



Spring 2013

Compulse

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Henson, Candise W, "Compulse" (2013). *Student Publications*. 65.
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Compulse

Abstract

A short short story that looks at the details of a strange marriage between a minister with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and his pregnant wife as they attempt to exorcise five girls at a backwoods church camp.

Keywords

short story, fiction, Stephen Crane Fiction Prize

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Fiction

Comments

Third Place - 2013 Stephen Crane Fiction Prize

Compulse

Rebecca watched Adam as she had for their seven years of marriage—furtively. When he woke, she made sure that she faced the wall, but as he walked to the sink, she angled her body slightly towards him, disguising the movement as a simple sleepy shift, so she could see his body in the mirror. If he realized that her eyes were open, he would stalk angrily down the hall into the main bathroom and slam the door so hard that the crucifixes would quake on the walls. A man's body was private; she was not supposed to look at him; it would foster the deadly lust, which would then spread its tentacles into her mind during church. Or so Adam believed, and had told her the first morning of their honeymoon when he had caught her eyes adoring his body from the cocoon of pillows she had been nestled in. Now, as he stood at the vanity boldly naked and began his morning routine by washing his face, she shaped her eyes into thin crescents. His long hands lathered soap (bar soap—Dove, and God forbid she buy Irish Spring by mistake) and spread it upwards on his cheekbones, his elbows elevating with each gentle caress to his face. She watched his face as he masked it in white, until it was coated thoroughly, and she understood this morning, as she did each morning, that this was his rebirth. He could only forget the way he had gorged on her body in his untamed lust the night before by baptizing his face each morning, by rinsing the taste of her off his lips and letting it escape into the drain with the rest of yesterday's sins.

His face sputtered under the water as he immersed it in the deluge; as usual, Rebecca noted the comedy in this sight: a gawky stork of a man contorted in a comma to angle his face completely under the faucet. Not that he knew he looked ridiculous. He thought nothing of his appearance until he was fully dressed, and then he merely checked his tie's straightness in the mirror. Vanity was, after all, the kind of evil that took one by slow surprise; it crawled into a

person's life in the form of color choices and softness of materials, and then fed itself on pride and grew to monstrous proportions of conceit. It was best, he believed, to ignore appearances, and as long as his face glowed from cleanliness, and his hands were starkly white with brutally trimmed nails, he felt like the being God intended him to be. Rebecca had given up fighting with him. She had tried to enhance his wardrobe, convince him to wear varying shades of green and blue to accentuate his eyes, but the shattered mirror that resulted from the discussion was enough for her. So he still picked his own clothes, which had all the expression of a piece of toast. To be fair, she wasn't doing much better these days. Since Adam had been promoted to State Overseer of the Church, her more attractive clothes had quietly disappeared from her closet, starting with the brightest colors, until her repertoire was distilled to shades of neutrals.

Adam kept his face in the sink as Rebecca closed her eyes. She wanted badly to get up. Her stomach rippled with nausea. Bile crept up her throat and into the back of her mouth, hot and full. She swallowed tightly. The feeling eased somewhat, but the metallic, rotten taste stayed. Against the pillow's comforting cotton case, which her mother had embroidered with red roses (the marriage flower, she had said), Rebecca breathed, smelling her own strawberry shampoo embedded in the fabric. Her stomach rolled again, and before she could think to swallow, she felt vomit penetrate her mouth monstrously, spill out from her lips and onto the white jersey sheets. Adam jerked his body out of the sink, flinging water onto the wooden floor.

"Rebecca!" Adam flinched as she retched again.

Rebecca looked up at him, ashamed.

"Clean it up," he said. His hands trembled violently, the fingers flapping in terror as he walked out of the room and down the hall. The guest bathroom door slammed, and she heard the hiss of the faucet.

She threw up twice more on the floor before she felt empty, satisfied. She climbed out of the bed on Adam's side and weakly pulled off the sheets, rolling the mess inside. Under the sink she found rags and vinegar water (Adam was allergic to chemical cleaning supplies—except bleach, which he bought in bulk). She knelt on the floor and wiped the chunky, slippery puddle, the vinegar assaulting her nose as much as the vomit. Afterward, she tiptoed to the laundry room and turned on the washer.

In the bedroom, she opened the linen closet and grabbed one of the vacuumed-sealed plastic bags that held the sterilized linens. She dressed the mattress in the blue organic cotton sheets that Adam loved. When he was feeling silly, once in a while, he'd roll around the bed like an excited dog, rubbing his skin against the soft, purely clean cloth, but only with these sheets. She smoothed the white-and-blue quilt up over the pillows and ran her hand along the pillowline, creasing the blanket before folding it down so that it fell exactly parallel to the top of the bed. There were no throw pillows; he didn't like extraneous objects, the nuisance of having to move something fluffy off the bed before he could sleep.

The water stopped; he was drying his face, careful not to let it touch anything but the towel. At her own sink, she brushed her teeth, wincing at the taste of the sugary mint toothpaste, but it was his favorite. When he kissed her at night, sometimes, he would mention how sweet her mouth was, how the mint made his tongue tingle, how it tasted clean. Those times, when they came, meant he would let her open her mouth slightly beneath his, as long as she kept her head motionless.

She opened the closet and chose her outfit: as much as she hated to anger him, she still felt ill and didn't want to wear tight-waisted slacks. In the bottom of the closet, in a basket, she kept a few pairs of worn jeans, usually reserved for lawn work. They slid onto her legs

comfortably, hugging her hips and stretching softly over her stomach. She could at least wear a nice shirt—the white blouse with the sculpted neckline he admired.

She walked to the kitchen but was halted by her stomach, which again threatened to explode. Breathing through her mouth, she limped, gripping her midsection, back to the bedroom and leaned against the side of the bed, sliding down to the floor, closing her eyes.

When she opened them some time later, Adam's legs were in front of her, encased in grey slacks. His feet were bare. His end toes on each foot were turned out. The bones grew sideways so that the toes were twisted to face outward. He hated them. There was some Bible passage about sinners and convoluted skeletal structures, but in her current state, she couldn't remember it. She tried to look up at him. He was frowning.

“What's wrong with you?” His voice was flat.

“I feel weak,” she said. “I can't go in to the camp today.”

“I don't understand.” She realized that he really didn't. “Just get up and come in. And change into some decent pants.”

“I can't today.”

He sighed and spoke slowly, stressing each word as though he were a teacher speaking to an exceptionally stupid student. “You have to come in. You have responsibilities.”

“I can't.”

“You mean you won't.”

“Adam, I can't.” His body wafted with the smell of sixteen layers of Dove soap and two coats of Cetaphil moisturizer. It was too much for her. She closed her eyes and leaned more heavily against the bed.

“When I’m sick, I still get out of bed and go to work. I help the homeless and the needy, the spiritually adrift and the fervent believers. I do everything because of God, who strengthens me. You need to pray more, Rebecca. Repent for whatever it was you did this time. If you were good, you wouldn’t be stricken with your pathetic helplessness.” His voice sounded ominous but far away. He walked out, and she heard him mutter, “Frailty, thy name is woman.” The garage door roared open and then closed.

From the first week she had lived with Adam, he had left, on the fridge, a list of daily tasks for Rebecca to complete. Every night when he came home, he sat his briefcase by the back door, hung up his coat, took off his shoes and socks, and then walked barefoot to the fridge to check the list. If each item had a check mark next to it, he smiled, or gave Rebecca an approving nod, or sometimes did nothing at all to acknowledge her. Then he went to his study, where, on a personalized memo pad, he wrote her list of tasks for the following day. He always wrote in print, and though he tried to write perfect letters, handwriting was not one of his God-given gifts. At the bottom of the note, he always signed, “In Christ, Adam More.” He put it on the fridge with a clip magnet and then went to the bedroom to put on a new pair of socks, which Rebecca had laid out for him. He had never checked to see if she had completed a single task on the list, but she always did them all. At first she had thought he trusted her to do them, and that it was a sign of his love and faith in her. After a while, she realized it was the check marks he needed to see. In the early years, when she had still been more of Rebecca Stein and less of Mrs. Adam More, she had tweaked him by casually forgetting to fill in the blank boxes with red check marks. Sometimes, she’d leave off only one, right in the middle of the list, to see what he would do. The results were rarely worth the small joke.

