

Home
Summer 2010
Spring 2010
Winter 2010
Autumn 2009
Summer 2009
Spring 2009
Autumn 2008
Summer 2008
Spring/Summer 2008
Winter/Spring 2008
Editor's Note
Guidelines
Contact

Nice Girls

by Devon Shepherd

As Harlowe opened the door to her study, Saturday-morning coffee in hand, the muted malaise that settled in on her occasionally – ever since she had first serious thoughts about the MFA, ever since she first mentioned her plans to Graham – returned. It had become a familiar discomfort, something she barely noticed, like a bra that pinched or a sweater that pulled when she stretched for something high up on a shelf, just as she had barely noticed the icy doorknob in her palm or the bristly draft that swept across the floor. A decade in this house was time enough to habituate Harlowe to its various peculiarities and problems, and although she hadn't felt the need to meddle with things for nine and half years, in the past six months, the improvements that she had made (not to mention the changes that had been thrust upon her) hadn't gone off as planned. Now, their shower was too slippery, their mattress too technologically advanced; the individually wrapped springs equalize weight differences and won't transmit the movement of your partner, they had told her – now, she just felt like she was sleeping alone. And although everyone swore the brocade window treatments were lovely, there were snags in the inner-folds that worried Harlowe.

But she tried not to think of all that, of all the ways she had become ineffectual, as she stood there in that smallish room, lined with book-stuffed shelves, where a battered saddle-leather loveseat sat atop a well-trod Persian rug. In truth, she wasn't thinking of anything but the dust-free order of her desk and the chemical lemon scent that had been scouring her nose since she walked through the door.

Harlowe circled her desk. MFA brochures had been arranged along the edge in an overlapping row like the magazines fanned over tabletops in Graham's waiting room, once by Marcy, and now by one of his many assistants and receptionists. She pressed her finger into the top of the desk and swiped. Clean. She opened the drawer. Her first rejection letter was still there, untouched. Her vague unease coalesced into anger; Lina had been in her study.

Back in the kitchen, Graham was still reading the paper, legs stretched out straight under the table. He crossed his ankles and refolded the paper; Harlowe doubted he had even noticed she had gone. But as she padded past the table behind him, he reached out and grabbed her wrist without looking up. Sliding his arm around her waist, her pulled her close, and held her there; she picked through his oak-bark hair, gently curling a lock around her finger.

“It's impossible How am I supposed to work when I never know who's in there touching my stuff?” She looked down at his head; he didn't acknowledge her. Standing there, the ball of his wrist resting on her hip, her shoulders flagged and she felt – tired. “I know it sounds silly but I feel –

invaded. You know?"

Her terminal inflection hung in the air; a question, unanswered. The granite floor, only seven months old, was still novel and the fussy stone still chilled through her cashmere socks. Her hand netted in his hair, she hopped about and wiggled her toes.

"This floor is so cold." He tapped her hip (to quiet her?). She hooked her finger through a curl and pulled.

"Oww!" He swatted at his head. She slipped from his grip and danced across the kitchen to the counter. "What did you that for?"

"Just checking you're still there."

"Well I am. I'm reading."

"I can see that."

Leaning against the counter, Harlowe took a sip of her coffee and watched the limber lines on Graham's face deepen and fill as he read his beloved paper. She knew he felt her watching him, and only a few minutes passed – she noted with a smirk – before he sighed and lowered the paper. She leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms, satisfied; he rubbed his face, scratched at his cheek and jaw.

"Looks like they finally got a bill on health care," he finally offered. Graham was a cardiologist. "But I can't see how they won't mess it up."

Harlowe blew into her coffee. Graham was generally too pleased with life to have strong opinions, and he rarely familiarized himself with more than the surface contours of a debate. She used to love this about him – his carefree nature, his easy mastery of life – Graham was a winner and being with him used to make her feel like she'd won something too. Now she found herself wishing it rougher for him, emotionally – then, maybe she wouldn't feel so alone.

"I was trying to tell you; Lina's still cleaning the study." He turned to her, his arm draped across the back of the chair next to him. A senior physician, unflappable in the face of uncertainty, he flashed her a baggy smile – a distraction – and blinked at her, blank-eyed. Twice. He didn't remember.

"Lina , who? The maid?"

"I've already told you," she hated that she couldn't keep the annoyed whine from her voice, "When she cleans in there, she moves everything around on my desk. Then I'm left to figure out what's where and reorganize my thoughts." Graham rested his knee on the table and rocked his chair back to balance on its back two legs.

"So ask her not to." Harlowe finished off her coffee.

"What? You think I haven't?"

Actually, Harlowe hadn't, not in clear and certain terms. She had left notes around – on the counter, over the fireplace, on the study door – but she had no way of knowing if Lina had even seen them and judging from the few times they'd actually spoken, she wasn't sure Lina could read English at all.

