



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #21
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**A SET OF INSTRUCTIONS, OR JUST ONE
INSTRUCTION, MUST BE AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT
OF EACH STORY...**

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Cartoons!

by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

The other day I saw a package of frozen burritos meant to be cooked in a microwave. The package had two warnings on it. The first warned us that the frozen burritos would be cold if you didn't cook them first. The second warned us that after cooking them in a microwave set on its highest power for five minutes, the burritos would be hot.

I'm considering writing the burrito company to complain that they didn't warn me that if, after I cook the burritos, I let them sit on the countertop for an hour, they'll be room temperature. That's pure speculation on my part, of course, because when I left them out on the countertop, the dog ate them. But some people are pretty stupid and need to be warned. And it's not just frozen burritos!

Ordinary Things You Wouldn't Believe Some People Need Instructions For



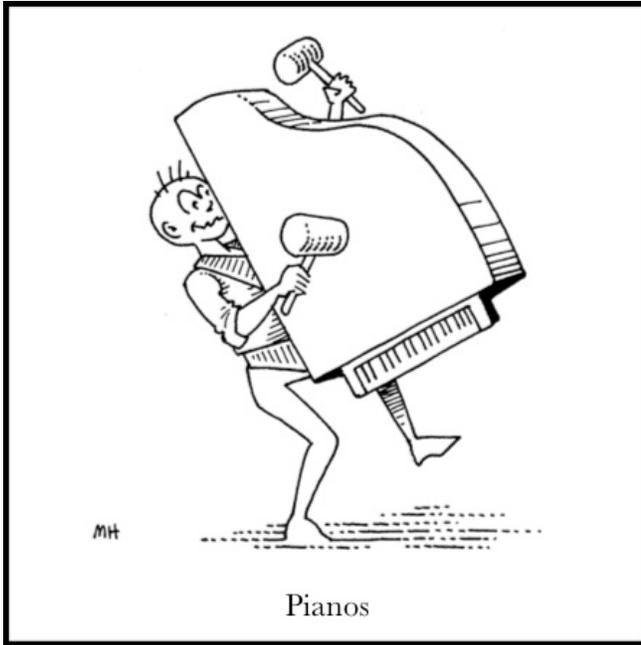
Ladders

MH



Maple Syrup

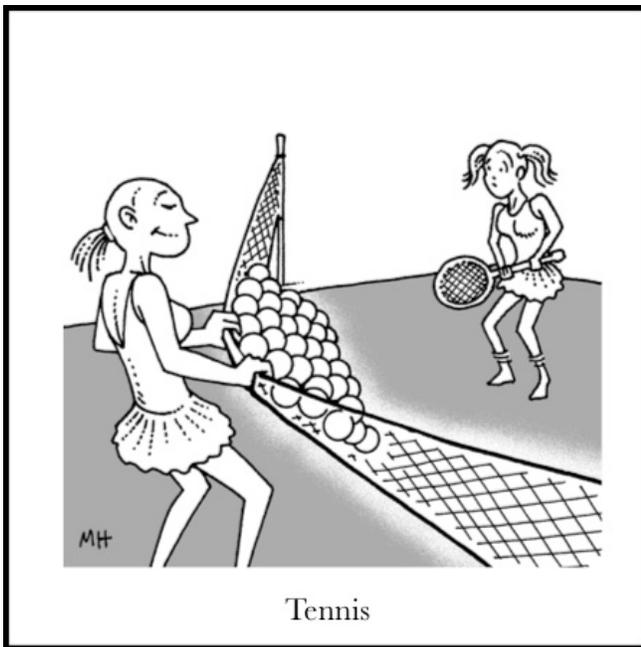
MH



Pianos



Slinkys



Tennis



Submarine Sandwiches

FIRST PLACE

Marilyn Warner's short stories, articles, memoir pieces and essays have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, newspapers, and literary journals. Her award-winning weekly blog, "Things I Want to Tell My Mother"—which includes memories, life lessons and encouraging strategies for families who struggle with Alzheimer's and dementia—is at <http://warnerwriting.wordpress.com>. Her mother was a poet and children's writer who no longer remembers her talents.

There Are Rules

by Marilyn Warner

Ona Feathers hates waiting on the platform at the bus stop. She clutches her backpack and hides the black braid of her hair beneath a faded ball cap. She doesn't make eye contact with others. Ona focuses on the *Help Wanted* cards pinned to the bulletin board, feigning interest in the scribbled notes seeking temporary workers for various jobs.

Only one actually catches her attention. Peeking out from between cards wanting babysitters and trash cleanup is a fancy-edged square with the message penned in elegant cursive script:

Wanted: young lady of highest calibre to serve as attendant to Miss Ethlyn Graham of 104 Elm Avenue, weekdays from ten o'clock until four. Applicants must be industrious, honest and open to instruction. Recompense is minimum wage plus invaluable social tutelage. Inquire in person, Wednesdays between two o'clock and three.

The station manager has posted a big card saying no job listings may be removed from the board. It is a rule, but other Metro rules also state that there is to be no

eating, drinking, cursing or spitting in the buses, and those rules carry no weight at all. As the West-Route bus approaches and riders begin pushing their way to the gate, Ona removes the elegant card from the board.

The next day, Wednesday, she rides a different bus.

On this ride Ona wears her freshly washed and curled hair loose, held back with barrettes, and a neat leather belt that keeps her blouse tucked into her denim skirt. She holds the fancy-edged card with reverence, and grins at the exaggerated vocabulary and the British spelling of *calibre*. Before she was assigned to foster care, Ona's first winter in Columbus was bitterly severe, and without the public library she would have frozen on the streets. She warmed herself among the stacks, learning a plethora of words and usages from the dictionary. Webster is her hero.

Ona is vehemently loyal to American spellings, though she won't dare correct the grand lady who will be tested enough to look past Ona's common appearance and Osage blood. In a steely heartbeat Ona vows to do whatever is necessary to earn the job that will surely change her life.

Her foster mother, Kila, has more than a few drops of Indian blood pumping through her, too, but it is Kiowa blood. Maybe that's why Kila has always warned her against a fairy tale ending to any story set in Columbus. While Kila is right—this Columbus town does seem to have more than its share of hard-rock bad luck and sorrow—surely there is also space for hope.

So at two-ten on Wednesday afternoon, a trying-to-be-hopeful Ona steps off the bus, tucks the fancy card in her skirt pocket, and walks up Elm Avenue.

Number 104 is a huge brick house, two stories high plus tiny round attic windows. The double front door is painted white, as are the window trims and thick columns of the porch. In the yard, workers have finished mowing, and now one rakes the grass as another trims around the bases of ancient trees whose spindly branches jab at each other and the rain gutters of the house.

A woman oversees the work from the shade of the porch. She is straight-backed and thin, her salt-and-pepper hair sitting like a round crown on top of her head.

She is elegant in a black dress, fingering a strand of pearls at her neck and fanning her face with an envelope. “Attention to detail,” she calls out to one of the workers. “You’ve missed another spot.”

He wipes the sweat from his face with a bandana, nods to the lady, and tries again. The other worker loads the mower and tools into the back of a rusting truck. When the lady is satisfied with the do-over, she clears her throat and waves the envelope, and the man from the truck hurries to her. She hands him the envelope without speaking, even when the worker says, “Thank you, Miss Graham.”

Ona’s stomach turns. *This is THE Miss Ethlyn Graham!*

The lady peers over the half glasses perched on the end of her nose. “Yes?”

Ona stares back dumbly until the lady snaps her fingers. “Speak up, girl. Are you in need of assistance?”

Later that evening, when Ona recounts the story, Kila howls with laughter. “You are too much, girl! *The Miss Ethlyn Graham* asks if you need help... and alls you do is stand there?”

Kila is a big-hearted woman with a body to match. She punctuates her glee with foot stomping, and the kitchen table rattles on wobbly legs. Two of the smaller foster children share one chair, clutching each other for balance. The newest addition, a pale toddler too small for his age, nearly slips out of the high chair.

Patty Cake, a six-year-old who denies recollections of her *other life*, but whose round burn marks and crooked bones testify for her, tugs Ona’s sleeve. “Was the lady nice? She didn’t be mean to you or nothing?”

Patty’s hope hangs by a slim thread, so Ona weaves a golden tale of tea served in china cups, with two cubes of sugar and linen cloths to put on your lap. Ona leaves out the criticism—“Tea is for sipping, girl, not slurping”—and other details better left unreported. Ona outright lies when Patty asks, “Did she think your tattoo was pretty?” by saying Miss Graham thought the thin black snake stained around Ona’s forearm was amazing artwork. In reality, the tattoo remained carefully hidden beneath the sleeve of her blouse.

Ona is silent about the things she didn't tell Miss Graham during the interview. She didn't say she lived in a foster home, when the end of the month meant Raman noodles for both lunch and dinner, where mold stained the ceilings and sometimes Kila sat on the front stoop at night, sipping from a bottle in a sack. But Ona did speak up proudly about her education. When Miss Graham's mouth twitched and her eyebrows lifted at Ona's announcement of her recent GED graduation, Ona drew the certificate out from her pocket and reverently spread it out as proof. The lady nodded.

The next morning as Ona marches to the bus stop for her first day of work, Kila cheers from the stoop, holding the fussy toddler and whistling. Patty Cake twirls in a circle and claps as if Ona is the hero in a parade.

This grand sendoff sustains her until Miss Graham opens the front door and leads her new employee to the kitchen table for tea, the dark brew that Ona is learning to respect as the foundation of all civility. The lady again allows Ona two sugars in one cup of tea, and Ona is careful to sip and not slurp. She is a fast learner.

