

Christopher Finds Home

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Baltimore. I'd wanted to move out of here since I was ten years old. Katherine and I had done it. We'd left. But we were back, bumping into old friends at the grocery store who screwed up their faces and said things like, you live here now? I thought you moved to San Francisco.

Three weeks after we moved into a narrow row home with a leaky roof (so we found out on day one), I got a call from Eddie, a guy from the Arbutus neighborhood where I grew up. Our mothers went to the same church, and they'd talked. He said he could "toss some work my way." I had a pregnant wife and no job. He had a contract to wire some city schools that just received a big grant from the state. "You'll be helping me out, too," he said. "This might lead to some bigger stuff, but I need to see if you got the kung fu I'm looking for. You'll start August first."

I'd been laid off from my IT job in San Francisco, but eventually got hired to drive a trash truck. When the HR rep told me I got the job, I nearly cried I was so happy. Katherine and I had nearly wrecked as a couple. But we would be okay. It would be the start of a new voyage for us. We would stay in San Francisco. The combination of her illness and my bad—no, terrible—decisions would not torpedo us.

But we had moved back to Baltimore. And the basement-dwelling Eddie, son of a church friend of my mother's, would see if thirty-five-year-old me had the kung fu he was looking for.

August was five long weeks away. Katherine and I were broke. She spent a lot of time at her parents' house, sometimes stayed the night, sometimes stayed for several days in a row.

One late afternoon I sat in a plastic lawn chair in the back yard. Katherine had woken up feeling good, strong, which didn't happen much. She'd gone out with friends.

My eyes felt grainy from lack of sleep—my insomnia was hammering me. I must have drifted off, sitting straight up in the chair while the Baltimore heat-humidity combo wrapped me up like a wool blanket. I snapped awake when I began to tilt. Christopher, my orange tabby, who had been lounging beneath my chair, was now lying on the steps of my neighbor's small wooden deck.

I clicked my tongue. Christopher looked over sharply, dashed down the stairs,

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leapt, balanced atop the piping of the chain-link fence, then jumped and fast-walked over to me. I reached down. He pressed the top of his head into my hand, stared at me with mesmerizing cat intensity, bunched, then leapt onto my shoulders. His purring rumbled in my ear. He perched there for a few moments before curling in my lap. He licked his paws, then tucked himself into a ball and sighed like a child before falling asleep. I smiled for the first time all day.

I hadn't noticed her, but Olivia Cook had slinked down her porch steps, placed her hands on top of the chain link fence, and stared.

"Baby," she whispered.

Christopher popped his head up when he heard her voice. He stood on my lap, arched in a shivering stretch, jumped away and sashayed down the back walk, up the metal stairs, then lounged atop the sun-warmed landing of our porch.

Olivia was several years younger than me, alone a lot since her husband travelled for business. She wore body-hugging tops and revealing skirts and shorts, told us more than once how often she worked out at the local Pilates studio. She took to putting in her yard or sweeping off her deck when Katherine wasn't around. I seemed to find myself out there in my yard at the same time.

She walked back into her kitchen and came down with two glasses, told me to come over and share some tea and talk with her. I leaned my hip into the fence.

"That's a beautiful cat," she said. "He's got a lot of personality. He comes and visits me up on my deck."

"Yeah, he's a great guy. I rescued him from an alley when we were living in San Francisco."

She stared at him lounging on the top platform of the metal stairs leading into our kitchen. He flicked his tail.

"Maybe you can help me haul some boxes from the basement into my car. Jeffrey said he'd do it, but..." She tipped her head.

"Sure, anytime."

"How about now?"

I placed one leg over the fence, then the other.

"You're tall," she said, smiled. "Jeffrey can't do that."

We set our tea glasses on the steps.

I could clearly hear a distinct voice inside the private room where self-conferences happened: *I thought you were done with the bad-no-terrible decisions, and yet, here you are.*

She opened her basement door and pulled strings to two overhead lights. We walked the length of the rowhouse to a dark storage room. She brushed past me to reach for the light switch.