She peeled her back from the counter. "And I hate the smell of Lemon Pledge." Graham chuckled and picked up his paper.

"Oh come on, Harlowe. Who hates the smell of lemons?"

"Not lemons. Lemon Pledge. It's different." She was rinsing her mug in the sink.

"Aren't you here when she comes?" She waved her hand as she yanked out the top rack of the dishwasher.

"Yeah, usually." The truth was, Harlowe wasn't writing much lately and had been spending her Fridays in the ten square kilometers Rysonville called downtown. She didn't know why – it wasn't important, really – she never told Graham. She used to work right through Fridays, and it would be well into the afternoon before she'd realize Magda had come and gone. But ever since Magda left the agency, and Lina started coming, Harlowe couldn't get anything done. Not that it mattered; now whenever she sat down to work, she found herself reading (and re-reading) her writing sample, not sure if she felt ridiculous for obsessing over her already-sent applications or for, at her age, even applying at all.

"So she can't be doing it often," he said, shaking out the paper.

"What?"

"Moving things. She can't be doing it often"

"No. I guess not."

"Well if you want to exchange her, call the agency." Exchange her? Is that how he thoughtt?

The door bell rang. Graham let his chair drop to the granite. Harlowe winced.

"Don't worry," he laughed, "Hard as a rock." She watched him glide, with his long-legged, tip-toed stride, to get the door..

"That's why we went with an agency," he called from the hall, "To avoid these messy problems."

Harlowe turned to the window. Although the sun had risen hours ago, the sky was still the weary grey of twilight. The backyard rose, dead and brown, away from the house; snow spilled down the hill in patches. Half-way up the slope, a brindle-branched oak knocked about – shamelessly naked – in the wind, while the only other tree, a leggy spruce, cowered – droopy – in the shadow of the house. She watched the snow crash through its barbed-

branches in clumps.

"John from next-door." Harlowe turned. "Got some of our mail this week. He was just bringing it over."

"Oh God! I don't even want to see any of that." She covered her eyes, turned her head – faux theatrics – and held her hand out. He just shrugged; she hadn't told him she'd started receiving answers. Flipping through the mail, he disappeared down the hall. Harlowe slid her hand from her face; when she let her arm fall – he was gone.

* * *

Harlowe tasted blood. The cold had split her lip, and the wind raked her white cheeks pink as she hurried down Aberdeen Road. The shop-lined sidewalks were deserted, the A-frame storefronts dark on account of the crystalline sun. Harlowe pressed her scarf to her throat. For some reason, the tinny-blood taste depressed her, or maybe it was the December decorations that still jutted out from the poles – tinsel garlands curved into candles and Christmas trees – blanched now by salty grime and frost. Strings of dead lights criss-crossed over the road.

The Rysonville cinema – she was off to see *L'aventurra*, this month's "Foreign Fancies" matinee – was only two blocks away and as Harlowe hustled on, she passed a series of yellow parking meters and was reminded there were only four more days until Friday, four more days until Lina'd come and dowse her study in Lemon Pledge. Again. She had to call the agency.

But Harlowe really didn't want to make that phone call. In fact, she was dreading it; as if speaking to someone – a stranger, no less – made it all the more real, what she'd become. And all the questions they would ask her: *How would you rate your MAIDS Inc. maid's performance? Which of the following words, would you say, apply to your MAIDS Inc. maid: Thorough? Timely? Professional? Prompt? Yes to all? Then what aspect of her service dissatisfied you? Can you be more specific? Just what, exactly, is your problem? Please hold a moment, Mrs. Ward while I pull up your file. What's this? No job. No kids. Home all day, all alone. What do you need a maid for?*

But she didn't lunch at the club or board a horse at the stable in Ritchfield. She didn't spend her afternoons in the salon or thousands of dollars on Botox. She didn't sit on any boards or organize gala fundraisers. She really wasn't just another woman whose hands were too smooth (and nails too expensive) to clean her own house.

"You work just as hard as I do," Graham had told her years ago. "There's no need for you to bother with the house, if you don't want to." Not that he needed to say that; Harlowe was never domestic and back then she couldn't care less if the floors got their weekly polish, the mirrors their weekly shine. All that mattered was her work.

She used to slip out of bed in the middle of the night and creep down the stairs to her study. When she'd wake up on the loveseat, neck-cramped and confused, Graham was often by her head with steaming cup of coffee. He'd watch her, vaguely paternal – proud – as she gulped from the mug, not

caring if she burned her tongue, just wanting to wash away the aftertaste of ambition. Earthy flavours of copper and rust; far worse than the pasty taste of morning. And so, although she would be loathe to admit it, she was pleased when Graham called the agency himself.