Today as she steadied herself against the fridge, she noticed the list was long. Too long.

- ❑ Clean the rain gutters
- ❑ Vacuum the garage floor
- ❑ Water the garden for 15 minutes
- ❑ Alphabetize the Self-Help section in my office
- ❑ Take food drive donations to Food Pantry
- ❑ Mow the lawn
- ❑ Wash and dry the good dishes; we're having company
- ❑ Order flowers for Mother's birthday: Lilies
- ❑ Bake cross cookies for campers to decorate
- ❑ Buy marshmallows

In Christ,

Adam More

Her queasiness had dissipated but she still felt a bone-deep exhaustion. She ignored the list and grabbed a box of saltines from the cupboard, ignoring, too the note card, pasted on the cabinet door, that read, "Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it." Every surface of their house had at least one note card touting a Bible verse on it. Adam liked to give her reminders.

The couch was squishy. One of the best things about Adam was that he refused to allow his guests to sit on hard furniture, believing that people were more likely to absorb the word of God if they weren't concerned about how hard the chair was beneath them. Even the pews in his church were padded, much to the disdain of the church Elders, who believed that people should ignore the condition of the flesh and focus on the condition of their souls. Rebecca laid on it, staring at the living room. The walls had nothing but framed Bible verses and pictures of Jesus.

Her house before Adam had been bright. Her friend, Noel, had painted for her—huge canvases of women, all kinds of women. There had been a portrait, too, of Rebecca, but she didn't know where it was now. Probably in her mom's attic, not that she would ever get to see it again. It had won Noel a prize in some local competition; it hadn't won a lot of money, maybe a hundred dollars, but it was Noel's first entry, and she had been surprised to win at all. There were offers at the gallery show to buy it, but Noel refused and instead hung it on Rebecca's bedroom wall. Adam had said it was the ultimate vanity to have a portrait of oneself in one's own room, to look at every day and worship, and so it had gone before they married, before she sold the house her grandmother had willed her. It was definitely in the attic; she remembered putting it there, wrapping it in burlap and knotting course string around it, then placing it in a plastic bin to protect it from any possible water damage. Her mother had said nothing but had helped her tie the strings, humming the way she did whenever she disapproved of something.

It was already nine. She should have been at the camp teaching the Newspaper Class. It was the one part of camp she enjoyed; the one time during the year that she didn't have to hide the fact that she loved to write. True, most of the kids were stupid. There were the girls who wanted to write about God and what they had learned in Bible study the day before, whom she loathed. There were the boys who wanted to report the winners of the flag football game, whom she tolerated but mostly despised because they refused to write the results in sentences and opted for tables instead. There were the seven-year-olds who had followed their older siblings to Newspaper Class on the first day of camp and were now stuck there with nothing to do except stare out the window towards the Craft Corner, where their friends were making crosses out of popsicle sticks and coating them with glitter. But, too, there was Jamie, who kept coming back every year to the campground and who took Newspaper each summer. Jamie, whom Adam

punished almost continually, and who was the only female camper in the history of Camp Sonrise to be forced to walk Sinner's Crest—a huge hill that loomed over the grounds and had, planted at the very top, a large silver cross. Campers who were defined as too far gone were sent there on a grueling hike, unaccompanied, as the rest of the campers and staff watched the lone figure recede into a small speck at the top. Jamie had done it twice. Once when she had been twelve, and Adam had found her holding the camp's dog, dead in her lap, his brains seeping out of his smashed skull. Adam had loved Skippy, probably more than he loved his wife, and despite the fact that Jamie insisted she didn't kill the dog, in Adam's mind, she was guilty. And just yesterday, at sixteen, she had climbed it again, this time when Adam had found a copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the chapel, and Jamie had confessed it to be hers.

Jamie thirsted for writing like Rebecca once had. She was alert to everything, knew everything, kept a camera and a pencil on her everywhere she went. She could find a story at every camp event, even one as mundane as the cafeteria workers discarding leftover pancakes (Jamie had photographed a young girl tearing apart pancakes and feeding them to the ducks, which began, upon its publication, a camp-wide tradition of duck-feeding). Without Rebecca, Newspaper Class would be redistributed; it was likely that Adam would do it mostly to punish Jamie.

It was already nine. Rebecca forced herself to stand. She walked to the fridge and stared at the list again. There were ten things to do. Ten very tiring chores. She picked up her scarlet pen and put a firm check in each square. She found her keys and walked out. The garage door crept shut as she backed down the driveway.

She couldn't go anywhere in town. Some of the members of the congregation might see her and ask why she wasn't up at the camp ground teaching their children, or someone who wasn't a member of the church but who knew a member of the church might mention, casually, that she had seen Mrs. Adam More driving around in the daytime looking plumb tuckered and wearing ripped blue jeans. Instead, she drove a few towns over and parked at the grocery store.

Inside, the air conditioning brought her the first relief of the day. Grocery stores excited her; it was the one place Adam refused to go. He hated the noise and the loud colors, and the way nothing was organized to suit his needs. He always waited in the car for her. Today, alone and without a time limit, she marveled at the peace she could feel by looking at produce. Her fingers sorted through avocados, stroking their beveled skins and admiring their clever shapes. The apples were more miraculous: section after section of one fruit, and all of them red and pink and yellow, punctuated by ripe Granny Smith's in the middle. She had grown up in apple country; this was a sight familiar and striking. She held a Gala apple up to her nose and inhaled.

On the snack aisle, she saw rows of cookies in every flavor and variety, from healthy alternatives to Oreos, biscotti to E.L. Fudge. The Milanos were unobtrusive. In a white paper bag, they sat on the shelf as if they weren't asking for much. They didn't scream with red foil packaging like the Chips Ahoy, or need to sell themselves with personified cookies or goldfish like some of the other snacks. Garnishing one bag of Milanos was a light green swirl of color and a gently-falling mint leaf. She used to eat Mint Milanos by the bag, six or eight times the serving size. She had been young and it didn't matter if she ate a whole bag of cookies because she wasn't married; no one could judge her. She put the cookies in her cart, too.

Walking down the International Foods section (a name that had confused her forever, because all the products on it were highly Americanized), she stopped for a box of Angel Hair.

From behind her, she heard a scream. Turning, she saw a small boy, who was maybe four, clawing at his father.

“Give it to me!” the boy whined as he dragged his nails across his father’s arms again.

“Brendan, you don’t need candy. We have some at home.” The man tried to move his arms out of nail-reach while still holding onto his son’s shoulders.

“But I want *that* candy,” he screamed loudly, startling Rebecca. She eased her cart down the aisle, away from the embarrassing, disturbing scene.

The dad crouched down to his son’s level. “Brendan, we have that candy at home—” The boy slapped his father, hard, across the cheek, and screamed that ear-splitting scream again. Rebecca froze, unsure if she should help the man, when a woman rounded the corner of the aisle.

“Brendan Scott Taylor, you better hope to God you didn’t just slap your daddy,” she said, walking angrily towards her son.

The boy whimpered and ran down the aisle, towards Rebecca. She stepped backwards quickly to avoid him, but he hooked his fingers through the holes in her cart just as his mother reached him. As he screamed, she picked him up and tried to pull him off the metal cart, but his grip stayed strong, and he started to drag Rebecca and her buggy with every tug from his mother.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, “but could you just loosen his fingers for me? His dad’s busy trying to regain his pride.”

Rebecca looked back at the man, who was rubbing his cheek with a slightly stunned expression on his face. She stared at the mother, uncertain.

“It’s okay,” the mother said, louder this time to compensate for her still-shrieking child. “It won’t hurt him. Just pry ‘em off.”