"They're right over there."

Two boxes she could have easily handled.

"Well, I think I can manage those."

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"I knew you could."

We looked comfortably into each other's eyes, as we'd been doing since the first time we met, the day Katherine and I moved in.

Why not? I heard from the same voice in the same room. *This will be the last of those terrible decisions. Then that will be that.*

My telephone rang. I pulled it from my pocket. Katherine.

"I need to take this," I said.

"Well, go on. We'll get to my boxes another time." She shoed me away.

I walked out of the dark basement into the sunshine and hiked my leg over the fence. Katherine said we should order out for dinner.

"Thank you," I said, "for suggesting that."

"What? That was weird."

"Sorry. Yeah, sounds like a great idea. What are you in the mood for?"

I watched Olivia come from her basement with a hand cultivator, kneel at the edge of her garden, pull weeds, and turn the soil.

Katherine and I agreed on Thai food. She said she'd be home in an hour or so.

Olivia sat crossed-legged and called to Christopher, who danced down the steps and jumped over the fence. He tucked his head into her hands as he had mine. I watched her lean down to whisper in his ear. She picked him up and rocked him while he lay on his back. He was dreamy with contentment.

"I've got work to do," she said to the cat, letting him go. "Bye, Baby."

He leapt the fence, jumped into my lap.

"He likes you," I called over to her.

"He's a beautiful, lovely boy. He's welcome anytime."

"I rescued him in San Francisco from the alley behind our apartment."

"That's what you said."

"I would die if I ever lost him."

That just came out of me. I was embarrassed.

She nodded and went back to weeding.

On Saturday, Katherine made her weekly visit to see her grandparents at their condominium up in Cockeysville. Her sister and parents joined her. She would spend the full day with them, maybe go out to dinner, then return home at nine or ten. Yesterday she said, why don't you come with us? I was tempted, but her family had always kept me at arm's distance, and I didn't feel like navigating their looks and sneers and silences.

I'd tried to get Katherine to tell me why they didn't invite me onboard. She would shrug, tell me I imagined it. I'd said, it's because we lived together before we got married, right?

Her parents were strict Roman Catholics, a religion I never understood. When Katherine's little sister Marion came to visit us in San Francisco, I asked her, too.

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We'd all gone out for drinks at the Owl, our favorite neighborhood bar.

"Look, I'm not whining, I just want to know. Lots of people don't like the guy their daughter marries. I'm curious about what it is. I'm not a drug dealer. We share the same bank account. I look after her."

Marion said that they were tight knit group. All boyfriends and husbands find our family treacherous sailing.

"But what is it?" I pressed. "I've heard you guys talk about non-family as being too jocky or nerdy or stuck up. So what is it with me?"

She glanced at Katherine, who sipped her wine, nodded ever so slightly.

Marion said, "My parents think you're a creep."

"Your father, you mean," I said. I got quiet inside.

"No," she said, "my mother is right in there."

"A creep," I said, just to hear it.

Marion gave me a secret smile. Before I moved to San Francisco with Katherine, Marion and I had rented a room at a Motel 6 near the airport one afternoon, knowing we wouldn't be seeing much of each other. My God we had a romp. And in San Francisco we made it again while Katherine was at work, in Golden State Park, right out in the open behind some trees.

I responded with, "Parents these days. What can you do with them, anyway." A creep. I'd never been named before. I could hardly keep myself from laughing out loud.

I drove to Home Depot to buy caulking for the upstairs windows, all of which leaked, and a gallon can of sealant for the leaky roof.

We'd bought the rowhouse in Medfield from a guy Katherine's father knew. A fixer-upper, all right. The house took on water like a ship in a storm.

Thankfully I was by myself when Maria called.

"Maria," I said. "I never expect to hear from you."

Maria was the wife of the husband-wife team who lived on the first floor and owned the house we'd rented in San Francisco.

