Pharmacy

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Sarah looks down to see her white knickers full of black marks from dragging her body over the metal frame. Her nylons have snags. Oh, they're ruined. Imagine not sitting down afraid to stain my pants, I should have just sat down when I had the chance. She closes the screen and leaves the window open for some fresh air, and takes off her other shoe and proceeds through the house. She glances up at the clock. Dad won't be home for hours unless he stops off at the tavern. Then it will be anyone's guess when he'll stumble in. Entering the kitchen, she glances at the table scattered with newspaper all open to Omar, the horoscope columnist for the Chicago Tribune. Oh those stupid horoscopes if only they could predict the future. Today's would read: you will be fired from your job, get mugged and be run over by a rodent. All indicators point to seclusion, do not go out, stay home at all costs. She walks through the house, and enters the dining room. A chill runs down her spine. She looks around as if there is a presence. Imagine being afraid of ghosts when there are so many real dangers to be afraid of. She turns the television on for company. Opening the front hall door she remembers the deadbolt, and exclaims, "Shit." Locked in, locked out, she secures the chain lock. Oh, to hell with it, if it's my time to go then let it be so. Her courage and continuance finally fading like a path worn in the grass from too much traffic, she heads to the bathroom.

She strips down, and fills the sink with water and a cap full of Woolite and soaks her clothes. She slips into a comfortable T-shirt and shorts that were hanging on the back of the door. In the kitchen, she puts on the kettle for tea and stacks the newspapers in a neat pile.

She finally sits down her feeling rise to the surface like a dormant volcano about to erupt, tears stream down her face, her rhythmic breathing changes to a jolting pant. I'm so sick of this bullshit. But no, I can't stop and cry, what use is it. She remembered what all the well-meaning relatives said at her mother's funeral; "You have to be strong now." "No tears, be a big girl." "You have to take care of your father and your brothers and sisters." These responses imbedded in her mind became the foundation of her psyche.

She emerges from her self-pity and starts to think about yesterday. Why did Mage do this to me? What could she possibly hope to gain? Is she just jealous? One thing's for sure she wanted me gone. Mage walked up to the front counter of the drugstore during Sarah's
shift.

"Sarah, where's the bottle of Chanel # 5, did you see it?"
"No, I haven't even opened the cabinet today." Sarah replied as she wiped down the counter.
Mage scratched her head with a pencil to avoid flattening her pinkish red bouffant and continued.

"I was going to buy that bottle, did someone come in and buy it, already?"
"No, I told you I haven't even opened the cabinet, I don't know anything about it." Sarah said, backing away from her slightly, avoiding the pungent aroma of her perfume. **Whoa woman could you spare some perfume and makeup for the rest of the population.**
Mage shuffled back to the pharmacy counter in her oversized house slippers. A few minutes later, she returned with Harry, the owner of the drugstore.

"Harry it was here when I left my shift." Mage raised her vein-laden hand extending her coral polished fingertip, pointing to the glass case, "and now it's gone."
Sarah looked at the two to them, confused for a moment. What's up with these two? She thought and then said,

"I haven't seen the bottle of perfume. Where do you think I would put it? Here, look in my purse." She said, and handed them her black satin bag so they could see for themselves.
Harry looked at Sarah with an exasperated expression and then looked to his mother,

"Are you sure mom?"
"Yes, Harry, what do you think? That I don't know what I'm doing?" she accented every syllable. "And don't I take meticulous care of my work? I take inventory everyday. I take care of the fragrances, and I was going to buy that bottle today, but, it's gone."
Sarah rang up the next customer. What is she talking about buying the perfume, I mean she could just take it. After all it is her son's store.

"That'll be $3.98." Sarah said, as she grabbed the five-dollar bill from the customer and made change. The store was busy at that hour. Patients from the doctor's offices were waiting for prescriptions. Sarah became distracted by kids gathered in the isles. That's right I'm watching you, don't even try it. The heavy-set kid looked up at Sarah, then nudged his friend and bent down and whispered something.

