Till Human Voices Wake Us

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The man at the table I’m serving can’t decide what to get on his burger. He stares at the menu, flipping the same greasy, plastic page back and forth even though all our topping options are on the same side. His wife stares out the window, and the toddler next to her cries that she’s hungry.

I look up for a moment, and that’s when I see James sit down at a table across the diner. I’m happy to see him, but a girl is sitting down across from him, and she’s laughing and he’s smiling and I can’t breathe. I suck in air until my lungs are full, but the air’s become thick, like I’m trying to breathe syrup.

The man finally decides about his burger, but by the time I get back to the kitchen — the long way, so I won’t have to walk past James — I’ve already forgotten his order. I lean on the counter with both hands. I can’t go back out. Seeing me would ruin James’s date, and I know how much he musta fought with himself before he decided to ask out that girl. Whoever she is.

I called off sick two days when he was in town last summer. About a year ago. It probably cost me a thousand bucks — Angel said it was real busy that weekend. James was in town visiting his parents, crashing in his old bedroom, and I was still living in that double-wide with Betsy and Angel and Angel’s little girl.

We lived off a dirt road in the most podunk part of this whole podunk town. There were two double-wides down that road, tucked back into the trees, sitting on about a half an acre each. We lived in one and worked in the other. Although technically Miss
Crystal owned them both. From the outside, they looked the same: plain, gray, old but kept clean, each with a gravel driveway leading to the road. Ours had blue shutters, and work had maroon, but other than that, identical. From home, you could only barely see the gray rectangle of work though the trees. But you could hear sometimes the men’s pick-ups ripping over the rocks, the *tick* of the gravel that their tires spit out hitting the siding of the trailer as they sped away.

Two winters ago, when James came to visit for the first time, he drove up to the work trailer by accident. I didn’t know he was coming, didn’t even know he was in town. I was sitting on the couch in my pink slip, and Angel was behind the bar—the little space that a kitchen used to be. The other girl working that night, Kitty, was playing a made-up card game that she said was Solitaire but we kept telling her wasn’t real.

She laid out the cards on the long coffee table, sometimes in five piles, sometimes in six or seven. Then she moved the cards around, not paying attention to their color or anything, just trying to put numbers in order. I think her goal was to get all the kings and queens together, but she never completely explained it to us. Sometimes she would say “Solitaire!” and smile and set the cards down and come back to the couch. But mostly she just wrinkled her forehead and mixed up the deck and tried again.

Whenever we heard a car driving up to the trailer, Kitty left her game and came to lay down with her head in my lap. When a client walked in, she would start making eyes at him as I combed my fingers through her hair. Kitty and I switched back and forth ‘cause it was almost always the girl lying down that got picked.
We heard a knock at the door, and it made us all jump a little, even Angel, who was leaning against the bar. It was always the new ones who knocked. Miss Crystal shook her head and laughed one of those short laughs that’s really just breathing hard out your nose. She stood from her armchair—the forest green one that she bought so she could call the tiny sitting room a parlor—and she pulled open the door gracefully. And there, with a friendly smile and confused eyes, was James Leale. Behind his scarf and his hat and the four years that had passed since high school, he was almost hard to recognize. But then I heard his voice as he tripped loudly over an apology. “I must have the wrong address,” he said finally.

I lowered my head, but on his last wide-eyed scan of the room, he saw me anyway. He called my name, and Miss Crystal raised her eyebrows at me. Kitty’s head fell to the couch cushion as I stood and hurried to the door. I stepped out to join James on the square of two-by-fours we called a porch and pulled the door shut behind me.

James looked to his left and studied the sign that hung on the porch wall. It said Miss Crystal’s and showed the black silhouettes of two women standing in different positions. Miss Crystal was actually married, and I don’t think her name was Crystal, either, but who wants to go to a brothel called “Rhonda’s” or “Mrs. Nelson’s” or whatever?

James stared at the sign for a couple moments too long. Understanding where he was but trying to make sense of me in it. “Is this where you live?” he asked finally.

“No, I live over there,” I said, pointing to our home through the bare, black trees, as if living in a trailer next-door to your brothel was any less uncomfortable to admit than living in the brothel itself.
“Mitchell told me you live back here. He said the red shutters. He musta meant blue.”

I snorted. “He meant red.”

Mitchell was one of my semi-regulars—not regular enough that the other girls knew him by name, but enough that they didn’t try for him ‘cause they knew who he came for.

Mitchell was also one of James’s best friends in high school, the sort that you don’t talk to much once you move away, but you meet up to drink together when you’re home on break from college.

I don’t know when it was that Mitchell started disliking me, but I think it was even before I broke up with James senior year, though I can’t think of why. That’s how I knew he told James the wrong color shutters on purpose. He was probably laughing imagining this moment—James and his prostitute ex shivering on the porch of a brothel. He’d be waiting for James at Wingstop or something with a “Told you you were too good for her, bro,” and would try and fail to distract him with a comment about the waitress’s rack.

James licked his lips against the cold and looked very uncomfortable. He watched me with a mix of anger and pity and fear that reminded me of the way the church people on TV looked after the president made whoring legal for the whole country. But with James, his reaction wasn’t ‘cause he was religious. He never was a Christian—just a good guy.

“I’m in town for a few more days, and I just wanted to see how you were doing,” James said. He said it too loudly and too casually and without acknowledging the
weirdness of where he was. Like he’d been practicing it in the car and was glad to finally be able to say it.

“I work all weekend,” I said.

He nodded. I shoulda let him leave. But my heart was jumping, so I said, “But you could… pay.”

“I’m not… I’ve never…” he sputtered.

“It’s not this,” I said, motioning at those two curvy silhouettes on the sign. “It’s, well, you have to pay Miss Crystal for my time. But we could go out. Get coffee. Whatever you want.”

This was another idea Miss Crystal had gotten from the big, city brothels. Sometimes it ended in sex. But not usually. *The Girlfriend Experience* was written in big letters on our menu, but it didn’t happen very often here like it did in the city. Most guys out here wanted to get in, get off, and get home before their women realized they were late.

“If that’s the only way to see you,” said James, “then, okay.”

I took him back inside, and I changed clothes while he paid Miss Crystal for three hours of my time.

