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voice

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voice

— Heather Gilbert

I GOT OFF ON THE WRONG FLOOR. The fading number 2 looked more like a 7 at this dreary time of night. I was half-way down the hall in a frilly orange dress before I noticed all the room numbers began with 2. I halted in the middle of the corridor. The elevator closed and sank into the depths of the apartment building, leaving me contemplating the ceiling and the layers of carpet between myself and home. The hall was deceptively long and well lit. Painfully lit. I closed my eyes and felt the muscles in my face relax. Rotating my head gently, I heard the tension snap like a dead branch. I turned slowly on my feet, guessing which end of the hall the elevator was in.

The chime ended the game. Opening one eye, I found myself facing a wall. I opened the other eye and retraced my steps to the elevator. With a swish and a rustle, I twirled into the car, hit number 7, and let my legs crumple with the upward force of the moving floor. The seventh was smaller than the other levels, except the penthouse suite directly above my floor. This elevator did not go that high.

"This damn elevator always lets me off at the wrong end of the hall," I grumbled to myself, "or maybe I just live on the wrong end."

I scraped a heel on the rug as I stood and set off for number 742. I paused at

741, knuckles poised to knock. The young couple next door to me were always happy to look after my baby daughter when I was away. Always happy. I traced the numbers on the door with an index finger. What time is it? Let them sleep. Eight more steps and I leaned against my door. I tried the key. Wrong side up, as usual. The door opened wide, the inner silence melding with the hall. I had left a light on, knowing I would be home late. I could be practical sometimes. Limping in on high heels, I closed the door with my whole body.

.....
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The bathroom was a welcome friend, conveniently located next to the front door in the narrow hallway to the main room.

I gasped and halted in the doorway, shocked at the sight of myself. A malicious designer had placed a full length mirror opposite the entrance. The faint light from the welcoming lamp threw a horrid illumination across my face, framing exaggerated circles under my eyes and accenting all of the wrong curves. My left shoe was loose. Slipping it off, I

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sent it in an arc toward the lamp. With a soft crackle of glass, the apartment was dark.

My aching pupils adjusted to the night-light over the sink as I splashed some water over my face, letting the make-up smudge and drip. I forced myself to look in the mirror; a bride's maid in a neon orange come-and-get-it gown, and now I looked like a used prostitute. I ripped the yellow butterfly combs savagely from my head, letting them flutter to the sink with broken pieces of hair. The rest of my hair fell in a stringy mass. After splashing more water over the dried strands, I walked into the living room, still wearing one heel. A faint glow from the street lights graced the ceiling, without defining anything beneath it.

I met the couch first and tumbled over into the cushions. The remote control arched into the small of my back, pressing every button simultaneously.

The television burst into a burning picture, with volume for the living impaired. Almost on reflex, I snatched up the remote and hit the mute button. The bluish light from the screen was a comfort. "Comfort will have to wait," I thought. A small groan and I was on my feet, searching for the phone. I found my antique radio first, with all the quaint knobs. Sleep used to come so easily

when I left that radio on a soft level. I slipped my pinky around one dial and gave it a slight twist. It glowed and hummed, but it was low enough to emit no sound.

.....
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.....

I found the phone next to its cradle, not quite in place. I limply gripped the cordless in one hand and steadied myself with the other. My world was tilted on one heel. Drifting toward the window, I dialed a long distance number.

I let the phone ring several times while I slithered onto the desk beneath the window, tearing the dress slightly in the process. I was feeling too warm, so I opened the window with my shoeless left foot and dangled my right leg outside. Peering closely at my wristwatch, I could discern the small hand near the three and the long hand on the ten. Eleven rings and a sleepy Southern accent picked up.

"Yeah?" he mumbled.

"You told me to call you the next time I'm drunk." I spoke carefully to get the words out straight.

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There was a pause and a soft laugh.
 “What happened this time?” he asked, humoring me.

“Nothing,” I lied automatically. “I just wanted to hear your voice. Talk to me.”

He let out a long breath. “You called me. You talk.”

I always hated when he did that.

“Were you sleeping?” I asked innocently. My right shoe slid off my dangling foot. I didn’t hear it hit the ground.

“Nah, not really,” he said, always the gentleman.

“What’s the ugliest dress you’ve ever seen?”

“Anything without a low neckline.”

“Hhhmmm...this dress has a low neckline, and it’s hideous.”

“How low?”

“Well, not as low as the back.”

“Then you’ve got it on backwards.”

“Yeah, right.”

I flicked the colored tassels hanging from the window. The graduation year read ‘93 on the charm. High school was a lifetime ago, as it should be.

A lazy summer breeze started a chill up my spine. I gathered my legs and torn frills and shut the window, turning toward the television.

“How’s Katie?” he asked in a more serious tone.

“She’s fine. Sleeping.” I managed to say before my throat closed. Katie, my

ten month old daughter was going to an adoption agency the next day.

I glanced out of the window again and down on the street. There was an accident: two crumpled cars and a woman stamping her foot, waiting for the driver to get out of the other vehicle.

“There’s a woman lecturing a girl who just crashed into her in front of my building,” I told him.

“Cool,” he said flatly, not entirely impressed with my change of subject.

I watched the scene for a while. “I wonder if my shoe caused this?” I thought. But there was something more pressing on my mind.

“I don’t want to give her up,” I confessed, stating what he already knew.

“Then don’t.”

“I can’t. I can’t work, study, go to night school and raise a child. Besides, I have to move out next month.”

“You didn’t keep her for ten months to give her up now.”

“I know.”

We were quiet for a while. I rested my head against the window, closing my eyes briefly. His breath was long and deep, he must have been dozing as well.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered to myself.

“Get yourself a new dress.”