Miss Graham outlines the list of duties, each day of the week with its specific major chore, and each requiring precise techniques and certain rules. The one constant in every day's work is the rule that Ona will vacuum all the carpets and dust the furniture in the entire house. With emphasis on the parlor and sitting room, in case of guests. Also, each day Ona must cover her hair with a kerchief.

*

Today is Thursday: bathroom cleaning day. The tubs, toilets and tiles are scrubbed, twice-rinsed and towel dried in all the lavatories. At the Mission Center, where Ona once scrubbed pans in trade for food, there were coffee breaks with snacks mid-morning, but Miss Ethlyn doesn't offer her even another cup of tea during the day.

At three o'clock, the lady comes down the stairs wearing serious walking shoes. She ties on a wide-brimmed hat and tucks a brocade bag under her arm. Without a word she marches resolutely out the front door and turns in the direction of the

mini-mall. She returns twenty minutes later, walks upstairs and closes her bedroom door.

*

Friday is the day for ironing lacework and blouses. It is also silver polishing day, and Ona's first lesson in social tutelage. When Miss Graham returns from her walk, she studies the work and slaps Ona's hand. Hard.

"NoNoNoFoolishGirl," she says in one agitated breath. "The silver goes in the chest, not the drawer. Following the rules is the only hope for an improved world." She slaps again, harder. "We learn more from pain than from pleasure. Learn that rule and you will prosper."

Ona's face still burns with shame when Miss Graham pays her for both days' work. The lady counts it out in fives, ones and coins that feel warm, as if they've been double-clutched tight.

"Be prompt on Monday morning. There is much to do," Miss Graham says, dismissing Ona with a curt nod.

As Ona closes the front door behind her, the mailman trudges up the front walk. He takes the outgoing mail from the box.

"Aren't these something?" he says, flipping through the letters. "Fancy envelopes. Fancy stamps, too. Return address labels like little works of art. And it's just bills to the utilities and the phone company and the newspaper and such. But it's still all fancy and fine."

"Yessir," she agrees. The labels are distinctive, with the return address printed in embossed words so thick they could be finger-read like Braille.

Ona hurries off with her money jingling in her pocket. Half of it she'll put away in preparation for when she's eighteen and too old for foster care. With the other half she'll fix a fancy dinner tonight for Kila and the kids, even buying bakery cupcakes for dessert. She'll take Patty Cake to the library on Saturday, and read her stories laced with magical new words, and on Sunday night she'll entice Kila to

drink from a tea cup with her at the kitchen table, instead of from a bottle on the front stoop. Money makes a difference, Ona decides, smiling as she runs to the store.

*

By Monday morning, thrilled with succeeding at two out of three, Ona nearly skips to the bus stop. During the ride she vows to never quit this job, no matter what.

At the Graham house a folded paper, addressed to Ona, is taped to the unlocked front door. Miss Graham waits upstairs, the note says, because she's twisted her ankle. "*Excruciating*" has been underlined twice for emphasis.

Ona hurries up the wide staircase to be of service.

By midday, she has washed and ironed the bed linens and made Miss Graham's bed, then remade it after learning to precisely tuck square corners. She has answered the clanging bell, fetching hot tea with lemon, dispensing pain relievers, serving cheese sandwiches grilled *just so*. She has assisted Miss Graham to the lavatory, and Ona's only break was while she waited in the hall, leaning against the papered wall until she heard the toilet flush.

At two o'clock, as she dries dishes while lunching on rejected imperfect grilled cheeses, Ona is again summoned by the clanging bell. She swallows the crust, wipes her mouth and hands, and trudges upstairs. Miss Graham leans against pillows, her arms folded across the bodice of her dressing gown.

"Are you a trustworthy girl?" She points toward the upholstered chair. "Sit there, Miss Feathers, if your answer is unequivocally yes."

Ona nods her head "yes," and is prepared to raise her right hand and swear an oath, but it isn't necessary. Miss Ethlyn tells her to pull the chair closer then launches into the history of the Columbus Grahams.

During the next hour's details of lineage, laws and land, two words surface repeatedly: *responsibility* and *rules*. Columbus is obviously the city it is because of the vigilance of its founders, all of them Grahams. The continuation of this

vigilance has fallen on Miss Ethlyn Graham's frail shoulders, an even heavier burden now because of her painful ankle.

"I am the last of my family to do what is necessary," she says. "Do you swear to help me improve the world, Ona Feathers?"

Of course Ona swears, with all her heart.

"Then retrieve for me the cardboard box." Miss Graham waves toward the desk. "Bottom drawer."

Ona is confused by the contents: dull gray envelopes, a pad of cheap tablet paper, and common postage stamps. "These, ma'am?"

"My personal stationery would reveal my identity." Miss Graham leans forward, giving weight to her next words. "Unless good deeds are anonymous, they are vainglory, and therefore ineffective. It's one of the rules." She peers over her glasses. "Would you like to guess at the meaning of the word vainglory, Miss Feathers?"

Ona nods. "To be boastful or proud. Ostentatious."

Miss Graham sinks into the pillows. "My, my. You are a bright girl."

Ona blushes and scoots the chair even closer to listen carefully as the lady explains the routine. Each weekday, Miss Graham will select three recipients who deserve a letter reflecting the standard of excellence for Columbus. Miss Graham will herself pen these anonymous letters. At three o'clock, Ona will serve as the Graham family's trusted emissary and discreetly deposit the envelopes in various postal boxes, a different one each day.

"Like Secret Pals!" Ona exclaims, remembering the birthday she received a card with a one-dollar bill inside. She'd happily suspected everyone of writing the anonymous affirmation on the inside: "*I believe in you.*"

Miss Graham arches an eyebrow. "Something like Secret Pals, I suppose. With the emphasis on *secret*, yes?"

“Yes, ma’am. Of course.”

That afternoon, as Ona proudly deposits three gray envelopes in the mailbox outside the grocery store, she imagines good will pulsing within each sealed envelope. She feels a part of something significant and savors the joy of doing the work privately, without vainglory.

She loves this job.

“Somethin’s blossomed in you, Ona,” Kila says during dinner. “And it’s more than jest providin’ tasty meals, I think.” The little ones munch contentedly, especially Patty Cake, who grins at Ona and bobs her head up and down.

Each day, Ona serves Miss Graham with special care, humming happily as she works. On Friday, Ona treats silver polishing and vacuuming like sacred trusts, while Miss Graham does the truly important work from a lapboard in her bedroom. Mid-afternoon, when Ona knocks on the door to ask if there are letters to put out for the mailman, she is surprised by the sound of hands clapping. In a refined way, of course, but still clapping.

“You’ve done excellent work this week.” Miss Graham beams with the pride Ona would wish from her own mother, if she could remember her. “Here is your well earned recompense, Ona.” After Miss Graham counts out the money, she sighs happily and shuffles through the fancy envelopes that will impress the mailman.

She stares at one, her shoulders slumping. “Oh, my, this one doesn’t have a return label. Be a dear, Ona, will you? The extras are in the downstairs cabinet.”

Promising to take care of it, Ona floats down the stairs. At the cabinet she attaches a label to the fancy envelope addressed to *The General Evan Graham Philanthropic Fund* and then puts it out with the others for the mailman.

Ona imagines the General starting the secret letter tradition generations earlier, penning his messages by candlelight. She glows with pride at being chosen as a messenger for the continuing tradition.

She is still glowing at the end of the day when she carries the special, anonymous letters to the post office mail drop. Ona reverently slips the plain gray Secret Pal envelopes into the slot, one at a time. The name on the last envelope catches her attention.

Miss Kila Kormier.

Ona double checks the name and address. Lifting the envelope to her chest, she holds it against the thumping of her heart and closes her eyes in a quick blessing before dropping the envelope into the slot. She must remain silent—that is the rule—but tomorrow she will feign surprise as she witnesses Kila’s joy when her efforts are finally applauded, and her life changes.

That evening, Ona sees her foster mother as the children do, the soft woman who cushions their wounds. She hears Kila warble off-key nursery songs rich with comfort. And when the apartment is quiet with sleep and Kila has taken her drink down to the front stoop, Ona tiptoes onto the landing and spreads out the stack of tenants’ discarded newspapers. She uses a flashlight to search for the information that earned Kila a letter of praise from Miss Graham.

Ona turns page after page quietly, scanning every article. Kila is mentioned on page eighteen of yesterday’s paper. She and other tenants stand in colorless photos protesting the landlord’s refusal to repair leaking pipes. In a quote, the landlord calls them low income drinkers and accuses them of late rent and sloppy behavior. The camera catches Kila shaking her fist at him.

Ona studies the article and pictures and has her answer. Miss Graham’s letter applauds Kila’s courage.

The next day, for lunch Ona makes cheese sandwiches perfectly toasted with the precise amount of cheese melted between the bread. Kila and the little ones gobble them down and beg for more. Ona is grilling the last sandwiches in the skillet when tin boxes rattle in the entrance hall. Kila jumps up from the table and hurries down the stairs to check her mailbox. Ona knows her foster mother’s tired fingers are crossed in hope that her check from social services has arrived early.

When Kila returns, her face is a flushed pox, and her eyes twitch. “Stay with the children, Ona.” She chokes on the words, yanks her purse off the hook and leaves.

Ona flips sandwiches onto the children’s plates and goes to the window to watch Kila bustling across the street. The liquor store flashes a welcome at the corner.