“Harlowe? Halowe? Wait up.” Trotting toward her, in Hermes riding boots and a luscious camel-hair coat, was Susan Drummer, Dr. Paul Drummer's wife. Her chestnut hair hung well below her shoulders and her tan was indicatively uniform.

“My goodness, Harlowe. Where are you off blazing off to? I've been following you for at least a block now. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to escape saying 'Hello'.” Susan laughed at that. In the cold air, Harlowe could smell the toasty spice of her perfume.

“Sorry,” Harlowe waved her hand around her head, “The wind.” Susan nodded.

“Can you believe this weather?”

“It's cold,” Harlowe confirmed. “How's Paul?”

“He's fine. Good. But I've got my eldest home with the flu.”

“James?”

“Jason. Worse than a baby, that one. Running me right off my feet,” Harlowe blew into her hands, stomped her feet, made a general show of being cold. “He's too old for such babying, I know. But I can't help it. It's hard not to be nostalgic for when they were young.”

“He might as well get it while he can. Before long, he'll be off to college. Gone.” Harlowe flicked her hand through the air like she was shooing a dog or casting ashy dust from her palm.

“Gawd! Harlowe! Don't remind me,” Susan playfully slapped her arm. Her neck creped and crinkled. “Nevermind that. You and Graham have to come over to celebrate. I heard 'Congratulations' are in order.”

“Congratulations?”

“Paul mentioned something about you teaching at the university. A poetry professor?”

A poetry professor? Harlowe could just hear Graham telling Paul: *After the Masters, she'll end up posted at the university, teaching poetry.* Nevermind that she hadn't even been accepted yet or that she had two years of study in front of her after being out of school for so long. Not to mention that professors who wrote poetry (rather than studied it) weren't exactly in demand. Yet, in Graham's careless summary – and in the breezy lives of his friends – her plans had been fast-forward, truncated, all the difficulty and struggle removed. Apparently, she already had a job.

Harlowe vaguely accepted Susan's invitation, promising to let the boys

figure the scheduling out. Harlowe looked at her watch as Susan loped off.

The movie had already started. Damn Graham! He revered the arts because he didn't understand them. Not that he ever tried, preferring fairy tales of benevolent beings who bestowed orchestral suites in B minor and oil-on-canvas landscape studies upon the Inspired – fully formed. She always thought this attitude of his ridiculous – superstitious – but now, for the first time, she saw just how insulting it was. His support and encouragment rested on little more than faith, far different than the admiration and respect he reserved for multi-degreed people and academic accomplishments. People like Paul. Or Marilyn (M.B.A., PhD.), his mixed-pairs golf partner.

The box office clerk traced a gloved finger across the page of her comic book. As she slid Harlowe her ticket, Harlowe could see the underside of her glove was money-grime grey, while the top of her hand was pure as a seal-pup. Harlowe pocketed her change and moved toward the glass-panelled door.

“Comb nah!”

Harlowe turned. A black woman, in a nylon-bubble coat, with a mismatched hat and scarf, was pulling a blond boy behind her. The snot that had dripped from his nose now hung from his lip, and the mucousy thread quivered like a harpstring as the woman dragged the boy along.

“Comb nah, chile. It's cole.” Harlowe tuned back toward the door. In the reflection, the boy flopped along like a doll and then both the boy and his nanny collapsed like cardboard cut-outs as Harlowe pulled open the door. Stepping into the oppressive warmth of the theatre, Harlowe decided that before she called the agency, she would speak to Lina herself.

* * *

Harlowe slipped the envelope between two perfume bottles, sat down at her dressing table, and tried to ignore the Boston U logo on the corner. She spackled cream from hand to hand, before daubing it all over her face. Oddly, as she aged, her skin had smoothed a milk-ice white, and her near-hairless brow and sloping cheeks glistened like white jade. As she worked the remaining cream into her hands, Harlowe examined her fingers. They were still meaty and thick, and her nails still broadened at the tip. As a girl, she used to wish for China-doll hands, dainty with rice-kernel fingers. But even as she tried to rub and roll her hands thin, she knew she'd never have wriggly mouse-pup hands. Hands like Grace

Grace had arrived a few weeks after Harlowe's 10th birthday – much to Harlowe's displeasure – and on meeting the timid girl, Harlowe had stomped up to her room and slammed the door. She was far too old for an *au pair*, but Grace was petite and quiet – practically silent – and her mildness soon bewitched Harlowe. She handled everything – her velvet-covered headband, the pieces when they played checkers or chess after school, the teaspoon she used to cut away at her yogurt – lightly, like they were sacred in substance or too fragile to hold up under the weight of her touch. Before long, Harlowe was following Grace around on her days off, jealous of the time she had to herself. She knew she shouldn't watch Grace painting in the backyard or scribbling in her sketchbook, and she tried to

keep the butterfly bush or the patio table between them. But she couldn't turn away, fascinated by the way Grace's hand scurried over the canvas, her soft and gentle face turned hard – masculine-- in front of the easel. On those days, Grace never acknowledged her presence, but Grace must have known she was there because one day Harlowe's mother sat her down and said, "You have to leave Grace alone. It's the law." She said Grace had to have a minimum of two days off (her mother said this as if she understood why she'd want more) and if she didn't stop stalking her, the cops were going to come and cuff her. Of course, Harlowe didn't believe her, but she stopped watching Grace, mortified that the gentle girl had tattled to her mother.

