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The Fourth Shed

In Fiction

THE EVER-PRESENT TEMPTATION to water down the Jim Beam flitted through Miri's mind as she turned the emptying bottle bottom-up. The sloped interior of the shot glass stared up at her, only half-brown.

"Hold on, sweetie," said Miri. Her eyes did not roll but her voice did. Hers was a medium-low voice sanded down by Marlboro 27s and time. Her customer, a bearded man in denim, looked as if he had been sanded down by something worse. But he said, "No problem," and waited patiently as Miri groped beneath the bar for the next fifth of whiskey. She topped him off.

"And the Anchor," she added, producing an amber bottle of steam beer. No mathematician was she, but columns and figures scrolled themselves past her mind as the opener ripped off the bottle cap. An ounce and a half of water could mean an ounce and a half extra of whiskey per fifth, which would mean the last shot, undetectably weakened, would be free for the bar but not for the customer.

And a free shot per bottle, at a bottle per day, at six dollars a shot, times 30 days per month...

"Ten dollars, my dear," said Miri to the biker drinking her Jim Beam and Anchor Steam shot-and-beer special. She snapped herself out of her math haze. Nothing was ever free, really – not free and clear. Best not to let yourself think that way.

The biker put eighty in cash on the table. Miri made it seventy, rang the register bell, and went down the bar to check on the other customers.

Sunlight always enters rooms at an angle, so despite the wide window in the front of the bar, the sun did not penetrate far. The paint on the floor was scuffed enough to hide the fact that it had been recently swept and mopped. The barstools and chairs leaned, and their occupants leaned the other way, acting as counterweights. A television that had never known Netflix played back a VHS copy of *Repo Man* from a perch above the dusty bottle-lined shelves. An old marquee displayed the tap list and the shot-and-beer specials. This, in other words, was a dive bar, and it was Miri's, and she loved it, even as it guzzled money faster than its regulars guzzled booze.

It was all regulars in the bar on this Tuesday afternoon. The biker drinking Beam; the man from the tech company playing hooky; the ladies from the coffee shop celebrating a 3pm closing time; the brewery workers in white coveralls clustered around their table. Miri knew them all, just as she knew that the new girl, Leah, was entering from the back room. Leah was taller and younger than Miri. She didn't yet know how to carry herself as if she had rolled up to work on a classic motorcycle, which was what she had done. And she was still learning about timecards.

"The Lagunitas kicked, baby," Miri called over her shoulder.

"Oh!" said Leah. "Okay."

"Are you strong enough to –"

"Carry the keg? Yeah, I can do it."

"Thanks, honey." Miri turned to the tech bro as Leah scurried behind her. "You doin' alright, bud?"

"Fine," he said. He raised his pint glass in greeting.

"Okay," said Miri. Her attention was drawn to the door, which had

opened. In came someone Miri did not know.

For various reasons Miri felt confident in her ability to identify drug dealers, sex workers, and undercover cops at a glance, and this woman was no cop. She wore gray sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt and hoop earrings, and she stood in the front half of the bar, as if adjusting to the lack of light, door swinging closed behind her. Miri waited for the woman to approach but something held her, Miri, back from greeting her. As the woman did not approach, Miri picked up a damp rag and started wiping down the bar. Let the kid deal with her.

"Keg's tapped," said Leah from behind Miri.

"Pouring okay?" asked Miri without turning.

Miri heard the clink of a pint glass. "Yeah," said Leah.

"Good. Thank you, sweetheart." The woman in leisurewear moved in Miri's peripheral vision. Miri rotated to Leah and nodded in the unknown woman's direction. You serve her, was the implication.

"How's business?" asked the tech bro.

Miri stopped wiping and searched her memory for his name. It wouldn't come. "About as good as always," she said. She smiled, revealing crooked teeth and a few glints of gold. "How about for you?"

"Moving along, moving along," said the man. He tilted his glass and made beer disappear. "I oughta be getting back soon."

"Things to do, people to see?"

"You know it."

"One more for the road?"

"Oh, sure."

Delicate fingers tapped Miri's shoulder. Leah said, "She wants to talk to you."

"One second," said Miri to the tech bro. *Thomas*. That was his name. She looked at Leah. "What's up?"

Leah leaned closer. "She asked to talk to you. She didn't want anything to drink."

Miri's eyes drifted to the woman in gray sweats; she was lounging with one elbow on the bar and her hand on her chin, and was staring at a point somewhere far beyond the building's outer walls. "You mean she asked to talk to someone besides you," her low voice went lower, "or she asked to talk to me, like, *specifically*?"

"Uh, to you."

"Does she know me?"

"I dunno. She asked for the owner. She knew your name."

Miri shrugged. "Okay, okay." She patted Leah on the shoulder. "Get Thomas a beer, will you?"

Hands on the bar she faced the stranger, who tilted her eyes up – deep, half-asleep eyes framed by shallow wrinkles. The woman wore too much eyeliner in too dark a color, matched by long fake eyelashes. Miri felt as if, by standing in front of this person, she was opening a long-neglected door.

