

**Entry Level:**  
**A Collection of Short Stories**

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Entry Level: A Collection of Short Stories**

Julie McIsaac

*Entry Level* is a short story collection that explores intersections between class and sexuality. The female characters are tied to their biology through tropes of motherhood, pregnancy and pubescent development, all of which visibly signify gender. However, the degree to which the individual women in this collection internalize the role of “mother” or “woman” varies.

The relationships of these women to their bodies are mediated by their roles as workers and by their class. The workplace provides an apt space to explore gender difference, since so often work is coded, either implicitly or explicitly, as belonging to women. Although these stories do not take place in overtly sexualized environments, sexuality always intervenes in the work the women do.

In many of these stories, women form collectives within their working class environments. Through humour and camaraderie, these characters reveal and construct joy in their lives.

## **Acknowledgement**

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To Mae and Myrle

## Table of Contents

The Cashier .....	1
The Falls Side .....	15
Sam .....	29
The Baby Section .....	40
Hidden in Plain Sight .....	50
Team Players .....	56

## The Cashier

Because I was new, I did not work cash alone. I was paired up with a more senior member of staff. Debbie, who was training me, had been with the company for five weeks. She was an overweight woman with a perm.

The first thing Debbie did was point out to me that my name tag was upside down. Earlier that day, I'd been issued a red vest with a zebra embroidered on the back and a blue name tag that said "Kathleen" in crayon-style font. I had to supply my own white dress shirt, blue jeans and black running shoes. This was tough to coordinate, since I was still living out of boxes.

I flipped my name tag around. My vest didn't fit and I had to keep pulling it down to cover my stomach, which I was sure had gotten bigger since I'd moved back home. Debbie and I took checkout number four. I tried to log in to my register the way I had been shown, but it wasn't working. The till kept saying, "Invalid PLU/SKN code."

"What's happening?" asked Debbie.

"I have no idea," I replied.

Debbie looked more closely at the register and flicked a piece of lint from the buttons with her pinky finger.

"You must have hit 'total' instead of 'enter,'" Debbie said.

"No, I'm pretty sure I hit 'enter,'" I replied.

"No, you must have hit 'total.'" Debbie tried with her employee number and was able to log in. "See, I logged in just fine."

"Okay, I'll try it again," I said, and got the same rejection: Invalid PLU/SKN code.

“That’s weird,” said Debbie.

“Not really,” I said. “That’s exactly what happened last time.”

“Well, try paging Jane or Brooke.” I didn’t know who Jane or Brooke were. And was I to page them both and they decided who answered, or did I have to decide and page one or the other? And how did I page?

Debbie read the confusion on my face. “Have you ever paged anyone before?”

“No. Jason showed me how to yesterday, but I’ve never actually done it.”

“Okay, I’ll show you.” Debbie picked up the phone at my till. “Dial 800, then listen for when the music in the store stops and there is a click, then say your page.” Debbie did as she had said. I heard her fuzzy voice splice into a Christmas carol: “Jane call two-two-four please. Jane two-two-four.” Then she hit the release button and hung up the phone. “Always make sure you hit the release button after every page before you hang up.”

I remembered Jason telling me that. If you didn’t hit the release button then the sound of the receiver being hung up was paged over the whole store. It sounded awful.

While Debbie and I waited for Jane to call back, she played with one of her earrings and I bit my cuticles. She looked at me and opened her mouth to say something, but then the phone rang and she answered it.

“Kathleen can’t get her login to work... Yes, we tried that... Okay... No, my login works fine... Okay, thanks.”

Again, Debbie and I waited at register four.

“So,” Debbie said. “Do you go to school?”

“No.” I smiled. “I’m finished school.”



“Oh.” Debbie started playing with her earring again. I looked across the store into a crowd of shoppers and noticed a girl I’d gone to high school with. I hadn’t seen Cynthia McLean since eleventh grade, when she’d gotten pregnant and dropped out. My mom and her mom had been friends too, but they’d lost touch. In high school I’d always meant to give Cynthia a call and offer to baby-sit, since I liked kids when I was younger. My mom talked me out of it though. I hoped that Cynthia would not notice me.

Then Jane arrived, breathing heavily as though she’d been running. She held a clipboard in one hand and there was sweat forming around her hairline.

“What is the problem with Kathleen’s login?” she asked.

“It’s not working. Mine works fine though,” Debbie said.

“Okay, well.” Jane focused on Debbie’s blue name tag. “Just let her use your number for now, Debbie, and I’ll make a note to look into it later.” Jane scribbled on her clipboard. “I’ll also note that she’s using your number, in case there are any mistakes.”

“Okay,” Debbie said. Jane left and Debbie punched her number into my till.

I was ready to sell. Well, not really sell, more like tally.

My first two customers went smoothly. They both bought toys from the Girls department. The first customer, an older man with lots of silver hair and a big silver mustache, bought a doll that cried when you shook it. The second customer, a middle-aged woman with a perm and a leopard-print winter coat, bought a giant Barbie head that you could put real make-up on. They both paid cash and I politely thanked them for choosing Toys-O-Ramma. Debbie continued to remind me that she was there if I needed help.

“Are you offering people a gift receipt?” she asked.

“I forgot,” I told Debbie, which was no excuse, judging by the look on her face.

The next customer at my cash register was a middle-aged woman with lots of gold jewelry and the same hair-do as Debbie. A red-faced toddler squirmed in her shopping cart. Tears rolled down his cheeks while he yelled and flapped his arms.

“Happy Holidays. Thank you for shopping at Toys-O-Ramma. Did you find everything okay?”

The woman did not answer but began piling her purchases on the tiny counter in front of her. I could not possibly scan and bag her items as rapidly as she hurled them at me. But I tried, moving so quickly that I almost forgot to offer a gift receipt. Almost.

“Would you like a gift receipt?”

She nodded. And I began to scan and bag, scan and bag, scan and... I felt a slap on my shoulder. I turned to see Debbie, stretching over from the till in front of mine where she was helping another trainee, her flabby belly pressed against the counter.

“Don’t forget to ask her if she wants a gift receipt,” Debbie said.

“I know,” I said, focusing on the pile in front of me.

After paying for her purchases, the woman with the toddler carefully examined her bill.

“So, you see what you did!” She thrust the bill under my nose. “You double-scanned.” She was right. I’d charged her twice for the same item.

“What did she do?” Debbie asked the woman, quickly returning to my register.

“She double-scanned an item.” The woman shook the bill so hard that her gold bracelets jingled and her gold earrings swayed.

Debbie carefully looked over the receipt and saw that the woman was right.

“Okay, you need to page a manager,” Debbie told me.

“Who do I page?” I asked.

“The manager on duty,” Debbie replied.

“Who is that?”

“Look at the time sheet.”

“What time sheet?”

“You didn’t get a time sheet?”

“I don’t know what a time sheet is.”

“Is this going to take very long?” the woman asked. Her toddler moaned.

“Try paging Marissa,” Debbie suggested. I had encountered Marissa earlier, in the lunchroom. She looked about 18 and I had no idea that she was a manager. I had given her a quick smile, but because of her braces, she returned more of a scowl.

I picked up the phone receiver, dialed and waited for my cue. The music stopped, there was a beep, and then I said, “Marissa call two-two-four please, Marissa two-two-four.” I hung up the phone without hitting the release button.

“Okay, there’s no way she heard that.” Debbie picked up the phone and did it again, this time talking very loud into the receiver. She pressed the release button and hung up the phone. “Also, don’t forget to press the release button before you hang up.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“How long will it take for Marissa to call back?” The woman tapped the counter as she waited. She did not look at her toddler. His face was covered in tears and mucus. He was likely as red and slimy as the day he was born.

“Shouldn’t be too long at all,” Debbie smiled.

The phone at my till rang and I answered it. It was Marissa.

“I’m on my lunch,” she said and then hung up. I wondered if the scowl from earlier had nothing to do with her braces. I looked at Debbie.

“Marissa is on her lunch,” I said.

Debbie grabbed a paper from beside my register. I assumed that this was the time sheet. She scanned over the long list of names while the woman sighed and gasped in disgust. The toddler sat crying in the shopping cart and stretched his chubby arms into a “V” above his head.

“Try calling Karen,” Debbie suggested.

I paged Karen, this time making absolutely sure to hit the release button before hanging up. I saw Debbie huff and shake her head, though I couldn’t figure out why.

The phone rang at my till and I answered quickly. “Hello?”

“You called me.” It must have been Karen.

“Yeah, can you come to register four?”

“No, I’m in the baby department right now.”

“Well, I’m having a hard time figuring out who the manager on duty is.”

“Well,” Karen said. “You need to find out who the manager on duty is. Oh, and next time you make a page, don’t forget to press the release button before you hang up.” She hung up.

I turned and stared at Debbie. “Karen is in the baby section.”

“This is ridiculous!” the woman hollered. She threw her hands in the air and then let them slap down on the counter.

“Okay, try Brooke.” I paged Brooke, making sure to press the release button before hanging up.

Debbie looked at the woman. “Those are lovely earrings,” she said.

“Thank you,” said the woman as she pinched her lips together and gripped the receipt.

Brooke phoned back and agreed to meet us at register four as soon as possible. In the meantime, Debbie continued to try and make small talk with the woman. I stared at the toddler. He had green eyes under all those tears.

Brooke arrived and asked Debbie what the problem was without looking at me.

“Okay,” said Brooke to the woman. “Unfortunately I need to return your entire purchase and then ring everything in again.”

“What!” the woman yelled. “I can’t wait that long”

“Well that’s the only way to do it,” Brooke explained.

“Oh my God!” said the woman. “Forget it!” She grabbed her items and threw them into her shopping cart. The toddler kept crying with his arms raised in a “V” as he was wheeled through the automatic doors. Brook, Debbie and I remained crowded at register four.

Brook looked at me. “Try and be more careful next time. Oh, and when you page, make sure you press the release button before you hang up.”

“I know. I’ve been told,” I said. Brooke walked away. I turned and saw Debbie still perched beside my register, awaiting my next mistake and her next opportunity to correct it. A customer wandered toward the checkout.

“Sir,” Debbie called for his attention. “Can we help you over here?”

My shift ended and I headed straight home. When I got there, my Mom and Dad were sitting at the kitchen table playing cribbage, smoking cigarettes and drinking. My Mom had a light beer while Dad stuck to rum and diet Pepsi because of his diabetes.

“Want to play some cribbage?” Dad asked while grey smoke shot out his nostrils.

“I don’t know how.” I sat beside them at the table with a plate of cold leftovers.

“You don’t know how to play cribbage!” my mother bellowed. After most things that my mother said, she made a little noise, like a tiny grunt or a nervous humming sound. The more she drank, the more pronounced the noise became. “I can’t believe you could grow up in this house and not know how to play cribbage! Hmmpf.”

“When I’m done eating I’ll play a hand,” I said. My mother slid the ashtray away from where I was sitting, down to the other end of the table.

“Hey,” Dad shouted. “I can’t reach it way over there!”

“Well, your daughter’s eating,” Mom said.

“Well I can’t reach it way over there!” Dad moved the ashtray back beside me. “That’s better,” he said.

“I think tonight’s the night Les Peters loses,” my Mom said. My parents were obsessed with Les Peters. He was beating the pants off of everyone on Jeopardy, winning more than any other contestant in the history of the game show. My Dad checked the internet every day to see what the insiders had to say about Les’s winning streak. Apparently, everyone agreed that Les would lose in his 83<sup>rd</sup> game, which was tonight. According to Dad, even the producers of the show had supported that

information, although I couldn't understand how Dad knew that for certain. My parents talked about Les constantly to anyone who would listen.

"They say tonight's the night," my mother said to someone on the phone last week. That was when Dad had thought Les would lose originally, although he had apparently just read the date wrong or misunderstood something.

"What do you mean 'what night'?" Mom continued over the phone. "You know, don't you watch Jeopardy?... Yeah, well Les's been winning for a couple months now... Yeah, well I thought you'd of known that... Well tonight's the night he loses."

My mother did not pursue a conversation about Les Peters with me.

"Did you send that email?" she asked me as I began to relax after my meal.

"What email?" I asked.

"The one I cut out of the paper for you? Hmmph."

"What email did you cut out of the paper?"

