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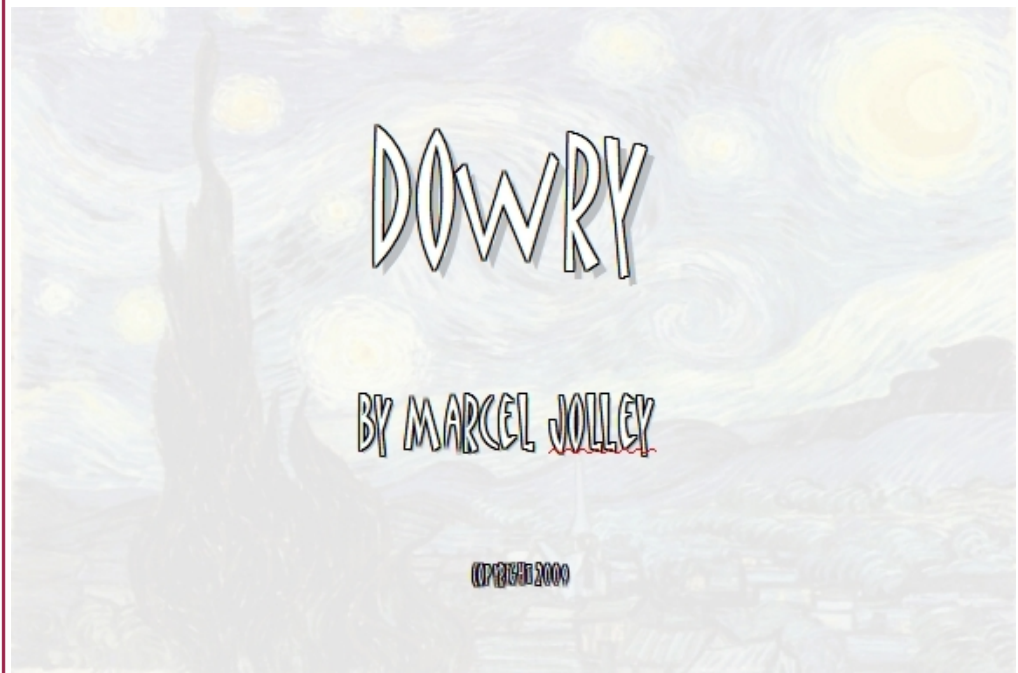
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The girl seated on Samantha's apartment stoop didn't appear to be waiting to rob her. Despite vague black fatigues and intricately-laced surplus boots, she looked neither threatening nor sinister. What worried Samantha most was that this kind of girl might instinctively dislike her. Eye contact wasn't established until Samantha stood close enough she could have reached over the young woman to unlock the door.

"Is Tyler here?"

"I don't know, I just got here myself." Only after replying did Samantha search for any Tylers she knew. Her sole recollection was a Ty from her Art Appreciation class back at Oregon State, but she remembered him like a one-hit pop band too upbeat for this dark soul. "No one named Tyler lives here."

"Then why did you say you didn't know?" The girl didn't sound mad, even with her eyes sooty holes of mascara.

Samantha let out a default chuckle that probably made girls like this nauseous.

"I'm tired from work, I guess," she said. "And I've only lived here a few weeks. It doesn't feel like my place yet."

The girl saw her point but didn't move. Samantha considered stepping around but just jingled her keys.

"Did Tyler live here before us?"

"Tyler and me."

Samantha didn't look at her watch but estimated from the Murray Road traffic that four-thirty was closing in. Another fifteen minutes and she would need to forego her workout and go straight to Papa Murphy's for the pizza.

“We just moved in this month,” Samantha said. “My husband and I.”

The designator still played like a catchy song she had yet to learn by heart. Her muscle memory yearned to present the ring, especially impressive after today’s visit to the Shane Company for the first of a lifetime of regular cleanings for which Todd had paid extra.

“Newlyweds.” The word slipped out like dinner table gas. “So you and Tyler were the previous occupants?”

The girl stood, coming only to Samantha’s teeth.

“I don’t know when he left. I haven’t seen him for a year.”

“Did you try calling him?”

“I don’t have his new cell number,” she said. “And we didn’t part on great terms, so he probably wouldn’t answer.”

Samantha nodded but really didn’t understand. She estimated the girl within a few years of her own twenty-six, but something about her seemed too young for authentic problems.

“And you were roommates?”

“We were lovers.” The girl gestured to the apartment, making Samantha second-guess whether the manager had steam-cleaned every possible inch of carpet. “This was our first place. Our only place.”