She touched Brendan's fingers, which were skull-white from his hold on the cart. Gingerly, afraid she would hurt him, she pried each finger loose and held it with her hand, until his mother gave a final tug, and Rebecca's cart was free.

Brendan's mom snapped her fingers, obnoxiously and commandingly, in his face. He stopped crying immediately. "Hey! You do not hit Daddy. Ever. You do not run from Mommy. And you do NOT attack women. Now say you're sorry to the nice lady."

"Sorry," Brendan said, his lip puffing out in dejected acquiescence.

"Now go wait with your daddy." She put him down, and Brendan ran toward the man at the end of the aisle, clearly relieved to be back in the arms of the passive parent.

The mother smiled at Rebecca, somewhat embarrassed. "He's a little bastard. I'm sorry about that. He just needs his dad to slap him once, good and hard, and he wouldn't misbehave anymore. Do you have kids?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"When you do, you'll understand. They can be bitches."

Rebecca stared at the end of the aisle after they had left it, and then finally decided to move on. She still needed a pregnancy test.

Rebecca's mom had been terrified of flying, so they had driven everywhere, spending most of their summers in the minivan, driving across the country to stay with rarely-seen relative and visit national parks for Rebecca's education. Because of the constant voyages through America, Rebecca had learned that Cracker Barrel was the best place to use the restroom. They were almost always clean, and if they weren't, the manager on duty would send a troop of employees in to tidy it in a jiffy. As a bonus, while you were there, you could order a square

meal that came with free biscuits, which doubled as dessert if you put some jam on them. And, helpfully, each Cracker Barrel bathroom had a traffic light over it, so you never had to have the awkward moment of asking where a restroom was located.

This Cracker Barrel was one she had never been to, but it looked the same as the others. She stopped to sit in a white rocking chair on the porch, trying to quell her bladder's insistent need to pee. She could have gone in the grocery store, but the thought of finding out that she was pregnant in the middle of a dirty employee bathroom that was preceded by grimy double-doors was too depressing. Still, she had waited too long, and her body was fighting her. She crossed her legs as tightly as she could and started rocking furiously to convince herself that she could make it to the bathroom in time. Suddenly, she stood up and hurried inside, breezing through the maple doors and heading straight to the back where the traffic light illuminated her sanctuary. Her purse bumped against her hip as she ignored the greeter's ridiculously optimistic "Hi, welcome to the Cracker Barrel" and pushed on the bathroom door.

She jammed herself into a stall and slapped the lock closed, hopping up and down a bit as she opened her purse and pulled out the pregnancy test. She popped the cap off and it clattered to the floor, bouncing under the partition into the stall next to hers; she nearly cut her finger as she ripped her zipper down. She jerked her panties to the ground and sat on the toilet seat, thrusting the absorbent end of the stick between her legs. Finally, relief.

Stretching her arm under the stall, she groped for the clear pink cap but couldn't reach it. Her arm extended slightly more, but it was still too far away. Seven years as Adam's wife had taught her to avoid germs at all costs; she didn't want to pull out the stick while it was dripping wet and not have a cap to put on it.

"Do you need something?" The voice from the next stall was polite but amused.

“Um. Yes. That cap. I need that cap.”

“Here.” She saw a hand with vermillion nails reach down and pick up the tiny lid and hand it under the door.

Rebecca put it on the strip and laid it on top the bulky toilet paper holder, then stood up and flushed, putting her pants back on. She opened the stall door and saw the woman with the bright nails looking in the mirror and applying lipstick. She was young, maybe 21, and wearing the standard Cracker Barrel apron.

“Hey, are you knocked up?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“I got pregnant once. It was awesome. Your hair gets really shiny and your nails grow super strong and pretty. And then people give you presents, just for having a baby.” She put the lipstick in her apron pocket and pulled out a nail file. She jumped up onto the counter and started working on her already flawless nails.

“What about the birth?” Rebecca soaped her hands.

“It’s not as bad as they say. I mean, it hurts worse than anything in the entire world you could ever possibly conceive, and it’s unlike any pain, so no one can really describe it, but afterwards, you’ve got this perfect baby and you forget what it felt like to have it. Plus, you get a really good parking spot at Toys’R’Us.”

The water wouldn’t get warm. “How is it after?”

“You mean with the baby? Easy. Unless you’re like my sister-in-law, who couldn’t even hold her baby right. Some people are just sucky mothers, and they’re just born that way. But most people just do it, and it all works itself out. Men are sometimes helpful. Do you have a father for it?”

“Yes.” She didn’t want to be the sort of person who didn’t have a father for the baby, the kind of person who found out she was pregnant in a Cracker Barrel bathroom.

“That’s good.” She put the nail file back in her pocket. “It’s probably been 90 seconds since you peed on that thing. Let’s see it.”

Rebecca turned to stare at the stall. She couldn’t move.

“Do you want me to get it?” the girl asked.

Rebecca opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Look, I’ll get it, but you’ve got to read it for yourself. How would you feel if you are pregnant and some day your kid asks you, ‘Mommy, how did you find out you were pregnant?’ and you have to say, ‘Well, Taylor—Taylor’s good for a girl or a boy; you’re always safe with Taylor—well, Taylor, honey, Lindsay from Cracker Barrel caught the cap to my pee-stick and then read the results when I was being a chicken.’ It’s just not a fun story, and then your kid’s gonna think you’re soft. Never let them think you’re soft, OK?”

Rebecca nodded and Lindsay hopped off the counter. She grabbed the stick from the stall and placed it in Rebecca’s cold palm.

“Hey.” Rebecca met Lindsay’s eyes. “Whatever it says, it’s going to be OK. You got that? It’s going to be A-OK.” She nodded again and flipped the pregnancy test over.

“Plus sign. Welcome to the Mommy Club, my friend,” Lindsay said, and she wrapped her arms around her.

“Don’t you have to be working?” Rebecca wiped her eyes.

“Nope. Shift ended ten minutes ago. I’ve got time. Daycare goes until two, and they charge me for the full day even if I pick her up early. Want to grab lunch? I get 35% off.”

“Window seats are the best,” Lindsay said, stretching her arms behind her head and reposing.

Sitting in two rocking chairs by the porch’s checkerboard were a pair of sisters, almost identical except one was clearly a year or two older than the other. Their blonde hair shone in the glaring sunlight, and they excitedly chatted while rocking as hard as they could on the chairs, stacking up checkers.

“Cute, right?”

“I guess,” Rebecca said.

“Sort of Norman Rockwell-esque.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I think you’re in shock.”

“Probably.”

“That’s the first non-totally-serious thing you’ve said since I met you. I like it; keep coming alive.”

“How do you know if you’re a good mom?”

Lindsay sipped her water. “Well generally, people have no clue if they’re bad mothers. Which kid of sucks for their kids, who typically deserve good moms. But I think I’m a good mom. Riley loves me, can’t wait for me to come home every day. She tells the other kids in daycare that I work at the Cracker Barrel and bring her free biscuits because she doesn’t realize that I pay two dollars for them every time I bring them home. It’s pretty cute. And she’s good. She doesn’t get into much trouble and she’s not spoiled. So that’s a good sign that I’m not totally sucking at this.”

“Does anyone help you?”

“My parents, my brothers. Actually, my brothers are funny with Riley. They’re these huge guys—over six feet tall—and hulking, but they’ll get down on the floor and play Barbies with her, or let her put my makeup on them. Who do you have?”

“My mom lives away. I haven’t seen her in a long time. And my dad died. A while ago.”

“What about the father? You’re married, right? You have rings.”

“Yeah, I’m married. He’s...not a kid person.”

“So are you gonna get rid of it? Because personally I think abortion is a shitty thing to do to a defenseless baby, but I mean, you’ve gotta exercise your right to your body.”

“No. I wouldn’t do that.”

“So, what, then?”

“I don’t know. Adam is an interesting man. He doesn’t like messes.”

“You seem like a pretty smart person, but in case you don’t know, babies are pretty much the messiest things in the world. When Riley was a week old, she threw up on my brother’s *face*. On his freaking face. It went up his nose because his head was tilted back when she did it. He refused to hold her for a long time.”