"About the web designer?"

"Oh, right."

My Mom was in the habit of cutting out articles from the newspaper that she thought I'd like. Often they were either personal-interest stories about cats or news articles about how poorly Wal-Mart treated its staff. But lately, she had taken to cutting from the classified section job descriptions she thought I might be interested in. Her latest finding was for a part-time web designer for a small marketing company located in Mississauga. I couldn't support myself part-time, had absolutely no experience in web design, was not interested in marketing, and hated Mississauga.

"No," I said. "I didn't email them."

“Why not? Hmmph,” Mom asked.

“Because I don’t want to be a web designer,” I said.

“You’d rather be a cashier?”

“I don’t want to be a cashier. I just am one.”

“Well,” she said. “Then apply for the job doing web design. Hmmph.”

“Don’t start about this.”

“What am I starting? I’m not starting anything.”

“Yes you are.”

“All I did was ask you if you’d sent an email. Hmmph.”

“I’m going to go to my room.” I went downstairs leaving my dirty plate on the table.

“No,” Mom said. “I didn’t mean you had to leave.”

“Well, I have no idea what you mean, ever!” I entered my room and closed the door. I could hear the TV blaring and my parents talking, about me, over it. This was all the peace and quiet I could hope for.

I was stuck in my room with its bare walls and empty bookshelves. I hadn’t gotten a dresser yet, so all my clothes were in garbage bags on the floor. On my bed was a thin quilt that my grandmother had made for me when I was born. It was orange and yellow with a large cartoon duck in the centre. There were two thin pillows that made my neck hurt in the morning.

I had a small nightstand and I could see that my mom had left me some reading material. I glanced at the title on the small pamphlet. “Disgusting and Inhumane” was written in large red letters over a black and white photo of a fetus. Inside, a comic strip



showed a cartoon fetus being removed from a cartoon womb by a pair of enormous hands. The accompanying text explained that the fetus could not be pulled out easily. Its head was too big and would get stuck inside the uterus. If a doctor tried to remove it this way, then instead of the whole body sliding out, its head would be torn off. In order to prevent this from happening, the skull contents were removed using some kind of suction device. This collapsed the skull, and allowed the fetus to slide out of the womb, pulled gently by the doctor's gloved hands.

I let the pamphlet fall to the floor beside my bed. The TV still muttered in the background. I closed my eyes and considered how it would feel to have my brains sucked out. I went to bed with my clothes on.

Suddenly, it was like a shot went off. My eyes sprang open. I missed him so much that my bones ached. It lasted a few seconds, or was it several minutes? I fell back asleep.

The next day, I had to run to get to work on time. I raced through the doors of Toys-O-Ramma, around the small children and piled shopping carts to the back of the store, and then bolted into the lunch room, where my uniform was in my locker. Because of my jaunt, I was a little sweaty by the time I finally stood in one place long enough to strip out of my winter wear and put on my uniform. My white dress shirt was damp under the armpits and down the centre of my back. I doubted that I smelled very good. I punched in.

A few of my co-workers sat silently in the staffroom. I didn't say anything to them. Instead I read a scribbled message on a large white board mounted on the wall.

*This breakroom is DISGUSTING! It is obviously that you live like this at home.*

*(Food on the floor.) Paper airplanes all over the floor. This stops NOW! If not the breakroom will be closed to everyone. Same for washrooms. -Management.*

I headed for the front of the store where the cashier supervisor told me I was on register five.

My first customer of the day was a woman who looked about thirty-five. She had blood-red hair, thick eye-makeup and black lipstick. She was buying three miniature sports cars, two WWF action figures and a Scrabble game.

"Can I get you a gift receipt for any of these items?" I asked.

"Um, yes," she said.

"Which items?"

"All of them."

"Together on the same receipt? Or separated?"

"I don't know. What is a gift receipt?"

"A gift receipt is a receipt without the price on it which is good for an exchange or store credit."

"So I can't return it?"

"Not with the gift receipt."

"I thought I had 45 days after Christmas to make a return."

"With a regular receipt, but not with a gift receipt."

"So why would I want a gift receipt?"

“The gift receipt is only if you won’t see the person after you give them the gift and you don’t want them to know how much it cost.”

“Huh?”

“You can give them the receipt at the same time as the gift and they can exchange it on their own.”

“Oh! No, I don’t think I want a gift receipt.”

“Okay,” I said. I rang in her purchases. She paid and left.

Later, a chunky, middle-aged couple wearing matching winter coats came to my till. They were buying a karaoke machine and a toy dog that barked and did back flips. I rang in their purchases and then tried to up-sell them on some batteries.

“I don’t know.” The man looked to his female companion. “Honey, don’t you have batteries at home?”

“Yeah,” the woman said. “For my vibrator.” The couple threw their heads back in laughter. The man slapped his thick thigh.

“Okay.” I put my head down and tried to fit their extra-large purchases into some extra-large bags behind the teeny-tiny counter.

“What is it, four AAs?” the man asked his companion. “Kathy,” the man said, reading my name tag and abbreviating. “Do you always blush like that?”

“Yeah, I blush.”

“Or are you just upset because yours takes five AAs?” He laughed again.

I smiled politely.

“Gary,” said his lady-friend, “leave the poor girl alone.”

“Well, at least there’s been a little excitement in your day,” the man said as I handed him back his credit card and he left the store.

I decided I was going to take a break. I’d call the cashier supervisor and tell her I had cramps, or some other kind of internal bleeding. I picked up the phone at my till, dialed 800, didn’t wait for the pause and ended up making a page that said: “ive seven please. Jane two five seven.” Then, I slammed the phone’s handset down, without hitting the release button, and the phone fell off the wall, onto my cash register, causing it to make a long beeping noise.

The slamming noise played throughout the store, but was absorbed into the bright plastic toys piled to the ceiling, surrounding me on all sides. Then the Christmas carols came back on. These songs were fed in from some satellite in Denver where head office decided what to play in all the Toys-O-Rammas everywhere, so that if you ever found yourself in two Toys-O-Rammas at the same time, it would not be the defiance of physics that struck you first, it would be the synchronicity of the tunes. But that would still not make them good tunes.

## The Falls Side

Shannon and I had been working together at the Falls Side Hotel for two months, although Shannon had worked there for two years total, including the six months she took off for maternity leave, when we encountered the people we later referred to as the Get-Away Couple.

It wasn't exactly my dream in life to be a housekeeper, or chambermaid, or whatever, but I was pretty messed up over my recent break-up with Charlie, the saddest I'd ever been, actually, and was also broke and also living with my mom again, so Shannon got me a job at her work when I moved back to Niagara Falls, Ontario, our hometown. Shannon and I had been friends since high school. Since she was going through a divorce while I was dealing with a breakup of my own, we had lots to talk about, which is always a plus when you've got a crappy job to do.

"You're the fastest, you two, that's why I asked you," our manager, Donatella, had told us, but in fact, that was not true. She'd asked us of all people because she was a 55-year-old lesbian with the total hots for Shannon and was trying to kiss up a little. Shannon was not interested, but played her cards so that her tardiness, extra smoke breaks and the odd stolen housecoat went unnoticed by Donatella. This meant however that Donatella saw me as the "other woman," which was fine since her dislike of me did not outweigh her attraction to Shannon and so Shannon got enough perks to go around. I figured one day Shannon might score me a housecoat too.

"Je-ee-ee-sus," Donatella said after letting us into room 916. "Some people, hey girls? Some people." She thumbed the collar of a men's wool jacket that was hung over

the back of a chair. “Like money’s disposable to them.” She took a long look at the mess the room was in. “Put it all in bags, girls, all of it – even the expensive stuff.” She looked back at me. “I’ll ask Security where to put it.”

It had happened before where I’d found a drawer full of socks or a bag of make-up in the bathroom, something that got overlooked and left behind. But these people left everything. All their clothes, their bathroom supplies, their shoes and luggage. Piles of magazines and books completely covered the desk. The closet was full of dresses and men’s jackets. There was a nightgown on the back of the bathroom door and empty food containers sitting on the piles of junk. The people had lived in this hotel room for just over a week, but it looked like they’d lived there for a month.

I grabbed a bunch of spare garbage bags from my cart and walked to the far end of the room, near the desk, beside the window. The Falls Side Hotel guaranteed everyone who stayed in it a view of the Canadian and American waterfalls, both of them natural wonders of the world. It meant that the hotel was long and thin, with rooms on only one side of the hallway. Every room had virtually the same view of the semi-circular falls and stone walkways and kiosks selling hotdogs and lots of tiny people posing in groups for cameras. After only two months, I rarely did more than glance out the window, quickly, while I was cleaning the far end of the room and if the curtains were closed, sometimes I just left them closed. The falls had always been there, and I figured they always would be.

“The counter is covered in pill bottles,” Shannon yelled from the bathroom.

“Anything good?” I yelled back as I began to fill a garbage bag.

“It’s all herbal shit,” she said. “No fun.”

“Sometimes herbal shit can be fun,” I offered.

“Naw,” said Shannon. “I’m a mom now anyway. Gotta make good decisions.”

The longer I worked with Shannon, the more it seemed to me that she missed the good old days of sitting on her mom’s couch, getting high and planning for a future that wasn’t here yet. The first day I slept over at Shannon’s, we smoked some hash oil that Shannon’s mom’s boyfriend had given us, and that he’d described as “pretty mediocre.” We sat baked on her couch laughing at a porno called *Forrest Hump* that Shannon had found in her mom’s closet. When Shannon and I were baked we often started talking about the falls, wondering what it would be like to see them as a bird, imagining the feeling of going over in a barrel, figuring that maybe they were the secret centre of the universe. Shannon said, “Like, okay, so let’s say that the waterfall is actually just a microcosm, or a macrocosm, like the way people are always thinking about jumping over it to see what is on the bottom. Well suppose that our waterfall is just the bottom of another waterfall, and some people jump over it into our world thinking it will be better than the one they’re from, and you could go back up out of it if you just worked it out right in your head.” We both used to try to imagine coming from way up above and then crashing down into Niagara Falls, Ontario, the strip with all the wax museums and the three-story motels and the big hotels that bought up all the land closest to the falls and that somehow promise everyone the same view so that no one gets jealous or whatever.

I looked around room 916. “All this is going to go in the garbage?” I moved to the desk and started tossing the magazines and cardboard food containers into a garbage bag. The magazines on the desk were women’s fashion magazines, but there were also some copies of *US* and *People*, the same magazines that Charlie used to read. Beside the

desk was a suitcase, completely closed and standing upright. I undid the zippers and peaked inside. It was half-full of dirty socks and there was a cellophane wrapper from a pack of cigarettes. I zipped it back up and leaned the suitcase up against the wall. In the space between the bed and the window there were three piles of clothes that had been sorted into whites, colours and darks.

“I guess they were going to wash these before they abandoned them.”

“Huh?” Shannon was still throwing out the pill bottles in the bathroom, apparently one at a time, just in case there was anything better than multivitamins or weight-loss supplements.

“Their clothes, they sorted them into piles.” There were a couple of sweaters in the colours pile that looked like they would fit me. I picked one up and held it to my chest. “Who do you think they were?”

“Who knows.”

“They left *all* their clothes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they have more tucked away in a castle somewhere.”

I dropped the garbage bag I was holding and headed into the bathroom. “How many toothbrushes are there?”

“Two. And one tube of Crest whitening toothpaste and a bottle of Chanel face wash.”

I picked up the face wash. “This looks expensive.”

“Put it in the bag, Denise. It’s not worth losing your job over.”

“No, I know. I just think, it’s so small, they could have easily taken it with them.”



“Well, clearly, they were in a huge fucking rush.” Shannon dragged the garbage bag into the foyer just outside of the bathroom door.

I pulled back the curtain on the bathtub and found two damp bathing suits hanging from the shower head, as well as three opened bars of hotel soap and one bottle of store-bought shampoo. “They also forgot their ‘hair growth stimulating shampoo for men.’ I’ll bet someone’s missing that.”

Shannon moved back into the bathroom next to me. “Is it weird that there are empty pudding cups *and* five empty bottles of Laker Light?”

“I don’t know, is it?”

Shannon looked at me with her eyebrows raised. “Denise, like he was totally way older than her.” She shook her head. “A little Lolita action, maybe?”

