

## Seventeen

By Valerie Fioravanti

“Do you think the Protestants could be right? About the Holy Trinity being separate and all?” Bo asked.

Kate pulled the blanket from his legs and covered the wet spot, which he always managed to avoid comfortably. He left her with the bed’s edge, the end table poking her shoulder. She didn’t understand why men had to spread their legs so wide. They did it on the subway, sponging up whole seats, and Bo was doing the same thing here. She didn’t care how much bigger he was, how he made the full-sized mattress seem so small. She hated how it never occurred to him to take up less than his share. That she had to by default, she hated even more.

“You never answer me when I ask you things,” Bo complained.

“I don’t understand why you need to talk religion after.” Kate poked his shoulder, but he moved closer, annexing more territory. “It makes me think of sin, of dead relatives watching everything I do.”

“We’re not sinning.” Bo laid his arm across her stomach. “I’m going to marry you, when you’re old enough.”

Kate loved the curve of his forearm, his protruding vein a well-marked trail to the sudden drop at his wrist. Bo had been her adolescent wakeup, her unrequited urge, her first kiss. “You’re supposed to ask, you know.”

“We could fly to Vegas with my signing bonus and get married by Elvis on your

birthday.”

“Elvis is dead, Bo.” Needing space, Kate used his. He was firmer than the mattress, a wedding gift that outlasted her parents’ marriage. How long could their marriage last? Bo dropped community college after football season. Almost two years in remedial and he still couldn’t pass the exams he needed to transfer, but he’d go in the next draft as a defensive tackle. Not early like he would have with a couple of years playing on a Big East team, but he’d go. That was enough to get him out of the neighborhood, and Kate with him.

Kate’s grades weren’t that great, but her SAT scores were in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile. Her high school guidance counselor still suggested vocational school. Rae, her mom, bounced between their apartment and a psychiatric halfway-house, so Kate’s dreams had to be practical. Night college after she found a steady secretarial job. Katharine Gibbs had already cashed her deposit check. She never told Bo about the money. He expected his wife to travel with the team.

Bo flipped her onto her back, but her thoughts stayed with her two possible futures until his presence became a distraction. He was anvil shaped, broadest in the chest and shoulders. Bo was designed for the action-oriented close up, that breath-catching moment of absolute desire. Unfortunately, the beginning of her pleasure time always signaled the tail end of his.

Kate reached down for her ankh-shaped hairpin, which had fallen. She found it at the club where she waitressed, and she liked the engravings of interlocking swirls. She didn’t want Bo crushing it when he ran for the bathroom, like he did with her

glasses last week. Kate stretched out her arm a bit further, twisting just as Bo collapsed on her. She heard the snap before she felt the pain in her side. The time lapse made her think whatever cracked couldn't possibly belong to her.

"Oh shit," he said, rolling off. The motion made her inhale wrong, and she started coughing. Firecrackers went off inside her chest, exploded in batches down her left side. "I think that bulge is one of your ribs."

"You broke my rib?" she screamed. "You asshole!" Screaming was bad.

"Don't get hysterical," Bo sat with his pants in his lap, dusting off carpet fuzz. "I've played in games with a couple of cracked ribs."

"Fucking Christ! I'm not on the god-damned team."

He said, "Don't blaspheme at me." She stood up, opened her mouth to blaspheme some more, and passed out. When she came to, she was wearing sweatpants and he was trying to get her bra fastened. He pointed at the floor and said, "Those jeans are way too tight."

She thought, *You never mind when you're looking at my ass*, but remained quiet. She was too scared to fight.

Bo picked her up carefully, but she started coughing again. In the car, he said, "If we don't tell them the truth, they're going to think maybe I hit you. If they call the cops and it gets in the papers, it's over for me. No draft. Bad boy. Bad risk."

"What if the truth gets in the papers?"

Bo didn't answer during the drive. Later, after she'd been grinned at, whispered over, poked, x-rayed, doped, and taped up while he was surreptitiously pointed out

and admired, he said, "Maybe now they'll draft me earlier."

Kate waitressed Thursdays and Fridays at a club called Santé, in what was the old meatpacking district just beyond the West Village. It maintained its popularity by changing themes every six weeks, and the new one was "endangered species." There was faux fur everywhere and musk was pumped through the air ducts. The heavy scent made it even harder to breathe. Her new uniform was an animal print bikini top and a black lycra miniskirt. Her taped-up midriff wasn't the look they were going for. "Go home," Tracey, the club manager, told her.

