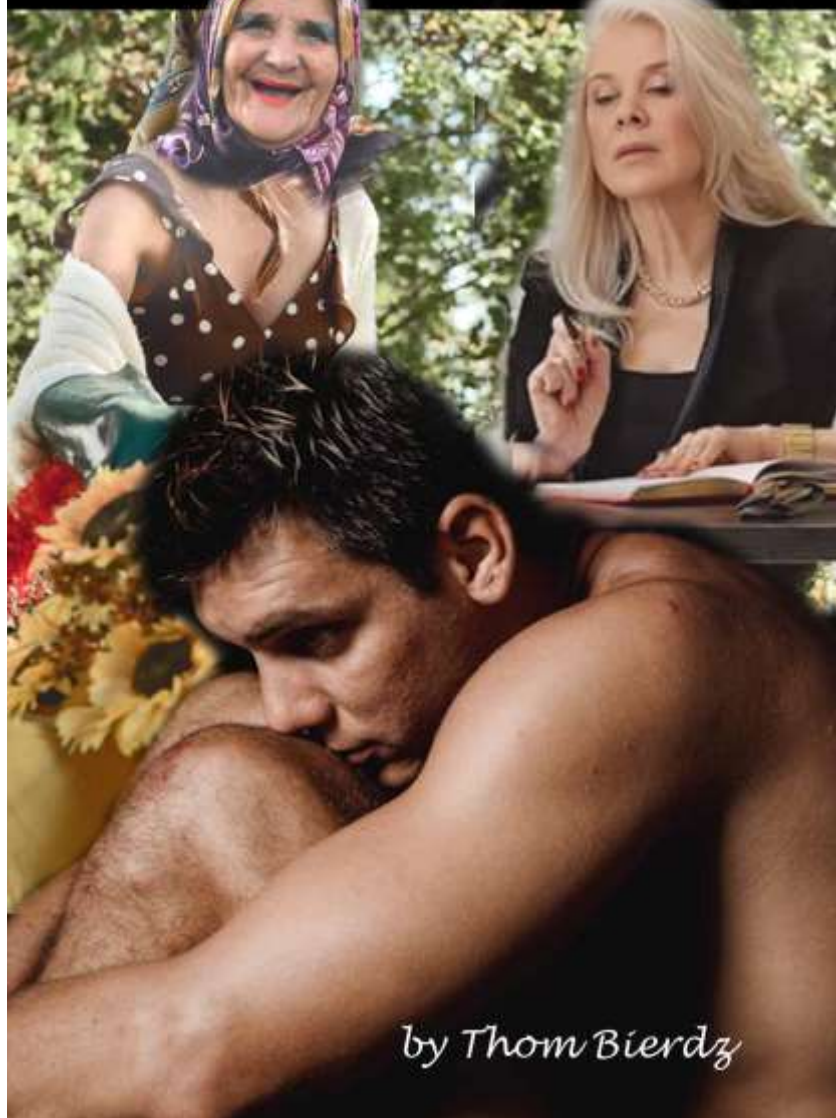


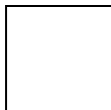
The Man Toy



by Thom Bierdz

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Chapter 1: Monday

Even in the cold of night, the freezing of night, Sunbar County was perhaps the most beautiful area in North Carolina. Evergreens, oaks and elms forested a hundred square miles except sporadic lots built up with lodge homes and Victorian manors, the latter lining the pristine private beach.

A rare chill iced the winding forest roads this first morning of September, but almost no one seemed to mind – residents slept warmly by heaters or fireplaces and birds cuddled in the their nests, squirrels in their tree forts and packs of coyotes in piles under fallen brush.

The lone entity suffering in this chill was perhaps the most beautiful man alive, as evidenced by his chiseled face, thick dark haunted eyebrows above olive eyes, and naked muscular hairy body scrunching into dawn's first sun ray through the prison window.

“It’s freezing!” he shouted.

A stern voice shot back, “Freeze.”

“Come on, I’m going to freeze to death! Where is my mattress? Give me my clothes.”

The towering guard, Sal, intimidating in size but not in looks with crooked eyes and upturned piglike nose, dropped an orange prison jumpsuit between the bars.

The beautiful young inmate scurried his nakedness across the cement floor to grab the clothes.

But Sal grabbed it first, laughed and wiped the grimy wet floor with it.

The helpless captive asked, “What did I ever do to you?”

Sal lectured, “Prison ain’t ‘spose to be comfortable.”

The beautiful inmate resumed sitting in a ball, shivering, rocking into an inch of sunlight that reached to him through the barred window.

Sal continued, “Prison is ‘spose to punish.”

“The punishment is being here. We’re not supposed to be tortured.”

“You deserve food, clothes and mattresses? Can I get you a room service menu?” Sal laughed and pissed on the jumpsuit, then kicked it near the prisoner. “Wear it and I might put you on laundry duty today.”

Disgusted by Sal and the urine, the freezing man nevertheless put on the jumpsuit, then resumed rocking in the widening sun ray.

The wide steel prison building and the bulletproof glass guard towers reflected the sunrise across ten miles of oaks, leaves turning orange, to the line of Victorian manors facing the windy beach.

Cute blond Pete, covering his huge blue eyes from the sun glare, hummed like optimistic youths in their twenties do as he lugged his heavy mailbag along the beach walkway.

As he opened the picket gate to the sparkling white Victorian, his eyes searched addresses on the mail and did not notice he was being spied on.

Peeking through curtains was a gorgeous mature blonde in a white silk robe, Lilith Jones. Old enough to be his mother, possibly even his grandmother, she undressed him with her eyes matching the color of the harsh ocean waves. As she opened the door, she smiled with teeth so perfect they must have been paid for.

“Lilith Jones?” he asked, friendly. He spoke with a Mid-Western accent and handed her a small box and letters.

Lilith spoke slowly with a Southern accent, “We met in the charity bakery where I volunteer on weekends, Pete. You had recently relocated.”

“For gosh sakes, were you the gal who kept fussing with the decorations when I picked up my wedding cake?”

“The bells on the cake were supposed to ring. I must’ve smudged icing in them.”

“Who needs a cake to ring anyway? Hey, this letter is for an Officer Jon Jones?”

“Jon just left for work.”

“Have a nice day, Mrs. Jones.”

As Pete turned to leave and continue his route, Lilith froze in place and forced her smile, but wrinkles suddenly gripped her sixty-two year-old eyes. She felt cut in the heart – just by Pete walking away so businesslike. Would it have killed him to engage in some polite conversation, maybe join her for tea? *I need to tutor this boy in Southern hospitality*, she thought to

herself, watching his athletic body bounce up the beach path. She watched him so long she went into a daze, stuck in memories of her being in her twenties, when everything was so much easier.

Wrestling the wind to close her front door, Lilith threw the letters on the entrance desk and ripped open the box to find a set of silver forks. Her face lit up in expectation.

Placing the new forks on her baroque antique dining room table, her face wrinkled again seeing they did not match the beautiful pewter Civil War cutlery that was already there, a complete set minus the forks. Lilith stabbed the old maple table with one of the new forks, in an effort to punish both the fork and the table, then screamed in frustration. She stomped to the door, opened it, her chin-length blond tresses tangling in the wind, screamed, then stomped back to the table, where she froze in place. Only her finger pointing at the forks moved, shaking.

Just then her macho husband Jon entered, hiking up the holster on his police outfit. This uniform of dominance, and his fast frightening movements gave him an illusion of power, certainly absent from his average frame and face and sparse silver mustache. “I forgot my gun ... Why you shaking?”

She pointed at the forks.

He marched to her, looked at the forks and lightly smacked her head, “Those forks don’t match, Lil! The Women Society gonna be here tomorrow.”

“They’re going to laugh at me.”

“I’ll join ‘em. These forks are bad copies! Get the real ones from Doris!”

“She won’t give them up, Jon!”

“Just take ‘em from the retard!”

“I can’t just swipe them from her!”

“Don’t you raise your voice to me!” he hollered, slapping her to the floor.

She shrieked in pain but like a rag doll did not fight back.

He growled over her, “Who pay for your sister’s shack and all property taxes and all utilities and all groceries?”

“You do ... We thank you, Jon.”

Her submission appeased him initially, but left him frustrated because he wanted to fight. The bigger the fight, the more he scared her, the better his days seemed to be. He grabbed his gun from the desk, holstered it and left, slamming the door loudly, hoping to make her tremble.

But she just lay like a rag doll or a discarded aged Barbie.

Gradually the sun climbed across Lilith’s roof then crept across the forest with dozens of rustic homes to reach an isolated two-story shack hidden under giant Ponderosa pines. The shack was so old it leaned, and the gray paint peeled. A scarecrow in a green flannel coat and an ominous dead oak tree flanked a winding garden of flowers, kale, squash and pumpkins.

In the center, crazy Doris Adelson gave an imaginary press conference. The frumpy, plain woman wore a torn gray sundress

which seemed older than her fifty years. Doris removed ruby red lipstick from her ripping pocket and applied way too much to her wrinkling thin lips. She looked, acted and sounded a bit like Baby Jane Hudson, “I’m not used to so many reporters!,” she pointed in five different directions as if the reporters actually existed. “You’re all here to see my beauty? This is so unexpected to win Miss Universe ... for the nineteenth year in a row! ... Oh look! It’s the last tomato of the season!! Hi there!”

She picked the one tomato, petted it and softly kissed it. “I won’t have another for eight months,” she sighed.

Suddenly her mood shifted and she twirled in glee then pocketed the tomato, looking around, pretending to grab something, “Are these balloons for me? A thousand helium balloons all for me? These must have cost you a fortune! I love balloons. How thoughtful.”

She attached the scarecrows’ Velcro hands on her waist, then she wrestled them off, giggling, “Jon Junior, I’m too busy with my beauty duties to kiss you! They demand I fly all over the universe because I am Miss Universe ... Here I step into the airplane!”

She pretended to step into a plane, then she stepped down. “Oh, look, now I am walking out on the planet Venus to greet my fans and publicist ... People, fans, fanatics, I can’t stay too long because it’s so hot.”

She continued her fantasy unaware Pete’s mail truck had stopped in the dirt driveway. He got out with mail and as he walked to toss it on the sinking shack porch he dialed and spoke into his cell phone, “Babe, I’m in the dirt driveway of a nutcase

who's talking to a scarecrow!"

From a modest cabin bed, Pete's young wife talked into the phone, her other hand smoothing her wavy red hair, "Why did we move here?! Be careful! I hear witches live in those woods!"

Pete laughed and got back into his truck and drove away. He did not notice Doris running after his truck, holding out her prized tomato.

She yelled, "Hey! You want my tomato?! Won't have another until next year!"

Lonely Doris watched the truck disappear into the distance.

Chapter 2: Tuesday

Pete's mail truck zigzagged through the forest to deliver packages to rustic homes. Eventually his vehicle slowed approaching the intimidating steel prison, stopping at the guard house.

A tall bearded man in uniform blocked the gate, "Mister, you got to take out and present your I.D.."

From his dashboard drawer, Pete handed him a paper and driver's license, "Hi, I just moved to Sunbar County. I'm Pete."

"Welcome to Sunbar County, Pete. Follow the road to our mail door."

The guard buzzed open the gate then waved Pete through.

Pete parked at the prison mail door. He exited his vehicle, opened the truck back and removed a large cloth bag.

Turning around he was met by a shorter mail guard fingering a gun who directed, "Just drop it there and wait for our bag."

Pete did and nervously waited.

Eventually an obese prisoner wearing an orange jumpsuit carried out a heavy cloth bag. Pete could not see that hiding behind him were two other prisoners.

Suddenly one kicked the short officer and wrestled for his pistol.

From lookout towers, other guards immediately fired bullets down at the offenders.

Panicking, Pete jumped into his truck and sped away, zooming out the gate which fortunately happened to be mostly open. As his mail truck careened into the forest, panicked Pete clumsily dialed his cell phone.

His wife answered.

Pete could barely get out the words, “Babe! I almost got killed picking up mail from the jail! Criminals tried to escape!”

“Oh no! Are you all right??”

Pete said he was lucky to be out of danger not realizing that he was in a very unlucky and dangerous situation. Hidden in the back of his truck were two prisoners, the beautiful inmate still wearing the soiled jumpsuit and Mike, a bald older muscular man with teardrop tattoos indicating two murder victims.

Mike whispered, “When he stops, I strangle him.”

“Strangle him?? Why kill him??”

Mike smirked, “Why not??”

The beautiful inmate’s sensitive eyes winced, aggrieved at the thought of an innocent man dying.

Hyperventilating but intent on continuing his route, Pete stopped near a log cabin. He exited then opened the back of the truck and grabbed mail, not noticing that just inches away the escaped inmates were ducking behind boxes.

Mike quietly grabbed a tire jack to fatally aim at Pete but the beautiful inmate stopped him with his large, strong hands. Unaware, Pete walked toward the log cabin with letters to deliver, passing a clothesline with garments whipping in the chilly morning wind.

Taking advantage of Pete’s absence, the beautiful man

quietly leaped out of the truck and pulled angry Mike with him, behind tall bushes, out of Pete's eyeline. When Pete returned to his truck, he drove away.

Mike itched his bald head and grunted, "This cabin looks abandoned. I'm going in."

With a rock he broke a window and busted in.

The beautiful inmate stayed outside and removed his foul-smelling prison jumpsuit - which had a paper tucked into the sleeve. He buried the jumpsuit in dirt, then naked, the sun caressing his Herculean body covered in sweat and dark body hair, he shuffled to the clothesline and stole jeans, a blue shirt, underwear and a knapsack. Hurriedly putting on the stolen clothes, he heard a police car with siren and saw flashing lights so he ducked behind bushes.

Miles up the road, the police car pulled over Pete. Two officers searched his vehicle. Not finding anything, they scolded Pete and just drove away.

In the middle of a mile of pine trees, the dilapidated two-story shack had a worn tall wood ladder leaning on the peeling gray exterior. Crazy Doris balanced atop, flinging vibrant blue paint on the sorry excuse for a home. The fierce wind rocked the ladder and bled the paint on the window, on her old sundress, on her face.

She didn't see the beautiful escaped prisoner walk slowly to

her, holding up his loose jeans way too big, his muscular pecs busting out of the shirt way too small, a denim knapsack on his back. Suddenly his big hands grabbed the shaking ladder.

She looked down and shrieked, “Ahhhh! Stop shaking my ladder!”

“I’m stopping it from shaking, ma’am.”

Frightened, she climbed down.

He gently backed away with his hands in the air, smiling as friendly as he could manage.

She scowled, kicking off her sandals, her mangled toes gripping dead grass. Though he was much taller than she, he didn’t seem dangerous anymore to baffled Doris because of his perfect smile and compassionate eyes.

She implored, “Who in God’s circus are you?”

“I’m ... Cody. Who are you?”

“With that dimpled face and tall body you must be a model but I ain’t seen you on magazine covers. I’m a model always on every magazine cover. Every one. Constant. Doris Adelson. Did the agency send you?”

“What? What agency?”

“The modeling agency, you crack whore,” she swiveled, turned, smiled, winked and tried to pose seductively.

His eyes enlarged, realizing she was nuts.

She enthusiastically sashayed away like a runway model, turned seductively, sashayed back, then shook her head as if in a shampoo commercial.

“Uh ... any other models here?” his low voice trembled, looking around.

“Why do you want to know? Do we need more??”

“No. Just curious.”

“Of course you are. Curious to see how supermodel star Doris Adelson lives. Normally, my bodyguards would throw you out! But since they’re sailing the Antarctic to find me sunken treasures, follow me inside.”

Cody hesitated, but reasoned *I’m so much bigger than her, she can’t possibly hurt me. She isn’t any danger ...* however stepping on the sunken porch after her he reevaluated, thinking *Damn, this porch could cave in any minute.*

That old porch bench could, too.

Yikes, The whole crooked flimsy shack could crash down in this wind.

Nevertheless, he felt compelled to follow her inside the small living room with peeling yellowing vintage wallpaper.

Doris posed like a gameshow model next to a dated pink plaid recliner, then over a ripped red plaid couch, then besides a stone fireplace mantel displaying her tomato and an axe. She hummed, revealing a missing upper and lower tooth, as she showed off her old pine armoire hiding a 1980’s television.

He chuckled, “Wow, this TV is about forty years old. You’re in your whole little world out here, aren’t you? Away from everything ... Nobody knows you’re way out here?”

She tiptoed to the window and peeked out, “Of course they know! Paparazzi hide in the bushes and trees! Hounding me for magazine covers. International. I’m Doris Adelson!”

“Sure ... but except for paparazzi, you can hide out here, safe from the world, huh?” he inhaled deep, exhaled, relaxed on

the sofa, smiling.

She marched to the mantle and picked up the axe.

An axe?? What the fuck are you going to do with an axe, he thought.

His whole muscular body tensed forward reminiscent of when he rocked on the prison floor. His eyes squinted in fear as she neared, aiming the axe in his direction.

“Hey now,” he cautioned.

She tapped the axe lightly on his hand which was shielding his face.

She scowled, “How do I know you’re not an alien trying to abduct me?”

“No, no, I swear I am not,” he assured gently, “How about putting the axe down?”

She remained miffed and frozen for thirty seconds, then took the axe to another room.

He sat on the sofa, not knowing what to do.

In the bright yellow kitchen with faded teapot wallpaper, Doris axed the ice built up in her freezer. Cody peeked in just as she pulled out pork chops.

“I’m not gonna pretend,” she shouted, “... that I have a fireman upstairs in my bedroom waiting to take me to prom. I’m uninvolved at the present time. You can call me Dor or Doris. I’ll call you Brown Eyes.”

“But I have green eyes.”

“Well you shouldn’t. Your hair is too dark. You’re meant to have brown eyes. Someone might have switched them. You can’t trust people.”

“Okay, call me Brown Eyes or whatever you like, ma’am.”

“Cut the ma’am crap. We’re the same doggone age. About thirty, am I right?”

His eyebrows raised in disbelief – *could she actually think she’s thirty?? She’s got to be at least fifty.* “You are thirty??”

Doris stated innocently, “I’m whatever age you are.”

As Doris cooked their meal, Cody pretended to watch her, patronizing her simple mind with flattery. However his deep-set eyes spent more time surveying the messy kitchen interior and more importantly, out the crooked sink window, glancing for cops.

It wasn’t until Cody shared the couch with Doris an hour later that he was able to relax and enjoy her delicious meal.

He sincerely complimented her, “You’re a damn good cook.”

“Betsy can’t cook for you.”

“Who? Who is Betsy?”

“Betsy Webber, only fat cheerleader at Sunbar High. I have a xylophone if you want music,” she smiled with pork in her teeth, gesturing lovingly to a child’s toy xylophone.

“How far away is the city?”

“A twenty minute drive.”

“Not by car. I mean jogging.”

“You want the coyotes to eat your nose?,” she spewed in

disbelief, “They ate Jon Junior’s nose.”

By the time they finished eating and washing dishes and took turns playing the xylophone, the sun was setting. She proudly gave him a sunset tour of her illustrious garden.

Doris pointed to her scarecrow in green flannel shirt and specifically his ripped hand-sewn scarecrow nose. She spoke with sympathy, “Jon Junior sung something to piss off the coyotes so they ate off his nose. Coyotes hate lyrics that rhyme. Try not to rhyme around coyotes.”

Cody’s gentle hands caressed the scarecrow’s hand-stitched face, “You sewed his face?”

“I can sew anything. Maybe tomorrow I’ll take in those loose clown pants for you and let out your shirt. You shrunk your shirt by washing in hot water. You don’t know anything. No man knows a damn thing.”

He shrugged and followed her to another scarecrow in a business suit with a different hand-stitched face, lying in the garden between growing squash.

Doris explained wildly gesturing, “Paul Junior was my first husband. That’s Sal Junior laying over there in the police uniform. David Junior’s laying across the garden way over there. They don’t get along. Jealousy. Over me.”

“You did all this? By yourself?”

“Gypsy Mother lends a hand.”

“Your mother lives here?”

“She’s passed on to a higher place. Same as the vegetarian dinosaurs. Dead alcoholics, the whole lot, risen to a better place,” she reasoned, looking up to the clouds and presumedly a

Heaven. She smiled noticing the three-quarter moon, “Oh Brown Eyes! Isn’t it the prettiest moon that was ever invented? You can sleep in my bed with me.”

“Gee. Thanks. Yeah guess I shouldn’t jog home in the dark with rhyme-phobic coyotes out there. Maybe I could sleep ... on your porch bench?”

“There’s a greater chance of your wish coming true if you wish on a three-quarter moon.”

“Dear three-quarter moon, can I sleep on the porch?”

A coyote howled in the distance.

