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about 63,000 words

Kisses for Andrew  
By  
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Karolyn pulled up to an empty parking spot at the back of the crowded lot of Jerry's Supervalu. It was busy for a Tuesday and could be the reason so many items were missing from their pickup this week. The whole purpose to curbside pickup was so she didn't have to go into the store.

*Oh, well,* she thought.

She turned the car off and ran through a mental checklist of what she needed for the party this weekend. She cursed herself for not writing it down, even though she often told Dixon that her mind was a steel trap.

Karolyn stepped out of the car, taking time to double check the locks, and felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She pulled it out and checked the text message. She read the message and responded.

<< [Karolyn] I'll get it dont worry

She shook her head, put her phone back in her pocket and walked to the front of the grocery store. There was a mass of people entering and exiting the store. Out front was a man, probably homeless, begging for change, and holding a sign that read "My time has run out".

It was rare to see someone busking or begging on the sidewalk in front of Jerry's. When they had, it was usually around the holidays. Karolyn always gave something, no matter how small it seemed. Dixon felt it was better to give to programs that helped these people rather than giving them the money directly.

Karolyn checked her purse and realized that she didn't have any spare change to give and made a note to break a bill for some change later.

She strategized her attack plan as she walked through the automatic double doors. It was all about which aisles to hit and in which order so not to disrupt the flow of grocery shopping. They hated it when you went against the flow of traffic.

Karolyn caught the eye of Sherry, a big, smiling teenager who knew everyone in the neighborhood.

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Milner. Wasn't expecting to see you today. Mr. Milner already came and picked up your groceries. Something wrong? I can get the manager." She reached for the walkie on her hip. Sherry's smile could brighten a funeral, and her overreaching nature would make the Pope feel like he was out of place. Karolyn raised her hands.

"That won't be necessary, Sherry, thank you. Just missing a few things we need for a dinner party we're having later this week." Karolyn smiled and passed by as Sherry mumbled something about dinner parties and her favorite finger foods.

Karolyn pressed on to the bakery aisle. She ran through the mental list again and had a nagging feeling that she had left something off her list. She reached into her purse again to call Dixon, but thought better of it.

*I'm sure he's busy with the boys, she thought. It'll be fine.*

Karolyn grabbed whatever she could remember and the rest they would go without. She knew Dixon would be pulling his hair out for watching their two boys alone by now.

Karolyn buzzed up and down the aisles, passing over specials on canned beans and "2 for 1" cereal boxes. The music playing overhead was your typical 80s, 90s mix of vague one-hit-wonders and forgotten songs that were played during the end credits of summer blockbusters. Those sorts of songs that you could hum but could never place them.

She did her best not to bump elbows or get too close to the other patrons at the grocery. She had a habit of looking in other people's carts, wondering what they were cooking and was full of opinions that she never shared.

Karolyn reached her hand into the meat shelf and felt a prickling feeling on the back of her neck. Her hand moved and instinctively rubbed it warm. She looked around and stopped on the beggar, who was only ten feet away. His eyes were hollow. He stood with his weight shifted to one side, his right arm dangling lower than his left. His mouth hung open as he breathed, showing all the teeth he didn't have.

She turned and did her best to concentrate on her meat choice, but the beggar took a step towards her. Karolyn's heartbeat picked up again, but there was something different this time. Something was wrong.

She took a deep breath and turned to face him again. He was right on top of her then. She took a step back, but he reached out and grabbed her hand that held the grass fed ground chuck.

"Hey!" she shouted, pulling her arm back, but no one seemed noticed. He pulled her back into him, his breath taking over every scent she had in her nostrils, and forced her stomach to turn.

"I know what you're doing. It ends today." His crooked smile filled his face, he clicked his tongue in his mouth, and pushed her down onto the floor. Karolyn picked herself up, collected her groceries that were scattered about, and noticed that the beggar was gone. The other shoppers continued their picking with no such a glance or murmur of the crazy lady on the floor. Karolyn looked around for him, but there was no trace. The smile was familiar even if it was on the face of a homeless beggar.

*What the heck was that,* she wondered.

After finally pulling herself out of her daze, Karolyn took off towards the front of the grocery. She bumped a woman into the peanut shelf who turned into her by accident. She turned to apologize as she kept running, but fell into someone else when she reached the front: Sherry.

"Mrs. Milner, are you OK?" Sherry asked, but Karolyn scrambled back to her feet and walked out the front entrance without answering.