"Will you pay me?" she asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think Workman's Comp might have a few questions about having a seventeen-year-old on your payroll for a year."

"What makes you think you're on the payroll?" he spat out.

"Tracey, please." He was from her neighborhood, had taken Kate's mother to her high school prom, but he'd never let her ruin this gig for him. He told people he was from the Upper West Side, the rebel child of two Columbia professors, and they believed him. He didn't even sound like he came from Brooklyn.

"Can you even lift a tray?" Kate pulled one off the bar. She clipped her tongue, tasted blood. She had Tylenol with codeine for the pain, but it wasn't working right.

"You have a black leotard in your locker?"

"I've got a couple in there," she said.

"Just wear the top over the leotard, then, and don't forget this the next time I need you to cover a shift," Tracey said.

"I always take the extra shifts anyway." Kate didn't want to be grateful.

She usually spent her break reading in a closet behind the VIP room, but she needed to lie on her back for a while, to stop the constant jabs. She went to the peace pit, a section of the converted Burlesque theatre that had small, private performance spaces. The club had taken out the chairs and carpeted the stacked floor, creating plush bleachers for "relaxation." This wasn't the singles section; as she made room for herself in the middle row, she tried to ignore the invitations. Finally, she just put her book over her face and pretended not to hear.

Someone tilted the book off her cheek and put it down again. "I find you in the strangest places, Kate."

Cameron was a regular. Went to Yale, although he was at the club most nights. Kate wanted to ask him what it was like, but she never would. He left her books as tips. *Ironically*. She read them anyway.

"Heard your boyfriend mistook you for one of his soccer balls."

"Football," Kate said. "Bo plays football, and he could break you in two with one hand."

"Been practicing that trick, has he?"

"It was an accident." Kate tried to sit up, but tortoise-like was still too fast.

"Now, however are you going to rise above your trailer-trash existence if you

resort to that tired old line?" He pulled a tobacco pouch from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. "You're not going to say, 'But Cameron, I love him' next, are you?"

"I don't live in a trailer."

"Minor technicality." He took a long drag, held his finger up as if testing the air, took a few steps away from her and exhaled, waving the smoke away before he came back. "A city built out of islands has finite space and trailer parks don't stack well. If you lived anywhere else in this great nation, it would be the trailer for you, babe."

"I despise you," she said.

"You despised me before you ever knew me, you snob." He picked up *Jude the Obscure*, which he left for her a few weeks back. "Page 286, huh? I couldn't get past the first fifty. You must be smarter than you look."

Kate stood up slowly, her spine taking a long time to straighten. "I'm only working here for the intellectual reward."

"Whatever. No one takes Hardy seriously anymore." He walked away and came back with someone's purse in his hands. "Try these." He handed her a bottle of pills. "Two should get you through your shift."

"You're a doctor now?" she asked.

"Just shut up and take them." She didn't see him again that night, but the pills worked. He left a \$100 tip on the table, stuffed between the pages of *Grendel*. She was tempted to take the book and leave the cash behind.

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At the supermarket where she worked after school she was taken off the cash register and assigned throwbacks, returning the items customers left behind. The other cashiers were miffed; she was hogging up the only chore that gave them a breather from the endless lines of customers. It wasn't even helping. Pushing the cart made her rib buckle and stab, especially when the wheels caught and reversed from all the scuff marks on the floor. Bending up and down was even worse. She asked for a week off, but they refused. She ran out of the pills Cameron gave her three days ago, and she hadn't been to school since. It was too hard to get out of bed in the morning. Besides, she already knew how to alphabetize, add, subtract, and format a business letter.

Bo tore through the double doors of the produce room with a smack. His brother-in-law was the produce manager, and Bo slacked his way through the off-season in the back room. He took the cart from Kate and started throwing stuff randomly on the shelves. "Stop it!" she said, picking up after him. "I'll get in trouble."

"They won't fire you," he said, sending a Spam container for a touchdown. It broke apart at the other end of the aisle, a few feet from an unattended child who started screeching. Bo shrugged, said, "They know you're my girl."

"Why don't you get me a week off, then?" She walked over to the meat counter and asked them to call maintenance to clean up the spill. She motioned for Bo to push the cart over to the next aisle.

