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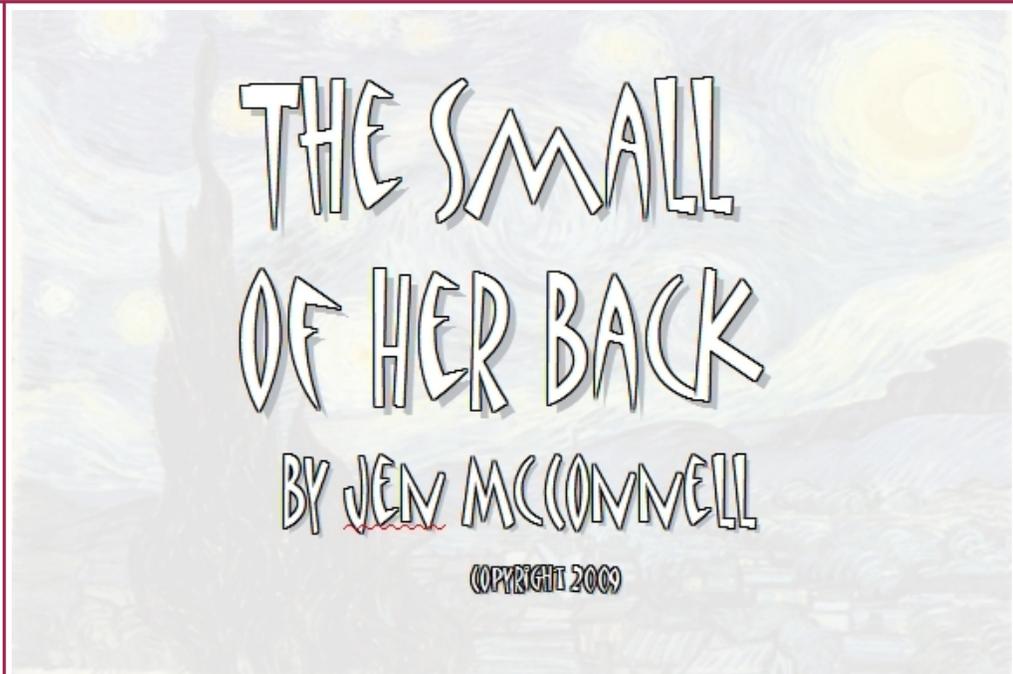
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At the counter of the Flying J at the north end of Punxsutawney, Patrick pushed his meatloaf sandwich away and motioned to Mary for a refill. In the mirror on the back wall, he watched a man come through the door, bringing in a gust of frigid air that swept down the collar of Patrick's jacket. The man sat down at the next seat and nodded at Patrick.

"Snowing yet?" Patrick asked.

"Not since Connecticut," the man said.

"Gonna be this cold," Patrick said, "might as well snow."

The man nodded again and signaled to Mary.

Patrick pulled up his collar and closed his eyes. Images of the pale sand of San Diego's Coronado Beach competed with the hum of men's voices around him. The warm California sun was just what he needed to loosen the winter in his bones. If he looked hard enough into the darkness of his eyelids, he could just make out the numbing blueness of the Pacific.

"Was it the meatloaf?" a voice asked.

When Patrick opened his eyes, Mary had already refilled his cup and moved down the counter. Judy, another waitress, had stepped up and removed the sandwich. Patrick was about to close his eyes again when Judy turned around and bent over to set his plate in a bin.

Patrick had seen Judy before; they had joked about the weather a couple of times. She was older than the other girls — in her late thirties — and the Flying J didn't seem temporary for her. Her long reddish-brown hair was held back in a clip and her uniform fit her poorly. She looked settled in but that wasn't what caught his eye. When she bent over, the space between the

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bottom of her blouse and the waistband of her skirt had widened, and there, on the small of her back, bloomed the tattoo of a sleeping green dragon.

It was the most unexpected thing Patrick had seen in a long while — a flash of whimsy in the jumbled dreariness around him. Patrick opened his mouth to say something but Judy lifted her head and caught his gaze in the mirror. He looked from her eyes to the tattoo and then back to her expectant green eyes. She was waiting for him to say something. Something she'd heard from every other man who'd sat at that counter. The words, whatever they were going to be, hovered on Patrick's lips. Judy closed her eyes as if bracing herself.