"Do I have your full attention, John. You seem distracted." Maria had an upper-class Spanish accent, soothing and dictatorial all at once.

"I'm here in the Home Depot."

"Why don't you find a quiet place for a few minutes."

"Okay," I said. I found an exit, walked to my car and leaned against it. "I'm surprised you called. How's Belford?"

"Belford's fine. We need to talk about you. Do you remember Nellie Vogel?"

Maria and I had sex together one afternoon on her front room couch. She told me that it would never happen again.

I tried for jolly. Never say never.

Never, she said.

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“Nellie Vogel? Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“From the high school.”

After I’d been laid off from the tech company, Maria got me a job as a janitor at the private high school where she taught art classes, no doubt to insure I’d pay the monthly rent as much to help me along. The regular guy had quit in a huff, and they needed a stand in until they hired a new chief custodian.

“Nellie Vogel,” she said. “Think hard.”

Nellie Vogel. My mouth turned to cotton.

I liked being a custodian because I got to man the buffer. Put a buffer in the hands of every white collar American male once a week: that would take care of some neurotic behavior real quick. I felt like a king behind that bad boy, moving it side to side, feeling the rotation of the buffer pad massage the surface geography of the tiled hallway floors.

I had two twenty-something knuckleheads working for me. The building had three stories, and we did one apiece every night. They loved me as a boss, because as long as they got their work squared away, I would let them bolt before six. They both slipped me thirty bucks at the end of the week to clock them out at seven thirty every night. I saw her standing at the doorway of a classroom just as I stopped the buffer and made a note to myself on a small pad to replace a fluorescent lightbulb in the hallway. I released the safety at the hand grip and powered up the flying saucer buffer again.

She leaned against the wall, text messaging with one hand. She wore blue jeans, black Converse All Stars high tops, a suede jacket with fringes on the sleeves. No doubt one of the young, hip teachers students loved. It was after six, so she’d worked extra hours on grading papers or lesson plans.

I rolled close to her. She didn’t move. I stopped the machine and said, “I hate to bother you, good looking, but I got a floor that needs my attention.” I liked playing the roguish janitor to female teachers and students. Most of them rolled their eyes and huffed away as if they needed fresh air from staying too long in the monkey exhibit at the zoo. Gave me a laugh.

“Hi,” she said and stretched out her hand. “I’m Nellie Vogel.”

“Glad to meet you, Nellie. What the hell you doing standing on my floor?” Big grin.

“Maybe I was just waiting here for you.”

“Here I am.”

“You and your big buffer.”

I laughed. “You’re going to get me in trouble.”

We didn’t have a problem getting right down to it. I’m telling you, snap your fingers, and there we were in her room unzipping our pants on a throw rug near the back. Afterward, I said, that was fun.

“I was in the mood,” she said. “Otherwise you would have been shit out of luck.”

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“Whoa,” I said.

She had herself dressed before me and leaned against the windowsill with arms folded while I buckled up.

Right after I left her room, she shut the door hard and locked it. Wasn't feeling quite as much fun now that it was just me and the big buffer in the hallway.

Three days later, I can't tell you I forgot about it, but I was back to my duties as a responsible person, a good husband, a guy who was on track.

I came down the hallway with my buffer, and there she stood. I looked at my watch: six thirty. Her eyes were puffy, her face tear stained. I turned off the machine.

“What's wrong?”

“I got into a fight with my boyfriend. He was so nasty and mean.” She stepped toward me and hugged me like I was a long-lost understanding guy. She cried hard for a while. “Make love to me,” she whispered.

I thought, no matter which way this thing goes, I'm shit out of luck.

My chest tightened. I imagined I heard somebody coming down the stairs. Two weeks before, Katherine, bedridden on and off for months, managed to walk the six blocks to the school. She said she felt lonely and wanted me to go with her to The Vanilla Bean for an ice cream cone.

I turned around. Nobody. Nothing.