"You don't look good," he said, when he joined her.

"I feel like crap." She fought back tears. She would not cry in the middle of the frozen food aisle.

“It’s been almost a month. It’s supposed to get better.”

“Look, I’m not you. I can’t forget that it hurts and still win the game.” She put a half-melted can of orange concentrate back, sticking it behind the others so it would have a chance to freeze. She took one of the frozen cans and put it to her head. The ice felt good against her forehead.

“I think maybe you should call your mother and tell her to come home for a while,” Bo said. From the crease settling in at the wide bridge of his nose, she knew he was concerned about her. The fear that something might actually be wrong made him want to pass on responsibility to someone else.

“She’s not exactly at a hotel, you know.” Kate pointed at the case of Budweiser in the cart. He looked confused. “Lift it for me, please.”

He picked up the case, slung it back on the shelf like he was flipping the ball. She left it, and motioned him forward. “What makes you think having my mother back would make things better?”

“She’s pretty cool sometimes.” Bo helped himself to an economy size bag of Doritos, leaving a trail of crumbs as he steered the cart with one hand and ate with the other. “She lets us drink at your place, doesn’t mind if I come over, she doesn’t hassle you about curfews and stuff. My parents are total stiffs.”

“How silly that they fed and clothed you and bought you a car for graduation, when all you really wanted was for them to crack open a beer with you every once in a while.”

He listened to a request for a price check in produce over the intercom. “I don’t

know why you're defending them. My mother can't stand you."

"I know," she said. She expected it to sound defiant. She cupped her hand over her rib and held her breath. If she applied pressure to the right spot and didn't breathe, the pain eased momentarily.

"Call your grandmother," he said.

"I call my grandmother every day."

"Yeah, but you don't ever tell her nothing." He was paged by name on the intercom this time, but he only looked toward produce. "Maybe Father Peralta could help."

"How?"

"A special prayer or a blessing." Bo's voice jumped an octave. He hated it when she scoffed at his religious convictions. They were supposed to be hers, too.

"Will you drive me to the club after your shift ends?" she said, as he was paged again.

"Why do you want to go there?"

She hesitated, but couldn't come up with a convincing lie. "Those pills really helped."

"You don't even know what they are." He swerved the cart around to face her.

"No way."

Kate took the cart from Bo and said, "I'll just take the subway, like I always do."

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"I didn't see you last night," Kate told Cameron when he sat at one of her tables.

"You don't work Wednesdays," he said.

"I was looking for you," she said. "I thought you lived here."

"The pops was in town. Had to have dinner at 21 so he could feel parental." He took the pad out of her apron and wrote down his drink order, then placed it back in the pocket and aligned the ends of her apron strings. Cameron had an eye for imperfection. "If I'd known you were finally going to give me the time of day, I'd have blown him off."

She stepped out of reach. "Cut it out."

"You're so prickly, Kate." He lunged for a drink on a passing tray and she had to swat his hand away. The sudden movement made her gasp. "You make it so hard for a man to court you."

"Court me?" she asked, just to be sure she heard it right. "You don't want to court me, you want to fuck me. I know the difference."

"Actually, I just want to fuck with you. That's a whole class of different."

"Great," she said. "I'll get your drink now."

"That rib still giving you trouble?" he shouted, when she was halfway to the bar. He timed it perfectly to a pause in the vocals. Half her customers turned her way. She kept going.

"What do you care?" she asked, when she brought his vodka martini. She had the bartender pour it in a margarita glass to gall him.

Cameron held the glass up to his eye and looked through it. "How many pills you have left?"

“What were they?” she asked. “Legal?”

“When prescribed.” He pulled out his tobacco pouch, felt around for his lighter.

“You need more?”

She nodded, her eyes trained on her tray.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He had a full bottle for her within an hour, and she took three. Now she was pain free, although she still felt the strain of clean breaths. It just didn’t seem to matter. It was hard to count out change, but her bad mood lifted. Then Bo showed up to drive her home. Her shift wasn’t over for three more hours. She took him into the back room and said, “It’s the busiest time of night, I can’t baby-sit you.”

“You look good,” Bo said, looking behind her into the main bar. She looked where he did, but the lights from the dance floor beyond bounced into her eyes. You could never look higher than eye level here without being blinded by the strobes. She turned away from the doorway. “Where’s your friend?”