"Miriam Walters?" The woman's voice was much softer than her appearance.

"Yes, but no one calls me *that*," said Miri quickly. "I'm Miri. Who are you?"

The woman blinked heavily. "I knew your dad," she said.

Miri stared into the strange pupils. "I didn't." She said it quietly, but with all the force that time and cigarettes could give her.

"I knew –"

"Can I get you something to drink?"

The dark-eyed woman tilted her head. "No."

"Then you gotta leave."

"I don't want to."

"Paco," said Miri, and the biker finishing the shot-and-beer special four stools down shifted in his seat. But he didn't have to stand. The woman appeared to receive the message. She turned away, breaking eye contact with Miri at the last possible moment, and slumped outside.

"Here, Paco," said Miri, automatically and blindly reaching for the Jim Beam. Her hand was stopped however by Leah's midsection. Miri's eyes rotated sideways.

"Sorry! I wasn't trying to overhear," exclaimed Leah.

"It's a small bar," said Miri. "I'm sure everybody heard." She clapped Leah on the shoulder. "Refill for Paco. On me." In her mind she lamented the free drinks. But it was cheaper to keep the bikers happy than it was to hire security.

"Sure, what's he drinking?"

"His usual."

"What's his usual?"

"Go find out."

The sun's angle grew shallower until it disappeared. The customers filtered in and out, drinking Lagunitas, Anchor Steam, Fernet Branca, and Miri's honest Jim Beam. Eventually Leah was joined behind the bar by Sunny – a goth with sleeve tattoos, face piercings, and a cloudy disposition – and Miri could become a customer herself. After a smoke break, her first in many hours, she relaxed with a fernet in one hand, her phone in the other, her forearms on the bar, and a cold High Life awaiting her on a cardboard coaster.

Leah was doing okay; she'd only broken two glasses and forgotten three orders. The boxy TV up high played *The Lost Boys* and a small flatscreen at the other end of the bar carried the San Francisco Giants game. (Outside, on the right street corners, one could hear the roar of the crowd at that same Giants game.) Then a lull came, one of those lulls that hit even the most successful bars on cool summer evenings, and there were no customers anymore, and Sunny went to go smoke and hopefully not do anything worse, and Leah busied herself with loading the dishwasher, and Miri stared at Leah until their eyes met and said, "Okay, so ask me."

"Ask you what?" Leah deposited a pint glass in the still-steaming appliance.

"'What the fuck was that today with that woman?'"

"You're the boss. What the fuck was that today with that woman?"

"The answer is, I got no fuckin' idea." Miri went back to her phone.

"Well, that's disappointing." Leah stopped pretending to clean and stepped closer. "What'd you want me to ask you for?"

"Just thinking out loud."

Leah tapped her hands on the bar. "So you...never knew your dad?"

Miri looked up. "Nope."

"I'm sorry."

"Well," Miri sighed, "not never. He was around until I was about 5 or 6. I remember him. Then – gone." Miri raised her glass of amaro as she pronounced the last word, then drained the glass.

"That's shitty."

"Know what's even shittier?" Miri raised her eyebrows at her young employee. "I thought he died. I thought he was dead. My whole life, I thought he was dead."

"He's alive?"

"No, he's dead now." At the sound of the front door opening both bartenders turned, but it was only Sunny, her black bangs swaying a little in the wind as the door shut. "But it happened recently. About three years ago. When I was a kid somebody told me he was 'gone,' and at some point I confused that with 'dead.' And nobody ever corrected me."

"You telling her the story?" Sunny's voice, husky with departed smoke, sounded from her place at Miri's elbow.

"What story?" Leah's eyes moved back and forth between the two women.

"There ain't no story," said Miri.

"There is a story," said Sunny.

"It's nothing."

Sunny turned to Leah. "She found out that her dad –"

"If you're gonna tell it all wrong, then I'll tell it," said Miri loudly. She took a swift swig of her beer.

"Pay attention to when the story gets vague," said Sunny.

Miri withered Sunny with a brief stare, then continued. "Real quick, here's what happened. It was a little after Covid had started. I was stuck at home with no job, like we all were, in my little apartment next to the Presidio. I got a call one day from this, uh, lawyer. He said I was the *executor*, and the *sole beneficiary*, of the estate of – he said my dad's name. I hadn't heard my dad's name in about 30 years. I didn't know what he was talking about. 'My dad died years ago,' I told him. 'You got the wrong person.'

"But he didn't have the wrong person. It just turned out that my dad hadn't been dead and hadn't even been that far away. This whole time, the last 30 years, he'd been living about 35 miles away from me, in Concord. You know where Concord is?"

"I grew up in Concord," said Leah, eyes wet.

"Oh really? So you know. Not that far, is it?"

"No."

"As long as there's no traffic, anyway." Miri sipped her beer. "Well, it is what it is."

"I'm so sorry," said Leah.

