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Safe

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ALISON RUCH

SAFE

Harvey didn't understand why Peg was so bent on joining him, then on driving. He hadn't seen Anna since the hearing, and anticipating this visit, his body did strange and grotesque things. Last night, chills, dramatic spasms, and this morning, diarrhea. He didn't need Peg watching him like this. They'd only been together for three months, about as long as he and Anna had been apart.

"How does one get into kaleidoscope making?" Peg asked him once they got on the road. She wore a sleeveless, yellow, collared shirt, which made her skin look picklish. Anna hated yellow. She should know Peg didn't always dress like this. His son, Colin, would likely be there, too. He wouldn't care so much about the yellow, but he probably would about the fact of Peg, the presence of Peg, Harvey's new life that allowed him to have a Peg.

"She also does stained glass and refurbishes antique mirrors."

"Oh. Are you hungry? I'm *hungry*. If I'm thinking right, there's a place out here off Old Wagoner with killer cheese fries. We'll be too early otherwise."

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"I think we should get this over with. Then we can eat. Then we'll feel more like eating."

"I could eat my shoe," Peg said.

Harvey watched Peg's hands on his steering wheel. Her fingernails were polished copper, which they'd been the night they met down at Sharks, the dive bar near work. He'd flattered her then, told her he was into copper, blond kinks, tank tops, youthful glows. It turned out it wasn't so much a glow, but a reality. Peg was twenty-nine, twelve years younger than Harvey. Fine, really. They had plenty to talk about.

Harvey looked out at the countryside he used to ignore on the drive to and from work. Now, in bright July, the cornfields were soothing flicks of green—so orderly, so healthy. He had to leave the country house at four thirty to open up his coffee bar for the commuters. The bar was in a Volkswagen showroom, and while business hummed steadily during the days, the commuters from the ballooning suburb just off the highway there—not the car shoppers, or the salespeople—were his best customers. "How do people even know it's there?" Peg had asked. "Word of mouth," Harvey had told her. He

was proud of the way word had spread. *A decent guy—a listener—makes a damn good cappuccino*, he mused.

He noticed that the old, fawn-colored brick house a few miles from his old place had been demolished, finally. Harvey and Anna had known about the demolition plans for about a year now, Anna always getting so emotional about changing landscapes. She'd demanded one day that Harvey stop by the brick house so she could knock on the door to plead with the owners not to give in to the evil developers. Harvey had tucked his head low while he waited in the car; people sometimes knew about his occasional fights with Anna, people he'd never even met. Anna returned to the car weeping. The old man who had come to the door didn't want to sell but had received an "offer of a lifetime"; he couldn't say no. Also, his lifetime, he knew, was coming to a close; he'd get a room in a *home* soon. Anna had invited the old man over for tea.

"So, what's in it?" Peg asked him now.

"Huh?" Harvey's stomach seized at her shrillness.

"The safe."

156 "Odds and ends. I don't really remember. It's been years since I've gone through it."

"And you can't just give Anna the combination? You a dirty secret keeper?" Peg dragged her copper fingernails from Harvey's knee up toward his crotch.

He stared at the fingers. With her wrist turned that way, it was almost like her hand was not attached to anything. Her fingers scurried around like crab legs. His pants started to bulge anyway. "Not now," he told her. He noticed they had already passed the elementary school. "Just another mile or so and then a left. Then it won't be long."

Peg used her crab hand to massage the wheel. The woman seemed to need things to massage—a toucher. Harvey liked having her around. She kept her bathrobe and things at his new apartment, and that was nice, and she made insightful summaries of his feelings, drawing them from him just by holding a palm to his forehead, or her toes to his toes.

On the left turn, Peg started to sniffle, and about a mile from the old house, she started to full-on cry.

"You didn't have to come," Harvey said. He could feel his underarms soggy. His head itched.

"I know, I know." Peg dabbed at her face to keep her eye make-up from running. She held the back of her hand beneath her nose.