“What friend?” she asked.

“The drug lord.”

“I’m more like a pharmacist who takes requests,” Cameron said, over her shoulder. He had his chest puffed out and his arms behind his back.

“Cameron, you know you can’t be back here.”

Cameron cocked his head in Bo’s direction. “He’s back here.”

“Tracey hates it when you act like you own the place,” she said.

He pulled his glass from behind his back. “I need a refill.”

Kate waved her arms at him, forcing his retreat. "Okay, okay. Go sit down."

"You're not going to introduce me to your boyfriend?" he asked, as he backed out of the room.

Kate pointed a finger at one, then the other. "Cameron, Bo."

Bo held out his hand. "Tony Bonanno."

Cameron handed Kate the empty glass, clicked his heels, and bowed slightly.

"Cameron Alexander White, III."

Kate left before they started pissing on the barstools. When she brought Cameron's martini to his table, Bo was sitting with him. "Bring my buddy a beer," Cameron said. "You're a beer man, right?"

Bo shook his head. "Already had a few tonight, and I gotta drive my girl home soon."

Cameron nodded, slid his drink away from Bo as if it might contaminate his purity. "Precious cargo."

"Damn right." Bo slapped the edge of the table, sending a shockwave that knocked the glass on its side.

Kate picked up the glass, put the napkins she had over the spill. "I'll go get a rag." When she came back, they were slapping each other on the back. Kate wiped down the table and stood there.

"So tell me, what do you two lovebirds do together?" Cameron asked.

"What do you mean?" Bo said, his face beginning to flush. Kate figured he thought it was a sex question.

“I mean what I asked. You’re in love, you spend a lot of time together. What do you do? What do you talk about?”

“We do what normal couples do. We hang out. We talk a lot.”

Cameron sat back and cupped his chin. “Anything special you do together?” It was his shrink pose. Kate had seen him use it on depressed NYU girls.

Bo squirmed in his seat. He only knew how to be admired. “What are you after? We’re not like that. We go to church on Sundays.”

“Church? Church!” Cameron gleefully abandoned his pose. “Now, Kate, I wouldn’t have pegged you as religious.”

Kate wanted to say, “I never go to church,” but she hugged her tray instead.

“She’s a good Catholic,” Bo said. Cameron rolled a cigarette, giving the process his full attention. Bo put both hands flat on the table, and suddenly it looked small, like a child’s play toy. “You think because she reads those books you give her, that you know her? You don’t know Katie.”

Cameron lit his cigarette and took a long drag. He held his breath for effect, and then let the smoke out slowly through the straight, neat bands of his teeth. “You’re right, I definitely don’t know K-k-katie at all.”

Bo knocked the table over with a flick of his wrist. Kate shoved all her weight against him, trying to move him toward the door. Her rib screamed like it had its own lungs. Bo moved in millimeters. “You can’t do this, I’ll get fired. Go and come back at five.” She slapped at his chest. “I mean it. Go.”

“If I leave, I’m going home.”

“Fine. I can get myself home.” Tracey was making his way through the crowd on the dance floor. “Get out of here.” Bo bent to kiss her, but she jerked her head away. Tracey nodded at her as Bo headed for the exit.

Cameron righted the table, held his hand out to Tracey, who didn’t shake it. “It was my fault, I was just having a bit of fun with him. Don’t get on her for this.”

“I’ll get your drink,” she said, leaving. Tracey followed on her heels.

“I don’t care if Captain America kicks the living shit out of that little prick,” he said. “Just keep it out of my club.”

Kate swallowed hard, her mouth dry, and nodded. “Give him his drink on the house,” Tracey said, and elbowed his way back through the dance crowd.

Kate handled her other customers before she brought him his drink. Cameron didn’t touch it, just stared at her until she said, “What?”

“I know you’re a pragmatist, Kate, but I hope you realize you can aim higher than that.” Kate slid his drink closer, and turned to the couple that sat down a few tables over. “That was a compliment,” he shouted over the music.

“Excuse me a moment,” she said to the couple, edged back to Cameron. “You’re the expert?”

“I was just saying—”

“What have you ever had to aim for?” If not for Tracey, she’d have flipped the table over herself. She checked on all her other customers. When she passed by next, he was gone. He left her *The House of Mirth*.

