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Shotgun House

She woke and said her full name out loud. She announced her age and her race and the name of the city and the state in which she lived. She said that she owned this bed in this room inside this house on this street among those houses with those rooms around those beds. She said it every morning, just like Mr. Firelli, her rehab counselor, told her to, but this morning she laid in bed a little longer.

There was no window in her small bedroom, so she hung a picture of a window that looked out onto a sunny field. In the center was a giant tree where a little boy sailed high on a wooden swing. Along the bottom of the picture, in multi-colored letters, was the word 'LIVE.'

"The drug," Mr. Firelli had said, "no matter what it was, owned you. It owned your thoughts, your actions, your hopes and dreams, one thing after another. And you have to get those things back. *You* have to own your thoughts. *You* have to own your actions, your hopes and dreams..."

And time, she thought. She also owned time now. And she could take that time and divide it into sections. A large section was devoted to enjoying food, causing another section to be spent in the bathroom. She gave an even larger section to her job, which she did not care to give to matters of physical beauty. And more and more sections were distributed among traffic light signals and conversations, scribbling on paper and walking through the park. She glanced at the clock on her bedside table and knew it was time for Mrs. Alstice.

The car came to a stop alongside a cracked sidewalk, and Mrs. Alstice emerged with a leather handbag and a red makeup case. She was a large, black woman but she walked briskly across the sidewalk and up the porch steps of the small, white house. Her right hand seized the doorknob as her heeled shoe gave the door a solid kick. It flew open easily.

"You fixed your door!" she said, now inside and looking at the black mark on the fresh, white paint. "Child, I've done messed it up!"

Mrs. Alstice closed the door and turned to survey the living room. The old tan sofa and coffee table that came with the house were still there, but a new chair had been added in the corner—a small wing-back with oak legs. She smiled at the pretty cream fabric.

Only a whiff of paint remained on the pale, yellow walls; and the beat-up wood flooring shone spotless in the sharp, early morning sunlight that poured through the window.

"You've got this place looking good, Elisse!" said Mrs. Alstice.

The living room door was open to the bedroom, and the bedroom door was open to the kitchen, so that Mrs. Alstice could see through to the back door of the house. It was the hallmark of the shotgun house, one room following the other.

"This doesn't even look like the same place anymore," she said, stepping into the bedroom and gazing at the pale blue walls. "It's amazing

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what a little cleaning and painting can do—and I love that chair in your living room.”

Still lying in bed, Elisse turned on her side and smiled. “Can you believe it was out by the dumpsters?”

Mrs. Alstice widened her eyes. “The dumpsters? Who would throw that away?”

“Well, the seating was stained,” said Elisse, propping her arm under her head, “but I just took the fabric off and replaced the cushion. Then I re-upholstered it—”

“You re-upholstered it?”

Elisse nodded. “I think I matched the fabric pretty good. It’s not the exact same, though.”

“It looks good enough. Nobody would be able to tell the difference,” said Mrs. Alstice. “Upholstery’s hard to do. I can’t believe you did that by yourself, though not really. You were always smart like that.”

Elisse blushed proudly at the compliment as her former college mentor continued to gaze around the room, glancing back into the living room as well.

“Incredible,” said Mrs. Alstice, shaking her head. “Here it is 1984 and the shotgun house is still standing. I never would’ve thought it. Can I snoop through your kitchen?”

“Snoop away,” said Elisse.

Mrs. Alstice sat her makeup case on a small dresser table, hanging her purse on the back of the chair.

“You must’ve spent half a day just scrubbing this sink,” she said, now in the kitchen and peering over the countertop. “And this counter, too,” she said, inspecting the grout lines.

The kitchen was painted the same pale yellow as the living room, and the freezer was cleaned and packed with bags of assorted vegetables. Walled off in the corner was a small bathroom. Mrs. Alstice stuck her head in and flipped on the light.

“Looks good in here, too” she said. But seeing the same blue walls as the bedroom, Mrs. Alstice thought: “Those two colors were all she could afford.”