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart. It was a surprise, that's all. Well, I was a little shocked to find out there was any kind of estate. But the estate turned out to be a house in the cuts, off of Grant Street (you know it, Leah?), plus there was about four grand in a retirement account and about five

grand of debt. So really, just the house. And what a house. Paint peeling, hella weeds everywhere, half the lights don't work, broken windows. And not just that. My dad, I guess, became some kind of a hoarder as he got older. Every inch of that damn house was stuffed with useless junk. And it wasn't just the house. It was the garage, the front porch, the backyard too. There were three or four sheds in the backyard filled with more of his crap."

"Was it three sheds or four?" asked Sunny.

"Four," said Miri, "not that it matters."

"Sure."

"Well, I sure as hell wasn't gonna live there. All I could do was sell the house. But either way I needed to clear out all the garbage. And this was Covid times, I mean like April or May 2020, and there wasn't anybody available to help me. Not even anyone to hire. I tried hiring movers, junk haulers, all that. All I could get was a big dumpster out front. So I pretty much made clearing out and fixing up this junky house my full-time job. At least I didn't have a real job to interfere with the process.

"It took me two months. Two fucking months, driving back and forth every day from the City, and when I was almost done fixing up the main house so that the damn *toilets* at least worked, I realized I'd forgotten about the stupid sheds. Jesus Christ. One shed after another full of mildewed newspapers, rotting chairs, gallons of paint, soda cans that he never recycled (covered in ants), rusting birdcages, dry-rotted scrap wood – goddamn. Every time I opened up the next shed I'd be hoping it would get easier and it never did. By the time I got to the last shed I was damn near ready to give up and die, or let the bank foreclose."

Miri finished the High Life and let the empty bottle rattle on the bar top.

"And...then?" asked Leah.

"And then I finally finished," said Miri. "And I sold the house, thank God. For a decent price. But when he put me in his will, my dad wasn't doing me a favor. He was putting a curse on me. It was two months of hell that I'm never going through again. Next time a distant relative dies I'll just let the bank take it."

Beneath dark eyeshadow, Sunny's eyes were signifying something to Leah, but she wasn't picking it up. Leah settled for asking, "That's it? That's the whole story?"

"I didn't say it was a good story or even an interesting story. I don't know why the fuck Sunny wanted me to tell it."

"Because I'm still waiting to hear what was in that fourth shed," said Sunny.

Leah was nonplussed. "She said, didn't she? Old newspapers and shit."

"Sunny, I love you," said Miri, "but I don't know why you read into things the way you do."

Sunny left Miri's side and went back around the end of the bar. Her steps were soft but nonetheless managed to communicate a combination of reluctance and fierceness. "You told it different the first time," was all she said.

Three broad-shouldered men traipsed through the bar's door. Sensing tips, Sunny floated to the end of the bar closest to them, leaving Leah with

Miri and a half-filled dishwasher. "Miri, what's she talking about?" Leah asked.

Miri shook her head. "Hell if I know."

"Did you find something...weird? Or...valuable? In your dad's house?"

"No." Miri watched Sunny out of the side of her eye. "Go serve the customers," she said, not looking at Leah. She smirked as she said it, and Leah obeyed.

Miri had, however, left out quite a bit of the story.

For instance:

Uncared-for sycamore trees loomed like eyeless sightseers over the curve of the road where her father's house was. These older suburban roads were narrow, with pickup trucks parked along both curbs, leaving room for one driver only in the middle of the road, and no walkers. Miri had to wait behind a box truck as a Honda came the other way before she could finish the long drive – a fast drive with no commuter cars on the road, but long – by coming around the curve and parking in front of what legal paperwork told her was now her property.

The house was haunted by weeds and desperation; this was obvious from the front. What had once been a lawn was now dead grass and dandelions, the latter blooming in the springtime. The eaves of the house were brown and the trim was brown. The outer walls were beige wherever they were visible. The piles of junk on the front porch blocked much of them, and obscured the front windows. The junk: rolling office chairs on top of each other; boxes stacked and tilting; bicycle tires cracking and collapsing; filing cabinets with contents that, though invisible, made Miri shudder.

What kind of man lived here?

This man of her blood, who was he? And what did that make *her*?

She had been delivered the key but due to the virus no one was there, no one could be there, to greet her or to help her. Even the realtors she had called had all made excuses. A security door hung from one hinge in front of the front door. The front door could be opened, despite the piles. She opened it.

It opened like a mouth, like a just-discovered cave, like the unlit bottom floor of an unfamiliar parking garage. It looked underground, the house's interior – what Miri could see of it from her place on the threshold. Underground like the man, like the father, who had already been buried by time and nearly forgotten by her, and had been buried by then in reality, the barely remembered hands that had held her in childhood curled in a death pose, with two yards of earth above them and a headstone – what did the headstone say? What could it say? Miri could hardly guess. There had been no funeral due again to the virus, and Miri would not have attended had there been one. But he must have been buried. Someone, masked, must have buried the body.