“Here. Let’s pull over. We’re early anyway.”

Peg parked the car, and just when Harvey thought she was through crying, she started up again. “I feel so boring!” she snorted on an inhale, which seemed to surprise her out of her sorrow for an instant. “I mean, I’m an artist, too, but it’s not like she’s going to really see that.” She peeked into the mirror, which brought on another torrent.

Peg did hair. She’d cut Harvey’s a few weeks ago in his new kitchen. “I doubt we’ll even have time for that conversation. It’ll just be a quick in and out,” Harvey said.

Peg glared at him.

“Jesus, Peg. We’re divorced. And as far as I know, Anna’s still seeing that fuck-up from Cross Plains.”

“You wouldn’t call him a fuck-up if you didn’t care anymore.”

“You know I’m the kind of guy who calls a fuck-up a fuck-up.”

“I guess you are. I guess that’s—” Peg laughed then sniffled, laughed then sniffled. “Remember that movie we watched, with Jimmy Stewart? You hate him so much!” She laughed from her gut. “Why do you hate him so much?”

“Well, I suppose it’s because he’s a fuck-up.”

“He’s a puppy dog.” Peg seemed okay again. She applied a new coat of lipstick. Harvey got a kick out of her lipstick shades—all coffee names. This one looked like *mocha frost*. “Let’s do this,” she said, and revved back onto the road.

A light blue pickup with a Save the Wolves plate passed, heading the other direction. The fuck-up’s, Harvey was sure. He didn’t mention it. Starting up the drive, Harvey felt inclined to remind Anna to check the mailbox. Otherwise it was a long walk down to it. They used to let days of mail pile up at a time.

Colin was in his mini-half-pipe doing stunts. He wasn’t wearing his helmet. As they neared him, he fell.

Harvey quickly unbuckled and jogged toward his son. “You all right there, guy?”

“Hey,” Colin said. He seemed to be trying hard to appear unfazed, all his face muscles twitching toward neutrality. His eyes were hidden behind a dark flop of hair. He was twelve now, with thin hairy legs poking out from beneath long black shorts. He wore bracelets. “Mom’s in the barn.”

“How you been?” Harvey bent down to Colin, who was picking at a scab.

“Good.”

"Ah." Harvey glanced at Colin's beat-up sneakers. "Need to get you some new shoes, Bud."

"Nah." Colin picked at the soles.

"Good to see you," Harvey said. He patted Colin on the back and felt the boy's muscles seize under his T-shirt.

"Yeah, you too." Colin stood and posed like he was waiting for Harvey to leave so he could resume skateboarding. Harvey noticed Colin's eyes dart briefly toward Peg, then back to his feet.

Peg stood against the car. She made a series of divots in the gravel with the toe of her yellow pump. Harvey walked toward her and muttered, "So, she's in the barn. You want to wait out here?"

"No, silly. I didn't come to stand in the driveway. I'd like to meet her."

For a moment, Peg's eyes sparkled with what looked like integrity, and Harvey thought this might be the best arrangement after all. "All right," he said.

Anna came to the door with a welder's mask propped on her forehead. Red spikes of hair shot out the sides of the mask, and one of her cheeks had a black finger swipe on it. Harvey could tell she was happy. She grinned at Harvey and motioned for him to check out the tangle of metal in the bright corner of the barn. She glanced briefly at Peg but said nothing to her. "Look!" she said to Harvey. "It's for Colin."

It looked like a deformed ostrich, or a jungle gym for rats. "It's angular. Sharp corners," Harvey said.

"It's a coat rack, Harv! See?" She showed him where coats could hang.

Peg scuffed one shoe, then another.

"Anna, this is my friend Peg. Peg, Anna."

Peg thrust her hand forward, almost toppling over in the process. "Glad to meet you. I'd love to see your kaleidoscopes."