“Hey, Lindsay. Are you guys ready to order?” the waitress asked, flipping open her tablet.

“We need a minute.”

“Take your time,” she said, walking to another table.

Rebecca flipped through the menu. Everything sounded great. “What are you getting?”

“Probably chicken fried chicken. I don’t believe in health food.”

“I bought a whole bag of Mint Milanos today. I want to eat them.”

“You can join me in whatever circle of Hell is reserved for gluttons. Along with the rest of the country.”

“The third.” Rebecca took the lemon wedge out of her water and played with it, rocking it back and forth on the table.

“What?”

“In the *Inferno*, gluttony is the third circle of hell. I wrote a paper on it once.”

“I would never read that. Too creepy.”

“It’s interesting.”

“Like your husband?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“What can I get for you guys today?” The waitress was back.

“Chicken fried chicken and a side of fried apples,” Lindsay said.

“And for you, hun?” She hated when people called her “hun.”

“A side salad. No dressing.”

“I’ll have that right out for you.”

“What happened to the Milanos?” Lindsay smirked.

“I figured I should start eating healthy. For the baby.”

“Do you want a girl or a boy?”

“I never thought I’d have one. I don’t know. When I was in school, I always thought it would be nice to have a girl.”

“Girls are work. But they’re fun. And you can dress them up. Riley puts on six different dresses a day sometimes. The thing with girls is, you raise them and the whole time in the back of your head, you’re thinking, oh my God, she’s going to grow up and be an adult and some d-

bag's going to fuck her around and ruin my perfect baby. And you're terrified of that. But I've found the best way to get through it is to tell her that boys are bad and want to steal her teddy bear. It caused a few problems in daycare."

"I had a panda bear when I was little. I named him Tookie."

"Do you still have him? When Riley was born, I gave her my bear. But I'm regretting that decision, because sometimes I get really lonely at night and need a little something to snuggle with."

"If I do, he's somewhere in my mom's attic."

"That was the cool thing about having a baby young. I had all these great toys left over to give to her. Have you seen some of the toys they make now? They're hideous. And stupid. Did you have Littlest Pet Shop when you were young? 'Cause I did, and it was awesome. Now they've got these Littlest Pet Shop dogs with huge honking heads and tiny bodies, and kids are supposed to want to play with them. And Barbie's gone full liberal now; they cut her boobs way down and gave her these ridiculous hips and flat feet, so she looks more like a *real* woman. Which is insane because the whole point of Barbie is that she isn't real, she can't be real, and that's why you can make her a pilot one minute and an archaeologist the next."

"I haven't looked at toys since I was in fifth grade. But I guess that would have been nice, to have a baby eight or nine years ago."

"Oh! Biscuits!" Lindsay said as the waitress set the platter down. "Thank God. I'm starving." She tore into one and slathered it with butter.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked after swallowing a few bites of bread.

"Trying to remember the last time I was in a Cracker Barrel. I think it was a while ago."

“Don’t you ever live? You keep saying you haven’t done things in years. Go do things. Well, now, I guess you’ll have to go do things. Babies require outings.”

“I guess.”

The biscuit was dry.

Rebecca got on the highway and drove back towards her house. Adam wouldn’t be home until after 9; there was an evening service today. She had plenty of time to get back and think about how she should tell him. Lindsay’s number was in her pocket, scribbled on a Cracker Barrel napkin because Rebecca had forgotten to bring her cell phone.

She pulled into the driveway and pressed the garage door opener. Adam’s car was there. She parked and walked into the house, fear building.

“Rebecca!” he cried as she came in. “Where have you been?”

“At the doctor.” Something had changed; it was easy to lie.

“Are you alright? You’re alright. Okay. We have a major crisis at the camp.” Adam was pulsing with glee, pacing excitedly and clasping his Bible.

“What’s wrong?”

“We have an exorcism tonight. First one I’ve ever gotten to do! Can you believe it? This is truly a gift from God.”

She swallowed. “Who are you exorcising?”

“A whole group of girls. THE group of girls. The bad ones. The ones who have been defiling our sacred space all summer. It’s finally time; I have indisputable proof that they’re possessed by some terrible demon, and tonight we’re going to get it out of them.”

“What happened? Where are they?”

“We put them in the chapel basement during Newspaper to keep them busy. When I came back to let them out, I found them levitating Leah off the table, chanting something sacrificial about using feathers in their ritual to propel her body into the air. We locked them in the main chapel for now, to keep the other campers safe.” He was still smiling, almost bounding through the den as he compiled various papers and books.

“Adam, you don’t seriously think they were levitating Leah.”

He stopped mid-bounce.

“I mean, they were probably lifting her. Maybe you just couldn’t see their hands.” She flinched; he was looking at her truculently.

“Their hands were visible—hovering beneath her body, which was fully suspended in the air. Do you doubt what I saw, Rebecca? Do you think that I, who have been called to do a great service to this sinner’s world, would mistakenly diagnose a demonic presence in my own parish? It would be wise for you to remember,” he said now, slowly, “that you are married to Reverend Adam More, State Overseer for The Church of God of Verses. What you do reflects who I am. God said, ‘Your desire will be for your husband, and he shall RULE over you.’ You will obey the word of God in this house, Rebecca.”

She nodded.

“Now we,” he said, stroking a strand of hair behind her ear, “are going to the campground in one hour. I expect you to be dressed appropriately. I expect you to assist me in any way I require during this exorcism. I expect you to be what God intended you to be. Get ready.”

The car was nauseating. A vanilla air freshener dangled madly from the rear view mirror, twisting and then untwining on its string. She could smell everything—his soap-skimmed arm was twisting the tuner button, and it put him right in front of the air vent. Rebecca laid in the backseat of Adam's Ford, the middle seatbelt buckled around her hips awkwardly, pressing into her skin with enough force that it only seemed to contribute to her carsickness. It hurt a little.

She closed her eyes and thought about the exorcism, this strange ritual Adam had fabricated. What was it he had said about feathers? They were chanting something, talking about using feathers in a ritual, and Leah was hovering above a circle of girls. It sounded familiar yet impossible. As much as Rebecca sometimes believed in God, there were some parts of theology she couldn't accept. When God started transforming objects into snakes and rivers into blood and burning bushes, well, those were the church mornings that she volunteered to staff the nursery, playing with the babies in the basement and ignoring the live stream of the sermon on the grainy tube TV.

In college, she had taken a philosophy course for three days and then dropped it in disgust, swapping for something in sociology. The professor of that first class was skinny like Adam, but he lacked any musculature, and his hair was long, just long enough to be sexy and not too feminine. She had hated him—the way his wisp of a beard hovered on his chin like it didn't want to be there, the way he pronounced every other word with an extra syllable, drawing out *like* to *lie-yuk* and *Kant* to *Ka-aunt*, and mostly, the way he didn't believe in anything but the study of philosophy. She could tell from just the few days in his class that he knew a lot, but he began the course by telling them that he had never believed in anything. He had no theories about life or death, but he could and would and did argue to support different possibilities of the “answers to life's big questions,” as he had put it.

She left because she was afraid he didn't have a soul, and that was a crazy thought. Everyone had a soul, or so she had believed until meeting Professor Rosenberg. To think, even for a moment, that someone could not was impossible. It stood to reason that if one human had a soul, they all did, and Rebecca felt hers sometimes as it moved in her.

Adam could have lied. The thought occurred to her as he drove over a particularly large bump in the mountainous road, humming along with the radio. He had never lied before that she knew of, and surely he was incapable of lying. He was a minister. He was a lot of things, but he wasn't a liar, and that had been a small comfort to her for the last few years. No matter what he did, he always told the truth, even if in his mind, truth meant a God who could and wanted to watch sinners boil in Hell.