The apartment door stands ajar, and out in the hallway gray shreds of envelope scatter across the linoleum, sprinkled with pieces of tablet paper. Ona drops to her knees and gathers the scraps like crumbs of food at the end of a hungry month.

“Whatcha doin’?” Patty Cake asks when Ona carries the scraps of paper inside. “Kin I help?”

“It’s like a puzzle.” Ona throws away the envelope remnants and flattens the jagged paper pieces on the table. “Can you fit them together?”

The girl giggles and begins. For a child who can’t read, she easily fits torn edges together, matching lines of scribbled words with other lines.

“Do I win?” Patty asks when the puzzle is finished.

Ona reads the carefully disguised print and nods.

Kila is the loser.

“What’s the words say?” Patty Cake asks.

Ona can’t say them aloud, but she reads them again silently: “Everyone knows you are a drunken fraud whose liquor money comes from the misery of children. You disgust us, Kila Kormier. We are watching you.” Ona nearly gags on the meanness. The plural attack is like a whole world of heavy hands choking her breath.

Kila doesn’t return that night. Ona posts herself at the window, watching the street below and the stars above, afraid for Kila one hour, furious with her the next. The sky has a weak glow when she finally goes to bed. When she opens her eyes the children are curled around her like puppies. Patty Cake’s face, even in sleep, is dismally tight.

Late Sunday evening Kila finally trudges up the stairs. She smells sour and idly pats the children's heads. She shuffles into her tiny room and closes the door.

Monday morning, Ona walks to work. She fingers the torn papers in her pocket, practicing what she will say when she flings them at Miss Graham. But when she arrives, it's like the first day, and the words wad in her throat.

Miss Graham doesn't notice. She sits up in bed, studying the newspaper, searching for deserving recipients.

Unsuspecting victims is what they are, and Ona has no doubt now that all the anonymous letters are venomous, disproportionately cruel. No wonder Kila always described the town as sad and mad and mean.

Ona vows she will not participate. She'll quit this job. Then she decides maybe to take the coward's way and say nothing. She will continue to collect her pay while secretly destroying the letters each day. That will solve the problem, and Miss Graham will never be the wiser.

All morning her mind thumps and aches: *Attention to details is the hope for an improved world. We learn from pain, not pleasure. Rules must be followed.*

By mid-afternoon Ona is exhausted. She numbly takes the gray envelopes from Miss Graham's outstretched hands, goes down the stairs, out the door and begins her assigned journey. After a mindless walk to places she doesn't remember, she returns to finish her work. The envelopes remain tucked deep in her backpack.

Tuesday is the same as Monday. Wednesday is a repeat of Tuesday, and by Thursday Ona is certain of the day only because she now hides twelve unmailed envelopes.

She buries them in her canvas backpack, beneath the wallet that holds her bus pass. By Friday morning the bag feels unbelievably heavy.

Patty Cake is silent at the breakfast table. She sadly stares over her cereal bowl, as if it is porridge and she is an orphan in a Dickens story. The little ones whimper and fight, setting off howls from the toddler in the high chair.

Kila slams a pan in the sink.

“Enough!” she says. Kila turns and glares at the wide-eyed group at the table.

Ona has seen this glare before. It signals defeat.

“I’m going to work now.” Ona picks up the canvas bag. From past experience, she can predict the future. Social Services comes and the family dissolves. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon. Ona looks at her foster mother, hard, meeting her stare.

Kila breaks the stare first and turns away.

During the bus ride Ona tries to focus on the rules of preparing proper morning tea. Swirling boiled water to heat the china pot, laying the tray out just so, with linen napkins, sugar cubes and lemon slices. Tea is the foundation of civility.

Miss Graham hardly notices. “The doctor says my ankle is healing nicely! I’ll be walking again, soon, with only a twinge of pain!”

“We learn from pain,” Ona murmurs, pouring the tea.

The rest of the day she polishes silver, paying attention to detail, storing it in the chest and not the drawer. She vacuums and dusts, completing each step according to the rules. She walks through the rooms, straightening chairs, smoothing cushions.

Miss Graham moves around upstairs, practicing her walk and writing letters. At three o’clock, she hands three gray envelopes to Ona.

“On Monday I shall take over the mailings,” she says, counting out Ona’s wages.

Ona clasps the warm money. She has food to buy for a special meal tonight with her family. Then she’ll sit on the stoop with Kila. Ona won’t betray the truth behind the letter—she has promised not to say anything, and her word is good—but she’ll try to find some other way to ease Kila’s pain. Ona can only do the best she can do.

Downstairs, in the entry hall of the Graham mansion, she opens her canvas bag, takes out the dozen letters and adds the three from today. Her job is to mail them, and for one last time to be the messenger who delivers the letters to assorted pick-up mailboxes around Columbus.

Ona opens the cabinet door and removes the fancy embossed return address labels. One at a time, almost feeling a thudding pulse from within the letters, she affixes an embossed label to each of the fifteen gray envelopes.

“I’m leaving to mail the letters now, Miss Graham. Enjoy your weekend,” she calls out to the lady upstairs. “I’ll be here early Monday morning.”

There is no reply.

Ona Feathers will mail the envelopes today, and at the Metro bus stop she will repin the fancy-edged card to the bulletin board. It’s only fair to those seeking employment, and it’s also the rule.

On Monday Ona will return to 104 Elm Avenue. Early, to prepare plenty of tea and fluff the pillows in the sitting room. Miss Ethlyn Graham, last of the long line of Grahams who founded Columbus, will undoubtedly be receiving many callers on Monday.

She will need someone to serve the tea.

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SECOND PLACE

P. Jo Anne Burgh is a Connecticut lawyer. By day, she composes legal briefs and motions; by night, she divides her writing time between short stories and the ubiquitous novel-in-progress. She works best with classical music in the background and a cat sprawled on her desk. This is her first fiction publication.

Logistics

by P. Jo Anne Burgh

In the end, it comes down to logistics. Wading through the morass of agony and terror and rage and strangeness that follows the words *I don't love you anymore* requires planning, clear thinking, control. It will be a challenge, but it can be met. Just one small, precise step at a time.

*

Log into online banking. Review every account, especially the joint ones. Dig in the desk drawer for the calculator. Give up the search and use the one on the computer instead. Figure out your net monthly income. Take the sheaf of bills from the "to be paid" basket. Add the minimum payments due. Refuse to panic.

Scan your address book to identify people who are divorced or recently broke up with a live-in. Try not to be scared by how many there are. Cull through the list casually, as if you had nothing in common with them. Recall Lila from down the street, standing motionless in her front yard as the moving van pulled away. Close your eyes against the memory of her ex-husband and that bleached-blond tramp in the Mercedes convertible, driving up the street behind the moving van. Google Lila's phone number.

Check the clock to see whether this might be a good time to call. Punch four digits. Take a deep breath. Finish her number. Leave a message when the answering machine picks up.

Scroll through your stored numbers. Find the number for that red-haired woman from your Weight Watchers meeting, the one who always talks about how hard it is to be single again. Punch in her number. Make small talk when she answers. Pretend all is well when she asks how things are going. Mention your favorite supermarket's sale on Ben & Jerry's as if that's your biggest concern. Nod as she tells you for the umpteenth time how much weight she gained when her ex left her for his personal trainer. Confess that that's kind of why you called. Hasten to tell her that yours says there's nobody else. Reassure her that you really don't think he's lying. Mention how you always know when he's hiding something and there's no sign of that this time. Don't admit you almost wish there was somebody else because somehow, it seems less insulting than having him choose nobody over you. Thank her for her support. Ask if she was satisfied with the lawyer she used. Roll your eyes as she laments how expensive he was. Ask for the lawyer's name and number. Cross your fingers that it's not the same lawyer he's already hired. Thank her again. Hang up.

Call the lawyer's office on Monday morning. Make an appointment for Thursday at 10:30. Take dutiful notes as the assistant with the breathy little-girl voice tells you what to bring. Hang up the phone. Review the notes until you're overwhelmed by the notion of gathering the papers necessary to dismantle your marriage. Stuff the notes in the unlabeled folder in your desk drawer.

Give yourself until Tuesday night to start searching for documents. Gather the past three years' tax returns, including all supporting documents. Sort through stacks of junk mail and warranties for receipts for major purchases. Try to figure out what constitutes a major purchase in a divorce. Decide that the dryer was a major purchase because it was a household item, but your charcoal gray lambskin leather jacket wasn't even though it cost almost six times as much. Remember how furious he was when you bought that jacket. Snicker at the memory of his stunned expression when that distinguished-looking older gentleman at Pazzo's stroked the sleeve and said you were obviously a woman of excellent taste and

invited you to go home with him. Wonder where you'd be now if you'd taken the gentleman up on his offer.

Go through the files in the basement. Pull out credit card statements, phone records, and bills for the mortgage, utilities, trash pickup and every other household expense you can think of. Refuse to look at the numbers.

Stop at the office supply store on your way to work Wednesday morning. Approach the copy center clerk with the intent of handing off the chore of making the copies for the lawyer. Halt as unexpected horror rushes through your body like an icy river at the thought of the skinny kid behind the counter seeing this evidence of your decaying marriage. Forget until much later that he would neither have known nor cared why you wanted the copies. Recover your breath enough to ask him instead where the manila folders can be found. Spend your lunch hour huddled over the antiquated copy machine in the town library, feeding coins into the slot and organizing the copies into brand-new folders.