Anna's face dropped. "I don't really do those anymore." She looked at Harvey as if to ask, "What else have you told her?"

And then Harvey noticed that Anna's face looked rounder, wider. She wore a loose, long-sleeved black shirt with the neck cut out. It was falling far off of one shoulder, revealing a thin strip of black satin. When she turned to set her mask on the worktable, he noticed the belly. She wasn't fat; she was carrying something, someone. His chest tightened.

“How far along are you?” Peg asked, as though it had been obvious to her the whole time. If Anna had been remotely honest about the fuck-up, anything beyond four months would be Harvey’s.

Anna smiled and touched her belly. “Five months—”

“Mom?” Colin shouted from the doorway. “Can I use Uncle Ron’s guitar, do you think?”

“I don’t think, sweetie. Probably wait till he gets home. Should be any minute now.”

“He said his room is my room.”

Anna sighed. “Well, maybe it’s okay then.”

Colin left dramatically, allowing the big barn door to bang several times in its frame.

“He’s so restless lately,” Anna said.

“Uncle Ron?” Harvey asked.

“Yes, Harv. Uncle Ron. You know he’s practically my dad. And I need help now—with Colin almost a teenager, with the baby on the way.”

“Gosh, how do you make time for your artwork?” Peg asked.

“I just do, I guess. And what do you do, Peg?”

“Hair.” Peg folded her arms across her chest.

“Must be fun,” Anna said. Harvey knew Anna was judging the poor girl—her yellow shirt, her fancy shoes.

“Anna, why didn’t you tell me?” he said. “I know we’ve made the arrangements, but you’d trust me for an afternoon here and there, right? What does Ron know about kids? Where is Mister Pickup Truck?”

“Mister Pickup Truck—Mike—has his own kids to raise.” Anna’s voice was fierce and low. “And Ron is gentle.” She looked at Peg. “Sorry,” she told her.

“Sales been good?” Harvey looked pleadingly at Anna. He shouldn’t have asked about an afternoon with Colin, here and there. Not yet.

“It’s none of your concern,” Anna said calmly, looking down.

Harvey wondered if her therapist had told her to say that. It could stand as a defense to most of his inquiries.

“Well, it’s so nice to meet you,” Peg said in an abnormally high voice. “And your mirrors? Do you sell them straight out of the barn? There’s this empty wall at the salon that just needs a little—”

“Harvey,” Anna said. “Could you excuse us for just a few minutes? I want to take Peg to the mirror room.”

Harvey looked at Peg. She nodded aggressively. "Sure," he said. "I'll just be working on clearing out that safe."

"Right! The safe." Anna laughed. "I'm so spacey lately."

Harvey watched the two women walk back toward the small room at the far end of the barn. Anna had rigged it up as a showroom for her mirrors, with different colored lights. He wanted to know what Anna wanted to tell Peg. Peg knew about the really bad night but little else. He followed them a few paces, then thought better of it. Anna could sense him from great distances. He used to try and spy on her in the dressing room mirror, just off the bathroom, while she towed off, but she'd always hear him somehow and meet his eyes in the mirror. The spying frightened her—made her cover up—so he stopped.

As he made his way across the driveway to the kitchen door, he listened to the agony spilling from his son's lips as he sang and strummed the guitar upstairs, and he thought about how silly he must look to Anna. He had tried to change for Peg, so she would think he cared some about style. He'd allowed her to cut his gray-brown hair so that it flopped a little to one side—almost like Colin's, but not quite as long—and he'd started to wear button-down shirts and shiny shoes on non-work days. With Anna, he'd never really thought about his appearance, just throwing on whatever was on the floor that didn't smell bad. He thought she'd been fine with it, although the fuck-up clearly tried a little harder than he. The fuck-up wore those tight-assed pants like the German Volkswagen correspondents he'd done lunch with. He also owned a wiener dog, which Anna thought was very cute and surprising—especially for a man who worked in hardware.