But what if he had lied? No one would question him; he was Adam More. The girls he loathed would be punished by the other staff without any thought at all. In fact, the other counselors would participate happily, trying both to please Adam and to rid the camp of any problematic campers. Adam was the portrait of security. He would not have lied about this, but maybe there was something he didn't see—something like the girls' hands beneath Leah. If that was true, then it didn't matter what had really happened because Adam was only capable of seeing what he had seen. And he hadn't lied.

The car stopped. The seatbelt jerked once against her stomach, and then she fell back softly into the seats again.

“Get up, Rebecca. Don't let them see you like this.”

She stretched, her hands grasping at the door handle so she could further elongate her spine.

“Now, Rebecca. They're watching.”

She unfastened the seatbelt. It whirred into its port.

Outside, the air was cool, but she liked it that way. The mountains made it better. If this camp hadn't been Adam's obsessive thought for seven years, and if Adam had not made it hers, too, she might have liked it here, where it was cold and smelled like leaves. At the top of the hill, Kathryn and Mike were standing, looking down at Rebecca. She felt aware of her disheveled hair, her one cheek scarlet from where she had pressed it against the seat. Aware, but unconcerned. It might have been the first time they had seen her with an imperfection.

Adam was already ten steps ahead of her, rushing up the hill. She reached the crest and Mike looked at her oddly.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"They're still in the basement. We lowered them some food through the half-window so no one else could be infected." Mike unfolded a piece of light blue notebook paper and handed it to Rebecca. Adam's hands grabbed it from hers.

"What's this?"

"It's the note they sent up with the empty food containers. Apparently one of them is smart enough to know our limitations. I'm betting Jamie, but it could be Holly, too." Mike hesitated.

"What else?" Rebecca kept her voice even.

"Two of them got out. We're not sure which two, or exactly when, but about an hour ago, we found the window smashed, and now Jamie is the only one we can see. She says she has two with her, but that the other two are gone. She won't tell us where, or who. We're assuming Grace and Leah were the ones who left. They're the smallest and could fit through the window with the most ease."

“So it’s become a safety issue,” Kathryn said. “If we don’t find the other two girls, and it gets dark, we’ll never find them. Worse, something else might. And that’s a law suit we don’t want.”

Adam turned to Kathryn, his voice heavy with wisdom but tinged with thrill. “The demons inside them will protect them from anything in the woods. Evil triumphs in strange ways. They are our concern only because they might taint the other campers.”

“Adam, if we lose those girls, people are going to want to know why. And when they find out we kept five of them locked in a basement all day because we thought they were filled with demons, they’re going to shut us down,” Mike said.

“Thought they were filled with demons? *Thought?* I saw them levitate one off a table! Are you questioning me, Michael? I am a servant of God, as are you. Anyone on this ground is subject to my authority. This is a land of God. It transcends all of man’s rules. We will proceed as planned. Inform the other counselors that they will all be expected at the Chapel in one hour. Put the campers in lights out early. Tell them if they so much as stir from their beds, they will be punished in a manner befitting their disobedience.” Adam glared triumphantly and strode down the other side of the hill, towards his office in the camp’s valley.

“We better get that message out.” Kathryn turned, uncomfortable and slightly ashamed.

Rebecca could hear Adam’s absence; it sounded like rain in her head.

“I’ll catch up,” Mike said, and he and Kathryn nodded to each other. “Rebecca—walk with me?”

It had been, probably, four years since she and Mike had spoken alone. Adam believed that married women should not consort with single men; their husbands must intercede for them. Women were untrustworthy, given to flesh, and men were easily tempted. Except him. The last

time they had spoken, Mike had been about to marry Kathryn. And then he didn't. Rebecca fell into place beside him, and he walked toward the perimeter of the camp, which was marked by the beginnings of the forest.

"Adam is too excited for this," Mike began. "He needs to take some time to consider the possibilities of our actions. If we take this much farther, it will be too late to change anything."

"Demons are a serious concern." Her voice was flat, phonographic. "Adam is trying to protect the camp."

"Rebecca, don't."

"Don't what?"

"It's like I'm talking to him when you say things like that."

"A woman is an extension of her husband. She serves his will as he serves God's." She suppressed her desire to cry.

"Stop it." Mike grabbed her arms. They were in the five o'clock shadow of the woods, as Jamie had called it once in an article. The new growth twined toward the campground, threatening as always to overtake it. "You're not him. Don't be him with me."

"I am him. I am his."

"You're not. Remember when we met, and you kicked that professor's ass and told him he was a soulless prick? You were alive."

"I was eighteen."

"You were beautiful." He slid his hands up to her neck, holding her face tightly from beneath her cheekbones.

"Don't." His hands loosened. "This isn't about you. There are two girls somewhere out here. Probably Leah and Grace; Holly and Jamie would have wanted them safe. Someone has to

find them. Jamie and Holly and probably Rachel are down in that basement, trapped, scared, and Adam is about to have his moment, and someone has to protect them, too. This is not about you.”

“So you admit that this isn’t real.”

“I never said that.”

“For seven years, we’ve been here, watching him get crazier by the day, and we’ve done nothing. I’ve done nothing. You know this isn’t real. Demons don’t infect little girls, and they don’t do it during an hour of activity time.”

“It’s real to him.”

“How are you defending him? After everything he’s done?”

“He hasn’t done anything—”

“No, he hasn’t done anything I can prove, anything I can touch and show to you, to tell you that I know. Except that mark on your cheek.”

“Mike, I fell asleep in the car. It’s nothing. And it’s different now. If we get through tonight, it will be different. I promise. He will be different.”

“He isn’t capable of being different. I’ve known him longer than you have; he has always been Adam. He’ll always be Adam.”

“People can change. I did.”

“You never changed. You’re talking to me now; doesn’t that prove you haven’t changed?”

The branches were low-hung. To Rebecca it sounded like their voices stretched into the trees and were caught there, snared in the leaves and thrashing.

“Find the girls. I’ll go to the church.”

“You’ll protect him.” It should have been a question.

“He’s my husband,” she said, and this time she wasn’t parroting a biblical truth.

Mike walked away, heading deeper into the trees.

Rebecca opened the chapel doors and walked up the red tongue of carpet on the center aisle. The pulpit stood, flanked by the altars, at the throat of the church, and behind that wooden focal point, Adam stood.

“Where’s Mike?” he asked. The other counselors, clustered tightly on the pews, looked at her. Kathryn’s eyes met hers for a moment, then flicked away.

“He’s locking all the buildings, to make sure the girls don’t get in to anything. He thought they might try to break in to cause a distraction.”

“An excellent idea.” His voice hardened and swelled. “We can’t allow for any distractions tonight. The demons who fled from the basement are alive and will look to harm our sacred establishment. This church will remain. And tonight we will make ourselves known as defenders of God’s great spirit.” The counselors applauded as he swung upwards on the last phrase. There were only twenty-six staff members, twenty-five of them in the church now, but it sounded like a mob.

“Practically, though, we need to strategize. Someone has to volunteer to go down into the basement and bring the girls up. Three people, actually. One for each girl.”

“Pastor Adam?” Kerry’s hand rose. “How will we subdue them? With only three of us, I mean. Shouldn’t we all go down?”

“That is an excellent question, Kerry. Perhaps in terms of numbers, it would be wise of us to go down together as one, expending all of our forces in one effort to bring three demons up

a flight of stairs. Yet I ask you: did David question the three stones he chose from the river to quell the beast Goliath? Did he ask for more? No. He had faith that God had given him the right number to conquer his enemy. God has spoken to me; it will take only three valiant counselors. Who would like the honor?"

"I would," Rebecca said.

Adam faltered on the pulpit, struck for a moment. He recovered. "Rebecca, I would appreciate your assistance upstairs, as you are a religious scholar and therefore have a background in this type of work."

She had taken two Religious Studies courses with Adam, six years ago. His eyes bored into hers, sending her the signal she had always responded to with immediacy.

"I am a religious scholar, and for that reason, I feel I should lead the other two volunteers into the basement to retrieve the girls." She sounded frighteningly like Adam.