Doris pinched Cody’s cheek, “I think that was a yes. I’ll go get you a pillow and blanket but if coyotes come, don’t you rhyme any words at all. They’ll eat you to the bone.”

True, sleeping on the rocky porch could be dangerous – not from coyotes, Cody thought, but from police - but he decided it was less dangerous than sharing the bed with the crazy lady.

Once Doris brought him out a hand-sewn pillow and quilt, he was surprised to fall asleep quickly; his worries only biting at his brain lightly. As the moon disappeared behind dark clouds, his magnificent physique and chiseled face breathed deeply in dreams - which inevitably turned to nightmares. His face became pained as he mumbled in his sleep, unaware that a frightening shadow inched over him.

It was Doris, studying every perfect inch of him. She tenderly touched his beard stubble, then his big hairy hand, gently, then as gently, she removed the quilt.

She carefully unbuttoned his tight denim shirt.

Still deep in sleep he did not know she removed his shirt

completely, crawling her tiny fingers under his massive back to free the material. Just as diligently, she unbuttoned his pants and removed them, ogling his muscled legs and tight abs in loose underwear which would have been easy to remove. She wanted to, but felt it wrong, dirty, she felt that people in love like them should remove their own underclothes ... so she left on his briefs, tucking the quilt around him up to his neck to protect him from the cold breeze.

Under the porch bench lay Cody's mysterious knapsack, which she felt she had a right to intrude.

Tiptoeing it inside, she searched its contents by candlelight, finding only an old paper. She read it aloud to herself, "I can't get a hold of you from prison, and if I could, would you still be twenty-two? Making my motorcycle do circles in Motel Eight parking lots?"

On the paper was a drawing of a young pretty blonde, titled "Marie."

Perplexed, Doris tucked the paper back in the knapsack, and the knapsack back under the porch bench, where the Greek god sent to her mumbled in sleep, his strong manly arms clinging to her quilt. Oh how she wished he was clinging to her, touching her, loving her.

But it would happen tomorrow, she rationalized.

Across town, in the middle of the night at the Victorian

manor, only one upstairs bedroom lamp glowed. In their king-size bed of silk sheets, sexy Lilith, in full make-up, fingered Jon's sunken chest.

He swatted her hand, "Stop it."

She pulled her hand back and deliberated, "Paying for this home, and Doris, is too much pressure on you, Jon. There's a position open at Neiman-Marcus--"

"You ain't getting no job, Lilly."

"But it's not fair to you that I'm so dependent on you."

He slapped her face.

She covered her eyes, hiding tears.

He grumbled, "I don't wanna hear your pathetic whimpers."

Still covering her face, she wriggled out of bed and shuffled to the mirrored bathroom.

There she stared at her swelling cheek.

A steely cold look took over her dispirited blue eyes.

Her shaking fingers pulled the door to close so Jon could not hear her.

She straightened her posture, staring at herself, took a deep breath, then circled both her index fingers around both her eyes and concentrated as if performing an occult ritual, "My one wish ... is he could never hit me again. Not ever again. My one wish ... If I get one wish."

Chapter 3: Wednesday

In the morning, at the elaborately set dining room table, Jon ignored Lilith and her strawberry pancakes. Agitated, she lifted his heavy revolver off the table and pointed it at the windows, then the door, then to get a reaction, at him. He ignored her. She followed him with the gun to the door, handed it to him as he left for work.

He tucked it in his holster at the picket gate passing cute, athletic, blond Pete who was humming, approaching with mail.

Pete beamed, “Good morning. Are you Mr. Jones?”

Jon ignored Pete’s greeting so instead of handing him the mail, Pete continued to the front door which was being laggardly opened by Lilith, her perfect teeth smiling sweetly.

Pete smiled in response, “Good morning, Mrs. Jones.”

He handed her a letter.

“Good morning, Pete. You need to come in for sweet tea. Sugar is energy.”

“Wish I had time but I have to get on with my “ruute.” Have a good day.”

He turned but Lilith grabbed his shoulder, rotating him back. After making sure her husband was long gone, she flirted, “Ruute? Pete, in North Carolina, we pronounce it “rowt.” I’m rather an expert on accents. Say “Your skin’s like porcelain, Lilith.””

“Your skin’s like porcelain.”

Her other hand inched to his other shoulder, “Pete, you’re a Midwest farm boy.”

“You’re right.”

“I had a lover from Michigan.”

“That’s where I’m from.”

“You Michigan men know how to ... give tender massages. And ... receive ... them.”

Her fingers caressed him.

He blushed.

Her robe slightly opened.

They both noticed – but only he was bothered by it.

Shocked and unable to speak, he turned and left.

Lilith whispered loudly, “I was making perfectly polite conversation!”

“I’m married!” he stammered.

“I am, too! How dare you!” She slammed the door and took her mail inside, humiliated and frustrated.

On the shack porch, Cody woke chilled, surprised to be on a porch bench, and even more so to be only in his underwear. Hearing a noise, he stumbled to see Doris atop her ladder wearing a halter and skirt made of paper towels and duct tape.

It wasn’t pretty.

“Jesus. What is she wearing?,” he mumbled to himself, his voice even more low first thing in the morning.

Unaware he was under her ladder, she continued her task of painting free-form swirls on her shack, inadvertently painting over flies, leaves and caterpillars. Even from ten feet below he could see her overly made-up face, now with penciled giant high eyebrows.

He cleared his throat, “Good morning, Doris. I don’t remember where I put my clothes.”

“Good morning Brown Eyes! I sewed your shirt bigger and your pants smaller,” she pointed to where they rested on a pile of wood.

He anxiously dressed as she hurried down, inadvertently splashing paint on her legs.

“Hey,” he exclaimed, trying on the garments, “These do fit better. Thanks.”

“There’s waffles warming for us in my stove.”

He tucked his shirt into his pants, “Oh. Thanks. Did I tell you I’m a banker? With your bank, by the way.”

“I don’t have a bank,” she took a lemon slice from a window sill and squeezed it onto her hair then winked dramatically, “I figure I might as well lighten my hair for a change.”

“A lot of people keep money under their mattresses but you should let me put your money in the bank’s safe.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Were you ever touchy-feely on Betsy Webber?”

“Do you want me to have been, Dor?”

“Betsy Webber’s the only cheerleader that went for boys in

bad clothes. She's a smoker. She's done evil things with truckers for a couple Viceroy's. Don't even get me started on what she did with her mouth to a football player for half a bag of Doritos."

His eyebrows rose and he couldn't help but chuckle.

Not the response she wanted.

She snarled and marched into her house.

Cody followed her inside and as she moved pillows on the couch, he opened and inspected the old pine armoire. Between jars of buttons and sewing needles there was a framed photo of a gypsy mother and two girls, one about fourteen years-old and the other two years-old.

Doris noticed his gaze and pried, "You like blonde girls, don't you??"

"Blonde girls? What do you mean?"

Staring at him, she shimmied to him, then back to the mantle where she kissed Gypsy Tarot Cards. The sun's rays shimmered on the crystals alongside them.

"Your last girlfriend was blonde," she teased, remembering the drawing in the knapsack.

"Wow. Yeah. Oh – are you one of those gypsies or fortune tellers that this town is famous for? ... Or a witch?"

The ends of her mouth curled in smile, but she shrugged, suddenly angry, then had another mood change and twirled into the kitchen.

He tracked her into the kitchen.

She pointed at a chair for him to sit, and he did quietly, as she brought them waffles, narrating every step of her boring

baking process.

She was an amazing cook, the best ever, Cody thought – or perhaps anything tasted delicious after prison food.

An old yellow phone on the wall rung.

Cody grew uncomfortable, “Who’s calling you?”

“Pay no attention to it. It’s a wrong number.”

“How do you know that?”

She debated, taking another bite of waffle, “I’m psychic. Do you like my forks?”

He admired the pewter Civil War fork she waved in front of his deep-set green eyes, the ones missing from Lilith’s set, “Sure. Nice old forks.”

“Nice?” “Old?” They are antique treasures,” she huffed. “One hundred and forty years old. Each fork is worth a thousand dollars.”

She delicately placed the fork down and abruptly stood up, chewing her last bite, “I got painting to do.”

The phone rang again.

She rolled her eyes at it as she left.

“Hey, Doris. Forget Betsy Webber. Now that I know she smokes I’m over that slut.”

She peeked her head back in the kitchen, blushing, smiling.

He winked.

Barely containing her joy and thunderous heartbeat, she disappeared.

Cody studied the forks then searched all the cabinets and cookie jars for money - to no avail. Hearing the sound of an automobile, he peeked through the kitchen window to see a cop

car slow down ... then ... park.

Color draining from his face, Cody opened a door next to the refrigerator to hide in a closet, but seeing it was a basement, he tiptoed down the creaky stairs.

An old washer and dryer were on one side of the damp basement, a ripped denim couch under a high window on the other. Cody lay on the couch, twisting his face into the warm ray of sunlight, "Nice! A basement with sun."

He recalled being in the prison cell just yesterday morning when he was shivering, denied clothes and bedding. He pleaded, "I'm going to freeze to death!"

The cruel guard replied, "Good. Killers should freeze."

Killer.

Cody hated being called a killer.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his tense furry brows with his fingers.

Upstairs, an African-American cop knocked on Doris's front door.

Startled to have a guest, she fluffed her hair then creaked the front door slightly ajar, "What you want? My TV too loud!? It's not even on, you hypochondriac!"

The cop recoiled and took a step back, "Anyone else here?"

Doris raised her high-drawn brows, imagining he was trying to seduce her, "I can defend myself even if my bodyguards are at the North Pole."

He took in her absurd make-up and peeked around her heaving bosom to scan the living room, "No one is here?"

"No one is here?! Am I invisible!?", she shot back, enraged,

“You cops need to stop bothering innocent people like me.”

Figuring that was a good idea, he retreated back to his car.

She opened the door fully to further enlighten the officer, “When you want to ask a girl out, you bring her bowling shoes! You don’t know anything! Men don’t know one thing!”

She slammed the door, then turning around saw Cody entering the kitchen from the basement.

“What were you doing in my basement?”

He instinctively grabbed a knife from the table. They both were startled. He moved it to his face, to pick his teeth, “I got lost, was looking for the bathroom.”

“Men don’t know where bathrooms are. Men don’t know anything. It’s on the second floor because toilets flush water down, not up, you alcoholic.”

“Who was at the door?”

“Some cop. A chocolate one. Wanted me to go bowling with him but didn’t bring me bowling shoes.”

The phone rang.

Cody looked frightened.

The phone rang again. He pointed at it with his knife.

Across town in the Victorian manor, Lilith, in a tight peach pantsuit, finished setting the formal dining room table. Holding her dialing iPhone with her neck, her nervous fingers straightened her Civil War place settings. The only thing

missing were the forks. The latest bad copies had to make do as entrée forks.

Jon snuck up behind her and grabbed the phone, suspicious, “Who you talkin’ to?”

“I was calling Doris.”

“Or some lover boy?”

“Of course not, you’re my lover boy,” she said, forcing a smile.

He glared at her.

She hid her fright and broke eye-contact to adjust the vase of sunflowers.

The doorbell rang. Lilith anxiously welcomed in six society women. If there was anyone sixty-two years of age who was thinner and prettier than Lilith, it was haughty Mary-Ellen in a red velvet dress.

Jon whistled at her and stroked her long brown wavy hair, “Mary-Ellen! Prettiest lady in Sunbar.”

Of course Lilith heard. Of course Lilith ignored it.

Mary-Ellen bat her thick fake lashes, “Says the most handsome cop in North Carolina.”

Mary-Ellen kissed Jon’s cheek.

Jon sighed, “If you wasn’t married to my best friend.”

Mary-Ellen giggled an obnoxious giggle, “If you weren’t married to my best friend.”

Mary-Ellen hugged Lilith, “Girl, did you put on weight?”

Lilith was mortified, “I don’t think so. Have I really?”

Jon pinched Lilith’s butt, “She packed on a bit.”

Mary-Ellen stepped back, “Or it might be the peach color.”

Lilith blushed, “I suppose I do usually wear darker colors. Maroons, pecans, royal blues.”

Jon rudely clapped to get attention then pointed the group to the dining room chairs.

The heaviest woman, Betsy Webber, stopped to whisper to Lilith, “You’re prettier than Mary-Ellen in every color.”

Lilith hugged Betsy in gratitude, nearly in tears, “Betsy Webber, what would I do without you?”

“No reason to ever think about it. I’m always here for you, Lil. Lunch smells terrific.”

The woman with the largest hat clutched her pearls, “Jon and Lilith, oh my. What an amazing home you have. Love love love the marble floor.”

Lilith felt validated, “Oh thank you! We do love it. Don’t we, Jon?”

“We do. Cost me a fortune. I’ll give you a tour of the whole thing later. But I’m over hungry now.”

Lilith took her cue, “Ladies, please be seated.”

Betsy marveled at the table set with sunflower fabric napkins, “The table’s up to par, Lil. The Women’s Society is never coming to my place, that’s for darn sure,” Betsy whipped out a Viceroy and was the last to sit.

Jon lit her cigarette. She smiled politely, as did he, but anyone watching could tell they didn’t care much for each other.

The tall woman in a long dress and corsage pointed, “Heavens glory! Is this the antique silverware I’ve been dying to see?”

Mary-Ellen responded over-dramatically, “It is. The Civil

War set, except for the forks.”

Mary-Ellen scrutinized the new fork, grimaced, catching the attention of the woman in lace who asked, “What happened to the forks?”

Jon lied, “Lilith ain’t unpacked them.”

Mary-Ellen stretched out her hands adorned with flashy bracelets as she stroked Lilith’s chin, “What do you do with all your time, Sweetness?” then she whispered to the guests as if it was gossip, “She only volunteers a few hours a week at the charity bakery.”

Jon cut in, “No wife of mine needs a job. Real estate been very good to me.”

Mary-Ellen ogled Jon in admiration, “Jon’s a mogul.”

Betsy rolled her eyes having quite enough of this pretense, “I don’t think owning this and a duplex makes him a mogul, does it?”

“I own more than that,” Jon defied, shooting her a dirty look – which she returned.

The tall woman yawned, “In any event it is so nice to meet people of standard.”

Mary-Ellen patted the woman’s hand, “We feel the same way about you ladies.”

Jon pushed Lilith’s back, “Now get the salmon, Lil. Ladies, you’re gonna love it if Lil didn’t burn it. She can burn oatmeal. I didn’t marry her for her cooking.” He laughed, expecting the others to, but only Mary-Ellen did.

Like a Stepford wife, Lilith kissed Jon on the cheek then walked toward the kitchen. She remembered a joke she had

rehearsed and as she turned back to say it, she discovered she was the joke. Jon was secretly stroking Mary-Ellen's leg under the table. Mary-Ellen's hand was encouraging him.

Detouring her shock and nausea into the brightly-lit kitchen, Lilith vomited in the copper sink. Dizzy, she washed her mouth then forced herself to remove the salmon from the oven and place it on a platter.

In her wild unruly garden, Doris's hand covered the eyes of Jon Junior the scarecrow, "Stop. Staring. At. Me."

She didn't hear Cody slowly approach her back, picking his teeth with the knife, then pointing it at her, "Phone keeps ringing. Who do you think is calling?"

Startled, she turned around and looked down at the knife pointing to her bosom, "Told you it's a wrong number."

"I gotta go. Gotta get to town and find someone who can pay a handyman."

"You can stay here for free," she stepped nearer her dream man, the only thing separating them was a six inch blade.

"I need fifty bucks to catch a train out of state," he confided, "No one around here will pick up a hitchhiker."

"Not with a prison up the road and a forest full of warlocks!" she pointed to her shack, "See how crooked my house is getting?"

"Yeah," he turned to look, inadvertently also moving the

knife is the direction of her house.

“So I’m making it straighter,” she grinned.

“By painting sections?”

“You don’t notice it’s leaning when there are swirls.”

He thought it best just to humor her insanity, “Okay.”

“But I got three more sides to swirl. You help swirl for a day or two and I can fix to pay you for it,” she rubbed her fingers, making the international money sign, then walked to the shack.

He followed obediently.

Doris reviewed, “So you need fifty dollars for a week’s painting?”

“For one day. I’m only staying one day. I’ll hike out in the morning.”

No, she thought, you have to stay. How do I get you to stay?

“Ten dollars a day. I hardly have any money at all.”

“Aw come on. You said those forks are worth a fortune.”

“Five dollars an hour.”

“Minimum wage is way more.”

Overwhelmed and panicky, she paced then acquiesced, “Ten dollars an hour.”

“Sold. I’ll work so long and hard I’ll be starving later. Now what are you gonna fix your painter man for dinner?”

Her lips curled into a smile and her heart beat fast, “It’ll be a surprise!” She quickly grabbed the knife from him and swished inside.

He inched to the ladder at the side of the house, picked up the paint can and climbed the rickety tall ladder, to the very top

- then risked his life turning around, no hands on the ladder. His handsome face crushed in worry as his deep olive eyes surveyed a hundred miles of forest tree tops. He closed those magnificent eyes and his Herculean body went limp, willing to end his life, to fall to his death, perhaps a death he deserved, mumbling to himself, “None of this means anything without you, Marie.”

The ladder shook, springing open his eyes to see below him was escaped convict Mike.

Cody looked terrified and whispered loudly, “What are you doing here?!”

He climbed down.

Mike was confused, “I was ‘bout to ask you the same thing. You get hired to paint?”

“Yes. But she can’t see you.”

“No one saw me. You think I’m a fool?”

“Mike, you have to go somewhere else.”

“Relax, asshole. I’m not gonna ruin your mark. Just offering to go partners.”

“No, sorry, Mike. I got this by myself.”

Infuriated, Mike nodded, then spit in Cody’s face and punched Cody in the gut, “Okay, I’m leaving, but you owe me!”

Mike marched off into the forest, fully visible via the kitchen window, but Doris didn’t see him as she was too busy making a cake. Once it was in the oven she danced upstairs to her bedroom and sat in front of her little mirrored vanity. She was Cinderella and in need of a ball gown, wasn’t she? – so her Prince Charming would woo her through their next meal. Exhilarated she jumped up, ran to her closet and from a basket

grabbed a handful of many dusty pairs of torn pantyhose that she had been saving for a rainy day. This was that special day. She excitedly began to sew them together with her outdated pedal sewing machine.

Outside, her King Of Hearts painted neon blue swirls on her crooked gray shack. He was shirtless and enjoying the afternoon heat, unaware of her flamboyant entrance below his ladder.

Doris touched her heart, “Look what you did!! I’ve never seen anything this glorious!”

He looked down at her and moaned, “Glad you like it, Dor. My back is killing me.”

He climbed down the ladder horrified at her obscenely tight see-through hose gown showing her nipples and her overly made-up face with silver glitter eye shadow.

Her fingers outlined her outfit, “I made this dress today all by myself.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it! The paparazzi in the bushes will plaster it all over magazine covers. International,” she beamed, batting her eyes at the bushes, then at him, waiting for her suitor’s flattery – which never came. Her delight turned to anger, “Now let’s head inside. I got the heater on in the kitchen.”

He grabbed his shirt from the ground and put it on and followed her inside.

Doris was irritated, “You can keep your shirt off, Cody. I said the heater is on!”

“No, I’ll keep my shirt on. I’m usually cold indoors.”

She curtsied across the living room as if being greeted by

aristocrat admirers, giving him time to look for loot in the armoire but found nothing but the old photo.

He pried, "Who are these people in the photo?"

"I'm the toddler. Gypsy Mother took the photo. She just gave me and my sister an anti-flu potion. Gypsy Mother died a week later."

"Sorry."

"She wasn't my birth-mother if you need to know. She was a waitress at the Civil War Dining Club which burned down forty years ago. Old bag was half deaf."

"I would think it would make it hard to be a waitress if you can't hear."

"She got a lot of complaints."

"Ya gotta hand it to her for trying."

"Some waitresses are real good at taking orders. Some waitresses are better at taking silverware."

"She took the silverware?"

"She stole the Civil War cutlery a piece at a time before I even grew out of the garden."

"You grew out of the garden?"

"Exactly by the dead oak tree."

"You grew out of the garden? You weren't born like the rest of us humans?"

Perturbed, her lips pursed, holding back cusswords. She marched into the kitchen. He followed, hesitantly.

Quickly, she turned to him, invading his personal space, "Why should I care what you believe?! Ask Gypsy Mother if she didn't find me growing out of the soil, my face like a rose!"

If she was alive, she'd tell ya. Stinking of whiskey. God killed off Gypsy Mother when I was two, and feeling rightfully guilty about it, God gave me the stolen dinner forks." She pointed to them on the table.

"Thanks for clearing things up."