Harlowe could hear Graham slapping his cheeks in the ensuite; the soothing scent of his aftershave soon filled the room.

"So what time does this thing start?" Graham called from the bathroom.

"Curtain's at nine."

"Plenty of time" Harlowe picked up the envelope and set it down flat, in front of her. She whisked a blush brush over her cheeks and dabbed Vaseline on her eyelids for sparkle. Appearing behind her – as she knew he would – Graham squeezed her shoulder.

"Lovely, as always, Harlowe" She looked down at the envelope. Their eyes met in the mirror.

"What's this?"

She twisted up her lipstick and shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't . . ." :His arm swooped down over her shoulder and plucked at something on the dressing table. He spun a cufflink between thumb and forefinger.

"I thought I lost this." He rattled it in his palm like a die.

" . . .opened it," Harlowe whispered, fingering the envelope as Graham bounced from the room. Her neck and chest burned, and the room pulsed with the beat of her heart. A piercing loneliness sliced through her with shocking force. She gasped and gripped the table. It only lasted a moment – seconds, maybe – and then the pain passed, and she gaped – stunned – at the mirror. As her vision cleared, her reflection reassured her – eyes staring so intently – slowing her heart, loosening her lungs, solidifying the ambient pulsing into the familiar objects of their room.

She snatched up the envelope, slid her nail under the flap.

We regret to inform you . . .

She looked up from the letter.

. . . wish you the best of luck in all your future endeavours.

Harlowe smoothed her hair and straightened her skirt, before shoving both the letter and its envelope to the back of her underwear drawer.

Harlowe followed as Graham pushed his way out of the Aughtsey Theatre into the sub-zero night. The sky was pitch behind the lamps that lit the parking lot, their peachy light pulverized on the frosted hoods of cars. People milled from the theatre around them, breaking from the general crowd in twos and fours, passing under the bright lights as they crossed the lot to their cars. Graham crunched ahead of Harlowe, raising his knees high, a precautionary measure against all the ice and snow. He either didn't know or didn't care that his comic high-step caused his pants to flap about ridiculously, exposing his veined calves to everyone and the cold. Harlowe followed slowly behind him, taking pains not to slip on the frozen ridges or the icy tire-tracks left by the plow.

In spite of the cold, Graham yawned as he opened the car for Harlowe.

"Community theatre. Always a gamble," he said, and then gestured playfully toward Harlowe's seat. "Your chariot, Madame."

Harlowe tucked her skirt under her legs and slid into her seat. Rubbing his hands, Graham trotted around the car.

"Oooh. It's cold." He blew into his fist and fumbled with the ignition. The heater whirred to life. As they waited for the engine to warm-up and the windows to defrost, Graham rubbed his face.

"God, that was awful," he complained as Harlowe opened her window. He turned. "Are you crazy, lady? It must be -20 out."

"You need to wake up," she said. Actually, after two hours in an overheated theatre, she didn't mind the cold. Graham chuckled, drumming his fingers on the wheel.

"Yeah, I guess so," he had fallen asleep at some point in the second act, "But, I couldn't help it. It was awful."

"How would you know? You didn't watch it?" Engine warm, Graham eased the car from the parking spot.

"Don't tell me you *actually* liked it?" What Harlowe didn't like was his certainty, his confidence. She turned to the window. Chunky snowbanks hedged the parking lot. Cars and lampposts scrolled by as they pulled out.

"Summary judgements are lazy."

"I'm lazy if I didn't like it?" he scoffed.

"You can't say you didn't like it. You didn't watch it." The truth was, Harlowe agreed with him; the play was awful. But Graham was rarely so opinionated and never about art. She was their arbiter on issues regarding the arts and he usually waited on her ruling, before agreeing, pleased with himself, or admitting, cheerfully, that he didn't quite get *that*, but he'd give it more thought.

"Harlowe, it was putting people to sleep. What was it called? *Aesthetics of the Middle Class*?"

"*Aesthetics for the Middle Man.*"

"More like *Anesthetic for Every Man.*"

"You were the only one sleeping."

