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OPEN DOORS

JASMINE PARKS THE CAR AND TAKES A SIP OF VODKA before killing the engine. Then she twists the cap and stuffs the plastic bottle back behind the fast food napkins and outdated maps in the glove compartment. The door hinges squeal open. She steps out and exhales, a whiff of fake fruit flavour on her breath.

“This is my home,” she says aloud—one of many growing habits. “It’s my life. I chose it.”

Home is a charming three-story with an enclosed deck and tulips that bloom every spring. Jasmine has made a lifetime of good choices. She dated many men to learn what kinds she liked, tested many jobs to find a real passion, and bought a three-bedroom home in pre-gentrified Leslieville. She married a kind, interesting man and ignored endless sexist jokes and grinding hours to nurture a well-paying, almost glamorous marketing career. She also did yoga, ate kale, meditated occasionally, travelled often, invested hard when the markets dipped, learned how to quilt, and ran the Toronto Marathon. Now she’s fifty years old and drinking in the driveway.

The car door’s slam makes her flinch. Ahead, the living room lights burn. Climbing the front steps, she knows with crushing certainty what she will find inside: Hafeez slumped in his leather recliner with his feet up, lost in a documentary on coral reefs, white-collar crime, or forced female circumcision.

“What should we be ashamed of now?” she’ll ask over supper, and Hafeez will tell her about yet another way that the planet should be behaving better. This is their game, and she knows that the ensuing conversation will be interesting, stimulating, and meaningful—or rather that it used to be. Now it is more like tasteless sawdust—a laxative running through her. Truthfully, she likes the world the way it is.

Today, however, the La-Z-Boy sits empty. She lets the A/C wrap around her like a snowman’s hug as her shoulder bag clunks to the floor. “I’m home,”

she calls, waiting for a response, fearing the slurred moan that will tell her Hafeez has suffered a stroke and that she will now be chained to a drooling invalid for the rest of her rapidly shortening life.

No reply. Stepping into the kitchen, she sees a cutting board and a half-sliced apple on the counter, and she suddenly pictures her husband on the floor, throat cut, the linoleum shiny with blood. She imagines a burglar in a balaclava leaping out of a closet and pressing a sharp knife against her wrinkling throat. A nightmare flashes: being shoved against the kitchen table, the tear of her pencil skirt, pain. It would be hell to be raped (she shivers at the thought), but she likes to think that all outcomes are possible—that her world is still full of open doors.

“Hafeez?”

Her hand is at her throat now. It is impossible to swallow. Where is her husband? He should be here. Jasmine opens her mouth to call again, then registers the sound for the first time—a faint but steady pounding, every three or four seconds, echoing from the basement.

The stairs creak as she descends. Hafeez is sitting against the hot water tank, topless in his green running shorts, gently banging the back of his skull against the metal tank. He doesn't look up.

They met as freshmen at the University of Toronto, baby fat still clinging to their cheeks. Her trajectory was tantalizingly unclear back then. If she wasn't necessarily on a direct path to greatness, then at least she was still considering it. In college, she was a natural networker who made the Dean's List every year. She was slightly fragile, sure, but what woman isn't? All her life she's despised men who walk around with their chests puffed out and their voices booming, tossing opinions like confetti, one hundred percent confident that the world needs to hear what they have to say.

Thirty years later, almost all of her friends have remarked on how well she married. Every other husband ballooned, but Hafeez stayed thin and kept most of his hair. The man was a silver fox, sensitive enough to cry at movies but manly enough to regrout the shower. He'd managed a hedge fund, taken her to Africa, and retired early. She chose well. Who could ever imagine that would be a bad thing?

“You're sick of me,” Hafeez had slurred last New Year's, salty-eyed and drunk on the Changs' god-awful holiday punch. “Don't bother denying it.”

“Stop being so perfect all the time,” she replied, aiming for a joke but catching the jagged way that her words came out. “I've spent my entire life

being the bad guy.”