Again Samantha played with the keys. “Did you try the rental office?”

Finally the girl smiled, revealing tongue jewelry that a past sorority sister had insisted there was only one reason to get.

“If anyone’s still there from a year ago I won’t really be welcome.”

“Trouble?” Samantha said, though this girl’s definition probably started where her own ended.

The girl shrugged. “No one pressed charges, but I’ll bet Tyler lost the deposit. The hole by the bedroom temperature control probably took most of that.”

Samantha knew the spot--a picture of she and Todd rafting on the Deschutes hung there--but remembered no hint of history.

“Do you want to come in for a minute?” Samantha’s head played pre-emptive clips of Todd coming home, working around this mopey slacker like a fallen bomb that had failed to detonate on impact. *And you invited her in why?* Maybe the girl saw this too. She shook her head but still obstructed the door.

“No--too many memories. Or even worse I wouldn’t recognize anything at all. All these units are just the same, I suppose.” Her eyes studied the complex. “How far is the nearest MAX station from here?”

Samantha recalled seeing the MAX light-rail cars running through her new home of Beaverton like a river whose name and origin she didn’t know and only recalled ever seeing the trains

stop when it inconvenienced her.

“A couple miles maybe. Downtown.” Samantha glanced in the general direction, the distance filled with strip malls and shrubbery and business parks. “How did you get here?”

The girl dug in her pocket, and where Samantha expected cigarettes she came up with Tic Tacs.

“A friend dropped me off.” She offered a Tic Tac but Samantha smiled the candy away. “A one-way friend, though.”

Samantha wondered how many of her own friends were one-way, or roundabouts, or dead ends. Her introduction found the girl’s handshake damp and warm.

“May,” the girl said.

“That’s the month I got married.” Again she held the ring finger down, this time knowing what Todd might say about revealing valuables.

“It’s short for Maybelline.” May smirked. “So you see why.”

“Where have you been for the last year?”

When May said New York Samantha relaxed off the keys. Her mind danced with the TV shows of her formative years and their attractive clean city singles who had no problems that couldn’t be solved by a good quip or at worst a special two-part episode.

“So have you been there?”

“No.” Samantha looked down at the too-anxious welcome of her new doormat. “But I want to. So you lived there? Right in the middle of everything?”

“I suppose,” May said. “There’s a lot of everything there, and a lot of middles.”

May now appeared very much Samantha’s contemporary, perhaps even a year or two older. City life made such things hard to tell.

“Did you know people before heading there? Or have a job?”

“Neither. Nothing.” May looked at the door’s peephole as if Tyler were inside studying her. “I just always wanted to go. I’m from Newberg, so I figured what the fuck? It had to be better.”

Samantha held up a hand pleading guilty. “Salem.”

May joined her in a sloppy high five.

“You know what I mean, then.”

“Cool.” Samantha also eyed the peephole. “So you just went there? Without Tyler?”

May’s teeth ratcheted over the Tic Tacs, which she replaced with several more.

“We weren’t in a great place, y’know? I needed to get away...”

“Did he hit you?” Samantha was unsure of the proper tonal range and just ended up sounding like an afterschool special.

May snorted. “Yeah, but I hit him back. We were like that, hot and cold. It made things more intense.” She smiled. “I mean, you know how when you and your husband fight and then sort of make up and start screwing but you’re actually still mad? And you just...it’s like you’re trying to prove your point.”

Samantha sent a grin she hoped agreed but couldn’t recall any argument with Todd that hadn’t reached a logical conclusion. And despite those websites she found in the browsing history that time she borrowed his laptop, her husband liked his sex logical. On the rare occasion she tried something that she’d studied in those pictures, he either stopped her or couldn’t maintain eye contact until they were finished.

“He stabbed me.” May grinned and made for where her dark pants covered what had to be a bone-pale hip. “With a fork. Nothing too bad, but do you want to see?”

Samantha did but heard herself saying no, fearing she might spend the night compulsively washing every fork in the apartment.

“I guess I would bolt, too,” she said.

“That was before,” May said. “But I left him with a few scars, too. Love does that, right?”

They shared a glance at the stairs to the upper apartments and Samantha thought of she and Todd’s scar-free bodies, save for his appendectomy at sixteen. Her watch confirmed that the workout was lost, and with Todd’s softball league tonight if she didn’t hurry she would be eating pizza alone.

“Listen,” she said. “I need to run by Papa Murphy’s. Can I drop you off at the MAX station?”

“Really?” May lit up as if her biggest worry had also been simply not being liked. “That would be awesome.”