"There was a lady snoring right in front of us. And the gent behind me, fell so far forward he knocked my seat and woke me up." Incredulous, she turned to look at him, but he was watching the empty road, grinning like he'd been drugged.

"Maybe it was just too abstract for you."

"Come on. You're not seriously defending that junk?"

"Fine. You didn't like it. I get it." Harlowe gripped the collar of her coat and rolled up the window. "I didn't realize I was married to Charles Isherwood."

Silent, Graham alternated between watching her and the road. He reached over and gripped her thigh. "Hey Harlowe?" He squeezed her leg, fondly. "You know I'm joking, right?"

Harlowe just nodded and turned back to her reflection in the window.

* * *

Harlowe was in the living room, flipping through *The New Yorker* when she finally heard the MAIDS Inc. car out front. The living room opened to the foyer, where three shallow stairs served the purpose of a wall. Harlowe had always thought the room welcoming – the hearth was almost directly opposite the door – but as Lina, in her oversized men's parka, huddled through the door, a biting breeze slipped in after her, spilling down the stairs, slicing through the room's cosy warmth. Feeling breached somehow – exposed – Harlowe brought her hand to the bare skin under her jugular, above the deep-scooped collar of her shirt, and stood up.

Harlowe watched, arms crossed, as Lina stomped off her boots and hung up her coat. Chunks of snow skidded across the foyer and dirty puddles quickly formed on the floor. Suppressing the urge to scold her, Harlowe tried not to think of salty-sand scratches on the still-new granite floor. Lina pulled a pair of stained slippers from her purse. As she shoved them on her feet, her socks gathered in fatty folds around her ankles. She picked up her plastic rack of chemicals and started off down the hall.

"Lina, can you come here a minute?" Harlowe wanted to deal with the problem once and for all; it had gone on long enough. If asked, she'd be at a loss to explain why she'd waited so long to talk to Lina. It had been more than six months since Magda left, and Harlowe was still ill at ease with Lina. At first it was the trivial differences – the point-tipped toilet paper, socket covers removed and soaked, faucets shined slick with baby oil – that disturbed Harlowe. But as the novelty evaporated and the changes became routine, Harlowe realized that it wasn't Lina's cleaning that bothered her. It was her craggy cheekbones and rock-shard nose. And her fathomless tar-

ball eyes. .

"I just wanted to say, you've been doing great work here." Lina was frightfully thin – all shards and spires – and she reminded Harlowe of the bird skull the melt had uncovered last spring, in the backyard . Harlowe tried to smile as she stepped closer.

"Gracias, m'am. Gracias." Lina pecked her hawkish head sharply. Her plastic bottles rattled in their rack. Pleased and encouraged, Harlowe unfolded her arms.

"There's just one thing, I'm not sure if I've mentioned. It's about the study . ." Harlowe stopped. Lina's eyes were pitch-bubbles of confusion. "That room over there, off the hall . ." Lina's MAIDS Inc. polo was rubber-glove yello and much too big for her. The stiff collar flapped over her flat-chest like a bib. A few inches more and the short sleeves would have touched her wrists.

"I don't want you to clean there."

"Si. Gracias, ma'am." Harlowe sighed and pushed her hair from her face. Lina looked down at her slippers.

"Alright. Come on." Lina shuffled down the hall, after Harlowe. Harlowe threw open the study door. The room was cool and shadowy, the light from an overcast sun further weakened by frosted windows, anemic. The mahogany desk was free of paper or pens, or any other evidence of her work.

"No clean here." Harlowe wagged her finger and shook her head. "I work here," she gestured widely, "No clean here. *Entiendes?*" Lina looked up at her blankly. "*Entiendes?*"

"*Si. Si.* No clean," Lina finally sputtered. Relieved, Harlowe clapped her thick hands. Lina cowered.

"Good. Ok. That's all." Lina looked around the room. Her forehead creased. She turned to Harlowe.

"You. Work."

Two syllables. The shortest of sentences, those two words echoed off the books and the rug long after Lina had gone, and the longer Harlowe sat there on that saddle-leather couch, the surer she was she heard a terminal inflection. You work? A question.

The perfect question. In all these years, how little she'd accomplished. Acquainted with facts, anyone – her husband, her maid, a stranger – would ask and if she was being honest, she have to answer, "No. I don't work much at all."

Harlowe rubbed her neck. The soft pillows she had bought to make their

bed comfortable, to lure Graham from spending his on-call nights at the hospital or falling asleep on the living room couch, cramped her neck. As she pressed her thick fingers into her tense muscle, she remembered how full of hope she had been, how the future had been open, wide, swollen.

She used to be sure of herself, comfortable with her choices. She used to laugh when criticized or questioned, like when Magda'd waddle past the study, clucking her tongue, mumbling things like, "Umph! Lady writer." Accent-heavy words soaked with censure.