Before she opened them, Patrick backed away from the counter, staring at her in the mirror, until the cold metal handle of the door hit his hip. He stepped outside, trying to conjure an image of the beach from the empty parking lot before him but Judy's eyes and tattoo blocked it out.

She wasn't the type Patrick normally chatted up when he stopped off for a bite. Not the type he flirted with and definitely not the type he invited to a hotel room, which was exactly what he was considering as he shifted from foot to foot on the sidewalk. He should just cross the parking lot, get into his truck and continue on to California to deliver the load of cheese. Then he could head to the beach as planned.

Instead, Patrick remained on the small width of sidewalk outside the diner, watching his breath fade into the afternoon light. It should be snowing, he thought. When he glanced back into the diner, Judy was watching him.

"I don't know where the truck is," Gail, the cheese buyer for Best Quality Foods, shouted at the speakerphone. She stood at the window of her office, working to get it open. In San Francisco, the morning was a clear fifty-six degrees. "That's why I'm calling."

Sal, a dispatcher at the trucking company, was simply a voice in Texas, one Gail heard only when there was bad news. The driver of her shipment had missed his status call and Gail was irritated. This was the third time in a year Sal's men had not delivered her order intact.

"He's not answering his phone." Sal was eating while he spoke. "Can't get 'em unless they answer their phones."

"I need that cheese by Friday," Gail said. "It's useless after that. Perishable. You know what that word means, don't you, Sal?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm not fooling around this time."

"Keep your shirt on, sweetheart. You'll get your truck."

"It's the cheese I want, I don't give a fig about the truck."

After she hung up, Gail took her sweater from its hook and slammed the

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office door behind her. In the cavernous warehouse where they handled much more than cheese, her problem was minuscule. Earlier in the week, a flood in Monterey had destroyed the baby lettuce and micro-greens crop. The other buyers were going crazy, too. She could hear echoes of their voices shouting on their own phones.

Inside the walk-in refrigerator, Gail nodded to two guys loading boxes and grabbed an inventory sheet. It was all written down but she wanted to see for herself. She ran her hands over the cold blocks of cheese. Some of it had been sitting for a while but it would have to do. She'd make it up to her clients later. Gail knew which chefs in town she could juggle, placate and bribe. They trusted her because she delivered the best cheeses on time, every time.

She wasn't about to lose everything she'd built during the last eight years over a hack driver who decided to take a piss in podunk Pennsylvania.

It had taken more convincing than Patrick had been prepared for. Judy wasn't young and that — combined with her hesitation — had made him more curious and more insistent. He waited in the cab of the truck until her shift was over, smoothing down his hair and ignoring the ring of his cell phone. With the heater blasting, he listened to a hockey game on the radio.

The phone stopped ringing for a few minutes then began again. He knew it was Sal, whose company owned the truck, but he wasn't worried about Sal. It was the buyer, Gail, who was probably pissing her pants. She owned the cheese but Sal owned the truck. This vague arrangement had never bothered Patrick as long as he kept getting jobs. The phone rang again. When Judy came out of the diner and waved to him, Patrick shoved the phone under the seat.

The motel clerk handed Patrick the key to the last available room. The sound didn't work on the television, the clerk told them. Inside the room, dusk came in through the edges of the heavy curtains. Neither of them bothered to switch on a light.

Patrick wasn't nervous as he moved toward Judy, not like he was with the young ones who sometimes bolted away from him. Judy stood still until Patrick was right in front of her, then reached up and slipped her hand onto the back of his neck, pulling his face to hers. Her lips were soft, parted.

He came quickly, surprising them both. Patrick expected Judy to get dressed and leave, disappointed and ready to tell a tale, but she came back from the bathroom smiling. She climbed naked into the bed and curled against him, resting her slender hand on his breastbone. He felt his heart throb against her palm. They shared a cigarette while a hockey game played on the muted television. Patrick stroked Judy's hair, letting the long strands slip through his fingers.

"I haven't done this in a long time, you know." Judy tapped his shoulder. "Don't look at me like that. You don't know me well enough to look at me like that. I swore I'd never get involved again with a trucker."

"You call this involved?"

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She waved him off, the cigarette smoke curling around her fingers like wisps of fog.

“It’s just a job for me, not a lifestyle,” she said. “Some of the girls, they go the whole nine yards. Different guy every week, thinking each time he might be the one. As if Prince Charming would drive a truck. But when I saw you looking at me, I thought, will I regret this?”

“Do you?”

“Maybe in the morning.”

