“Neuropathy”

By Kathy Flann

You scan The Shopping Network again for the thing God wants you to buy, the thing for the troops. Those barely-shaving boys. There are wind chimes, brooches, stop-snoring aids, mini trampolines. And more stuff of no value to young men in Humvees, young men storming rooftops, shooting at cars, frisking villagers whose kind brown faces are costumes.

The presenter, Petunia, offers the profligate items in a baby voice. She jokes about wrinkles she doesn’t have. Words line up in your throat like fighter jets—something like, “Get more Botox! Maybe it’ll paralyze that mouth!” You clamp them inside your lips. Fool outbursts at the television aren’t Christ-like. And they make your bad hand flare up, the pain an electrical storm up your arm. According to your smarty-pants son, you risk a blackout.

The next product she presents is the American flag—not something the troops need sent. Still, an icy-hot pool seeps in your stomach. You lean forward and squint at Old Glory. It’s shiny. Like maybe it’s fashioned from the same stuff as a rain slicker. Utility impresses you. If you were made of something like that, maybe you’d have endured the winter better—your husband dying in that shameful way and everyone around here knowing about it.

Her porcelain hands flutter along the flag’s contours as she rattles off its dimensions. “Everything about this flag is standard military issue,” she says, “except for one thing.” The camera pulls close and she takes a bite out of the corner where the stars are. She chews and smiles. “Delicious,” she says.

You gasp, bring your good hand to your mouth.

“That’s right, folks.” She dabs at her pink lips with a napkin. “One hundred percent fruit jerky.” Your scalp tingles. The daily inspiration card you drew this morning featured Proverbs 20:13—*Do not love sleep or you will grow poor; stay awake and you will have food to spare.* Food! Can this possibly be a coincidence?

Ever since Wayne died, you crave a calling, a flourishing endeavor, like the ones church friends have—Monique gathers restaurant breath mints for women’s shelters, Pat takes old people to The Golden Corral on meatloaf night, and Ken fills out tax returns for the needy. You have tried some things that fizzled, like a used medical equipment bazaar and a clothing drive for big & tall homeless men.

But then God showed you. A junkie you’d given a dollar staggered off the harbor wall. Dropped. Disappeared under the brackish film. His matted hair drifted on the surface like seaweed. You watched, frozen. It seemed like a long time before that soldier in fatigues brushed past and sprang from the edge. He lugged the incoherent, babbling man, shoved him onto the retaining wall. The soldier, short of breath, freckled face all red, climbed out and hurried away, trailing water. Didn’t even give his name. This was *it*. Could anyone be more inspiring, more filled with the Holy Spirit, than a warrior, someone who tamed death?

You go to the wall calendar, circle the Fourth of July. You’ll be able to airmail these babies to Afghanistan by then, no problem. Your bad hand shakes such that you can hardly dial. But for a rare moment, there’s no ache, no throb. Its absence is like zero gravity, like you could float out the window and sail over Baltimore, could drift to the Middle East in this bathrobe, coasting on warm air currents.

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“You ordered what?” says Peyton, who has just gotten out of bed, even though it’s 3pm. Your son works graveyard shifts at Hopkins as a patient care tech—what used to be called an *orderly*. “Soldiers can’t *eat* the American flag. That would be desecration.”

“Desa—what?” you say. “Talk English.” You know what the word means: you’re just irritated how he uses it against you.

Peyton sighs in that way he has. There’s been a certain tone ever since he started studying for his nursing degree at the community college.

He hulks in the doorway, filling it like an eclipse. The weight of his gaze turns your head toward the window, toward the coneflowers so pink against your strip of manicured grass and the May sky. So pink against the two meth-heads meandering down the back alley, both clad in gray t-shirts and dirty jeans. People like that are exactly why, after the accident, you stayed home and raised your boy instead of finding work you could do one-handed. Wayne made just enough managing the Royal Farms Convenience Mart. It had always given you a thrill, the fact that your husband was employed. You return to folding Peyton’s boxer shorts, still warm from the dryer, holding them under your chin to fold, and placing them in the laundry basket. He wears all of these strange European labels now, and the fabrics are slippery as eels.