"My bossy sister didn't get the forks."

"Your sister?"

"Lilith visits me but. She's. Boring."

Since the sun was setting, Doris lit candles on the table then pulled out a chair for Cody to sit.

He sat, groaning.

She turned off the kitchen lights.

He asked, "When's the last time you had a visitor?"

"Besides Prince Charles? I mean King Charles? He asked me to be queen. You probably saw that on the news?"

Cody humored her, "Well, tonight you have a visitor."

Doris presented the sliced prized tomato to her man, then quickly put down the cake and cut him a piece, insisting, "Take off your shirt. The heat's on."

"No. I'll keep it on. You made me a cake. You're a dream come true, you know that?"

Their eyes met.

She glowed as he lifted the treasured fork and tasted his piece of cake.

She poured him a glass of box wine, "Wash it down with this."

He chugged his portion, "This is so good! I haven't had wine in ... ten years."

“Now do you want to take off your shirt?”

“No. I’ll leave it on.”

Exasperated that he would not take it off, she plastered her hands on her hips.

He ignored her upset, “You got money for me?”

“Yes!” she turned and removed money from a cupboard canister and counted out forty dollars, “Four hours. Forty dollars for incredible paint swirling!”

“Thank you.”

“There’s more swirls to do tomorrow,” she sat to taste her piece of cake.

“Think I’ll leave the second the sun rises though.”

Her jaw dropped, “Don’t you need more money for the train?”

“Ten bucks more.”

“Then you have to stay tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll paint another hour after supper.”

“You can’t paint in the dark.”

“Why not?”

She looked at him, incredulous, “If you paint in the dark the swirls will become circles. Circles won’t make the house any straighter, will they?”

“I promise they’ll be swirls.”

She shook her finger “no” in his face, “I can’t have you ruining my property.”

“Aw come on.”

“We’ll just have to do it tomorrow. Eat some more cake. The hamburgers are almost done.”

He ate the scrumptious frosting.

She wasn't satisfied, "If it's hot, you take off your shirt."

"Again??" he shook his head at her persistence.

She enlarged her eyes as if he was making no sense.

Witnessing her neediness, he decided to capitalize on it,

"Hm ... Will you give me ten bucks?"

"Ten bucks??"

"To take off my shirt?"

Her eyes opened in shock, "You want me to pay you to take off your shirt?"

"That's right. I want ten bucks if you want me to eat with my shirt off."

Speechless, she stood up and grabbed a spatula from a drawer and from the stove retrieved hamburger patties to put on plates, handing him one, "I didn't charge you for meals, did I?! I could have!"

"You didn't. And the meals are heavenly. Thank you, Dor."

"Five."

He exhaled, "Okay. Five bucks to remove my shirt."

She sat as he slowly, teasingly, removed his shirt, one sleeve at a time.

Once it was off he finished his wine.

She poured him more, admiring his physique, "You have so many muscles, look at you!"

"I had plenty of time to lift weights."

She touched his shoulder.

He jerked away, "No touching."

Insulted, her brows lowered, "Your chest muscles. I should

touch them. You still need five bucks for the train.”

“No way. No. I don’t want you to touch me. I’m sorry.”

She thought *you don’t have to play hard to get with me. We know we’re in love*, “I can massage your sore muscles.”

“Not into it.”

“You need five more dollars. Let me ... kiss you.”

“No, nope, thanks.”

She gulped wine, accidentally spitting some as she spoke, “You’re mean and horrible to me!”

“No kiss.”

Her eyes searched the room for help out of her quagmire, “But you need five dollars!”

“No kiss,” he said, rushed, “You want to ... see me ... naked, Doris?”

“Naked?”

“You want me to eat totally naked? I will. For only five bucks.”

Her heart beat so loud she spoke louder so he would hear her, “That means you won’t be staying tomorrow?”

He nodded as he undressed to his underwear, “Do you want to see the rest?”

He imagined she had already seen him in his underwear the night she disrobed him in his sleep, but it was dark, she probably didn’t see all she wanted to.

She coughed, “I never saw a man naked.”

“You must’ve seen photos.”

She shook her head, frightened, “I don’t have the internet yet.”

“Well then, if I were you, I’d want me to take off my underwear.”

She did and tried to say it but suddenly her mouth could not speak.

He looked at her, adoring her innocence, until she could remember again how to talk.

She stuttered, “Yes, take down. Your. Underpants.”

“Go get me my money first,” he demanded, chewing his burger.

She flew up, opened the cupboard, grabbed a coffee can, shook it. Many quarters fell out. She gave them all to him.

He counted it as her eyes memorized his serious face and his hairy muscled shoulders and biceps, “That brings me to fifty dollars and seventy-five cents.”

He put it and the rest of the money in his knapsack, then removed his underwear and stood naked in his socks. He let her take a long look at his godly nakedness.

Embarrassed, her eyes looked to the candles - then to the floor - and then to his socks. Enjoying the attention, he lifted his legs one at a time, slowly peeling off his sweaty socks and throwing them on the kitchen counter.

Her eyes devoured his large caveman feet, his muscled calves and thighs and his large hairy genitals.

He studied her curiosity as much as she studied his body parts.

Time stood still.

She couldn’t form words to express her emotions of desire - and guilt - and conflict - and embarrassment, which prevented

her from meeting his eyes.

A coyote howled.

Eventually he dropped his head in his hands, mumbling, “You’re like a little kid. So innocent ... What did I do?!”

Reaching into his knapsack, he removed a few of her Civil War forks and one crystal from her mantel, confessing, “You’re too innocent for me to steal.”

She felt incredibly violated – first to be studied as she studied nakedness – and now to be robbed, “You stole everything I care about.”

Heart aching, she grabbed her precious forks and his bag, waving it to spill all it concealed. The paper with Marie’s drawing sailed in the air. She reached for it but he stood and grabbed it first.

His eyes grew wet with tears, which he wiped, humiliated, “I’m pitiful just like you.”

She didn’t understand. *I’m not pitiful*, she thought.

He continued, “You show me what happens when someone is alone too long. I’ve had this with me for too many years.”

He burned the paper over the candle as a splitting headache dizzied his vision, “I need to get out of here.”

He reached for his clothes.

She wrestled them away from him.

He felt too depressed to fight for clothes – something so worthless.

Naked, he stumbled toward the door.

She screeched, “You’re not going to town to meet Marie?!”

That startled him, “Marie?” he coughed, “How’d you know

her name?”

She formulated an answer, “I’m psychic ... A Gypsy raised me for crying out loud.”

He turned pale, “What else do you know?”

“My crystals see everything. I know everything in the world.”

“Can you ... get in touch ... with Marie ... for me?”

Doris looked confused, but said anything to keep him, “Maybe.” She herself didn’t know if she was lying or telling the truth. But if she was lying, she couldn’t be caught. She shouted, “Yes! Of course I can. I am the best psychic in North America. Go get firewood.”

Confused, needy, dizzy, he turned to do as she ordered.

She grinned. Such power she suddenly felt to have with this magnificent specimen exactly where she wanted – naked – and needy.

Not far from the sinking porch, Cody bent over, his ample hairy buttocks and thighs flexing, as he axed a log, then piled the cut wood in his arms. He didn’t notice a powder blue convertible Mercedes parked in the driveway, with a Louis Vuitton suitcase on the hood.

From the shadows, startled Lilith quietly watched this mysterious naked stranger, a bag of groceries getting heavy in her arms.

Rage fueled her words, “What is your business here?!”

Cody jumped, dropping the wood, a log rolling to Lilith’s shoe, which she kicked away. He squatted to restack the wood in his arms, holding it low to hide his crotch, “Who are you?”

Lilith pleaded, “What have you done to Doris?!”

“Nothing. She told me to get firewood.”

“Get out of here before I call the cops!”

“Who are you?”

Lilith stomped to the porch. Now nearer, they met eyes and he was quite attracted to her gorgeous mature face – and her expensive perfume wafting over her expensive tailored burgundy pantsuit, pearl necklace and matching earrings.

“I’m this lady’s sister! And you would be?!”

“From the photo? You’re the blonde girl?”

“What photograph is she showing to strangers?! And you would be??”

“Cody. Were you the one who kept phoning?”

“I don’t believe my sister has mentioned a naked man named Cody.”

“I was helping her paint the house. She paid me to eat naked.”

Lilith slapped his face and stormed into the shack.

Grocery bag in her arms, Lilith searched the coffee table and mantel for the photo, which she couldn’t find, before darting into the kitchen where Doris washed dishes.

Lilith talked softly, “Doris?? Did he hurt you?! Are you okay?? Where’s that old photo? Doris, this is not a hotel for naked men.”

Doris wiped her hands on his sweaty sock, “I am entertaining!”

“You certainly are,” Lilith muttered, putting the groceries on the table, then she drank from Doris’s wine glass, “Did you

pay that man to remove his clothes?”

“He’s not dangerous.”

“There is nothing more dangerous than a naked man,” Lilith fumed, opening the fridge. She felt it deserved repeating, loud enough so Cody might hear, “There is nothing more dangerous than a naked man!!” Lilith sighed, tossed molded food into the garbage, then examined Doris’s dress, “What the hell are you wearing?”

“Your old pantyhose. The paparazzi is putting me and this outfit on next month’s Vogue,” Doris boasted, taking groceries from the table and organizing them into the fridge.

Lilith opened the freezer, “Where is my vodka?”

“You drank it last week.”

Lilith couldn’t remember. She turned to Doris, pulling at her ridiculous hose ensemble, “Go upstairs and change into something respectful that doesn’t show your nipples. For crying out loud. You can’t wear things like this! Where’s that old photo?”

“You can’t take away that one last photo from me. I need to look at us when I get lonely.”

“That indecently exposed man out there knows I’m almost a dozen years older than you. That’s not how I like to present myself, is it? Where’s that photo?”

“I don’t know.”

Lilith hugged Doris, “Go up and change, honey. Scoot.”

“He’s mine.”

“Scoot! As if I would give him the time of day. Go change. Scoot it!” she ordered, pushing Doris up a few stairs.

Once up in her bedroom, Doris flew in front of her vanity mirror and disagreed with Lilith – her pantyhose dress looked perfect on her, ravishing in fact. But now that competition for Cody’s affection had arrived, Doris needed to up her sexiness – and big glitter bows in her hair were the answer.

Down in the kitchen, Lilith counted the Civil War forks on the table, then sneaked a peek into the silverware drawer to make sure all were present. She sighed, relieved, then poured more wine, taking her glass into the living room where Cody, dressed, was starting a fire. Now that he was lit by the fireplace and she was not distracted by his nudity, she could finally see how good-looking he was. One more gulp of wine and when he wasn’t looking she twisted her wedding ring off her finger and into her pants pocket.

Cody turned to her, “Nothing happened between your sister and me.”

“How do I know that?”

“What do you think I did? Rape her or something?”

“I was raped when I was very young.”

Still squatting, he turned away from the fire and met her eyes, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I was raped again last year.”

“I’m sorry. But I didn’t rape Doris.”

“When we catch the man who raped me last year he’ll

never see a day outside bars again, I give you my promise.”

He threw sticks into the fireplace.

She went on, “Why was Doris dressed like that?”

“Why does she talk to scarecrows?”

“When mama found Doris, Doris was short on oxygen. Her brain might have collapsed? I don’t know. She’s as “special” as they come.”

Doris entered in her same outfit and did a runway turn to show off her sparkling hair bows.

Lilith sighed, “I told you you look ridiculous in that see-through dress. Please put on something normal.”

“You hate how pretty I am,” Doris laughed, then informed Cody, “And Lilith hates my fashion flair!”

Lilith patted Doris’s rear, “Go! Scoot it! Put on a bra.”

Doris twirled, then retreated upstairs.

Lilith giggled.

Cody chuckled and stood up.

Lilith directed, “Sit. Over here by me.”

“I can think of worse things,” he said, exhaling, sitting a foot away from her on the red plaid couch.

Lilith stopped gulping her wine and started to sip it. Her tense back melted comfortably against the sofa fabric. Her wrinkles disappeared. Her voice softened, “Why didn’t she answer the phone? She always answers the phone to let me know what she needs at the grocery store.”

“I asked her to pick up the phone.”

She turned to him and tapped his chest with her finger, “She can’t fend for herself against intruders.”

His smile revealed his attraction to her, but she wrestled her own smile into a pout in an effort to hide her desire for him.

She pretended to be angry, “Your welcome has expired. Go on. Scoot scoot scoot!”

“Doris and I have some unfinished business.”

“And just what business is that?”

“An old friend ... Doris is going to contact an old friend for me,” he looked away from her eyes and into the raging fire.

She watched him breathe. And heard him breathe. And heard herself breathe – too loudly – too excited by him – too embarrassed, “Scoot scoot scoot, Cody! Get. Go on.”

He rose, “Tell her I’ll be back another time.”

She stood up, feeling so small next to his intimidating height. Nevertheless she pushed him out the door – yet her fingers would not release his shirt fabric. She warned him, “If you dare come back here, I’ll be waiting right here for you, with my rifle. Go on. Scoot!”

As tough as she pretended to be, all he saw was a beautiful blonde woman fighting their mutual attraction. He smiled at her beauty and his eyes darted around her lovely face, admiring every contour.

She smiled at his attention – but still tried to pull off being tough, “Oh - Just a minute! You’re not going anywhere until I figure out what happened here.”

“Should I go?” he flirted, “Or stay?”

Her fingers pulled him inside to the couch, “Sit your cute butt down and pour me another glass of wine. And one for you. I suppose in the morning I can give you a ride to town.”

They both reclined on the sofa, admiring the fire, then turned to each other at the same time.

Cody spoke nervously, "You smell like a movie-star."

"Have you smelt many?"

"It was a compliment."

Doris entered, a bra over her hose dress, and squeezed to sit in the few inches of space between them, asking Cody, "What do you think of my perfume?"

"Nothing wrong with tangerine," Lilith said.

Doris whined, "Lilith, bring me some of your perfume next time."

Lilith patronized, "Oh honey, citrus is very nice."

Doris snipped, "Lilith, your doctor called about your body lice medicine."

Lilith shook her head, "Oh stop making stories, honey. That's not nice. Why would my doctor call this number?"

Cody asked, "Lilith, you don't have a cigarette, do you?"

"Do my lips look wrinkled like I smoke?" Lilith asked, offended.

"No," he said.

Doris was on another page altogether, "I'll change the sheets upstairs for you and me, Cody."

Lilith stood up, "Stop this right now! This intruder will sleep on the porch."

Cody rose, "It's cold on the porch. How about the couch in the basement?"

Lilith reiterated, "You can sleep outside! On the porch."

Doris threw a tantrum, "Cody can sleep in my basement!"

Lilith searched her purse and found one electronic cigarette. Cody reached for it, accidentally touching Doris, titillating Doris.

Lilith vaped with Cody as they fought the sexual chemistry between them, and innocent, jealous Doris sitting between them.

Lilith pet Doris's cheek, "I was wondering if I could borrow the Civil War forks, Doris?"

"No. Those forks are mine! They're all I have from Gypsy Mother!"

Lilith turned away, "Blah blah blah. Stop your hollering."

"All smokers aren't going to Hell, Cody," Doris explained, "Only Viceroy smokers like Betsy Webber. E-cigarette smokers got a shot at purgatory."

Cody thumbed-up.

Lilith giggled at him.

Doris glared at her sister, "You're not sleeping in the basement with him."

Lilith quipped, "Annihilate the thought."

Doris said, "You're sleeping upstairs with me or do I have to call Jon?"

"Who's Jon?" asked Cody, already jealous.

"Jon is no one," Lilith vented, "Doris, I'm so looking forward to sleeping right beside you, like kittens! But I need a big welcome-to-Dorisland cocktail first. Cody, would you be kind enough to check my glove compartment to see if there's a real cigarette and a vodka flask?"

Cody nodded and walked outside to Lilith's Mercedes, surprised to see that the keys were in the ignition.

He glanced back to the shack and in the kitchen window could make out Lilith's silhouette sipping wine. He couldn't see that from the corner of her eye she was spying on him.

He fondled the Mercedes's keys, thrilled by the idea of stealing it, but he really never stole anything and felt guilty even thinking of stealing. He twisted the keys in the ignition, looking toward the road. No, he couldn't leave, not yet, he and Lilith had a chemistry he wanted to explore.

Walking into the kitchen, Cody handed a flask to Lilith. "This was in your glove compartment but no smokes. Where's Doris?"

"I snuck an Ambien in her drink and sent her to bed."

"Careful. The dinosaurs went alcoholic."

"Don't I know it. Join me?," she poured two glasses of vodka then turned to give him one - but he was gone. She looked outside to the Mercedes but he wasn't there. She heard noise in the basement and put her ear to the door, "Cody? Sugar? Vodka will help you sleep."

Making sure Doris wasn't watching, she twisted the knob. But it was locked.

In the basement, Cody lay on the couch and closed his eyes tightly in agony, remembering driving a motorcycle on one wheel to impress his girlfriend, Marie, sitting behind him, holding onto him for dear life.

The door knocks pulled him out of the memory. Lilith called for him to open the door, but overwhelmed with memories he pretended not to hear it.

Upstairs in the bedroom, Lilith slept on the right side of the bed. On the left side, Doris quietly snuck out of bed.

Doris tiptoed down the stairs and into the kitchen where she crawled her fingers into a drawer and pulled out scissors. The crazy lady twisted the basement doorknob and finding it locked, retrieved the key from another drawer.

Holding scissors like a killer, Doris tiptoed down the basement stairs.

Her menacing shadow watched him sleep.

The scissors inched toward his handsome face.

He's so helpless I could kill him, she thought. Or I could ugly him up so Lilith would stop wanting him.

What power she had to be able to destroy his devastating good looks – but she was not there to hurt him – she was there to clip a lock of his hair.

Chapter 4: Thursday

The next morning, Lilith and Doris ate breakfast.

Doris said, "I'll wake Cody."

"No, let the poor man sleep."

"He's mine."

Lilith bat her eyelashes, "I'm not after that piece of trash and you keep your distance from him, too. He's angling for something. Cheap men can be very expensive, darling."

Cody opened the basement door, and shocking them all, he kissed Doris. Lilith looked on in disbelief as Cody and Doris moaned passionately, French-kissing, their hands roaming over each other in lustful desire.

In his wrinkled denim shirt and jeans, Cody awakened from that nightmare of kissing Doris. He pushed himself up from the basement couch and staggered up the stairs, opening the kitchen door to find Lilith sitting in jeans and a copper silk blouse at the table, eating alone. He smiled, already in love with her. She smiled, already in love with him. She pointed to the other plate of pancakes she was not eating.

Cody grinned, "For me?"

"I'm no gourmet. It's only a pancake."

He yawned, "Have to warn you ... I have a knack for sniffing out arsenic."

"And an immunity by now, I'm sure."

He took a bite, staring into her lustful oceanic eyes, "I'm

freezing. Let's go out in the sun."

Lilith grimaced, "I despise the sun."

"I'm freezing. The sun is my best friend."

He exited with his plate and sat on the sunny woodpile, the axe buried in a log next to him.

In a minute Lilith crept out with her plate and sat next to him, handing him a coffee. She may have hated the sun but she was sexy in it.

"Coffee will warm you up more," she coaxed, watching squirrels chase each other on the dirt road, "We slept so late. It's almost noon."

"Is she in her garden?"

"No – I couldn't find her this morning."

He seemed alarmed. She was not. She took his hand. He thought she wanted to hold it and so he kissed her hand ... but she set his fingers over her eyes to block sun.

Lilith puckered her lips, "She's wrinkling like a prune. That's exactly why she plasters herself with make-up. Who'd ever believe I was the older one? My skin is like porcelain, in fact the mailman told me that just yesterday morning."

He took back his hand to eat and looked around then exclaimed, "Your car's gone!"

"No need to despair. I'm sure Doris has saved up an errand or two."

In the distance two police cars appeared.

Lilith hid her face from them.

Cody did, too.

The cars passed.

It was an awkward minute until Cody stood up and paced, asking, "Sheriff station up ahead?"

"Why are you so interested?"

"No reason. You and your mother lived alone in this house?"

"That's correct. Until Doris."

"Your mother found Doris by the oak tree?"

"She told you that? ... Yes ... Many years ago."

"But your mother was half deaf? How could she find a baby in the middle of the night if she couldn't hear it crying?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you the questions? It's a good thing I came by when I did."

He sat back down next to her, thigh touching thigh, "I think it is, too."

"I don't have body lice."

"I didn't think you did."

"She was a few hours old."

"It doesn't make sense. There are no other houses for a mile. Why would somebody come all the way here and dump her fifty feet from your house? If they wanted her to die they had miles of woods to dump her. If they wanted her to live, they'd put her on your doorstep."