Go online at home that evening. Type in "storage facilities." Click on the link for the one at the top of the list. Click on the tab entitled, "How Storage Works." Find out how storage works, including the sizes of storage units available. Try, and fail, to find a list of rates. Back out of that site and go to the next one. Repeat. Come to terms with the fact that none of them will reveal a price list online. Go back to the first one and check locations. Find one in the next town. Remind yourself that you might not need a storage unit if you get the house. Fill out the form for an online quote anyway. Click "send."

Hear the garage door open. Hear it close. Hear the thump of the car door closing. Hear the hinges squeak on the door from the garage into the kitchen. Hear his footsteps, slower than they used to be.

Do not move from the desk.

Hear his footsteps pause in the hall. Look up casually, as if you just realized he was home and you weren't particularly concerned anyway. Exchange toneless hellos. See the sadness in his eyes, as if what is happening is beyond his control. Resist

the sudden, nearly overwhelming urge to hurl the stapler at his head. Turn back to the computer screen. Hear him walk away. Close your eyes.

Clear the search history. Shut down the computer. Go to your bedroom. Close the door firmly. Applaud yourself for insisting that the guest room should have its own bathroom. Ignore the sound of running water. Decide it's a good thing you don't have to listen to him snoring anymore.

Hear the water being turned off. Stand very, very still. Listen for footsteps in the hall. Feel your heart pounding so hard it seems ready to break through your ribcage. Sit on the edge of the bed. Cross your legs. Uncross your legs. Stop moving in case you might miss a sound. Rise from the bed. Turn the doorknob slowly, silently. Peer out into the dark, empty hallway. Creep down the hall to the closed guest room door. Close your eyes as you listen to him snoring.

Download directions to the lawyer's office as soon as you get to work the next morning. Wait until ten o'clock to tell the office manager you need to go out for an appointment. Ignore her irritated frown at your belated announcement. Thank her when she gives you permission anyway. Avoid looking at anyone as you return to your desk. Pick up your purse, the tote bag full of documents, and the directions. Drive carefully through oblivious city traffic to the lawyer's office.

Perch on the edge of the uncomfortable wicker chair in the waiting room. Listen to unseen people talking and laughing. Feel a quick surge of anger that they can laugh in this place that sees so much misery. Jump to your feet when you hear your name. Follow the girl with the happy white smile and long golden hair up the stairs. Notice the large diamond engagement ring on her left hand. Control the impulse to snap at her insensitivity in wearing it in front of you.

Walk into the gray-haired lawyer's office with your head held high. Shake his hand. Have a seat in one of the tasteful wing-back chairs in front of his desk. Tell him your friend recommended him. Read the fee agreement. Feel your stomach lurch at his hourly rate. Sign anyway, because really, what choice do you have?

Search through the folders in your bag. Hand over a sheaf of documents. Answer questions about your marriage, your financial circumstances, your health, and

“marital property.” Remain stone-faced when he tells you how much he’ll need as a retainer. Clench your teeth as you write the check. Try not to think about what else needs to be paid this month. Try not to wonder how it’s going to happen. Try to tamp down a flare of rage that you need to spend money on a divorce lawyer at all.

Stand up when the lawyer rises. Gather up the now-lightweight tote bag and purse. Turn as the door opens and the perky blond assistant returns. Follow her back down to the lobby. Manage a smile as she chirps that you should call if you have any questions. Walk out the front door and around to the parking lot. Unlock the car. Toss the tote bag and purse onto the passenger’s seat. Get into the car. Slam the door. Rest your forehead on the steering wheel. Try not to cry. Fail.

Return to the office. Concentrate on your work. Refuse to think about home. Concentrate. Refuse to think about him. Concentrate.

Notice that the outside lights aren’t on when you pull into the driveway. Tell yourself that this means he forgot to turn them on. Push the button on the garage door opener. Drive into the left-hand bay. Ignore the empty space on the right.

Unlock the door. Enter the kitchen. Smile at the large silver cat who barrels into the room. Remember how he agreed you could keep the stray who kept coming back every night as long as he could name it. Remember how you were watching *Rocky III* that night. Pick up sweet, soft Rocky. Hold him close as he purrs. Wonder how anybody could ever leave such a beautiful cat.

See the red flashing light on the answering machine. Erase the messages without listening to them.

Tear open a pouch of cat food. Spoon it into the cat dish. Set the dish on the floor. Pour a glass of chardonnay. Open a box of those crispy wheat crackers he loves. Take the wine and the crackers into the office. Log in to the computer. Check e-mail. Read the quote from the storage facility. Check his Facebook status. Feel your heart leap that it still says “married.” Open the document listing what you want to keep and what he can have. Notice that the keep column is longer. Refuse to feel guilty.

Jump when he speaks your name from the doorway. Minimize the window so he can't see your list. Sit very, very still as he walks into the room and places a piece of paper on the desk. Nod as if you were expecting this, his list. Say nothing. Do not move. Watch his hand draw back and out of sight. Tell him you met with a lawyer today. Wait for a response. Nod again when he finally says, "Okay," and leaves the room, his footsteps slow and heavy.

Maximize the window. Compare his list to your list. Notice that you both want his grandmother's dining room table. Remember when you were dating and the two of you would sit at that beautiful oak table with his family. Recall how you both knew this was the right house because the dining room was the perfect size for the table. Wonder whether his new apartment even has a dining room. Remember how long it took you to find those antique Windsor chairs to go with the table. Feel the tears starting as you recall the expression on his face—flabbergasted, thrilled, incredulous—when you gave him the chairs on your first anniversary. Close your eyes against the memory of the two of you making love on the rug underneath the table.

*

Sleepwalk through the days until the final meeting. Sit at the conference room table next to your lawyer. Say *hello* when he and his lawyer come in. Let the lawyer-talk swirl around you as the document entitled *Marital Separation Agreement* lies on the table, deceptively calm and business-like, as if this kind of thing happens all the time. Look through the agreement when your lawyer says to. See that he got the table after all. Remain motionless as the lawyers confirm that everybody's in agreement. Bite your lower lip to keep from screaming that you don't agree, not at all, not to any of it. Initial all the pages. Write your name on the last page. Pass the agreement across the table. Watch as he initials and signs. Say *yes* when someone asks whether next Wednesday will be good for the final hearing and entry of judgment. Nod as your lawyer tells him and his lawyer good-bye. Try to say good-bye, just like a polite, civilized person. Feel the word get stuck in your throat.

Take the long way home. Go to the supermarket, the library, the gas station. Try to think of any other errands you could do. Arrive at home to see a battered red

pickup truck in the driveway. Be civil to his buddy Walt, owner of the truck. Go inside. Find Rocky. Take him into the bedroom. Close the door. Turn on the television so you don't have to hear the bumping and thumping as half of a life is removed from what the agreement called *the marital home*.

Wait for the knock on the bedroom door. Tell him to come in. Look up as he stands in the doorway and announces *that's it*. Do not move as he comes into the bedroom and pets Rocky. Hear the sadness in his voice as he tells you one more time he's so sorry. Nod and say, "I know." Walk with him to the front door, the way you would with a guest. Stand face to face, just over arm's length apart. Wait for one of you to say the thing that will make all this hurt and awfulness fade away, that will let you go back to the life you thought you had. Wait for him to give you a better reason than *I'm not happy*. Let the silence stretch out between you until it's obvious that nothing can be said to change anything.

Nod when he says he left his keys on the kitchen counter. Watch as he walks out the front door. Feel the warmth of the marital home fading into the chill of your divorced home. Close the inside door. Watch through the window as first Walt pulls out of the driveway, and then he pulls out and drives away.

Stand still in the silence. Feel it press in on you until you might buckle under its weight. Walk slowly through the living room. Turn the corner. See the dining room table. Walk slowly, so slowly, toward it. See the piece of paper lying on its polished surface. Read the three words he wrote: *It belongs here*.

Crumple to the ground. Howl. Moan. Keen. Lie under the table, curled up and aching from weeping, as the sun sets and the room grows dark and the cat comes in to nudge you.

Finally, sit up. Stand up. Walk to the kitchen, one foot in front of the other. Feed the cat. Check caller ID when the phone rings. Turn down the volume on the

answering machine so you don't have to hear your mother's well-meant encouragement. Open the refrigerator. See the new bottle of chardonnay next to the opened one. Know that you didn't buy it.

Let the tears flow.

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THIRD PLACE

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Domestic Bliss

by Kelly Jensen

Harry noticed the difference right away. Mary-Ann stood in the doorway of the house, which usually meant she was real mad; she planned to chew him out the minute he stepped inside.

Except, she didn't. “Evenin’, Harry. You look pooped.”

Not: Where in the blazes have you been? Dinner petrified an hour ago. But that's all right, you're used to eating cold gravy. 'Cause you gotta have your gravy Harry, don't you.

The tirade changed with the day, but invariably included a dig about gravy. What was wrong with gravy, anyway?

Harry pushed past her, not interested in playing whatever game she'd cooked up with his gravy. With a walk particular to him, a sliding stride that eased on out from under sloped shoulders, he moved into the sitting room—you know, the room where folks sat and drank and were all civilized like—and pulled up in front of the wooden trolley where they kept the liquor.

“I fixed you a drink,” Mary-Ann said behind him.

He could see that. Sitting in a small puddle of ice sweat was a glass of bourbon. A decent sized pour with three ice cubes, just the way he liked it. A frown wrinkling his brow, tired skin pulling against his tired hairline, Harry reached for the glass. He picked it up, sniffed at it, bushy brows bumping upward, and took a swallow. Tasted like bourbon.