“Your boyfriend?” I said.

I held her by the arms out from me. I needed to see her face.

She nodded.

She lunged and held onto me. I imagined Katherine and Maria showing up together. I didn't know what to do. I could feel my legs shaking. My breathing was shallow.

I stared at my buffer over her shoulder wishing it really was a flying saucer to get me the hell out of there.

After a while, she pulled away and went into her room. She returned wiping her eyes with tissue and blowing her nose. She said, “Thanks, I feel a lot better. Sorry to be such a basket case.” She tried to smile.

I told her she was a trouper. She held both of my hands, stared into my eyes for a disturbingly long time before saying, “I'm feeling better.”

“Okay,” I said. “Listen, I should get back to work.” I cocked my head toward the buffer.

Her eyes got blank, as if shutters closed. She tapped my chest twice with the flat of her hand.

Did she whisper “I love you” before stepping away? Or maybe she said, “Fuck you.” I felt like a rat caught in a glue trap.

I got back to the buffer and almost plowed into a trophy case.

I called Katherine a few minutes before seven thirty and asked her if she wanted to meet me at The Vanilla Bean.

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“No,” she said. “And don’t bring any home, either. You’re getting fat.”

I stood near the old-fashioned time clock where we punched in and out. “I’m five pounds overweight,” I said. “Big deal.”

“You’re fat,” she said. “You’re a strudel boy.”

I tried to laugh it off. She knew I was touchy about my weight. I should have gone to the Y more often.

“Just take a walk with me, then,” I said.

“I’m tired,” she said.

“I was finishing up and thought I’d call.”

“What’s wrong? You sound weird. You get fired from that job, too?”

“No, I’m a damned good janitor.” I was freaked out to my fingertips.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Listen, I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.”

I opened the front door and nearly went to my knees and kissed the floor. I’d been so casual and negligent and selfish. I didn’t want to lose her or the apartment or the San Francisco dreams we shared. I had everything I could want, and I had nearly thrown it away. Marion and then Maria and now Nellie. What in God’s name was I thinking?

I could have done something about getting laid off from my IT job. How many times had I made half-assed excuses about upgrading my skills? They wanted me to go down to Sacramento for a week, and I blew them off. Near the end I didn’t read spec sheets closely enough, which means I didn’t get a job done right, which means the company lost time redoing what I should have done in the first place, which means I made us look like amateurs. Nobody could exactly trace it back to me—we worked as a team—but I didn’t fool anyone, either. When the company needed to tighten up, I was out on my ass. Now I pushed a broom and guided a buffer around a high-falutin private high school.

The veil dropped from my eyes that night. Katherine had repainted the living room in the spring. She’d bought new furniture. She’d refurbished a chest cabinet that she used to store nice dishes and tablecloths. She’d put up pictures of friends and relatives and found a wooden kitchen table at a yard sale with all four chairs intact. She had maintained our home even though she’d been in deteriorating physical health for months. I thought I’d been doing all the work.

I would stop being a creep. I would strangle John the Creep and become John the Good Guy. I could do that.

I saw her in the kitchen at the stove in her running tights and a windbreaker jacket. She’d taken off her running shoes but still wore ankle socks.

“Hey,” I said. “You’re wearing your running gear.”

“I ran a mile today,” she said. “I’m going to beat this thing.” She had routinely run three to five miles before getting slammed by the virus or bacterial infection or whatever it was.

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“Hey, congratulations,” I said. “Really. I’m proud of you.”

“You should be. I kicked ass today. Now get over here and give me a hug.” After dinner, we made love for the first time in six months.

Three days later she was back in bed. We’d been in San Francisco a couple of years when Katherine came down with the mysterious ailment that plagued her. One doctor thought chronic fatigue syndrome, one thought Lyme disease. Another suggested an environmental toxin. She told me her bones ached. She could hardly stand up. The next day, I drove her to the doctor, who told her she needed to take a leave of absence from work or she would never recover.

