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Chill

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Jane removed her sheepskin mittens and sat on the pew next to Matt, her date, if that's what he was. He took her chalky white fingers and stroked each one until the blood began to flow with a burn. On his wrist was a tattoo of a dog tag with the word sacrifice inked in gothic font. They were in an overheated church, waiting for a folk concert. The steam radiators hissed like a chorus of asthmatic cats. One of her hands was trapped in his; the other was clutching her parka and purse to keep them out of the puddle of salty snow melt on the wood floor. No one had held her hand since she took the Trailways from Boston three weeks earlier. In fact, no one had touched her at all for months before that. Her husband had been sleeping on the couch ever since she yelled at him for spending a thousand dollars of student loan money to buy a 1927 edition of Joyce's Dubliners in Russian—a language he did not read.

The band played adequate Dylan covers. The soprano sang with an un-Dylan like purity. Her plaint to the jack of hearts was convincing enough, but her rendition of "Just like a Woman" wouldn't fool anyone.

After the applause for the last song died down, Matt put on his tan cap and desert camo jacket. He was the most beautiful man. She wanted to put her arms around his strong shoulders but shuffled behind him out of the church with the crowd.

Jane's feet slid out from under her on the wet step. The handrail was too thick to grip with her bulky mitten, and she landed on her butt. Matt reached for her elbow and lifted her to her feet.

"You're okay, right?"

"Yep, okay," she said, rubbing the sharp pain in her tailbone.

Matt led Jane down the block to a pub that occupied the first floor of a Victorian house. In the front yard, patio chairs were tipped on their sides, and tables dripped with stalactites of ice. The room was warm, but there wasn't any place to put coats, so she left hers on. All the tables were occupied. They crowded up to the bar. He ordered two Dogfish IPAs and handed one to her. Bitter wasn't what she wanted, but she sipped the beer anyway, wishing she could get some food. Even one beer on an empty stomach hit her hard. He downed his, then ordered a second right away and drank it just as quickly. The Eagles' "Hotel California" blared. Matt said something, but the bar was noisy and she wasn't sure what he was asking. "Right, I work at the college." "I asked if you liked this old music, but that's nice," he shouted. "I got my BA there, but I still work construction." "What was your major?" "Communications." The conversation died. They just couldn't hear each other.

"My place is close. I'll make you some cocoa" He spoke loudly into her ear. Without waiting for her answer, he led her out the door and away from a couple scraping ice from their windshield in the parking lot. Matt smoked a cigarette as they walked down the hill past the

general store. On the short walk, her hands and feet went from overheated to icicles. His apartment was on the second floor of a house with peeling paint. At the top of the stairs there was a rag rug covered with dog fur and crusted footprints of mud and dried salt. She wondered where he kept the dog but didn't stop to ask, even though she was phobic.

She heard a growl behind Matt's apartment door. Matt leaned in to kiss her so heavily that she had to shift her weight against the wall to balance. Her cold hands made her self-conscious, and she didn't embrace him.

"Let's get you inside and warmed up." Matt unlocked the door and walked into the kitchen.

"This is Brandy." The dog was big, with long red hair.

"Sit," he ordered. The dog whimpered and sat down. Jane inched around Matt, making sure he stood between her and Brandy.

"Not a dog lover then?" He grabbed the dog's collar. "Sit," he said, looking at Jane.

She almost protested, but his eyes crinkled at the edges, his expression inviting.

"I need to take her out, but it won't take long. She hates the cold."

Jane lowered herself gently into the metal and vinyl chair, her tailbone still aching from her earlier fall. This wasn't her plan, going to the apartment of some guy she'd met at a food co-op. They'd worked their volunteer shift in the storeroom, a dim space in the back of the store that smelled of cinnamon, incense, and cheese. His muscular arm looked impressive slicing through a giant wheel of cheddar with a large knife. Her job was to wrap each oily wedge in plastic, weigh it, and write out the price on a sticker. They got into a contest to see who could guess the weight, and he won every time. This wasn't his first shift weighing cheeses. And he made some bad cheese-cutting jokes in his thick Vermont accent. Laughter rose like an uncomfortable bubble in her chest. She hadn't laughed in months. Her husband was more likely to give a lecture on the fart joke in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* than to find humor in what he called “our human corporeality".