Perfume drifted around his shoulder, a slightly obnoxious scent he did not recall. Still, the sharp notes addled his senses a bit. He turned around and looked into his wife’s eyes. Those twin green orbs were not Mary-Ann’s.

Her eyes had been that exact green when they met. That flash of emerald, lit by a spark of wickedness and thought, had made him think: That’s the girl for me. And she had been for some years—until the gravy thing. Or, until she got as worn down as he was, tired as his hair, receding back from life in a final effort to preserve itself. Only Mary-Ann wasn’t the retiring sort. She nagged everyone else into that state. Sucked out their youth and used it on herself. Some sorta witch-fangled beauty treatment.

“Who are you?” he said as his body stiffened with a sort of panic. Curiosity tempered the process, leaving his lungs pliant.

“Why, I’m your wife, Harry. Don’t you recognize me?”

Looking at the shiny new Mary-Ann in front of him, Harry asked the next logical question. “What are you?”

She smiled. Her lips did not spread into a predatory grin; she simply smiled and tilted her head. The angle was sexy. A heated flush shot down from the bourbon patch in his chest, all the way to his groin.

“You’re a sharp one,” she said. Then she reached into the pocket of her dress—no apron, he noted now; no starchless fold of grimy cloth that turned his wife from woman into potato sack—and pulled out a small book. “Here’s what you need to know.”

Harry extended fingers gingerly toward the book, then looked down at the cover.

Your New Wife™. Mary-Ann, model 1B.

“Huh?”

She pushed the little book forward so it slipped under his fingers, which curled instinctively around the edge. “Instructions,” she murmured, her voice all breathy.

Skin prickled across his scalp and down his back. His tired brain surged into sluggish motion. Eyes narrowing, Harry said, “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I—”

The book pushed up against the meat of his palm. “Just read the book, Harry.”

She sounded so much like Mary-Ann, then, Harry moved to do as he was told. He scowled as opened the book.

Congratulations on your purchase of a New Wife™ Model 1B.

Harry looked up. “I didn’t purchase any, ah, New Wife.” What the hell was a New Wife, anyway? Angling his chin forward in a belligerent manner, Harry inspected the woman in front of him. Mary-Ann stood completely still. His eyes narrowed again. “Is this some kinda joke you planned, Mary-Ann? If it is, I don’t wanna play it. I’m tired and I’m hungry.” His usual state of being, seven o’clock in the evening version.

Her face brightened as if someone had switched on a lamp inside her skull. “Well, then, come on and eat. You can read my instructions afterwards.”

Harry clicked into survival mode. Whatever his harridan of a wife had schemed up would be better dealt with on a full stomach. He didn’t care if the damned gravy had congealed. He sloped on out of the sitting room and into the dining room, ‘cause didn’t you know civilized folk had to have a room for each? Which meant a house with lots of rooms, each of which needed lighting and heating and all the furniture and knick knacks. Except all they needed was a house that had a kitchen with a couch for napping and then another room behind that for proper sleeping.

Didn't need a door in between, neither. Wasn't like anything but sleeping would ever happen in that other room. Not anymore.

The dining room was lit with candles and looked real nice. A cloth with scalloped edges fell halfway down the table legs. He noticed the edges because the cloth was so white and not at all fussy. Set on top were two plates from the good china set, which they never used because it had to be washed by hand and really was only for display, anyway. Flanking the plates: shiny flatware, from the good set. Their wedding set. At point sat cut crystal glasses, beaded with moisture from the cold water inside. Even from the doorway he could see three cubes of ice in his. An array of covered serving dishes ruled the middle, and opposite his water glass, the gravy boat, a film of plastic wrap across the top.

Mouth gaping a little, Harry turned to Mary-Ann. Fear pinged through his veins now. His wife had gone to a lot of effort to set up whatever this was and he would have to pay, literally and figuratively. "Looks real nice, Mary-Ann," he said.

She smiled softly again, her lips at the same exact width as before. "Why thank you, Harry." Her smile clicked one degree wider. "Sit down, why don't you. Eat!"

*

The air hanging over the factory floor stank of machine oil and sweat, like it always did. A new odor slid under the funk, though. Something sharp, acrid. Brimstone and hellfire. Harry reckoned it was fear and it stung his nostrils every time the gaze of his fellows slid away or bounced from face to machine and up again. They all moved like machines, their muscles jerky with tension. The roar of gears and grinders seemed louder—or maybe the lack of shouts just made it that way.

Three hours into his shift, the bell clanged the way it always did and Harry straightened up, away from his console, fingers already dipping into the pocket of his overalls for his rag. He liked to keep his fingers clean, when he could. Otherwise, by the end of the day he looked like he'd painted himself for war. Maybe he had, in a way.

His fingers brushed the pages of the small book he'd shoved into his pocket, thrust there by the same delusion that suggested he'd do something other with his break than lean against the cinderblock wall of the yard and stare vacantly up at the clouds, mind too dull to form them into fanciful shapes. He joined the crowd of greasy overalls shuffling out to the yard, leaning out in rhythm to snag a cup of coffee on the way. Steam fogged the nervous faces as everyone settled into their customary positions; small groups, two or three men conversing quietly together, the loners who stared at the sky, and the drifters, men like Harry who sometimes joined one group, sometimes another, but often ended up just staring at something that didn't move, didn't puff out goutts of oily smoke, didn't heave and jerk beneath his hands, part of a process, part of a machine, voiceless, nameless—

“Harry!”

Harry turned and smiled at Frank. “Hey, Frank. How's it?”

“Good, good.” Frank danced nervously from foot to foot, as he always did. His coffee cup wavered upwards and his movement steadied long enough for him to take a sip before he resumed his shimmy. “You?”

Lips twisting, Harry studied the other man. “All right.” He enunciated each word, letting them go all slow like in the hopes Frank might catch the buried treasure beneath.

Frank jerked and bounced in front of him. “Right, then.” He sipped his coffee, then hissed as it spilt across his stained fingers. Swallowing, licking his lips, he regarded Harry a moment longer, then said, “And Mary-Ann? How's your wife?”

Harry saw it! The flash in the other man's eyes. Harry leaned forward, then back, rocking from toe to heel, and pushed his hand back into his pocket where his fingertips bumped into the top of the manual. “Well, now,” he drawled. “Mary-Ann is just fine, thank you for askin'. I'll tell her you did so. I think she'd like that.” His eyes narrowed as he waited for Frank's response.

Salty blonde brows shot up over widening blue eyes. “Ah, you do that.”

“How’s Bethany?”

Frank’s thin lips pressed together, then he leaned forward. “You know something,” he said in a coffee scented murmur.

Harry remained fixed in position, his expression barely changing. “What do you know?” he bit off quietly.

A small book edged out of Frank’s overall pocket, then quickly dropped out of sight. A relieved sigh unfurled in Harry’s lungs, pushing his ribs in before it warmed the back of his throat. It wasn’t an elaborate joke, then. Or, maybe it was. Maybe all the wives had gotten fed up.

“Did you try anything?” Frank asked, eyes cutting left and right.

Giving in to temptation, Harry let his eyes follow. What he saw didn’t hardly surprise. Fellows stood in twos and threes all over the yard, like they always did, but their head were bent closer together and hands were buried in greasy pockets. Earnest conversation flowed liked a small machine sound, whining and hissing through the yard.

Hm.

He wasn’t going to tell Frank all he’d tried. Harry didn’t think of himself as a good man, any sort of saint or model of respectability. But he followed a few old rules, the ones that never changed. He didn’t talk about what he did in the bedroom—or at the dining room table, starched skirts thrown up, lacy panties pulled down, his New Wife™ as soft and flexible as the real thing, or as she had been ten years ago. How she’d actually cried out his name, his *name*, and gripped his shoulders, then his hips. How it had been good. So damned good. Spur of the moment like, but that sudden inventiveness of his baser instincts capturing them both by surprise. It had been a rush; the thrill and the idea he should finish it up before they both came to their senses.

“I, ah...” His tongue swiped across his lips, a mistake at the factory. He gulped at his coffee and swallowed the bitter, oily taste all together. “I set a program to run while I was at work today.”

Frank’s eyes turned into dinner plates—ones with the wrong pattern, but round and shiny all the same. Then a blush crept outta his shirt collar, crawled up his neck and stung his cheeks.

Harry grinned and leaned forward. “What’s Bethany up to, then?” He both did and did not want to hear what Frank might arrive home to. Just as he had a prohibition on sharing his bedroom secrets, he didn’t really want to hear those of his friends. But curiosity poked, nonetheless.

“Out. I sent her out,” Frank gasped. “To her mother’s.” He leaned forward as well, their closeness bordering on uncomfortable intimacy. “You look kind of happy, Harry. What does that mean?” Frank straightened. “What does it all mean?” This last whined softly like a new-polished saw blade.

Harry blinked. “It means I get the gravy,” he said.

“But where are our wives?”

“Home! Cookin’ and cleanin’ and rearranging furniture, I hope. I want the damned couch under the window. Don’t care if the upholstery fades. We can put a rug over the back or something. I want to nap in the sun Sunday afternoon.”

Frank rocked back. “That’s not your wife, Harry.”

“‘Tis now.”

Harry closed himself up. It was knock-off time for this conversation. Frank hadn’t nudged Bethany across the dining table. He’d spent his night wondering where his wife was when she’d been right there in front of him. New and improved, all soft and sparkly. Not hard and flinty. ‘Course, Harry couldn’t remember if Bethany had been as much of a nag as Mary-Ann. He just assumed so. Wives were wives, weren’t they?