They watched the game until Patrick felt Judy move slightly and glance at the alarm clock bolted to the nightstand. He lifted the sheet, pushed her gently onto her stomach and began to trace the tattoo with his fingertips. She tensed up but didn’t pull away.

“Tell me the story,” he said.

She had been seventeen, working the ice cream counter at Thrifty’s. That summer, her sister had fled to the city, leaving Judy behind. Black & Blue Skin Arts, the only tattoo shop in her little town, sat at the opposite end of the strip mall. One afternoon, Judy pressed her face against the bars to see the drawings on the walls inside — skulls and snakes and lightning bolts. Suddenly the door opened, spitting out a group of boisterous boys with completely inked arms and legs. They laughed at Judy, pointing at her pale legs. As she turned away, a woman came out and yelled at the boys. The woman grinned at Judy as the boys sauntered down the sidewalk.

“Do it.” The woman held up her wrist with a tattooed chain of daisies around it. Her other wrist was bandaged in the same spot. “You’ll hate yourself if you don’t.”

Judy nodded and made herself a deal. If she didn’t see any design she liked or the shop didn’t look clean, she would leave. But as soon as she walked in, she saw what she wanted — a cartoonish drawing of a sleeping dragon: a huge ball of red, yellow and orange with the tail curled around a forward haunch. The drawing on the wall was so big it would cover Judy’s whole back. But, Judy thought, she could handle something smaller, like the size of her fist. And one color; that she could imagine. One color wouldn’t hurt so bad, she told herself as the girl behind the counter rummaged for tracing paper.

“How’s this?” The girl held up the paper with the outline of a small dragon.

“Yes. Green. Just green,” Judy said. “My favorite color.”

Behind a partition, Judy unbuttoned her jeans as the girl motioned toward an upholstered chair. Judy straddled the chair and bent forward toward the mirror that ran the length of the room. The air was cold on her exposed back. In the mirror, Judy watched the girl remove small jars of ink from a cupboard.

The first prick of the needle made Judy jump so much she hit her head on a shelf above the chair, rattling glass jars of Q-tips and gauze. In that moment, as Judy stood shaking, her back throbbing and head hurting, she knew she couldn’t go through with it. She’d never be able to bear the feeling of her skin

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like a piece of cloth caught in a sewing machine. But the girl didn't wait for Judy. She just yanked Judy down, said "Deep breath," and started in again with the needle.

Judy watched her own pale face in the mirror. Her pupils were dilated, like a cat surprised by a sudden light. After a few minutes it felt like it was happening to someone else. Endorphins, the girl said. Judy heard the whizzing of the needle and in the mirror saw black ink mixed with blood on a piece of gauze in the girl's hand. The endorphins faded after about ten minutes and Judy could feel the pricking and the pulling of her skin all over again. She dug her fingernails into the padding of the chair. Later, at home, she would find scraps of blue fabric lodged under the tips.

"Almost done with the outline," the girl said.

"That's the worst part, right?"

The girl lifted her head and smiled at Judy in the mirror. A bit of green ink was smudged under her left eye.

"Sure," the girl answered.

The pain went in waves. Endorphins, Judy repeated to herself. Also this: if she could do this, she could do anything. Faith, Judy had always thought, had to do with God and miracles. But she was beginning to understand that faith was simply the belief that something could be done. Courage was what you needed to do it.

At the one-hour mark, Judy thought she was going to faint. Her freckles had disappeared into the paleness of her face.

"It hurts," she whispered.

"Relax," the girl said.

After another five minutes, the girl sat back and snapped off her gloves. Judy collapsed against the chair. The girl dug into a jar of balm and rubbed some onto the fresh wound with a touch so tender it made Judy cry.

The next morning, Gail stood at her office window watching the branches of a tree shake in the breeze. She didn't know what kind of tree it was. Useless trivia like names of trees or birds or solar systems usually bored Gail but on days like this she wished she knew things other than what was necessary. Random things, so she could point to something as simple as a tree and say, I know what that is.

The phone rang.

"His truck was spotted off a turnpike in northern Pennsylvania." Sal sighed into the phone. "He's still not answering his phone."

"How can the truck be in Pennsylvania if you told me it was in Ohio?"

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“What can I say? I made a mistake.”

“You don’t make mistakes with my cheese.”

“Look, I can get you another driver for pickup day after tomorrow. Four days late is all.”

“You think I can get all that cheese again just like that?”