I made a barfing noise. “Unless the pudding cups were his.” I put the swimsuits, shampoo and little bars of soap into a garbage bag.

“What kind of adult eats pudding cups?”

“The kind who lives in a hotel room for a month.”

“Like the Lolita guy. Who played him in that movie?”

“Jeremy Irons.”

“My mom thinks he’s hot.”

“Mine too.”

“Even though he’s a pedophile?”

“Only in the movie.”

“This could be the root cause of our problems with men, Denise.”

“That our moms like Jeremy Irons?”

“Settle down. You want to clean the bathtub, or should I?”

“You can. I’ll do the beds.”

“Maybe there wasn’t a big age difference,” I said as I walked back into the bedroom area. “Or you know, if there was, she could have still been an adult.” I wanted to imagine the couple as happy and loving, the way Charlie and I had once been. I pictured him running her a bath after she’d worked all day.

“No, you’re right,” said Shannon. “No sense getting worked up over nothing.”

Then I found a hairbrush on the floor between the two beds and I gagged a little. “I hate other people’s hair.” Shannon came into the bedroom and we both huddled together, looking at the strands inside of the brush’s bristles.

“Dyed,” said Shannon.

“She was probably in her twenties, at least.”

“How old were you when you first dyed your hair?”

“Eighteen. Still, an adult.”

“I was twelve.”

“What?”

“To piss off my parents. I dyed it mahogany with a box of henna that Jenna Woodhouse’s mom picked up in Buffalo.”

“Did it wash out?”

“Sort of. But I didn’t start *dye-dying* my hair until I was 22. I was waitressing at Wimpy’s and they said the girls on staff had to look nice.”

“You didn’t get the same memo about this place?” I asked as I scratched my head and stuck out my tongue. The uniforms were powder-blue pants and matching golf-style

shirts with white collars and trim around the breast pocket, but the best part was the blackened knee pads that fit poorly and were too thin to be useful. We looked like a couple of washed-up roller derby queens.

Shannon laughed a little.

“Do you ever talk to Jenna anymore? Didn’t she move out of town?” I asked.

“She did, but she’s back now.” Shannon looked at me. “They always move back.”

“Shut up.”

“Anyway, I saw Jenna at Grumpy’s just last Wednesday and she said she saw Bill Gitlin on the States side two weeks ago. He married an American girl and, *co-in-ci-dent-ally*, he is totally bald.”

“And he’s young, right?”

“He’s older than you’d think.”

“So if she’s about 22, and he’s balding, then that could be totally fine, although it still doesn’t explain why they left.” I thought about when I had packed a bag and left mine and Charlie’s old apartment. How I’d snuck out late one night, before he got home from the bar. I pulled hard on the corners of the fitted sheet to get them out from under the mattress. “Maybe she left him and he followed. Or maybe he cheated on her and she found out.”

“Maybe he checked his other girlfriend into a room downstairs and thought he could just divide his time here between the two of them.”

“No one would really do that.”

“Sure they would. Guys are dogs.”

“But that?”

“Did you look all the way under the bed? If they left all this out in the open...

It’s going to be fucked up under the bed.”

“I bet it’s spotless.”

“I hope it’s spotless.”

We squatted down beside each other and looked under the bed. There were three more magazines, a wool scarf, six or seven empty water bottles, a few dirty spoons and more clothes. But nothing horrifying.

Shannon pointed at one of the magazines. “Porno?”

“Not sure.” I reached my hand under the bed and picked up a magazine. “Yep.”

“Sleazeball.” Shannon stood up and went back to the washroom.

“Like you don’t read porno.”

“*Read* porno, Denise? No one *reads* porno.”

“Watch. Look at. Whatever.”

“Sure, but I already pegged this guy for a perv, and its different when pervs read porn.”

I could see the sharp heels of a pair of red stilettos peeking out from underneath the clothes. I bent down and picked them up, and when I stood up again, my left kneepad fell down to my ankle.

“These kneepads are driving me crazy!” I hollered to Shannon, who was still in the bathroom.

“Yeah, try not wearing kneepads and see how crazy that drives you.” Shannon walked out of the bathroom and stood in the middle of the bedroom, next to the television.

“Did you notice my limp?” she asked.

“What limp?”

“So, you didn’t notice.” Shannon took off both of her rubber gloves and pointed at her right knee.

“Listen to this.” She bent her knee several times. “You hear it?”

“No,” I said.

“Like Rice Krispies. Did I tell you when I was on my ‘separation vacation’ last month I decided to go on one of those boat rides under the falls? Something about the mist and the humidity down there or something, my knee *locks*. Freezes right up. I thought it might never go back to normal, like for the rest of my life I wouldn’t be able to bend my knee. Did I tell you? And everyone else there is Japanese so I don’t know how I’m supposed to tell them that I’m basically paralyzed. But then it eased up. From this job, Denise, that’s what does it.”

“But you don’t even look like you’re limping,” I said.

“I totally fucking am. I’ll probably need surgery eventually.”

“Well, you’ll always know when it’s about to rain.”

“What?”

“Never mind. At least you got a vacation.”

“Yeah, but it would have been better if I’d gone away. I feel sorry for tourists who come here. There isn’t anything to do and you just get ripped off all the time.”

Shannon put her gloves back on. I thought of how I'd always wanted to take Charlie on a boat ride under the falls, but he'd insisted that they were uncomfortable and overpriced. Maybe he'd been right.

"Did I tell you about the guy I met from Mexico at Wimpy's?" Shannon continued. "He was visiting Niagara Falls with his girlfriend, although I never met the girlfriend. I was talking to him for, like, ten seconds before he told me he had ecstasy in his backpack if I wanted some. Did I tell you? I said 'No way, Jose!' before I even realized that his name might actually be Jose, but I guess it wasn't. *Then*, he tells me he has coke if I'm more into that. I thought about it for a second, since I was on vacation, but no, no, I thought, I'm a mom now, I need to make better decisions, even when I'm on vacation."

"Good for you," I said.

"*Then* he tells me also has pot, hash, Percocets and mescaline. In his backpack!"

"And you didn't do any of it?"

"Some pot, just some pot – and only because I was on vacation. It was shit anyway."

"Have you talked to Jeff since you got back from vaca – what the hell?" I had pulled open the drawer of the nightstand between the two beds. There were about fifteen double-A batteries in it. "I just don't get it." I turned to Shannon. "Need some batteries?"

"Careful, there are probably about eight different sex toys around here somewhere that go with those batteries. Put your gloves on, Denise."

Shannon limped back to the bathroom and I moved to the other bed and began to strip off the sheets.

“But I was saying, have you talked to Jeff?”

“I have. We might try couples therapy. I’m still going to stay with my mom for a while, though.”

“I hope you two can work it out.”

“Should I ask you about Charlie?” Shannon said. “Don’t tell me if you don’t want.”

“Charlie and I aren’t talking. My lawyer said not to be in contact with him.”

“Lawyers. Shit. When did things get so fucking complicated?”

“Seriously.” I sprayed the nightstand with cleaner and wiped it down. “Maybe these two were just a couple of daredevils. Maybe they are cramming themselves into a barrel as we speak.”

“They were running from the law, I bet.”

“Maybe for robbing a casino, or a bank, so they won’t need this stuff because they can afford to get all new everything.” I turned the lamp on and off to make sure the bulb didn’t need replacing. “Maybe they’re starting over. Maybe they just had enough of who they were and left it all behind.”

“People don’t really do that.”

“I don’t know. They don’t do it often, but they might still do it once in a while.”

“Well, then they’re the suckers.”

“They’re not suckers, they’re-”

“They’re suckers because they’ll still be their same shitty selves, even without all their stuff. But now they don’t even have anything to wear.” Shannon came out of the washroom and threw a half-full garbage bag against the floor. “Denise, I have other rooms to clean later. I don’t want to work until midnight.”

“Me neither.”

“Well, my kid doesn’t want me to work until midnight either, so that makes three of us. Neither does my mom, who’ll have to babysit her until midnight if that’s when I work until, so that makes four.”

I looked at the floor and felt my face get hot. “I get it, Shannon,” I said without looking up. “Neither of us wants to work until midnight.”

Shannon looked at me and then turned away and dumped the waste bin out into a garbage bag. “We still gotta vacuum and do the mirrors.”

“We’ve still got a lot to do before then.”

“I know, I was just saying.” She moved back into the bathroom and I heard the faucets turn on. I hated the way that Shannon always brought up her kid, as if being a mother made her time more precious than mine. Charlie didn’t want kids, so I said I didn’t either, and never really thought about it after that, but I used to look at pictures of his niece, sometimes, because I figured that was sort of what our daughter would look like, if we ever had one. So it wasn’t like I couldn’t even imagine what it was like to have a kid.

I moved over to the entertainment unit and began opening drawers. The first drawer was full, almost to the brim, with men’s shirts. Some were dress shirts and others were plain t-shirts but they were all neatly folded. At the bottom of the drawer, buried



under the clothes, was a Lonely Planet guide to New York City. The cover was worn and soft, but still held some gloss in its finish. Were they headed there, or had they just been? I'd lived a drive away from New York City my whole life and I'd never visited once. Charlie had said that we would go but we never made it. I stuck the slim guidebook down the back of my pants. My baggy shirt covered the bulge it created.

I opened the next drawer, and it was as tidy as the first. It was full of jeans, about five or six pairs. These people were clean when they wanted to be, or maybe they had split personalities, or maybe she was messy and he was neat. Maybe they fought about it, and that's why they broke up and left. The basement room where I was staying in my mom's house was so cold and lonely. I used to hate all of the stuff that Charlie left around the apartment, but I hated the thought of it all being gone now.

"Bathroom's done," Shannon said, walking into the bedroom. "Whoa, you alright?"

I sat back on my heels. "I'm fine. I'm just, I'm tired."

She took off her gloves and squatted beside me.

"I know," she said and put her hand on my back and helped me up.

We emptied out the second drawer together. Then we both moved all of the garbage bags into the hallway and put all of the dirty linen into the hampers. I took two sets of sheets off of my cart and walked back into the room. I stood at the foot of the bed and snapped the folded sheet out in front of me. We both watched it float onto the mattress and then I crouched down beside the bed to tuck the first corner under.

"Careful," Shannon said. "There may be a dead hooker buried in the box spring."

"What?"

“Guilty. These people seem guilty.”

“That wouldn’t make sense,” I said. “Look at all the evidence they’d have left behind.” I stuck my hands under the mattress. There was nothing there.

Shannon and I finished making the beds together. I dusted the rest of the furniture while she vacuumed the carpet.

“How long did that take us?” I asked.

Shannon looked at her watch. “Thirty-five minutes. Some of these girls take longer than that just to do the bathroom.” Shannon held her right palm up in the air and we high-fived each other. I grabbed my rags and all-purpose cleaner and we headed out the door. Before I turned off the light, I gave the room one more glance. We’d made it so that it looked like every other room in the hotel. The beds were perfectly made and totally identical to each other, the carpet was clean and the furniture was shiny. It was as if those strange customers had never been there. Out the window I looked at Niagara Falls crashing down outside the hotel. Seeing it from inside room 916, I felt farther away from it than I ever had before. My eyes traced the perimeter of the horseshoe shape, moving away from and then coming back to the walkway in front of the hotel. Next, I looked out, past the falls to the border that separated Ontario from New York State. I could feel the travel guide against my skin. I followed Shannon out of the room, turning out the light and closing the door behind us.

## Sam

I had decided that I wasn't going home for Christmas because I was tired of my family—my sister's drama, my brother's selfishness, and my mother, Jesus God my mother—but when the time finally came, I kept thinking of Sam. My step-dad had always loved Christmas, and I knew that this one could be his last. I thought about him and I missed him. Even though I'd repeatedly told my friends and neighbours that I was looking forward to spending the holiday alone, I finally decided to fly home on Christmas Eve.

I took a cab from the airport, then stood in the driveway outside of Sam and my mother's house. The street around the house was cold and empty and the shrubbs in front of the bare porch were wrapped in brown burlap. But the windows were foggy with moisture from body heat and I could hear a low thump of music and laughter. I walked up the driveway.

Just as I got to the front door, it flew open in front of me. The interior of the house was blinding, throbbing with the glow of red and white Christmas lights. Three of my older cousins, all with cigarettes stuck in their lips and drinks in their hands, pushed out onto the porch.