Those boys in the alley—they’re just a few years older than he is, nephews of people you know. He could have turned out like them, like so many from this neighborhood, this gray labyrinth of formstone—wandering and wandering, with gaunt faces and protruding teeth like skeletons, like ghosts. It’s not as if you’d prefer that.

Peyton smirks. You can feel it, but don’t turn your head to look. “Wouldn’t it make more sense for soldiers to eat their enemies’ flags?”

“Muslims have a flag?” you say. You’re sure they don’t. But it seems to make Peyton so happy when he’s smarter than you. You go into the kitchen to pour him a coffee in a Johns Hopkins Hospital mug—the cupboard is full of the things. And he keeps bringing more home.

He is laughing. Now he stands in the kitchen doorway. He has a habit of following you around the house, your shadow. He accepts the mug of coffee and blows on it.

Then he lowers himself onto a kitchen chair. He’s only twenty years old, but the chair looks too small, like he’s spilling over the sides. You rummage for the Coffee Mate and the sugar, and he waves them away. You keep forgetting that he takes it black now. Bad enough that he’s been lifting weights since he was thirteen. But he’s also persnickety about what he eats and drinks. Says his body is a *machine*. “Of course, you do understand the whole concept of *enemies* is problematic?” he says.

You raise a skeptical eyebrow. You won’t say what you really think—that enemies are real and they are everywhere. There’s our weak mortal flesh. That’s obvious. But there are other things that lurk, like Daylight Saving Time—things that seem benign until something happens the way it did with Wayne.

“I understand a lot of things,” you finally say.

You wonder if this is true. When you ordered the flags from the nice lady on the phone, what you pictured was Peyton and you sitting at this kitchen table late at night filling out airmail labels together, just the way the two of you used to sit here and work on his science projects. Right now, you understand you may have been wrong about the probability of such a thing happening.

“Is it bad today?” he says, nodding toward your hand.

You shake your head and shrug off his question so that he won’t lecture again about neuropathy, about how it’s a sleepy, garbled conversation between your hand and your spinal cord and your brain, about how drugs would make it better.

“The flags are full-sized,” you say hopefully. “You know—like a regular flag.” You glance at him while you wipe the countertop, the familiar throb in your other hand pulsating with the rhythm of the sponge.

He stares into the mug.

“And they come in a pouch, like those ponchos we got at the Ravens game that time?”

Peyton was only sixteen then, and you used the last of your savings to buy him those tickets for his birthday. Wayne didn’t come—what with his work schedule, the extra shifts, the meetings with staff. But you and Peyton had fun in those purple get-ups, laughing and talking, even after it was clear the Ravens would lose and even though the temperature dropped to thirty-five. Wayne called Peyton a *mama’s boy* that night, and flashed his trademark grin, the one with the cute overlapping front teeth. Peyton opened his math book wider and gave Wayne the finger. The way they loved each other *was* boyish. Your two boys.

“The flags are grape-flavored,” you tell Peyton. “Like Fruit Roll-Ups.”

“*Freedom* Fruit Roll-Ups?” he says. “You still have those weird dolls from last month out in the hallway.”

You don’t see what was so bad about those dolls. The company had taken black celebrities and made them white with blond hair and blue eyes—white Dionne Warwick, white Sidney Poitier, white Nat King Cole, white Kobe Bryant. They had also made white celebrities black. The black Marilyn Monroe was especially pretty.

“They’re called *Reverse Racism* dolls.”

“It’s cute,” you say.

“It’s *not* cute,” he tells you. He runs a hand through his hair.

Last month, he had refused to load the dolls into the SUV to take them to the city schools. And he physically blocked you when you tried to do it. “Maybe I can change those black kids’ lives,” you told him. “Maybe they can—”

“Can what? Lighten up?”

“No,” you said blinking at him out there in the dark. “Maybe they can see that looks don’t matter. Maybe *this* is the key!”