She walked across the bar to his friends, the ones that wouldn’t sit in her section

any more, and aimed the book at their table. The spine hit the edge and bounced before falling under a chair. She enjoyed watching them flinch and jerk away. No one bothered to retrieve it, but that didn't matter. They'd let him know.

Kate was having trouble counting out her register. Three times she counted, three times she had wildly different totals. It was brag day at school, and she had to sit through a three-hour assembly where they announced the college tallies for the senior class. All the top students got to talk about their choices. 93% of her class was going on to college. Kate rode the subway an hour each way to get to this school because they had such a good reputation, because at the local high school the college entrance rate was probably reversed. An extra ten hours a week for three years, and she still wasn't any better off. Maybe at the other school she would have stood out more, maybe someone would have tried to help her get a scholarship somewhere. It never occurred to her that her extra effort would amount to nothing. For this alone she felt like a fool.

On her way home, she saw her neighbor's boy on the long, wide steps of Saint Anthony's. He was trying to play jacks, but the ball and jacks he had were too large for his hands. He couldn't catch the ball without the jack leaking from his grip. "My mom said to look out for you."

"What's wrong?" She caught the ball for him as it ricocheted off the heel of his palm.

"Your mom's back."

Kate flung the ball against the ground, and the bounce it took reached almost as high as the cross hanging from the roof. The ball bounced four more times before he could catch it. "Wow, do that again, Kate."

"Thank your mom for me, okay?" She left him bouncing the ball in the air, trying to match her distance.

Kate heard Patsy Cline lamenting love from halfway down the street. Three flights up, the two front windows were wide open. Her mom's stereo was in her bedroom in the back. The women sitting on the stoop stared at the gum-pocked steps as she squeezed by. Mrs. Kozinski placed a scapula in her hand, blessed by the pope from her native Krakow. Kate had a dozen others stuffed in a drawer. "Katie, just go to grandma's. It's better for you, hon."

Kate nodded slightly and kept going. Both her grandfather and her great Aunt Alma were sick, with prostate cancer and glaucoma. Her grandmother had enough burdens.

At the door, all the locks were set, including the chain and the floor bolt. "Mom, it's Kate. You have to let me in. Rae." She yelled over the music, trying to stretch out the chain so she could squeeze enough of her head through to look for her mother. She had to wait for the lull between songs to get her attention.

Her mother took a long time opening the locks. She kept changing her mind about the order, accidentally relocking instead of unlocking, while crooning, "Mama's coming, Katie-baby, just a minute, babygirl, hold on, Katie-pie, Mama's here now."

When her mother finally got the door open, she launched herself into Kate's

arms, setting off shivers that reached her fingernails. Kate stood for a moment, absorbing the pain before she kissed her mother's cheek. She went to the bedroom to turn down the music. Her mother held on, dragging behind her. "I heard Patsy down the block," she said. "Do you want the police to come again?"

Her mother detached herself and fell to the bed with a sigh. "Sgt. Joe said he'd take all my records next time."

Kate joined her mother on the bed, spreading out next to her. Her body just wanted to stay there forever, weave itself into the worn threads of the sheets. Her rib was starting to give off a kind of heat that meant the pain was about to double. This was when her head got fuzzy, and it was hard to make her eyes stay focused. "Let me see," her mother said.

Kate lifted up her shirt, showed her the tape across her middle. They had retaped her last week, after her six week check-up. She wasn't healing. "Did Bo call you?"

"He said you fell down and hurt yourself." Her mother ran her fingers along the edges of the tape, wrapped a stray strand around her finger and was about to pull, but stopped. She unwound the strand and smoothed it back along the edge of the tape line, then very deliberately put her hands flat against her own ribcage. That tiny bit of restraint was an encouraging sign from her mother. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Her mother's voice, naturally loud, seemed to come from outside the room, like the tinny sound of a bad phone connection. Was this how the world sounded to her mother? So remote it was barely worth answering? Was going through this a way to finally understand her?

“Katie girl? Are you listening?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Kate said automatically. She pulled two pills from her bag and stood up slowly. She needed water. In the kitchen, the fridge was open and the cabinets were empty. All the food was stacked on the table.

“I was going to cook for you,” her mother said.

The glasses were lined up in a row along the counter by the sink. Kate took one from the middle, filled it with water. On the other side of the sink, there were rows of cups and soup bowls. The plates were stacked on the window sill. Kate swallowed the pills and emptied the glass of water. “You can’t stay.”