She shut him up with a quick kiss.

He grinned, "You're gorgeous. So what is it?"

"I'm not following you."

"Do you talk to scarecrows, too? That why you aren't married?"

She pulled out her wedding ring from her pocket, "The

ring's on probation.”

As she stole the pancake piece that remained on his plate, he noticed bruises on her forearm.

“Did your husband do that to you?”

She looked away, “No ... No, of course not.”

Across town at the Sunbar Strip Mall, Doris, in Baby Jane make-up and outdated trenchcoat, dramatically exited the Mercedes outside Target.

Inside the store, Doris runway-sashayed to a door reading “Management.” A couple crossed her eye-line. It was Pete and Pete's wife. He modeled a black shirt from the rack. His pretty red-haired wife buttoned it. Pete kissed her.

Doris finagled between them, “Hey aren't you the mailman?”

“I am,” Pete said, “Oh, you live in that old shack?”

Pete's wife smiled graciously, “Hi there, I'm Pete's wife,” and extended her hand.

Doris ignored it, “Pete never said he was married. He just lead me on, flirting with his eyes. But now I have a man anyways. I've got clips of Cody's hair taped to my heart. It's heart-guaranteed.” She opened her coat to show a low-cut aluminum foil dress and Cody's hair taped to her cleavage. She grabbed a similar black shirt from the rack and brought it to the counter.

Pete's wife pulled Pete away and whispered, "This town is crazy. Oh, what was that other old wives' tale? Sunbar County females get one wish, they circle at their eyes, and make a wish. One per lifetime." She giggled and circled both index fingers at her own eyes. "I wish ... I wish she'd fall flat on her face and cut both ears."

They looked at Doris – who did not fall.

They chuckled as Doris waved the shirt at the purple-haired adolescent clerk behind the counter, who instructed, "You can pay for that in the men's section."

Doris was incensed, "I can pay for it at any register. I know the rules, you alcoholic. You don't think I know the rules?" She read the employee's nametag, "Dina."

"My mistake. Why don't I total that up and we can get on with our day?"

"I can't afford this now anyway. Can I put it on layaway?"

"It'll require a deposit."

"Then I can't afford it. I need some free perfume samples."

Dina threw a few perfume samples in a plastic bag.

Doris gestured wildly, "I see the price of taffy has skyrocketed in ten years. Does the attendant know not to use the same scoop on different candies?"

"We beat him senseless if he doesn't."

"My fiancé and I will be looking for rings soon. Is the employee discount still thirty percent?"

"Twenty. You're not an employee, are you?"

"I used to be about ten years ago."

Doris fondly remembered ten years prior when she herself

worked the register ... when the management door opened and a big-nosed gentleman in bifocals exited with a paper bag, giving her the slightest smile.

Doris brought him, Roy, a Valentine's card and candy box ... but he ignored her and instead hugged plump Betsy Webber, who brought him a present. Doris was heartbroken as Roy handed the paper bag to Betsy, saying, "Here's your gift, Betsy."

Betsy pulled out a bag of Doritos, giggled and purred sexually.

Doris hated Betsy. She had to. Betsy had taken her man.

Summoning Doris out of her daze, Dina waved the Target bag across Doris' eye-line.

Doris came back to the present, "Employee? I used to be about ten years ago and I'm thinking of coming back."

"Oh goodie."

Doris checked her ridiculous make-up in the curved chrome register and in the distortion she looked as wonderful as she hallucinated in her everyday warped reality.

Dina said, "You can go away now."

"That blouse you're wearing isn't even for sale here. What is it? Walmart? Dina! Only wear clothes that are available here in case a customer wants to dress like you. They worship us." She grabbed a floral blouse off a rack and handed it to Dina, insisting, "Wear this. Carry an extra sandwich in case Roy asks you to stay late but never bring tuna fish or barbecue chicken because it gets too messy. Oh, I'll need you to drive me to work every day. Please make a note." With that, Doris turned,

swiveled and runway-sashayed to the door reading “Management.”

Barging in the management offices, Doris winked at the baffled elderly secretary and sashayed into a larger office, “I’m Doris Adelson. Ready to rejoin the Target family. I want to see Roy.”

The secretary tried to stop her, “Wait! You can’t just walk in there!”

But she did.

Baffled Roy stood up from behind his large desk, taking off his glasses, “Who are you and why are you here?”

“Roy! It’s me! Doris!”

Roy panicked, “Doris? Not candy department Doris?”

He put on his glasses, looked her up and down and grimaced.

She removed her coat and turned, swiveled, modeled her shiny aluminum foil gown, that was becoming untaped, “Roy, less than four dollars. Wipes clean.”

“I don’t understand ... what are you doing here?”

She knelt before him and grabbed his hands, “I am breaking up with you, Roy. I have a new man and he needs money. I have to take care of him.”

“Breaking up with me??”

“No sense arguing. My mind is made up,” she rose, “I need my job back.”

Roy stepped away from her, “And we would love to hire you back but we’re overstaffed as it is. Dang it.”

He sat at his desk, picking up work sheets, hiding behind

them, until defeated Doris lowered her head and shuffled to exit.

Doris, weeping, in a ripped aluminum foil dress, parked Lilith's Mercedes outside the shack. In the passenger seat was a box of blonde hair dye and Winston cigarettes.

Inside the shack living room, Cody squatted, chiming the xylophone.

Lilith traced her finger over his massive biceps, "That sounds like our school signal to begin our halftime performance."

Like a young girl, she performed a cheerleader ballet dance.

His eyes lusted after every curve of her body, "So you were the star of your school?"

She spoke with a French accent, "Mais no. Mary-Allen was always the best. But I had blackmailed the football coach to get the solo."

"What did you have on him?"

She kept up the French accent, "He was a horrible beast. He was a horrible man. I was only oonze years old. Eleven."

After a beat, she kissed Cody. His hands inched up and explored her waist ... and breasts.

Doris entered.

Lilith jumped to embrace Doris, "Where did you go, sweetie?"

"Cody's mine. I discovered him. Don't you steal him."

“Does it look like I’m stealing anything?”

“Yes!” Doris huffed, handing Cody a pack of Winstons.

He was ecstatic, “That’s my girl!”

Doris cautioned, “Don’t show anyone. I stole them. I went to get my job back but Roy said Target is overstaffed. It’s because of the computers they sell to everybody on dry land!! I just know it is. Computers ruined my life!”

Cody unwrapped the cigarettes, “I’m going to call Target and cuss the fuckers out.”

Lilith advised, “Save the energy and make us lunch. I’m going to take a nice, long, hot bath.”

He shrugged, took a match off the mantel, lit his Winston, inhaled then sauntered into the kitchen.

As he searched the cupboards, Doris entered in her ripped aluminum foil dress. She squeezed between him and the counter, tried to be seductive as she purred, “Paparazzi wants to know if you love me or Lilith or Marie?”

“Marie? Hey how did you know her name?”

“I’m psychic.”

“Oh yeah, you said that before.”

“You want me to do a psychic reading?”

“Do you know how Marie feels about me?”

“Of course I do but I charge for psychic readings.”

“You charge?”

She flipped him the finger, “All psychics charge.”

He flipped her the finger, “Don’t scam a scammer, Doris. You’re in over your head.”

“Don’t you threaten me after I opened my home and cooked

you cake and chops!”

She stumbled to the sink, poured herself a glass of water, drank, then threw the water on him.

Reflexively his hand went to slap her but he stopped himself, closed his eyes in pain, “Just do a psychic reading for me. Please.”

“There’s a fee. Twenty bucks.”

“No fee.”

“Fee.”

“No fee.”

“Fee. Twenty bucks.”

“Five.”

“Ten,” she compromised, waltzing out of the room.

“Okay. Seven.”

“Ten!”

“Whatever. Ten!” he consented.

She eagerly came back in.

From his pocket, he handed her money, “Eight.”

“Ten,” she lectured, “When you stole the crystal you polluted the psychic energy, so it needs to clean a few more hours.”

He grabbed the money back, “You’re full of bullshit. You can’t contact the dead.”

“She’s dead??”

“You didn’t know Marie was dead?”

She was flustered, “Of course I knew your Marie was dead. I channel the dead all the time ...” She tried to recall what was written on the paper with Marie’s drawing. “There was

something about a motorcycle.”

“What about the motorcycle?”

“Did you have a motorcycle?”

“That’s right. Did Marie tell you I drove it too fast?”

“She ... wanted you to ride slower,” she bluffed.

“Yep. She always used to say that. You’re good, Doris. Marie was good, too. At getting her way. She would’ve celebrated her thirty-second year of high-maintenance next month.”

“I thought she was twenty-two years-old.”

His jaw dropped, “That’s how old she was when she died. Ten years ago. You’re freaking me out.”

She grinned, took the money back, “I’m North America’s best psychic. Ask me questions if you don’t believe me. Blonde Marie. You in prison.”

“She told you I escaped from prison?”

“Escaped?!” Doris squealed in shock, then pretended she knew, “Yes, escaped. Those were her exact words.”

“What else does she say? Does she ... Do you think that she ... let’s say ... Does she ... If ...” he stammered, overcome with emotion, “Would you think that she forgives me?”

“Forgives ... you ... ?”

“I didn’t mean to kill her.”

“Kill ... ??”

“If she forgives me then maybe I can move on.”

Doris didn’t know what to say.

She opened the refrigerator to buy time.

Cody pleaded, “If she won’t forgive me, Doris, then I’m ...

nothing ... I'm stuck."

Doris turned to him, searched his eyes, "She ... does ... not forgive you."

Devastated Cody collapsed his upper body onto the table as Doris ran upstairs.

Hours later in the bedroom, Lilith massaged hair-dye through Doris' hair. Depressed Cody entered, drinking coffee. He held an extra cup. Both ladies reached for it.

He handed it to Lilith, saying, "Lilith screwed up breakfast and I just burnt lunch so if Doris doesn't cook dinner we're all going to die of starvation." He winked at Lilith.

Doris fidgeted, envious, "I think I passed Lilith's husband Jon today."

"Oh. Did you?" Lilith chuckled, "Was he buying body lice medicine?"

"He was driving his police car."

Cody turned white, "He's a cop?!"

Doris added, "Crooked as my house."

Lilith corrected, "I didn't marry crooked. My husband has connections. Thank god he does. Sunbar is attracting its share of transients like Cody and frankly we don't need any more city slickers either."

Doris ordered, "Cody, if you burnt lunch you have to make dinner. A casserole."

Cody looked out the window, eyes suddenly enlarging in fright, seeing Mike peeking in Lilith's car, his hand reaching toward the keys in the ignition.

"A casserole? Okay, I'll try," Cody acquiesced, quickly running out the bedroom and down the stairs.

Outside he tiptoed to Mike who was just about to start Lilith's car.

In the nick of time, Cody grabbed the keys away.

Mike said, "Oh hey there. Get in. Let's drive out of state."

Cody whispered, "Nah ... I can't leave yet."

Mike grabbed back the keys, "Then I'll go without you."

"No, Mike, listen. These ladies are good to me."

"Ladies? There's one for me now?"

"Not your type. You have to run off before they see you."

"If we kill them, we can hide out a long time here."

"No, they're good people. You can't steal her car, Mike. She's married to a jerk cop."

"Damn you. You owe me one," Mike moaned, his hand reaching for a pen and note paper on the console. "Here's a number of a cell phone I stole. If you don't call me in a day with tips to get loot, I'm coming back here for the kills."

Mike punched Cody then walked off.

Cody kicked fire logs in frustration. Then he paced, noticing dark clouds in the distant sky.

In the shack kitchen later that evening, Lilith poured box wine as anxious Cody set a large glass pan on the table.

“What is she doing up there?” he asked.

“God knows,” she shook her head.

“You should have made her come down and cook. I don’t know how to make a stupid casserole. This is bologna, three cans of beans and Frosted Flakes.”

She giggled.

He caressed her lovely face, then retreated when he heard Doris descend the stairs, now a very unnatural blonde.

“Wow,” he said, “Look at you, Doris. I bet Target is kicking themselves now.”

“No they’re not. The color’s completely uneven,” she complained, slipping, falling flat on her face.

Lilith bent over her, “Oh no! Are you all right?! Your ear is bleeding.”

Cody said, “Look! So is the other one.”

“From what?” Lilith asked, “Nails? I don’t see any screws or nails. Did you break a glass?”

“No,” she whined.

“No,” he shrugged, “She must have scraped the floor with her ears?”

“Both her ears?” Lilith dismissed him, concerned, “How can anyone scrape both ears on a floor?”

They helped her to stand, and into a chair. Lilith grabbed a paper towel and tore pieces to clot the ear bleeds.

Doris was as confused as they were, “I don’t know what happened. I never slip.”

Cody sniffed Doris, “Somebody sure smells like a movie-star.”

“That’s my perfume,” she boasted.

Lilith winked at Cody, who winked back.

Doris saw, stewed a bit then huffed, “I’m not sure I’ll be able to reach Marie today after all.”

Lilith asked, “Marie? Who’s this Marie?”

“Cody wants to reach his girlfriend ...”

“Ex,” Cody interrupted.

Lilith pried, “Oh, does he?”

“Just a game,” he pretended, “Marie moved ... I can’t ... locate her.”

Lilith was more preoccupied with the forks, “I can always take these old forks off your hands, Doris. Why don’t I buy you a shiny new set instead?”

Doris glared, “You’re not getting the Civil War forks.”

“Jon wants the forks,” Lilith insisted.

“I hate Jon,” Doris pouted.

Lilith pet Doris’s shoulder, “No no no, without Jon you’d be in an insti... You must always be nice to Jon. Wouldn’t you like to trade these forks for my bicycle?”

“Gypsy Mother left them to meeeeeee.”

“How about trading them for my massage chair?”

“No, Lilith! These are from Gypsy Mother! It’s a full moon tonight. Perfect for our psychic reading, Cody.”

Lilith rolled her eyes, “No games tonight. Can’t we just sit here like adults? And do adult things ... like gossip?”

Doris concentrated, “When I try I can see Marie’s face and

her blonde hair.”

Lilith was doubtful, “You sure Cody didn’t tell you these things?”

Cody shook his head, “I didn’t tell her anything.”

Lilith parted Cody’s hair, “Do you have a tattoo that reads Marie?”

“No,” Cody said, “But I did have a paper with that information in it.”

Doris objected, “How could I have read it if you burnt your paper?”

Cody barked, “How did you know what was on that paper??”

“You just said!” Doris lied.

Cody blushed, wondering if he had been duped by Doris?

Lilith finger-tapped her iPhone, “I can try to locate this Marie for you?”

Cody looked away, checking Doris’s ear, “You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist,” Lilith stated, “What’s Marie’s last name?!”

Doris interrupted, “It’s a full moon. Cody, you know to never let the light of a full moon catch you frowning or you face death within three days?”

He shrugged, “This one of those witch tales?”

Lilith shrugged, “Better to go along with witch tales in Sunbar County, just in case.”

Cody smirked, “Are you two witches?”

Lilith winked.

He winked back.

Doris winked at them both but they didn't see. Stewing, she spewed words to hurt them, "Maybe that's what happened to Marie."

Lilith was confused, "Marie's ... dead?? Cody said she moved."

Cody turned to the rain sprinkles lining the crooked window above the sink, "Death ... is a move."

"Enough of these games!," Lilith snapped, "Go to the basement and have your little séance. I've had as much as I can take!" She pushed Cody and Doris into the basement stair area but he grabbed Lilith before she could slam the door.

Doris tripped, nearly falling, but gripping the railing she recovered and continued downstairs.

At the top of the stairs, Cody whispered to Lilith, "You're the one deceiving, Lil. Wedding ring in the pocket. No, wait a minute, wedding ring on the finger."

Lilith tried to pull her arm away, "You're pressing on my bruise."

"Your husband beats you – or not?" Cody wouldn't release her, "First time you see me, you tell me to go, then you insist I stay so you can drive me to town ... but no, you never drive me to town. You say "do my lips look like I smoke?" like you don't smoke, but you do smoke. Lying Lilith."

Lilith struggled to push him out the kitchen into the basement, then slammed the door.

He tripped over his big shoes to the base of the stairs.

Doris helped him up, "Marie is here."

"She is not."

“She is telling me about dying. Motorcycle going too fast. By a motel?”

That got his attention. He followed her to the old denim couch. They sat as she shuffled her Gypsy Cards and lit a candle.

He pouted, “You got ten minutes.”

“Get happy! Marie might forgive you. Want me to convince Marie that you didn’t mean it?”

Cody was hopeful, yet skeptical, “Do you really see Marie? Tell me what she looked like.”

“Blonde.”

“What color eyes? Tall or short?”

“Shh. Marie is talking. She’s very nice. Something about a kiss.”

“I don’t remember.”

“She wants a kiss. Now. It’s important, before her energy disappears.”

His sexy manly lips kissed the air.

Doris moved nearer to him, “That wasn’t even close to her face, dimwit. Wait! She wants to jump in my body. You have to kiss her in my body. Dimwit.”

“No way.”

“Marie is stuck in a tortured memory and needs to think about a better time than the Motel Eight parking lot.”

“Motel Eight parking lot? You did read my paper! My sixes look like eights! It was a Motel Six not Motel Eight!”

Doris panicked and stood up, “Marie’s trapped thinking about you driving her so fast ...”

Cody rose, “You like Lilith to think you’re mentally-handicapped, don’t you, you little snake!”

Doris’s eyes widened, seeing a white orb fly in the room that grew into a ghostly light. In disbelief, she pointed at it for Cody to see, but he couldn’t see it, “It’s a ghost there. That light. It’s her.”

“What light??”

Thunder was heard in the distance.

“Right there,” she pointed to it.

“There’s no light there. Maybe you saw lightning flash?”

“No, dumbass. Marie’s here. She says it’s like you’re the dead one, isn’t it? It’s like you’re the one that died. Look inside, Marie says. Look inside your chest.”

Doris poked his chest.

“Don’t you touch me!”

“There. It turned sour she says. Sour. “You didn’t use to be jaded.” Her words. You’re bad inside now.”

He moved away, stared up out the basement window into darkness, hearing rain, “I didn’t use to be jaded at all.”

“Think about what you wanna say to her when you kiss her. Help Marie out of the parking lot. You dimwit basket case.”

Cody walked to Doris, towering over her, “You’re the basket case. Don’t talk to me like I’m a dimwit. There’s no dimwit down here. Marie didn’t die in the parking lot!”

Doris pointed hysterically at another white orb flying that disappeared through the wall. Cody couldn’t see it. “Cody, Marie just flew out through the wall!”

“Bullshit.”

“She died ... in the highway?”

“How did you know that? That wasn’t on the paper!”

“Marie told me! Why did you kill her? “

“No, not me -- the injuries did.”

“You want to leave her tortured forever and ever?”

“Of course not.”

“Marie needs ... a kiss.”

“This is too bizarre, Doris. Last night you wanted to kiss me and now I’m supposed to believe my dead girlfriend wants me to kiss you?”

“Marie is stuck in a tortured memory.”

“You’re not dumb enough to think I buy this crap.”

“She was there last night. She was jealous of me wanting a kiss. Which is exactly why she wants a kiss now.”

“That so doesn’t make sense.”

“Neither does killing someone you love. Neither does keeping someone you love tortured in an endless death on a freeway. A kiss is a small price to pay to raise someone’s spirit to a heaven.”

Overwhelmed with guilt, he paced, but couldn’t think clearly. All he wanted was to believe there was an afterlife and that Marie was fine there and that she forgave him. *Doris is probably scamming me*, he reasoned, *but if she’s not, the tiny chance that she is not, damn it, if there’s a tiny chance ...* He groaned, “If I kiss you, don’t you dare tell Lilith I ever fell for this.”

“Cody, I don’t even want to kiss you now. Can’t you see I’m in a trance??”

He couldn't be sure – but there was too much at stake, “Okay. I'm going to kiss you very quickly.”

“Marie needs you to show her how much you love and miss her.”

He closed his eyes. With his big muscular arms he pulled Doris into him and kissed her. Passionately.

Doris's entire body felt exhilarated and weak at the same time.

He felt used, but still hung onto hope, “What did Marie say?”

Doris smiled, “She wants you to take off your underwear again and jump up and down.”

Furious, he almost punched her, but punched the wall instead.

At that very second, up in the kitchen, Lilith heard the wall crack as she packed the framed photo in her suitcase on the table.

Doris ran into the kitchen from the basement, screaming.

Lilith hugged her, “What happened?”

“He's trying to kill me!”

Cody lunged into the room.

Lilith stood in front of Doris to protect her, “Don't you lay a hand on her!”

Doris said, “He killed Marie.”