The med-tech firm couldn’t afford to keep her on any longer—she’d stretched their patience with absences—so she got canned the first week of April.

Over the next month, Katherine got worse. June loomed. I began to sleep less. I would be let go when the school year ended. Younger people glutted the IT market. Companies wanted high-powered, lean staffs. I was long in the tooth for my skill set. They wondered why, at thirty-five, I hadn’t been promoted to project manager anywhere. I hoped to get on with the city: cleaning parks, doing something outdoors, changing my ways. That’s when I interviewed with the waste removal company. They told me that if it worked out they would train me to drive a truck. I could then go out solo and take charge of a green Dumpster route. The HR rep leaned back in her chair. She said she thought I was management material.

As it had happened for the past month, the moment I walked into our apartment and shut the outside world behind me, I felt such gratitude for Katherine and the safety of our home. I found her in bed with her arm across her brow as if shielding herself from light. I sat next to her, grabbed her weak hand in mine, and asked what I could do for her.

“Whew,” she said, “I’m really out of it today.” She attempted a smile. “How about going to the store and getting us one of those already cooked chickens. We have enough stuff here for a salad.”

I peeked in on her when I returned. She snored softly in a deep sleep.

On Sunday morning, I went down to the cooperative and picked up sesame-sunflower bread, fresh cherries and nectarines, and a cup of Sumatra coffee.

While I was gone, she’d set the table and opened the window. Christopher greeted me when I walked in. I picked him up and kissed him. Katherine looked strong. Her eyes were bright.

At the table, buttering my toast, I said, “I’m going to be a trash man.” Tears welled in my eyes. Christopher sat on my lap beneath the table. I could feel him purring. She bit into a cherry. She hadn’t touched her coffee.

“John,” she said.

Her dark eyes went hard and sharp. “I’m pregnant. We’ve got to make plans.”

“You’re pregnant?” Pregnant. Whew. Pregnant. I stood to walk around and give her a hug.

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“John, sit down. We need to make plans.”

“Plans? I’ve got a job now. I’ve been hired by a private waste management company.”

“The other night, I sat out back with Belford,” she said, referring to Maria’s husband.

“I don’t really like him all that much.”

“He told me about Maria. Do you know that those two might break up because of your...your stupidity?”

I stopped eating.

“Is there anyone else you need to tell me about?”

I saw the letters N-e-l-l-i-e V-o-g-e-l engrave themselves in my mind like automatic writing on a piece of silver. I thought of Katherine’s younger sister Marion.

“I’ve been sick, John. How could you be such an asshole?”

Any plans we would make, she’d already made.

“All of that stuff is in the past,” I said. “I’ve got a good job lined up. It’s something I can do. I’m management material.”

“I talked with my father, John. We need to move back to Baltimore. I’m not well yet, and now I’m pregnant. Johns Hopkins Hospital is right in the city. I’ll be around medical experts. I’ll feel safer there.”

“Are you serious?”

“We need to get set up in Baltimore. My father told me the real estate market is good right now. We can get a row home in Medfield for cheap.”

“A row home in Medfield. Why don’t you put a stake through my heart?”

She buttered a piece of sesame-sunflower toast and with the tip of the knife put a thin layer of apple butter on it. “Like you put through mine? I told Maria and Belford. They want to work with a realtor. She’ll be here at 2:30.”

“I’m waiting,” Maria said.

“What’s the name again?”

“John, I’m waiting.”

“Okay, I remember her. Vaguely.”

“Enough, John. Enough of that. She’s having problems. Serious problems. I helped get her admitted to the psych wing at San Francisco General Hospital. She keeps asking for you.”

“You tell her I moved all the way over here to Baltimore?”

“I think you need to come and see her.”

“How’s that supposed to work?” Sweat trickled down my back.

“Get on a plane and get out here.”

“What, tell Katherine I got a hankering for sourdough bread?”

“You might consider coming clean with Katherine. Nellie’s on suicide watch. Believe me, this isn’t pleasant for anyone.”