Frank pulled at his ear, fingers painting a line across the ridged flesh. “First I thought she was up to something, you know? Had dinged the car or wanted a new hat. Dunno why hats cost so much, or why a woman needs more than one. Like gloves? Just get a white pair, I say, or brown. Don’t brown go with everything?”

“I’d like to paint the walls brown. Brown is a good color,” Harry agreed. This was a better topic of conversation. Couldn’t last, though.

“But it wasn’t her. It was this robot thing.” Frank leaned again, his coffee-scented breath bitter, now. “Buttons all up her back.”

Harry’s brows angled upward. He hadn’t inspected Mary-Ann’s back. “What are the buttons for?” he asked. He’d given his instructions verbally, right before he left the house.

“Did you read the manual?”

“Not much.” His hand made a bulge in his pocket again. “Planned to take a peek at it now.”

Their break was almost up.

“You can change hair color, breast size, hips, everything.”

You kinky devil. Harry pressed his lips together, lest he say that out loud.

“It ain’t natural,” Frank whined. He looked from side to side again, his whole head moving this time. “And everyone’s all riled up, see? We all got one of these new wives, I bet. And no one knows what to do about it.”

Harry shrugged. “What’s to do?” he asked. Inside, a little worry bloomed. Where was the real Mary-Ann? He’d sorta assumed the one in his house had been made out of the old one. New and improved like.

Frank gave him an odd look. Then, pursing his lips, nodded down toward their steel-capped toes and drank the rest of his coffee.

*

The blank space of wall in the sitting room looked empty, like they'd just been robbed. Sucking on his glass of bourbon, Harry turned a slow circle and inspected the rest of the setup. It met with his approval. The couch reclined beneath the large window, the coffee table looked to be within ankle reach—should he choose to sprawl rather than nap—and the stuffy velvet curtains had been replaced by some gauzy material that moved against the windows. The new, blank wall countered the rest of the crap, like the fussy cabinet with the creepy little dolls inside. His gaze slid to one of the doll faces, all vacant black eyes and plaster smile.

“How’s it look, Harry?”

A shiver advanced down his spine, one cold finger after the other. “Looks good.” He drained his glass and set it down. “I’ll test it out on Sunday.”

He look up at Mary-Ann’s perfectly made up face. Didn’t look so much different, he thought, until he recalled he hadn’t actually inspected his wife’s face in some time. The small lines around her eyes were new. Fine creases that he could imagine slipping into furrows if she squinted in anger.

“Where’s Mary-Ann?” he asked, spine tucking closer into his back.

“I’m right here, Harry.”

“The real Mary-Ann.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, showing him just how those lines could deepen. “I am the real Mary-Ann.”

He’d like to ask why she’d squinted at him like that, but they just didn’t talk about feelings and reactions and so on. They bickered and then flung themselves aside when they ran out of things to say. Would this Mary-Ann bicker with him? He supposed not, and that would be a good thing, right? Evenings of peace and quiet and gravy.

“Are you ready for dinner?”

“Sure.” He produced a smile for the wife who had arranged a room just as he liked it and had then invited him to dinner rather than harangue him to the table from the front door.

After dinner, he tested the angle of the couch. Sprawled, with his socked feet propped up on the coffee table. He been tempted to heft his boots up there, watch flakes of dried dirt drift down to the carpet, listen to the way the hard rubber heel squeaked along the rolled edge of wood. Just to see if Mary-Ann would react. She’d smacked him across the side of the head with a wooden spoon, once. The damn thing cracked against his skull, stinging the top of his ear. Still, he hadn’t hit her back. He might not be a good man, not a saint or whatever. But he was not a man who hit his wife.

Thoughtfully, Harry reached up to fiddle with the flexible top of his ear, reminiscing on the sting. She’d been mean as a snake, his Mary-Ann. Green eyes flashin’ all the while. Why had he put up with it?

“Don’t suppose I’m a man who leaves his wife, neither.”

“What’s that, Harry?”

Mary-Ann stood framed by the wide arch that opened the sitting room to the hall. Foyer, if you wanted to be fancy like.

Harry patted the couch next to him, then looked down to the hand that made the gesture. Clearing his throat, he said, “Come sit.” He leaned forward to scoop up the small book resting on the coffee table.

Mary-Ann glided over to the couch and sat next to him so delicately, the cushions didn’t even dip. She’d always been like that as he recalled. Most graceful woman he knew; even in anger she managed an economy of movement. A well-oiled machine, that was Mary-Ann. She smelled like dish soap and gravy. Under that, he caught the strident notes of perfume, same as yesterday. Something oily, exotic.

He flipped open the manual to the page detailing the buttons on her back. “So, are you at the default setting?”

“Factory standard,” she replied as if they were discussing the weather.

“Can I see the buttons?”

Green eyes flashed with mischief. Her lips crooked into a sneaky little smile—which highlighted another fine line he had not noticed. His gaze flicked side to side, taking in the fact she had small parentheses on either side of her mouth. Laugh lines. Whenever did Mary-Ann laugh?

Mary-Ann began sliding out of her dress, her movements slow and sinuous. She looked like a snake shedding her skin. Harry’s shoulders bunched into another shiver. He stared at her half-exposed breasts, and recalled he’d spent time looking them over before. Many, many times. His wife had fabulous tits, even covered by a structured scrap of lace, as they were now. His desire rose, a heated thing squirming beneath his skin. Harry swallowed it down and lifted a finger before revolving it through the air.

“Turn around.”

She pouted and then complied.

The buttons were embedded in her spine. Feeling his brow wrinkle less attractively than hers might, Harry leaned forward, grasped her shoulder and turned her slightly so the light fell on the row of shiny round bumps that seemed to sit above each knob of backbone. They were set into flesh, the skin around bunched like a sleeve. He swiped a finger around the wrinkled skin, then up over a button. It was smooth and warm. Without referring back to the manual, he pushed it. The button depressed until the top rested flush with her skin, then clicked. Then it pushed back at his finger, gently. Harry let it pop back out. He looked up at Mary-Ann’s head. Her wavy auburn tresses, always so artfully arranged, glimmered and then faded a shade. Harry pressed the button again.

When they had achieved a strawberry blonde shade that looked right nice in the warm glow of the lamp, Harry peeked at her profile and noted her brows had altered to a complimentary color. Slightly darker, but obviously the brows of a woman with lighter hair. Her lashes remained dark, which made a nice contrast.

Throughout, Mary-Ann said not a word. Then, as he nodded his approval, she said, “What do you think?”

“Looks nice,” he said, a familiar twist of anxiety grabbing at his guts. He never knew how to give out compliments. Wasn’t entirely sure he knew what counted as nice, neither. Or what to do about a custom-designed wife.

He referred to the manual again, sliding the same page back and forth as he memorized the function of each button. Then he reached up and depressed the one second lowest on her spine. Mary-Ann held out her hands to display the altered color of her nails.

“Seems a pretty useless adjustment,” Harry remarked.

She shrugged, the crease between her breasts deepening. “It’s all cosmetics, Harry.”

That it was. Pursing his lips, he studied the description of the last button. It wasn’t cosmetic at all. Pushing that button would alter Mary-Ann’s personality.

We recommend allowing two days to pass between personality enhancements. The full effect might not be immediately obvious.

How much would she change with each press?

He kinda liked her as she was now. All pliant and softly amusing.

Harry reached up and pressed the button.

Mary-Ann purred in her throat and rolled him back on the couch. His shirt quickly joined her dress, then his pants. Holy mother of God.

*

He still felt flushed, even in the dark, brimstone stink of the factory floor. He hadn't followed the instructions. He'd pressed that button again, right before they peeled themselves off the couch and staggered into the bedroom. Green eyes sparkling, Mary-Ann admonished him, then picked him up and tossed him on the bed. Was a wonder he could walk.

The same odd quiet that held the factory in check the day before had increased, which made the cavernous floor echo even more loudly with machine noise. Harry noted that phenomenon first, then began catching the gaps between the infrastructure. The factory usually buzzed with men and a few women, all of them indistinguishable in their greasy overalls. Today it seemed half empty, which only highlighted the fact a few of the fellows had been missing yesterday, too.

Harry looked for Frank and found him nervously punching buttons on his console. Looking around to clock the position of their foreman, Harry sidled over to his friend.

"Frank."

The slender man tensed and then looked up. "Oh, Harry, it's you." Purple thumb prints rested below his blue eyes and the blond fluff on top of his head stood straight up, making it seem thinner than usual. Harry smoothed his hand over his own forehead, palm sliding back too far as always before it slipped over the groomed strands of hair he still possessed.

"You don't look good, Frank. What's the news?"

Frank shook his head and turned back to his console, gaze fixing on a button before he jabbed at it. Harry took a hold of his arm and applied enough pressure to turn the man back around without seeming to insist upon it.

"You're worrying me."

"You should get back to work, Harry. Mind your own business."

Frank's eyes widened, then, and he seemed to shrink back, away from his skin. Harry turned around, wondering what had alarmed the other man so, and saw a cadre of uniformed men weaving their way across the floor toward them.

He turned back to Frank and shook him. "Frank! What did you!"

"It wasn't her!" Frank whined, bubbles of spit forming at the corners of his mouth. He began to shake. Harry let him go and stepped back just in time to be swept further aside by an extended baton.

"Frank Werther?"

Frank's head bobbed and shook.

"You're under arrest for the murder of Bethany Werther."

"It wasn't her!" Frank wailed.

The uniforms moved through their routine, another well-oiled machine. One cuffing the suspect or perpetrator or whatever they wanted to call Frank. Another patting down overalls that used to be blue. He'd be painting his face with grease afterwards. Harry stood aside, horror knotting and twisting his insides.