When the shift ended, Matt said, "Hey, there's a singer at the church this evening. She's pretty good. Want to stop in?" He peeled off his latex gloves and carried the knife over to the sink.

“Maybe? If it won't run too late. I have work tomorrow." She knew she needed to meet people in town. Make friends. The other staff at the college development office were all her mother's age. Dim light from the window in the back of the co-op lit him from behind. His hair and beard looked like a red halo; his face was in shadow. The only things she knew about him were that he made her laugh and—judging from his accent—he was a local. He knew too much about her already. She'd spent the afternoon spilling her story about leaving her husband.

Howie was probably in their apartment in East Cambridge. His last text to her had a crying emoji. To be honest, she didn't believe he was crying at all. The days of believing him were over after she found him one evening in a Starbucks playing mahjong on his phone. It was weird that this game, which her grandmother played at the senior center, click-clacking tiles with her

friends, was now popular as an iPhone app. Howie always bragged he'd never go to Starbucks because they overroasted the beans. For weeks he had lied to her saying he was working every evening with classmates on a team project. The next week she found out he had dropped out of school altogether, which meant his loans would come due and they'd lose his student health insurance.

The sound of Matt and the dog bounding up the stairs brought her back to the present. She fiddled with her shirt making sure the v-neck was centered.

"Just a sec, I'll put her in the utility room." Matt shoved the water dish and dog food behind a door off the kitchen. Brandy followed, wagging her tail.

Matt got out two mugs, filled them with water from the sink, and tapped powder from packets of hot chocolate into them. Then he stuck them in the microwave. They came out with drips of chocolate down the sides and undissolved lumps floating on the surface. He topped off each mug with a large shot of rum. She took one sip, then put it down on the red Formica table. He tapped a pack of cigarettes and slid out two. He put both in his mouth and lit them. Then he placed one between her lips. She put it, still lit, into the old pie tin sitting on the table full of butts.

"I don't smoke," she said. "Yeah, you do."

"What makes you say that?"

He took her hand. "The smell on your jacket."

"Must be from you." She left her hand in his. "I quit a year ago. My husband hated it."

He grinned. "Well, tonight you're going to unquit."

"Maybe just one," she said. She slid her hand from his and put the cigarette back between her lips, drew in the smoke, and coughed. Her eyes watered. Matt leaned back in his chair and chuckled. Then, she took a long smooth draw and exhaled a perfect smoke ring.

"Neat trick." He grinned and answered with a ring of his own. They sat drinking the cocoa and blowing smoke rings across the table, trying to pass one ring through the other, but the air currents didn't work out. She giggled at each failed attempt. After he took his last sip, he reached over and took the cigarette from her hand and stubbed it out. Then he led her by the wrist toward the bedroom. Her head was spinning from the rum, which was stronger than she realized.

It was hard for her to know if the warm feeling in her pelvis was want or fear. Let go, she thought. Enjoy. She let herself embrace him. His kisses tasted of smoke.

But then she remembered that she wasn't prepared. "I don't have protection. We can't do this."

He smirked. "Me neither. But it's okay, we can do all the other things." He led her toward the bed. The sheets weren't particularly fresh, but it was cozy under the quilt. She peeled off everything except her socks and lay down. He nudged his muscular legs between hers and balanced his weight over her. Soon he had one of her hands in his, pinned to the mattress, and

his other hand between her legs, stroking. He studied her face and smiled as she flushed and squirmed. Then he shifted his weight and kissed her ear.

"Too loud." She laughed to show she was enjoying it and to make sure he didn't think she was criticizing his kiss. He took her other hand and pinned that to the bed as well. She felt something prodding between her legs and realized his fingers weren't down there.

"Wait, get off." She wrenched her hands from his grip and rolled out from under him.

He put his hands up in a gesture of surrender and laughed. "We can slow down."

She gathered up her clothes, ran out the door into the hall, and dressed on the rag rug, fumbling with buttons and zippers, hoping no one would see her on the landing. Brandy's barks echoed in the hallway.

He yelled from the bedroom, "Wait. Aren't you gonna kiss me good night?"

As she ran down the steps, she heard him yell, "Cunt."

The sidewalks were slippery, and she was too dizzy to walk, so she stumbled away as fast as she could. Her chest expanded with relief each time she looked back and he wasn't there. A few blocks away, her legs folded under her. She collapsed onto the sidewalk and shivered, not feeling the cold.