He lifted the box out of your arms. His voice softened. “It isn’t, Mom,” he said. At the time, you’d thought maybe God was using Peyton to communicate with you. But you probably shouldn’t let Peyton stop you this time. If Jesus had had a grown son, maybe that son wouldn’t have approved of him, either. Would that have slowed Jesus down? Would he have kept his miracles in stacks of cardboard boxes in the foyer?

Peyton drains the last of his coffee and clinks the mug into the sink. “You do know that God doesn’t watch The Shopping Network or care which crap you buy.”

“God is everywhere, Peyton.”

“Was he in Pop?”

You close your eyes. So long as no one mentions Wayne out loud, you’re able to keep the bad parts at bay. Now your synapses itch and you can’t stop it. Normally, if you keep the TV on, the memory doesn’t replay over and over and over.

You sigh. “I can’t speak about your father’s relationship with God,” you tell your son. “Only my own.”

Peyton shakes his head. “That pastor at the funeral couldn’t do it, either.”

You had no way of knowing that by the time a good Samaritan called at 8am, Wayne had already been carted away, had already succumbed to the cocaine-induced heart attack he’d had in his neon SUV parked on 36th. It is the neighborhood’s main drag, its shopping district with Paradise Uniforms, David’s Consignment Furniture and Pawn, and of course, Dmitri’s Tavern, which, on that day, like always, had opened at 6am. It’s a place where the firefighters go after their night shifts, a place where a person can grab a beer to take outside and keep him warm at the bus stop or on a bench.

You smile and fold your arms as if this whole conversation with Peyton has been playful. You pretend it has been. You pretend you don’t worry about Wayne’s soul, about whether you’ll see him again when your time comes.

If it had all happened one day earlier, Daylight Saving Time would still have been in effect. It would have been dark at that hour and people might not have noticed the girl running down the street, her blouse open. She would have escaped the scene, remained anonymous, the way she wanted to. A crowd would not have gathered around her or around Wayne’s Blazer. The good Samaritan would not have called and you would not have hurried the few blocks down there to be greeted by gasps and giggles. You would not have had to endure their descriptions of him in the driver’s seat, the way his eyes were open, the way his jeans were pushed down past his hips, the way his penis was still erect. “Better you hear it from us,” they insisted.

You would not have seen all of those hands pointing at the girl on a bench across the street, knees pulled up to her chest, head down, friends gathered, trying to comfort her.

If it had been one day earlier, dark and quiet, probably a policeman would have knocked on your door to deliver the news, leaving out most of the details. Your husband wouldn’t now be any more of a stranger than husbands normally are.

“Go take your shower and I’ll make you some eggs,” you say to Peyton. You can do most things one-handed. It was something Wayne admired. He kept one of his own hands behind his back sometimes to

see what it was like. He'd even put his ring in the jewelry box with yours, as if the weight of the metal were unbearable.

"I'm meeting Suzanne at the mall," says Peyton.

Peyton drives his late father's Chevy Blazer—the unmistakable thing is emblazoned with lime green ads that a local radio station paid Wayne to have painted on there. You're not sure which is worse, that you have to ride in what everyone now calls the "pecker-mobile" or that you're stranded in the neighborhood when Peyton goes to work. Or to the mall. You can't drive because your husband crashed into a tree years ago—the protective arm he thrust out no match for the gravitational pull toward the windshield.

You laugh and shake your head, as if this might make it seem like you're delighted Peyton's leaving for the mall, not hurt. You had imagined that this day, the day you ordered the flags, was special—the two of you might celebrate.

"You and Suzanne never get to ride anyplace together. Shame." His friend is in a wheelchair. She used to be a patient at his work. The city's handicapped bus, which requires appointments three days in advance, is how she gets around.

He shrugs. "It's too hard for her to maneuver into the Blazer. The seat's too high and the ceiling's too low."

You remind yourself that he's being a good boy. Maybe he takes after you! You've been paying twenty dollars a month to the Christian Children's Fund for the past thirty years. The Navajo boy you sponsored at the beginning has already grown up, robbed a gas station, and gone to prison. Sometimes he writes you the most beautiful letters, full of quotations from scripture. He's Catholic, but his heart's in the right place, so you still mail him the twenty dollars, even though he's too old for the program.