Harlowe missed bulb-browed, sour-tongued Magda.

* * *

Harlowe peeled back the brocade drapes. Outside, Graham was packing his golf clubs into the trunk. The American College of Cardiology conference was in Orlando this year and Graham planned on taking advantage of the summery locale to play some golf. He had even invited Marilyn along; he said she'd never forgive him if they missed the opportunity to get in some winter golf. Harlowe had sanctioned their mixed-pairs golf-buddy relationship long ago, asking only once, "Aren't these mixed-pairs tournaments for couples?"

"I guess," Graham had shrugged, "If your wife's a golfer."

"And your wife is not?"

"You hate all things golf. You should thank Marilyn."

"For what?"

"For taking over."

Graham waved to her. She waved back as he bounded up the drive and burst through the front door.

"That looks like all of it." He crossed the living room and pulled her into a hug.

"I'm going to miss you," he pressed his lips to her forehead. "It's not too late to change your mind, you know?"

Harlowe shook her head. "What about Marilyn?"

Graham chuckled. "What about her?"

"She wouldn't mind me dragging you off the course for lunch."

Graham cocked his head, "You wouldn't do that."

"I know."

"And anyway, you know Marilyn. It's hard to see her minding anything,

she's such a nice girl."

From the doorway, Harlowe watched as Graham backed out of the drive. He lowered his head to meet her eyes through the windshield as the car rolled back and the tires crunched over the icy snow. She pressed her fingers to her lips and blew Graham a kiss. An unusual gesture. She wasn't sure why she did it and she could still feel her calf-skin lips against her fingertips as she stood there waving at the disappearing car, wondering at the curious way he spoke of Marilyn.

Marylin was older than Harlowe, with a M.B.A. and a Ph.D. in Economics. It was just too much of a stretch to think of her as a 'nice girl'. Harlowe tried to remember if Graham had spoken of anyone else like that, but she could only think of Marcy.

Marcy had been Graham's first receptionist and when he hired her, she wasn't much younger than Harlowe. She had rosy skin and warm hands, with long, efficient fingers. The first time Harlowe met her – in Graham's new office – she hadn't noticed her spicy scent; the paint stink and the plastic stench of freshly-laid broadloom clung to everything like shrink-wrap. As the workmen in overalls carried in potted plants and a series of seats strung along a bar, Marcy cupped Halowe's hand in her own and breathed, "Oh, Mrs. Ward. It really is a pleasure."

It was six months after patients started lining the waiting room walls, perched on the bar-strung seats like pigeons and crows when Harlowe saw Marcy again. It was then that Harlowe noticed that Marcy smelled spicy, like onion, ripped open, and oregano, ripened in the wizening heat of an oven. The scent itself wasn't unpleasant, just unexpected, and it sprang from her inner folds – the underside of her elbow, the oily creases where her neck met her chest – as she shuffled about in reception.

Harlowe rested her purse on the desk. Marcy smiled at her as she finished up on the phone According to Graham, Marcy was the ambiance of the office. "The patients just love her. It'll be a shame when she goes." Marcy was a newlywed and Graham knew it wouldn't be long before he lost her to motherhood. Marcy put down the phone and leaned across the desk to scratch something onto a pink pad of paper. Copper freckles topped her milk-froth breasts like cinnamon sprinkles.

"He's with a patient, Mrs. Ward. But he shouldn't be much longer. Would you like to wait?" The same cinnamon-dust freckles warmed her rosy cheeks as well.

"No, that's alright. I thought he might be able to sneak away for lunch."

A woman with chicken-claw hands shook her magazine and scowled at Harlowe.

"It doesn't matter if we wait. We are dying. As long as the doctor's wife gets her quickie for lunch." Harlowe stared at the woman, red-faced, and then turned away, abruptly. The woman snorted, disgusted by Harlowe's lack of gall.

“Just tell him I stopped by.”

“I will. But don’t worry Mrs. Ward,” Marcy’s brown eyes were toasted with flecks of olive, “I make sure he doesn’t eat too much junk for lunch.”

Harlowe smiled weakly as she passed through like old woman’s scowl and pushed her way out the door.

The air was still musky with sex as Harlowe propped herself up with her elbow and kissed Graham’s shoulder. Her hair was longer then, and it fell onto his arm in long, tickling waves.

“I don’t know how you stand it. I almost feel sorry for her husband. Do up your coat. Take your vitamins. Eat more bran. And don’t forget your vegetables.”

“Well, *she* feels sorry for *me*.”

“What? She does not.” Graham wove his hands together behind his head, and lay, elbows out, smiling at the ceiling.

“Poor girl can’t get her head around the fact that you send me off every day without a nutritious, homecooked lunch.” Eyebrows raised, he let his head roll toward her. Harlowe slapped him lightly.

