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Don't See How It Won't Get Worse

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"I'm sure he didn't drop it on purpose," said Jennifer.

"You don't know that. Besides, it don't matter if he did it on purpose or not," replied Helen. "He's not careful with my things--always droppin somethin." A wistful sigh. "Wait and see what else he accidentally drops today."

A pale sun overhead. The broken drawer of a nightstand lay nearby. The women were on hands and knees in the parched summer fescue along the walkway. Bending forward, they sorted through a spilled tangle of Helen's things: necklaces, fingernail clippers, bracelets, ear plugs, rings, pack of breath mints, barrettes, colored scarves, buttons, receipts, a bottle of Tylenol, combs, pens, slips of paper with phone numbers, ChapStick, and a few nickels and pennies.

"You have a lot of jewelry," said Jennifer, wanting to change the subject.

"I hardly ever wear any of these. I got two good necklaces I wear all the time." Helen touched her throat and fingered the brushed-gold hummingbird and slender gold chain that hung around her neck. "This here's one."

"That's nice," said Jennifer, taking time to give it a proper look. "Claude give it to you?"

"Mmm."

"I don't have any real jewelry yet," said Jennifer. "Except what my mother gave me for graduation." She pushed her curls away from her ears to reveal two gold studs. "Maybe Stoney will give me something for our first anniversary."

A bluejay dropped from a nearby sumac bush, bounced once or twice, and cocked an eye at the baubles. It pointed its beak at a lone pearl earring some distance from the tangle. The women looked up--surprised, but not startled. Jennifer waved an arm at the bird. It flashed its wings and jumped a few feet away from them, but remained on the ground where it continued to bounce, and jerk its head in the manner of birds with large beaks. Jennifer reached for the pearl.

"He's OK," said Helen. "I don't care if he takes anything."

"Is that a real pearl?"

"Who knows?" said Helen, without looking up. "Who knows if any of it's real?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jennifer. She teased up a section of necklace entangled with what looked easily like a dozen more. She leaned in for a closer look at its clasp. "This is fourteen karat gold."

"Men give you things," replied Helen, as she collected bracelets into a separate pile. She shrugged. "I don't care to look at them too close."

"Who gave you this?" Jennifer held up a silver parrot with a yellow and red beak.
Helen touched it, but didn't take it. "My first husband Leonard, when we lived downstate. It's probably junk. Know what he did, the cheap bastard? I took my diamond engagement ring to be appraised after our divorce? Guess what? It wasn't a real diamond. I called him and told him, and you know what he says to me?"

"What?"

"He said someone must have switched it. I said who on earth could have switched it? He said 'one of those times you had it cleaned.'" Helen paused, and settled back on her heels. "The cheap bastard always had an answer for everythin."

"Who gave you these?" Jennifer held a pair of diamond earrings in her palm. Helen touched her friend's hand. "Jen, please. I'm not up for these questions."

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Where the walkway met the graveled drive, two men stood inside the back of an Avis rental truck, resting, watching the women. They were far enough away that the women's conversation could have been mistaken for murmured prayers. Claude, at forty-two, was breathing hard. He leaned on his own bedroom chest as he waited for the lift-gate to rise. Stoney sneezed and pinched his nose. "Smells like old cardboard in here."

The men had lined the walkway leading to the back door of the bungalow with lighter objects for the women to finish carrying into the house-assorted small boxes, kitchen chairs, laundry baskets, lamps, a white hamper, curtain rods, a birdfeeder, and the nightstand with its now broken drawer. Stoney wasn't breathing hard. Loading books on and off carts everyday at Borders for the past six months had shaped him up. He looked at Helen's ass stuck up in the air, pink thong peeping above tight black workout shorts. His wife, Jennifer wouldn't wear a thong-a minor thing really, but all the same.

Claude lifted his chin toward the women. "Helen ain't the woman you think you're seeing." His lips were pressed together and he looked to Stoney as if he was about to spit.

Stoney with his shirt off, felt his face warm at the remark. He didn't want to ask Claude what he meant. He guessed he'd been showing too much interest in Helen. Claude had a few gray hairs now, but he could still go off on you. He looked at Claude, then back at Helen. Earlier he had watched as she tied her dark hair in a ponytail, and he liked the way she looked in her pink tank top. When he noticed Claude was watching him, Stoney had tried to keep his face passive and go with the only safe compliment he could think of: "She looks fit."

This time he didn't say anything.

"She watches Law And Order," said Claude.

Stoney raised his eyebrows. "I watch Law And Order."

Claude looked at the younger man. "Every night?"

"Well, no. But I like the show," said Stoney.

"Re-runs are on every night at seven and eight," said Claude, squinting toward his new house. "You know I work swing shift. Nights I'm not home, I don't give a shit. But, Friday, and Sunday, she won't miss the new ones on prime time for nothing."

"Special Victims Unit," said Stoney, nodding his head. "Criminal Intent."

"What?"

"The ones on prime time."

"You know something about this?" asked Claude, cocking his head.

"I watch the show is all I'm saying."

"Is that what you do on Friday night? You watch back-to-back Law And Order, like they
Jennifer reached into the cabinet. "Damn right, no. You go out, don't you? You and Jen."
"Yeah, usually."
"Where you go?"
"The Beacon."
"Still go to the Beacon?"
"Yeah. They got the band."
"You two go alone?"
Stoney shrugged. "Rick and Patsy, they go with us if they can get a babysitter."
"That's what I'm saying," said Claude.
"What?"
"We don't go out anymore."
"You don't go to the Beacon?"
"We don't go nowhere."
Stoney glanced at Helen's ass again. He couldn't help it. Claude pulled on his gloves.
"Ready?"
"Yeah," said Stoney. They hefted the chest onto the lift, and Stoney hit the down button.
Riding to the ground, Claude and Stoney continued to watch the women, who, climbing to their feet, appeared to have given up untangling the necklaces. "We get inside," said Claude, "try not banging into anything--Helen's all over me today as it is."