"Hey," said my cousin Eliot as he stepped outside. "I heard you weren't coming."

"Well," I said. "I guess I changed my mind." I noticed that Eliot was carrying two beers in his left hand while he removed the cigarette from his mouth with the other.

"You've got your work cut out for you," I said to him.

"Yeah, Charlotte is pregnant again, so I'm drinking for two now."

“Congrats.”

He grinned.

I passed my other two cousins and slipped into the house. The place was full of people, all relatives on my mother’s side of the family. My four uncles were gathered around the buffet, filling their round bellies with ginger cookies decorated to look like Santa Claus.

I put down my duffel bag and took off my boots. There was such a bustle inside that no one seemed to notice that I’d entered. I walked down the hallway into the kitchen. The house smelled like scented candles and a rock ‘n’ roll Christmas album played behind the din of conversation. My mother was standing at the kitchen counter pouring vodka into a jigger.

“You’ve *got* to try a candy-cane martini,” she said to my Aunt Louise, who stood next to her, holding a full glass of wine in her hand.

“That sounds neat,” said my Aunt Louise. She swayed a little as she spoke.

I took off my coat and hung it on the back of a kitchen chair. My mother turned around and looked at me, shaking the jigger as we made eye contact.

“You can put that in the closet, please,” she said.

I did as I was asked without saying a word. The hallway closet was full of coats and there didn’t seem to be any extra hangers, so I threw my coat on the floor, on top of all the boots. I started thinking about the candy-cane martini.

I walked towards the kitchen once again. This time, my mother approached me half way down the hallway. She reached out and grabbed me by both shoulders and then threw me into her chest, into a strong hug.

“You look good,” she said once she released me. “You look healthy.”

“Healthy?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. You were too thin before.”

“I’ve put on weight?”

“No, I didn’t mean that. It’s just that you usually have dark circles under your eyes but now you don’t. Are you still off the--”

“Yes,” I answered.

We stared at each other for a moment, trapped in the narrow hallway, each of us blocking the other from moving.

“Where is Sam?” I asked.

“In the living room.”

I walked through the crowd of people towards the living room. There were people I didn’t recognize, and I was greeted by people who most certainly didn’t recognize me.

Then my sister appeared from out of the crowd, holding a glass of red wine and smiling at me.

“Hey Liz,” she said.

“Hi Brittany.” I stared at her wine glass for a second, then looked her up and down. She wore a slim-fitting black dress with a crew neck, as well as sheer tights and a pair of kitten heels that matched both her lipstick and her nail polish. Her hair was freshly dyed and delicately curled around her face. She wore dark, heavy eye makeup that made her look old, but otherwise, she looked beautiful. I folded my arms across my chest. “I’m so sorry about you and John,” I said.

She shrugged. “Maybe it was the best thing that could have happened to me.” She shrugged again. In fact, it seemed that she had started shrugging and couldn’t stop. “I know. Who ever thought that I would get jilted? I had to return all the gifts, send out notices of cancellation, and we didn’t take out insurance on the honeymoon.”

“Why not go anyway? To get a break.”

“I never really wanted to go to Cuba,” she said, still shrugging. “I wanted to go to Paris.” She took a sip of her wine, then she looked at me as though she were suddenly embarrassed. “Oh Lizzy, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?”

“Does this bother you?” She glanced at her wine glass.

“No.” It was my turn to shrug.

She smiled. “Well, I should have known I guess, when I said Paris and he said Cuba, that things weren’t right between us.”

“How’s mom taking it?” I knew that my mother was desperate for one of her kids to have a wedding. She’d told me that she always knew Brittany would be the first.

“She wants us to try and work it out.” Brittany pointed at the ceiling with her free hand. “Not. Happening.”

“Is Carl here?”

“No,” Brittany said, her curls bouncing as she shook her head. “He stayed in Calgary. He makes double-time if he works on a holiday. Plus, he’s hanging with his lady, I guess.” Brittany rolled her eyes and took another drink.

“You’ve met her?” My brother Carl moved to Alberta three years ago and had only made one trip home since then. His life out there was a mystery.

“No, but I’ve seen some photos.” Brittany moved in closer and whispered. “Total. Skank.” She stepped back again. “Just like Carl to end up with some tart.”

“Maybe she’s really nice.”

“You can tell a lot about a book just by its cover,” she insisted. Then she looked at me in my jeans and striped dress shirt. I stood in my socks, shifting my weight uncomfortably.

“It’s been a long few months, hasn’t it?” I said, trying to smile.

“Fuck. Yes.”

“Have you seen Sam?”

Brittany looked down. “It’s not good, Lizzy. You know,” she said, shaking her head. “Everyone has one parent that they really don’t want to see go *first*.”

I paused, then said, “I wanted to come see him,”

She nodded. “It’s good that you did. He’s in the living room.” She looked back over her left shoulder at the buffet. “I’ll catch you soon.” She met my eyes with a look of sadness and nodded slowly as she turned to walk away.

I faced the living room and saw Sam sitting alone in a sofa chair. He was a short man and looked tiny in the oversized furniture. I checked to see if his feet touched the ground.

There was a time when you could barely tell Sam’s neck from his shoulders. They joined in one tense group of muscle and vein. We used to have a game we’d play together when I was smaller, a show that I liked for us to perform in front of others. He’d grab onto my hair at the top of my head and pretend to lift me up that way. I would actually be holding onto his wrists, but I’d scream like the pain was almost killing me.

Now, at 59, the skin hung loose around his neck. He'd lost a lot of weight in the last year, since starting radiation treatment. Now, he couldn't pick me up off the ground with both hands and a forklift.

"You made it," Sam said when he saw me. "Here." He struggled to pull the ottoman out from beside his chair. "I saved you a seat."

"How are things?" I asked him, moving the ottoman myself and sitting down.

"Oh, you know." Sam smiled at me. His eyes were icy blue. I knew almost nothing about Sam. I was ten years old when he married my mom. My brother was eight and my sister was five. I knew that he was not born in Hamilton, but that according to my grandmother, he had moved to Ontario from Nova Scotia in order to take advantage of our excellent welfare system. It seemed to me however that he'd worked every day of his life.

Sam and I sat on the periphery of the get-together, turned so that we were both facing the crowd of people. He asked if I wanted a drink, but I declined.

"We've got pop, too," he assured me. "And juice."

"Nothing right now," I told him.

"How is that going?" he asked me, glancing towards his own light beer.

"Still fine," I said. "126 days."

"One day at a time, isn't that what they say?"

"Sure is."

"I'm proud of you," he said. I felt my eyes tear up, but I took a deep breath and they cleared. I looked around the room. My mother had decorated the tree this year using only tinsel and white Christmas lights. There was a family of stuffed reindeer



sitting in the middle of the coffee table. She had three poinsettias that I could see from where I sat.

“Your mother did a nice job this year,” Sam said to me.

“Hm.” I nodded.

“She loves you very much,” he said, touching my knee with his hand. I turned slightly and he took his hand back. I felt thirsty, but couldn’t stand the thought of going back into the kitchen.

“I noticed that Buffalo to San Francisco is only \$129 return,” Sam said.

“You thinking of going?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said. Sam was always telling me about discount airfares, potential get-aways, but he never actually purchased them.

“You should go,” he said to me. “You like San Francisco.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I’ll be able to get away from work any time soon.”

An explosion of laughter came from the kitchen. I heard my Uncle Dave’s voice boom above the rest. It was followed by shrill squeals from some of my aunts and female cousins. Bruce Springsteen’s version of “Merry Christmas, Baby” started playing for what seemed like the third time.

“I used to love Christmas,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

“Remember that one Christmas, when we made that snowman to hang in the window?”

“Of course. That was so long ago.”

Sam took a sip of his beer. His hand shook as he brought the heavy glass to his lips.

“You must have been about eleven or twelve,” he said. “I remember I used to get so excited for Christmas morning when you kids were little.”

Sam turned to look out the window beside him. The skin on the back of his neck looked white as the snow outside. He looked back at me.

“You were just on the verge of being too old for Santa.” He looked towards the ceiling as the memory came to him. “You were asking questions like, ‘*All* the houses? In the *whole* world? In *one* night?’” He chuckled. “I wanted you to stay a kid for a while longer. I wasn’t going to burst your bubble.” Sam started to cough. He picked up a napkin near him and held it to his mouth. He coughed hard for a several seconds, then calmed back down. He looked at me and shook his head, then leaned back and closed his eyes. “Oh dear, oh dear,” he repeated softly, and my eyes filled with tears again.

I swung the ottoman to the other side of where Sam sat, so that my back was to the crowded room. I needed to tell Sam so many things because I felt like he was the only one who would understand. “Brittany says that Carl’s new lady is a tart,” I said quickly, looking at the floor. “But she’s just upset about John and she’ll never be happy for anyone else but she’s always been like that. But who gets engaged to someone they’ve only known for three months?” I started rubbing my palms up and down against my thighs.

“You are surrounded by good people,” Sam said, still resting his head against the back of the chair, but looking in my direction now. “We all have our problems, our flaws. All of us.”

I shook my head and wiped tears from my face. I took some more deep breaths, hoping that would help. I was silently scolding myself for crying. I felt I needed to stop, but I couldn't.

"I don't fit in here," I said to Sam.

"You're good people, too, Elizabeth," he said.

"How come I only hear about my mistakes? How come Mom only tells me what I'm doing wrong?"

"She worries. She isn't perfect."

I felt lonely in this room full of people that Sam said were good. "Carl can't stand us, that's clear. I'm not mad at him." I looked up at Sam. "I'm jealous!"

"Leaving is the right thing to do sometimes," he said. "But when you want to stay and can't. Well..."

I stared at him as he closed his eyes again. His face was pale. The room was hot. I could see his chest moving as he breathed. His mouth was open slightly. Conversations grew louder around us. I could smell a vanilla-scented candle. I had to say something, so I opened my mouth, to tell Sam not to go. I opened my mouth, not knowing what to say, not sure of what would come out. "I want a drink," I said, "so bad and everyone is drinking and then they try and make it better by pointing out that they're drinking like telling me that they know it's awkward will make it less awkward. I could drink a full glass of whiskey. I could drink the entire thing right now in one slow pour. With just mom, and Brittany—"

"Elizabeth." Sam sat forward and our eyes met. "How many times do you think we live?"

I stared at him.

“Because you know what I think?” he said. “I think that once is enough.”

I tilted my head forward, pressing my chin into my neck, and I watched tears fall onto my lap. “What are we all going to do?”

He leaned back in his chair. “We are going to enjoy Christmas together.” He took a sip of his beer. “Your mother did a wonderful job.” He turned to me and smiled. I put my hand on his knee. I would have sat there all night. I would have stayed awake for days, on the periphery of the Christmas cheer, sitting next to Sam.

\* \* \*

One Christmas when I was little, I couldn’t sleep so I got up and sat cross-legged in the middle of the bathroom floor. I stayed there for a long time, trying not to make any noise at all. Then the door opened and Sam came in.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Me neither.”

He helped me up off the floor and we went downstairs together to the Christmas tree.

“Maybe if we open just one present,” he said. “Then do you think you’ll be able to sleep?” I nodded.

The present we opened was a do-it-yourself stained-glass window-hanging. It was a picture of a snowman with a multi-coloured scarf and hat. There were dozens,

maybe hundreds, of little beads that had to be divided into their separate colours and then placed within the correct sections of the metal frame. Once that was done, we baked it in the oven to melt the beads into coloured glass. I remember looking into the oven as it was baking and getting so excited that I laughed out loud and woke up my mom.

“Elizabeth,” she said from behind the slightly opened door to her room. “What are you doing up?”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “We’re just finishing up. We’ll both go to bed soon.”

My mom went back into her room and Sam looked at me, placing his finger in front of his lips, reminding me to be quiet. When the snowman was ready, we hung him up on the kitchen window. After that, I went to bed and slept until Christmas morning. And then, for the last time in my life, I opened presents that I believed were from Santa Claus.

## The Baby Section

As I walked through the parking lot towards my work, the red, blue and yellow façade of Toys-O-Ramma grew until it loomed over my head. I looked up and saw the grey sky, the tiny, speeding snowflakes, and the massive plastic paneling with a smiling zebra smiling out. The sliding doors were held open by my presence as I stood in front of them, staring up at the sky.

