as she made her way into the restaurant. Hanging overhead light fixtures lit up the carved wooden tables and little else. Pale light from the overcast sky slanted through occasional small windows to pick up glints off of brass and glass in the dimness. The group slid several tables together in a line and started placing drink orders. Millie watched this extended family talking and catching up, and wondered when they would get together like this again, if she herself would see any of them again. She smiled at Keith and his family across the table before opening her menu.

"Go ahead and order whatever you want, Millie, it's on me." She wondered at Brad's insistence, but nodded and smiled. She ordered tea and a chicken sandwich. As Matt and Brad ordered beer after beer, she

wondered how they were going to be able to drive back to their hotel rooms. At least she wasn't riding home in the same car with them.

It seemed strange not to have Jack there trying to run things. His name wasn't even being mentioned, and he was the reason they were all together. She picked at her sandwich and listened to bits of the chatter around her.

"Millie, how are you holding up? Are you all right?"

Millie kept sipping her tea. "What? Oh! Yes, I'm fine. How are you holding up?" She straightened up in her seat and tried to focus on what Keith was saying.

"Fine, fine. You know if you ever need anything, just give me a call. Are you going to be keeping the house? I know Dad was insistent about staying in that terrible neighborhood." Keith's granddaughter crawled over to drape herself across his shoulder while he talked, his arms automatically rising up to support her. Millie's chill receded a little.

"I haven't had time to think much about that yet."

"Of course." Keith looked down for a moment before shifting the weight on his shoulder.

"Aren't you going to have anything more?" Brad had caught her eyeing the dessert menu standing in the middle of the table. "Go ahead."

She skimmed the menu. "I'm not really hungry, but that Triple Chocolate Cake looks so good. Maybe they could box it up for me?" She felt greedy.

"Sure! You should have some celebratory cake." Brad grinned broadly.

Millie felt her jaw drop. Is that what he thought of her?

His eyebrows rose. "That's all right, we had our celebratory cake last night." The waitress came while she was still processing this information, and Millie heard herself placing the order.

Keith offered to pay her bill later when the checks came around, quickly seconded by Brad. They conferred with each other briefly. Millie wasn't surprised to see Brad hang on to his money.

* * *

The sun had set by the time Millie came home. She grabbed the wrought-iron railing with both hands and pulled herself up the front steps in the dark, wishing she had thought far enough ahead to turn the porch light on when she left earlier. She paused halfway to give her stiff and aching hip a chance to rest before continuing upward to the porch door. There would be no one now to catch her should she lose her balance and fall. By the time she reached the top of the short flight, she was exhausted and felt around for one of the lawn chairs Jack kept on the enclosed porch. He would come out and sit in them whenever the

weather was warm enough, so much that the webbing in many of them was worn out to the point of breaking. Millie hoped the one she dropped into wasn't one of them. She pictured herself falling through the seat with her feet in the air and her bottom on the floor, stuck until the mailman found her in the morning. Fortunately, the creaking chair held. She sighed heavily and listened to the evening's stillness.

The India ink silhouettes of the trees were barely visible against the navy blue sky, with only one glowing star caught in the branches. Was that Venus? Probably so, since it usually was the first evening star. Venus was all alone. Millie inwardly chided herself for being maudlin as she shifted in the lawn chair for a more comfortable position and pulled her coat more tightly around herself. She wouldn't be able to sit for long out here in the cold, but she couldn't quite bring herself to go inside. Not yet.

Jack had planted two trees out front years ago in one of his splurges to improve the property value. His seedless ash tree seemed to drop seeds by the bushel, but at least it attracted the birds that came to eat them. The pin oak had greenish-yellow leaves each summer because Jack didn't want the expense of giving it the acid fertilizer and iron that it needed. Both trees grew despite his lack of attention and care, eventually growing taller than the house. This night they stood tall and naked in the

cold, shivering in the winter breeze that blew through their branches. Millie shivered with them.

The trees weren't the only things that had survived Jack's neglect and abuse. As she had seen that day, Keith had triumphed as had Brad in his own way. But then there was poor Matt. He had loved his father so much, had wanted—no, needed—his father to pay attention to him and love him. His ADHD, as they probably called it now, had needed additional attention and care that Jack rarely provided. Of the three sons, Matt had clung the tightest to Jack. Now he was showing the probable results: failed marriages, stress, loneliness, even premature aging as he tried to emulate the indifferent father he worshipped. Millie's heart hurt for him, but it seemed too late for Matt to remake himself, even if he had wanted to. She still hoped that this absolute separation from Jack might force Matt to become himself instead of an unhappy copy.