"You're sure it was there when you left?" Harry asked
"Yes, Harry, How many times do I have to tell you the same thing? It was there."
Harry looked at his mother and then at Sarah and said, "I can't abide by your stealing Sarah."
"What?! Sarah raised her voice and refocused her attention back to Harry. "I didn't steal anything."
"Mom, can you take over the register?"
"Well, I was going to go to dinner with George, but, I guess." She replied
"But," Sarah said "Harry you can't be serious. I've been here for two hours and I haven't left the counter. I didn't take the bottle of perfume. LOOK!" she said again and handed him her purse.
Harry took a deep breath and blew it out in exasperation with an expression of complete disdain avoiding eye contact with Sarah he said, "Look there's been a lot of merchandise missing and it has to stop. Gather your things, I'll send your check in the mail at the end of the week."
This can't be happening Harry knows I didn't take that bottle. Sarah looked around and noticed the customers pointing and whispering. It wasn't the first scene ever created in that drug store but it was her first. Her cheeks flushed with crimson, Fine, I'll leave, we'll get this straightened out later.
"Harry, I didn't take it, you know I didn't take it," she said one last time.
She gathered her things as Harry turned and walked back to the pharmacy counter with a smug look on his face. Sarah looked at Mage's worn out face, with sagging skin. Mage looked into Sarah eyes with utter contempt and said, "Leave."
Sarah grabbed her purse, and ran through the door and headed for home.

The steady whistle of the kettle near screeching like a suckling piglet absconded from its mother roars in the background rousing Sarah back to her kitchen. I wonder if Harry knows about the Sunday papers? Sarah grabs a mug and pours boiling water over the tea bag. Was that two or three, no it was just last year. Yeah that's right I remember because it was spring and I wasn't wearing a coat. I can still see the paper bunny taped on the door of the pharmacy. She reaches for the canister of sugar and ladles out a heaping teaspoon dumping it into her mug. Leaving the tea to steep she continues thinking. That was the last time I saw Chondel.
"Hey Carrie, What's up?" Sarah said as she entered the store.
"Nothing really, same old same old."
"I ain't your plantation Nigress!" Came a shout from the back.
Carrie leaned over and whispered in Sarah's ear, "I guess Harry broke up with Chondel."
Sarah looked to the back of the pharmacy. Chondel stormed up to the front counter. She threw her keys down on the counter and took a deep breath fighting back tears she said.
"You girls remember, never trust a man. I'll tell you they'll take you for everything you have and leave you dangling from a rope."
"No. You are beautiful." Sarah said
"Ah, look at you sweetie." Chondel said taking Sarah's chin in her perfectly manicured hand. "You are the prettiest little thing, don't ever let any man take advantage of you. I was young once and now time has taken everything away from me."
"Gosh, I just don't understand it. Chondel is so beautiful, what is she doing here?"
"Drugs honey, she addicted to speed. Harry gives her a fix."
"Wow that's too bad. She so beautiful and intelligent, she's really selling herself short."
"Those woman are a dime a dozen around here."
Carrie opened the register and deposited the money from the ledge.
"So, you're not ringing up the news papers?" Sarah asked
"Let's go have a cigarette." Carrie said and yelled to the back.
"Lilly can you take over the register while I take a break?"
"Sure give me a minute, I'll be right up." Lilly replied.
Lilly came up to take over the register and Carrie and Sarah exited the
store through the front door. They walked in silence west bound down Melvina, past the doctors offices and a few shops to the built in sheltered gangway leading to the back of the building. Harry owned the whole block of three-story buildings with offices and shops on the ground level and apartments above. They stopped in the stairwell and lit up cigarettes.

Carrie took a deep drag on her cigarette and said.

"I'm so sick of working for that pharmacy, you know how it is. We work so hard while Harry rakes in the dough. He doesn't pay us what we deserve."

Sarah looked at her for a moment.

"I don't know. I like working at that drug store, I mean if I didn't have that then what would I do? I like being around all those doctors and pharmacists."