Walking to the car May’s head swiveled, maybe wondering how she and Tyler’s bruises and thrusts ever thought they had a chance among the over-tended grass and reserved carports.

“So what would you have said to him?” Samantha said.

“I know I should have thought about that, but I was going to wing it.” May fumbled for more Tic Tacs. “Mostly I wanted him to see me. I mean, I’m sure he worried. I worried about him.”

Samantha’s Sentra chirped hello and they slid into their seats.

“I just wanted him to see I’m okay,” May said. “That I made it through.”

The sounds of Jack Johnson filled the car upon starting, sounding dopey and pedestrian and sending Samantha to the volume knob.

“Are you going to keep looking?”

May shook her head at more words for which she hadn't planned.

"We'll see," she said. "I can't chase things forever. They either find their way back or are just gone for good."

May hadn't yet put on her seatbelt. Samantha arranged her handbag for a moment, brainstorming tactful approaches before finally ignoring her own belt and backing out.

* * *

The officer did his best to make sure Samantha didn't feel stupid. He was polite and listened to everything with his pad and pen in hand, though he wrote down far less than she said.

"What about the MAX station?" Samantha said. "Maybe there's a security camera that shows her getting on a train."

The officer's nod turned to a headshake. "We'll check it out but chances are she never got on. She probably just left to wait somewhere for her friends to pick her up after they were done here."

The apartment hardly felt like a crime scene, and hardly felt any less full despite the things missing. Even with the telltale vacuums in the entertainment center and the sliding patio door that now didn't latch properly, the apartment felt like the same place she'd left that morning.

These things happened every day, the officer explained, and seemed to be increasing in frequency. Somehow these people got names and addresses of newlyweds like themselves--maybe via the internet registry sites, or even just a friend at some moving company--and came for all the gifts that nuptials implied. Their neighbors, still unknown to Todd and Samantha, had seen some men wearing nondescript coveralls moving equipment boxes in and out through the patio door of the ground floor apartment, but assumed them legitimate or didn't want to meddle. Pretty textbook, really.

"So it happens to a lot of people?" Todd said. "This is common?"

The officer closed his notebook. "Fairly. They probably targeted you with the randomness of a lottery ticket."

This comforted Todd, whose softball team was in the third inning by now and no doubt suffering from his absent fielding skills and hustle. He appeared inspired to stand but clasped his hands and stayed seated.

"And this girl," he said. "Just an accomplice?"

His legal speak earned an official grin.

"That would be my guess," the officer said. "I can't be sure, but it sounds like a front just in case, like today, you came home early."

"But what if Samantha could pick her out of a line up?"

The officer's smile cracked. "You could come look at pictures at the station, but that description sounds like every tattooed hipster I see between I-84 and Powell. Most likely it's a well-chosen disguise and easily changed."

“She said she grew up in Newberg.” Samantha felt Todd’s gaze but avoided eye contact. “I know you think she was lying but I...and she said she had a scar from being stabbed with a fork.”

“Sounds like she’s just a pathological liar,” Todd said. “A sociopath.”

“Did you see the scar?” The officer said.

“She looked ready to show me.”

All three allowed this comment to blow itself out. The officer left his card and set an appointment for them to bring in their itemized list of everything missing with serial numbers and warranties and other information Todd had wisely recorded. The apartment complex handyman was arriving to fix their lock as the officer took his leave, again ensuring that today’s events were not out of the ordinary. Avoiding specifics he assured Todd and Samantha they were far from unique.

“Thank you,” Todd said. “That honestly does help.”

* * *

“I’m not blaming you for this,” Todd said. “First and foremost, know that. Okay?”

Samantha’s wordless reply stopped just short of thanks. They sat eating pizza around a living room table adjacent to the entertainment center. The silence had been booming and sent Todd digging into the closet for his old college TV. The set lacked proper hookups and the local channels came in scratchy, but the laugh tracks and commercials seemed to calm him.

“It’s my fault,” he said.

“How?”

“I said we should rent, to see if we liked the area.” Todd tapped the antenna, hoping to make *Two and a Half Men* just a little clearer. “We should have used the money your folks gave us for a down payment and bought a house.”

“Houses get robbed, too.”

“Not as much,” Todd said. “I can’t quote statistics but I bet far less. We could have gotten an alarm system, maybe found a nice gated community where people watch out for one another.”

After short deliberation Samantha took the last piece of pizza--more than she needed on a day with no workout, but certain indulgences felt implied. Todd gave up on the antenna, settling for a Charlie Sheen whose bright shirt buzzed with the camera angle changes.