He opened the car door for me, a different car than he had in high school, newer but not new. As he drove, he called a couple restaurants in the next town—our town didn’t have much outside a few diners and an Applebee’s—to see if any of them still had call-ahead seating on a Friday night. Even after he put down his phone, he only drove with one hand. I remembered that he used to do that. I told him once I thought it was hot, and after that I barely ever saw him drive with two hands.
I stared at the skin of his wrist that was bare above the red cuff of his sweater. It was the first time in two years I’d hoped for a man to touch me.

We pulled into the shopping center where I used to donate blood every two months before I started working at Miss Crystal’s and the Red Cross people stopped letting me. When we walked into the restaurant, I wanted to turn around. The tables all had white tablecloths and candles, and the hostess and waiters were actually adults, no after-school teenagers, and they didn’t look like they hated their lives. The hostess sat us and started reading specials and wine pairings. It was the fanciest restaurant I’d ever been in, by far, and I was wearing jeans.

James looked way more comfortable sitting in the restaurant than I’m sure I did. But I knew this kind of place was more fancy than he was used to, even though he was always richer than me. He never liked friends to come over to his house ‘cause he didn’t want anyone knowing his family had money. They didn’t have an awful lotta money, I guess. Although it was enough that they could go on vacation every summer, which was more than the rest of us.

After a few months of dating, he finally asked me to come over. I can’t remember exactly what we did that day—it was usually ping-pong in the basement or watching a movie and making out any time we were sure his mom went back into her office. But when I went over that first time, I just remember thinking that everything was so spread out.

In my house, even though it was just me and my mom, everything seemed too crowded. Spices and oil and liquor cluttered the kitchen counter so there was barely enough room for a cutting board when I wanted to make something. Both our
toothbrushes, all our makeup, her straightener, and usually a water glass—always empty—all on one tiny bathroom sink. So many pairs of shoes spilling out the closet, no matter how many times I organized them.

But in the Leales’ house, they had an entire wall just for the TV. In high school, I never understood why James was ashamed of people seeing his house. But I guess it was ‘cause he hated feeling like he was better than anyone else.

So why was I sitting there worrying? He saw where I worked, and he took me out anyway. He smiled across the table at me and my red lipstick that I’d tried to wipe off before I left the trailer. Though he wore khakis, he didn’t say anything about my jeans that I tried to hide beneath the crisp, white tablecloth. I didn’t understand what he was doing or why, but I knew it couldn’t last forever.

He read his menu, looking over the pages faster than he could possibly be reading them. I’d only done a few Girlfriend Experiences, but when I did, I always let the man lead. It was hard to tell what they wanted you to be till they started talking.

I knew what James wanted, though. He wanted to pretend he didn’t just pay a few hundred dollars to spend time with me. He wanted to pretend I was the same girl he loved in high school. But I didn’t know who that was, so I stayed quiet.

“So, how have you been?” he asked.

“I’m good,” I said. “Real good. You? You still in school?”

“One more semester. Then med school.”

After high school, he had moved away, far away, to Kansas or the Dakotas—one of those really flat states—to be a doctor. It surprised me. I didn’t think he’d be smart enough. He loved helping people, though, so I guess that made sense, but I always
figured him to be the cop or fireman type. Shows how much two years of dating him taught me.

I asked him about his family. He asked me about my mom. Then, “What happened to moving to the city after graduation?” He smiled, pretending he was teasing.

I told him what I told all the men that asked. There’s no point in lying about it, making myself seem more glamorous, more exotic, more dangerous than I am—they’re gonna screw me either way. So I told the truth. When my mom had to move three years ago, I had already graduated high school and was just a little too old to feel good about still living with her rent-free, especially once I noticed the hike in the collection calls. So I didn’t move with her.

I stayed in town and met Betsy and her friend at the diner I was waitressing at. Her friend, a man, was tall and somewhere between me and Betsy in age. Whoring was just made legal not too long before that, and Betsy and the man told me how much money you could make just for giving a blowjob. I had already gotten stiffed on two checks that day, and my mom had just called the day before to tell me the damn repo man took her car, and Betsy had a room I could rent in her double-wide, and I couldn’t come up with a reason why not.

The other girls have really crazy stories—some of them scary, most of them sad. But that’s mine. It’s not scary. It just is.

By the time our food came out, James and I were talking about high school and laughing. When the check came, I reached into my purse, but James said, “Put it away” before I even had time to pull my wallet out.
He held the bill straight up, never setting it on the table where I could see it. He learned to do this in high school, when all our meals ended with me insisting that he hadn’t tipped enough. He’d tell me 17 or 18 percent was fine, but I never wanted to go under twenty. I’d heard one time that waitresses only make like three bucks an hour. I knew what my mom made—more than that—and I knew how many times I’d seen her at the kitchen table tipsy and crying, her tears bleeding the ink of the bills in her hands. So when I went out with James, I would watch the waiters and waitresses bring us our food, and I didn’t understand their smiles.

A few times, I left my purse behind on purpose, so I could run back in the restaurant and drop a couple extra dollars on the table. I think James caught on after a while ’cause eventually he started going back in himself to get whatever I’d left behind.

Now I know that being a waitress isn’t all that different from my work. Your boss made all the money from the stuff you sold, so you had to rely on tips, your groceries or electric dependent on how men who were better off than you felt about you that day.

By the time he paid and we were walking to the car, James had his arm around my waist. When he leaned over and kissed me in the front seat, still in the restaurant parking lot, his mouth was shaking. I hadn’t kissed a man’s mouth in a long, long time. We made it off-limits at work.

James was staying at his parents’ house, and Betsy had a no-men rule at home. And I definitely couldn’t ask him to go back to work with me, even though technically it was included in the price. I couldn’t picture grabbing his hand and pulling him through the parlor, the other girls staring, and sleeping with him in the same bed where I’d been
with so many other men. So we ended up on a dirt road in the backseat of his car like we were teenagers.

He didn’t have a condom, but I had one in my purse. It was the law now, the men had to wear condoms, but the brothels had to supply them, meaning the girls had to supply them. It didn’t matter anyway ‘cause he couldn’t get it up. I wonder how long he’d been thinking about this moment and how frustrated he probably was that couldn’t get it up. You didn’t find a lotta men who got in their own heads that much.