“You’re a smart gal, you’ll think of something.”

Gail tried counting to ten, as they had taught her in the anger management class she’d been asked to take.

“Still there, Gail?”

“I want to talk to that driver.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“You said you found him.”

“Word is he’s holed up with some waitress at a motel. We can’t reach him. Not surprising, really.”

Gail tried to think about this. An adulterous affair, a drunken one-night stand, a Hollywood love-at-first-sight fling. Those she could grasp. Holed up was something new. To disappear from the world and forsake all responsibility. Not care that other people were counting on you. That was impossible to understand.

“He doesn’t expect to keep his job, does he?” she asked.

“I don’t think he’s worried about that right now. If you know what I mean.”

“Someone should care, Sal. He’s putting my job in jeopardy, too.”

“You’re not going to lose your job over something you can’t control.”

“But I can control it.” Gail hit the speakerphone button and walked over to the window. She tried to force it open wider, picturing Pennsylvania covered in snow. Quiet and peaceful — the way winters were supposed to be. “I order something, it comes in, I send it out. I control it all.”

“Don’t tell me in all these years something like this hasn’t happened before.”

“Not some jerk probably left his wife for a piece of waitress ass.”

“So it’s a morality thing?”

“I don’t care what he does on his own time. That’s my cheese.”

“You’re taking this way too personally. It’s a great story. The guys here are

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dying.”

“I can’t believe you’re defending him.”

“Maybe you need to relax yourself, let loose a bit.”

Gail knocked the receiver from the stand, killing the line. She returned to the window to stare at the trees. Hadn’t she been told some version of that her whole life? Lighten up, relax, give in to the moment. No one — not her son, not her mother, definitely not her ex-husband — had ever understood that this was living for her. This pattern, this set rhythm of life when things ran just as they should, that’s what made it all work for her. That was her life. Change meant chaos, and chaos meant not being able to count on anything because you never knew what was going to happen. No little shit of a delivery guy was going to ruin her rhythm.

Gail looked at the leaves on the trees, counted to ten, then called Sal back for the location of the motel.

When the phone rang in the motel room, Judy jumped, scratching Patrick on the ear, but neither of them reached for it. She lay back down in the bed.

“Probably wrong number,” Patrick mumbled.

“Or front desk,” Judy whispered.

A few minutes later, the phone rang again. Patrick reached across Judy to pick it up.

“What?”

“This is Gail, the cheese buyer. Remember me?”

“Yeah. Oh.” He sat up. “Sorry about your cheese. Probably bad by now.”

There was a long pause. Patrick thought about hanging up but he was curious. From the little contact they’d had, he knew Gail was neurotic but he didn’t think she’d take it hard enough to track him down. He slipped out of bed and walked naked to the window, stretching the phone cord to its limit. The clock radio said eleven a.m. but it was silent outside.

“That’s all you have to say?” Gail asked finally.

“If it’s any consolation, I know I’m fired.” He parted the heavy curtain with a finger, surprised to see five inches of snow on the ground. He smiled. “Look at that, it’s snowing.”

Judy rolled over toward the window. “I thought I heard it snowing,” she mumbled.

“What?” Patrick asked.

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“Why?” Gail asked in his ear.

“Why is it snowing?” Patrick asked into the phone.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Gail asked. “Do you hate me? Or do you hate cheese?”

Patrick felt the cold seep in through the windows, making every hair on his body stand up. There was movement along the street but the sound of cars and people was muted by the falling snow. When Gail repeated her question, Patrick moved from the window to flip the heater on high, then returned to the bed. He rested his hand on Judy’s arm.

“Would you believe me if I told you I was in love?” Patrick said into the phone. He felt Judy shift under his fingers.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Gail said. “There’s a difference between sex and love.”

“There doesn’t have to be.”

“For men like you—”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Gail.” Patrick couldn’t contain the harshness of his voice. Judy’s skin was warm and inviting and he let his fingers wander across her body, down to where her back met the roundness of her hips. “You don’t know me,” he said. “Order your cheese again, they’ll get someone to deliver it. Chalk it up to life and move on. There is no why.”

At three o’clock in the afternoon, Patrick smoked and watched a talk show while Judy took a shower.

“So what will you do now?” Judy called from the bathroom. A moment later she came into the room, naked and wet from the shower. She slipped up against Patrick in bed and ran her hands through his curly gray-brown chest hair.