“Yes. It was my mistake and now that’s not an option because it will take most of the money to replace everything.”

Samantha laughed. She actually laughed and then stifled it like a curse word in the church parking lot.

“What?” Todd said.

“Do we need to replace everything?” She gestured to his tiny Sony. “Sure, we need a TV,

and another computer, but a lot of what they took we didn't have long. Some were still in the boxes. I'm just saying I won't miss a lot of those things."

Todd crossed his arms and looked at a phantom Xbox.

"Isn't that insulting the people who gave us the gifts?"

"Maybe," she said. "But I don't think so. We could use that money for something else. A trip. Or a move. You always said the great thing about your work is that you could pick up and go anywhere."

Todd shook his head. "I can't just leave after eight months unless I was moving up. It looks terrible on a résumé."

"A trip, then."

"For how long?" Todd said. "Neither one of us can afford to take a sabbatical or anything like that."

Samantha folded the pizza's cardboard tray and carried a cargo of crumbs and congealed cheese to the kitchen. A shiny KitchenAid mixer smiled her way. I'm still here, it said.

"Maybe just a week or so then," she said. "We could blast away like we used to go down to the coast in college. Wherever. Colorado to see Hunter and Brianna. New York. Mexico, maybe. Wherever."

One glance assured her that tucking the city between two extremes was both a wasted effort and an insult to Todd's mental note pad.

"You know she's probably never been there," he said. "Probably never been east of Troutdale."

"I wanted to go before all of this," Samantha said. "When I was young I thought of just heading out there on my own."

Todd's arms went up only to immediately refold for lack of any better option.

"Jesus, you don't find that scary?" he said. "I mean, you got duped by a common criminal here. That city would..." He paused for a gape-mouthed shudder. "Do you know how much it worries me even now? To think of you just driving around with that girl? A girl whose friends did all this?"

His hand swung an arc encompassing the apartment, which still didn't strike her as empty.

"I never felt threatened," Samantha said. "Even knowing what I know now."

The ringing phone saved them. Todd snatched the cell from his belt, studied the number, and rushed a glance her way before answering.

"That," he said. "Is the scariest part."

* * *

The robbery revealed itself incrementally that evening as Samantha tried to find ways to busy

herself--DVD's and CD's with no place to play them, e-mails floating in the internet ether with no PC to extract them, songs stuck in her head begging for an iPod and its ear buds. She waited for some honest flush of disappointment to run through her that never did and mostly just watched the funny little TV while eavesdropping on the phone calls that occupied Todd until bedtime.

This sort of thing was very common--he impressed this on every call, elevating the frequency until the last few friends and relatives heard of an organized criminal effort using exactly this approach. Her interaction and subsequent car ride with May now fell just short of kidnapping, an ordeal traumatic enough to keep her from the phone tonight. Samantha really didn't want to talk to anyone, but also enjoyed hearing her husband amplify the docile afternoon into something that people would want to hear about but be afraid to bring up.

An expected percentage of the gift-givers volunteered to repurchase their offerings, but Todd refused each time. No, he said, we're alright. We have some funds set away for situations like this. In bed they were robbed of the late show monologues and though Todd held her anything amorous would have undermined the seriousness of today's crime. But Samantha waited, for had Todd moved toward her she would have done all the things she'd seen on his laptop and made him look her right in the eyes as she did them.

By one a.m. Todd lay in a huffing, angry sleep and Samantha was out on the couch. The basic channels turned to crap after midnight and ran thick with infomercials for things even the pitchmen's eyes admitted they knew unnecessary. Until now Samantha had been able to believe May might not be part of this. All signs suggested she was, but Samantha had held off surrendering the idea to Todd and the officer. Now she could let go of her theory of one big coincidence and see May in her proper role. And Tyler, too. While May sat waiting on the steps Tyler was inside this apartment they hadn't shared a year ago. His face was unclear but there were bruises and cuts and bite marks he didn't hide but rather let hang like jewelry from his t-shirt's sleeves and neckline. Tonight they were together in their athletic way, surrounded by all the stuff Samantha had owned but never considered hers. Tomorrow they would sell everything and use the money to get away, if only for a little while. Maybe New York, or maybe somewhere sunny where May could lie out in an ill-fitting bikini and tan herself until the fine puncture marks on her hip blended in like four little vaccination scars.

Now that Samantha knew all this, how everything would turn out okay, she could rest. She went through the apartment, unlocking the front door and new patio latch, and crawled into bed with her husband to fall asleep feeling safe.

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