The beggar's space was empty. She shook her head and walked through the intersection, narrowly missing a car that failed to stop at the stop sign. The car never touched its brakes. Finding herself safely on the other side of the road, she surveyed the parking lot. She scanned the top of every car, but nothing looked familiar.

Karolyn reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys, fitting each one in between her fingers and squeezed her fist tight. Her breath was hard to catch, but she pressed on towards her car.

When she was just a few car lengths away, she relaxed her hand and hit the key fob a few times to unlock the doors. She grabbed the handle to the driver's door, slid in, and slammed the door shut. She looked over the steering wheel and around the car. No beggar, no strangers.

Karolyn found the ignition key and slid it into the column. Right as she was about to turn the engine over, another hand gently laid on top of hers. She froze.

The hand was attached to an elegant arm that was part of a body that she was very familiar with. The cab of the car filled with a faint smell of lilies and strawberries. Karolyn sat back in her seat and looked over to see herself sitting in the passenger seat staring back at her. She smiled to which her double smiled back. They locked fingers together and her double squeezed back.

"It's time," her passenger said at last. Karolyn exhaled, releasing her grasp. A tear forced its way from her eye. She chuckled, as if embarrassed because she was crying in front of herself. Her heart continued to race again when reality set in.

She looked back at herself in the passenger seat and smiled. The double nodded and returned the smile. "It's time," she said again, in a more reassuring manner than before. Karolyn nodded in agreement and had a sudden thought.

Karolyn stretched towards the wheel, then twisted her body back and felt for the screwdriver that was still lying on the floor behind her chair. She gripped the handle and brought it in closer to her. She marveled at the flathead's sharp edge and plastic handle. Her passenger tilted her head, slightly confused.

"What's that for?" she asked. Karolyn smiled.

"Just saying goodbye," she said and then plunged the screwdriver tip into her forearm. She winced from the pain but continued to drag the screwdriver across her arm, cutting intricate patterns. Her passenger's head dropped and moved in small circles. A growl left her lips. Karolyn lost the feeling in her legs.

*Almost done,* she thought.

Each one of her fingers slowly let go of the screwdriver and Karolyn felt her body go lifeless in the driver's seat. Her eyes moved over to the passenger seat and she found herself alone again.

Her arms went limp to her side. Her body lurched forward, hitting her head on the steering wheel. If she would've been able to express the pain that raced through her body, she would have.

Like a puppet tied to a string, Karolyn's body moved from side to side, limply grabbing a hold of the door's handle and pushing it open. Her body forced its weight out of the car and padded towards the front of the grocery store.

When Karolyn entered Jerry's SuperValu for the second time, Sherry again greeted her, only this time she was holding the arm that broke Karolyn's fall.

"Oh, Mrs. Milner. I am so sorry that I ran into you. Did you want me to call over the manager?" Sherry asked, slowly moving her bad arm to grab the walkie from her belt, but Karolyn's body walked right past her. Sherry called her name again, but noticed a trail of red marking the floor behind her.

"Mrs. Milner, are you bleeding?" Sherry asked, but Karolyn's body was out of sight.

Karolyn shuffled to aisle 14: cleaning supplies. Her body fell forward again, the invisible strings pulling her up to a stop in front of a four-foot section of bottles of bleach. Her hands fumbled in front of her, grabbing a bottle and pulling it in tightly. Karolyn reached down deep and forced her body back in control, but a cascading headache fell over her, forcing her down to her knees. She felt her nose go cold and wet, a few drops of blood falling to the floor.

The strings pulled again and forced her back to her feet, then down the aisle towards the checkout. When she made it to the cashier, Karolyn's face forced a smile.

"Membership card?" the checkout associate asked. Karolyn forced another smile and fumbled with her keys, but the strings pulled again, forcing her to shake her head no. The cashier swiped the bottle and placed it in a plastic bag. "Total comes to \$3.16," she said. The strings pulled her arms to her purse and pulled out her wallet. Karolyn's fingers trembled and flexed as she handed over a five dollar bill. The cashier grasped the bill and struggled with Karolyn to release it. Karolyn's body shook and wretched, trying to hold itself up as she let go of the bill. When the transaction finished, Karolyn grabbed the bag and refused the change before stepping awkwardly out of the grocery store.

#

*You've reached Karolyn. Please leave a message after the beep or else I'll assume you butt dialed me. OK. Bye, bye.*  
Beep.