The bluejay appeared to give up on its chance for a free prize; it hopped up into the sumac and squawked a couple of times. Jennifer held open a plastic Dominick's bag; Helen loaded in the handful of golden and silvery strings, the bracelets, and all the rings and pins. Then Jennifer reached down, snatched up the bright mix of scarves with one hand, and the Tylenol and Chapstick with the other. "Get those earplugs too," said Helen. They left the rest to the risk of trampling by the men, and headed into the house.

"Jen looks good with colors, doesn't she?" said Stoney. He tugged at the crotch of his jeans.

Claude blew air between his lips. "Forget sex," he said. "Law And Order is what we're down to now. Law And fucking Order. That's it."

Stoney tried to put another blank look on his face. What could he say to that?

The men wrestled the chest into the kitchen, through the hall, and into the larger of two bedrooms. Huffing and staggering, bumping the walls, they set it down near the indentations in the carpet where the previous owners had probably placed a similar chest.

Walking back out to the truck, they passed the women, who were now in the bathroom. Claude kept moving, but Stoney placed a hand on the doorframe and leaned in. "Working hard, girls?" Helen on her knees again, thong showing again, was placing cleaning products under the sink, and making some noise doing it. She didn't say anything or even look up, which suggested to Stoney she wasn't in the mood for goofing around. Jennifer was stacking half-used tubes of lipstick, hand creams, toothpaste, and various lotions and sprays onto the plastic shelves behind the mirror in the medicine cabinet. She looked at Stoney, licked her lips, and blew him a kiss. "Harder than you," she said, damp curls around her face. "You have your shirt off."

"Too hot," said Stoney, grinning. He noticed the greenish brass fixtures on the sink, which reminded him of his grandmother's house in Berwyn. They were like what? Fifty years old? He blew Jen a kiss, and then hurried to catch up with Claude.

Riding the lift-gate, Stoney said, "That guy on Criminal Intent--what's his name? The
main detective... I forget his name."
"The pretty boy?"
"Yeah. The main guy."
"What about him?"
"I think he's clever. The way he questions suspects. Like he knows what they did, but he has to figure their motive. All the while, he comes across like he's harmless. One night..."
"Maybe you don't get me about Law And Order," said Claude.
"I got you."
"You don't got me. If you got me, you wouldn't be bringing it up."
"I got you," said Stoney. The lift stopped and the men stepped into the truck. Stoney sneezed at the cardboard smell again, and rubbed his nose with the back of his wrist. They walked toward a long dresser midway back. Claude stopped, took the glove off his right hand, and rubbed the middle of his forehead with his fingertips.
"Goddamn, if my life hasn't turned to shit."

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The women returned to the yard. Helen tore tape off boxes, looking for blankets for the bed. "We should have marked these," said Jennifer.

"He don't put nothin in the house," said Helen, pulling out folded blue sheets and clamping them under her left arm. "Not a loaf of bread, not a roll of toilet paper-nothin," she said, voice rising.

"Shhh," said Jennifer, frowning, looking toward the truck.
"Don't shush me. He drinks the last pop, eats the last banana and don't say shit. I come home from work, you know? Fight my ass down Naperville Road at rush hour, and there's dishes in the sink." She looked at her friend and rubbed the side of her right hand along her cheek.
"Know what I mean, Jennifer? The big money from his mother is gone, and there's a full day of dishes in the sink. Not even rinsed. Front room ain't picked up. Shit." Helen clenched her fists. 'Just doing nothin but sittin there watchin TV all day. Like working swing shift makes him the royal prince or somethin."

Jennifer found the blankets and pulled them out of their box. She placed her hand on Helen's shoulder; felt the woman trembling. They headed into the house.
"And now," said Helen, tears running, "Way out here in the woods in Warrenville somewhere? What am I gonna do? I don't see how it won't get worse." She paused to wipe at her tears with her finger tips. "Only way we're gettin along now, is stayin out of each other's way."

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Half hour later, heavy feet as the men threaded their way through the remaining items in the truck. "Hey, what's this?" asked Stoney. He pointed to a golf bag with what looked like a rifle butt sticking out among the club heads.
"Old pellet gun," said Claude.
Stoney pulled it out. "Still work?"
"What?"
"Does it work?" Stoney cocked the gun and walked to the edge of the truck before Claude could answer. He sighted along the barrel and pulled the trigger. It went off. "Hey, I got the sucker."
Claude walked up fast. "Got what sucker?"
Claude searched the ground until he saw the shot bluejay flicking around on its side in the dried leaves. "You son of a bitch," he said, snatching the gun from the younger man.
"What I do?" asked Stoney.
"You shoot a bird right here in my yard?"
"They got a law here?"
"I don't know if they got a law." Claude frowned, or maybe sneered—Stoney wasn't sure which. "I don't give a shit if they got a law."
Stoney held his palms open in front of him. "It's a bird. So what?"
Claude took off a glove and ran his hand over his face. "You don't know shit, do you? Helen loves those birds. Birds are about the last things make her smile now. Why you think we're moving out here?"
Tight face on Stoney. "I'm sorry Claude. Really, I am. I didn't know."
"She sees a dead bird, she's crying all night."
"I didn't know."
"Fuckin-A, Stoney."
"I didn't know. I said I'm sorry."
"You carried the birdfeeder off the truck!"
Stoney shook his head. Both men stared at the bluejay, now motionless in the dead leaves. Claude suddenly pushed at Stoney's shoulder. "What are you waiting for?" he said. "Get that fuckin bird out of here before she sees it."