The memory came to him, vivid as ever, when he opened the screen door into the kitchen and saw the strawberry-print tablecloth. That night he'd hit both Colin and Anna. He'd been drunk, which he knew wasn't any kind of excuse, but Anna had been making all these changes around the house—things like the tablecloth—and she'd been dressing sharper, going to town more for "odds and ends" and coming home without them. Harvey had been having a rough period on top of that. He'd been sleeping through his alarm (which Anna always slept through), missing potentially profitable mornings at the coffee bar, pissing off good customers and the Volkswagen people. Peg had told him when he met her that night down at Sharks that he was probably depressed.

Harvey took the steps down to the basement carefully, trying to recall which ones needed replacing. He'd promised to do that years ago, but instead Colin, Anna, and he just got used to knowing where to step lightly. It was Colin he'd hit first. The poor boy was just informing his father of what he should have figured out anyway—that Anna was in love. What hurt Harvey most was that she'd told Colin first. It was brutal, that night. When he drew blood from Colin's trembling mouth, Harvey's rage warped into something like sorrow, but then he saw Anna's pretty face, and he heard the echo of his son's news, and all he could think to do was make a mess. The rest remained blurry. He realized it the morning after, that that would be *it*. He'd lashed out before that, but usually with just a slap to Anna, raving about some new male client, or some over-tanned lifeguard down at the pool she took Colin to. Sometimes Anna even slapped back. But that night he left marks, and so he left voluntarily, though it wasn't his desire. Hitting had worked out differently when he was a kid. His own dad had had his nights; his mother had let them fade, and had learned when to be gentle. He'd told Anna all about that. Peg didn't have to be told; she'd guessed it after several minutes with her palms pressed to his shoulder blades.

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Harvey realized he'd opened the safe without thinking about the combination. It was a small safe he'd had since he was a boy. His fingers knew what his brain no longer had to. For some reason he'd kept Colin's social security card in there, which Anna needed now in order to get him into some kind of after-school art program. The safe was dark, and when he reached his hand inside, he felt moisture and smelled whiskey. He must not have capped it well the last time. Had it been that night? He brought out damp notebooks and photographs, a soggy nudie magazine, various keys to doors he didn't remember, a stupid old Packers hat—all of it damp. The bottle lay sideways in the back, empty now, which he lamented for a moment. The print on the social security card had stained and spread. Colin would have to get a new one anyway. Harvey tried to decipher what was written in one of the notebooks (he used to try his hand at poetry, showed nobody, but sometimes Anna), but he couldn't figure it out. All the ink ran down the pages, and what could have been discerned was in his intentionally cryptic scrawl. It was foreign to him now.

He went up to the kitchen and grabbed three trash bags. He took from under the sink a bottle of cleaner and some paper towels. Back down in

the basement, he cleared out the entire safe, triple bagging all the contents except Colin's card, and then sprayed down the insides to hide the smell.

When he ascended the stairs again, he heard a man's voice outside—Uncle Ron—and took a deep breath, held it, let it out.

"Ron." Harvey waved as he set the garbage bag into the can, careful not to let the glass clank.

"Harvey," Ron said. But he was looking toward the barn where Anna and Peg had just emerged, both somber-faced. "How's my girl?" Ron asked Anna. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Peg," Anna said.

Peg held her copper nails out under the sun as if Ron were to kiss her hand. He shook it like a good old man. Harvey never got along too well with Uncle Ron. He unnerved Harvey because he knew Anna told Ron everything. And Ron was also a womanizer and tended to complain about but never quit the band he'd had for decades: The Goodtimes. Harvey was careful to stay away from Sharks on live music nights. There were only so many bands on this side of town willing to play at the dive, and surely Ron wouldn't be above it.

"I've seen you!" Peg said. "Do you come in to Chops for Less?"

"Yeah, I do! Joellen?"