And of a sudden it came to Miri the space of time and consciousness and memory and anger that she must cross to enter this underground empire of trash, this hellhole, this hell, and she was – afraid. She was – afraid. And the muddy air of the Diablo Valley filled her lungs and nostrils, and a gentle

breeze blew that sounded like a whisper, and here in the curling maze of post-urban streets surrounded by boarded-up shops and masked shut-ins and apocalypse, her city mind could find no foothold.

She could not go in – not that day. She got back in her car and drove through the Caldecott Tunnel and over the deserted Bay Bridge, back to her city, her familiar if ghostly city. She would come back – how many times? Before she went really inside? The unscheduled nature of the Covid lockdowns would always make it difficult for her to remember precisely in later years...

Yes, she had left all that out of the story...

When Miri was long gone home and the customers had dwindled, Leah and Sunny closed down the bar. This sometimes-delicate process was made simple when the slumping drunk at the corner table left of his own accord as they turned the lights up. The bartenders exchanged brief directions and suggestions and questions with each other as they worked with a burst of energy that would have surprised the patrons who had watched Sunny pouring beer with great deliberateness and Leah dithering like a mad billionaire's personal assistant.

"So how'd that come up?" Sunny asked sharply as the last glass came out of the dishwasher.

"How'd what come where?" Leah whirled around, caught off guard by Sunny's tone.

"That stuff about Miri's dad."

"Oh, that." Leah relaxed against the counter. "I forgot you weren't here. It was so weird. This woman came in, asked for Miri but didn't seem to recognize her, then said she knew Miri's dad."

"She said this to Miri?"

"Yeah."

"And what did Miri do?"

"Kicked her out."

Sunny smiled for the first time all night. "That seems like an overreaction."

"I think it was mostly cuz she didn't order anything."

"You can give someone a few minutes before you kick them out for that. Let them make up their minds."

"That's true."

"Come on." Sunny clutched at Leah's elbow. "Let's shut the lights off. Come smoke with me."

"Alright."

They shut things and locked things and stood in the 3am glare of the streetlights, a glare that was mitigated by wet fog. The bar was the only one on its block, and it faced a small green park, so the street was silent. Under the short awning Sunny clicked her lighter and made the tip of her American Spirit glow orange. She lit a second cigarette and gave it to Leah.

"It worries me," said Sunny, breathing smoke into the blurry yellow night.

"What does?"

"Whatever Miri's hiding. About her dad."

"What do you think she's hiding?"

"I don't know." Smoke. "The first time she told me that story, about finding out her dad had been alive and had left her the house and everything, she was drunk. Very drunk. Sloppy. And she said something much different about clearing out the sheds in that backyard."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing specific. She said, 'And then I opened up that fourth shed, and I just couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe what was in there!' She kept saying that, over and over. 'Couldn't believe it!'"

"What was it?"

Sunny's cigarette was already down to its filter; she inhaled the last of the nicotine. "I tried to get her to tell me then. 'No, no,' she said. That's all. 'No, no.' And then she started talking about other shit. But don't you think that sounds fucking sketchy? Like there was something in that shed that she couldn't tell me about?"

Leah processed this, and shrugged.

"Anyway she shuts up about it now, whenever I ask her. I dunno, maybe it's nothing. But here's what else. You know this bar isn't the only thing she owns, right?"

Leah's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"She owns a laundromat in El Cerrito, and she has a dispensary on the peninsula somewhere. She owns the apartment she lives in here. And she owns two houses out in Fresno."

"Two? In *Fresno*?"

"She rents them."

"Ah."

"The bar makes the least money, but she likes it the most."

"That's why she's always here?"

"Yeah, but listen. What scares me is that she didn't have any of this before. We used to work out in the Avenues together before the pandemic and she was just like me, working and renting. But ever since the pandemic she has – all this."

"She sold her dad's house, right?"

"She sold a fixer-upper house in a bad neighborhood in Concord. You're from Concord. You know the area. You think she got a million dollars for it?"

"No."

"Half a million?"

"Maybe. If she got real lucky."

"And maybe she did. Does that buy all that stuff I just listed? I don't know anything about business or houses, but I don't think it does. So I worry that she did something to suddenly get all this money, during the pandemic – something dangerous or bad, something she can't tell anybody about. Maybe it has something to do with her dad and her dad's house and that shed, and maybe it doesn't, but either way, I worry that whatever she did, might cause something bad to happen to her now. And that scares the shit out of me. Because if something happened to Miri, I don't know what I would do, I really don't."

Leah opened her mouth to reply, but shut it when words of comfort didn't

come to her, because she felt the exact same way.

On Wednesday Miri opened the bar at 11 in the morning. To pass the time until drinkers arrived she cleaned the bathrooms. She smoked a cigarette, then had a meditative bourbon while perusing the bar's videotape collection. In the end she couldn't find anything she was in the mood for and put on *Repo Man* again, muted.