Adam frowned at his wife. This was the second time, maybe the third if you counted the way she had gotten out of the car so slowly, that she had defied him today. Never openly, but there it was. If he smacked her down here, now, the night could disintegrate before it began. Rebecca may have been just a wife, but she was Mrs. Adam More. The female counselors looked to her, not to him, for their guidance. They respected her, and why shouldn't they? She was his voice. And women could be fickle about things. They could forget what something really represented. She was an extension of him, yes, but what if he denied her a right tonight, here, in front of them, and they sided with her instead? The exorcism would be forgotten; panic would ensue—the kind of panic Adam had read about in history books and had always feared since he started preaching, when he was twelve. There was a paranoia that surrounded religion, and he was well aware of it. In fact, he used it. Things worked best when he kept that paranoia

alive, fed it with talk of damnation and sin, but redeemed it gently with talk of obedience and God's love. For more than sixteen years, he had succeeded in keeping the line between paranoia and panic in a perfect balance, but he knew it could waver. The slightest misstep could undo him, could turn that loving paranoia into uncontrollable panic; that was why he had married. He had chosen Rebecca, picked her out of Mike's friend group because he knew she could lead, but more importantly, she could serve. She could be his stabilizing point. Women could trust her and want to follow her. He could be a family man, and family ministers were more likely to get promoted faster. And it had helped with the problems, too, of being a single minister. Before Rebecca, even when his church was small and the camp was only a dream, every girl in the congregation, it seemed, wanted to catch him, keep him. He went to dinner at every family's house, meeting nieces and cousins and daughters and smiling and eating more than a few suspicious casseroles. No one could focus on his sermons when they were all vying for his affection. And so he had married. And the balance came then.

It had been only a moment. "Thank you for your concern with this matter. Rebecca will lead the group into the basement and return with the demons. Who will go with her?"

A few hands went up. "Kathryn, yes, and...Greg. Come up to the altar." Rebecca and the others knelt on the scratchy blue carpet—nobody ever bowed on the central aisle. It was an unspoken rule. Rebecca folded her hands, interlocking her fingers, and thought absurdly for a moment of her Sunday School class when she had been five or six, before her mom had stopped forcing her to go. There was a rhyme they said. It was about a steeple, but she didn't remember it, and all the girls would fold their hands like this, and it had a purpose.

"Let us pray," Adam's voice rang, "over our brother and sisters so that they may have our strength and our faith in God's ability to lead them to righteous victory."

The prayer continued. Rebecca kept her eyes shut lightly but firmly. People touched her back, some roughly, claiming they were in the Spirit, and some with just a few soft pats. She felt the holy water on her temples and forehead, and still she stayed on her knees, unmoving, as his voice boomed above her.

She worried about the girls, who were surely hearing all of this from where they crouched below. Jamie and Holly, the leaders, would have wanted Leah and Grace out. Leah was their baby, and why they chose to pretend to levitate her was confusing. Jamie never let Leah do anything dangerous. While she was mean to her sometimes, she always protected her. And when she didn't, there was Grace, who was tough but emotional, who had seen her brother die two years ago and who had never been the same since, and who looked at Leah like she was an answer to the question of pain. Grace never would have let them play around with Leah like that. And then, too, there was Rachel. She wasn't as charismatic as Holly or Jamie, and that's why she followed them, but she had something they didn't: unshakable faith. She liked to be mischievous; she'd spray the other cabins with silly string or coat their toothbrushes in coffee grinds, but nothing she did ever threatened harm, and more importantly, she would never try to flout God by trying to levitate a girl off the table. She wouldn't even have pretended to try, even under pressure from Jamie or Holly. Rebecca was certain about all of these things. She had watched the girls for the past few years as their roles became more defined, as they wound more closely into a tight, united sphere, and she knew how far they would go.

It came to her in a memory. A sleepover. Mariah Donoghue's eleventh birthday party. It was her first real sleepover, and she had brought a purple sleeping bag and hidden her panda bear at the bottom, afraid she would be mocked for it. It turned out that everyone else had done the same thing, and they had laughed about it later that night in the darkness, when it was safe to

snuggle their bears and unicorns without judgment. But before that, before Mariah's mom had turned out their lights at three in the morning and said that they needed to get some sleep, for God's sake, they had told scary stories, passing a flashlight around in a circle and pointing it under their chins, illuminating their rounded cheeks but shadowing their eyes. And it was Mariah who cried out, after a particularly thrilling story about a girl who had volunteered to be levitated at a magic show and who had never been able to come down, and who just rose and rose until she hit the atmosphere and died of suffocation, that they should all play Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board. Mariah told them that you picked the lightest person and laid them on the floor, then gathered around them and used two fingers from each person to put under the girl on the floor. Then, chanting, you raised them up like magic.

Annette Wirth was the smallest girl in their school, and she happened to be at the party. Nervously, she stretched out on the rose-colored carpet, and Rebecca remembered sliding her two pointer fingers under Annette's arm, the sleeve of her sunflower-printed pajamas tickling her slightly. And they had chanted, "Light as a feather, stiff as a board," over and over, whispering first but getting louder, as they lifted Annette's little body high into the air, to their chest level, before sitting her down. They had laughed because it was all so ridiculous, but it was fun. It was what Stephen King would call almost-believing, this definition tucked into the pages of *It*, which Rebecca read dozens of times in the short years before Adam. They didn't believe, but they almost could. Had they been five instead of eleven, and raised in a world without so much science and fact surrounding them, they would have.

Leah was the lightest.

The thundering of Adam's prayers ceased, and Rebecca opened her eyes. Her knees were sore. They had probably been kneeling for fifteen or twenty minutes, but it was hard to tell. Altar calls always left her feeling a little punch-drunk. Dizzily, she clamored to her feet and felt immediately nauseous. She fought her physical impulse, which had been to place a hand on against her body where the baby was growing inside her, and instead grabbed Kathryn's arm lightly for support. If Adam guessed that she was pregnant or thought that she was sick, she didn't know how the night would turn out, but her guess was leaning strongly towards the "not good" option.

"Adam, excuse me for a moment," Rebecca said. She gave him the loving wife smile she always did in church, knowing how beautiful it made her, knowing that everyone around them would take it as a sign that everything in the church was alright. She walked calmly to the left of the altar, through the hallway door and back to the bathrooms. Standing at the sink, she scrutinized her reflection, trying to imagine the changes she would experience. Her face was young-looking for twenty-eight, but her eyes were tired. Probably too tired for a baby.

The door opened.

"You okay?" Kathryn asked.

"Of course. I was feeling a little warm, and I thought some water might cool me down."

"You seemed a little dizzy."

"My foot fell asleep. Are you ready to do this?"

"As long as you are." Kathryn looked in the mirror. "It's going to be a long night."

"We've had longer. Remember, we did that Knit-a-thon for sixteen hours before we raised enough money for the roof repairs."

“You know, Rebecca, it takes a lot of effort to like you, especially when you can’t stop being Little Miss Sunshine all the time.”

“I’m aware.”

“Let’s get this over with.”

Mike wasn’t lost. Okay, maybe he was a little lost. Not lost, but just confused. Not even really baffled. He just wasn’t sure where he hadn’t looked that he needed to look. He had searched the woods in the dwindling twilight first, and then scoured the camp common buildings, especially the kitchen because it was generally a favorite spot for campers to sneak into. But after an hour of scouring under ping pong tables and even opening the walk-in freezer (though he doubted they would be that stupid), he was ready to throw in the towel. He hadn’t checked the chapel, but that was ludicrous. They would never go back to the chapel. They could have been wandering in the woods, but they wouldn’t have gone deep into it. He was sure of that. Campers had been taught the limits of the property, and trespassing onto the other side of the grounds was dangerous. It was private land, used for hunting. As desperate as they were, they wouldn’t do that. They had to be somewhere.