Cody looked tormented, “Things got out of control.”

Lilith pushed him away, “You killed your girlfriend?!”

“No, it was a motorcycle accident,” he said.

Lilith fumbled to zip her overloaded suitcase. The framed

photo fell out of it.

He reached for it.

Lilith pushed him away.

“Why are you pushing away a good guy like me?”

Lilith pulled Doris to her, “We don’t know anything about Cody! He could be very dangerous.”

Cody reasoned, “You know I’m not and I like it here with you guys.”

Doris glowed, “You do?”

He stole the photo away from Lilith, “I do ... What’s so special about this photo, Lil?”

Lilith tried to get the photo back, “Please leave.”

He held onto the photo, scrutinizing it, “You were always beautiful. Even as a kid. How old were you in this picture?”

Doris answered instead, “Two. And thank you.”

Cody looked to Lilith, “I mean Lilith. How old were you, Lilith?”

Lilith’s fingers latched onto the frame, “Give me that photo!”

“In a minute!” he shouted, “Just tell me how old you were! What’s the big deal?”

Doris started, “She was --”

Lilith covered Doris’s mouth, “Shut up! Don’t tell him.”

“Why such a big secret?” he didn’t understand, “You still look great, Lilith, no matter how old --”

Lilith hugged Doris, “Doris, don’t you say anything!”

“Come on,” Cody laughed, “This is silly. You were a teenager ... or barely ... so you were either fourteen, fifteen,

thirteen?”

Lilith finally got hold of the photo, “What right does he have to interrogate us?!”

He looked stunned, “Oh my god. You were fourteen. A twelve year difference. There was a high school football coach. When you were “oonze.” Eleven.”

Lilith dropped the photo, “You stop your babbling this instant!” She pushed Doris into the living room, “Go and lie on the couch and turn on TV, sweetie. Go on. I’ll bring you some sweet tea!! Scoot scoot scoot!”

Doris resisted, “I want to stay here with you guys.”

Lilith screamed, “Go watch TV!”

All were shocked at Lilith’s rage.

Cody talked quietly, “Doris, please leave us alone a minute. Go ... Please, okay?”

Doris refused to budge.

“You need me to touch you?!” he patronized, as he physically carried Doris to the doorway and directed her out. She exited, devastated, but also excited Cody had touched her.

When she was out of earshot, Lilith whispered to Cody, “The football coach ... raped me.”

She picked up the broken glass and ripped the photo to shreds.

Cody whispered, “Your Gypsy mother found Doris before the coyotes found Doris. But you didn’t find Doris. She did. And she was hard of hearing! Do you know how loud Doris must have been screaming?”

Lilith threw the glass and ripped photo in the trash, “Of

course.”

“She was screaming for you.”

Lilith nodded, wiping a tear, her whole body shaking.

He held her face still, “Were you going to walk out on me just like that?”

“You repulse me.”

“Doris doesn’t know you’re her mother?”

“Of course not,” she shoved him, then whispered helplessly, “She can’t ever know I didn’t want her. That she was a mistake from rape. She thinks she is a rose that grew out of the dirt, and in a way, she did. I’m the only person in her life and she needs me. As is! Her hating me would cut me out of her life and she’d be totally helpless.”

“She would understand, forgive you.”

“She doesn’t have the capacity. She’s fragile, her reality shifts. My visits are her throughline. I can’t ever stop. The way it is is the way it has to be.”

“You’re lying to her every minute.”

“For her benefit. I’m calling the police this instant if you don’t get out of here.”

“Call your cop husband. I have some things I’d like him to hear.”

“Maybe I should tell him you were the one who raped me last year?”

Thunder roared.

“Go ahead. Liar. I have an alibi.”

He offered her the wall phone. Instead, she filled a glass with wine and exited to the living room.

He walked to the kitchen window and studied the Mercedes, deliberating stealing it and leaving the warped shack forever.

A minute later Cody entered the living room but neither Doris or Lilith were there.

In light rain outside the shack, Cody passed the wet moonlit woodpile, climbed in the Mercedes and inched the keys to the ignition. Suddenly he halted, mumbling to himself, “The axe is gone. Who took the axe?? Oh no – Mike??”

He heard a scream.

Running to the other side of the house, he saw Doris screaming, marching the garden while swinging the axe violently, ripping the fencing out of the ground. As violent as she was, he relaxed relieved that Mike was nowhere in sight. However visibility changed second by second because fast-moving rain clouds sporadically blocked the full moon.

Cody shivered silently watching Doris continue to maniacally destroy her pumpkins and plants. When lightning escalated the rain velocity he shook his head and scurried to the Mercedes.

Also outdoors on the dark porch, Lilith, with wine glass, spied on Cody from the shadows. She wrestled with mixed emotions watching her young lover drive away.

Thunder roared in the garden as Doris hollered and assaulted the towering oak, axing lower branches. Squirrels fell and scurried in the mud.

Lilith raced to her, “What are you doing? No, Doris! No! You love this garden!!”

Doris axed apart her tomato vines and stakes.

Lilith chugged her wine then dropped the glass to run to Doris, attempting to hold Doris' axe still.

Doris screamed and shouldered Lilith off of her.

Lilith slipped and rolled in the mud, screaming as well, "It's all you have!" She ducked from the light of the full moon, "You're being asinine, Doris! That's really asinine!" Lilith backed up against the tree for support and scraped the mud off her arms, "You give me the axe!! Give it to me!!"

Doris, frowning, axed scarecrow Jon to pieces as lightning flashed.

Lilith screamed, "Don't let the full moon catch you frowning!!"

Thunder bellowed as Doris shouted, "You don't get Cody!"

"Stop it! Cody's already gone! He took my car! And we're better for it -- his wild imagination."

"But Cody can't leave. I've got clips of his hair taped to my heart. It's heart-guaranteed."

"You have to stop believing your own stories. You know you have a tendency to see things that aren't there."

As the storm intensified, Doris swung the axe directly at Lilith.

Lilith shrieked, ducked and ran, losing her footing.

Doris chased her with the axe.

Lilith tripped and crashed into the side of the shack. Now exposed to the moonlight, Lilith forced a ridiculous smile - so the moon didn't catch her frowning, "You put the axe down!"

"You stay away from my house!"

“Honey -- nobody cares about you more than I do! Nobody! Now stop this tantrum.”

“I could kill you,” Doris debated chopping Lilith with the axe, as Lilith lay helpless, forcing a ridiculous smile as rain pelted her face.

“No, honey, if I go, you’ll have nothing.”

“You use me.”

“No. No.”

“Can we share him?” Doris pleaded.

Lilith looked at her, incredulous, “Smile!!”

Doris forced a smile as she screamed, “Like our other things. Like the hair-dye and coffee and your old clothes and church hats. Like our toys. Like the baby dolls and Barbies and the man doll that we used to have.”

Still forcing her smile, Lilith responded, “My old rubber man doll?”

Doris kept forcing a smile as well, “Mine. Gypsy Mother gave me a man doll.”

Lilith, forcing a smile, debated, “That’s not true, sweetie. Betsy Webber bought him for me.”

Doris sobbed, all the while pretending to smile, “Can we share him like we shared the man toy?”

Lilith grabbed the axe from her and threw it into the raging wind, then rose and cradled Doris like a little baby, shifting her out of the moonlight into shade.

Doris asked, “Can I have him when you’re done with him?”

“You’re delirious. Get inside and out of this rain.”

“He didn’t mean to kill that girl.”

“Sugar pie, you can’t believe men.”

“He was here first, before you this time.”

“We don’t need him. It’ll be just us two out here. Just us like always.”

“It’s never been just us. You always had a man.”

“Not always,” Lilith argued, pulling Doris toward the porch.

“You only come here when they leave you!” Doris shouted, overpowering Lilith, dragging her into the garden.

“That is not true! I come here every Wednesday to bring you food. You are the best part of my week. Of my life. You don’t see it. Your innocence — I always leave here hopeful again. Because you are.”

Doris jerked Lilith and Lilith fell to her knees, caressing the axed scarecrows: Paul Junior, Sal Junior, Davy Junior.

Standing above them, Doris wiped her face dry.

Lilith mused, “We always had the same taste in men, didn’t we?”

Doris agreed, “Exact same. We still do. Four husbands and now Cody.”

“Cody is gone,” she said, standing, hugging Doris.

Their embracing silhouettes rocked for a minute in silence until Lilith pulled her secret daughter toward the porch, “Enough of this. Let’s get out of this rain. Scoot.”

Holding hands, they stumbled up the porch, both fake smiling when in the moonlight.

Under the porch awning, Lilith’s voice cracked, “You married men that you sewed together from my husband’s

clothes. You don't have anything except a garden but somehow you give me whatever I need whenever I need it."

"I always give you anything."

"The forks? For Jon?"

Doris ran into the front door, "Jon can burn in a grease fire."

Lilith chased her inside, "Honey, Jon pays for your life."

"Then I'll get my job back."

"Your bills are way too much. We need Jon. And Jon needs ... the forks."

Doris circled her living room in a wild screaming tantrum, "You only care about the forks!"

Lilith was embarrassed. Humiliated. And guilt-ridden.

Doris continued her rampage, "You don't care about me! You don't care about what I want. You don't give me what I want! I want Cody!"

Kneeling, Lilith took off Doris's muddy shoes, "Okay Dor. No more scarecrow husbands. We're going to find you a real man. Somehow."

Lilith was forever changed like a mother realizing her pubescent daughter needed attention from the opposite sex, and mother's contact alone from here on out would not suffice. "Doris, of course you deserve a man, every bit as much as I do."

On her knees Lilith slammed shut her eyes and tightly gripped the shoes to her bosom with the melodrama of someone praying for the impossible, "I'm gonna get you a real man. Somehow!!"

Doris was perplexed why Lilith seemed to make it all so

complicated. The answer was simple to Doris who elucidated, overenunciating, “I already told you! Cody. Is. Heart. Guaranteed!”

An hour later, Doris with dried mud on her clothes, sat on a kitchen chair, lifeless.

Showered Lilith, in a robe, paced, and noticed out the sink window that the Mercedes had returned.

She quickly ordered Doris, “Go up to bed, honey. I’ll be up in a minute. Scoot scoot scoot!”

Lilith snuck an Ambien in Doris’s drink.

After Doris defeatedly climbed up the stairs, Lilith quietly opened the basement door. She tip-toed down to find Cody, lying awake on the couch.

“Hey sexy lady,” he whispered.

“You’re a no-good thief.”

“I brought it back.”

“Why?”

“I see your eyes when I close mine,” he said, a tear rolling down his beard stubble.

They kissed tenderly.

He backed up, tore off his shirt.

She threw her robe against the wall.

He lifted her, kissed her, lowered her onto the couch, where they tenderly made love.

“I love you so much,” he kept repeating.

“No. Don’t.”

“And I know you love me.”

She shook her head no, but they both knew she was lying. Cody’s sweaty face lit up in a wide smile. He pulled her even closer, sticking their sweaty bodies together.

Half an hour later, Lilith tip-toed into the bedroom to find Doris asleep. Lilith opened the closet and searched through hanging nightgowns. One fell. Picking it up, she found a dusty rubber man toy doll in a blue shirt and jeans, the “man toy” that they shared as kids.

Lilith remembered when they first saw the doll, almost fifty years ago. The shack was not as worn.

A rotund eleven year-old Betsy Webber in a long white coat pounded on the front door, holding the man toy with a ribbon on it.

Gypsy Mother in a gray caftan and long gray hair in a bun opened the door. She rocked a tiny day-old baby Doris and whispered, “Come in, Betsy. Haven’t seen you all summer, child! Come on in and see what we found in the ragweed last night.”

Betsy walked in, stunned to see a baby. Betsy spoke loud so Gypsy Mother could hear. “You found a baby?!”

“We gonna call her Doris.”

“She’s so itty-bitty!”

“Ain’t it so? Now don’t get too close, darling, it took me all night to get her breath at regular.”

“School’s started already and the teachers been wondering where’s Lilith been all summer! I came to see and bring her a new doll!”

“Isn’t that a lovely doll! I’ll give it to her. Lilith would love to see you but she has a virus and ain’t feeling up to schooling. We both was up all night with this one here.”

Betsy nodded and was silent as a chunky post-birthing eleven year-old Lilith drifted hesitantly down the stairs, “Betsy Webber, what are you doing here?”

“I brought you a new doll. Did you know school started?”

“Did it already?” Lilith asked, looking down, pulling lint off her pajamas.

“There will be a football team this year, too. I was thinking we should start practicing if we’re going to be cheerleaders.”

“Let me think about that some more.”

“If we practice we’ll be great. So if you want to practice jumps and things you should come to school.”

“I’m so sorry I haven’t come ... had the longest flu.”

“I’ll tell the teachers you had the flu,” Betsy said, handing the man toy to Lilith, “I got it for you.”

“It’s dear. Thank you, Betsy!”

“You don’t have a man doll, right?”

“No, I just have lady dolls.”

“Now you have a man, too,” Betsy smiled, then turned to exit.

Lilith blushed, “The baby. We don’t know who’s the mother. She was left in the garden.”

Gypsy Mother kissed the newborn, “If you got an extra blanket we could put it to use.”

Betsy obliged, “I’m sure I can find one somewheres.”

Lilith smiled, “I don’t know what I’d do without ya, Betsy Webber. You light my soul.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow with a blanket,” Betsy enthused, “We’re gonna be cheerleaders!”

“We’re gonna be!” Lilith echoed, brightened from her friend.

Chapter 5: Friday

The next morning Lilith awoke to see Doris in her pajamas looking out the second-story bedroom window.

Though Doris had on no crazy make-up, her facial features nevertheless stretched to unbelievable proportions because she was experiencing unbelievable joy, “Lilith! Cody didn’t go! He’s fixing the garden!” She twirled, caressing his taped hair over her heart.

Outside the sun highlighted the worst of the storm-axe-full moon-garden massacre.

A skittish deer ate slaughtered squash.

In his blue shirt and jeans, Cody stepped over the fence pieces to examine a torso of a scarecrow. He found its’ head and tried to reattach it.

Minutes later in the kitchen, robed Lilith, in face cream, tapped Doris on the shoulder and took over making coffee.

Doris grunted, “I don’t even want to go out there and see the wrecking I did.”

Lilith removed the ironing board from a closet and stood it in front of Doris. She put a bushel of clothes on it as she said, “Remember that heavy man with the lisp? The one with the skinny head who works at the slaughter house?”

“He’s cute.”

“You’re telling me! I wonder if you’d like to make him porkchops?”

“No. I don’t want him anymore. He had his chance,” Doris decided, rising to iron.

Cody crept in, “Doris, how could you do that to your garden? It looks like hell. You look good though. With no make-up.” He cornered Lilith and touched her face cream, “I like the clowny face cream on you.”

She played cold to keep their romance a secret from Doris.

“I smell coffee,” he grunted in his low voice.

“No,” Doris chided, “It’s not done yet.”

The yellow wall phone rang adding tension to the room.

Lilith became frightened, “Tell Jon I’m doing charity. Out of town. No, wait,” Lilith suddenly moved for the phone, then changed her mind, signaling Doris to answer it.

Doris spoke into the phone, “Hello ... hello Jon ... she said something about a charity ... out of town somewheres ... sure ... ah huh ... okay... sure ... bye.” She hung up, then relayed, “Jon says you better get home.”

Cody balked, “Is he your husband -- or your boss?”

Lilith quipped, “Scoot it, houseboy, go fetch some slaughtered pumpkin so we can make pie.”

“Not until I get coffee.”

Doris pushed Cody out the room, “Coffee’s not ready!”

In cold tree shade, Cody collected pumpkin pieces. Shivering, he maneuvered away and lay down, basking in a sun warmed area. *I love it here*, he thought, *this is the best place I’ve ever lived*. He smiled. *It feels amazing*.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Doris ironed.

Lilith stared out the crooked sink window, pensive. She

watched a car pass, then Cody jumped in her view with the axe. She screamed.

He crossed his eyes and extended his chin, trying to look like a psychotic serial killer waving the axe.

Lilith shook her head and held her heart.

He laughed, handing her pumpkin remnants.

Lilith dropped them on the counter then slammed the window down and chuckled, “Doris, he’s a loose cannon. There’s no telling what games he plays.”

“He plays the xylophone.”

Ironing, Doris held up a vanilla silk blouse of Lilith’s, “Can I borrow this.”

“Oh, honey, you know that I don’t like to lend my things out. No you cannot.” She stopped herself, then completely changed her attitude, “I’m a monster, Doris. Yes. Wear anything but pantyhose dresses. And if you’re going to wear such a nice designer blouse, I think you’re right that you should get a job again. To get out of the house, make some friends. To have money if anything happens to Jon.”

Less than an hour later, squeezed into that blouse, heavily made-up Doris shimmied into the local Neiman Marcus store. Once inside she took a deep breath and meandered to the managerial offices.

Mary-Ellen wearing a nametag at her desk interviewed Doris as she filled out an application, “Well, welcome to Sunbar

County, Doris! Your sister phoned, says you're very "special" and here for a long stay! Well welcome to Sunbar County! Lilith is right, you do not want to deal with the cash registers. Let's cross that out. Let the students in computer tech handle that."

"Computers ruined my life."

"We're all in the same boat, darlin. Let me take a look at you. I bet you'd be a big help bussing tables in our brand new cafeteria a few times a week. Would you enjoy bussing tables for the Neiman Marcus restaurant?"

"I'll do it."

"Well then. You came at a good time. Someone just gave their notice. We just need approval from my higher-up but between you and me, she'll hire anybody for the bussing positions."

Mary-Ellen knocked on an office door reading "SUPERVISOR BETSY WEBBER."

Reading it, Doris panicked.

A husky voice said, "Come on in."

Mary-Ellen twisted the knob and ushered in anxious Doris.

Chain-smoking Betsy Webber looked up, confused, "Mary-Ellen, who have you brought? ... Oh ... Oh."

"Lilith phoned to say her "special" sister just moved here. This is Doris, who would like to bus tables. Not work cash registers. She seems strong," Mary-Ellen explained, then left, closing the door.

Betsy rose, agape, "My. It's been a coon's age, Doris. Have not seen you for ten years? At Target? Valentine's Day. When you bit me and Roy."

“I cursed the oily blubber on you. Do you want me to take the curse off you or not?”

“Fine, Doris. Yes, you can be a busboy. Is that what you want to do? Pick up greasy plates? Not very glamorous.”

“You should have let me have Roy, you Eskimo slut.”

“I assume that language is reserved only for your bosses, Missy, you can’t talk to the customers that way. Wait! Your mother ... um ... sister ... said you enjoy cooking, don’t you, dear?”

“I cook better than you.”

“We agree on that. Do you think you can bake a hundred orange roughly tomorrow? They can’t burn.”

“I can. I will. My fish don’t burn, cowface.”

“Come give me a “Welcome to Neiman Marcus” hug. No biting.”

They hugged.

Excited Doris runway sashayed back and forth.

Betsy applauded, then in good humor Betsy also runway sashayed back and forth.

Doris applauded, finally relaxing to a smile, “Oh my god I got a job!!”

With pity in her tearful eyes, Betsy said, “We’re lucky to have you, hon.”

Doris threw up her hands in ecstasy, then posed like a model.

Betsy mimicked the pose, wiping her compassionate eyes.

The two took turns with model poses. They swiveled, twirled, sashayed and pivoted - and applauded each other.

Minutes later, Doris danced into Target.

Upon seeing her, Dina, wearing the exact floral blouse Doris had handed her on their last encounter, threw perfume samples in a bag, "Here."

Doris sighed, "I didn't come for Target perfume, you alcoholic."

"Then what may I help you with today, ma'am?"

"I'll be working at Neiman Marcus in days but I don't need a ride because I'll get a helicopter but if you want to meet on our lunch breaks let me know."

Dina stared blankly at Doris.

Doris waited for her reply.

Finally Dina shrugged, then asked, "What time will your break be?"

"One."

Dina scrutinized Doris from head to toe, "Great," Dina smiled, "We can go to Arby's."

Back at the shack, Cody axed firewood then sat on the porch bench. He shook his pack of Winstons as a mail truck

pulled up. Pete got out with mail.

Cody waved, "Hi."

Pete waved, "Mail for Doris Adelson. You must be her boyfriend?"

"What?? No way. Give me the mail."

Seeing Pete, Lilith stepped out from the shack, moving seductively in her robe, "I didn't know the mailman was here."

Pete nodded, "Hello Mrs. Jones. Lilith."

Lilith pretended she did not know him, "Have we met?"

"I'm Pete. From Michigan. Where men know how to give tender massages?"

Lilith pretended she did not remember.

After an awkward silence, Pete turned around and walked back in his truck, then got inside.