The drive home was quiet. I held one of his hands in my lap as he drove. Right before he made the turn onto my road, he put the car in park.

“I have to ask you something,” he said. “I have to know. Are you planning to stop this?”

“You shouldn’t ask questions you don’t want answers to,” I said, my chest starting to burn.

He didn’t respond for a while, tapping the steering wheel with his fingers like an angry man tapping his foot. Then he turned to face me. “Move in with me,” he said.

I knew I shoulda been surprised but I wasn’t. He could’ve asked me to marry him, and I wouldn’t’ve been surprised

“James,” I said, “I can’t.”

“I wan’t you to be happy. You know that’s all I want.”

“What makes you think I’m not happy? I have nice clothes, nice stuff. I like the girls I live with, especially Angel’s little girl. And… well, you hear about things, the madams and pimps who don’t treat their girls right. But Miss Crystal’s pretty good to us.”
He didn’t argue. I wanted him to argue. “I hope that’s the truth,” he said. “But
even so…” I stopped his thought by kissing him, softly, for a long time. Then I watched
him as he struggled not to ask me anything else while he drove me back to work.

I didn’t hear from James again until that summer. That time he called, at least, so
I could take off from work. He had just graduated from college and had gotten into a
bunch of med schools. We spent two days together that summer. On the first, he
brought two big pretzels from Auntie Anne’s, and we ate them in his car.

Auntie Anne’s was our favorite ‘cause it was the reason we met. I had known of
James from school, might’ve even had a class with him once, but we never spoke. Then
one Saturday—it had to be a Saturday ‘cause that was when I was off from school and
my mom was off from work, so I could use her car—I went to Walmart to get our
groceries. Right beside the automatic sliding doors, there was a plastic table set up
where the Salvation Army man usually stands with his bell and his pot.

There was a girl and a guy behind the table, both wearing green sports jerseys.
The sign in front said something about fundraiser, so I stopped. The guy noticed and
started talking. They were raising money for the travel baseball and softball teams to go
to a tournament down south somewhere. He started talking really fast and loud when he
mentioned the tournament, and I really liked soft pretzels, so I ordered two Auntie
Anne’s pretzel kits. The order sheet asked for a name, address, and phone number, and
James joked months afterward that the whole fundraiser was just a plot to get my
number.
Now, in the front seat of his car, I licked cinnamon sugar off my fingers, and we talked about that day and all the good ones after it that we could remember.

We ended up, that night and the next, on the same dirt road as last time in the back of his car. He started off with the same problem as before. He felt me notice and said, “I can’t do this. I’m sorry.” He pulled back and shifted awkwardly. “Look. I love you. You don’t have to say it back. But I can’t do this if I don’t tell you. I’m… Well, I’m not one of your customers. You know sex isn’t what’s important to me.”

“I know,” I said, and kissed him.

The second night, he played a CD of songs from high school—songs we’d slow danced to, songs we’d had sex to. He whispered the lyrics as we kissed, and his mouth was still shaking. That time, there were no problems like before. When we were finished and he was holding me on top of him, he kept whispering to me.

The way he told me he loved me was the same way most of the men drank liquor: like a habit. A familiar taste that stung in his throat but that stopped him from hearing his brain say this wasn’t a good idea.

I remember how important it was to him, in high school, before the first time we had sex, that he told me he wanted to marry me. Even if we broke up, he kept saying, I would be the only one he’d ever be with. That turned out not to be true. He’d had one girlfriend between our breakup and this night. He told me about her at dinner, in the spirit of honesty, which was one of the things he’d always been serious about.

One. Besides me, his body count was one. The thought made my stomach tighten.
He leaned forward and reached across the front seats to click off the music. “I know you’ll probably say no,” he said. “But I can’t leave without asking. Move in with me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Why was he doing this? He knew I couldn’t. Why was he asking me to hurt him?

“You’re not thinking,” I said. “You live a thousand miles away. You’re going to med school. Your friends hate me. And what are you gonna tell your parents? You’re back with your ex from high school, and, oh yeah, she’s a whore.”

The word hurt him, I could see it on his face. It reminded him of who I was. But I didn’t say it to remind him. I said it to remind me. No matter what he was thinking now, he didn’t want this, not really. He was still playing the Girlfriend Experience, even though he hadn’t bought it this time. And once he drove home, back to that flat state, back to med school, back to his friends, he would figure that out.

I could see us in a few years, still living together in a little house, him coming home to me every night only ‘cause he’s too loyal to leave. He would tell me stories about his day, about his patients at the hospital. And what would I have to say to him? We would go to parties when his coworker got a promotion or his friend’s wife got pregnant, and James would leave his hand on the small of my back all night. But when we got in the car to drive home, he would drive with both hands on the steering wheel, and we wouldn’t say a word.

So I said no. He asked me two more times that night, and both times, it made my chest hurt. “I can’t,” I kept saying, “I’m sorry.” And it was weird, like I was someone else hearing myself say it.
That feeling didn’t go away, either—the feeling that my brain wasn’t in my body. The next day, I watched myself have sex with my first client, and the one after that, and the one after that. I saw my hands on their shoulders, my mouth on their thighs, my legs around their waists. It’s not such a bad feeling, sleepwalking through every call, but it makes you feel like you’re not real, or like parts of you aren’t real, which can get kinda trippy.

The feeling wasn’t so bad at home, especially on my nights to watch July. It seemed like she was almost big enough to stay home by herself, but Angel musta not thought so. She had to haggle with Miss Crystal not to schedule all three of us—Angel, Betsy, and me—on the same day. One of us needed to stay home.

I never had a little sister or anyone to look after before, and no one to look after me, either, really. When I was July’s age, I was walking home from the bus stop, watching TV, making dinner, and sometimes getting in bed before I ever saw my mom. So I kinda liked being able to do some of that for July. And it wasn’t like it was work to stay home with her. She took care of herself. She sat on the floor, even though we had a couch and a chair, with a book on her knees, reading. It seemed like another book every day. She was always finding new spots to sit, and you would trip over her just trying to walk to the bathroom or put your cup in the sink or whatever. She didn’t say much, though, so it really wasn’t bad.