“In or out!” Inside the doors, Carly was lining shopping carts up against a wall. “In or out, Kath. I’m fucking freezing,” she said, slamming one cart into the back end of the row.

“How’s it going, Carly?” She looked at me and then she shaped her hand into a gun and motioned like she was shooting herself in the temple. I put my head down and pulled the waist of my too-small winter coat down, sensing that my belly was protruding. My mom had told me that morning that I looked like I’d put on weight since I’d moved back home. She said she’d told me just in case I wanted to do something about it, not to make me feel bad.

I turned towards Pam, who was talking on the phone behind the customer service desk. When she saw me, she hung up the receiver and held her hand out towards me, palm up, and gestured with her fingers for me to approach her. Throughout the large, box-shaped store, Christmas carols played and fluorescent lights glowed.

“Laura,” Pam said, looking at me.

I looked to my left and to my right.

“Laura,” Pam said again.

“Me?” I pointed at myself.

“Uh-huh.”

“My name’s Kathleen.”

“Huh?” Pam scrunched up her face.

“I’m Kathleen,” I repeated.

She shook her head. “Sorry, hon. Look, I just got off the phone with Bob and he’s going to need you to move to the baby department for today. Marg is going home early.”

“Okay,” I said, not moving from beside the customer service desk. “I’ll just get changed? And then go to the baby section?” I walked past the baby section almost every shift on the way to the lunchroom. I didn’t like the way it smelled. Plus, I’d never worked at the toy store as anything other than a cashier.

Pam looked at me with her eyebrows raised then nodded her head sharply.

“Good,” she said.

I walked quickly to the back of the store. I tried to enter my employee code into the lock on the break room door. My hands kept slipping and I accidentally hit two numbers at the same time. On my third try, the door opened.

The break room was a small room with hangers against one wall and lockers against another. A counter, fridge, microwave and vending machine lined the back wall, and several tables were scattered in between. On the fourth wall was a whiteboard used to communicate important messages from management to the staff. It said: “Notice! All sportswear sale items are to be scanned under the PLU/330 code until further notice. Hopefully all people will read this instead of asking stupid questions later.” Underneath

that, someone else had written: “doughnuts are for everyone. pls take one and have a Merry Cristmas.” An empty box that had once contained doughnuts sat on the table nearest the whiteboard.

I turned away from the board and saw Marg standing by the lockers while Lisa helped her get her coat on. Marg’s face was red and wet with tears. She breathed in a staccato rhythm until suddenly she heaved in a breath that seemed to get trapped in the upper part of her chest, not sinking any further in. Lisa was stroking the shoulder of Marg’s puffy down coat. Marg reached up and wiped her eyes but continued to cry, flooding more tears down where the others had been.

“We’ll wait in here for five more minutes,” Lisa said to her. “Then Dave’ll be here.”

I had been introduced to Marg during my first shift two months ago but I hadn’t seen much of her since. She was a stocky woman with short hair that curled tightly against her head. She had puffy eyes that made her look tired, although her skin looked soft. She usually managed the baby section but had been on a leave of absence recently. Apparently, she’d been pregnant this past year but her baby had been stillborn. I didn’t know too many details, but had overheard Lisa screaming about it once, saying that the company was trying to force Marg back to work for the Christmas season, since the store was so busy.

“Can you imagine? Can you imagine coming back to this job? After all that?” She’d been yelling to someone, I can’t remember who, but I remember them saying “shhhh,” and then moving their hand as if they were pushing her words down towards the ground. She calmed down a little after that.



I stood and looked at Marg and then she made eye contact with me. I put my head down and moved towards my locker. I opened the door and quickly pulled out my red vest with the always-attached name tag. I realized that I hadn't taken off my winter jacket yet, so I held my vest between my teeth while I struggled out of my coat. My arm got stuck in the sleeve so I started shaking it hard. When I finally got my coat off, I jammed it into my locker and put on my vest. I was sweating a little underneath my armpits and down my back. Lisa and Marg moved towards the door of the lunchroom, passing behind me. I thought that maybe I should turn around and say something, or turn around and smile, but I just stared really hard at the buttons on my vest as I did them up.

Once Marg and Lisa had left the break room, I gave them a couple of minutes and then exited myself. I went to the baby department where Debbie and Connie were leaned up against the counter that held the computer for the baby shower registries. They were talking to each other and holding their hands up near their mouths and shaking their heads.

"Just awful," I heard one of them say.

One of them clicked her tongue against her teeth.

"Hi," I said as I approached them. "Pam said that Bob said that I should work in the baby department today."

Debbie and Connie barely glanced at me and then continued to talk to each other. I was sure they'd heard me.

"I've only worked cash before," I said, a little louder this time. Connie looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "Um, what do you want me to do?" I looked at Connie and then she looked at Debbie.

“Okay,” said Debbie. “Why don’t you go tidy the feeding section.”

“Where is that?”

“Over there.” She pointed to the back corner of the store and a sign that said, “Feeding Section.”

I walked over to the section and saw a woman with her hands pushing against her lower back and her round belly sticking out in front of her. She looked like she was about seven months pregnant. She had her coat under her arm and a plaid winter hat on her head. She held a cardboard box that she was busy scrutinizing. I tried not to stare at her stomach.

She noticed me coming and looked me up and down. “Are these storage containers safe for the freezer?”

“Um,” I said, leaning towards the product myself. “I don’t know, but I’ll ask.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, this is my first day.” Then suddenly I felt a large hand spread against my left shoulder. Debbie was standing behind me.

“Can I help you with anything, ma’am?” she asked the woman.

“Yeah, I just want to know if these are safe for the freezer.”

“Not those ones. We have others that are specifically for the freezer. I’ll show you.” Debbie turned to me. “Do you want to come along so you can see what to do?”

I didn’t, but I shook my head and followed them.

Debbie moved further down along the display. Everything in the feeding section was stacked in tidy, rigid piles. The glossy packages all had pictures of brown-haired smiling women on them. Bright red letters that said “Pump and Save” stood out against

yellow packaging. Debbie began pointing out the various types of breast milk storage containers available, and also the canvas zipper-bags to keep them in. My eyes drifted to the different boxes on the shelf. There was a white plastic thing that looked like a couple of ice cube trays stacked on top of each other, which, I learned, was a baby bottle drying rack. More white-toothed women smiled out from packages containing bottles, topical breast cream, nipple shields and nursing pads. This was all new to me. It occurred to me that there was a whole world of things out there that I didn't know about. There were so many things I hadn't thought of, didn't even know enough about to know that I hadn't thought of. I froze in one spot and moved my left hand to my breast. What the fuck did anyone need a nipple shield for?

“Did you get that?” Debbie turned and asked me as I quickly dropped my hand back down to my side. I saw the pregnant customer walking away from us.

“What? Oh, yeah,” I said. Debbie shook her head a little then went back to where Connie stood, near the computer.

I turned to my right and saw that the adjoining wall was filled with similar looking boxes, all stacked neatly in perfect rows. The sign on the wall said “Bath and Potty.” Everything was in order and I wasn't sure what there was for me to do. There were no holes in the display or gaps where new products needed to be added. I'd been avoiding the baby section until now, but clearly it was the cleanest section in the entire store.

I continued to scan the shelves until my eyes stopped on a prenatal heart listener. The box stood out to me because not only was there a picture of a woman on it, but a man stood just behind her with his arms around her. They both wore earphones and held a

square piece of plastic over her large belly, his hand resting on top of hers. Strange that I'd only noticed one picture of a couple so far.

It made me think, "It must be strange to be a guy," which was not the most brilliant thought I'd ever had. But then I realized that what I really meant was, Justin doesn't even know that I'm pregnant. He moved away so quickly, before I'd even had a chance to tell him. We were supposed to move out to Whistler together, but he'd gone out first and met someone. Or maybe he knew her before he left. He changed his phone number and didn't leave a new one. Not that I really wanted to talk to him anyway, but I just couldn't imagine him walking around his shitty apartment, taking the lift up to the top of a ski hill, racing to get to work on time, kissing his new girlfriend on the lips, and all that time having no idea that he could be a father soon. I tried to imagine him with one pair of headphones and me with the other, listening to the heartbeat. The package said it only worked within the last months of pregnancy. I wasn't there yet.

I turned further to my right and looked at the small half-wall displaying about twelve different styles of baby shoes and some assorted baby bodysuits, apparently called "onesies." I'd heard that term for the first time years ago, when my cousin had used it at her baby shower.

"What's a onesie?" I'd asked.

"Kath," said my cousin, "you are so never babysitting for me."

Over the top of the fake display wall I could see the blond hair of two women. They were browsing the items on the other side of the display.

"Oh my god! Oh my god these are so cute."

"Oh my god! Your sister would so love this. It is so her."

“Ew, or look at this. I could get her chewable pregnancy heartburn tabs instead.”

She laughed and then pointed her finger down her throat, like she was going to gag herself. “Can you imagine?”

“I know, gawd.”

“That is totally why I am never having kids.”

“Exactly. I like your skirt.”

“Thanks, it’s new.”

“But I totally know what I’m going to name my kids if I do have them.”

“What?”

“Cassandra for a girl and Shaymis for a boy.”

“Shaymis? Oh my god that is so cool. Did you make that up?”

“Yeah, and I would spell it with a ‘y’.”

“Oh my god, awesome. Oh my god how much is this?”

“Yeah, so why aren’t there any prices on anything here?”

I opened my eyes wide and took a deep breath in. I looked over to the computer. Connie had gone but Debbie still stood there. She had noticed the two women and was flicking her hand towards them while looking at me. I figured that I had almost seven hours left in my shift. I moved around to the other side of the small display and stood next to the two young women.

“Can I help you?” I asked, and smiled.

The first girl turned to me and then elbowed her friend. She turned and looked at me too, frowning.

“No,” she said. “We’re fine.”

Suddenly my stomach went tense. I felt like the skin under my chin was sagging and like there was too much saliva at the back of my throat. I put one hand on my stomach and with the other I reached out to the fake display wall for support.

“Ew,” said one of the girls. “What is she doing?”

Suddenly, I gagged. I couldn’t control myself. Red and yellow coloured vomit hit the floor in front of the two girls. Some of it splashed up onto one girl’s shoes. Her new skirt was spared.

“Oh my god,” she hollered.

Debbie ran over and looked at the two girls.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. I felt her hand on my back. “You need to go to the lunchroom,” she said. “You should go sit down.”

I held on to Debbie and tried to steady myself against her. I remembered when I was little I used to cry every time I puked. My mom would give me flat ginger ale and tell me that she’d done the same thing when she was younger.

Debbie helped me to the washroom. I sat on the edge of the toilet seat and held my head in my hands. I didn’t want to cry at work, so I kept taking deep breaths, but it was no use. I needed someone to explain what was happening to me. I wanted to know it could be okay, that I could be happy with a baby, like the women in the ads. Or I wanted to go back to not knowing, like those sorority girls and their fucking skirt and their avant-garde spelling. I slammed my closed fist against my forehead. How many people did this alone, really?

I stood up and looked in the mirror. I looked into my own dark, swollen eyes. If I could focus on something besides the crying, then I would stop. I had seven hours left in my shift.

## Hidden in Plain Sight

You imagine how good it would feel to tell your secret to someone, but you also worry about getting caught. It is not too late for the repercussions of your crime to be felt. You decide that you can handle the weight of your past all by yourself, you can bury it inside of you and no one has to know. But then there are times when you feel that you need to get it out of you, like purging a poison or exorcising a haunted house. You often meet people who talk about honesty, its value and its importance. You decide that these people don't know what they are talking about. You decide that they don't know what they're asking for. "Honesty," you think, "is so easy for some people."

Mr. Langford had always been a creep. You always tried to remind yourself of this when you thought about his death. Your mom had told your dad, after his body was found and news of his death circulated the neighbourhood, that although she hated to say it, he had always "rubbed her the wrong way." The same was true for you, although your twelve-year-old brain couldn't quite articulate your feelings. The summer before his death, when you were eleven, Mr. Langford bought a new video camera and tested it out by sticking his head over his fence and taping you, in your parents' backyard, doing hand stands. You told your dad at dinner that night, that Mr. Langford had been videotaping you. He dropped his fork onto his plate and stared into your eyes.