"Jo! She's my girl. She's a color genius! I mean not that you, ah, probably do color."

"She's a sweetie," Ron said. "And how's poor Harvey?" he asked, directing the question at Anna.

"Doin' great. Doin' good at work. Such a snowball effect—the word of mouth. I'm sure you've felt that with your band."

"Nothing like a buzz around town." Ron smiled and looked at Peg. "Well, I suppose you two need to be getting back now. It's getting to be about dinnertime, no?"

Of course Ron knew why Harvey was there. Harvey wondered if Anna had asked Uncle Ron to appear, to help keep Harvey's visit brief.

A pained but impressively pleasant falsetto rang out from the window above them. Peg made more divots with her toe.

"He's gotten good," Anna said. The others nodded.

"I found the card," Harvey said to Anna, without moving to take it from his pocket.

"Oh, good. Thanks for doing that."

"Yeah, it's in a bit of a condition."

"A condition?"

"Not usable, I don't think."

"May I have a look? What have you done to it?"

Harvey felt for it in his pocket. It ripped as he pulled it out. He handed her half.

"Oh, I see." She sniffed it. "I see."

Ron lit a cigarette and said he was headed up to see Colin, maybe try out some new tunes.

"Smoking in the house?" Harvey said to Anna after the screen door was shut.

"Just in his room, usually. He leaves his window open. And you know how adamant Colin is about it being disgusting and unhealthy."

"The filmstrips worked, huh?" Peg said.

"Give him time." Harvey shook his head and looked up at the window. The old blue house needed a new coat, maybe a new shade of trim. Yellow even.

Anna ran her rough hands over the black fabric covering her stomach. Soft and peach-cheeked, she looked just like she had carrying Colin.

Harvey stared at her face, the creases around her eyes and mouth. She'd be an old mother to this one. "You doing okay?" he said.

Peg said she was going to get something from the car. Her checkbook. She wanted to buy a small mirror.

"I get along. She's yours, you realize," Anna said.

"She?"

"Yep. You'll meet her. I won't slice you out completely."

Slice. Her whole life, one giant canvas; her weapon, an X-Acto knife. "Anna—" He stopped.

When Peg came back, she put her hand on Harvey's forearm, just left it there, her check already made out. Anna turned to get the mirror, which she had wrapped up and propped against the barn. By the size of it, Harvey figured Peg had paid at least three hundred, which he knew was more than half of her normal paychecks. They all said quick goodbyes and thank yous—hands were shaken—and Harvey and Peg shut themselves back into the car, Harvey in the driver's seat this time. He watched Anna yank her shirt onto her shoulder. It promptly fell back off. She waved goodbye.

Back on the road, Harvey gunned the engine. "Pleasant visit, huh?"

"She's sweet. She does good work."

"Yeah, well, lots of people think so." He paused. Peg pulled her seatbelt out long in front of her, then let it quickly snap back, over and over.

"How are you? You still hungry? Cheese fries or something?" Harvey asked.

"Not so much."

"Me neither, I guess. You want to catch a movie or something? Air conditioning might feel nice."

"You just don't strike me as a violent man," she said.

Harvey couldn't think of anything to say. He didn't feel like a violent man.

"I've wondered why you didn't have Colin part of the time. You like him, right?"

"Sure. He's my boy. We'll reconnect in a few years. He'll need a father in his teens."

"But what about Ron, and this Mike guy?"

Harvey slapped the steering wheel to the beat of a stupid song. "I could fix you up a nice dinner when we get back. We could sit out on my balcony, maybe drink that wine you like."

"I've got an early morning," she said.

"Yep. Got one of those too. A deal: just dinner, no wine. An early night."

"I'll have to leave by eight o'clock," she said. Her copper nails were wrapped up in a heap on her lap. She leaned her head on the doorframe and stared out at the cornfields.

Harvey continued slapping out his song. He hummed along, with a tune that clashed, and hoped that Peg would touch him.