She switched the light back off and ran a hand across the tiny kitchen table and chair. Eager to see the stoop, she opened the back door. It opened easily, like the front door, and she felt even worse about that black mark she made with her shoe. She shut the door without looking at the stoop and walked back to the bedroom.

“I’ll get Snooks over here to paint your door, Elisse,” she said. “So don’t you worry.”

Elisse rolled onto her back. “I’m not worried.”

“Well, don’t you be,” said Mrs. Alstice, sitting down at the dresser table. “Because it’ll be new again like it was.”

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Unloading pot after pot from her makeup case, she noticed a blanket in a plastic bag propped against the wall. "He's been lying around enjoying these long winter days. This'll give his fat back something to do."

Elisse laughed. Mrs. Alstice liked to complain about her husband even though secretly she did not mind his shortcomings. Snooks did the same thing. It was a little game they played, and it always made Elisse wonder about the strange nature of love. She looked at the picture on the wall.

"I could not get up this morning," said Mrs. Alstice, studying her face in the mirror. "You know how those cold mornings are when you're all warm in bed? So now I'm rushed and have to put on my makeup here so I won't be late to church." She smeared foundation over her temple.

"I don't mind."

"Thank you, baby."

Elisse stared at the vibrant green fields surrounding the tree in the center of the picture on her wall. The little boy looked so carefree seated on the swing that Elisse couldn't help but wonder what expression was on his face. Laughter? Or just a smile? She couldn't see it from the bed.

"Child, don't tell me you go to bed like that every night?" said Mrs. Alstice, her eyes widening at the girl's half naked body. Elisse was wearing only a thin tank and her underwear.

"I've been waking up hot," said Elisse, stopping just in front of the picture.

I don't see how, Mrs. Alstice thought, staring into the mirror again.

There was no laughter on the boy's face. Not even a smile. He just gazed calmly up at the clouds, his legs swinging freely beneath him. But why? Elisse ran a finger over each colored letter of the word 'LIVE.' Why does he stare so calmly?

Mrs. Alstice smiled, watching Elisse's curiosity play out on the features of her face. It was nice to see it again, and she let her eyes wander to the marks on Elisse's arm.

"How long have you been waking up hot?" she asked.

"About a week," Elisse replied.

"Have you checked your temperature?"

"No."

"You need to."

"I'm all right," she said, gazing tenderly at her. "It's just been warm in here."

"Then what's that blanket for?" said Mrs. Alstice, nodding at the wall.

"Kenneth."

Mrs. Alstice put down the blush. "How is he?"

"He's still sick," Elisse replied, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Have you noticed any changes in him?"

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"He gets tired sometimes, like he's exhausted."

"Can't you get him to take that test, Elisse?" said Mrs. Alstice. "It could be cancer, you know, and they can give him treatment for that."

"He's not afraid," said Elisse, looking at her. "I look after him. I'll be looking after him even more pretty soon...while I can, anyway. So you don't have to worry."

"But I do, Elisse."

"I know."

Elisse looked back over at the picture. "Do you remember when Randall took all the money their father left to them?"

Mrs. Alstice shoved the mascara wand back into the tube.

"Kenneth's not angry about it anymore," said Elisse.

"Has he talked to him?"

"No. He's forgiven him. That's all that matters."

Mrs. Alstice's lower lip trembled. She lifted a folded tissue from the makeup case and dabbed the tears in her eyes.

Swollen eyes won't do in church, she told herself, laying the tissue down.

She finished the mascara on both eyelashes. Those boys used to be so close, Mrs. Alstice thought. Their daddy dying is what tore them apart. It was a hard thing to say, so she never said it. Family is that way. Elisse was not his family, so it wasn't like that with her. She and Kenneth had known each other since they were children playing in the park on the seesaw and the swing set. They went into everything together and came out of it together, too.

"Elisse, baby," said Mrs. Alstice, opening her purse, "I almost forgot." She held a check out to her.

Elisse took it, raising an eyebrow. "I didn't know the church had a money-back policy now."

"Just because you've had some run-ins doesn't mean they're all bad."

"Uh-huh."

Mrs. Alstice combed her eyebrows. "Everybody asks about Kenneth."