"You should tell me, Jessica, when that happens."

But you had told him, just then, at dinner, and you didn't understand why he was suggesting that you hadn't. He went out and knocked on Mr. Langford's door that



evening after dinner. Your mom told you to go into the family room and watch television. You found the entire thing thoroughly confusing.

By the following summer, when you were twelve, you had newly budding breasts and hips that were sore with growth, and it seemed to you that everything in your life had changed and gone wrong. You were desperately uncomfortable with your developing body, your height, and your pimples. You did not like any of the new looks you were receiving. You got your period that winter and cried for a week.

“This is going to happen every month,” your mother had said to you as she unwrapped a maxi pad and demonstrated how they were supposed to attach to underwear, how they were to be disposed of afterwards, where she kept them in the house.

“When will I stop getting it? When will it be over?” You knew the answer. You weren’t stupid. But you needed it confirmed by your mother in the hopes that she could unbreak your heart.

“Not until you’re much older,” she’d said. Your face crumpled and you threw your head into her chest. You were exhausted by change already.

You were a solid half-foot taller than the next tallest girl in your homeroom class, and you absolutely dwarfed the boys in your school. You stood out like a clown. You worried constantly that your bra strap would accidentally become visible or that people could hear your maxi pad swish as you walked down the hall. If you thought that a boy in one of your classes was looking at you, noticing your new curves, then it took all of your strength not to run away and cry. You felt shame. You wore baggy sweatshirts and Doc Martens. Your look was boyish, though you were not a tomboy, just desperate not to be a girl, not now. You kept your hair long and let it hang in front of your face, which

sprouted new pimples every day, glowing like a beacon atop the lighthouse that was your body.

You and your parents lived in a small house in a new suburban enclave not far from where a new airport was being built. You were twelve, wearing short blue jean shorts that felt too small on you because of all the growing you had done. You also wore a blue and red striped t-shirt and battered Keds running shoes, and kicked a gently used soccer ball up against the five foot high fence in the back of your yard. The sun was high, since it was just after noon, but the cool breeze made the day an ideal Sunday, a good day for kids to play outside or for grown-ups to get some work done in the yard. On the other side of the fence, Mr. Langford stood on top of a ladder, installing pine-coloured lattice atop a portion of the fence, making it more than six feet high on one side. You became bored with kicking the ball against the fence, and began to kick it into the air. You remembered seeing your dad throw the ball into the air and then bounce it off his head. You gave it a try, but ended up hitting it too hard and hurting your head. You choked back tears, and then looked around, not knowing where the ball had gone.

“It’s over here,” Mr. Langford yelled from the top of his ladder. You were quiet, uncomfortable talking to adults and you disliked Mr. Langford. “If you’re not going to try to be more careful with it,” he said, “then you’re going to have to come over here yourself and get it. I’m not going up and down this ladder a hundred times because you can’t be bothered to be more careful.”

The top of your head burned from where you’d butted the soccer ball. You thought of how Mr. Langford hadn’t needed to convince you that it had been a bad idea.

You sniffled back more tears and then headed for the gate where you could go into your neighbour's yard and get the soccer ball.

Once on his property, you couldn't see where the ball had gone. His yard was bigger than the one in back of your parents' house, and sprinkled with shrubs and trees, potted plants and gnomes. There was a bird bath and feeder next to a large porch that he'd built last summer. Sticking out from beside the porch, you saw the black and white patchwork of the ball. You ran over and grabbed it, letting the gate swing shut behind you. When you turned back towards the gate, you saw that Mr. Langford had come down from the ladder, which you had thought was strange, since he'd made you retrieve your own ball just so he wouldn't have to do that. He moved a couple of paces towards you and you began to get nervous and moved towards the gate.

"Wait just a minute," he hollered. "Turn around and look at me." You stopped and did as you were told, holding the ball with both hands in front of you and looking down at the neatly mowed lawn that blanketed his backyard. You moved your eyes upward until you were looking at him. He was staring at you, up and down, and you thought you saw him licking his lips. You remembered the time with the video camera from the summer before and the reality of that encounter with Mr. Langford registered differently. Suddenly, you saw Mr. Langford the way your father had. Then you thought of how you hated being so tall, hated your hips and breasts, hated bra straps and maxi pads, how you wanted to be alone, playing in the yard, not being watched by anyone.

He turned back towards the ladder and climbed up a few steps and returned to installing his lattice work.

Surprised at your sudden anger, you threw the soccer ball at Mr. Langford, hoping to hit his back or his leg. He turned to catch the ball and wobbled on the ladder. It looked for a moment like he would fall, but he hung on. The ball bounced off his side and then rolled back to where you stood. He looked down at you from the ladder.

“That’s all, Jessica. You can go,” he said. You bent down and picked up the ball, feeling your tight shorts stretch across your body. You looked up, through your legs, and saw Mr. Langford, upsidedown, staring at your bum. You stood up quickly and thought about running from the yard. But instead, you looked him in the eye. Then you cocked your head to one side and dropped your hip, taking on a coquettish posture that you’d seen before, somewhere else. You don’t know what made you do that.

He looked surprised for a moment, and then turned to face you, looking as if he was about to say something. Then his foot slipped from the rung and he spun to try and catch himself. You watched him fall. Then you walked over to where he lay and stared down at him as his head bled against the concrete path that rimmed the perimeter of his yard. After a long moment, you ran inside and told your dad that you’d watched Mr. Langford fall off his ladder. The entire neighbourhood consoled you for having had to witness such a thing.

You killed Mr. Langford when you were twelve, but everyone thought that he had died an accidental death. Your parents never knew the truth, even though they had always kept a close eye on you when you were a kid, chaperoning you when you were playing in the backyard, fearing a sudden accident or the invasion of murderers. Their fear was warranted, ironically, yet they remained clueless to the fact that you were the murderer; you were the neighbourhood’s little killer, hidden in plain sight.

Sometimes, when you think back on the day of Mr. Langford's death, you like to blame it on the soccer ball. Sometimes, when you are alone on the bus, or when you are in bed in the morning, or when you are jolted awake at night as you drift off to sleep, your brain burns suddenly with thoughts of regret and sadness. You succumbed to Mr. Langford's look and became the thing that you didn't want to be. You remember that you saw his face as he fell and hit the pavement. You remember that as he fell, in the few seconds before he hit the ground, he looked into your eyes. You think that you saw him seeing his own life flashing before his eyes. It was quick and painless. It was called accidental. It was his soul escaping from the prison of his body, and you dreaded and envied him.

## Team Players

From her work station at the Tele-Markup telemarketing office, Tanya Burke watched Gemma Blake enter the room. Gemma held her elbows high while her long legs scissored back and forth, stiffly and quickly, so that she looked like she was nearing the finish line in a speed walking competition. She held her head high in the air as her chunky heels plunked heavily against the floor and her long trench coat swished rhythmically against her striding arms. Gemma really *arrived* at work in the morning. Tanya Burke did not like Gemma Blake and thought that when she entered the Tele-Markup office space, her tall body and dyed-blond hair, along with her lanky arms and legs, made her look like a female version of the scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz. Gemma spoke in a sharp voice and Tanya marveled at how she always had something pressing to talk about, even first thing in the morning.

“Third one today!” Gemma said, entering the office with her travel mug in the air, then taking a massive swig of coffee. She looked at the clock on the wall. “And it’s only 8:45.” She took another gulp. “It’s all I’m running on. Been up since 4 am.”

Gertrude Baker, one of the oldest telemarketers at the Tele-Markup call centre walked towards Gemma and the office’s complimentary coffee station. “How are you, Gemma?” she asked.

“Great!” replied Gemma, pulling her coffee mug away from her. “Two big poops this morning.”

From half-way down the long, narrow room, Tanya swiveled around to face Gemma, her pregnant belly nearly resting on the chair’s padding between her legs. She

rolled her eyes, by now familiar with this kind of talk. “Jesus fucking Christ,” she muttered, then made eye contact with Gertrude as they both shook their heads.

“After a two-day dry spell,” Gemma continued, nodding her head, standing next to Gertrude at the coffee station while Gertrude poured herself a cup. “Top me up a little there, will you?” Gemma took the lid off her cup and then thrust it at Gertrude. “I’m telling you. Kids! Had me so worried. I was asking myself, ‘Do you go to the doctor about something like that?’ I mean, where the heck was she putting it all?”

Gertrude walked back to her carrel while Gemma continued to stand and gesticulate with her one empty hand. She turned and kept talking to Tanya. “But nothing left to worry about. Starting at 4 am this morning, she made two nice, big, wet poops!”

“Wonderful,” Tanya said, shaking her head. Her co-worker, Cindy, entered the office and sat at the work station beside Tanya’s.

“That’s my girl!” Gemma said. Then she walked closer to where Tanya and Cindy sat. “So, as a goal for today,” she began. “I’d like to see us all try and up those numbers. I was thinking it might help productivity if we tried to talk less while we were at our desks. I mean, I have no problem at all with talking in the break room, the hallway. No no no no no no no no! That is A-OK with me. But I was thinking that while we’re at our desks, we could try and keep our thoughts to ourselves. That way we’d be extra fired up to talk when a call comes in. How about it?” She nodded furiously and Tanya sensed that she was supposed to feel enthusiastic about these plans.

“Does this come from management?” Tanya asked.

“Nope,” Gemma said, and Tanya and Cindy glanced at each other, frowning.

“Nope. I was just thinking on my way to work, trying to come up with some new

strategies. You know, to *crunch* the numbers. To help *sell*.” Gemma laughed and punched the air in front of her. “Oh! Maybe we can even make a game out of it. Like whoever talks the least in between phone calls can get an extra ten minutes on their coffee break? Or maybe everyone else in the office can give them a dollar at the end of the week? How’s that sound?”

Tanya and Cindy smiled, then turned around without answering and tried to ignore Gemma until she finally walked away. She entered her office at the back of the room and closed the door behind her.

Tanya stroked her belly, then looked at Cindy and said, “That bitch is fucking insane.”

“She is out of control!” Cindy said. “Why does she always want to try out these new ideas? It’s like she’s kissing management’s ass all the time, trying to impress them.”

“And if I hear one more thing about her kids...” Tanya scoffed. Tanya was seven months pregnant, but if there was one thing she dreaded talking about, it was children. When she found out that she was pregnant and that the father was going to be no help at all, Tanya took a second job at Tele-Markup to supplement her income as a waitress. Her first trimester had been so physically exhausting that she could barely keep up with all the orders at the restaurant, so she soon gave up that job and made Tele-Markup her sole employment. Since Gemma had started working there 13 weeks ago, Tanya had grown to detest her constant anecdotes about her children. She felt that Gemma was secretly entering both of them into a Best Mom competition. Tanya, who was 28, single, and broke, felt she had no chance of winning that competition, and resented being entered into it in the first place.



Tanya and Cindy sat at their neighbouring desks, fiddling with some papers, when their co-worker Ashley entered the office. Her hair was in a messy pony tail and her eyes were still puffy from sleep.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” Tanya said to her, pulling out her chair.

“My cousin here yet?” Ashley asked. Ashley’s cousin, who was also named Ashley, also worked as a telemarketer at the call center.

“Nope,” Cindy replied. Then her phone started ringing. “Jesus Fuck. It’s early, isn’t it?”

“I guess it’s nine o’clock where ever that call’s going to,” Tanya said. Tele-Markup specialized in cold calls. The phone rang at a marketer’s desk, and when she picked it up, it was also ringing at some unknown location. It was the marketer’s job to try and sell rolls of credit card receipt paper to whoever answered the phone.

Cindy picked up her phone and then, after a short pause, said: “Hello, and how you are today? Fantastic. May I speak to the person in charge of major purchases?”

Tanya had briefly interviewed for the job 21 weeks ago, and Jake, the man who Gemma had replaced, had assured her that they were providing people with something that they *needed*, saving them the time of having to worry about their receipt paper.

“This is a job you can be proud of,” Jake had assured her. Tanya tried to keep a straight face. She’d only needed a job that would pay her, and preferred one that was physically undemanding. Jake was later fired.