One year, me, Angel, and Betsy all chipped in to buy July a nice bike for Christmas. The first mild weekend in February—warm enough to be outside, but still cold enough that your breath puffed like cigarette smoke—July took her bike for a ride.
Angel told her to be back by lunchtime, and she pedaled down the dirt road, pink and white streamers flapping from the ends of the handlebars.

July wasn’t back by noon. Then she wasn’t back by one.

When Betsy got home from her shift, around one-thirty, Angel and I were sitting at the table, each with a cold grilled cheese sandwich in front of us. I had taken one bite of mine, and Angel hadn’t touched hers.

“What’sa matter?” Betsy asked.

We told her, and she joined us at the table. Finally, Angel decided to take her car to go look for July. She had a shift starting soon, so she asked me to take it. I went to my room to get dressed, and when I came back out to the living room, Betsy was on the couch with her eyes shut, crossing herself over and over. I knew Betsy had a Bible in her room, but I’d never seen her read it or pray or do anything religious at all.

When she finally opened her eyes, I said, “Angel will find her.”

Betsy nodded. I stepped towards the door, but then I stopped and turned around, still picturing her hand moving from forehead to chest to shoulder to shoulder.

“Do you think God is okay with… all this?” I asked and motioned down at my body and the fishnets and heels showing beneath my winter coat.

Betsy half smiled and said, “Jesus had dinner with prostitutes all the time.”

“Did he?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said. “There are whores all through the Bible. None of ‘em seem too bad. Actually, one of Jesus’ great-great-grandmamas was a whore. Imagine that!”
I nodded and walked to the door. That didn’t seem right, Jesus and prostitutes, but I didn’t wanna argue with Betsy. I’d let her keep on thinking one of our great-great-grandkids could be royalty or something one day.

“Come over and let me know when July gets back, okay?” I said.

Betsy called Miss Crystal’s a half hour later to tell me that Angel and July were home. Angel had found her playing with some kids in a neighborhood almost a mile away.

For a few months, Angel didn’t let July bike out of sight of the trailers. Even after two years, Angel still couldn’t eat whenever July went out to ride.

One night, like a week after James left the second time, I was watching July when someone knocked on the door. That almost never happened, but July knew what to do. She stood, still staring at her book, and walked back to a bedroom, out of sight from the doorway. The only people who ever knocked were men who smelled like beer and were confused about which trailer they’d drove up to. We made July hide when that happened.

But this time, I opened the door to a slap of hot air, and Mitchell. Thinner than the last time I’d seen him, but with the same flop of black hair that looked like someone just set it down on top his head. He grinned.

“Been a while,” he said. He stared at me and my t-shirt and my yoga pants and my bare feet.

“I’m off tonight,” I said. He knew I didn’t make exceptions.
That wasn’t true, though, ‘cause if a guy that paid good for me last time showed up, Miss Crystal would call our house and I’d have to change into something and walk down the dirt road to work, slip into my heels on the porch, and stride in like I was glad to see him. Long as someone else was home to take care of July, of course. Mitchell didn’t pay all that good, though, so Miss Crystal left me alone if he came by on my nights off. No exceptions.

“I just want to talk,” he said.

I ran my tongue over the front of my teeth—clean, smooth, brushed three times since my shift last night. I had one hand still on the inside doorknob, and I thought seriously about swinging it shut. But if I was nasty to one of our regulars and it got back to Miss Crystal, I’d be working the bar for the next two weeks or I’d get all the night shifts with no break. I decided I’d let him talk.

Even though it was almost evening, it was still hot, and our air conditioner was already working too hard, and the flies were getting in, so I told him to come inside, sit down. I didn’t get him a drink. It was still my night off.

He sat on the couch, leaving room for me next to him. I sat in the chair instead. He looked at me for a moment.

“Where are those shorts you like to wear?” he said.

“What did you want to talk about?” I responded.

He smiled like he knew something I didn’t. “I heard James has been around.”

I was silent.

“I know, I know. You can’t talk about other clients.”
It was true. We weren’t supposed to discuss other johns. It was a privacy thing, like we were therapists or something. But in this case, it didn’t matter.

“James isn’t a client,” I snapped.

“In his mind, he’s not,” Mitchell said. “But he paid you, didn’t he? So if he’s not a client, what is he?”

I frowned. I didn’t think there was a word for what he was.

“Come on, honey, I know you’re a talker. You’re much more vocal over there,” he said, thrusting his thumb in the direction of the work trailer. When I stayed silent, he kept talking. “Look, I don’t know what you did, but James is going crazy. Before he left, he told me he’s thinking about waiting on med school.”

“What? He can’t do that. He’s already got in and got scholarships and stuff.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t apply to any schools on the East Coast. And suddenly staying here on the East Coast is all he cares about.”

“I didn’t do that! I didn’t tell him to stay.”

“Well you must’ve done something. James is a stand-up guy. He doesn’t fall in love with sluts for no reasons.”

It felt so wrong to hear him call me that, here, in the living room, looking me in the eyes. Him sitting on my couch, me in my t-shirt, July maybe hearing through the cardboard-thin walls. The blue shutters were supposed to keep that stuff out.

It’s not like I never heard it—I got called a slut almost every night at work. Some guys were really into it, and you had to do gross shit, stuff they’d seen in porn. With others, you just had to apologize a lot.

“I think you should go,” I said.
Mitchell nodded. “Just stay away from James, alright? If you get lonely, you can always call me.”

He stood and crossed behind my chair towards the door. He stopped for a moment behind me, twisted a chunk of my hair around his finger, and tugged a little. He did it lightly, not to hurt me. Like when little boys pull pigtails, and everyone says it’s ‘cause they like the girl.

“You don’t deserve him, Reds,” he said. I shivered. That name didn’t belong in this trailer, either.

Mitchell left, and I kept hearing his words. I’d heard it in high school a lot, that I didn’t deserve James. I remember this one time, at homecoming in tenth grade. I know it happened way more times than just that dance, but that night I heard it the most, or maybe not the most but the worst. Either way, it’s the one I remember.

A line of girls stood in the school bathroom in front of the mirrors and tugged at their dresses and fluffed their hair and layered on more lip gloss. A couple of them wore their dates’ ties—which only almost matched the colors of their dresses—loosely around their necks, like some sort of weird mating ritual.