“You’re teasing me?”

“Dead serious. Now she packs me a lunch.”

“And you eat it?”

“Sure. Why not? She’s a good cook.”

“That’s just . . .”

“What’s the big deal? It makes her happy and she’s a nice girl.”

“. . .pathetic,” Harlowe finished as Graham reached over and turned off the light.

* * *

For all her reluctance to call them, when Harlowe finally got around to contacting MAIDS Inc, it was in person, in their office in the outskirts – not on the phone. Not that she had had that intention when she set off, but after opening her sixth and final rejection letter, she just got into her car and drove. She had no idea where she was going, only a vague notion of fleeing an even hazier ‘here’(Rysonville? her house? her study?). But she knew it was useless; there was no getting away from it, the ‘here’ clung to her.

Highway 21 was little more than a higher-speed, two-lane road. Lined with large-lawned colonials, the historic homes flickered past, in stop-motion procession, before falling away altogether. Soon, single-storey commercial buildings took over. Her distaste mounted with each mid-sized business that

passed. Wilson Windows and Drywall. Dyco Storage. Mapletree Nursery and Flowers. A string of not-too-big, not-too-small, Goldilockean dreams. Such mediocrity was depressing. But who was she to be such a snob? Her second-rate chapbook and minor publications were no more impressive than Sadie's Wholesale Beauty or Seamens Kitchen and Bath.

Harlowe caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror. Her eyes blinked back at her, strangely disembodied; rheumy, but alert. The skin around her eyes was smooth and white. It was hard to believe her eyes had once been ringed by aubergine circles. But they had and Graham had loved them.

"Your passion marks you. You wear your scars," he had told her once in college, as they lay, entwined, on a rug in his dorm.

"Oh Gawd!" Harlowe had groaned, rolling over. "I wear my scars? You have to be joking." Graham pulled her back on top of him.

"I'm serious," he said, brushing an invisible lock of hair from her face. "I can't think of anything I'd put before my health. Look at how pale you are. You're probably anemic. What did you eat yesterday?" He kissed her eyelids and gently traced her dark circles with his finger. "I bet you stayed up all night, writing."

She didn't have the heart to tell him that she never wrote at night (at least when she was in college) and that she owed those circles to partying with her art-school friends. Instead, she closed her eyes as he kissed her.

The salt-bleached road stretched out before her, disappearing over the horizon, under the colourless sky. Strangely, it was the sky – the wan uniformity – that blanched away her mental fog. What was she doing? Why had she driven out here? As Palatino Marble Showroom shimmered past, a sudden hopelessness constricted her chest. What was the point of months preparing applications? Or years spent writing? Of her inconsequential life? She slammed her hands against the wheel until her palms stung and she was gasping. She opened the window. The frigid air slapped her face, calmed her down. She scanned the passing signs to get her bearings. Next exit: Hikers Road. Harlowe signalled to exit. At least she'd get something from this goddamn dismal drive.

The MAIDS Inc. office was in a typical commercial unit. The single-storey building was L-shaped, windowless and bibbed by a parking lot. The landscaped undulations that squared off the property – little more than sod-covered bumps – were muddy and patched with snow. A stout joint-tenant sign stood by the entrance drive; the MAIDS Inc. panel was the only one big enough to be seen from the car. Harlowe inched toward a string of canary-yellow hatchbacks – identical – with MAIDS Inc. decals stuck to the doors. As she parked, she wondered if the other units were occupied; besides the hatchbacks and a lone Lexus, hers was the only other car in the lot.

The MAIDS Inc office was in the foot of the L and the only entrance was an iron door. The first time she was here, Harlowe had been confused by the missing storefront and the absence of a public-friendly door. Not knowing what to do, she had stood at that iron entrance knocking until someone – eventually – flung open the door.

"Well come on then," a woman had called out gruffly as Harlowe stepped

into a dank room lined with filing cabinets and bulletin boards. The woman resumed her position behind one of the three metal desks angled, carelessly, in the center of the room. She had a wind-wrinkled face and orange-frizz hair and her jeans were tucked into her hiking boots. "It was open."

Harlowe placed a cheque on her desk. Without looking at it, the woman slipped it into a drawer.

"Clients usually mail these."

"I was at the mechanic – new spark plugs," the woman stared at Harlowe as if she were diseased, "and since I was so close, and I am never out this way, I thought why not . . ."

"It's fine," the woman cut her off. It obviously wasn't. Harlowe remembered she had been amused at the way the woman had stuffed papers into files, with force and determination, silently willing Harlowe to go. But that had been back before Lina, back when Harlowe could still laugh things off.