He circled the perimeter of the camp again. Rebecca probably could have found them. She should have been the one to look, but as usual, she had to be next to Adam, following him pathetically, the way they all did. He wasn’t unaware of his own blind submission. When he first met Adam, he had felt compelled to like him. He was a frighteningly young pastor, only eighteen, when he came to the church Mike had been going to all his life. They were so close in age that they started talking about life, and God, and Mike had listened. He had wanted to listen. Back then, it had felt like a partnership. Mike could give an idea, and Adam would be receptive

to it. After Mike started college, they emailed to stay in touch, and then strangely, in the midst of his sophomore year, Adam had knocked on the door of his apartment and asked to stay for a week. He needed a vacation, he said.

To make him feel welcome, Mike threw a party—a tame party, but a party nonetheless. Rebecca had come, beautiful in a grey dress and smoky eyes, and Mike had seen Adam watching her, almost predatorily, all night. As Mike leaned in the doorframe of the living room, watching Adam watch Rebecca, Noel had laid her head on his shoulder. He felt her warm, erratic hair on his arm and was comforted.

“It’s going to be terrible,” she had said, and Mike had nodded, not really understanding yet the depths of Noel’s perception.

And now, nearly eight years later, he understood. Rebecca had withered as Adam thrived; as if he used her to feed himself, to swell with her life. And Mike had kept going to their church, helping as needed but keeping the distance Adam subtly indicated was necessary. Then Kathryn had come and made everything worse. Tonight he had lost a control he had maintained for some time. Seeing her cheek reddened when she got out of the car had enraged him, but it had also allowed him to speak to her in a way he thought he had forgotten how to do. Adam had hit her, finally. He knew it. And she just stood there, loving him, or at least pretending to, which was worse.

But she had been right. This was about finding Leah and Grace. So he turned again and started looking.

Adam’s office was blue with a mural of Bible verses painted on it, each one spreading from white paint into scrolls of tree branches. One of Rebecca’s friends had painted it with her

when she and Adam had first started dating—some art freak sinner with hands constantly stained with splashes of dye, and a messy ponytail she wore all the time—he couldn't remember her name now. Rebecca had her art all over the house she had inherited from her grandma. It was a small house, only two bedrooms, and there was color everywhere, exploding so loudly that he could hear it when he looked at it. He had hated the whole house, especially the floor pillows that Rebecca and her friends preferred to use rather than buy a couch like normal people, but the thing that bothered him most had been the painting.

The painting was over three feet in both directions, sprawling on Rebecca's wall. It was painted all in shades of blue, obviously trying to model something Picasso, who hadn't been that great of an artist anyway, but Adam had always thought that his name and ugly but unique cubism paintings had earned him his unearned fame. This wasn't cubist. It was every shade of blue he could conceive of: his favorite colors, all, hanging there on the wall, and building to Rebecca. The lines of color collided onto her eyes, her shoulders, her rainfall of hair, and lower, past anything he had seen yet, past what any man should see of any woman but his wife, her breasts hung large and cerulean beneath her denim lips. It made him shiver to see them. Below that perfect and accurate portrayal, though, was the oddity: Noel had painted Rebecca pregnant. Fully, bloomingly, pregnant. Beneath that imagined bastard, her legs were hers but seemingly longer, sexier than possible. And between her legs...he shuddered again, awestruck, and then suddenly shook himself free.

Stepping back from the canvas, closing his mouth, he could critique it. Blue was not an accurate color for humans to be. Realistic paintings were true art because they captured a moment and demonstrated skill. These attempts at art were bred from laziness, not experimental creativity. The painting would have to go. He couldn't be in this house with it here, with her

starting at him from the wall like a Jezebel, her hand draped over her impossible stomach, her eyes daring him to touch her.

That night, over a dinner he cooked for her at the parish house, he told her to take it down. The next time he entered her bedroom, it had been gone.

The blue of his office sometimes reminded him of the painting, and he had a feeling that the whore artist knew it then and painted it blue on purpose, but his relationship was new and he didn't want to scare Rebecca away by forbidding her to paint the office. It was just an office, anyway, and at the camp. He had another one at the church in town and another in his home. The camp wasn't even a camp yet—just an idea in the works, and it might never be a camp. So the blue office had stayed, and Noel (that was her name; a blasphemous name for someone who was fully Jewish) had gone, banished slowly to the Christmas card list (which Adam had enjoyed sending her for a few years; always nice to show a Jew what they're missing out on by denying our Lord and Savior).

On a shelf in the office, there was a small black box. He opened it now and retrieved his most sacred tools: a large silvery cross with a broken chain, a small black leather bound Bible with a worn snap closure, and a photo that he tucked hurriedly into his pocket. He switched off the lights as he closed the door, his pulse jumping excitedly.

Rebecca walked out of the church with Kathryn and Greg, small bottles of holy water in their hands. Kathryn radiated annoyance and glee; she was still reeling from their small conversation, and her attitude towards Rebecca was highlighted clearly by her stiff shoulders. Yet she was happy, looking forward to Adam's praise when she would return, triumphantly, with the demon's flesh gripped in her palm. For all Kathryn's talk about practicality and law suits, she

wanted an explosion. She just didn't want to be blamed for the fallout. Standing next to her, where Rebecca could feel those intertwined emotions, was disorienting. Greg was completely excited, and Rebecca had never known anyone to act more like a dog than Greg was doing now. He was literally, and ridiculously, panting as they walked around the church. She felt like any moment he would bound ahead, and she'd have to call out *Heel, boy!* to reclaim him. And she was sure that if they returned with the girls, Greg would look to Adam for praise for his job well done.

They had passed the broken window, the glass glinting on the grass in the growing darkness. She was somewhat surprised that no one had cleaned it up, but then figured that they were hoping the girls couldn't try again with the danger of cutting themselves. Then again, if they were smart enough to break a window and avoid getting cut the first time, they could probably do it again. The cellar doors were padlocked. Rebecca knelt down and turned the key, then pulled the chain off. It was a clichéd motion she never thought she would see outside of a medieval novel, but here she was, unchaining a dungeon door to finish off the witch hunt. It disgusted her but also struck her as a little funny.

Greg stooped to pull open the doors. They thudded against the grass. Holy water in hand, they went down the stained concrete stairs. Rebecca was in the front, leading them behind her, and scared that she would slip and fall. Lindsay had told her today (had it really been only a few hours ago that she had felt so secure with Lindsay?) that falling this early in a pregnancy was almost always catastrophic, and the quickest way to a miscarriage. Protectively, she held her stomach, and with the other hand gripped the metal pipe railing.

At the bottom of the stairs, she groped for the light switch and found it in the darkness, shifting to the side so Greg and Kathryn could get down. As she turned it on, she saw Jamie,

Rachel, and Holly sitting calmly on three metal folding chairs. They stared at the stairs behind the counselors, unmoving, unblinking.

“We’re taking you upstairs now,” Greg said, walking towards them, but he stopped as the girls failed to react.

“Come on, girls. Get up so we can take you to the chapel.” Kathryn’s voice wavered slightly.

Rebecca stared at them, really looked at them. Rachel was in the middle, her long, blonde hair hanging sweetly around her face, framing her skin and making it glow a little in the dim light. On her left, Holly sat with her legs crossed, hands folded atop them, almost prissily. And Jamie, in the third chair, was a statue of regret, her body hardened already by what had happened to her over years of this camp, of Adam’s reign and victory over her. The girls’ eyes were wide, dry, and dead. She felt, for the second time in her life, that she was looking at things without souls. For the first time, she believed in the demons. She saw them, clawing out of the girls, eating their souls and leaving behind these ravaged husks. She believed, fully believed, felt it in her bones and the quivering of her pelvis as her heart pulsed blood to her very new baby, and she was afraid. Adam’s name brimmed in her throat and then died.

Then Jamie blinked, meeting Rebecca’s eyes, and Rebecca felt inside her body a sudden tearing, a rupture. She whitened and clutched her abdomen again. She could feel blood seeping through her worn jeans already, blood in a unceasing torrent. Her knees descended, and as her spine curved in a delicate arch, as her head rushed toward the concrete, as Greg and Kathryn exclaimed above her and reached for her, she saw Jamie’s eyes, still locked on her, and they laughed.