“I am staying,” she said. “I’m the mother. You need me.”

“Don’t go there – I don’t want to fight. You know you can’t take care of me, and I can’t take care of you right now. I’m sorry, but I just can’t.” Kate picked up the stack of plates and put them back in the cabinet.

“I’m organizing all that,” her mother said. “I’m here to take care of you.”

Kate brushed past her and pointed at the fridge. “Why is this door open? Why did you have to take out all the food?”

“I had to see what we had.” She leaned forward with her hands at her hips, and looked like a chicken about to peck. “How else do you plan a meal?”

“Who’s going to put all this stuff away? You have to go back.”

“No.”

“Where are your pills?” Kate asked.

“I’ll take my medicine. Every pill, I swear. I will.”

“Show me.”

“I’ll get some. Tomorrow. First thing.”

“Genovese is still open,” Kate said.

“No, tomorrow. I promise.”

Kate reached for the phone. She had the number on speed dial. “Hi. Who is this? Jackie? Hi, it’s Kate Connelly. I need the van to come pick up my mother... I know she checked herself out.”

Her mother started marching around in a circle, calling out, “Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow,” in progressively louder tones.

Kate held out the phone so Jackie could hear. “She’ll be out-of-control soon,” she said, then, “No, I won’t leave her, but I need to be at work by ten.”

Santé closed at four, and by the time she cleaned up it was five-thirty. She never took the subway home before seven, so she waited at the all-night diner down the block. It was the old trailer variety, and it was a popular spot for breakfast with the Santé crowd. Nico the night manager made his special Armenian stuffed grape leaves on Fridays. He always saved a plate for Kate, but tonight she couldn’t eat. She showed up at the club late, then spent half the night sobbing in the back room. Even Tracey didn’t have the heart to chew her out. He loved Rae once, too.

The door chimed and Cameron walked through. Nico came out from behind the counter with his bat in his hand. A few months back, Cameron and his friends were

roughed up by some guys from Bensonhurst, who wrecked the place in the process. Nico hadn't let him in since. For a golden boy, Cameron had real trouble making friends.

Cameron threw his arms up, pointed his finger in Kate's direction. "I just want to see if she's okay. I can drive her home if she's not feeling well." Nico took a practice swing. Kate felt the swish. "Just let me ask her." He leaned in Kate's direction, his arms protecting his head. "Will you call him off me, please?"

"I'm off duty," she said. Nico charged and Cameron pleaded.

"Let him stay if he wants," she said finally.

He slid into her booth and stared at her. She ignored him. "Some women can get away with the splotchy skin and the red-rimmed eyes. You are not one of those women."

Kate's indifference wilted. "Did you come here to insult me?"

"It's not an insult," he said. "I've never wanted to kiss you more."

"Leave me alone."

"My parents, me, I don't think we feel anything for each other – fuck, that's trite." Cameron gestured to Nico. "Maybe he should come club me with that bat."

Kate covered her ears. "Don't play the all-families-are-crazy game with me. It's humiliating."

"Last year, on my birthday, I found out my mother can't remember my middle name. I think the bare bones requirement for motherhood should be that you remember what you wrote on the birth certificate."

Kate smiled briefly. They both sat quietly for a while.

"What about your father?" he asked.

Kate never thought about her father much. Her mother took up too much time.

"He was nice, but he died when I was ten."

Cameron nodded. "I think my father is the most selfish prick I've ever met."

"Considering the crowd you run with, that's pretty frightening."

"I know." Again he seemed sincere. "I can drive you home, if you want."

Kate shrugged. "I don't want to go home."

"Then tell me what you want."

Kate snorted. In Cameron's world, naming a desire was the only obstacle. She wanted a piece of that life for herself. "I want to *not* be me. Just for a little while. Can you make that happen?"

"I know a way," he said. "But I'm not sure you'd go for it."

"What?" There were no rules tonight.

"Smack," he said, as if it was obviously the only choice.

Kate tried to imagine his tailored friends slapping their veins, cooking brown liquid on a spoon over a candle flame. She couldn't, not the how or the why. "How very retro. Here I thought you couldn't wait to get me all coked up and in bed."

"Coke doesn't make you want to leave the world, it makes you want to rule the world. Besides, sex is better on heroin."