"Damn it, Kay. Where the hell are you? If you went out for a drink or something, I don't care. I just need to know where you are. I'm getting really fucking worried. I love you. Please call me back."

Dixon ended the call and pulled down on his screen to see the time.

*Fuck, where is she?* he thought. His memory transported him back to another time that Karolyn hadn't answered her phone. It wasn't until the following morning that he discovered they had arrested her for public intoxication after celebrating with some friends. Cops picked her up right outside the bar she was sleeping up against.

He had turned into the splitting image of his mother that night envisioning her dead in a ditch somewhere. The car in pieces; her body in pieces. The image haunted him all night until his body finally gave out and let him sleep. She had gotten lucky that night.

Andrew cried again. His shrieks reached all the way through the house from his crib in his bedroom. He looked at the time again. His oldest son, Joseph, patted his leg.

"Bottle time, dada," he said, never looking up from his tablet.

Dixon stood up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, he pulled out a bag of breast milk then heated a glass of water in the microwave. He dipped the bag in the glass and waited for it to heat up. Andrew's cries rose and fell, and every time he hit a crescendo, Dixon's eardrum would crackle and his head would ache. Dixon poured the milk into a bottle and walked into Andrew's room.

Inside, Andrew was lying on his back, face red, eyes shut tight. When Dixon came into view, Andrew opened his eyes just enough to see who it was and began crying again.

"Hey, buddy, come on. I know. I'm not mommy. Look," he said, reaching to pick up him and cradling Andrew in his arms. "I've got your bottle. You want your bottle?" Andrew reached up for the bottle, then threw it on the ground.

"Hey!" Dixon said, his face turning sour as Andrew's cries grew loud again. He knelt down and picked it up and offered it again, but Andrew tried slapping it down.

"What do you want then? Sleepy? Dirty?" Dixon sniffed his diaper. "Well, it's not that," he said. Dixon continued to rock him back and forth, hoping that Andrew would calm down after long, but that seemed like a long time away. After some time, Andrew's cries fell to sharp, snotty breaths that he took in through his nose. Dixon continued his slow dance and sway as Andrew played with his shirt.

He had often looked down at Andrew from this angle. His blonde curls and deep blue eyes were no comparison to Dixon's own black hair and brown eyes. Andrew would light up when Dixon came home from work, which was always a welcome. Dixon even made sure that his first word was "daddy". Those are the memories he held on to when things got bad like this. If Karolyn was here, she'd been able to calm him down faster.

*Damn, Kay. Where the hell are you?*

Dixon lifted his son's head to his lips and gently kissed him on the forehead. He held the bottle tight in his other hand. Dixon mentally patted himself on the back for whatever it was he did to calm Andrew down, who was quietly snoozing in his arms.

*Another mystery solved, he guessed.*

Flash of red and blue light sped across Andrew's bedroom window. Dixon's phone vibrated in his pocket. Adjusting his weight and placing Andrew up on his shoulder, he fished his phone out.

A new notification came through, but it wasn't a missed call or text message: it was from the video doorbell.

*Jesus, Kay. Did you forget your keys,* he thought.

He clicked the banner and the app loaded. Standing at the front door was a police officer, another stood closely behind her, and their squad car parked in the driveway behind his. The spot where Karolyn's car would be. Dixon's heart leapt into his throat.

He rushed to the staircase and down the flight of steps to the front door. The jostling woke Andrew up and he began crying because of it. Dixon offered the bottle again, but Andrew pushed it away. He fumbled with the deadbolt and the bottle fell to the floor.

Opening the door, the officer took a step back from the front stoop, hands on her belt, and gave the storm door room to swing. Dixon nodded and cracked open the glass door.

"Something wrong?" he asked. Andrew's cries fell quiet then.

"Are you Dixon Milner?"

"That depends. What's the problem?" Dixon had seen enough cop shows to know not to give away too much information without a lawyer present. You just don't know what the cops want and giving them a reason to ask more questions would only get you in trouble. He could be anyone at this moment: Mr. Smith, maybe, or Betty Boop. He had nothing to hide, but sometimes that's how they get you.

"Do you know Karolyn Milner?" the officer asked. That pit in Dixon's stomach hit him again.

*She wasn't sitting in the drunk tank this time. It's something worse.*

His mouth went dry just then. He peered back to the officer standing behind them and she averted her gaze to the ground.