"Yeah, well, I don't know, I think he's lucky to have us. I mean there's so much illegal stuff going on in that place he's lucky we don't report him. Remember four years ago when we were taking the word sample off the capsules with peroxide and a Q-tip?"

"Oh yeah, I didn't even know that was illegal. I mean your mother use to do it in her spare time. He had us doing his dirty work. We were only twelve years old. Then Juanita let a few capsules slip through and that one customer reported it."

"Exactly, and Harry was able to get out of it because he has all those connections."

"A regular Harry Houdini. Yeah, I heard about that one. He takes all the samples that the salesmen drop off and sells them for profit." Sarah added.

"Yeah and the doctors write prescriptions because they get kick backs from the salesmen. Those doctors don't care about the patients they just set appointments and write prescriptions because Uncle Sam is footing the bill via Medical Cards."

"Yeah, and he gets the cigarette before they're run through the state tax stamps and sells them for a higher profit."

"Oh please that's just the tip of the iceberg. A lot of the merchandise falls off of trucks on the way to other stores, if you know what I mean."

"I remember what that place looked like when I first started working there. What a mess! It took me an entire day to clean out that one corner it was like an archeology dig with year after year of piling debris."

"That's right, you put your heart into your work and ask yourself;"
"Have you ever gotten a raise?"
"Well, no."
"And the greeting cards, you took that upon yourself and now it's just beautiful."
"I really like the responsibility of ordering for the store."
"That's fine Sarah and don't forget I got you that job, and don't be stupid Sarah, you've never seen his house. You don't know how he lives. His house is huge with an in ground pool. His kids have motorbikes, the best of everything. They took that trip to the Bahamas last spring, oh, and before that Hawai. You've seen his Corvette, and Cadillac, right? They're rolling in dough. So, I just figure that he is lucky to have us, and I deserve to have a little extra money. After all, he's not going to give us a raise. No one gives you anything Sarah, you have to take it while you can."
"So what are you doing?"
"Well, you know how it is on Sundays, everyone comes in and buys newspapers with exact change. So, I just line the money up on the ledge and then when I have ten bucks I just ring up one paper and keep track of the rest. At the end of my shift I just pocket the extra money so the register balances."
"Oh, I see."
"Well you might as well do it too, at least this way you can feel like you're getting what you deserve," Carrie said as she flicked her cigarette down and dowsed it out with her foot. "I've got to get back."
As they walked back down the gangway, Carrie added,
"When in Rome, do as the Roman's. After all, it's only a couple of bucks. A drop in the bucket when you consider how much money he has. When you think of all the hard work you do, I just think of it as a bonus. So, Sarah, you should do it too."
Sarah walked back to the store with Carrie so she could get her newspaper. A gang of men formed a gauntlet in front of the store.
"Ah Sarah, you so fine. In a couple years, there'll be no stopping you," one man said.
Sarah looked down.
"Shit, You's got to be kiddin, if that girl drank tomato juice she'd look like a thermometer. Why I'd crack her in two." Another man said.
"Hey Carrie, you want to spend some time with me baby? I'll
make a woman of you." another man said.

Carrie and Sarah did their best to ignore them as they walked into the pharmacy.

"Those guys are such creeps." said Carrie as the door eased close on its hydraulic hinges. "Harry's Henchmen."

"I know, why are they always hanging around?"

"The Green Monster." Carrie said climbing behind the front counter. "Hey thanks Lily."

"Sure, no problem." Lily replied as she grabbed her coke and headed to the back.

"What is The Green Monster?" Sarah asked Carrie in whispered tones.

"Cough syrup laced with codeine. They drink it down and vomit it right back up but the codeine stays in their system, giving them a high, leaving them in altered states."

"God, they must be desperate, I can't imagine anything would be worth vomiting over. I hate throwing up."

"Me too. Harry takes advantage of them. He gets them to do his bidding. All for the price of a bottle of cough syrup." Carrie said.

Sarah grabbed her paper and headed toward the door.

"Hey, I'll catch ya later."

She said as she braced herself to face the gauntlet again.

"Later.' Carrie replied as she rung up the next customer, Sarah was out the door.