Without so much as a tap to announce her entrance, Harlowe yanked open the door. Not much had changed; filing cabinets still lined the wall and metal desks still quartered the room. The far side of the room opened to a hallway and women in MAIDS Inc. uniforms passed by, taking no notice of Harlowe, as they came and went down the hall. Across the hall, there was another room, filled with lockers, and Harlowe could hear echoed chatter from where she stood by the door. Harlowe was so focused on the locker room laughter, she almost didn't see the moustached- man, standing over one of the desks, on the phone.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Weinstein," the man said, his back to Harlowe. "I said, I am sorry. No. Sorry. No. I am sorry. No. SORRY. I AM SORRY. Yes. Yes." Although he was small, the man stood rigid with authority. Harlowe wondered if he was the owner. "I understand that Mrs. Weinstein. YOU WON'T HAVE TO CALL AGAIN," the man turned and saw Harlowe. He frowned, annoyed "I've already sent over my best girl. NOW. YES, SHE'S COMING NOW."

Harlowe stumbled back as the iron door opened and a cold blast ripped through the room. Two women in MAIDS Inc. uniforms, entered carrying racks and crossed the room. Their movements were disconcertingly coordinated, and Harlowe stared as they stopped in the hall to chat with another maid. The man put Mrs. Weinstein on hold. Harlowe stepped forward, but he ignored her.

"Hey! Hey!" The little man crossed his arms and waited until the women stopped talking and turned. "Ladies, are you finished? This isn't a social club. Punch out and get out."

The group dispersed without haste or fear, one woman, younger and fresher than the rest, rolled her eyes and waved her arm at the man. An ambiguous gesture.

"Hey! Hey! Sofia! Don't push it. You cause me enough trouble as it is.

Because of you I'm stuck on this phone. How hard is it to clean a tub?"

Sofia waved her hand again. "That old lady is a *loooo-caaaaaa*," she laughed. The man's moustache twitched and his lips curled, in spite of himself. He quickly bit them straight.

"Just get out of here."

Sofia disappeared into the locker room; the man punched a button on the phone.

"I'm here, Mrs. Weinstein." No one had so much as looked at Harlowe.

It was hot, and strangely humid, in the room. Harlowe clutched at her scarf. Why was she just standing there like a fool? Her cheeks burned and before she knew what she was doing, she'd backed out of the office, into the cold.

Harlowe shivered. White plumes billowed from her nose as she stood there, indecisive, by the door. She knew she should stay and arrange to replace Lina, but she just wanted to get into her car and go. She stared at the mud-ice hills between her and the road; she had left her gloves in the car and now her hands were cold. She shoved her fists into her cashmere pockets and swung her body around to look at the car. It was still there, frosty and glistening, in the parking lot.

Why hadn't she said anything? It was ridiculous; a grown woman, slinking out the door like a child. She should go back in there and demand her right to service, remind that little man of the infallibility of a paying customer. But as she reached for the door, Sofia's sing-song "*looo-caa*" pealed in her head and she saw the man's not-so-secret smile.

Sofia and the little man (and everyone else in there) were allied in their judgment. There was nothing she could do to change that to them she was just another useless wife. *Be honest, Harlowe. Are they so far off? That's what you are. A wife. Good for not much.* She felt sad as she realized Graham hadn't asked about her applications. Not once. He'd probably forget all about them if she didn't mention them again.

The door swung open; Harlowe jumped back. Two women, in nylon-puff jackets, stepped outside to smoke. The first woman, a drugstore blond with two full inches of black roots, clicked a Bic behind cupped hands, before passing it off to the other. They both shuffled about to keep warm.

"I done told him, 'Ya'a plate in the warmer. Y'ain't gone starve'," the blond said. Her already small eyes narrowed to nothing as she pulled hard on her smoke. She waved her hand in the air as she spoke. "So what I need be sitting round there for. Ain't like he pay me no mind. Sleep on that damn couch by nine." Streamers of smoke hovered in the cold air around her.

The other woman snorted. She was stout and russet, like a bull. She had a short neck and angled almond eyes. "Georgie knows he best watch his mouth. I liable win the jackpot and keep it to myself."

"Ha! Charles'd say, 'Y'aint ever gone win shit at that bingo'." Together, the women laughed and, until the blonde stopped and glared at Harlowe. The

bull-woman turned.

"What she looking at?" she asked. The blonde flicked away her smoke and shrugged.

"Let's go. It's cold." Scowling, the bull-woman flapped her thick arms at Harlowe.

"Bitch!" Harlowe blushed and lowered her eyes. Her wind-chapped hands hung lifeless and numb at her sides. Slowly, she curled her fingers to her palm. She tasted metal. An intense heat steamed up from her stomach, straightening her spine with hydraulic force. Harlowe's face contorted in anger. She raised her head, eyes wild with challenge. But it was too late. The women had already disappeared behind the iron door.

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