By the time the break bell ran, his throat had unlocked. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he loped into the yard and took a place near the wall where he could catch the sun. He turned his face toward the sky and basked. He picked out shapes in the clouds. They were crude, all of them, but he had to do something with his thoughts, something other than reflect on what Frank might have done.

It hadn't been Bethany, right? Not the real Bethany?

*

Harry noticed the difference right away. Mary-Ann stood in the doorway of the house, which usually meant she was real mad; she planned to chew him out the minute he stepped inside.

Except, she didn't.

She dragged him bodily across the doorjamb, his boots scuffing the skirt along the bottom of the wall, and then pushed him back against the same wall, her mouth fastened to his, her hands already pulling buttons off the clean shirt he habitually changed into before he left the factory.

"My boots," he protested between nips of teeth and flicks of tongue. "Dinner?" he tried when his pants dropped to the floor.

Harry liked sex. What man didn't? But they'd been at it four times last night and then there'd been the session across the dining room table the night before that and he felt a bit, well, drained. Empty like. He'd been wondering if he might not test the nap-ability of the couch that evening, let Mary-Ann do whatever it was she liked to do when she wasn't harassing him.

Before her hand could grab him again, Harry pushed her away, firm but gentle. He didn't want to hurt her, after all. "Wait, Mary-Ann, I'm tired."

She pouted and the purse of her lips didn't strike him as sexy as it had last night. Sliding a hand around her waist, he felt for the button that altered her personality and depressed it again. Damn the instructions. He couldn't be living with a woman who wanted him morning, noon and night. Not with the weekend coming on.

Mary-Ann growled and thrust him back against the wall. Between stabs of panic as he fended off stronger bites and the claw of nails, Harry wondered if he should have fiddled with her breast size instead. Thing was, he'd always liked Mary-Ann's bosom just the way it was. Just as he liked her eyes.

He pushed the button again and Mary-Ann shuddered against him. Harry pushed the damned button again. She pulled away, staggered back into the hall and twitched in place for a good thirty seconds. Mouth slightly agape, Harry flinched against a premonition. What if she exploded? Horror twisting him tight, he wondered if he'd be arrested for murder after his wife flew into fleshy pieces, staining the pristine white paint of the foyer.

Mary-Ann did not explode. She settled, blinked rapidly a dozen and a half times and then showed him a demure smile. “Well, Harry!” her voice seemed to have risen by a degree or two. “You look all disheveled. What do they do to you at that factory? Let me get you a drink and you can tell me all about your day.”

She wanted to hear it, too. Every gruesome detail. The telling of it allowed him the time to catch his breath, though. Stop squinching up with remembered terror, put himself back together. Stop imagining life behind bars and start thinking about life with the unpredictable robot that had replaced his wife. He’d adapt, wouldn’t he? Like someone had pressed a button. He’d figure out how to react to each version of her. Learn the triggers and cues, work on just the right reactions, arrange himself around Mary-Ann in the way he’d always done. Marriage was a damned trial of its own.

Lying in bed that night, pleasantly unmolested, Harry listened to the all but non-existent breath of the woman next to him. Mary-Ann had always been a quiet breather. That’s how she snuck up on him, he supposed. He’d marveled at how quiet she could be with her mouth closed and how loud she became once her lips started flapping. Though, come to think of it, he hadn’t heard her just talk for a while, now. Not until she’d... gone.

A twist of melancholy unfurled inside of him as he thought back to the Mary-Ann he’d courted and wed. Was she still inside the woman next to him? The robot with adjustable boobs and moods? Had she ever been? Or had she slipped away some years before, without his notice, replaced by the new lines marking her face?

He’d ask her in the morning. Nothing in the instruction manual cautioned him against just talking with his New Wife™. He’d try that.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Retired from teaching, these days JoAnne blogs, makes wine, and works on her first novel among southwest Wisconsin's improbable hills. Her poetry, articles, reviews, and creative nonfiction have appeared both online and in print for more than 25 years, but this is only her second fiction publication. Her devotional blog appears at Joannepotter.blogspot.com. Find her other links at joannepotter.weebly.com.

Head On

by JoAnne Potter

“Aim right for it,” Ron told me.

I pulled my helmet and hood off and ran tired fingers through squashed, sweaty hair. I had to have heard wrong. “What?”

“If you’re running at speed and a wreck starts going down in front of you, aim right for it. Inertia will carry it out of your way and you’ll drive right by.”

I looked past him, over his shoulder, buffeted by successive roaring Doppler ascents and descents from other cars lapping us. He was serious. I tried not to shake my head. Aim right for a wreck. There was no way I could do that, not any more than half the other techniques Ron was trying to teach me. Instead, I just lingered on the pit lane, next to him and my 1972 Opel GT, trying to look like I belonged. The two layers of Nomex I’d put on that morning in case the car burst into flames sagged from sweat. My neck ached from trying to keep up with high-speed turns that jerked me left, then right. My calves burned from the trembling, constant pressure I applied to the car’s accelerator, brake, and clutch.

Ron reviewed my last track performance. I'd missed a chance to pass the yellow VW Rabbit on the left in turn four. I needed to brake later going into turn one. I should have waved the black and green Mini by me. But I couldn't remember seeing any of those cars, I honestly couldn't. The practice session just blurred into distant color and motion. I hadn't expected things to happen so fast. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, but I couldn't tell him. I couldn't tell anybody.

While Ron compared my times with the other cars in my group, I ran a gloved hand over the smooth rise of the Opel's front fender. Oh, but I did like this car—its low, sleek profile; its tight, twitchy bite in corners; its deep-throated growl under acceleration. The motor I built with my own hands during months of rising expectation. My car. A love gift from Marty.

I didn't have to look for him. I knew he stood waiting for me on the other side of the fence. Smiling, thumbs-up Marty. Marty, who bought me the car the week after we found out we wouldn't be having a baby after all. Marty, who gave me smooth glass and steel to make up for the sweet flesh and blood he couldn't give. Marty, who hoped the car would make up the difference.

He showed me step by step how to build the Opel's race engine, all the while sitting there, manual spread out on his lap, coaching, laughing at my mistakes. He bled brakes and primed the carburetor and bought the bottle of champagne he was sure we'd use to celebrate on the day I finally pushed the starter and it ran the first time.

Marty, who wanted more than anything else to make me happy.

But it wasn't working.

"Come on," Ron said. "We've got another session. Get in."

I pulled the Nomex hood over my head again and the helmet after it, tightened its neck, climbed over the roll bar, and settled in. While Ron buckled into the passenger seat, I flipped on the ignition toggle, pushed the button, and teased the gas. The motor settled into its sweet, familiar rumble. I did like that. The flag man looked at me. I pointed toward the track and he waved us out.

What had Ron told me? Brake later. Go faster. Didn't he see my legs shaking? I accelerated down the front straight at the back of the pack and counted down the brake markers for turn one. 5, 4, 3... Enough. I crammed my left foot down hard, then my right on the accelerator and yanked the car around the corner.

Ron shook his head. "Faster. Smoother!"

I went into turn four with my foot all the way down and ducked under a Mazda on the inside, then flew through the right line for turn five. Ron smiled and nodded, but then I lifted for the next turn and went spinning into the infield, kicking up clouds of dust and slamming to a stop in the tire wall. The engine died. I put my hands in my lap and just sat there.

After the session, Ron went off, presumably to compare horror stories with other instructors, and I sat down to lunch with Marty. Trying to relax, I unzipped my drivers' suit halfway, hoping to catch some fresh air, trying to avoid his shining enthusiasm.

"How's it running?" he asked. "It sounds great."

At least I didn't have to pretend about that. "Really well. Not a pop or hesitation anywhere. And the brakes feel solid."

"What did Ron say?"

"That I need more practice."

"Well, of course you do. But you look great out there."

How could he say that? Everyone was passing me. Every single car.

"Man, it looks like fun—cars all around... chasing. Passing. Downshifting into turns, accelerating out. You're real smooth."

Now was the time to say it. Just tell him that I'm always in a pack because I'm usually in their way. That I'm smooth because I'm too slow. That I loved him for buying the car and helping me build it. That I liked so much to look at it and was

proud of what we'd done together. That I didn't need him to make up for anything. That he was enough.

But neither of us knew how to start. Both of us just smiled and pretended we'd never seen the disappointment that had taken up residence between us, the same sad loss that became our back seat driver and the third person in our bed. When should we say the words? When do I tell him I would rather have the baby than the car but am happy without either one? When do we agree to settle with less than we dreamed for? I couldn't tell him, then just stand by and watch him bleed. Certainly not today. Maybe not ever.

Marty and Ron watched from trackside for the first afternoon session. The flagman lined us up for practice starts and we idled on the grid waiting for the green. I shifted my feet between the pedals, feeling the spot on each where resistance began and the mechanisms engaged. I goosed the accelerator in neutral. The motor wound up confidently. It didn't hesitate. Why did I?

A yellow flag signaled the start of the pace lap and we stayed in careful order coming around. When we reached the tower, the green fell and every right foot in the group tromped down hard. The roar took me by surprise. It sounded like a jet plane was taking off right behind me. I backed off the power without even willing the movement.

The car hiccuped and in less than three seconds I was last again. I tried to make it up, braking later than I'd done before and trying to find the fast line through the back turns. When I came around to the front straight, there stood Marty holding up my sign board, smiling still. But I barely noticed him.