His wrinkles deepened, and for a moment she thought they were going to have a fight—a real plate-smashing, heart-scarring brawl. Then he cocked his head, smiled with infinite patience, and asked if she’d care for some tonic water.

“You’ve been crying,” she says now.

Even in the dim basement, she can see his eyes shine.

He doesn’t reply but stops banging against the tank. She steps closer as her husband’s hands start working the lip of his stomach, kneading his belly fat like bread dough, and she is unsettled. Her first thought is: I don’t recognize those hands. She wants to find his shirt and put it on him. She wants to go upstairs, get in the car, and drive to New York.

“I found her on the beach,” he says eventually, face sinking back into the shadows. “I came downstairs to get batteries for the smoke alarm and, bam, I remembered. It’s been decades, but I can still see her lying in the sand.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was ten. I’d never seen one before.”

Exhaling, she lingers on the bottom step, wondering if he put a bottle of sauvignon blanc in the fridge like she’d asked. Not for the first time, she wonders what it’d feel like to get divorced. Shelia, the firm’s new head of digital marketing, has been married three times and now lives with a golf pro with a beer belly and a bronzed tan. She doubts they discuss documentaries over supper.

“You’re not making sense. Let’s go upstairs and have a drink.”

“She was already dead when I found her,” Hafeez says. His hands rise, gesturing to her to come closer. He still needs her, even after all this time. It’s wonderful. It’s sickening. “We were at my grandma’s place in New Brunswick, a few hours from Moncton. Mom was napping, and Dad was off somewhere, probably working, so I went exploring.”

Giving up, she sits down and leans against the washing machine.

“I walked and walked on the beach until the cottage was gone. I remembered my heels got blistered, but I kept going, restless in that way kids get, you know? The sand ended, and all of a sudden I saw a half-hidden cave. It looked like the perfect kind of place for hiding pirate treasure.”

Approaching the cave, the boy who would be her husband tightened his sandals and mustered his courage. He crawled through the yawning hole in the limestone. Across the basement, he moves his arms to show her exactly

how he did it.

The cavern was dark and musty, and the ceiling was crumbling. Faded graffiti tags dotted the front walls. The light grew dim as he inched deeper. Waves murmured outside. Then he saw a short-haired woman slumped against the back wall, her body curled like a snail, her milky eyes staring straight through him. She was old and wearing a hospital gown with stains across the front.

“Her white hair was dusted brown by the sand,” he says now, tilting his head against the tank. “It took me forever to brush it out.”

“Wait, she was dead, right?”

“It’s crazy, isn’t it?” he says, not answering. “All the ways that a life can change.”

Jasmine nods half-heartedly, turning inward, thinking about how Chester Tamozki changed her own life. They had met in Boston while Chester was working on a Ph.D. at Syracuse and she was taking an East Coast vacation alone to celebrate finishing her MBA. Chester had smelled of pine and tasted of coffee. He had looked unsophisticated in the way that even smart men do when they’re young.

“At that age, the only woman you know, really, is your mother,” her husband continues. “So when her hair was clean, I thought I should take her to my parents. But her body was too heavy, and her skin felt too gross, so I used my sandal to bury her in the sand.”

Hafeez pulls off his sock and mimes using it like a shovel, scooping the air from their basement. She watches, shaking off thoughts of love affairs. He shows her how he buried the woman’s feet, legs, and chest but left her head uncovered.

“Then, when I was done, I took off my shirt and curled up beside her.”

She looks up. Had she heard him right? “Why would you do that?”

“I was a kid, Jas.” His voice cuts sharp. “Even through the sand, she had a terrible smell—rotten and dank. I had to breathe in gulps.”

“But you stayed there, spooning a buried corpse?”

“For a while, yeah. It took me years to figure out why I did it.”