The customers didn't enter so much as they were forced in by the fog that on this day had rolled all the way to San Francisco's western side, where the sun usually prevailed by noon. Nobody was warm and nobody was happy. Miri missed her girls, but it was Darryl's shift today. She served drinks and made change and waited for Darryl. This felt like a day for going home early.

A giant entered the bar. He had pale skin and a brown beard and straight brown hair, which was long despite a receding hairline. He wore all black: black jeans, black boots, and a leather vest over a black hoodie. Miri, in the market for more leather herself, wondered where he had gotten such a large vest. A chain hung from his pocket to a belt loop and jingled as he came up to the bar and to her. He didn't pick a stool and he didn't sit down.

"Drink?" said Miri. She didn't know him and wasn't enjoying what she detected from him.

The giant ignored the question. "I'm a friend of Angie P.," he rumbled.

"Who's that?"

"You met her yesterday."

"I meet a lot of people. What's the 'P' stand for?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I wasn't worried. You wanna drink?"

"Angie P. sent me."

"You said that."

"She said to tell you, 'I knew your dad.'"

The muscles in Miri's arms tensed but she revealed no emotion. "Okay. She said that yesterday."

"She also said to tell you, 'I know what was in the fourth shed.'"

Miri felt her face turn a little whiter. "What the hell is this." Halfway through the sentence it stopped being a question.

The bar was silent; why hadn't she put on music? One of her regulars was down at the end of the bar and was watching the interaction closely. Two women at a high table in the middle of the room were talking too quietly to be heard. Even with these witnesses at hand, Miri felt exposed, endangered, and cold.

The giant pulled a piece of paper out of a pocket in his vest. "She wants to talk to you," he said. He handed her the paper. It was a folded sheet of hotel stationery. Miri unfolded it.

"This is a blank piece of paper," she said, annoyed.

"Address is on the bottom," said the large man.

Miri looked closer. Indeed, along the bottom of the stationery was printed in small font the name and address of the hotel. It was in Concord, of course.

"What am I supposed to do," she said, looking back slowly at the giant,

"show up here and start knocking on fucking random hotel room doors?"

"Room 217," he said. "She'll be there for two weeks."

Miri's mouth watered; she swallowed. The giant was swiveling away. "What do I do if I show up and she's not in the room?"

"Come back later," he replied over his shoulder. With two steps he reached the door. With one more step he disappeared into the fog.

"I can't do that," Miri said to no one. "I have a goddamn business to run." But she knew she would make the drive anyway.

Miri had never looked for a criminal lawyer before. Feeling foolish, she had contacted all the top-rated ones on Yelp. After emails and phone calls she found herself in a small office overlooking the Hall of Justice on Bryant Street. The lawyer's name was Peter. His last name wasn't part of the firm's name, but his gray buttoned shirt, clean and pressed, looked like success. Miri felt underdressed in paint-stained blue jeans and a men's plain white T-shirt with its bottom half chopped off. Very underdressed.

He stared at her from behind his wide desk. She was making stupid motions with her hands while her words formed. "I'm not sure," she said at last, "how I'm supposed to start this conversation. I mean, what can I tell you, really?"

"Well," said Peter, "that's up to you. But let me see. Have you been charged with anything, or are you just worrying about being charged?"

"Worrying."

"And what are you worrying about being charged with?"

Miri's hands twisted in her lap. "Can we talk about statutes of limitations?" she burst out.

"Okay."

"What are the statutes of limitations on, say, uh, trafficking?"

The lawyer blinked. "Well, it depends on what, exactly, is being trafficked. Now, human trafficking –"

"Not that," said Miri quickly.

"Oh. Drug trafficking?"

"Let's say that, yeah."

"Five years, federally. Depending on the kind of substances and the amount. Three to six years in the state of California. Again, depending."

"What about for something like guns?"

"Illegal firearms? I would have to look it up to be sure, but in the same ballpark."

"How about other...stolen goods?"

Peter put his hands together. "Are you worried about something that happened a long time ago?"

"Not that long."

"In the ballpark we've been talking about?"

"In that ballpark, yes."

The lawyer nodded. "Well I would really need more details. I also – I mean, you would need to hire us before we could, ah, advise you. This is just a consultation."

Miri rocked back and forth. "I think I might be getting blackmailed."

"O...kay..."

"Or about to be blackmailed. Or whatever."

"Well, Ms. Walters, that's a serious crime in and of itself. Now if you..."

"Do you guys ever, like," Miri shifted in her seat, "do some of your own investigating?" She felt idiotic but pushed through the pain. "Like, if you wanted to find out more about a person or a crime or a case."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "We do have a relationship with a private investigator, yes. Services like that are...pretty expensive."

"How much?"

"You would have to hire us, pay a retainer up front, before we even discuss —"

"So, what's the retainer? I mean are we talking six figures?"

The lawyer smiled. "No."

"Five figures?"

"Four."

"Oh." Miri investigated the interior of her purse and produced a checkbook. "Who do I make this out to?"