"Ma?" Peyton says, his voice soft. He starts to put a hand on your shoulder, but then pulls away, like maybe he'll hurt you. "I will *not* drive you to mail those flags overseas. Return them, okay? It's too much money."

You nod.

Maybe he'd see things differently if you could share your news about the $150,000. The man from the bank said that Wayne had won that money from the Maryland Lottery. And confound it if he hadn't put every cent in a trust for you and then kept living the same way, as if the winning ticket had never happened. You should have told Peyton by now, but every time you open your mouth to say it, your eyes well up, your throat goes dry.

Your boy doesn't hug you on his way out. He doesn't rest his chin on your head. He doesn't say, "You're the best." They are all things Wayne used to do before he left for work. He had done them that final morning, a morning with the sun searing through the living room blinds an hour earlier than the day before.

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The following week, on the same day as the UPS man delivers the fourteen cases of edible flags on his hand truck, Peyton wanders into the living room, trying to find you amid the towering stacks of boxes

and he casually announces that he has asked Suzanne to marry him and that she has accepted. You haven't yet met Suzanne, but you have pictured someone with withered arms and legs, someone who can't speak clearly or hold her head up. You hadn't known he would consider dating such a person, let alone marrying her. "Oh," you say. "I see."

"I'm serious," he says.

"I understand that."

"She wants to meet you."

"Well, I mean, how can you… *know* that for sure?"

"What?"

"I suppose you've found a way to communicate with her?"

"Ma, she's not like Stephen Hawking," he says laughing.

"Who?"

"Cut that out!" he says, laughing harder. He wags a finger at you. "I'm onto that. You know who Stephen Hawking is."

You laugh, too. When was the last time you laughed together? His face is different—you see the child he used to be, the slightly lop-sided grin and the brown eyes that close almost completely when he's happy, like the Buddha statue on your hippie neighbor's stoop.

He composes himself. "Suzanne was in a car wreck. Just like you." He gestures to your hand, the one that shattered to dust after Wayne swerved across the center line. Wayne said there'd been a dog in the road—something you question now, after the way he died. That car accident had been the end of your career as a flower arranger, one of the best in the shop. "Just think if your spine had broken instead," Peyton says. "That's Suzanne."

"Oh," you say. It's the most he's told you about his life for months. "Well, congratulations." You hug him and he lets you. His hands light on your back, and you hold on. Your fingers nestle in the ridges of his spine.

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The next day, when you return from distributing leaflets for the church bake sale, Peyton stands next to a tiny blond girl in a wheelchair in the living room. The flags are stacked in the front hall with the dolls. He keeps insisting they go back, and you keep making excuses.

The girl is as beautiful as a TV star, with platinum hair that looks like it has been in hot rollers and a spray of freckles across her nose. If not for the chair, maybe she would be out of Peyton's league. The boy's big, sure, but he still has some acne and he hasn't really grown into his nose and, as far as you know, he's never really had a girlfriend before. You'd been like that at fifteen, when Peyton's father had sauntered up—on foot—to the drive-through window where you worked and retrieved a strawberry milkshake he hadn't even ordered. No one had ever asked for your phone number before.

An icy vacuum opens in your stomach. Maybe she wants Peyton for that money. In your logical mind, you know you're the only one who knows about it. But still. The feeling prickles your skin like frost crystals.

"I'm going to run out for pizza and let you two get acquainted," Peyton says. And he leaves. Just like that.

She appears to be resting, like she might at any moment jump up to fetch her compact or a diet soda. Maybe she is like a faking villain on a soap opera.

"Will you need help using the ladies room?" you say, talking louder than normal, stepping forward. It occurs to you that maybe she has a power to make people feel sorry, to make them do things, just like Wayne did. He'd had a promising football career dashed by a bad elbow in high school, and he'd finagled prescription pills from sympathetic doctors ever since. You always thought he needed them.

Suzanne laughs. "I'm good."

"Because I'm stronger than I may look," you say, making a muscle.