When the spooning was done, he thought that someone should say something for the woman, like that preacher had done at his grandpa’s funeral, so he knelt and mumbled some made-up prayers. Jasmine didn’t know this boy he was describing. Her husband wasn’t religious.

Without Chester, she might have never married Hafeez. By the time she

told him about Boston, that weekend felt like ancient history—like the beginning of a story where she learns how to be a grown-up, buckle down, and succeed. Looking back, that was when she decided to marry Hafeez—the good guy who would make a good husband for her good life. He was handsome, smart, and never embarrassed by her—the kind of man who could listen patiently when she bitched about her friends but also open a Corona with his teeth. For nearly three decades, she had worked hard to deserve that man. She read *Harpers*, limited her drinking, acted like the mature grown-up that he was and would always be. When he spent too much time playing golf with the other Bay Street suits or insisted on buying the new Mercedes S-Class, she repaid him by being patient and measured in return—or at least she tried.

Across the basement, Hafeez exhales a breath. “The next summer, we returned to the beach, but the body was gone. I dug for her to be sure, but there was nothing but a beer bottle and a small gold earring in the sand. I threw the trash into the water and walked home.”

“Did you give her a name?” she asks when the story is done.

He looks up. “Why would you ask that?”

She shrugs.

“I did,” he says after a moment, “but I can’t remember it.”

A few years ago, she hunted Chester down on Facebook. Jasmine didn’t send a message, but she studied his photo albums. He taught English part-time at a community college in Toledo and was married to a tart with a rose tattoo stamped on her breast. In one picture they were bowling with friends, but neither one faced the camera. He eyed the lane, she stared off to the left, and if you cropped that photo in half you could imagine them as strangers heading in different directions—two ships drifting free in the starless night.

Later, Jasmine hears Hafeez humming in the shower. The sauvignon blanc is still in the wine rack, but she cracks it anyway and swigs straight from the bottle. The motion settles her nerves more than the drink. Setting down the bottle, she climbs the stairs and knocks on the bathroom door, shouting above the running water.

“Why did you spoon her?”

“What?” he shouts back.

“You said it took years to figure out why you spooned that corpse.”

The water dies, though lonely drips tinkle against the tile. “Yeah, it did.”

“So why?”

The shower door opens. He is flushed and pink-chested from the heat. Grabbing his towel, he covers his face and talks into the fabric. “I think I was lonely. My parents were so distant.”

“So it was therapeutic?”

“I knew that she wasn’t going anywhere and that I could lay there as long as I wanted.” He rubs his chest with the towel. “It’s funny, isn’t it? How as a kid you never think twice about these kinds of things?”

She wants to ask why he is remembering this now, but her hips are already turning.

In the home office she finds her laptop, his coffee mug, and their framed degrees hanging on the wall. She pulls down her master’s and looks at it. Her name is written across the paper, but it feels like the work of a younger sister or former friend. Jasmine wants to smash it. She feels lied to, betrayed. Where has this freak flag been for the last thirty years? What else has he kept secret? She strove constantly to become better—to match his goodness—and here he was, faking it all along.

She sees that Chester’s Facebook profile has been updated. He and the blond bimbo are standing in front of the Bellagio fountain in Las Vegas, a bright red MAGA hat on his head. The caption reads, “TEN MINUTES BEFORE I TRIPLE MY \$\$\$.” She closes the laptop. She’s never wanted to visit Vegas.

Hafeez calls from the kitchen, asking what’s for dinner. She knows he will come hunting for her. He is not the kind of man to march straight to the television. He will need to look her in the eye, smile, and see that she is still here in the centre of their house—their shared existence. She swallows. Her lips open a crack. She does not know what will happen when he enters the room. Will they talk all night and swap secrets? Will she pack her bags and drive to Washington, Phoenix, or Florida? Will she get drunk on white wine and watch a Ken Burns documentary in silence? She sees multiple doors opening at once.

The floorboards creak in the hall, and she sucks in a hot breath, her pulse racing, intensely alive.