Rebecca had a headache. The kind of headache that debilitated a person and made it impossible for any kind of work to be done. She sighed inwardly, knowing her pain meant another fight with Adam, another moment of him not understanding what a migraine was, or how it could hinder her from being his wife. Her eyes opened to whiteness. She looked to her left and saw, sleeping on a row of chairs, Noel. It had been years since she had seen her. She blinked.

“Noel?” she asked, her eyes falling again.

“Rebecca?” She had expected Noel’s musical lilt, that soft, assured voice that sang her to sleep sometimes when they were both lonely and missing home, but it wasn’t Noel.

“Rebecca? Hey. Hey, you’re up,” Lindsay said, taking a huge gulp of an even more enormous blue slushy.

“What?”

“You’re up. You’ve been out for a while.”

Rebecca looked, finally, and saw the hospital room around her, the IV puncturing her arm. “What happened?”

“Apparently you fell down some steps at that camp your husband runs. When they brought you here, he didn’t come with them. The ambulance, I mean. Some other guy did, but they wouldn’t let him in because he wasn’t family. And then they found my number in your pocket, and you didn’t have a cell phone, so they called me and asked if I knew you. And I said I totally did, and then I came here.” She took a sip out of her straw again.

“Where’s the other guy?”

“In the waiting room. They figured you wouldn’t want him here during the exam and everything. They also thought you’d be pretty delirious because of the head injury. You kept talking about demons, and they had to sedate you.”

Her mouth was dry. “Can you go get Mike?”

“The guy? Sure. Do you want some?” She extended the slushy to Rebecca, who greedily took a sip. “Have more. I’ll be back.”

The slushy was blue raspberry, a flavor that had always confused her. Was there actually a blue raspberry? She had never seen one in any fruit aisle, anywhere in the country she had been. Maybe they were tropical and foreign. She supposed she could have googled it at some point, but she never remembered to. She sometimes considered keeping a small book filled with a list of things she should google, but she never got around to that, either.

Mike opened the door in a rush and turned Rebecca’s hand over in his, kissing it just below the IV. “You’re okay. My God, they wouldn’t tell me anything. But you’re okay.” He was nearly crying.

“The baby. How is the baby?”

Lindsay snapped the door closed. “The baby is fine. You bled a little, but when it stopped, they did an ultrasound, and it’s all good. BTW, you’re ten weeks along, which is impressive considering your lack of any kind of weight on your stomach. You should at least look bloated.” She sprawled into another chair.

“Mike, what about the girls?”

“What girls?” Lindsay asked.

“At our camp, there were some problems with some of the girls.”

“I don’t know, baby. When you fell, I was up on the hill. I saw Greg open the doors and you start to walk down, and then I heard a scream behind me, and I turned and it was the two little girls, flailing around. They had been hiding under a bush, I guess, and a huge beetle had crawled onto Leah. She screamed, and I turned, and Grace was brushing at her skin to get it off her, and then I heard your scream. I grabbed the girls and ran down to you. When I got there, you were bleeding from your head and your—there was a lot of blood. Greg was calling an ambulance, and Kathryn was standing there in shock. And the girls...”

“What? What happened, Mike?”

“They were just sitting there, like nothing had happened. Like they didn’t even see. And Grace and Leah had gone quiet, too, beside me, and then Adam and the rest of the congregation turned up, and no one knew what had happened. I picked you up and Greg and I took you down to the road to meet the ambulance, and Adam—he just stood there, looking at the girls, like you didn’t exist.” Mike dropped her hand and moved to look at a clipboard on the nightstand.

“How did you fall, Becca? Oh yeah, I’m gonna call you Becca from now on. It’s cooler. Did you slip on the stairs?” She took the slushy back and started sipping again.

“I didn’t fall down the stairs. I was standing at the bottom.”

“Baby, no. You weren’t. Kathryn said she saw you fall.”

“I didn’t. I turned on the lights at the bottom, and then I saw them sitting there, and then I don’t know what happened, but I felt like something was wrong.”

“Maybe someone is confused. Probably Kathryn. But the important thing is, you’re okay. And the baby’s okay,” Mike said.

“So are you guys like a thing now?” Lindsay asked, winking at Mike.

“I’m married,” Rebecca said sternly.

Mike thought, stupidly, that he had heard his own heart break, until he realized he'd just snapped the clipboard he was holding in half.

"Mike, I'm still married. Nothing has changed."

"He let you go in the ambulance and didn't follow it. You've been here for five hours. Five. In all that time, he hasn't called, or driven here, or had someone else call. And our so-called church community hasn't called, either. I've gotten voicemails for everyone on the staff; no one will pick up. He doesn't love you."

Lindsay slurped loudly on the slushy.

"Well, this is awkward," she said, eying Mike like he was the newest episode of *Grey's Anatomy*.

"I can't just be yours. I'm having a family."

"Rebecca, your mom's on her way here, okay? Just wait and see her, and we'll talk about it later. Don't give up on this yet."

"I should have asked about the baby first," Rebecca said.

"You had head trauma. Give yourself a little forgiveness. Also, you had that super hot guy waiting for you outside." Lindsay had coffee now, which made Rebecca slightly worried about what this woman could possibly be like when increased by caffeine.

"Aren't you a little young to be scoping out thirty-year-olds?"

"I have a kid. I'm mature for my age. Or preternaturally slutty. But either way, he's delicious. You should go for it."

"You haven't seen my husband."

“Well, if he got you, I imagine he’s pretty sexy, but that doesn’t mean he’s better than your personal savior out there.”

“He’s more than sexy. He has a presence. When I met him, and I went to church with him for the first time since I was a kid, it was like having a new body. He would sit in the empty pews after service and listen to me sing. I learned all the old hymns, and I’d just sing them to God, and I could feel my soul moving inside my heart, like they were two separate people who lived together.”

“But that wasn’t Adam, right?”

“Adam showed me how to find it.”

“When I was ten and started my period for the first time, I had no freaking clue how to put a tampon in. I barely knew what a vagina was, and I certainly didn’t know where exactly it was, so the nurse at my school had to help me find it and put the damn thing in. But you don’t see me married to her and carrying her spawn.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Rebecca said, but she grinned.

“If you have a hunk of burning man jonesing for you, you go for it.”

“I’m married.”

“Look, clearly my deeply personal vagina monologue wasn’t enough for you, so allow me to make it simpler and more emotional. Imagine this baby is a girl, and you name her Lexie or Anne or Eve or something like that, and she’s twenty, and she gets married, and she stays in what is obviously an emotionally abusive relationship for eight years, and you watch her do this and want so badly for her to be free, but when you talk to her about it, she says she can’t be because she’s married, and she might go to Hell for it if she leaves her husband for a better, and

conveniently sexy, man who saved her life. What would you tell her? Because if that were Riley, I'd tell her that it's okay to be happy."

Rebecca looked at her nails. They were still perfectly sculpted from her manicure earlier in the week. "What time is it?"

"Around eleven."

"It's been a long day."

"Mhm. What do you think I'd look like with pink hair?"

"Not good. How did you name Riley?"

"From *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I loved the name but thought it was too girly for the soldier guy who had it on the show. So I gave it to her. Plus there are tons of girls named Riley these days."

"I think it was on a Mary-Kate and Ashley show once. Riley and something else that sounds preppy."

"Are you saying my kid has a preppy name?"

"Yes. She sounds like a rich girl with a corvette and a toy poodle. And a huge credit card."

"God willing. Anyway, I better get going. My brothers want to try to get laid in the near future, so they need to go on dates, and if I keep making them babysit at night, they'll never achieve those particular goals."

"Thanks for coming."

"No problem. Anything for the baby. That's really the only reason I decided to be friends with you. I'm hoping you have a son, and he's a good guy, so I have someone to marry off to my daughter."

“That would be convenient.”

“See you tomorrow, okay? I’ll bring Riley.”

With a brief hug, she was gone. The IV dripped like rain.