For some reason the investigator's office was all the way down in Bernal Heights. Miri had trusted SF Muni too much and had nearly missed her appointment. She spoke with a person whom she had assumed was some sort of intern, but who turned out to be a jaded ex-lawyer-turned-P.I., and who happened to be fresh-faced. He flipped a blank piece of hotel stationery over in his soft hands.

"That's where she's staying," said Miri. "Room 217. Goes by 'Angie P.' I don't know her full name or if that's even her real name."

"And she looks like..."

Miri described her.

"And she's an associate of your father's?"

"My dead father's."

"Your late father's?"

"I dunno. She said so."

"What was his address?"

She gave it. "He's not there anymore, obviously. I sold the house."

The P.I. sighed. "Out in Concord too, huh? Well, there will be some mileage expenses."

"How soon —"

"Someone will give you a call tomorrow."

"Hasn't it almost been two weeks already?" Leah spoke from the edge of herself. She poured Bud Light into a tilted plastic pitcher and Miri watched the suds nearly spill.

"Have a drink, babe." Miri's hands found a shot glass and she poured one

for Leah from the nearest bottle, which contained Fernet Branca. "Fucking lawyers. I shoulda known 'tomorrow' meant '10 days from now.' But I'll be okay."

"But hasn't it?"

"Don't waste the merchandise, sweetie."

Leah started, and corrected the position of the pitcher so that Bud Light stopped pouring out.

"Yes it has been. It'll be two weeks since that poser came in here as of tomorrow. But even if I had heard from that asshole P.I., I'd wanna make that bitch wait. Wait and sweat."

"You don't even know what she wants, though."

"She wants money." Miri said it with finality. "Same thing everyone wants in this world."

"People want other things too."

"Why are you here, Leah?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you work here?"

Leah shrugged. "I dunno. I needed a job."

"You needed money." Miri patted her employee on the shoulder. "And I like giving you money, because you help me make money. Leah, my dad was a scumbag. I dunno exactly what *type* of scumbag. But I cleaned out an entire three-bedroom house's worth of his shit, and believe me, I do not want to fuck with anybody who says they *knew* him. That's not the kind of person I like or trust. So fuck her. Let her sweat in her shitty hotel. You know how hot it is in Concord today?"

Leah nodded glumly, pitcher in hand. "Probably about a hundred degrees."

"One hundred and three. I looked it up today out of curiosity."

Leah smiled. "I like living here better." Outside the wind blew off the bay. The sky was blue but the air was cool. "And Miri?"

"How many glasses you need?"

"Three. And Miri?"

"What, sweetie?"

Words collided and tangled themselves up in Leah's mouth. "I like *working* here, too," she said at last. "I like working for you."

"You're sweet," said Miri. "Serve that beer before it gets warm."

"It's not just the money –"

"I don't pay you enough for it to be *just* the money." Miri knew what the girl was trying to say but wasn't in the mood to help her say it.

She put a hand on top of the bar and surveyed her fiefdom. The lights needed dusting and the chairs needed replacing and the small stage in the back needed a new set of outlets and Leah had handed the pitcher to the customers but had forgotten the pint glasses, but taken all together Miri didn't think she'd ever seen anything more beautiful. She had built a place in the world for herself and the people she liked, and she was going to keep it.

The bar vibrated beneath her hand and Miri's first thought was *earthquake*; in the corner of her eye she saw the screen of her phone, which was plugged in a couple of feet away, light up. She picked up the ringing phone. Unknown number. "Miri...am Walters," switching to the formal.

"Ms. Walters?" The P.I.'s voice.

"Yes."

"Are you in a place where you can talk?"

"I can be." Miri winked at Leah and, phone pressed against her cheek, she went into the small office beyond the bar.

Angie P. turned out to be short for "Angela Peralta." She'd been in county jail once and arrested twice more, all three for possession. She was, on paper, a hairdresser at a salon in Modesto, but appeared to be completely unavailable for appointments. She'd been audited, but never penalized, by the IRS.

"She's a dealer," Miri said to herself, going over this information in her mind.

Angela Peralta was indeed staying at the hotel her large friend had indicated; she lived full-time in Turlock, not Concord. But she had, at one time and for about nine months, lived at the address Miri had provided, the address of her father's house.

"I got some background on him as well," the investigator said. "You want it?"

"No."

"Okay. That closes out my portion. The firm will be in touch with you."

Miri pressed "End." She came back to her position beside Leah at the beer taps with silence in her face. She was mulling over whether to let the day expire and head out to Concord at the two-week mark, or go right away and get it over with. She looked down at her phone again – it was quarter to four – commuters were already lining up on Bryant and Brannan. It might take her an hour just to get onto the Bay Bridge. That decided it. She'd stay here and go tomorrow.

"Everything okay?" Leah, wide-eyed, almost screamed the question.

Miri snapped back to the present. "Yes! Sorry." She patted Leah's hand. "Stop worrying. I'm heading out there tomorrow. See what she wants."

"Did you find anything out?"

"She sells drugs, probably. I'd guess uses too."