Cody trailed him, crept to his car window and whispered, "You seem like a cool guy. You get around."

"We mailmen do get around."

"Selling meth? Grams? Sacks?"

"Drugs?"

"I need just a bit. To take the edge off."

Pete was offended, "Drugs? I don't sell drugs, dude."

"I was kidding," Cody lied, "I'm a cop. Good to know you're clean. Stay clean."

Pete nervously drove away.

Cody sauntered back to Lilith, "You have a boyfriend in Michigan?"

"I did years ago. Not him."

"And?"

Lilith spoke with a Midwestern accent, “Oh for gosh sakes, my guy Clem was a super bowler, even with a Pabst brewski in his hand, don’t you know.”

She stepped nearer to his chest so his large frame blocked the sun for her.

He smiled, “Am I blocking the sun for you? Saving you from wrinkles?”

She nodded.

He kissed her neck.

She sighed, “You’ve wrinkled my entire brain in a couple days. Deepened my crow’s feet.”

“You could be ancient and you’d still give me a hard-on. There’s just a magnetic chemistry about us.”

“From your standpoint.”

“A girl afraid of the moon and the sun.”

“A girl? Are you blind?”

“I see the girl in you.”

“I’m old. It’s too late.”

He grabbed her.

She jerked to get away but he clutched her arm firmly, keeping her near.

He growled sexily, “I’m shading you.”

“I’m married.”

He kissed her.

She pulled back, “You’re a dangerous fool.”

He stared into her eyes, into her soul.

She looked away.

He breathed on her, “You excite me more than a living

creature ought to.”

“I don’t ... feel the way you do.”

His brows furrowed. He looked hurt until Lilith switched moods and pushed his head down on her bosom.

He whispered, “You love me, too.”

Regardless that a passing car might see them, he pulled away her robe and kissed her nipple.

Her hands pushed his head lower to her genitals, which he kissed, in ecstasy. Then strangely he took her hand, navigated it to slap his face as he confessed, “I didn’t think I could love again.”

“We can’t.”

“We are.”

“No,” she said, tying her robe, moving away. She sat on the porch bench, hiding her face in her hands.

He sat next to her, undressing completely. The sun was so hot the hair on his neck and chest curled.

She looked up the road nervously but couldn’t resist playing with the hair on his chest, “I will never leave Jon.”

“You will. It’s you and me from here on out.”

She wiped a tear.

Naked, he knelt in front of her, pushing his head through her robe to lick her legs. She playfully slapped him. He grabbed both her wrists, forcing her to hit him again.

She whined, “What’s wrong with you? Your hurting my wrists.”

He wouldn’t release her.

Left without choice, she had to hit him to break free.

He liked it, "Come on! Do it! I dig the rough stuff."

"I don't want to hit you!"

"Then I'll tell Jon about us."

She slapped him hard.

He fell over laughing, then hugged her legs, pleading, "Keep hitting me. I like it."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I was a bad boy. I need a spanking."

She struggled to kick loose and ran into the house.

Seconds later, she was in the upstairs bedroom packing her things. She heard Cody running up the stairs so she ran to close the door. His muscular naked body struggled to open the door while she used all her strength holding it closed.

Growing weak, she slipped to the floor.

He barged in and lifted her.

She protested, "I am married."

"He hits you."

"Once. Twice. By accident."

"Let's run away."

"I can't leave Jon. Jon pays for Doris to live. He won't let me get a paying job, so this way I am dependent on him."

"I wish he were dead. And left all his money to you. To us."

"I wouldn't refuse it," she said.

Their raw confessions stunned them to silence. Their eyes locked, studying each other -- each wondering if the other was capable of murder.

Minutes later in the kitchen, Cody, still naked, poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Lilith, in her robe, who was speaking on her iPhone, “Jon, I’m volunteering at the charity bakeries day and night ... we have so many homeless in Charleston to feed ... I’m at some Charleston dive motel ...”

At the Victorian manor, Jon’s fist clutched the phone, his other clenched fist waved an I.D. card of a U.P.S delivery person.

Jon fumed, “Leave the dang motel and get home. Now.”

“I can’t. Jon, there’s a handicapped kid who used to work at the bakery who’s having a bar mitzvah. They still need my help ...”

“How do I know you ain’t in bed with some U.P.S. man named Will?!”

Lilith stiffened, blushed, stammered, “Would you rather I don’t ask the U.P.S. guys for I.D. ... and end up butchered?!”

“I catch you with him and I butcher you both to your knees.”

“Your audacity, Jon! As you screw my best friend right under my nose!” Her shaking hands hung up the phone.

She screamed to Cody, “No! I can’t get him angry. He’ll hurt me and Doris! We can’t upset him. I have to call him back,” she dialed her phone, lips moving to wet her dry mouth.

Cody hung up her phone, “Fuck him. You don’t love him.”

“He’s my husband. He pays for this house.”

Cody kissed her and untied her robe.

She protested, "I have to call him back and apologize."

"You said he's fucking your friends."

"Just my prettiest friend."

"She's not as pretty as you."

"You'd want her, too, if you saw her."

"I only want you. Forever."

He threw off her robe and lifted her naked body onto the table, then climbed on top of her.

She giggled and resisted, "Doris can come in any minute!"

"She's working."

"They could fire her," she protested, "You know how she is."

"Shh. This is our time. Just me and you. Nobody else in the whole world, Lil."

"That's not true."

"Shut up."

"No, you shut up."

He kissed her, "Look at me. My eyes."

She did.

"It's just you and me," he sighed, "In the whole world."

"It's not."

"Life screwed us both. I got locked up for an accident, and you got knocked up as a kid. But when she's at work, it's just you and me."

"In the whole world," she relented, kissing his neck, clutching onto his chest hair.

Mary-Ellen flirted with the handsome waiter who set down her plate of orange roughy. She was sitting with Betsy at the Neiman Marcus restaurant.

Betsy pointed to the fish on her plate, "Lord I hope this tastes good and that Doris can cook as well as Lilith says."

They tasted it, both marveling.

"It's yummy," Mary-Ellen mused.

Betsy called the waiter over, "Can you ask Doris the new cook to come out here, please?"

"Of course," he said, adjusting his bow-tie, then scampering away.

"Don't you find it odd?" Mary-Ellen gossiped, "... that Lilith has this sister appear out of nowhere? Lilith never once mentioned a Doris before now?"

Betsy mumbled, "She mentioned she had a sister to me."

"Well, you two were closer as kids. So where was this sister these past fifty years?"

"With relatives," Betsy lied, "But please don't bring it up to Doris. She's very sensitive."

"Oh I know sensitive!" Mary-Ellen quacked, "Nobody's more sensitive than me, deary. I wear my heart on my sleeeeeeve."

"Shhh," Betsy whispered, pointing to Doris approaching.

Doris's face was plastered with too much eye shadow and blush, and now cooking grease. "How is the fish?" she huffed.

Betsy smiled, "Best fish I ever had in my long hard life,

Doris! You know a thing or two about cooking, don't you, hon?"

"I do."

Mary-Ellen patronizingly patted Doris's hand.

Doris pulled her hand away saying, "Mary-Ellen, you keep your hands off my man."

Mary-Ellen's eyes bulged, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Betsy butted in, "Doris, Mary-Ellen and I promise to keep our hands off whoever is your man. Is it Roy?"

"He wishes!" Doris fumed, "I broke up with Roy. I am engaged to Cody."

Betsy affirmed, "Hon, we promise to keep our hands off this Cody as long as you promise to keep cooking this good?"

Doris grinned, showing food in her missing teeth, "Promise."

Excited Doris did a runway sashay and pose.

Remaining seated, Betsy smiled and also did a move and model pose.

Mary-Ellen laughed.

That evening in the kitchen, denim-clad Cody whispered into the wall phone, "Mike ... Officer Jon Jones ... Jonathan Jones. He's loaded with bucks ... All I know is he's loaded. So get your sources to open the cop's account info -"

Lilith inched near, looking like a movie-star in subtle make-up and form-fitting pecan pantsuit.

Cody quickly hung up the phone.

“Who was that?!,” she asked, “Jon??”

“No. Wrong number. You look so hot.”

“Don’t pick up the phone here. This is not your home,” Lilith chided.

From the staircase jubilant Doris appeared, head wrapped in scarf. As she sat at the table, she boasted, “Betsy Webber put me in charge of tomorrow’s filet mignon. Enough to serve a hundred.”

Lilith smiled, “Lucky you.”

Cody added, “Lucky filet mignon.” He removed a casserole from the oven then served it.

Lilith sat and immediately stuck her prized fork in to taste it.

Cody asked, “Well? How does my cooking taste, Lil? No Frosted Flakes this time.”

She ignored him, pensive.

Doris tasted it, “Cumin? And I taste a clove?”

“Yep! You know your seasonings.”

“It’s the best casserole in the world, Cody,” Doris appeased, then in an effort to make him feel as good as Betsy made her feel, she parroted, “Best casserole I ever had in my long, hard life.”

“Aw thanks!” he said, then sat and turned his attention to silent Lilith.

After dinner as Lilith washed dishes, Cody lit a cigarette

then roamed outside, and to the Mercedes. The keys were inside the ignition. He paced up the road, then back to the car, conflicted about disappearing. *I could grab Lilith right now, throw her in the passenger seat and we could be across the boarder in a day, live in Mexico.*

Through the crooked kitchen window, Lilith spied on him once again, poker-faced.

Cigarette in mouth, Cody carried a log into the shack living room and threw it in the dwindling fireplace.

Lilith passed him, "Good night."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You coming downstairs later?"

"Shh! No."

"Let's take the car to Mexico," he grinned.

"Shh. What about Doris??"

"Well, if we have to, we can take her."

"You're being ridiculous."

"We'll all get jobs in Tijuana or Cancun."

"Jon would find us in two days and kill us all."

Their eyes locked.

He whispered, "Not if we kill him first."

Their calculating eyes poured into each other for half a minute until she looked away and whispered, "I'm going to bed right now. We'll see you in the morning," and off she went, hiking up the stairs.

He sat in front of the fire warming the chill, but alone and glum.

Upstairs in the bedroom, Lilith, in a nightgown, climbed into bed with Doris. Lilith showed Doris an image on her iPhone, “Here’s that German guy with the limp who sells bait, always seemed fond of you.”

“He has bad breath.”

“Because of his teeth. But they can be fixed.”

“No. He has to have perfect teeth like Cody,” and then, as if to prove how delusional she was, “Perfect teeth like me.”

Lilith scanned more photos, “Sal has that brother.”

“Bully Sal?”

“His brother’s not a bully.”

“He’s in a mental home.”

“But ...” Lilith searched, “... but ... he’s cute with that unibrow, isn’t he?”

“He’s no Cody,” Doris whined, “Did you have nookie with Cody?”

Lilith put Doris’s head on her bosom and stroked her daughter’s hair, “No I did not. What are we going to do with your wild imagination? You’re obsessed with him.”

“He’s all I think about.”

“Men hypnotize. Like all those men who would come by and bring us groceries after Gypsy Mother died? One would always spend the night “to protect us.” But Paul put an end to those men and insisted I be his teenage bride but the ass left me ten years later for another teenager.”

Lilith scanned to show Doris a photo of Paul, then a photo of Sal.

Doris asked, “Then Sal beat him up?”

Lilith sighed, “Sal the alpha-male. Intoxicating. I was so lucky big tough Sal married me, wasn’t I? He was supposed to protect us, wasn’t he? Until he left me for Mary-Ellen. Thank God the best-looking man of all came into my life then and made me laugh,” Lilith showed another photo of a gorgeous man with a mustache, “Davey’s practical jokes made me hum again, until I learned our marriage was the joke and he was bisexual and in love with our plumber. I was devastated when he left me for a plumber! Losing a good plumber like that!”

They chuckled.

Lilith pet Doris’s head affectionately, “You got my joke. I wasn’t sure if you would get it.”

“They always leave you,” Doris stated, “Jon’s going to leave you, too. They always do.”

Lilith’s crowfeet deepened as she rose and continued to scroll through her phone, “Jon can’t leave me. He can’t ever leave us. We need Jon.”

“I need Cody. He makes me feel incredible.”

“Your house doesn’t make you feel incredible? These views! Do you know how many people would love to live in a secluded home like this with forest views? Millions of city folks would.”

“It could burn down for all I care.”

“Don’t curse it like that. You love this place. Your garden is so special ...”

“I don’t know if I’ll have the patience for it next year.”

“Of course you will. It means the world to you. And all of us. We all get such pleasure from your garden. Your heirloom

tomatoes are delicious.”

“They’re so much work.”

“But your tomatoes are better than the store’s! A lot better! And your butternut squash! My my!”

“It’s a lie. There’s no butter or nut in butternut squash. It’s only good with butter. Store squash is just as good with butter.”

“Your furniture?”

“The crummy old furniture in this old house?”

“That pink plaid chair mother always sat in. Every time I see it I feel, I don’t know, sentimental.”

“I see it every day and it just looks old. Still smells of her whiskey.”

“Oh it does not. You have antiques. The pine armoire is a very rare armoire.”

“It doesn’t mean anything ... It was at a flea market.”

“This warm bed with the pillow covers you made, oh honey, it’s all so special. You have so many special things.”

“I don’t have a man.”

“Men are temporary, they don’t last as long as furniture. Don’t you care about all these wonderful things you have? What about the Civil War forks?”

“Nothing feels like I do when I look at him or when he comes into a room.”

Lilith inhaled deeply, “You’d give up the forks?”

“He means more to me than the forks.”

Lilith grabbed something from the closet floor, “Really?”

“He’s Cody.”

“You’d trade the forks for Cody?”

Doris was perplexed, “If I had to choose. But I don’t. I have a wish, don’t I? The green witches that fly between oaks gave all females in Sunbar County one free wish.”

“No one knows if that witch’s tale has any truth to it, but if it does, don’t use your one wish to make someone do something they don’t want to do! You save the wish for when you’re in danger.”

Doris circled both her index fingers around her eyes, “I wish Cody ...”

Lilith covered Doris’s mouth, “Your wish is canceled. Save that wish for when you’re in danger.”

Lilith’s fingers walked the man doll to Doris’s side.

Doris instantly recognized the old toy, “The man toy! You brought it back to me!”

“He was here all the time, you messy housekeeper. At the bottom of that deplorable closet.”

“I love the man toy!”

“And look, he loves you. Look at his little tiny smile.”

“The night I wrecked the garden and cried. You acted like you were going to give me Cody.”

“Now wait a minute. I never said I was going to give you Cody. That is not up to me.”

“Yes it is!” Doris shouted, “You have to help me get him. You’re my big sister.”

“I never said I was going to get you Cody.”

“You led me to believe you were going to,” Doris said, crying. “You manipulated me like you manipulate men.”

“I do not manipulate,” she argued.

“That’s how you get men for you.”

“I can’t manipulate to get you a man,” Lilith chuckled.

Doris sobbed.

“Crying is not how you get a man. Yes, I ... know how much you want a man.”

“A real one. Not a scarecrow.”

“Well ... I’ll do my best.”

“Cody is heart-guaranteed,” Doris showed the taped hair on her bosom, wiping her tears.

Lilith sighed.

Later in the afternoon, Doris, wearing her gray sundress and a striped scarf on her head and a polka dot one around her neck, toiled under the dead oak tree. The drifting clouds only permitted a few feet of warm sun, at this moment over the reassembled and standing scarecrow Jon Junior.

Thirty feet away, Cody and Lilith realigned fencing, both of them shivering.

Cody whispered, “I want to put my arms around you to keep you warm.”

“Don’t you dare. If Doris sees that, no telling what crazy things she’ll destroy. Look at this garden mess.”

A headache overtook him, making him dizzy, “What gets me is that it’s still happening. When it all went down.”

“What?”

“Marie. I see her last look she gave me ... like she hated me ... I hear her yelling ... I taste the crystal meth.”

“You did meth?”

“Everybody in the trailer park did.”

He flashbaced to the fateful night at the Motel 6 by the highway when he drove a motorcycle on one wheel to impress twenty-two year-old Marie, sitting behind him, holding on for her life.

The motorcycle hit uneven pavement and he slipped off the bike onto parking lot gravel.

Marie screamed and grabbed onto the handlebars, terrified and angry, spinning to her death as the motorcycle careened onto the highway and dragged her under a semi truck.

Witnessing it, Cody yelled, shocked and tormented. With a broken leg, he crawled to the middle of the highway, finding Marie bloody and dead.

He screamed.

Drugged on meth, he crawled between cars, desperate and confused.

Lilith’s touch brought him back to realign the garden fencing, “Are you okay?”

“Maybe I’m still high. I don’t know. It’s trippy being here with you and Doris. Look at how crazy she is. And swirls on a shack. Maybe it’s all a nightmare.”

“Is that how you see me? As a creature in your nightmare?”

“No, you are the good part. The saving grace.”

“How do you feel about drugs now?”

“You offering?” he chuckled and winked.

“No! You have to stay away from drugs.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not like I know any drug dealers. I know only two people. You and Doris.”

“You don’t need to know anyone else. But if you met a drug dealer?” she asked.

“Drugs can be a nice break. Took the edge off. Low doses. Numbs my memories.”

“I see,” she said, eyes narrowing.

He grinned, “You look old when you look angry.”

She went to slap him, then stopped when he laughed anticipating pleasure from it, or at least relief from the excruciating guilt in his over-wracked brain.

“Bastard,” she said, “You want me to hit you.”

“Sure, a little.”

“You’re this big man and I’m this little woman and you want me to dominate you. You’re ... the nightmare.”

“If you hit me, I don’t know, it feels good.”

“I should take you to my psychiatrist.”

“You have a psychiatrist?” he implored.

“Many people do.”

“What for?”

“You see my life. Jon. Cheating ass. He hates Doris. And Doris. Crazy as they come. She hates Jon. It’s not easy to try and make nice every goddamned day.”

“It’s easy when it’s just us two, though.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But it’s not just us two. Why haven’t you ever mentioned your family?”

He shook his head, uncomfortable.

“What?” she asked, concerned.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is the trailer park near here?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why haven’t you gone home to your family?”

“That’s the first place cops would look.”

“What do you mean? Look??” she asked, “Wait ... You weren’t released from prison? ... You escaped??”

“Never mind.”

“Oh nasty heavens. You escaped??”

“Never mind.”

“Aren’t you concerned that your family might think you’re dead?”

“They might be dead. I don’t know. Why didn’t they ever visit me in jail??”

He touched where the sun now heated her forearm. Then he pulled a shovel out of the cold dirt and pressed it there.

She flinched, shivered.

He asked, “Who can stay alive in a cold cell like that?”

“Prison isn’t that cold. Jon has taken me to the jailhouse and it’s heated.”

“When you walk in, no doubt it is heated. You’re hot. You don’t know what it’s like to be a cold man in a cold cell. The guard took away my clothes and sheets and bed. You don’t know what it’s like when the sun doesn’t come out for ten years. Nothing warm inside or out. I’m still freezing.”

He indicated his lungs.

She whispered, “I wish I could rub your hairy chest right

now and make you warm.”

“Do it.”

“No, she can never see that.”

Lilith fought a headache as she looked over to Doris working by the scarecrow.

A plan brewed in Lilith’s brain, “Go ... over in the sun by Doris and the scarecrow. She could use your help.”

“I want to be by you.”

She prodded him with the shovel, “Scoot scoot scoot!”

He looked up to see Doris struggling to stab duct-taped tomato sticks in the earth and called to her, “Dor! I’ll help you with that!”

Doris yelled back, “Come help me, Brown Eyes!

Watching Cody and Doris for half an hour, Lilith realigned fencing fighting a headache, as a plan evolved in her manipulative mind. *I have to do this*, she thought. *I have to*.

She took a deep breath then shouted, “Cody! We need you over there putting in the fence!”

Lilith pointed to an area.

Obediently, he went to it.

Lilith walked to Doris and ripped the flannel jacket off the nearby scarecrow.

“What are you doing??” Doris questioned.

“Cody’s going to need this,” Lilith stated as she marched to Cody, who was working on his knees.

She pulled him up by his shirt, “Here.”

“What? You told me to work over here.”

“Winter’s coming. I know how you hate to be cold,” Lilith

reasoned, shoving the coat at him.

She studied him as he tried on the scarecrow's green plaid coat. "You like it?"

"Wow. It fits," he laughed, surprised.

"It needs a good cleaning. Don't you think you should put it in the wash?"

"For me to wear?"

"You need a warm jacket."

"I do," he agreed.

"Go. Put it in the laundry. Scoot scoot scoot."

And off he walked just as instructed.

In the kitchen, Cody whispered into the wall phone, "What did you find out?"