“That’s what this is all about, sweetie.” He slid his hands along her body. “I usually just act. I finish a job, watch a ball game, go to sleep. Never stop to think about it. I’m forty-seven years old. Life isn’t slowing down, if you know what I mean.”

Judy said nothing. She was caught by the word sweetie. He didn’t say it like the guys at the diner who called everyone hon or darling. Patrick meant it, if only for that moment, which was enough for her.

“Are you thinking about it?” Patrick said. “Losing your job?”

“I think too much,” she said. “Not going to work is an action, right? Not acting is an act of will, too, isn’t it?”

Patrick pulled on her hip, tipping her toward him. “Sometimes things just happen on their own.”

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They made love slowly, pausing after about twenty minutes, talking for a bit, then beginning again. Judy's own body surprised her. She hadn't enjoyed sex this much in a long time. It was so infrequent these days that it wasn't something she worried about. But this was different. It felt so much better when she stopped worrying about whether he was enjoying himself. Of course he was.

Later, they lay silent next to each other. Judy could feel Patrick's breath slowing down toward sleep but her body still tingled. Forty-seven. He probably couldn't do it again for a while. Less thinking, she told herself, more acting. She reached for his hand and felt him shake with laughter.

"More?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You're quite a gal."

"Don't think about it. Just do it."

"Turn over," he said.

It was a special trick, he told her. Something he'd learned from a girl who'd dated girls for a while. Judy did what he said and realized that, even at thirty-eight, she knew very little about what else there was in the world.

"It's a rough time to travel, ma'am," the travel agent said. "Been snowing all day."

"I can drive there from the airport in three hours, right?" Gail asked. She sorted her in-box as the woman rattled off flight times over the speakerphone. It wasn't a good time to take time off work but, then again, there was never a good time.

"Yes, ma'am. Will you need a hotel as well?"

"No, thank you."

"Anything else? I can fax tips for driving in the snow."

"I grew up in Michigan," Gail snapped. "I think I remember how."

It had been easier to get time off work than she'd expected. Gail hadn't taken a vacation in three years and Bill, her supervisor, didn't care where or why. She wanted to tell him that since the trip was technically for work, she shouldn't have to use her vacation days. But Bill didn't even look up from his computer screen when she asked him.

"Have a good time," Bill said as she left his office.

"I'm not going for fun."

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“Do us all a favor and try.”

Normally Gail would have spent a week arranging to leave — stop the paper, have a neighbor collect her mail, get everything in order at work — but she only had time to get home and pack before driving to the airport. She wanted to catch Patrick before he left. To see what someone who could do this looked like. And she'd stop by the diner to see what kind of woman would walk out of a job for that kind of man.

When Patrick woke up the next morning, he knew Judy would go back to work. She was asleep on her stomach, her arms cradling the thin white pillow under her face, her breath deep and even. He lifted the sheet, bent over her back and began to lick the outline of the dragon.

She left without saying much. A quick shower, a lingering kiss and a slow drag on Patrick's cigarette, then she was gone. He knew she didn't regret it.

The phone rang ten minutes later. Patrick imagined it was Judy calling from the diner; the first sentimental thought he'd had in years. But it was Gail, on her way to the motel.

“If that's what you want, Gail, but I can't promise I'll be here,” he said.

“I don't care. I want that cheese.”

“It's a long way to go to prove something.”

“I've gone further.”

“I'm sure you have.”

“Just leave the truck keys at the motel office.”

“But why?”

“That's none of your business. What about the girl?”

“She went back to work.”

“Couldn't rescue her then?”

“That wasn't the point.”

“What was?”

Patrick lit a cigarette. Through the part in the curtains, he could see it was still snowing. He wondered if Gail had clothes for this kind of weather.

“Be careful driving,” Patrick said and hung up.

He watched a game show while resting his hand on Judy's pillow. Now and then, he pictured her bending over for silverware or a bottle of ketchup,

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aware for the first time in years of exposing her tattoo.

Maybe he'd wait for Gail to show up. See what she was all about. Ask her if she'd ever done anything that took blind courage. Patrick thought about this as he watched television and listened to the snow fall outside.

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**Jen McConnell**, a California native, now is roughing it in the Midwest. She graduated with degrees in English and philosophy from the University of California, Irvine, and earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College in Vermont. Her short fiction has appeared in the *Clackamas Literary Review*, *The Unknown Writer*, *The Clockhouse Review*, *Word Riot*, and *Spectrum*.