"Peyton told me about your terrible accident."

You blush. What has he said about you? You have been a mother who spent years in darkened rooms, afraid to fill pain pill prescriptions because of your husband. Maybe he'd steal them. Or worse yet, maybe they'd be as wonderful as they seemed when your husband's eyes shrank and dilated away into something more blissful than you'd ever known. It scared you how much you wanted to go to that place with him. Better to endure the crush and pulsation of your hand—the pain like something alive, like company.

You can still see your boy's pudgy, babyish twelve-year-old face staring at your hand the first day he rode his bike over to visit you in the rehab hospital, his father probably in a bar somewhere dealing with a different kind of pain. Maybe it was guilt about the accident that transitioned him from prescription drugs to the cocaine he hid so well.

The young Peyton regarded your newly un-bandaged hand with horror, yes, but also fascination. "It looks like it's made of putty," he'd said. And then a dawning realization registered on his face. "You won't send notes with my lunch anymore."

"Maybe I can learn to write with my left hand."

He'd burst into tears. "But it won't be like they're from you."

Without thinking, you'd reached over with the back of your bad hand to wipe his eye. It hurt and you flinched, and then he'd cried harder.

You've been lucky to have a gentle son. If he were inclined, all he'd have to do is squeeze your hand to reduce you to animal agony. There are women on this block whose sons have hit them—police dragging flailing and shouting young men out to cruisers late at night.

"So, Mrs. Polasky," Suzanne says now. "Those are the edible flags in the hallway?"

Your cheeks warm, like she's caught you in your undergarments. *More* things he's been telling her about you. You clear your throat. "I want to send them to the troops, but Peyton thinks—"

"He worries too much!" she says. "He thinks about every decision for a month. It's a wonder he can decide what to wear."

"He proposed to you. That was a big decision."

"He kept chickening out," she says with a shrug. "He kept taking me out for fancy meals and ordering champagne and stuttering." She begins to imitate him in a goofy low voice. "Uh, um, Suzanne, uh, um. It's just, well, um." She laughs.

You cannot picture the person she's describing. Your stomach burns with a feeling you can't identify. "Peyton may be hard to read, especially with knowing him such a short time."

Suzanne laughs. "I don't think so," she says. "I love the guy, but one thing I know I'm not signing up for here—and that's a life full of surprises."

Heat rises in your throat. You imagine moving behind her and grabbing the handles on the chair and pushing it out the front door. But you feel guilty for even picturing what might happen next—the careening down the front steps, the toppling onto cement.

So you imagine instead walking out the front door yourself. You would slam it behind you. You'd wander around the neighborhood like those meth-heads do, slipping off the main avenue and down back alleys. Looking at the row houses from the back, at the long skinny rectangles of grass, at the dilapidated home-built balconies, at the abandoned children's toys, at the pairs of shoes in neat lines—it would seem like an invasion of the most intimate kind. You'd peer into everyone else's lives the way they'd peered into yours, crowded around that SUV.

But you do not move toward the door; you do not disappear, only to return when the sun burns pink at the horizon. You have never been full of those kinds of surprises. Maybe that was why Wayne sought solace elsewhere. You close your eyes. Then you go to the kitchen.

You bring Suzanne a glass of ice water. She sips it, looks at you brightly. "Why don't you take the flags to the VA hospital instead? It's so close."

Just then Peyton comes back with the pizza. You can't stop thinking about Suzanne's idea, though, even after you're all eating at the table. You only half pay attention to the two of them as they talk with their mouths full, discussing how great the disabled van has gotten lately, always on time, never getting lost like it used to.

You wonder if that soldier who dove into the water was actually a veteran, maybe in uniform because he'd gotten home that very day. Maybe *veterans* are God's real mission for you. Your heart buzzes in your chest like a little engine. The VA hospital is just a mile away—you'll get there somehow, independent and resolute like that soldier, like you're on a mission. And hey. Maybe Peyton will see that you like people in wheelchairs as much as he does, no matter how objectionable they may be.