On the other end was Mike, "The cop's crazy about a Mary-
Ellen?"

"Lilith mentioned Mary something."

"He must be screwing this Mary something because his will states she gets everything. Nothing goes to Lilith."

"What a piece of shit he is."

That evening in the shack living room, Cody played the xylophone in front of the roaring fireplace. Lilith sat on the pink plaid recliner scanning her iPhone. Doris sat on the couch, sewing together dishtowels with marker-drawn moons and writing.

Lilith said, "Doris is making you a shirt."

Doris explained to Cody, "The different moons have the explanations next to them so you won't bother me by asking which means what and when not to look at the moon. Never let the light of a full moon catch you frowning or you'll face death in three days. It caught me frowning so I have to be extra careful these next days."

He hugged her in sincere appreciation.

She froze in ecstasy that her man had touched her again, this time willingly! When he withdrew, she concentrated on her stitching.

Cody waved his xylophone mallet to get Lilith's attention, but she pretended she didn't see him and ducked behind her iPhone, where she also hid a few Civil War forks.

He cleared his throat, "Lilith, do we have any more pie?"

There came no response.

He repeated, "Lilith, do we. Have any more. Pie?"

"I think so," she answered.

"Can you show me where it is?" he asked.

"Do I have to draw you a map to the kitchen?" she laughed, refusing to look at him.

Cody was pissed and played the same key louder and louder to get Lilith to look at him. She would not.

Doris held her ears, “That’s obnoxious.”

“I’m just playing anything.”

“Let me teach you a real song.”

“No. That’s okay.”

Doris’ little hands guided his giant hands along the toy xylophone to play a melody.

Lilith peeked around her iPhone to see the taped-up mallet start to unravel.

Doris laughed, “No no! It can’t unravel! We just started the song.”

Soon the xylophone was completely covered in the flailing mallet stuffing.

Doris played faster, “Hang in there, mallet! Come on!”

Cody laughed along.

Doris’ mallet got stuck between keys, but she continued. The mallet now looked like a chopstick.

“I better tape it up,” Doris reasoned.

“Keep playing, it sounds good,” Cody said encouragingly, “I’ll get the tape,” he offered, sprinting into the kitchen.

Doris hollered, “Hey! Want to try on your new shirt?”

From the other room he yelled back, “You’re not finished with it yet!!”

“Can we try it?! Otherwise, I won’t know if I’m doing it right!”

He reentered with tape and taped the mallet stuffing while Doris’s fingers touched him gently, guiding his hands, “Keep taping around and around.”

He did, not objecting to her touch as he had previously.

The mallet was saved.

Happy, Doris's attention went to the shirt she was sewing and she held it up for Cody to appreciate, "Try it on."

"Aw, you're so sweet to make me a shirt," he said, pulling her into a sincere hug.

Doris's mind raced, *He can't get enough of me! Always roaming his hands on me!*

They had come a long way from the time he forbade her to touch him.

He took off the shirt he was wearing to slip on the new one.

Doris stared lustfully, *I don't even have to pay him to take his clothes off anymore!*

The fireplace crackled.

He flexed modeling the new shirt, which fit nicely in the shoulders but the sleeves were inches too short.

Doris was deflated, "The sleeves are too short."

"That's okay," Cody chuckled, "Lilith -- Doris made me a 'short sleeve' shirt. Get it?"

There was no response.

They looked at the chair where she had been sitting. It was empty.

"Where'd she go?" asked Cody.

Doris called for her, "Lilith?"

Cody called louder, "Lilith!?" He stood up, "I'll check outside. You check upstairs."

"We would've seen her if she went upstairs."

Doris went upstairs anyway, to search.

Cody ran outside, jumped off the porch and searched the

overcast darkness, whispering, “Lilly?? It’s me. Hey, are we escaping now? I’m ready.”

But she was nowhere in sight.

Doris searched the bedroom then hollered down the stairs, “Her suitcase is missing!”

The man toy had been strategically left on Doris’ bed pillow.

Doris flew down the stairs and looked out the kitchen window and noticed that the Mercedes was gone. Where it was, Cody paced, pissed.

Doris stood with her hands on her hips, “Cody! Her suitcase is gone!”

Across town, Lilith entered a small brick office building and once inside, opened a door reading: DR. HAYS, PSYCHIATRIST.

Moments later Lilith lay on the black tufted leather couch as seated bald Dr. Hays took notes, rubbing his gray beard. The walls were dark and the curtains even darker, bordering barred windows.

Lilith inhaled nervously, “Cody had many chances to steal my car and leave. He never does.”

“He likes it there?”

“And why not? Doris loves him, adores him, makes him clothes, the best meals. He’s the companion she needs. Well, she needs a man, a real man, sexually, a husband, not that he

feels that way about her. He feels that way about me. Can you believe it? At my age?"

"And you are in love with this young man?"

"Dr. Hays, I will not feel guilty since Jon is cheating on me and forbidding me to make any money of my own! I'm trapped."

"You are Jon's prisoner?"

"I guess so, I am his prisoner. And so is Doris."

"Your voice quivered when you said Doris."

"She is my responsibility. I need to give her what she needs."

"And you give Jon what he needs? What does Lilith need?"

"I need ... a way to give Jon what he needs and give Doris what she needs and give Cody what he needs ... And I have a plan."

Not long after, with her suitcase, Lilith peeked in the windows of the Victorian manor. She saw Jon in his police uniform and Mary-Ellen in a low-cut red dress standing and talking. She quietly opened the door expecting to catch them in a lover's embrace but was surprised that Mary-Ellen's husband, Sal, her ex, the mean prison guard, was also there.

Jon looked disappointed to see Lilith, "Look who home in time to put on supper."

Lilith fake-smiled and fake-kissed Jon, fake-hugged Mary-

Ellen and Sal, saying, “Of course I came home. What are we all hungry for tonight?”

Mary-Ellen grabbed Lilith’s hand, “Let’s leave the husbands to talk police business and we’ll whip up something perfectly divine.”

Mary-Ellen pulled Lilith out of the room and walked her to the kitchen, arm in arm.

Within an hour, the foursome enjoyed an elaborate dinner by candlelight in the dining room.

Lilith laughed and smiled although inside she resented them all. Her husband was abusive, her ex-husband Sal was abusive and her best friend was married to Sal and having an affair with her husband. *If Sal knew about their affair, he’d kill Jon*, Lilith thought. *Should I let the cat out of the bag?? No, Jon can’t die, as much as I hate him. He pays for Doris to live.*

After dessert yogurt, Lilith hugged Mary-Ellen and Sal good-bye in the foyer, then watched her husband do the same. Jon winked at Mary-Ellen the way he used to do at her.

As Jon shut the door, he avoided Lilith’s eyes.

She turned to search a stack of mail, “Did you like the invitation?”

“What invitation?”

“To the bar mitzvah? I told you somebody at the bakery needed my help to plan the whole thing -- where do you think I’ve been these last couple days? You didn’t get that invitation? Lavender with a pink border? I sent it days ago!”

“We didn’t get it.”

“Well, I hate to suspect that new mailman who gives me an

attitude. What was his name? Pete, I think. I caught him opening a letter addressed to you.”

“A mailman opened my mail??”

“Pete. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Pete is his name?”

“Pete and his wife moved to Sunbar County with an attitude.”

“He needs to be fired.”

“Or maybe you need to just give Pete a good talking to?”

“I’ll bash his head in.”

“No. You don’t want a lawsuit. You just need to explain who we are in this town, and get us the respect from him that we deserve.”

As Jon went upstairs, Lilith sat at the desk opening more mail, then she signed on online and typed onto the keyboard then searched the computer. A newspaper with Cody’s photo soon popped up with the headline: ESCAPED SUNBAR PRISON: ERIC HYNDS.

Eric? You’re not Cody? You’re Eric? she thought, her heart hurting that he, too, had lied to her.

Chapter 6: Saturday

The morning sun flattered Doris' swirled Van Gogh shack. The caterpillar cocoons painted to the house siding hatched into Monarch butterflies.

Indoors, robed Doris jumped down the basement stairs to wake Cody, sleeping in his moon shirt. She told him, "It's Lilith."

"Lilith's back here?"

"No, she's on the phone. I don't know where she's calling from. She won't tell me."

Cody pulled on his jeans and raced up the stairs to the kitchen to grab the phone, "Where are you?"

"Ask her when she's coming back," Doris pressed.

He did, "Lil, are you coming back? ... No? Then I'm coming there. Where do you live?"

The phone went dead.

Cody was heartbroken, "She hung up!"

He slammed down the phone and raced down the basement, searching for something.

Doris followed.

"I had my knapsack down here!" he squealed, "Did you see my bag, Doris?"

She followed the Herculean man upstairs as he searched the living room, finding his knapsack behind the recliner. He yanked it up and sprinted out the door and up the dirt road.

Doris chased him as dark clouds loomed above.

Cody yelled, “What street does she live on?”

“You have to finish swirling my house!”

A van approached.

Cody flipped out his thumb to hitch-hike.

The van sped past him.

Doris hollered, “We’ll see her again Saturday when she brings groceries!”

He stopped running and let her catch up to him, then pleaded, “I have to go to where she is, Dor!”

“That’s a horrible idea.”

“Do you care about me or not?”

“The secret’s out.”

“Then help me.”

She shook her head no.

He hugged her, then sprinted into the thick cold fog.

She crossed her arms hugging herself as if to somehow keep the ecstasy of the way his hands felt on her body. When his magnificent body disappeared into the fog she yelled, “Brown Eyes!! She lives in a Victorian Manor on the beach!! The white one!!”

As a few rain sprinkles hit her hair, she heard him yell, “Thank you!!”

Doris’s dreams of Cody as her man shattered. Her heart broke. She exhaled deeply, painfully, then coughed so hard she lost balance, spinning to the dirt. Sitting up, she removed his hairs taped to her chest - and threw them – and watched the wind steal them until they died in the forming rain puddles.

Lowering her head in defeat, she found the strength to rise and shuffled back to the shack, aching.

Suddenly she stopped, circled both her index fingers around her eyes, “If it’s true, if I get one wish, my one wish is Cody would come back.”

Pete’s mail truck approached. Doris ran to him. Pete threw her mail to her, shouting, “I’m not walking in the rain! Sorry!”

Doris screamed, “I’m working at Neiman Marcus!”

He called back, “Good for you! Have a good day! Get out of the rain!” and drove off.

When the fog cleared, Doris saw a police car coming from Cody’s direction. The car parked. Jon got out as the rain subsided.

Doris shuffled to him, guarded, “Jon!.. Hello Jon. I haven’t seen Lilith at all.”

“Look at you, Doris. You did something strange to your hair.”

“It’s bleach.”

“In places. That’s what it is.” The sight of the painted shack startled Jon, “Ain’t you been busy.”

“It used to look crooked.”

He surveyed the shack, trying to understand. He then reached into the front seat and pulled out Cody’s knapsack, then from it, the Civil War forks, grumbling, “Doris, these forks seemed a wee bit familiar.”

Doris felt sick. Betrayed. Confused. *How could Cody steal from me??*

Jon asked, “Gonna press charges? ... Theft ... probably

won't get more than a slap on the hand unless he got a record." Jon looked into his backseat, "Robinhood, you got a record?"

Doris heard Cody's voice deny his theft, "I didn't know those forks were in there! I didn't put them in there!"

In the backseat, Cody wrestled with the handcuffs, angering Jon who pushed his gun against Cody's temple, warning, "You rip my interior and I rip your interior."

Jon yanked handcuffed Cody out of the police car and threw him onto the muddy dirt road.

Cody coughed, "I didn't steal the forks, Doris."

Doris covered for him, "I don't have much use for these fancy-dancy forks, Jon. The cheap forks are easier to clean."

Jon spit on Cody, "Robinhood seem to got use for your family treasures. Let's go press some charges on his handsome face."

Doris resisted, "I think I remember giving him those forks."

"Giving?! Listen, you imbecile, don't you ever give these away!"

Doris pushed Jon, "Shove it up your Vulcan ass, Jon! I'm not pressing charges!" then, without missing a beat, "Let me make you both some waffles."

Jon stammered, "Lil said to hold Robinhood 'til she see him. She said she got a feeling he the man that raped her last year."

Doris was in disbelief, "She said that?"

Cody spoke in a high tone like a child, "I didn't rape anyone!" then he spit upwards in Jon's face.

Jon took his gun and smacked Cody's head with it, "Do it

again and I spit a bullet between your eyebrows.”

Cody stood, dizzy and defiant, as Jon pressed his gun into one of Cody’s eye sockets. Lightning flashed.

“Shoot me,” Cody baited, “But I never raped anybody.”

Thunder sounded in the distance.

Jon huffed, “We’ll see ‘bout that. My wife’ll be here in a little bit.”

He roughly handcuffed Cody to a small tree, then grabbed the precious forks and Doris by her arm, pulling her up onto the porch and inside the shack.

Once inside the kitchen, Doris made waffles, refilling Jon’s coffee.

She rambled, “He’s not a rapist. He never raped me and I won Miss Universe nineteen years in a row. I feed him and he paints for me.”

They did not see that Lilith’s Mercedes parked down the road.

Lilith, wearing sunglasses, fake fur, scarf and purse, scrimmaged to find Cody bending the little tree to which he was attached. Her shadow overtook him as she whispered, “Are they inside?”

Cody was startled to see her right next to him, “Oh hi!”

He smiled, in love with her.

She smiled, in love with him.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Try one of your car keys to uncuff me.”

“Not part of the plan.”

“Plan?”

“Plan.”

He was perplexed, “Plan?”

“The forks.”

“The forks?? Did you put the forks in my bag?”

She squatted next to him, all the while peering inside the house for movement, “Jon will take the handcuffs off. But in one second he can slap them on again and have his buddies whisk you off to jail for rape.”

“Rape? I have an alibi for last year. I was in prison, remember?”

“If rape doesn’t get you a life sentence then escaping prison will, Eric Hynds.”

“Eric?”

Lightning flashed.

“I don’t want to be Eric,” he gasped.

“Eric Hynds.”

“I’m Cody now.”

Thunder rumbled. Rain fell.

“I can tell my husband you are Eric Hynds in a split second, unless you follow my orders.”

“Don’t do this, Lil.”

“What? I’m supposed to leave Jon and just elope with escaped felon Eric Hynds and we’ll get jobs at a fast-food place where I’ll catch you doing drugs in the walk-in cooler?”

“Hey hey hey. Let’s just start with eloping.”

“How are we going to afford to pay for Doris?!” she slapped him so hard his eyes stung with tears, “Did you enjoy that?!”

“No. That was mean.”

“I am not being mean. I’m the adult in the room giving everybody what they need.”

He wiped rain from his face and looked to the shack, “What if John were dead?”

She yanked his face to her, “Are you going to kill John?”

Lightning flashed in the distance.

He looked down at his hands cuffed to the tree, overwhelmed.

Thunder roared.

She lovingly touched his face, “You’re not going to kill anyone. You’re not a killer. You shouldn’t have been convicted of Marie’s murder but you were and sentenced to life in prison.”

“But I broke out.”

“No, Eric Hynds, you clearly did not.”

He jerked away.

She grabbed his cuffs, jerked him back.

He locked eyes with her, “No, if I kill Jon, I’ll go crazy, Lil, look how I am, haunted everyday, when I didn’t even kill Marie. If I really kill a person ... like the army vets that come home, they kill themselves.”

“What army vets?”

“They are so filled with guilt. I can’t kill Jon ...”

“I know that.”

“But ... but ... you can.”

She was flabbergasted, “You want me to kill Jon?”

Rain poured down on them.

“Lil, for you it’s self defense. He beats you ... but ... if you

kill him, it'll haunt you. Everyday. You won't be able to live with yourself."

She measured his words, then slowly admitted, "I can't kill anyone either."

"He's leaving everything to that Mary girl."

"Mary-Ellen? What??"

Cody nodded.

She was stunned and hurt, so much so that she collapsed to her knees, "That can't be true. What about me and Doris?? How do you know that?"

"A friend ... did research."

She turned to ice, "You are never going to speak to your friend again. You are never going to keep secrets from me. Ever!! Do you understand??" she demanded, rising, yanking his wet hair. "And you are never going to leave me!"

Cody was shocked to see her so dominant.

She scowled, looking her age for once, but he was still attracted to her. Truth is her dominance turned him on. He grinned.

"Is that the asshole?" Jon's voice carried from the porch.

Lilith turned to see Jon loading his revolver.

Jon asked, "Did that riffraff rape you?"

Lilith backed up from Cody, lying, "I'm trying to see." She wiped her wet face with her hands, then her wet hands on her fake fur.

Doris flew out onto the porch, "Don't lie, Lilith! Jon'll kill him!"

Jon grumbled, "We can handle this, Doris. Go make more

waffles!”

“I couldn’t have raped her last year!” Cody yelled, his voice trembling, “I was ... not in the area.”

Doris ran in the line of fire, shielding Cody.

“Is it him?! Lilith!” Jon shouted.

The rain stopped.

“Not yet sure,” Lilith debated, seemingly enjoying the pressure everyone else was under. She relished being the relaxed one for a change, the one in complete control. Her expensive high heels treaded slowly through mud puddles towards Jon, “He does resemble the young man who assaulted me last year ... but I don’t think ... it’s him.”

Jon pressed, “Is it or ain’t it?”

As Lilith searched Cody’s eyes from six feet away, nothing could be heard but thunder in the distance.

Shivering Cody saw in Lilith’s eyes a cold manipulative spiteful warden. Lilith saw in Cody’s eyes a weak prisoner.

Eventually Lilith spoke, “I don’t think it is him.”

Cody exhaled, relieved, “I would never rape this woman.”

“You ever lay a finger on my wife and I kill you ten minutes later. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Cody submitted.

“Say it again.”

“I said, yes sir.”

“I don’t like the way you look,” Jon said.

“I wish I could change that, sir.”

Cody bowed his head in guilt, pulling his wet shirt up in an effort to find warmth.

Jon looked puzzled as he stepped down from the porch, “He looked kinda like one of them escapees, don’t he?”

Doris interjected, “He didn’t escape!”

Lilith helped out, “Escapee from jail?? No one who escapes a jail would stay within a couple miles of it.”

“Unless they a retard,” Jon figured, “Or they want to get caught?! Boy, you ever been in trouble with the law?”

“No, sir,” Cody shivered, staring down on his handcuffs.

Lilith put her hand over Jon’s gun, “It’s not the rapist, Jon. The rapist had much more of a backbone.”

“He’s been helping me paint,” Doris piped, “Don’t need a backbone to paint swirls.”

“I paint swirls,” Cody agreed, as his large frame shrunk, kneeling in the mud.

Doris pet Cody’s head, adding, “And he chops firewood. He’s from Venus.”

Jon snapped, “Stop talking retarded!”

“Doris is not retarded,” Lilith said softly, taking Jon’s gun.

Jon walked a step closer to Doris, raising his hand as if a warning to hit her, “You retard and Cody retard seem so familiar to each other??”

Lilith warned, “Don’t call her a retard, Jon!”

Jon did not see that she was raising the gun to point at him.

Jon bullied Doris, “You say he Mr. Fix-it and get room-and-board but you a sitting duck with this riffraff around.”

Lilith turned to aim the gun at Cody, saying, “Jon, you say Cody’s been here? The two of them -- all alone out here? ... Well, I imagine he would’ve hurt her already if that was his

intention ... Don't you think?"

Jon shrugged, "Makes sense. No doubt the retard lonely for company."

"I am not retarded!" Doris protested.

Jon glared at Doris and did not see Lilith turn the gun back at her abusive husband's head.

Cody saw.

Doris saw.

Their eyes enlarged in shock, wondering if she would pull the trigger.

No one tried to stop the potential murder as Lilith silently crept up behind Jon.

Jon turned and saw the pistol and chuckled. Lilith did not fire it. Instead she just tucked the gun in his holster, reasoning, "Doris needs company and the shack needs fixing up, so you don't lose in property value. Put the riffraff to good use. He looked strong enough to do fix-ups. Hm. What do you think we should do?"

All eyes shifted to Jon as if he was the Wizard Of Oz deciding their fates. He consented, "I 'spose he can stay and fix up this rotten property so it's worth something. I'm losing money here. Doris, you let me know if he act up. The boys and I'll drive by as many times as you want and we be more than happy to teach this bum a lesson or two. If he steal anything else from you, I drive over his pretty face."

Lilith acted confused, "Anything else? What do you mean? She has nothing anybody would want to steal. Does she?"

Jon explained, "He had the Civil War forks in his bag."

Wet Cody protested from his knees, "I was set up. I didn't steal anything."