The company's explanation for firing Jake was that they were going in a different direction. They didn't want anyone to feel "nervous" or "alarmed" by the high number of dismissals that had happened recently. Shortly after Jake's dismissal, a memo had been sent out: *We understand that some of you may be concerned about the recent changes in our management structure. We are here to answer your questions. Sincerely, the Management.*

"It's so good of them to clear things up, isn't it?" Cindy said to Tanya when they both received the memo. Soon, other memos arrived.

*Reading in between phone calls should consist only of picture-heavy magazines. Thick books, such as novels and short story collections, are no longer allowed. Additionally, playing board games at your desk is no longer permitted. This includes tic tac toe. Thank you, Management.*

Next, memos were done away with in order to keep costs down, and instead notes were handwritten on a whiteboard in the middle of the telemarketers' shared office.

*Due to threat of injury, knitting and crochet needles are no longer allowed on the premises. Furthermore, drawing at your desks is no longer permitted. Thank you for your co-operation, Management.*

"What the fuck?" Tanya had yelled, reading the board. "How am I going to get junior's wardrobe ready on time if I can't crochet between calls?" She rubbed her belly and then sat back down at her carrel.

The following Monday, the Tele-Markup telemarketing staff walked into their office to find another note written on the whiteboard: *After some consideration, it has*

*been decided that while drawing in between phone calls is unacceptable, doodling will be permitted. Thank you, Management.*

“So what,” said Ashley, “are they going to hire a fine arts graduate to keep an eye on us?”

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Tanya thought about Ashley’s remark later, after finding out that in fact the company had hired someone with a fine arts degree to take over Jake’s job. It was as though the company had beat them to the punchline. On Gemma Blake’s first day, management had written a welcome for her on the whiteboard.

*Please join us in welcoming our new team manager, Gemma Blake. Gemma comes to us with a background in sculpture and painting from York University. Gemma will be the local authority on the difference between doodles and drawings, as some of you were concerned as to how to tell the difference. We look forward to working with you, Gemma! --the Management*

Tanya had opted not to welcome Gemma because she distrusted managers and was happier ridiculing them from afar than actually speaking to them. But other women at Tele-Markup asked Gemma about herself, and Tanya heard from them that after she’d finished school, Gemma had married a doctor and had two babies and that now she was very eager to get back to work for the first time since before she had her kids. She’d been bored at home. She described herself as a “doer.” That’s when it became clear to Tanya that Gemma had this job because she wanted it, not because she needed it.

“I guess spending Dr. Husband’s fat cheques got a little boring for her,” Tanya speculated while talking to Ashley’s cousin.

Ashley’s cousin had laughed and rolled her eyes.

That was 13 short weeks ago, during which time Tanya repeatedly overheard Gemma saying, “I just *love* my job. I. Just. *Love it!*” Gemma got to work early. She left on time, but only because the kids needed to be picked up from school, she said. Otherwise, Gemma Blake said she would have gladly worked late.

But lately, there was little need to put in extra work. The calls had slowed down at Tele-Markup.

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The same day as Gemma’s big poop announcement, and shortly after Ashley arrived at work, Ashley’s cousin Ashley arrived at the office almost 20 minutes late. She entered wearing a ponytail twice as messy as her cousin’s and she had a couple of deep red blotches on her neck.

“Is it love this time, Ash?” Ashley asked her cousin.

“SHH!” Ashley’s cousin replied. “I can’t believe the marks this guy left.”

The three women laughed, then stared at their phones, hoping they would ring and dreading they would ring. Ashley’s cousin’s phone rang and she picked it up.

“Hello, may I please speak to the person in charge?” Ashley’s cousin talked like a robot on the phone. “When would be a good time to call back? Yes thank you. Goodbye.”

Ashley leaned back two desks over. “Ash, you’ve got to put your hips in to it,” she said.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Ashley’s cousin replied.

From her office, Gemma Blake was yelling, “I would *kill* for my kids! *Kill* for them!”

“Is she on her personal phone?” Cindy asked Tanya, then directed her attention to the latest whiteboard note. Tanya hadn’t noticed that it had been updated. It said:  
*Personal video game devices and cellular phones are not to be used in the office between phone calls. Please refrain from bringing them into the work area at all. Thank you, Management.*

“Who’s going to tell the warden?” Tanya asked.

Cindy’s phone rang. She picked it up and then paused. “Yes, hello? Am I speaking with the person in charge? I just guessed. I mean, you *sounded* like the person in charge.” Cindy talked like a phone sex operator. She had the highest number of sales.

“*That’s* what I mean,” said Ashley to her cousin.

“She should be getting paid way more an hour than she is,” Tanya said. She looked down at her own belly, which was pressed up against the desk in front of her. She never thought she’d get so big. Somehow, her size made her self-conscious of trying to be sexy, even over the phone.

Cindy hung up. She looked over at Tanya and the Ashleys. They all sat looking at their phones.

“How many calls have you been making lately?” Tanya asked.

“Half as many as last week,” Cindy replied.

“Layoffs are coming,” Ashley’s cousin said.

“Shit.”

Cindy looked at Tanya’s stomach. “Christ, T, what you going to do?”

“Every night before I go to bed, I rub two pennies together and put them under my pillow,” Tanya said. Cindy looked at her, confused. “For good luck,” Tanya continued. “So that the baby will be born rich.”

Gemma came over to where they were sitting. “Hey girls,” she said, looking down from where she stood behind them. “You’ve both spent a little time talking.” She frowned in concern. “Everything okay?” She spread her fingers apart and then waved her hand around in front of the two workers. “Anything I need to know about?” She looked back and forth between the two of them. “Anything you want to share?”

Tanya snorted. “We were just wondering how to go about ordering in our lunch now that cell phones have been banned.” Cindy and the Ashleys turned to look at Gemma.

Gemma’s face dropped. “Pardon me?” she asked.

“Take a look.” Tanya directed her gaze to the whiteboard. Gemma read carefully.

“That’s fine,” she said, straightening her blouse. “I’m sure it’s still okay to use cell phones in the break room.”

“You’re sure?” Cindy said. “We wouldn’t want to get in trouble if management caught us.”

“I’ll double check, but I’m quite sure,” Gemma said. Gemma spent most of her day on the phone with her kids and her voice carried from her office into the work space. Once the loud conversation was done, Gemma would then repeat segments of it to the

rest of the office. “Jeffrey wants to know why we can’t have a swimming pool in the living room!” Gemma would laugh uproariously. Others in the office who listened would laugh politely, then return to work.

“Might be hard for some of us to get by without cell phones in the office,” Tanya said, looking at Gemma. Cindy and the Ashleys turned back to their phones and tried to look busy.

“It’s different for mothers,” Gemma explained. “It’s not like I’m just goofing off on the phone. My kids need to *always* be able to reach me. *Always!*” Gemma looked at Tanya’s belly. “When are you due?” she asked.

“June 8<sup>th</sup>.”

“Seven weeks.”

“Is it seven? My math skills are terrible.”

Gemma’s eyebrows narrowed slightly. “Seven weeks, Tanya Burke. Then you’ll see. Your cell phone will become a little more important to you then.” Gemma walked away.

“She would kill for her children! Kill for them!” Tanya impersonated Gemma in a stage-whisper.

“You need to watch out for her, T,” said Ashley’s cousin. “She don’t like you.”

“Oh, I know that. She’s judging me as an employee *and* as a parent,” Tanya said.

“I think that judging is her thing,” Ashley’s cousin said.

“Who gives a shit about her?” Cindy said. “Management’re just going to fire you when the work dwindles. Which is any minute now.”

Tanya shifted in her seat and stared at her phone. She cursed herself silently for forgetting how much she needed this job.

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The next day at work, the complimentary coffee station had disappeared. A note on the whiteboard said, *Due to cutbacks, staff are encouraged to enjoy a beverage from the snack wagon in the parking lot. Thank you for your co-operations, the Management.*

“Oh yes,” said Tanya, “we are so good at giving our co-operations.”

“Are pregnant chicks even supposed to drink coffee?” Cindy asked, reading the board. Gemma had come in behind her and overheard.

“My doctor says one cup a day—”

“No siree, no caffeine for expecting mommies!” Gemma boomed, looking past Cindy and Tanya at the board. “Okay, so it looks like the coffee’s gone now too.” She looked as sad as she had the day before when cell phones were banned. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. She walked with her head high as she returned to her office.

“Everyone,” Tanya started, looking in the direction of Gemma’s office, “is a fucking expert on what pregnant women should do!” She walked up to the whiteboard and used her index finger to erase the *cou* in *encouraged*. Cindy pointed out that the same thing could be done by removing the last half of *enjoy* and the first half of *beverage*, although the large gap in between made it more difficult to see the final word. Two other women in the office erased some letters and deformed others, so that the sign



soon read: *Due to cocks, staff are enraged to enrage from the crack wagon in the puking lot. Hand job operations, the Man.*

“That felt good,” Tanya said. She turned to Cindy and they smiled at each other before returning to their work stations. Then, both Ashleys walked through the door together.

“What’s a ‘hand job operation’?” Ashley’s cousin asked. They were nearly twenty minutes late, but most of the women in the office were too busy laughing to notice.

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That same day, when it was time to go for a coffee break, Tanya declined. The Ashleys and Cindy went downstairs to the parking lot, but Tanya decided to wait at her desk. She had recently been going over some breathing exercises with her mom and she wanted to practice. With the coffee station gone, the office nearly emptied out at break time. Tanya closed her eyes and began to quietly practice her controlled inhalations, followed by many short, rapid exhalations. She began to feel light-headed, but wanted to practice while she could. She didn’t like talking about the birth with anyone, not even her mom, because she was so scared of the pain she would feel. Yesterday, someone had mentioned the need to “tear” herself away from the novel she was reading, and Tanya had winced. Lately, she had been clinging to her breathing exercises, convincing herself that this would cure her of any discomfort during child birth. In the middle of one exercise,

she began to sense that someone was watching her. Tanya's eyes popped opened and she turned to see Gemma looking at her.

"You're practicing your Lamaze?" Gemma asked.

Tanya nodded, feeling irritated that Gemma watched her doing her breathing exercises. She did not want to talk about the so-called miracle of childbirth with Gemma, who was always overly eager to share her own stories about motherhood.

But to Tanya's surprise, Gemma did not try to talk about labour. All she said was, "Every little bit helps." Then she put a cup of steaming tea on Tanya's table. "I really liked this when I was preggers." Gemma smiled. "I put a kettle in my office. Don't go telling everyone or I'll never get any quiet in there. But this tea is really soothing, and totally safe for the baby."

Tanya didn't know what to say. "Thank you," is what came out, but it sounded like a question.

"No worries," Gemma said. "I'll bet they wouldn't have *that* at the snack wagon." Gemma walked back to her office. Before closing the door behind her she stuck her head out and said to Tanya, "Lamaze is good, but *take the drugs!*" She smiled, then hopped into her office and closed the door.

Tanya thought about walking to the bathroom and throwing the tea into the toilet. But it smelled delicious, and no one else was around to see her, so she drank it instead.

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After the morning coffee break, the work picked up slightly. Ashley's phone rang. "Hello. May I please speak to the person in charge of major purchases?"

Tanya leaned back and looked at Ashley's cousin, who still had traces of red hickies on one side of her neck. "Don't get into the same position I'm in, Ash," she said pointing at her stomach.

"I'm careful," said Ashley's cousin.

"Hello, sir. How are you doing today?" Ashley said.

"Be carefuller," said Tanya. "Because it happens—" She raised her hand above her head and snapped her fingers. "—like that!"

"I am calling to enquire about the status of your credit card receipt paper."

"One roll in the hay with my ex," Tanya continued. "After a three month dry spell. And blammo!"

"Who wants to wait until they run out to buy more?" Ashley asked.

"I haven't had sex in 13 months," said Cindy.

Tanya and Ashley's cousin looked at her. Ashley looked over at her also, with her phone held to her ear.

"We are the leading suppliers of credit card receipt rolls in the United States and Mexico," Ashley said, still staring at Cindy.

"I'm going to be 30 next month," explained Cindy. "It gets harder as you get older. To meet people." She looked at the Ashleys. "You'll see."

Then the phones starting ringing and the women were busy at work.