Kate lifted her brows. "Why?"

"Imagine an orgasm that's less centered, less intense, but lasts as long as the

high— or as long as you can stay focused on sex— you tend to drift in and out of things.” Kate looked away, drank the last of her coffee. Cameron leaned over the table.

“Is Bo the only guy you—”

Kate nodded incrementally. He said, “You’ve never—”

“None of your business.”

“Come on.” Cameron slapped a fifty on the table. “This much I promise I can do for you.”

In the car, on the way to his apartment on the Upper East Side, he rested his hand in her lap. Kate thought to push him off, but his hand was still and she felt warm and aware. His fingers began to nudge softly, a timid arc that seemed harmless until her legs drifted apart and his hand glided smoothly under her skirt, past the thin strip of underwear. He rested the heel of his hand there. She waited for his move, but he made no move. She had to force herself to be still as the car stopped and started. She watched him drive. He was focused on the road, seemingly unaware of her while she fixated on what he was— wasn’t— doing to her. Her teeth were grinding, made tense by the building warmth that seemed entirely her own doing. He was merely driving.

He curled a finger, then another, inside her. She leaned into them, her body relaxing into the seat, then lurched as his thumb started working her tip. When he turned into an underground lot, she didn’t want the ride to be over, felt the hard disappointment of being cut short. Again. She expected him to pull his hand free and get out of the car, but he braked into a spot and shifted the gear with his left hand. He leaned across her, his shoulder digging into her chest, and shifted her seat back. He

shook his free hand at her and said, "Elbow room," with a wicked smile.

They kissed for the first time. He climbed over the gear shift to get on top of her, get his arms more fully around her, deepen the kiss, stretch out the places where they touched. The pain was somewhere in the background, shoved aside by the prospect of pleasure. She was dazzled by her body's fireworks, confused by the order of things, by how much she wanted him. "You live alone?" she asked, when they breathed. She swallowed another pill as she waited for his answer.

"Right upstairs. Elevator. Fourteen floors."

She had his jacket off before the elevator doors shut, and she let it drop to the floor. He lifted her, leaned her back against the wall, held her tighter as he grew still. Once again, she seemed to be the restless, impatient one. "What's wrong?" she asked, as he lowered her to her feet.

"Conscience." He had to squeeze the word out. "You're not yourself."

The doors opened and she walked off as he froze. She waved her arm at the sensor to keep the door from shutting. "Don't you dare ruin this."

The hallway was large, with hotel-like décor. There was tan carpeting, two armchairs, and lines of doors on both the left and right. It was much more institutional than she expected. "You'll hate me tomorrow," he said.

She laughed, a sharp bark that exploded from her, made her rib echo. As if sex could change the nature of their relationship.

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When she woke up, there was pain. Her pills were in her bag, but her bag was still in his car. Cameron wasn't in bed with her. She listened for sounds of him, but the apartment was quiet. It was large, but it was also spare. She expected something grander, something from a magazine. He had his own bar, and he was only two years older than she was. He had skipped a few grades. Said he was making up for them now.

It was after four and her supermarket shift had already started. Her rib hurt so bad she couldn't move. For once, she didn't try. He could get the pills for her when he returned. Soon, she hoped. She should have realized last night that her rib would be balky this morning, but morning hadn't mattered last night.

It wasn't only her rib, either. She was sore all over. If she could get herself to move, she'd take a hot shower or soak in his bathtub, which was the size of an inflatable kiddie-pool. He said it had jets, but they never made it into the tub like they planned. Sex had never seemed so...urgent. Cameron didn't weigh much more than she did, and it was as light between them as sex with Bo had grown heavy. They wrestled, evenly matched, and they laughed. He was interested in her body, and he asked her questions she couldn't answer. Gradually she found the words. He read to her, poems at first—a dirty one about a car that was really a woman—and then from any book she pulled from the shelves that lined his bedroom, every room, in his apartment.

His eyes were a blue-green that morphed with the light. She never noticed that in the dim lights of the club. She had thought of them as bored, contemptuous, demanding, but never lovely, like the line of his jaw and his prominent collarbone.

When she rested her head against his chest, he was bony but not oppressive. She fell asleep tangled with him and didn't feel hemmed in.