"They told you that?"

"They didn't. I'm guessing, based on what I know and what they told me."

"Does that help you?"

"No, not really. But at least I know what I'm up against now." She kept the part about rooming with her father to herself. She couldn't fit that information into place.

The dawn of another Wednesday morning washed over the spires of downtown San Francisco, leaving shorter and shorter shadows in its wake. The water of the bay turned gray, then green, then blue. Miri let it turn indigo before she turned the key in her Camaro and rumbled onto the bridge. Standard checkout time was 11, so maybe she'd catch Angie on her way out.

The Camaro's windows were up but she didn't need to feel the air to know it was warmer on the eastern side of the bridge; it *looked* warmer. She passed through Oakland without noticing it, winding up the slope of Highway 24 into the Caldecott Tunnel. The tunnel was dark and the lanes, built for smaller

cars in narrower times, squeezed her. She came out the other side into hills and here it was not warm – it was hot. The heated air passed over her forehead as she cracked her window to smoke a cig. The sun and summer had killed the grass on all the hillsides and the brown blades waved at her in the swirling breeze. Visible suddenly was Mt. Diablo, the lone peak looming presidentially over the hills, then valley, then hills that lay between her and it. Concord was in the valley.

The hotel was on Monument Boulevard, which Miri knew by reputation. Motels and apartments branched off the busy street, offering no hints of beauty, no signs of upkeep. She could find rougher streets in San Francisco just by closing her eyes and pointing at a map, but that didn't make the drive any nicer, or the grimy hotel parking lot she pulled into any safer.

Miri went in through the side door. The hallway carpet was dark blue, low, and flat; easy to vacuum if anyone ever cared to; and the walls held records of mistakes and collisions in the form of scuffs and divots. The stairs to the second floor echoed too much. Miri found the 17th room on the second floor. The door was off-white and solid, ornamented only with a number and a peephole. She raised the hand that wasn't on her purse and knocked. She hoped nobody was doing anything to her Camaro.

"No housekeeping," said a soft but direct feminine voice from the other side of the door.

Miri smirked. She had made Angela Peralta wait for a long time. She knocked again.

"I said..." The door opened. Angela looked much as she had two weeks ago, except her makeup was smudged and her lashes were shorter. Her fatigued eyes opened wider as she recognized Miri. Then an expression Miri couldn't identify passed over her face.

"It's you," said Angela softly. "D'you wear contacts?"

"Contacts?" Miri raised her eyebrows. "No."

Angela stared down at her. When she stood up straight, as she was doing, she was a head taller than Miri. "Come in," she said finally, pulling the door back further.

"No thanks," said Miri. "What do you want?"

"What?"

"You wanted to talk to me. I'm here. What is it?"

Angela's body relaxed, and Miri recognized the posture of a pill-popper whose buzz was kicking in. "I knew your..."

"Don't fucking say it again." Miri took one step closer so that she stood under the doorway. "You knew my dad. You lived with my dad. For all I know you lived in that shed too. I don't give a shit. What the fuck do you want from me?"

"I want..." Angela didn't finish the sentence. Her eyes found Miri's again. She muttered, "It wasn't much light in the bar."

"I'm coming in." Miri did so and shut the door. She wasn't going to be afraid of a junkie. She snapped on the overhead light, which came on with a flicker, and scanned the distressed room. No giants in here... "Anyone in the bathroom?" she asked Angela.

"No."

Miri checked anyway. "You've been here for two weeks, huh?" she asked

over her shoulder, seeing no one in the bathroom.

"A little longer," came the slow voice in reply. "I spent some time looking...I couldn't remember exactly where the house was."

"What house?" Miri dragged a chair into a corner of the room she liked, far from the disarranged bed, and sat in it. Angela remained standing.

"His house."

"You couldn't remember – you fucking *lived* there."

"How'd you know that?"

"I had you checked out. Don't get pissed. Why couldn't you remember where the house was?"

"I was high." Angela took slow paces into the middle of the room, looking away at last from Miri. "I can't remember very much of that time."

"You're high now."

"Not as high." Angela's glare pierced Miri's eyes again. Miri was getting annoyed with her constant direct stare. "You have your dad's eyes," she mumbled.

In movies Miri had seen moments when the lock of a safe was turned correctly and its tumblers clicked into place, suddenly allowing the door of the safe to swing open. Angela's words did this in Miri's mind, unlocking voices, faces, feelings, smells. People had said that to her – "You have your dad's eyes" – when she was very young. A small bomb that wanted to become a sob exploded in Miri's chest. She contained it.

"Why the fuck would you say something like that to me?" she asked. "You're nothing to me. I don't know you."

"I said it because it's true. It was too dark in the bar. I couldn't see..."

"Don't talk shit about my bar."

Angela blinked luxuriously but didn't drop her gaze.

"What do you want, dammit?"

At last she turned away, turned around. "I thought I wanted something," she said. "But now it turns out I just wanted to see his eyes again."