Carrie's right, no one gives you anything you've got to take it. Sarah decided and brushed through the men standing outside.

* * *

Sarah takes a sip of hot tea. I've done everything in my power. I've tried everything. I just have to face facts. I don't have a job anymore. I'll just have to find a new one. There no salvaging my job at the pharmacy after what happened this afternoon. Harry is such a stubborn jerk. I probably shouldn't have threatened him though, Oh, but who cares Let me retrace my steps this afternoon when I went to the pharmacy. I was so upset, what did I say?

"Hey Lily." Sarah said as she entered the store earlier that day. "Is Harry here?"

"Yeah, he's in the back but I thought." Lily said. Sarah just shrugged and smiled as she headed toward the back.

"Harry I need to speak with you." Sarah said.
"I'm very busy here." Harry replied.
"Well, this can't wait, I need to speak with you."
"We said everything there is to say, Sarah."
"No we haven't Harry, I need to speak with you."
"You'll just have to wait."
"Fine."

Sarah waited for a long time. When Harry realized that Sarah was not going to give up, he stepped out from behind the counter and headed to his office,

"Sarah, you have exactly three minutes."

Once inside the office he sat down behind his desk.
"Well, have you come to confess?" he asked.
"No, of course not! Harry," Sarah said closing the door behind her. "I didn't take anything. You know I didn't take anything. I've known you for years and I've worked here for the past three years. In that time, I've done a very good job for you. I have never received a raise and I've never complained."

She looked straight into his eyes, which he averted. "I was happy here. Now you treat me like this, it's just not fair. I know a lot of what goes on around here and if I spoke with the right people, well, let's just say there will be trouble."

"Are you threatening me?" Harry asked, this time looking straight into her eyes.

Intimidated, she looked away, softened a bit and said,
"You know I didn't steal that bottle of perfume. Why don't you tell me why you really fired me?"

"Look young lady there has been a lot going on around here starting with merchandise missing and the register isn't ringing up the way it use to. So, let's just say I'm doing a little house cleaning."

"Oh, so I'm the fall guy? You think I am the one doing all this stealing. Look around Harry, everyone is working some sort of scam around here. Don't use me as an example."

"The truth is I don't know who's doing the stealing and I mean to find out by process of elimination."

With an expression of superiority, he scanned his desk dismissing her with his eyes sorting through paper as if she were invisible.

"Well, that's not fair. I've been a good employee to you and you're leaving me high and dry for something I didn't even do. You have no proof, besides it takes one to know one. You are the biggest thief that I've ever met. You're not very smart making
an enemy of me."

Looking straight into her eyes unblinking, he said,
"Okay that's it. I will not sit here and take threats from you.
You're fired, you don't work here anymore, and you're not wel-
come here anymore. I suggest you leave now and stop wasting
my time."

Sarah, not knowing what else to say, stormed out of the drug store
and headed straight to Juanita's. God, who am I that he can just throw
me away like a piece of garbage. I have no one to help me, that's why
he knows he can get away with this. What am I going to do report him?
To who? Who would believe me anyway. He'd just get out of it. Ah,
maybe it's for the best. Absent-mindedly she stepped off the curb into
traffic. A loud "HONK," comes from a passing vehicle as she stepped
back up on the curb and looked up at the traffic signal. She was too
absorbed in her own thoughts to let the incident distract her. After
three years of working here I'm just a piece of trash he can throw away.
Now everyone thinks I'm a thief. Really how long could I stay in this
place anyway? It's time to move on. This is only one messily little cor-
ner in the world.

* * *

Immediately after Sarah left Harry's office, he grabbed the phone to his
private line and dialed.
"Hello, I'm having a little problem here that I want you to take
care of."

"Who's the problem?" asked the voice on the opposite end.
"Sarah Moore, can you take care of it?" Harry asked.
"Oh, shit Harry, she's just a kid! Are you sure about this?"
"You ought to know by now that I would not call you unless I
was serious, it has to be done."

Harry said.

With reluctance the man replied, "Usual Fee?"
"Fine. Usual fee, but be quick about it."