*Shit's about to get real bad.*

"Yes. She's my wife," Dixon choked. The officer removed her hat and clinched it in her hands. A move he'd seen hundreds of times in movies and TV shows. Even if it was raining, the cops always had to show how serious they were by removing the hat like it was some sort of a symbolic gesture like a doctor removing their mask before telling the family that grandpa didn't make it.

"We found her in the parking lot of Jerry's Supervalu, just down the street from here. We received a call that a woman was sleeping in her car while the engine was running. She was gone by the time paramedics arrived. I'm so sorry."

The officer's words entered Dixon's ear, flew past his brain, and fell out the other side. Andrew began crying then, but the cries came from a distant mountaintop that Dixon couldn't remember the name of.

The wind picked up. It graced over his face, flung his hair slightly to the side, and carried on down the street. It was a bit too late for birds to be singing and wondered if the police lights woke the neighbors up. It was just a mother and daughter and maybe a boyfriend that came around every once in a while. They kept to themselves mainly, so Dixon never found out for sure. He had liked the boyfriend, never asking his name, but he purchased an automatic diaper wrapper from him during a spontaneous yard sale that Karolyn just begged to have.

"We have too much shit," she had said right after Andrew was born. "We will never use this stuff again. Let's just sell it and be rid of it," she had said. Fine, fine.

Dixon remembered the boyfriend coming back and asking about the diaper trash bin.

"That thing looks expensive," he had said. Dixon nodded.

"Yeah, it is. We just need to get rid of it. You a dad?" he had asked. The boyfriend nodded. He remembered making a follow up joke about being a first time dad, but the joke was escaping him now.

It wasn't long after that the mother and daughter moved out and Dixon hadn't seen the boyfriend after that. The house was still empty.

*I guess the lights are only bothering the ghosts then, he thought.*

"Mr. Milner?"

There had been a bunch of stuff that Kay had asked for during their first baby shower that Dixon just shook his head at. Like, who needs special wipes just for baby boogers? Just grab a damned towel. You don't need towels that are "special" just for boogers. They're just damned boogers.

"Mr. Milner?"

*Oh, shit, did Kay pick up the wine for the dinner party this weekend?*

He knew she had written a very specific name of wine on the note page on the fridge. Night-something, he couldn't remember. It sounded expensive. Too expensive for the guest that was requesting it. They had a small fight about it. Karolyn wanted to impress her new possible *whatever* she was, and Dixon felt like it was a waste of money. Then again, most things feel like a waste of money to him.

*Shoot, who had the wine been for?*

"Mr. Milner?"

"Huh?"

"Did you hear what I said?" the officer asked, crossing her arms, frustrated. Dixon would have to ask Kay who the wine was for *again*, probably for the thousandth time.

Andrew cried out loud and tried to push off from Dixon holding him. Joseph ran to the top of the steps and crotched down to get a better look.

"Dad, what's going on? Why are the cops here?" he asked. Dixon turned and looked back up the steps at him, meeting Joseph's gaze. Dixon shrugged.

"Mr. Milner." It was no longer a question. It was a point of attention and Dixon snapped back to face her.

"Yes, what?" he asked, readjusting Andrew on his hip. Reality pulsed through him when he remembered where he was. A tear broke from the peak and fell down his cheek.

"Sir, I need you to come with me," the officer said, her voice softening.

"I can't," Dixon announced, his voice breaking at the end. He cleared his throat. "I can't. I've got the boys tonight." Dixon's mind went fuzzy. He felt like he was going to lose his balance or break out in song and dance. All of those things were at the surface for him now and it wasn't up to him on how to proceed next. If only it had been up to him to pick.

"Hey Dad, where's Mom?" Joey's voice cut through the static Dixon was hearing. Now, all he could hear was a distant hum and the slight breeze that said hello to him again. More tears broke free.

*What the fuck was happening?* Dixon felt himself cracking up.

"Mr. Milner?" the officer's voice was soft again. Dixon couldn't see any more; the world was too wet. Was it necessary

for him to see? Could he go the rest of his life walking in the watery dark?

"Dad?" Joseph whimpered. Dixon turned to find him completely lost in the future he was about to walk into. "Where's Mom?" he asked again.

Dixon turned and faced the officer once more. He adjusted Andrew on his hip again and looked for the right words. His hand quickly swatted away the tears that just didn't seem to care enough to stop. He tried to clear his throat again, but something was so large in the back of his throat that a simple cough wouldn't do the trick. He forced himself to relay the question. More tears.

*Fuck.*

"Yeah," Dixon started, looking back at the police officer. "Where's Mom?"