At lunch time that day, Tanya snuck to the break room with her brown bag in hand. She was trying to save money by packing a lunch, and also trying to increase her culinary skills, but she didn't want the other women in the office to notice that she wasn't part of any of the small groups heading out for lunch. She'd been ridiculed recently by Cindy and the Ashleys for bringing egg salad to work. Tanya had been so happy with herself for making a simple packed lunch that she showed the halved sandwich to Cindy and both Ashleys.

"Not exactly a moon landing is it," Cindy had said to Ashley's cousin, presumably thinking that Tanya could not hear. Tanya walked away slightly hurt, but knew that she would have said the same thing if Cindy had come in bragging about her own lunch. The sarcasm in the office was relentless.

Today, Tanya brought her smoked turkey wrap, Fig Newtons and apples into the break room to eat them for lunch. She'd spent a lot of time thinking about and preparing this meal, but she knew by looking at it that she'd be hungry again in less than an hour and be running out to one of the snack wagons in the parking lot at her next coffee break.

The break room was laid out like a galley kitchen, with a toaster oven, a bar fridge, a small sink and a drying rack organized along one wall, and a small couch and two folding chairs backed against the other. When she sat on the couch, Tanya felt like she was either on a car ride, or sitting in a tiny movie theatre, watching a tableau of kitchen appliances.

But their office building was located in a small enclave of office buildings, and there was little else in the neighbourhood. There was an Irish-style pub across the street,

but it didn't open until 4 pm. A few snack wagons and cafeteria-style establishments were set up in the parking lots and ground floors of some of the neighbouring office buildings, but very few of them provided anywhere to sit. Many of Tanya's coworkers sat at their desks and ate their lunch, but Tanya thought that was depressing, and it made the small break from work feel like no break at all. The break room was far from perfect, but still the best of the limited options available.

When Tanya turned to enter the break room, she saw Gemma Blake sitting on the small couch with her arm extended over the back of the seat next to her. Her tall body seemed to fill the entire space. Tanya winced in Gemma's direction and then unpacked her lunch at the counter. She sat on one of the folding chairs and began to eat her turkey wrap.

"Not much of a lunch," Gemma said, pointing with her chin at the three apples and half dozen cookies sitting on the counter.

"I'm not much of a cook," Tanya said.

"I wasn't either until I had kids," Gemma said.

"Hmm." Tanya didn't know how much she cared to have a conversation with Gemma.

"I used to love Kraft Dinner and hot dogs." Gemma chuckled and shook her head slowly from side to side. "I mean *come on!* Kraft Dinner, sheesh." Tanya and Gemma both stared forward at the narrow kitchenette. Tanya wondered why Gemma wasn't eating in her office today, then assumed it was probably for the same reason that she wasn't eating at her desk.

Gemma crossed her legs and extended her top leg in front of her and began to examine her shoe. Then she looked over at Tanya, who was almost done her turkey wrap and not even close to full.

“I should have made ten of these,” Tanya said. Gemma laughed.

“Here.” She pulled half a corned beef sandwich out of her purse. Tanya saw that there was almost two inches of meat on the sandwich and that a thick daub of mustard spilled over the sliced edge and was smeared against the plastic wrap. Her mouth watered. But she wondered why Gemma was offering her this.

“I’m okay,” Tanya said. “Once I eat the apples.” She looked over at the counter. “I was only kidding.”

Gemma looked at her and then started talking in a soft voice, one Tanya had never heard before. “I’m only giving this to you because I can’t finish it and it won’t be any good by tomorrow. Someone should eat it.” She placed it on the counter beside the rest of Tanya’s lunch. “My mother-in-law made the corned beef. I never cooked until I had kids, but I never said I got good at it.”

Tanya smiled. Gemma had just told her a joke, or something like a joke. For one moment, Gemma had become warm.

Tanya saw that Gemma had her cell phone in her right hand, held against her lap. Gemma must have seen her looking at it.

“We’re not supposed to have these in the work space, so I decided to come in here for lunch, just in case my kids’ school or my husband has to get a hold of me,” Gemma explained. “It’s my job to make sure no one else uses them at work, so I can’t be caught with one, or who’d take me seriously?” The sharp tone that Tanya associated with

Gemma was returning as she talked about her authoritative role at the office. “It’s a tough rule, though, when you’re worried about your kids all day. Makes me *sick* with worry not to have this thing in my hand.”

“There should be different rules for parents,” Tanya offered, and realized she didn’t know if she was being sarcastic or not.

Gemma huffed. “That’ll be the day.” Once again, the sarcasm was unclear. Gemma’s face went slack as she stared at the toaster oven and kicked her foot nervously in front of her. Tanya could tell that she was thinking about something outside of Tele-Markup. Her kids, most likely, but maybe something else instead. Tanya reached out and grabbed the corned beef sandwich on the counter. Perhaps it had been given to her in charity, but until she learned how to pack a proper lunch, it was charity she needed. Her stomach dictated so much of her life these days.

“Thanks for the sandwich,” Tanya said, looking at Gemma.

“Believe it or not,” Gemma said, standing and straightening her skirt, “women like us are on the same team.” She turned and left the break room.

Tanya unwrapped the sandwich and took a large bite. The mustard was tangy and the corned beef was soft and salty. The back of her mouth watered even as she chewed. She wished for a mother-in-law, or a husband who might call her on her cell phone, and she tried to keep her eyes from watering as she finished her half of the sandwich.

“Fucking hormones,” she muttered to herself as she wiped her eyes and stared at the toaster oven across from her.

“I think we need a drink, ladies,” Tanya said to Cindy and the Ashleys after work that day. They all looked at her. “I’m having soda water, don’t worry.”

They went to the Irish pub. They sat down and got their drinks.

Cindy looked at Tanya. “Why’d you keep it?” Tanya glared at Cindy with no trace of a smile on her face. “Look, we’ve all been wondering. And since who knows how much longer we’ll all be working together, why not just say?”

Tanya took a sip of her soda, then shrugged her shoulders and leaned back in her chair. “I kept it because I didn’t know what to do. I had no one to talk to. I couldn’t figure it out. And it took me so long to decide, that it was too late and there was no decision left to make.”

“But you’re happy now?”

“Happy in a terrified-out-of-my-mind kind of way. But when he kicks, it’s cool. I like to think he’s feisty.”

The women drank silently for a few minutes.

“I don’t care if they lay me off,” Ashley’s cousin said while looking around the pub. “I bet I could get a waitressing job or something. Probably pays way more.”

Tanya nodded.

“Better hours too, especially for someone on your schedule.” Ashley winked.

“God, did you see Gemma’s face when she saw that the coffee station was gone?” Ashley’s cousin asked. “I thought she was going to cry.”

“She’s such a bitch,” Ashley said.



Tanya dropped her soda water onto the table. “She’s just pissed off like the rest of us. What do you think management’s going to write on that board tomorrow? ‘From now on, please bring your own toilet paper.’ Or maybe we’ll be sitting on each other’s laps to conserve chairs.” Tanya took a sip of her soda water, then she continued, “Gemma’s not so bad, maybe. I mean, she’s getting fucked around just like we are.”

“She doesn’t have to like it so much,” Cindy said.

“But who doesn’t like getting a little dick once in a while?” Tanya elbowed Cindy as she said this. “Gemma’s more like us than she is like the management. It’s more like we’re all on the same team.” Gemma’s words felt strange in Tanya’s mouth, but she’d wanted to use them.

“Fuck that,” said Ashley’s cousin, slamming down her empty pint glass and flagging the waiter. “Gemma’s got a cork up her ass. She’s not like us.”

“Exactly,” said Ashley, after finishing her drink as well. “She’s the one who cares so much about impressing management. Well, guess what? That means losing points with the workers. And besides, when we all get canned, guess who’ll just go back to being a doctor’s wife? Won’t be us, will it?”

Tanya looked away, sensing that the Ashleys were right, but still she felt a pang of sympathy for Gemma. She was beginning to sense the hardship behind Gemma’s ability to smooth her appearance even when something bothered her. Where had she learned that from? And she imagined Gemma’s mother-in-law, preparing beautiful corned beef dinners, while Gemma stood ineptly to the side, never having learned how to cook. Cindy and the Ashleys couldn’t explain Lamaze techniques to Tanya. In fact, they would have surely made fun of Tanya if they ever caught her practicing. Words like

“tearing” and “nipple chafing” were as abstract to them as “hand job operations.” Tanya had to admit that her future could end up resembling Gemma Blake’s—and that maybe that was a best-case scenario. What would the Ashleys look like in the future? Or Cindy, who would she become? Would any of them be any better off than Gemma Blake?

Ashley’s cousin was snapping her fingers in front of Tanya’s face. “Yo, T, where’d you go?”

Tanya shook her head. “I was just thinking about how much I want a scotch.”

“I’ll have one for you,” Ashley said, rubbing Tanya’s arm. She raised her hand in the air and called out, mockingly, “Garçon!”

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The next day, the layoffs started, just as the four women had suspected. But there was still a surprise in store. A messenger from head office was inside Gemma Blake’s office.

“Me? What?” Gemma yelled from inside her office. “I don’t understand.”

The layoffs came from upstairs. If she had questions she could speak to them. The messenger left the Tele-Markup office and then Gemma staggered into the middle of the room.

“I love my job.” She looked down at a small pink paper in her hands. Her eyes filled with tears and she ran out of the room, her chunky heels clicking noisily as she left.

The four women took turns looking at each other, and then looking in the direction Gemma had left.

“Not as satisfying as I’d thought it’d be,” said Cindy. Tanya felt like she was on the verge of tears. “T, you okay?” Cindy asked.

Tanya sniffled as tears pooled in her eyes. “Fucking hormones.” She got up and followed Gemma out of the office.

Gemma was sitting on the front steps of the office building that housed Tele-Markup. Tanya still wasn’t sure why she’d followed Gemma out of the office, but she felt compelled to sit beside her. For a moment, she thought about touching Gemma’s arm, but she didn’t.

“It doesn’t make any sense, Gemma,” she said. “It’s just because they’re a fucked-up company.”

Gemma sniffled and looked at Tanya. “Are you going to keep up the language once you have that baby?”

Tanya pulled away. “Seriously?”

Gemma started crying again. “I know! I’m sorry! Kids are my life, though. I can’t help it.”

The two of them sat on the steps looking at the traffic out on the street.

“It’s not like I ever thought I would be a famous artist,” Gemma sobbed, “but maybe an art history professor, or a gallery owner. I used to look down on women like me, who stayed at home, looking after a husband and kids.”

“There’s no reason to be unhappy with what you’ve got,” Tanya said, remembering all the times she’d wished for a husband, or how often she’d fought off feelings of fear and loneliness when she thought about single-parenthood. “You did it the

way you're supposed to. Marriage, *then* babies. And you don't even need this job. I heard your husband is a doctor."

"I *felt* like I needed this job. Carl's a doctor, yeah, but—" She looked out into the street. "He gets to leave the house every day and go to the hospital and be his own person." She wrung her hands. "And I'm with those kids," she trailed off. "I love my kids."

"No one's doubting that," said Tanya, rolling her eyes behind Gemma's back, but continuing to rub her shoulder.

"But *I* want to be my own person for a change."

"Well, Jesus," Tanya said. "There've got to be better places to do that than Tele-Markup."

Gemma snorted. "Not when you haven't worked in five years. Well—" She made quote marks in the air. "*Worked.*"

Even though part of her felt like she needed to protect her personal information by keeping it secret, Tanya decided to talk to Gemma, in the hopes that it might comfort her. "This was the only job I could get. I applied for so many. I act like I don't need it, but I do. I really, really do. I couldn't keep the job I had when I got pregnant, and no one wants to hire you once you're showing. They know you'll be gone soon, I guess, or they don't want to get saddled with your maternity pay and shit." Tanya smiled at Gemma. "I mean, your maternity pay and *stuff.*"

"You need to marry a doctor," Gemma said, laughing.

"Hilarious," Tanya said.

They both stared at the traffic again.

“I’ll help you pack up your stuff,” Tanya offered, “but I’m not supposed to lift anything.”

“This is a blessing in disguise, I guess,” Gemma said, standing and straightening her blazer. “Something better is going to come along, I’ll bet.”

Gemma and Tanya pulled open the office building’s heavy doors and headed back inside.