I had started getting ready for the dance hours before it started, so I wasn’t about to turn my look tacky with a tie. I found a dress cheap and saved up to get my nails done—it was the first time I’d ever had fake nails. They were bright blue acrylics from an Asian spa in the mall. I picked the color ‘cause it matched my dress. There was a different dress I liked better, but people always say redheads look good in blue.

At home, I used my mom’s straightener to force my waves to lay down flat, hoping that the moist gym wouldn’t cause them to fight back halfway through the night. I
grabbed the hair that fell beside my face and bobby pinned it to the side of my head, then repeated on the other side. The two remaining lightbulbs in the fixture above the mirror made my hair glint, but not too bright like camera flashes did. More like sunshine. It was my favorite thing about myself.

When I was done with my hair, I finished up with too much makeup, then sprayed on perfume and sat on the couch for an hour and a half until James came to pick me up.

He drove me to his house where Mitchell and his date were waiting. James’s mom and her camera posed the four of us under trees, and on the porch, and in the living room by their stone fireplace—a real one that burned actual wood in the winter.

After his mom was done with pictures, James—the only one of us with a license—drove us to school. I sat in the passenger seat, and Mitchell sat in the back with Sonny, who had made it very clear that she was going as his date, not as his girlfriend, which Mitchell understood to mean he wouldn’t be getting laid.

Sonny was a blondish music department kid who talked too quiet and stared at other people too much. At the dance, she stared over Mitchell’s shoulder at me and James and didn’t look away like she should when I made eye contact. In the bathroom, we stood next to each other as we adjusted our dresses in the mirrors. She had taken off her heels at the door and pushed them in a corner like most of the other girls. I kept mine on, so I had several inches on her.

“James seems really nice,” Sonny said to me.

I said, “Thanks, he is,” and waited for the usual You guys look cute together—the typical school dance compliment.
But she just kinda nodded for too long and then said, “You probably don’t deserve a guy like that,” and walked out of the bathroom with the sticky sound of bare feet on tile.

It was so weird that I didn’t say anything. Couldn’t say anything. The girl that had been on the other side of Sonny looked at me with raised eyebrows, but she didn’t say anything either.

I didn’t mention the situation to James, but I also didn’t speak to Sonny the rest of the night, even during the car ride over to Mitchell’s house for the afterparty. Once we got there, there were some other cars in the driveway and a few kids in the basement already. Mitchell’s parents had probably showed them in.

Mitchell’s parents were the “we know you’re going to drink, so we’d rather have you do it under our roof” type. So they stayed upstairs, probably laying in bed on the second floor watching HGTV, and we partied in the basement drinking out of solo cups and blasting the real versions of the songs we’d heard clean at the dance.

I didn’t usually party, so I wasn’t used to all the drinks and the bass pounding in my chest and lumping my throat. Even though I knew James was having a good time with Mitchell and the other guys, I asked him if he could take me home early. He agreed ‘cause I asked him to, but I could tell he was upset since he barely talked to me on the ride home.

When I got back to my house, my mom wasn’t there. James offered to stay with me to make sure I was okay, but I told him to go back to the party. After he left, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and the cluttered sink. I filled the empty water cup,
swallowed it all fast, and returned the cup to its spot. I pulled my bobby pins out and stared at the dents they’d made in the hair above my ears.

My hair has started to grow a little blonde since then as I’ve grown up, though it’s clearly still red. When I was younger and it was fiery, my mom would pet it and—if she’d had something to drink—cry a little ‘cause hers had turned from red to gold to gray.

Three weeks from the day Mitchell came over, I had a job in the city. It wasn’t hard to find work. The city houses were looking for girls with experience ‘cause they already had too many runaway 18-year-olds who thought they were rebels. Which was really good for business at first until the men started figuring out that that these girls’ only experience was when they were drunk at high school parties. Then the super young ones stopped selling.

I found a big house—which wasn’t actually a house, obviously, ‘cause it was the city. It was more like a slice of a bigger building. Our slice had three stories, and the rooms belonged to us girls. You paid Miss Charli rent, and you got a room in the house that was all yours, for sleeping and for working. There was a little shared kitchen, too, where you could make coffee and keep snacks. You just stuck a post-it on your box of crackers or whatever, and the other girls mostly stayed away.

I was new, so Miss Charli had me at the bar along with whichever other girl was on rotation there that night. I wore the nicest dress I had—tight, green silk—and used my big barrel curling iron on my hair, but as I stared at the three girls in the windows and the handful in the lineup and at the tables with men, I realized I had some work to do. Even my nicest dress barely stood out there. Most of my other work clothes—the few
slips and teddies and dresses that I had taken from my closet at Miss Crystal’s and slipped into my bag, a few per night, the week I decided to leave—they were too plain or too ratty. Not enough padding or not enough lace. I suddenly noticed every small rip or loose thread. Once I started making tips and passing quota, I would have to practically recreate my entire wardrobe.

My first night, I worked the bar with Cookie, who said she didn’t mind it back there ‘cause some men would tip you good just to keep pouring and talk with them from behind the bar. Cookie was a real tall black girl who smiled a lot, but it didn’t look fake. She told me she was an actress before, or was trying to be, and that being a prostitute was the hardest acting gig she’d had yet.

When there was no one at the bar, we leaned against the shelves and talked. It was nice to have someone who was closer to my age than the girls I’d lived with before, and someone who had something more to reach for.

I asked Cookie about the other girls a lot. She told me their work names, and their real names if she knew them, which wasn’t often. From the bar, I could only see the backs of the girls in the windows. There was one girl in the right window and two in the left. The two sharing a window both had brown waves and matching strappy, red outfits. They twirled each other’s hair and wiggled their fingers at the men in the street. When a man in a suit walked in and asked for them—which didn’t take long—they stepped their pointy heels down from the window and each wrapped themselves around one of the man’s arms. When they turned around and walked past us toward their room, I saw that their faces matched, just like their outfits.

I looked at Cookie. “They’re twins?” I asked.
“Oh, yeah,” Cookie said.

“And they go up there… together?”

She laughed without smiling. “All the big houses have a set now. I even heard of one that has triplets, but I won’t believe that till I see it.”

I couldn’t figure out what to say.

Cookie sighed. “You do what you gotta do to keep up. If you don’t, one of the other houses will. You know that price match thing that Walmart does? It’s like that. And if you don’t keep up, you’ll hear about it from Miss Charli. Or else you’ll get it from them guys.” She pointed with her chin at one of the two blocky security guards near the front of the house.