On your way to the bathroom, you spy Suzanne's sparkly black purse on the floor, some of its contents spilling out. You scoop the lipstick and the barrette back inside, and then you study her ID card for the

handicapped bus, the fetching photo. When you slip the ID into your cardigan pocket, you tell yourself it's for the greater good. Jesus was nothing if not resourceful.

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You arrive at the front desk of the VA, clutching one case of flags, and the woman sitting there doesn't even look up from her *People Magazine*. "Donations over there." She points in the most lazy way possible toward boxes and bags at the opposite end of the lobby—a mountain of them.

You clear your throat.

The woman finally glances up. You flash her Suzanne's ID photo. You hold it out, close to the woman's face. "My daughter-in-law," you say. Maybe association with someone pretty will get you better service. "She helped me gather these items." It isn't true, of course, and you try not to think about the panicked way she and Peyton searched the living room last night or about that moment when she hung up the phone and said, her eyes brimming, that it would take six weeks to get a new ID from the city. "I have to *prove* I'm disabled," she said, reaching up for Peyton's hand. "What does that even mean?" You refused to look out the window while they tried, for half an hour and without success, to maneuver her into the Blazer without contorting her back in painful ways. Finally Suzanne's mother had to drive in from Harford County with her large van. After they were gone, Peyton grabbed three of his Hopkins mugs and smashed them on the sidewalk out front. He swept up the shards before he went to work.

The woman at the VA studies the ID for a moment and then stares at you. What she sees, you figure, is a skinny lady clutching a too-big box to her too-apparent bones. She blinks. Will Suzanne's beauty compensate for your lack of it?

You smile in a way that you hope is Christian enough to keep your stuff out of that landfill across the room. Then, you pat the cardboard with your bad hand. Too hard. It tingles. You stifle a flinch, shut your eyes. "Everything in this box is brand new." Earlier, at home, you stuffed some of the dolls in there, too. "*This*," you tell the woman, "is a special box."

The woman smiles and winks, like she's sending a message and you'll understand it. Wayne used to wink like that before he went out at night, not to return until four a.m.—the wink like code for something private and special. Maybe an acknowledgement of the child you reared for him, the home you kept. But you're not as adept as you thought with codes.

The woman comes around the counter, and you step back, unsure what she'll do to you. She hoists the box onto her shoulder. "I'll put it right on my boss's desk."

This is more like it.

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A few days later, the director of the VA phones to say what a hit the flags are with the veterans. Some of them have apparently been weeping while they eat them. "Wait, what did you say?" You give your full attention to the voice on the phone.

"It's very cathartic for men with post-traumatic stress." He pauses. "Oh. And those dolls. They're certainly strange. But they fostered a fascinating conversation in group therapy."

His words begin to take shape in your brain. “That’s wonderful!” you say. “I mean, well, I don’t mean it’s wonderful. But you know what I mean.”

He laughs, and it is gentle, kind. “Would you like to come meet the men?”

A knot blossoms in your throat where the word *yes* should be. You picture the way the soldier hustled into the crowds of tourists, disappeared. Maybe sensing your hesitation, the VA director says, “*The Sun* wants do a story on this.”

“I’m not looking for attention,” you tell him. It feels good to say this, to let go of earthly concerns. But you do imagine the pastor holding up the article for the congregation—the headline something about a local hero.

“I get it,” he says. “So much shame.” He lets out a disapproving sigh. “You *and* your daughter.”

He means Suzanne? You swallow a lump. Maybe you’re in trouble for the ID. Or maybe, you think brightly, he has you confused with someone else.

“Two in one family. What very brave ladies.” He sniffs, takes a deep breath, like he marvels at his own words. “You are such an inspiration. From now on, when I have trouble getting out of bed, I’m going to think of you.”

Your brow furrows. Mouth moves. Wait, *what*?

“Let’s not hide you two under a bushel.” He says he has arranged an initial meeting with the reporter and the photographer for tomorrow. “Mrs. Polasky, will you please wear short sleeves like you did the other day?” he says. “So we can see your affliction?” He pauses. “You might as well be proud of what God has made you. That’s what I tell my guys.”