All I saw was Ron standing next to the pit lane, holding up his right foot above the knee wall, shaking it. No smile on his face. Step on it. He had not missed my hesitation at the start. He knew. I finished the session in a funk and came off the track thoroughly defeated.

Only one more session to go. The final test, and I dreaded it. There was no way I would pass. I leaned back in the camp chair and closed my eyes during the break, pretending I needed to rest. Disappointment crowded disappointment. Marty

believed himself a failure because he couldn't produce a baby. I didn't want to hurt him any more by talking about it. He bought me a car to make up for the baby and now I couldn't earn a racing license. We just kept missing the mark.

People call their cars babies, but they aren't. One does not make up for the other. Marty had to know this. I could hear him in the next chair, breathing. There was no way around it. I had to drag up the words, regardless of whatever hurt they brought.

"Marty..."

"Shh..." he said, putting two fingers over my mouth. "Listen."

The loudspeaker had begun to crackle. "First call for race group two." I'd waited too long.

"That's you, girl." He handed me my helmet. "Knock 'em dead. You can do it," he said. But he meant, "Let me do this for you. Let me make you happy." I turned toward the grid, pulling on my helmet so I didn't have to look at him.

I was gridded last, of course. At least I wouldn't get in anyone's way at the start. When they let us out, I saw both of them standing by the pit wall, Marty waving, Ron still and stoic. I followed the green and black mini into turn one. He had plenty of power, but his brakes weren't as good as the Opel's. Maybe I could pass him. One good pass might be enough. I had five laps to get it done.

For the first two, I kept in the mini's mirrors, edging the inside on one turn and pushing the outside on another. No daylight anywhere. I kept the nose of my car close, tromping alternately on the appropriate pedals. Gas. Brake. Clutch. Gas. My calf throbbed again.

Then the mini started to pull away. What the....? He'd been sandbagging, saving something for the end, suckering me. I couldn't go fast enough or brake shallow enough. The distance between us grew. He'd beat me for sure.

Why bother? I throttled back as we approached the last sweeping carousel turn, the mini ahead of me. He disappeared around the bend. I was last again.

I clipped the apex coming around the corner, turned hard and saw the mini's undercarriage. The mini was airborne, upside down in front of me, right on the racing line, exactly where I was supposed to put my car.

I remembered Ron like a distant echo: "Aim right for him."

Quick moves at speed would send me rolling over just like the mini. I didn't have time to think and hadn't developed reliable reflexes. The racing line, now blocked by the mini shedding small mechanical pieces and cascading gravel, would take me into a short straight and a hard left. I knew it was there, but couldn't see it. I breathed once, grabbed the wheel tight at ten and two and pushed the accelerator all the way down. Then, God help me, I closed my eyes.

*

When it was all over, I counted a slow fifteen before my legs stopped shaking, and the pause gave my wits time to reassemble. While I sat there, Ron stuck his head between the roll bars on the driver's side right next to my head.

"You passed," he said.

"How's the mini driver?"

"He's fine. He didn't pass, though."

When Ron pulled himself out of the window, I saw a blurred Marty, still smiling, taking long, exuberant strides in my direction. What was that around his head? Gray and bursting, it looked like a cloud, a haze that surrounded him just like the mini's dust and gravel halo. I blinked twice and shook my head. Marty's crown of detritus dispersed.

But did it really? The mini driver had survived, but Marty and I were still headed for the ditch, threatening to become a sad wreck of what we'd hoped so long for, and only because we still misfired in our attempts to do it right. We drifted toward our own wreckage because we still avoided the truth, the truth that waited around the next turn to see whether I'd have the guts to face it, the truth that we'd have to hurt in the short run to heal in the long run. Oh, Marty. I owed him at least as

much determination as I given the unfortunate mini. We could do this. It wouldn't be easy, but we could still finish right side up.

I climbed out of the Opel, pulled off my helmet for the last time and walked toward him. Aim right for it.

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GUEST WRITER

Laura Ruth Loomis is a social worker in the San Francisco area. "Like Riding a Bike" is part of a series of short stories that she hopes to turn into a novel. Other stories from the series have appeared previously in *On The Premises*, as well as in *Wordrunner Chapbooks*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Alalit*, *flashquake*, and *Phone Fiction*.

Like Riding a Bike

by Laura Ruth Loomis

Julie's been crying for half an hour now, and she's almost cried out. She's exhausted, and so am I, but she tries to give me a smile. "Thanks for coming over, Roy."

"You know I'll always be there for you." Besides, it's probably a good thing that Julie pried me out of my office; I've been spending too many late nights there in the past few weeks. Tonight I'm here as her best friend instead of ex-husband, if the two can be separated. Her fiancé just dumped her for another woman. Julie was the only one who didn't see it coming.

Earlier I came over and cooked her favorite comfort food, lasagna, plus chocolate custard for our son Andy. Now Andy's in bed, and I've stayed for a glass of wine and the unedited version of what happened. We're on the couch, the utilitarian beige one that we bought while I still lived here. The rest of the living room has been redecorated in the jewel tones that she prefers. I'm still stinging from my own recent breakup, so hearing Julie's angry recriminations feels like watching the same bad movie twice.

“And there he is, I’ve just gotten him to admit he was cheating, and then he starts yelling at me like I’m the one who did something wrong.” Julie finishes her second glass of chardonnay. I pour her another. “You were so right about that asshole. You warned me about him, and so did—”

“It’s all right,” I say, interrupting so that she won’t say my ex-lover’s name out loud. I just don’t want to hear it yet. I’m not used to dramatic breakups; my divorce from Julie was terribly civilized, just like the marriage. I slide an arm around Julie, and she gives me an odd half-smile. “You’ll find the right guy,” I tell her.

“We both will.” She sets the glass down and lays her head on my shoulder. It feels comfortable, fitting together as if the last three years hadn’t happened. This isn’t where either of us expected to be when we hit forty. “If I could just figure out what I’m doing wrong.”

“It’s not you,” I tell her.

She giggles, though she’s not really tipsy yet. “It’s not you, it’s me. I love you but I’m not in love with you. It’s just not working out.”

“You forgot, ‘Honey, we need to talk.’” That one was deadly for us.

“Can we still be friends?”

I try to think of another cliché. “You’re too good for me.”

And then she kisses me, not the way she usually does. I know she’s just feeling vulnerable, but it’s so sweet, her open mouth against mine, her hand caressing my hair. I’m not sure if it would be more unkind to succumb or refuse. She looks up at me and her need is so strong, and it’s been so long since anyone wanted me like that. It’s my need, not hers, that wins out.

My tongue plays softly at her ear. “I hope I still remember what I’m doing.”

“Like riding a bike,” she says, and it turns out she’s right. It’s mechanical, repetitious, soothing. I slide into the gears of memory, knowing how she likes to be touched.

She tells me she loves me, and I don't know what to say. I do love her, my best friend, the one who's shared so much of my life. We brought a child into the world together. But that's not the love she needs from me, and I'm not going to lie. Not anymore.

She finally falls asleep on my chest, and I adjust so that I can hold her without my arms going numb. I want her to wake up feeling safe.

It's not that I feel sorry for her. That would be presumptuous. Julie deserves to be loved: she has a warm forgiving heart and a generous smile. Some people were meant to be married and don't thrive alone. It was one of the things we had in common.

She and what's-his-name used to fight about me; he was sure she loved me more than him. He was right. I pretend not to notice, but Julie loves me unreasonably. The way I should have loved her, but I couldn't.

I wake first in the morning. The cherry tree outside our window—her window, now—still shades most of the sun this early. It's never produced cherries; we learned after planting it that they only bear fruit if there's another one nearby. Even among trees, some are the marrying kind.

Julie's warm in my arms, her brown hair straying into my face, tickling. I give a moment's thought to leaving now and sparing us both the awkward conversation where we reassure ourselves that our friendship won't change. Instead I stroke her hair and inhale its familiar herbal scent, thinking of how our life together might have been, if things had been different. If I'd been different.

Julie opens her eyes, and the confusion only lasts a moment. With the ease of the long-married, she sits up and says, "I forgot to tell you, Andy's parent-teacher conference is next week. Thursday."

"Okay." I suppress a ridiculous urge to pull the sheet up, as if she hadn't seen me undressed every night for fourteen years. "Feel any better?"

"Yeah. Thanks for staying." She stretches and reaches for an embroidered robe. I think I bought it for her, a birthday or anniversary or something.

I can't quite clear my throat. "I guess we'll just tell Andy I fell asleep on the couch. I don't want to confuse him, thinking we're getting back together or anything."

Julie has no trouble seeing where I'm going. "It's all right. You went above and beyond the call of best friends." She ties the robe. "Have you heard from Jesse, since...?"

Since I called Jesse an immature self-centered commitment-phobe, all of which was true, and Jesse stomped out of my life after calling me an overbearing workaholic control freak, all of which was true. "No."

"You should call him, then."

This disturbs me. Julie has a way of seeing things that I've missed. "Why?"

She leans on the door frame, not meeting my eyes. "Roy, I know you better than you think. I didn't want to see it when our marriage was a mess, but we never had a chance. I stopped blaming you for that a long time ago. I thought if I just loved you enough, you'd have to love me the same way."

"Julie—"

"We never had a chance. But you and Jesse do. You love him the way I loved you." *The way I still love you*, she doesn't say, but I hear it as clearly as if she'd spoken aloud.

I cross the room and put my arms around her, feel her hot tears against my naked shoulder. "I'm all right," she says, and I know she isn't, but I love her for saying it, and I wish one more time that love had been enough.

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