Certain facts about her father and this woman became clear to Miri; certain blank spaces were filled in. Instead of sympathy she felt disgust. This was sickly – to be satisfied with his eyes – *his* eyes – she wanted to tear them out of her skull. To love *him* so thoroughly that a look into his eyes, even on another face, was satisfactory. Two weeks in a dying hotel and she was satisfied with Miri's eyes. Sickly.

The idea that someone, anyone, this woman, could have *loved* him so much that a look into his eyes would fulfill her – would fulfill her more than money or anything else –

He had been alive the whole time, and not just alive, but 35 miles away

–
The trash – the hoarding – the miserable two months clearing it all out when she had thought he was already gone –

That anyone could love him – it was *unfair* –

Miri didn't realize she was at the door until her hand reached the handle. She was going; she was leaving; her body had decided it for her; it was reflex.

"You think you're the only one he took care of?" Angela's voice came

from somewhere far, far behind Miri.

Miri made herself turn around. "Took *care of*?" And for the first time in her life she let all the hate and rage and disgust drop into her voice. "Took care of?"

"He left you the house and everything in it. I know about that."

"*That* was taking care of me? Do you have *any idea* –" But she stopped. She regained control. This sickening person didn't deserve to know her, Miri, in this way. To see the rage and hurt that she hid even from herself. This person had no right to know about that.

"What did he leave you?" Gathering information.

"Life insurance." Angela stared into Miri one more time.

Miri had nothing left to say, nothing left to ask; there was nothing more she wanted to know. She went into the hallway and shut the door.

She went down the stairs, through the side door, and into the parking lot. The Camaro was where she had left it, and was whole and intact. Quickly scanning she saw movement to her right. She glanced without turning. It was the giant.

He was all in black again with his beard swaying in the hot breeze. He had on rounded aviator sunglasses so she couldn't tell where he was looking. He was about eight steps away; her car was about ten steps away. He was lumbering towards both her and the hotel's side door.

Miri slowed down. Her right hand went into the one functional pocket on her jeans. She fingered the folded knife within.

The giant continued towards the side door without giving any indication he had seen her. He pushed it open, ducked, and went inside.

"You should'na had the blade with you," said Paco, wiping his mouth after swallowing the last of his bottle of beer. "More dangerous to you than to him, 'less you really know what you doin'. Seen a lotta people get hurt that way."

"Come on, Paco," said Miri, leaning over the bar. "A *lot*?"

"A coupla people."

"What was I gonna do? Mace him?"

"Couldn't hurt."

"Coulda hurt *me*. He was so tall I can't guarantee the spray woulda reached him."

"But he wasn't even trying to get you, right, Miri?" asked Leah from her seat on Paco's left.

"No," said Miri, "but you can never be too careful. They lured me out there, you know. I still didn't know what for."

"Head on a swivel," said Paco. "That's you. That's why you smart."

"That's why?"

"That's why."

"I wish I'd seen you kick her out," said Sunny, standing with her hand on the Lagunitas tap. "I never get to see you be mean. You're always too nice."

"I just told her to leave. Nothing exciting. You gonna pour that beer or

what?"

Sunny, moody, pulled the tap towards herself.

"Anyway," said Miri, taking the top off a bottle of Anchor Steam and handing it to Paco, "I ain't going back to Concord again anytime soon. I hope."

"I got a buddy out there," said Paco.

"I'm sorry for your buddy."

"Hey, that's my hometown," said Leah gently.

"Sorry honey. To each their own. This," she gestured to the bar and, presumably, the city as a whole, "is my own."

A man in a Giants cap and a black-and-white flannel shirt, three stools down from Paco, called out, "Miri! Need a top-off!"

"Goddammit, Darryl, go home," said Miri even as she reached for the Jim Beam. "You ain't working today." She glanced over to Leah. "Matter of fact none of you are supposed to be here today except for Sunny."

"What 'bout me," said Paco defensively.

"You do what you want."

"You know I will."

"Sure, homie."

"You want me to leave?" asked Leah.

"No, I want you to stay. Actually, why don't you head back and pick out a movie." She indicated the blank TV screen. "Lately nothing sounds good to me."

The door opened and Miri turned her back on the crew to serve the customer. She hadn't told her friends much, except that Angela had ended up not following through. Miri had made it sound as if she had won a game of chicken – had outlasted or out-bluffed Angie P. Nobody needed to know about her eyes.

She had seen it herself in the pictures she had thrown out as she cleaned up the house back in the pandemic. Her eyes were not her own. She resented it. And there was no solution to this particular problem.

This, she knew, was her fate: to live without closure, without resolution, without redemption, with genetics and inheritances borrowed from scumbags and criminals. Atop of which she could build her own life – but without any illusions that she was anything other than what she was.

The customer in front of her was a man in a Patagonia vest with carefully combed hair and a clean-shaven face. "Can I have a martini?" he asked.

Miri smiled, revealing two gold teeth and a dozen crooked ones. "No," she said.

– BRYAN VALE

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