Comprehension snaps like a mousetrap, pins you in place. Your lungs deflate, dead flaps in your chest. He wants a photo spread of you, Suzanne, and the vets—everyone broken, in need of repair. Maybe pull on the heartstrings of donors. A last puff of air escapes. You see yourself the way he does: You’re not the soldier. You’re that junkie in the water, spluttering, green snot oozing down your lip.

You slam the receiver down as if you are hitting the man’s face, which is probably clean shaven and probably sprouts from a starched collar and tie. “Ugh!” you yell, slamming the receiver three more times. Maybe you even hold it in your bad hand on purpose.

“What the hell, Ma?” Peyton calls. His feet rumble down the stairs.

“Cripples!” you yell out. It feels good to say such an ugly word, like splashing into icy water.

Peyton appears in the doorway. “Ma, you can’t do this.”

Your hand is hot. You try to wave a finger, but they have curled. “God punished Suzanne, Peyton.” You spit when you talk. “How did she make God angry?”

“I don’t believe in God,” Peyton says. For a moment, you are too disappointed he isn’t angry to hear what he’s saying. You want to yell at someone.

You sputter for a moment, words not finding any traction. “Well, then what do you think has become of your *father*?”

He shrugs. “It’s like you think he was an actual person.” Peyton steps closer, tiptoeing. He lowers his voice. “Look around this place. Wayne didn’t pick out a single thing. He was never here. And did you even notice? He sold your jewelry.”

“That’s not true.” You study the shelf of photos of Peyton, the lace curtains, the India ink drawings of football players that you gave Wayne for your first anniversary. Your mind scans back for the last time you saw your ring. Or Wayne’s.

Your hand gets hotter. There’s a tingling in your pinky—gentle at first like it has fallen asleep. But then the nerve endings fire all the way up your arm, like white lights. You yell out. The vibrations in your throat intensify the needles in your skin. Your vision narrows to a tunnel. You are lying on the carpet.

You can hear Peyton hover over you. “Ma?” he says. You open your eyes to see his brow furrow. He reaches for something on the floor beside you. Then he inspects it.

It is, of course, Suzanne’s ID, which has fallen out of your pocket. “Why the hell do you have this?” Ah, *now* he decides to get angry—now that you can barely make a sound. He has one hand up. Maybe he’s going to slap you. You almost wish he would.

“I have her ID,” you whisper, “because I need it more.” You’re sure this isn’t true. And that’s how you know what you’ve done is as bad as things Wayne did. Your behavior has been garbled, like a conversation between three people who can’t hear each other. You extend your bad hand. You offer it to Peyton. Maybe he’ll take it, crush it, send you into permanent sleep.

And then, in a move quick as a wrestler, he picks you up. He carries you up the stairs. On the bed, you open your eyes, and he leans in. He flashes an expired bottle of oxycontin from Wayne’s bathroom drawer. “You’re taking these goddamn pills,” he says. His eyes well up. He clamps his lips, as if he can trap his sadness inside. And you understand that this moment, right now, is why he works out, why he studies—so he can care for you. But all you can think about is what Wayne maybe already knew, that it hurts not to be punished. Like a dry heave or a hollow tooth socket, or the last cocaine slicked along the gums.

You open your mouth to let Peyton put the pill on your tongue. The sleep is deeper than you’ve ever had—so deep that waking is a fast elevator ride. You gasp twelve hours later when you open your eyes.

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In the morning, you pay a neighbor boy to load the SUV with every box in the front hall, dolls and flags alike. You drive for the first time in years, crawling along at twenty miles per hour, gripping the wheel with your good hand and using the wrist of the other to guide the steering. It’s eleven miles to the city junk yard, but it takes an hour. Then another two to get back via the bus.

Peyton is waiting on the front stoop in his pajama bottoms and a Hopkins t-shirt. He doesn’t ask about the Blazer, almost like he has been waiting for the past six months for you to drive it to the dump. Soon, Wayne will buy his son a fully loaded handicapped accessible van—as if he was an actual person, as if that was the way God made him.

It is still early. “You’re awake,” you say.