In the left window, another girl had already taken the twins’ spot. And when she got picked, another stepped up. They kept doing this, one after the other, in an order I hadn’t figured out but they knew without thinking.

Around one in the morning, a younger girl came downstairs from her room to start her shift. It looked like she’d forgot to put makeup on, but she stepped into the lineup anyway. She had brown pigtails and a white button-up with no bra.

Shocked, I turned to Cookie. “How old is she?”

Cookie shrugged. “She’s been doing this way longer than I have, so she’s gotta be at least 22, 23? She’s way good with her makeup. Goes by Mary, not sure her real name. She does the schoolgirl thing, obviously.”

As Mary stood in the lineup, some men ignored her entirely, wouldn’t even look at her. I thought her blank face and tiny figure musta reminded them of their daughters or
granddaughters or nieces. But even though we might not look like it, a lotta the rest of us were young enough to be their daughters, too.

Regardless of the men who were creeped out, Mary got picked quick that night and most of the nights after.

My first client in the house picked me the next afternoon when I was working the bar, which made the girls in the lineup mad. They pushed out their fake, plumped lips at me as I led him by his hand to the staircase. He was older and bald and smelled nice.

“Whatcha want, baby?” I asked after I had shut my door behind us.

He told me a half-and-half and then tried to haggle on price. I pointed at the menu on the counter by the door and told him the prices were set and he knew it. That’s what was good about those big houses. No fighting with the men over prices and you could turn the drunks away if you wanted.

We could pick our own working names, too. They’d even put them on our permit cards. In the city, everyone’s all official about everything. Customers are allowed to ask to see our cards, make sure we’re up to date on our testing and all. That’s why we put our working names on there, so the men wouldn’t see our real ones.

I didn’t bother picking a new name when I came to the city. I couldn’t think of one I hadn’t already heard, and they were all just gonna call me Reds anyway. After a year or two of working, I’d heard enough carpet-and-drapes jokes to wanna poke the eyes out of the next man that asked.

A couple nights in was the first time a client expected me to kiss him. Back in the trailer, I’d been pinned against a wall or had my hair grabbed or had my head pushed
down a lotta times. I’d had a few men push their mouths onto mine, but it was never part of the agreement beforehand, and no one’s ever expected me to like it.

But this guy—young and skinny and bluetooth-important—he started off by talking, and after I laughed at a few bad jokes, he leaned in to kiss me, like we were on a date. When I jerked away, he started talking lower and calling me things like “baby.” He put his hand behind my neck and leaned in again. I couldn’t push back against his hand, but I kept my mouth closed. Then he got serious.

“You don’t want me to go downstairs about this, do you?” he said, still in a low voice.

I shook my head and forced myself to smile.

Twenty-five minutes and seven kisses later, he left. I didn’t throw up. I had a strong stomach. But it was the closest I’d been in a long time. For hours—even after I gave three more blowjobs and had one man stick a finger into my mouth, even after I brushed my teeth and crawled into bed—I still tasted the skinny guy’s tongue in my mouth.

After a few weeks, Miss Charli had me as a regular in the lineup. She even tried me in the windows a few times, but I didn’t do so good there. The light was pinkish, and Cookie said it washed out my hair, which was my seller. Plus, no one outsold the twins in the windows.

In the lineup, you could either stand on the platforms in the back of the room or sit at the lounge tables with the men. Which one you chose depended on which kind of tired you were—tired of standing in heels with sore calves or tired of trying to make cutesy conversation with tipsy, groping men.
One night, Cookie and I were both in the lineup, which almost never happened. We were both standing on the platforms, shifting our weight from one leg to the other, when a man with curly gray hair walked in. I’d seen him a couple times before, always with Cookie. He got a yellowish drink from the bar and sat at the padded, round booth in the corner. Cookie stepped down off the platform and joined him in the booth. She did her thing, touching his arm and flipping her hair, but after a minute he noticed me in the lineup and wouldn’t stop looking.

After a while, he got up, grabbed another drink, and walked over to me. He said he hadn’t been with a ginger in a while and then said, “Let’s go upstairs.”

Cookie sat at their booth and stared at me with her arms crossed.

It was sometime around then, I think later that month, that one of the twins got sick. She kept talking about her head pounding, and I could hear her puking at night in the bathroom across the hall. It only took a couple days before Miss Charli made her leave. One of the guards escorted her to the hospital. She kept crying and insisting it was just the flu, she was fine, she was fine.

She didn’t come back. The other twin kept working, but Miss Charli had her behind the bar. I couldn’t tell if it was a punishment for no longer being part of a pair, or a temporary act of mercy.

I couldn’t ask Cookie to help figure it out. The last time I asked her a question, she said, “Looks like you got everything figured out real good,” and started stuffing a towel into glasses that were already dry.

The next morning, I went downstairs to the little kitchen to eat the last one of my granola bars. I sat at the table, in the corner by the back stairs, and noticed there was
an envelope in the wire mail tray. No one barely ever got mail there, so I glanced at it and noticed my own handwriting.

I had addressed the envelope to my mom at her apartment, but now there was a yellow *Return to Sender* sticker attached crooked. I’d been sending her envelopes for years, and I never got one returned. I stared at it for a moment, then tore the flap, pulled out the clump of money inside, and counted it. It was all still there.

Tucking the money back into the envelope, I grabbed the phone from the wall and dialed my mom’s number. It was the number of the flip phone I’d bought her and forced her to learn how to use before she moved. I wondered if she’d changed her number without telling me, like she’d apparently changed her address.

The phone rang and rang. Then, “Hello?”

“Mom, it’s me. Is everything—”

“Honey!” she said. “I haven’t heard from you in so long! How are you?”

“I’m… good,” I answered.

“Guess what. You’ll just think this great! Guess what I finally bought the other day.”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“The shoe hanger thing!” She laughed. “But it wouldn’t fit over the damn door!”

For my 14th, 15th, and 16th birthdays, I asked my mom for a shoe organizer to hang in the downstairs closet so her shoes wouldn’t keep piling up inside. We coulda hung it over the back of the closet door and freed up space in the closet for the vacuum, which usually lived somewhere in the hallway. Every year she laughed at me and told me to ask for new clothes or concert tickets or something normal
She never got me the shoe organizer, and I knew if I bought it for her instead, she would get offended and never use it. So I stopped asking.