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“What if I say no?”

“There’s a group out here that’s big on rights for mental patients called Advocacy Corps for Persons with Mental Illness. After San Francisco General has her a while, they’ll contact ACPMI. If a true believer gets hold of your name, they’ll come after you. They’re big on responsible citizenry. ACPMI is a place to earn your stripes. The hordes of youngsters coming out of law school who sign up with them are prowling around looking for game. How would you like to be slapped with a civil suit? I know two lawyers who work for the organization. They love to come after people who act dumb.”

“How long do I have?”

“I’d say you better decide in twenty-four hours.”

I sat in our backyard in the middle of the night, feet propped on a lawn chair, aimless with insomnia.

The light went on in the second floor back room of Olivia’s house. Faraway sounds of the freeway circled in the air. I clicked my tongue to see if Christopher would wake from wherever he slept and come to the basement screen door, and there he appeared, tail straight up, question mark hook at the end, searching the gray night for the source of that familiar sound. I carried him to my chair and petted him a minute, but the night smells and sounds were too alluring for him. He tiptoed through the unmowed grass, sniffing, indexing odors, stopping mid step, staring fiercely and shifting ears toward shadowed movements or sounds outside of my range. He no longer ranged freely as he had in San Francisco, and I think he missed that. I would have to decide if I would allow him to be an outdoor cat.

I watched him, relieved that I had something to do with myself this muggy, insomniac evening. He granted me momentary peace just by being present and alive.

I dreaded losing him. I was tempted to say that I would have given my life for him. If I ever saw a snot nosed little shit of a neighborhood kid throw a rock at him or hit him with a stick, I would go after him with a baseball bat.

He swiped at a nocturnal bug, then bounded over the fence and ran up the stairs to Olivia’s deck.

With as much stealth as I could manage, I put one leg over, then the other, and tiptoed up to grab him. I picked him up, and as I stood, Olivia opened her door wearing a thin robe over a nighty unbuttoned at her neck.

She stepped outside.

“Geez, sorry. Christopher—”

She moved in close, reached out, and took Christopher from me. Unnerved and speechless, I watched Christopher curl up in her arms, squeeze his eyes half-shut and purr, contented with all things in this world. It tore my heart out.

“There’s a good boy,” she whispered to him. “There he is.”

Christopher looked at me with eyes half-closed, sodden with pleasure, then he shifted his face toward her and rested his head against her breast.

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I watched Madonna and child for as long as I could stand it, then hoisted him out of her arms and carried him down the stairs. I walked through her gate and around to mine. Christopher perched his front paws on my shoulder and looked at Olivia. The swampy heat made the inside of the house feel like a crypt. I stretched out on the hard floor with a couch pillow beneath my head and stared at the ceiling until I fell asleep. I awoke feeling seasick, as if I'd been bobbing on a small fishing boat in rough seas. My left arm was numb. I got up and took some Excedrin, then went out on the porch. I held the railing and breathed deeply, trying to clear my head, fighting off the nausea. I'd booked a flight to San Francisco.

The plane touched down at three thirty. Katherine said she would stay with her parents. She insisted I not call her while I was there.

"Fix whatever mess you made," she said. "Try and do that."

I rode the bus to my European-style hotel. The room stunk of mold, and two drawers were missing from the chest. A bar of used soap sat in the dish, and someone had, within the hour it seemed to me, washed their hands with it and used one of the towels. A shower and bathroom were down the hall.

That dreary morning in Baltimore, hours after I'd seen Olivia hold Christopher in the middle of the night, the psychiatrist told me on the phone that when I arrived we would need to go over some protocols. I called Maria and begged her to come with me, but she said, "You're on your own, John."

At seven p.m. I took a BART train to San Francisco General Hospital. The receptionist called my name through an amplified speaker built into the glass. Dr. Keilson sat behind an organized desk, wearing a white lab coat over a shirt and tie. He pointed to a chair to his left. A silver-haired couple sat on a small couch at the desk's other end.