Millie checked in her pocket for the house keys and wondered how she was going to make it without Jack there. He had excluded her from his activities and withheld information about their finances and other information vital to running the household. She had no idea what bills would need to be paid. And there were the household chores that needed strength and the ability to stand up for awhile, like taking out the garbage or washing the dishes. He may not have done his chores well,

but at least they were done. She thought about the heaping bag of garbage in the kitchen that Jack had planned to haul to the trash can out back. It was too heavy for her to lift.

He would find a way to skip out of doing chores. Millie huffed at herself. It wasn't as if he had planned on having a stroke and dying like he did. His hand had held onto hers so tightly as he lay on the kitchen floor and she had coaxed him to squeeze it. *Did I wait too long to call for help?* A flicker of self-doubt and shock skittered through her mind for a moment. She had wanted to be sure it wasn't just a case of being stunned before calling the ambulance, but had she wasted valuable time? Would he still be alive today if she had gone straight to the phone? It horrified her for a moment.

But no, she didn't think so. The doctor had said that Jack's brain was bleeding too heavily for surgery. If it was bleeding that heavily, the minute she spent holding his hand wouldn't have made a difference. Would it? Probably not. No. Millie braced her hands on the lawn chair's cold, ridged aluminum armrests and pushed herself out of the chair, pushing her thoughts into a back corner of her mind. As she straightened up, the faint pops of tendons and joints rippled up her legs and back. Millie paused and hissed as her hip gave a loud pop and a jolt of hot pain. It was just as well she was going inside: it was past time for

her pain medication. It took a moment for her hip to calm down enough to take the next step.

The house key was a little hard to see in the dark, but by twisting the handful of keys and squinting, Millie could pick out the silver of its metal by way of the streetlight down on the corner. She grasped the cold doorknob in one hand and slid her thumb over the end of it until she felt the keyhole. The key's teeth clicked against the lock's inner workings as she slid it in, and the lock gave a solid clunk as the tumbler turned to unlock the door. Inside the house was filled with absolute darkness. Millie slid her hand along the rough paneling on the inside wall, feeling for the light switch.

With light, the house looked less forbidding. Instead it looked more like a stage waiting for the players to appear. Millie entered, locked the door behind her and made her way over to the worn recliner she sat in to watch television. Her hydrocodone and glass of water sat on the empty Christmas popcorn tin she used as a table by the side of the chair. Jack's personal possessions from the hospital still lay on the floor on the other side of her recliner where she had put them the day of his death. She reached over for a pill and her water.

It still seemed like Jack hadn't gone. Millie half expected to hear him clear his throat on one of his trips from the den to the bathroom upstairs, or that she would go upstairs for the night and find him dozing

in front of the television. She looked over the side of her chair and was reminded of reality. An oversized clear plastic bag sat there, its thin white drawstring hanging limp and unused. The glint of Jack's watch competed with the shine of the plastic bag around it. She picked up the sack and sorted through its contents.

The wristwatch was heavy. The stretch band was dark in between the links with dirt and grime. Millie decided that tomorrow would be the day she cleaned it. The watch was still ticking away the seconds, which seemed strange in a way. Like Jack's heart, it kept going regardless. She wondered which of Jack's sons would get it, or if they'd even want it. She laid it in her lap.

Jack's house slippers came next. The cracked brown leather was stiff but glossy, almost as if it were petrified with age. Foot powder was still caked inside, and Millie remembered how Jack would shake so much powder in each sock that there would be a haze in the air for minutes afterward. She shook her head and one corner of her mouth twitched upward.

The plastic sack looked empty now, but there was a slight weight when Millie lifted it. She turned the bag upside down and shook it. Two flesh-tone hearing aids dropped into her lap. One of them started a high, steady beep which cut a thin, high line through the stillness within the house. The hairs on Millie's scalp rose. She gingerly picked up each

hearing aid and opened the little beige door on the devices, pulling out the batteries. The beep cut off abruptly. She put the molded pieces of plastic back in the bag and slowly closed her eyes. How was she going to manage? She just felt so exhausted.

Well of course you're exhausted. You've had a long day and a lot of stress. This was no time to worry about tomorrow, but a time to rest and recharge. Handle tomorrow when it gets here. Millie leaned her head back and elevated the footrest on the recliner. Her legs tingled with relief. *Ahh. This feels so good I might just sleep here tonight.* There should be some people who could help her move to Assisted Living if she needed to go, and hopefully someone would buy this old money pit of Jack's to take it off her hands. If even the trees outside could manage without Jack, then she should be able to too, somehow.