I waited until she was done laughing, shifting the phone from one ear to the other. “Mom,” I said, “did you move?”

She grew silent quick.

“Mom.”

“Yeah,” she said finally. “You know how it goes.”

I did know. Eviction is how it goes.

“What did you do with the money I sent last month?” I asked.

“Bills, babe.”

“Well why didn’t you give me your new address? The money for this month just got sent back to me.”

“Still making good tips, huh?” she said.

I paused. “Yeah. Pretty good.”

“Seems like a lotta money for a waitress at a dump diner.”

This time, I was the silent one.

“I stopped by the diner last week,” she said. “I wanted to see you. They said you haven’t worked there in years.”

“Yeah, I—”

“Years!” she shouted. “But I figured it out. It’s still a small town, ya know.”

“I wanted to tell you,” I said weakly.

“Why the hell would you tell me? You think I like finding out that my daughter’s a whore?”
“Mom.”

"Don’t send me any more of your dirty money. Fucking disgrace."

She hung up the phone.

I shoulda known. She sounded too happy to hear from me at the beginning. I stared at the phone in my hand until I heard another girl coming down the stairs. I stood, hung up the phone, and stuck what was left of my granola bar back in the cabinet.

After my mom moved years ago, we didn’t talk much. But when we did, I always needed to tell Betsy about it, or even Angel. Whoever would listen and commiserate and not give too much advice. Now, I wanted to talk to Cookie, but she hadn’t barely said anything to me since December when I took her regular. Some of the other girls would talk to me, but none of the rest of them were real with me. That night, after the phone call, I decided I would try to start a conversation with her when we were both working.

I came downstairs for my shift and saw Cookie leaning against the bar shelves wearing a green, silk dress. She was tall enough that the dress only barely covered her crotch, and she had to keep tugging at it so her thong wouldn’t show. I kept staring at her, but she wouldn’t make eye contact.

I didn’t understand what she was doing. I woulda let her wear the dress if she would’ve asked. And who steals something and then wears it right in front of you? At least when Angel wanted to wear a pair of my heels back at the trailer, she would ask to borrow them, even if I never got them back. There was one pair I really liked—a classy pair, not even stripper heels—that Angel borrowed one night a few years ago and never returned. I was ready to confront her about it, but then I saw July wearing them one day when I was home with her, wobbling from the bathroom to the bedroom she shared with
Angel. I cringed, wondering what kind of twisted dress-up world she’d created, a little
girl living in a trailer with three prostitutes. And then I heard her through the thin
bedroom door teaching her teddy bear about nouns and verbs. I never mentioned the
heels.

Two mornings after Cookie stole my dress, I packed the rest of my clothes in my
car and left the city.

I parked my car in front of the double-wide with the blue shutters. Betsy and
Angel’s cars weren’t there, and the lights were off inside. It was already getting dark out.
July should be home from school, someone should be there.

I pulled out of the driveway and drove down the road to Miss Crystal’s. There
were no cars there, either. No tires spitting gravel. No men stumbling in or out. No fake
giggles from inside. No door slamming shut to keep out the cold. Just a big, silent, gray
rectangle.

Shivering, I climbed the two steps onto the porch. The sign with the silhouettes
was gone. I wished it was still there, even if none of the girls were. I woulda taken it,
shoved it in the back seat of my car, just to have something. But there was nothing, not
even the white curtains in the windows, not even Miss Crystal’s big green parlor chair. I
tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I have no idea what I woulda done if I got in.
Instead, I sat down on the porch and I cried.

For a while, I lived off the money I made in the city. Then I got my old job back at
the diner, no problem. And now James is back in town.
Betsy told me one time that if I couldn’t make a decision, I should just flip a coin. It wouldn’t matter what the coin said ‘cause when it was in the air, that’s when I would know what I really wanted.

When I saw James on the other side of the diner, the coin was in the air, and I knew what I wanted. But then I saw the girl, and the air turned to syrup, and I hid. ‘Cause if he sees me, I won’t even have to say anything. He’ll see me working here and know that I’m done with everything else.

And that girl, I’ve never seen her around here, probably someone he met at school. And now he’s bringing her home to meet his parents. It’ll be a much easier introduction than mine woulda been.
Reflection

When I started planning this project a year ago, it was not going to be about prostitution. I originally wanted to write a series of short stories on a dystopian world with legalized sexual slavery. I conceived the idea during my sophomore year in my African American Theology course. I did not understand how Christians—as many slaveholders were—could enslave other human beings and reconcile their actions with their faith. I began to wonder what other atrocities could be committed and subsequently justified with faith, science, economics, or anything else. It was then that I remembered the paper about sex trafficking that I wrote for my first year CCC course. These two elements—slavery and sex trafficking—fused, and suddenly I had my idea.

Though I am horrified by the realities of slavery, I am fascinated by the determined faith of so many enslaved individuals. That they could trust God despite their circumstances and despite their masters' misuse of the Bible against them is incredible. For that reason, I also hoped to integrate an aspect of religious justification into my stories. Then, I recalled the book *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I read in high school. Though the wildly popular television series had not yet been released—and, therefore, the story was not yet widely visible in popular culture—I was still concerned I would be accused of stealing an idea that I had worked hard to develop.

By writing my literacy narrative in my Composition Theory course, I worked through these fears. Ultimately, though, they were irrelevant because my project evolved into something much different than my original plans. By September, I was still planning to write three to five dystopian short stories about legalized sex slavery. In fact, when I registered to write my honors project, the official title on my transcript was
“Modern Slave Narratives.” That semester, I took Slavery and Abolitionist Literature, which I expected would provide inspiration as I wrote these modern slave narratives. But after beginning my research, I realized that I might need to move in another direction.

As I read Frederick Douglass’s and Harriet Jacobs’ slave narratives for my Literature course, I was also reading *The State of Sex*, a book containing research of the legal sex industry in Nevada. I expected the book to condemn legal prostitution as dangerous and immoral, but it did almost the opposite. The book supports the women’s “choices” to enter prostitution and does not address those who were forced or coerced into the industry.