Cameron obliterated any illusions she had of a future with Bo. She wasn't sure if she liked him very much, but that felt irrelevant. He had recognized something in her, something she considered special about herself that no one else ever seemed to see. Even so, she feared the day when all his worldly contempt turned on her. For real. It seemed too much a part of him to ever be sidestepped. What if that was happening now? What if Cameron wasn't coming back? Maybe some stranger, someone Cameron paid, would come offer her a speedy shower and cab fare home. Maybe everything that happened between them was planned with this result dense and heavy in his mind. Maybe all he recognized was just how easy she would be. All he had needed was patience. As time clicked by in stabs, this reasoning became absolute and satisfaction passed into remorse.

When Cameron returned, she was turning blue. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her breaths were shallow gasps. Both hands were pressed against her side, as if they were all that held her rib inside. He dialed 911, but put the phone back in its cradle before the operator came on the line.

"You're just hyperventilating, Kate. You need to calm down and breathe right."

She could hear him, but was beyond understanding.

"Relax! Please! That's all you need!" He jumped around her, then sat on the bed and emptied the bag he brought with him onto the bed. He wrapped the tubing around her arm and this time, he served her. Kate would appreciate the irony later. He bit on

his tongue as he pricked her arm, a vein at the base of her wrist. Her hand fell to her side before the plunger was all the way down. The tightness washed from her face and her color returned as her breathing normalized. The nausea followed next and he helped her to the bathroom.

Her stomach was empty, leaving only dry heaves that made her body tremble. Her rib didn't worry her. Nothing worried her. She was astral. A star floating in the crowded sky. A speck in the universe. How hard could the life of a mere speck be? She embraced her speckiness. Found this revelation insignificant. Moved on.

She sat on the floor, her back against the side of the bed. She had a portion of his oriental rug in her lap, and she grasped at its edges as she stared at the pattern. Order existed within this rug. It was communicating with her, about to reveal something only she had the brains to look for. She nodded off, into blankness. A fold in the universe grabbed her and let her go, grabbed her again. And again. Like a man. Pain couldn't reach her. She was an embryo again, unformed, or maybe the arms of God were around her. If so, religion finally made sense.

She wasn't sure if she slept. Her eyes were open, but it took a while to see. To remember about seeing. She was back in bed, shifted on her good side. Her mouth was dry. Cameron was running his finger across her forehead, and she wanted him to scratch. "Time?" she asked.

"Eleven-thirty," he said, added "p.m." when she looked scared.

"I should go home. I have to work tomorrow." As she said this, she knew she wouldn't. The bed was plush and warm, and she had room.

“Stay the night,” he said. “I’ll drive you tomorrow. You won’t miss it.” He still had his hand on her forehead.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re too young to have lines. I’m smoothing them out for you.”

“Did we have sex?”

“You don’t remember?” His face turned rosy. She didn’t think he knew how to blush.

“I mean just now. It’s fuzzy, but you said...”

“You didn’t even know I was in the room.” He tried brushing the hair from her face, but his fingers caught in the tangles. “It was business as usual.”

She felt weird. Limp, but relaxed. Her heart was beating really fast, but nothing felt wrong, exactly. “I need a bath. And food. Food would be excellent.”

“Eating should wait, or you’ll get sick.”

“How was it for you?”

“I can’t shoot myself – too squeamish.”

“You didn’t get high?” she asked.

“I just watched you.” She thought about him watching her, and was prepared to be disturbed. But the feeling just didn’t take.

“I feel better,” she said. “I needed every minute of this.”

He snorted, rolled onto his back. “Glad to be of use.”

“What, *you* don’t like that feeling?”

“Stay the night,” he commanded.

“Only if I get a bath, some food, and some sleep.”

“You’re awfully demanding.” He chewed at a fingernail, as if deciding. “Do you tip well?”

“That depends upon the service,” she said. “I might have a book or two I can spare.”

He took the portable phone from its recharger, and went into the bathroom to run the water for her. “Do you like Indian food?”

“I’ve never had it,” she said.

He poked his head back into the room. “Pizza?”

“No,” she said, slowly sitting up against the headboard. “I want to try.”

He ordered for them both and then helped her into the tub, where the jets pulsed hot water scented with eucalyptus oil around and against her. “I use that stuff for hangovers,” Cameron said.

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply. Tomorrow she would go home and face her life. Tonight she would take what Cameron offered. Tonight she liked him, and tomorrow was hours away.