"He stole her forks?!" Lilith feigned shock, "Oh no! We can't let him take those forks from Doris. Those antiques mean so much to her ... You don't think we should keep the forks at our place until he leaves, do you?"

Jon smiled and kissed Lilith, "I do. I do indeed."

Doris rebelled, "You're not taking my forks!" as she ran inside to protect them.

Lilith pet Jon's shoulder, "I'll bring the forks home, baby."

"That's exactly what you gonna do," he smirked as he took out his keys and unhandcuffed Cody.

"Thank you, sir," Cody spoke, his teeth chattering from cold.

Jon spit on him and waited to see what Cody would do.

"Thank you, sir," Cody said.

"Thank you, sir," Jon mocked him, "Cody's a faggot. Faggot, go paint the house."

Shivering Cody walked gratefully toward the ladder.

Lilith pulled Jon away and walked him toward his police car.

She asked, "You want me to grill you surf and turf tonight?"

"If you don't burn 'em," he said, lightly tapping her head.

"Promise I will not."

Jon kissed fake-smiling Lilith then drove away in the police car.

Once his car was out of sight, Lilith immediately ran past

Cody on the ladder and into the shack. In the kitchen at the sink, she saw Doris hold the prized forks tightly into her torso.

Lilith inched to her, “Jon ordered me to get these out of your house.”

Doris tried to run but Lilith grabbed her by her robe.

Doris argued, “Cody won’t steal these! You did.”

“Weren’t you there when Jon caught him red-handed?”

“Cody doesn’t have a use for it. You do!”

“Jon was very adamant about not allowing mother’s antique silverware and Cody in the same house. That was a direct police order. You better decide right now which is more important to you. The forks stay here or Cody does. Police order.”

Doris screamed and held the forks threateningly as if she would stab Lilith.

“Police order, Lilith repeated calmly, “In your bedroom, when we talked about what meant the most to you, the armoire, the furniture, the forks, Cody. You said very clearly you’d give up the forks for Cody.”

Doris couldn’t deny that.

Lilith wrestled the forks away, then grinned as she counted them, “I’ll stop by in a couple days. I’ll bring you a bicycle to get to work.”

“I want a Mercedes.”

“No.”

“I want a helicopter. A yellow helicopter.”

“No, you’ll get a bike. A yellow bike.”

Feeling betrayed, Doris looked down.

Lilith touched her daughter’s face, then lifted it up so their

eyes met, “Doris, no one loves you more than I do. Don’t you know that?”

“The paparazzi loves me more.”

Lilith hugged her special needs offspring, “Honey, trust me. I always take care of you, don’t I? Because you are my whole world.”

“Hardly.”

“You mean the most to me of anything in my life,” Lilith said, sincerely.

“You like the forks more.”

“Oh honey, Jon insisted he has the forks. Not me. Yeah they’ll complete the set and impress our fancy friends, but come on, I’m not impressed by fancy friends. I’m impressed by you.”

“You’d give up the forks for me?”

“You mean more to me than these stupid forks. If I had to choose you in my life or the forks I’d choose you. Of course I would. Jon demanded the forks, honey.”

Doris felt Lilith’s love, and stopped resisting.

Outdoors, Lilith passed Cody now on the ladder swirling paint on the shack side.

She pointed to the front door, “Go inside and start a fire. You’re freezing.”

He caught a glimpse of the shining forks, “Hey! Those forks aren’t yours!”

Aggravated, he climbed down.

She tried to push him up on the porch, but he was too big, “Get inside and in a warm bath!”

“You can’t boss me around like this!”

When Lilith was sure Doris wasn't watching, she kissed him, then backed away.

Her finger went from his wet lips to his chest to his stomach to his crotch to his legs to his feet, then she took an electric ankle monitor out of her purse and slapped it on him.

He was stunned, "What is this?"

"I'll be back in a couple days with a bike for Doris."

"I'm your prisoner?"

"And my sex slave when Doris is at work."

"Boner ... But no, I need to be free!"

"Do you? If you needed to be free you would've driven my Mercedes to Mexico. You came back here."

Doris came out holding cooked bacon in her greasy hand, "Cody, you didn't eat breakfast. Have some bacon."

Cody grabbed and pretended to choke Doris, "Give me your keys, Lilith! I'm not gonna let you boss me around like this!"

"You had the keys a dozen times!" Lilith mused, walking away, ignoring coughing Doris.

"I'll choke her to death. Like the full moon thing! Doris frowned – doesn't that mean she dies?"

"Means she faces death! Not necessarily dies! You're not a killer, Cody," Lilith said confidently as she got in her Mercedes.

"Don't drive away without me!" he screamed, choking Doris harder.

She drove away.

When her car was out of sight, he released his hold. Doris coughed but slowly regained her breath, her fingers still holding onto greasy bacon.

He shook his head in disbelief, “I wasn’t really going to kill you. I just had to see if I could get out of here.”

“You can’t,” she wheezed, “You didn’t eat breakfast,” she coughed, “I brought you bacon.”

“You’re so good to me no matter what I do.”

“You’re a good man, Cody.

“No one has ever called me a good man.”

“Well I think you’re perfect.”

“You’re a good woman, Doris.”

“I know. Vogue magazine says I’m the best in the world. Eat some bacon.”

“No, my stomach hurts.”

She stuffed the bacon in his wet pocket.

He sighed, “I’m stuck here.”

She felt sadness with him ... but she smiled.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because you’re stuck here,” she grinned.

“I’m not really. I can still run away, get this ankle monitor off.”

“No. If you take it off, Jon will hunt you and kill you. All the cops will.”

He breathed in deep, afraid, trapped, weighing his options.

Lilith’s Mercedes parked behind the white Victorian manor next to Jon’s police car. Grabbing her purse and the forks, she

ran excitedly towards the glass back doors. She entered and rushed to the dining room table, immediately spreading the antique pewter forks on the table. Noticing the front door was open, she investigated to see Jon talking to Pete. She spied, overhearing them argue.

“I did not open your mail,” Pete insisted to Jon.

“My wife said she saw you.”

“She must have imagined it. I would never open anyone’s mail.”

“Ask around on who I am, boy. You’ll find out my gun don’t always stay in its’ holster.”

“Are you threatening to shoot me??”

Jon looked down at his gun in his holster, “I’m saying screw whoever you was before you came here, and screw whatever you used to doin’. But in Sunbar County we got what you call rules, and I get to enforce ‘em. I could make one phone call and get you fired. But Lil says just to let you know who is boss here so you start behaving appropriate. I am boss. Not you, got it?”

Pete was astonished and objected, “Your wife doesn’t necessarily follow rules.”

Lilith instantly made her presence known, “Just what does that mean??”

Pete studied her, unsure if tattling on her coming onto him would do any good. He looked at Jon’s gun, being tapped by Jon’s fingers.

“Been too long since I used a bullet,” Jon baited.

“Now wait, cool down,” Lilith waged, “Mailman, we don’t

know you from Adam, but you want to know people of our caliber in Sunbar County.”

Jon added, “You either on our good side, and life is easy for you here, or you on our bad side, and life is scary for you every day.”

Lilith whispered, “My husband is a very powerful man in this town, and because I am married to such a powerful man, I am a powerful figure in Sunbar as well. It’s in your best interest to know your place and to give us the respect we have fully earned and deserve.”

Pete grew incensed, “Is it in the best interest of a policeman’s wife to play around at forest shacks??”

Jon was irritated, “What you talkin’ ‘bout, smart ass?!”

Pete looked away, “What if I told you your wife hangs out at somebody’s cruddy little forest shack when you’re at work?”

Lilith was furious, “Jon here owns that cruddy little shack!”

Pete was confused.

Lilith continued, “He pays for my sister to live there! Now you better start minding your business and stop gossiping or Jon will get you fired and I’ll make sure no one else hires you because you are a disgusting dirty gossip.”

Before Pete completely surrendered, he pushed once more, “And this Cody dude??”

Lilith was outraged, “Jon and I both know about Cody. He is renovating the cruddy little shack for us! We are losing patience with your stories, Mister Mailman, so if I were you, to save your job, I would apologize to my husband and myself then slowly walk away and stick to delivering mail. Say you are

sorry.”

Pete was beat, so he acquiesced, “Okay, I am sorry.”

Lilith wanted more, “For opening your mail.”

Pete protested, “I did not open your mail.”

Lilith pried, “I see your wedding ring. You have a wife here, don’t you? Where is she employed??”

“No, don’t cause any trouble for her,” Pete pleaded. “I am sorry.”

Lilith insisted, “For opening your mail.”

He relented, “For opening your mail. I’ll go on with my ruute [route]. Have a good day.”

He turned but Lilith grabbed his shoulder, turning him back. She said, “Ruute? In North Carolina, we pronounce it “rowt.” I’m rather an expert on accents. Say “Your skin’s like porcelain.””

He couldn’t believe her nerve that she would bring up their previous conversation – the conversation where she came onto him! With dead eyes he repeated, “Your skin’s like porcelain.”

She went even further, “You’re a Midwest farm boy.”

“You’re right,” he said, embarrassed at his submission and embarrassed at her audacity. But he wanted the last word, “Midwest where we give gentle massages or something.”

Jon took out his gun and swung it at Pete, who ducked, then scurried away.

Jon hollered, “You come onto my wife again and I’ll kill you!”

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That evening at the Victorian manor, Lilith, Jon, Mary- Ellen and Sal dined again by candlelight – for the first time with the complete Civil War cutlery, including the prized forks.

Mary-Ellen marveled, “Now these are exquisite! It’s about time you found them.”

Lilith pretended, “There they were, in an attic box, all this time.”

Jon winked at Lilith and they exchanged a knowing smile, though under the table Jon’s hand stroked the knee of Mary- Ellen.

Jon bragged, “I always get the best of everything. Got the best silverware. Got the best house. Got the best job. Got the best cars. Got the best wife,” then secretly he locked eyes with Mary-Ellen, “... the best love of my life.”

Unaware of their affair, Sal chuckled, “That’s laying it on a bit thick. Mister Sentimental all of a sudden.”

“Can’t I be happy for once?” Jon grinned, “I’m a man with everything. How many men can say they got everything?”

All were unaware that a hooded man was watching them through the backyard glass doors.

Lilith’s phone buzzed so she looked down to read a notification: ANKLE MONITOR HAS LEFT THE PROPERTY.

Mary-Ellen snooped, “Who’s texting you? Some secret admirer?”

They all laughed.

Lilith blushed, buried her phone and said, “Yeah, right. It’s just Doris.”

Sal pried, “Your sister who just moved here?”

Mary-Ellen probed, “Where was your sister all these years?”

Lilith nodded to Sal, “Yes, my little sister. Out of milk and bread already.”

Jon sighed, “Doris is retarded and I don’t allow her name mentioned in my house.”

Mary-Ellen joked, “Retarded or not, she cooks better than Lilith.”

Lilith downed her wine.

Suddenly the hooded man kicked through the glass back door and scurried to the buffet, grabbing Jon’s gun.

Mary-Ellen screamed and jumped up.

The hooded man aimed the gun at her.

She fainted.

Lilith turned pale.

Jon moved to lift Mary-Ellen.

The invader held a gun to Jon’s head, laughing maniacally.

Lilith pleaded, “Cody?? No. No!!”

Jon lay Mary-Ellen down then he slowly raised his hands, “Let Cody take what he wants.”

Lilith froze as the thief gripped her necklace, then ripped it off, bruising her. She fought the pain silently, staring at the thief with pleading eyes. He pointed to her wedding ring. She removed it and handed it to him, briefly gripping his hand.

The invader laughed like a maniac then hit Sal’s head with

the gun and lifted Sal's wallet. He did not see that under the table Sal slid his own gun up from his pocket.

The thief searched the buffet drawer and stole several sets of keys. He backed to exit, tripping over broken glass.

Sal took the opportunity to fire his gun from under the table.

Lilith shrieked.

The thief was shot in the shoulder and spasmed, but he quickly fired back, missing Sal but hitting Jon in the side.

Jon went limp and capsized on top of Mary-Ellen who was gaining consciousness.

Sal lunged to the thief and stood over him pointing his gun.

Lilith yelled, "No, don't kill him!"

Sal grinned and shot the hooded man in the chest.

Lilith rose, blood draining from her face. Slowly she moved to the thief and knelt besides his dead body. Her eyes leaked tears as she removed his hood.

It wasn't Cody. It was Mike.

Perplexed Lilith backed away.

Sal grumbled, "It's that escaped con, Mike something. Finding out no one escapes prison. Idiot."

Jon's blood dripped on Mary-Ellen's face, awakening her. She screamed, finding Jon unconscious.

Lilith stared at them, frozen, unsure what she should do.

Sitting at the side of a forest road, using a sharp rock, Cody cut off his ankle monitor, then hitchhiked. A car passed him.

In the hospital emergency room, Lilith, Mary-Ellen and Sal listened to an exhausted young doctor, “Jon is stable but paralyzed from the neck down at this point.”

Lilith stuttered, “Paralyzed??”

The doctor confirmed, “Unable to use his arms or legs.”

Mary-Ellen wept.

Lilith wiped her eyes and walked to stare out the hospital window, remembering when she circled both index fingers at both eyes and concentrated, “*My one wish ... is he could never beat me again. Not ever again.*”

In the cold forest night, Cody knew he was being watched – by six coyotes who had trailed him. He ran from them, flagging another car to stop, but it passed and drove off in the distance.

The coyotes howled and neared him, biting the air at his knees and waist.

“Lay off. Back off. What did I ever do to you?”

A coyote’s teeth circled him and ripped his pocket.

Cody shrieked like any man facing his death.

But the salivating wild animal was not after him, it was after the bacon in his pocket.

Relieved, Cody threw the bacon on the road, which they ate, leaving him to be.

As a shooting star lit the sky, Cody backed into dead grass to lay down and sleep.

It wasn't long before two coyotes stalked him there. But they didn't want to eat him. They just studied him.

"I'm not going to hurt you guys," Cody said softly, "There's no reason to hurt me. Just let me be ... oh shit, I rhymed."

Not that they noticed, or cared.

He reached out his hand. A coyote licked it, but did not bite him. When trust ensued, Cody pet it. Within minutes they all wanted Cody's touch.

He laughed, "Sky why my tie die pry buy. You guys don't hate rhymers at all. Climbers are tall. First timers can fall. We're having a ball. Mall, Paul, crawl."

He pet them all until he fell asleep, them curling up next to him.

Chapter 7: Sunday + Sun Days

The next morning as Doris washed dishes, out the crooked kitchen window she saw a figure walking toward the shack through thick fog. She ran out to the road, arms outstretched, “You can’t leave! This is your home!”

Cody hugged her, “I know.”

The next week as Doris and Cody gardened they heard a car horn beep. Moving to investigate they discovered Lilith directing a truck of building supplies to unload.

Over the upcoming months, Lilith supervised Cody and Doris to renovate the old crooked shack. All three worked hard at transforming it.

New foundation exterior was added to make it secure and straight.

Cody learned the table saw to expand the porch by six feet in three directions.

Doris helped secure the new larger windows Cody installed in all the rooms.

Several days a week Lilith helped making their dream home with fix-its giving it a bright contemporary, warm and loving feel. The final work day she even brought Jon in his wheelchair to see how much his property had gone up in value. She hugged him from behind as Doris and Cody sat on the summer grass on both sides of Jon. Being only able to move his head, Jon nodded his approval and slurred out compliments. Then Doris made

them all waffles.

The two-story leaning shack was not the only thing renovated. Cody was no longer besieged with haunted guilt. No, he had found purpose, and pride.

Doris talked less to imaginary reporters and she didn't win Miss Universe that year. The paparazzi stopped stalking her from bushes. She stopped painting her face like Baby Jane Hudson.

Lilith was no longer an abused wife begging any man to appreciate her. She was no longer self-conscious of her crow's feet. She was confident of her appeal with Cody more and more in love with her as the months passed, keeping their romantic flame clandestine.

Cody happily followed Lilith's orders.

She was the boss, an unlikely arc she could not have foreseen, but it seemed justified since she previously was subservient to her four husbands.

The seasons turned quickly and before long the first tomato of the new year was picked and relished by Doris, whose garden blossomed unprecedentedly with wildflowers, kale and squash.

When Lilith disappeared all nights to care for Jon, Doris and Cody were not the least bit unfulfilled. Like brother and sister, they gardened, played xylophone, cooked and watched the old television.

One particular evening when Jon was in the hospital, Lilith in underwear concealed by her faux fur parked her car on the shack's dark driveway. She tiptoed downstairs to the renovated bedroom but she did not find Cody. She searched Doris's

renovated upstairs bedroom but did not find Doris.

Coming downstairs she saw Doris and Cody asleep on the old red flannel living room couch, his arm around her. They looked like lovers. Lilith wondered if they had had sex. Either way she would have been fine with it, thrilled for Doris. As she moved to the muted TV to turn it off, she saw something on the news that amused her.

The TV news read: THINGS TO FEAR IN SUNBAR. #1 - WITCHES.

She shrugged, not knowing if there were any witches in Sunbar.

The TV text then read: #2 - MISSING ESCAPED CONVICT ERIC HYNDS.

Lilith turned pale as the TV showed Cody/Eric's emotional family members being interviewed. His parents, both younger than she, had a lifetime of bags under their eyes. His sister and brother held back tears. Lilith had never imagined Cody had a family, much less a concerned family. She quickly turned off the TV.

Driving back to her beach manor, her hands shook so much on the steering wheel she almost hit Sal's police car.

She lied to Sal that her shaking was due to her worry of Jon at the hospital. Sal told her not to worry, that Mary-Elen was there with him. They both looked away. There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Lilith patted his hand and stumbled back into her car.

The next morning, before dawn, frantic Lilith paced Dr. Hays therapy office, until he finally managed to get her seated.

He yawned, “What is so terrible you had to get me before dawn??”

“Seeing his family ... I don’t know what to do.”

“Does he talk about them much?”

“He never talks about them.”

“What does he talk about?”

“Me, and Doris, and our great new house.”

“You shared with me his growth, and Doris’ growth. And I see your growth.”

Lilith wondered, “Should I let him go back to his family?? I would let him go ... If he needs that??”

“If he needs to leave, he’ll find a way to leave. Right now he just needs a safe home and to be loved, and appreciated. Just like you do, my dear.”

Lilith digested that, nodded, wiped a tear, tried to hide it, then showing unprecedented fragility, folded into herself and quietly wept, “But Cody’s my prisoner. He’s in prison.”

Old Dr. Hays rose, suffering much pain as he limped to the window which had safety bars, not unlike prison bars, “Aren’t we all in a prison of some sort?” he mused.

He opened his desk drawer, grabbed a pill bottle, took pills, grabbed a liquor bottle, poured two glasses. He shrugged, “Isn’t the goal just to make all our prisons as comfortable as possible?”

Both of Lilith’s shaking hands reached for her glass to drink

down the alcohol, hoping her nerves to be sedated.

She fumed, “Cody said a warden, an asshole, it must have been Sal, I know it was Sal, the jerk. Cody said Sal pissed on his prison clothes and made him be naked on that cold cement floor. Sal took away his bedding, made him freeze, said prisoners don’t deserve room service.”

After a beat, Dr. Hays asked, “Do you think prisoners deserve room service?”

She stuttered, “No, of course not, not room service, like a hotel, but they shouldn’t freeze! They should be comfortable, like you said. Isn’t the goal just to make our prisons as comfortable as possible?”

Ironically, that exact moment at the forested shack, even before sunrise, Cody began his gardening duties, shivering as he watered the vegetables with a hose.

As the sun appeared, a bright light seemed to coast to a tall garden scarecrow.

Upon closer inspection, it was Doris in a taped aluminum foil dress reflecting the sun – walking toward Cody in his plaid scarecrow jacket.

Without a word, Doris knelt below Cody’s stretching large frame, in the wet muddy garden, to look for another ripened tomato.

Cody lowered his arms and knelt beside her and found a

ripe tomato, handing it to her.

Her foil cast sun into his eyes, which he squinted then closed.

He couldn't move.

The sun off her aluminum felt good. Right. Warm. Free.

His eyes closed, his hand blindly searching for her arm, to hold it and make it still like his.

She turned to him, curious, aroused, her heart pumping fast, awaiting an explanation.

He tilted his face toward the rising sun's heat, smiling. A happy tear rolled down his cheek.

She followed his lead, tilted her head to the sun, closed her eyes.

They smiled enjoying the heat of the rising sun.

Watching them from the driveway was Lilith, grocery bags getting heavy in her arms. She smiled to herself, *I think I did the impossible. I got her what she wanted. I got him what he wanted. And I got what I wanted.*

Just then, Cody opened his eyes and noticed her presence. He smiled, in love with her.

She winked, in love with him.

THE END