"Why don't they come see him?"

"They're scared of him, Elisse," she said, putting the comb back in the case. "You know that."

"They don't even know if he has that disease, yet they're afraid."

"They pray for him."

"Great." Elisse looked down at the check in her hands. "What do you want me to spend this on? He doesn't need anything."

"Everybody needs something," said Mrs. Alstice. "And whatever's left you can put on books and lab fees when you come back to Brice Com-

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munity. You never did finish that paper on *The Scarlet Letter* for me. It was promising. You know it was."

Elisse smiled, laying the check on the dresser.

"When are you gonna take the blanket to him?" asked Mrs. Alstice, uncapping a lipstick.

"After work," Elisse replied, sitting back down on the bed.

"You're working today?"

"12 till 6."

Mrs. Alstice sighed. "It didn't seem that long ago stores wouldn't even open on a Sunday. Now everybody gets mad if they don't." She put the lipstick back in the case and latched it down. "You could've rescheduled if you didn't want to work."

"I wanted to."

"Well, that's good. A strong work ethic is something to be proud of—and the extra money ain't bad either."

"Yeah," she said, laughing. "It's nice to have it."

"Yes, it is," said Mrs. Alstice. "Money *always* helps out." She checked the contours of her face in the mirror. "Now, get over here and tell me I look as good as I know I do."

Elisse laughed, walking up behind her. She placed her hands on the older woman's plump shoulders and bent down into the reflection of the mirror.

"You look the same as always," said Elisse. "Same mischievous eyes. Same exuberant smile. And what age has removed in youthfulness has added back in beauty of form, entire form until, at last you become grace looking out from a mirror."

Mrs. Alstice patted Elisse's hand. "Still promising." Tears came to her eyes, but she blinked them away and stood up. "Give me my hug."

As she pulled from the embrace, she held onto Elisse's arms.

"You give Kenneth my love," she said, warmly. "And don't you go overdoing it at that job. You just go slow and take care of yourself. You understand me? You take care of yourself, Elisse."

Elisse averted her mentor's gaze and the meaning behind it.

"Are you sure you're warm enough at night?" asked Mrs. Alstice.

"Yes."

"Because Snooks has got a gas heater in the garage that's just catching dust."

"No, I'm fine. I don't need it."

Mrs. Alstice searched her eyes again. "All right then."

Elisse carried the makeup case through the house for her. In the living room, Mrs. Alstice asked where she bought the fabric for the chair. They

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hugged again at the door, and Mrs. Alstice waved from the car, pulling off down the street.

Elisse walked through to the kitchen. She waited for the oats to cook, then ate them slowly with a little sugar. In the bathroom, she left the faucet on, splashing the water over her face. It was icy and rigid and stung only a few seconds. She brushed her teeth, and then switched off the light. She stood some minutes gazing through the glass pane in the back door. The stoop was bare, but she thought in the spring she would add a pot of flowers to it. Bright blue ones. Cornflowers, maybe. That would be something else for Mrs. Alstice to see. Locking the door, she walked back to her bedroom.

She still had time, so she re-read an article about the macrobiotic diet. It was believed by experts to really make a difference in a person's health. She had been on it for a week now and would get Kenneth on it, too. Then—because Mrs. Alstice had mentioned it—she read a few chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*. Somehow she still had that book after all those years. Somehow it had survived.

Then she put on her pet store uniform. As manager, it was her job to arrive early and make sure the store was ready for customers. That was something else she owned now—responsibility to those other than herself.

Tucking the blanket under her arm, she stepped in front of the dresser and looked down at the check. Soon, she would need a bigger mattress for Kenneth and herself, and, of course, more food for them both. She smiled, picking up the check.

Mrs. Alstice was the only church member who gave her money. They both knew that. And they both knew Elisse would be spending the night with Kenneth again. Elisse folded the check in half and slid it into her pocket. She left the doors open throughout the house as she walked to the front door. Locking it, she glanced at the back door. Bright blue flowers would be perfect, she thought. Bright blue was Kenneth's favorite color. She turned down the sidewalk and imagined him smiling at them from the breakfast table.