"We've had some developments," Dr. Keilson said.

The man on the couch had placed his expensive brown suede cowboy hat on his lap. He wore a bolo tie with a silver slide showing an Indian on horseback spearing a buffalo. He had a boulder-sized head, big shoulders, and calloused hands. His wife was wearing a red cowgirl shirt and stared at me with a tight, ferocious mouth.

The doctor folded his hands on the desk.

"Mr. Stevenson, these are the grandparents of Nellie Vogel, Mr. and Mrs. Vogel. They called me this morning, and I asked them to come over, knowing that you would be here. They have decided to take Nellie with them, so her stay with us will end after our meeting. Mr. Vogel knew that—"

"I'll take it from here, Doctor," he said.

"May I speak with you in the hallway a minute, Doctor Keilson?" Mrs. Vogel said.

"I need to say just one little old thing before we go further with this."

Dr. Keilson looked to me, then to her husband. He glanced at his watch. "Okay, but let's be quick."

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He allowed her to go first. She walked him down the hallway several feet.

Mr. Vogel stood and quickly pulled the small couch across the office space, shut then blocked the door. Then the big powerful man turned to me. "You go screw an innocent child like that, some little girl don't know what's what."

"Innocent child," I said. "Wait a minute. She's a young woman."

He took three steps toward me and smacked me so hard on the side of my head that my ears rang. He bunched my shirt in his fist and pulled my face up close to his. I could smell his briny, sweat stink and see the hairs inside his nostrils. He breathed with stertorous inhalations. "That little girl in there don't have her head screwed right. By God up in heaven if it was up to me I'd bring you back to my ranch and have a bull fuck you till you couldn't walk straight."

He pushed me back onto the couch, then put a knee on my chest to block me in, grabbed my hair, and jammed three fingers down my throat till I choked and nearly passed out. Finished, he took out a blue kerchief, wiped his hand, then threw it into the trashcan.

I coughed and gagged until, finally, my breath came back.

The doctor had been banging, yelling for him to open the door. The old boy pulled the half-couch away and the doctor charged in followed by Mrs. Vogel.

"What in the hell went on in here?"

I didn't say a word.

The man and his wife sat down together again.

"We're going to take her back to the ranch, Doctor. My son didn't do right by her, but we will. I don't want this poor excuse for a human being to set eyes on her." He pointed at me. "We'll take care of her, make her right again."

The following day in Baltimore, I leaned against the chain link fence with Christopher in my arms, watching Olivia snipping ends of plants and fussing with arrangements of statuary and furniture on her deck. She swept the deck and steps as she did each night, then sat down at the table with a glass of iced tea. She'd pinned her thick black hair so it was up off the back of her neck.

"Olivia," I said.

She walked down her steps, her eyes alert, a quiet smile on her face.

I handed him, my treasure, to her over the fence. Christopher lay on his back, spine along her forearm, reached his paw up to her face, and stared into her eyes.

"Oh," she said. "There he is." She cupped his head and kissed him. "He will visit you," she whispered to me.

She returned to her table and sat with him in her arms, speaking to him words I couldn't hear.

I went inside. "Katherine," I called up to her. "Let's clean some of this stuff up tonight, want to?"

I knew she wasn't home. She was with her parents. She needed time to think,

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she'd texted me while I was still in San Francisco.

I started stuffing the first heavy duty contractor bag with clutter and crap the previous owners had left in the basement. Old clothing, shoes, boxes of romance and western paperbacks, jars of rusty nails and screws, plastic piping, stacks of magazines. Tons of stuff. I filled five bags before calling it a night. I would haul them to the dump for recycling or disposal. I swept and mopped.

After three hours, I went to the kitchen and opened a beer. Tomorrow I would climb up on the roof with the can of sealant and see if I could find where rain leaked through, which had happened two more times during summer storms. I knew I could fix it.