As I did more research, I realized I didn’t need to go to dystopia to find individuals who desire legalized prostitution—those people exist, and they are not just society’s outliers. The well known human rights organization Amnesty International has an official policy on sex work which states that both selling and buying sex should be decriminalized. I had conversations with some of the most intelligent people I know, and they felt the same way—or they at least had no opinion on the matter. This is when my project began to lean very heavily on reality.

I continued my research by reading novels such as Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* series and Francine River’s *Redeeming Love*, both of which, though in very different styles, contain stories of women in prostitution. I then interviewed Messiah alum and anti-trafficking activist Emily La Bianca, and she recommended that I watch a documentary called *Nefarious* and listen to the *Exodus Cry Podcast*, both released by the anti-trafficking organization Exodus Cry. These have been my two most helpful
resources by far. They have been vital in helping me more deeply understand the issues of human trafficking and prostitution and the undeniable relationship between the two.

There are two general schools of thought about women in prostitution. The first is that women choose to enter prostitution, so they deserve whatever they experience, even if that includes abuse or rape. Many even believe that a woman who makes money by performing sexual acts cannot, by definition, be raped. The other side believes that women choose to enter this industry because they want to be sexually autonomous, so we should empower them by legalizing prostitution. After months of research, I discovered that I fundamentally disagree with both sides.

This story, therefore, is written for both sides. Through characters like Reds and Betsy, I want to humanize prostituted women for those who cannot see past the short skirts and high heels and thick lipstick. But I also endeavor to show the lack of autonomy that truly exists in prostitution and the physical and psychological pain that it can cause.

Halfway through the fall semester, I began to work on my stories by writing short sketches. My first sketch began as a single line of dialogue that came to me at random one night. It was Betsy’s voice, in a conversation with Reds and Angel, told from the perspective of Angel’s daughter, July. Over the next few months, I wrote more sketches from different points of view: Angel as a high schooler, a john whose girlfriend recently had a miscarriage, a conservative family watching the news of prostitution’s decriminalization. Contrary to my typical writing process, I alternated between these
sketches, trying to flesh them each out a bit at a time to see which characters spoke to me the most.

As I continued to both research and write sketches, Professor Perrin suggested that I try to write this project as nonfiction because of the depth of my research and my strong reaction to it. I considered this option but decided that fiction was the best way to tell these stories. Prostitution and sexual exploitation have been studied and researched and reported on, but I wanted to reveal something beyond the statistics. Novelist Arundhati Roy says, “Fiction is truth. You turn to fiction when you can’t express reality with footnotes and evidence and reportage.” I never wavered from fiction, but nevertheless, my professor’s comments caused me to think about the ways my research might have been prohibiting my writing.

I discovered that I have distinct zones. I have a planning zone, I have a research zone, and I have a writing zone. Each demands a particular amount of time, and I don’t do well trying to force one to begin before it’s ready. But before this project, I’d never written a piece of fiction that required months of preliminary research, which means I have never been so deep in my research zone. I had to learn how to crawl out of my research and begin constructing stories.

When I transitioned to the writing phase of the project, my research slowed but did not cease. I still regularly listen to Exodus Cry’s podcast, for example, and just recently began investigating Amnesty International. Research is necessary, of course, because I am writing outside my field of expertise. I have never personally been involved in prostitution, nor has anyone I’m close with. Previous writing instructors and handbooks have advised me to write what I know, but I was far from knowledgeable
about this topic. In *On Writing*, Stephen King says, “When you step away from the ‘write what you know’ rule, research becomes inevitable, and it can add a lot to your story. Just don’t end up with the tail wagging the dog.”

I internalized King’s quote and considered it often during my writing process. I, the writer, was the dog, and I could control which direction my research, the tail, wagged. This was easier said than done. Because I was learning so much, I had to be careful that my fiction did not turn into a thinly veiled research paper, but in the end I believe I was successful. Instead of simply integrating new facts and theories into my stories as I learned them, I used all my research as a backdrop of knowledge, trusting that the things I learned would weave themselves into my story without me forcing them there. For this reason, I feel confident that allotting significant time for research before I ever started writing was the right decision for me and my process.

Eventually, I narrowed down my sketches to three: Reds, July, and a man named Charlie. These were the stories that took shape most clearly in my mind. But as I continued writing, I spent more and more time developing Reds’ story and less on the other two.

I focused the story primarily on the relationship between Reds and James. I knew there would be a scene or two of Reds working in the city brothel, but I put off writing those. Once I approached 20 pages of story, I began to get nervous. I had an ending I liked, but there were holes—like the city—that I needed to fill, and I already felt that the story was too long. I knew Reds had more to say, but I was afraid my readers would get bored if I wrote any more. But the more I got to know Reds, the more I wanted to spend
time with her, so I decided to focus on her for the remainder of the project. Then, however, I had to address my fear of reader boredom.

As a reader and a writer, I love a strong plot. A story always intrigues me at first with its good storyline and its twists and turns. But what Reds’ story demanded was not more plot intricacies but rather more character development. The audience needed a reason, besides simple pity, to cheer for Reds. They needed to like her. The relationship between Reds, Angel, and Betsy needed to be stronger, too. I discovered that my focus on plot had caused me to shy away from character development, afraid it would bore my readers.

Once I realized this, I began to combat it. I started working to evolve Reds into a character that was both plausible and compelling. I studied her until I uncovered her most admirable trait: generosity. Then, I wrote and rewrote scenes in ways that would allow her generosity to shine. This was an important part of the process because the goal of the entire project was to humanize the very real people who are affected by prostitution and sexual exploitation. My research taught me about the issue, but it wasn’t until I wrote Reds that I learned about the people.

When it came time to name my project, I became nervous; I hate titling my stories, and I don’t think I’ve ever been good at it. Sometimes, my titles emphasize minor aspects of my stories simply because the name is catchy.

I came across the line “Till Human Voices Wake Us” while reading an article completely unrelated to my project. I recalled the line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a T. S. Elliot poem I had read in high school. I immediately realized that it would be my title because it perfectly describes why I wanted to write this project—both
why this topic intrigued me and why it had to be fiction. I hoped to wake my readers to the realities of sexual exploitation and to the very real trials, both external and internal, that prostituted women experience. And that's something only human voices can do.
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