

FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

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A-WORD

SO LET'S SAY THERE'S a girl, right, and maybe you get her pregnant. Maybe she's a nice girl but you don't think she's *the* girl. Say her name's Lindsay and she came to Halifax to do a Women's Studies degree and you wooed her with your Wookiee call after noticing her Yoda t-shirt last year when you were still tending bar at the campus pub. Maybe she's from a Mennonite community in Buffalo Corpse Manitoba and you're not sure how close she is to her family these days or whether she really believes in God anymore but she calls herself a "cultural Mennonite" and prays sometimes and you're terrified to use the A-word with her. Maybe even though she was totally DTF her parents probably wouldn't be cool with the fact that she was DTF and they might not even believe she was completely consensually DTF. In fact, her parents almost definitely don't use phrases like DTF, let alone drink or dance or play games with face cards. They would probably wear some kind of medieval torture shirt before using the A-word in the same breath as their daughter's name. Probably they also wouldn't like it if Lindsay explained that she wasn't exactly DTF until you committed to a long-term relationship, and it was only after like fifty handjobs that she explained this, so you found yourself moving in with her last year even though she was nineteen and blooming and you were going bald at twenty-six and you knew (even then) that she probably wasn't *the* girl. Although you really do love her. Sometimes. Like when you first moved in together and had that *Next Generation* marathon and she started screaming Klingon-style during sex and you couldn't stop laughing all night. Or the night you couldn't start the barbeque and she made steak on her camping stove in the backyard. There was a bottle of wine and a three quarter moon and you sat there together, eating red meat and slapping mosquitoes. Maybe those

other times—when her smile feels like rug burn and you try to get from the video games to the bathroom without her noticing because you don't want to say hi or tell her about your day—maybe that's just because you're in a lousy mood or you need some alone time.

Say you work at a dive bar on Gottingen and mostly your job involves pouring flat pints for VLT-addicted customers. Maybe most of those VLT-addicted customers have substance abuse problems and a solid chunk of them are on welfare and sometimes there's a gaggle lined up outside at 10 a.m. when you show up to open the bar. Maybe Steve the flamboyant retired English teacher likes to rush from machine to machine collecting the bonuses that weren't cashed in when they were shut off at midnight the night before. Say Steve's leaking hot vodka-breath and patting your back in that harmless-but-not way as you're trying to open the machines and count your till, meanwhile Brenda's parched voice is hollering for two draughts and Harriet needs you to get her a Bud Light in a cocktail glass with a straw. Also you were not exactly pious last night and your acid reflux is acting up and though you don't like to admit it the stale-beer-smell is making you fantasize about pouring yourself a Caesar for hair of the dog purposes. Say there's the lights and the music and the tables and the coffee and you've got to get everything done by 11 a.m. when Kosta the owner/manager comes in because he loves nothing more than to beak off at you if everything isn't just the way it's been since the Palaeolithic Era. Say Dora, Kosta's dinosaur of a mother, who opened the bar with her husband George back in the Palaeolithic, comes in at noon every day and that's when shit gets really heinous. Maybe Dora's husband George smoked too much and kept a strict deep fried diet and died of a heart attack when he was barely sixty and Dora has been emotionally radioactive ever since but she still shows no sign of slowing down healthwise. Maybe you figure Dora is a solid eighty-five because she tells occasional stories about growing up in Greece during wartime and she takes naps in the VLT room and hobbles around on a four-footed cane all day but sometimes, when she thinks nobody's watching, you catch her moving full kegs in the beer fridge to get at the musky homemade yogurt she stashes in there.

Let's say Dora comes in at noon everyday and asks you to get her twenty dollars from her personal compartment in the office safe. Say she feeds the money into Crank's Bash or Super Crazy Fun Pots and even though she's making five cent bets she's lucky if the twenty lasts an hour. Maybe

when she runs dry she starts yelling your name and it doesn't matter what you're in the middle of you have to run back to the safe and grab her another twenty and no matter what you're not fast enough and as you hand her the money she starts chirping about something else.

Maybe the reason Dora has her own compartment in the safe is because she used to take the money straight out of the till and some days she'd lose close to a grand and eventually Kosta had to step in and give her a daily limit of a hundo, dispensed one twenty at a time to make it last. Say some nights she makes you lend her five or ten bucks out of your tip money and promises to pay it back but never does. Maybe you "lend" her the money because as much as you despise her she's still a lonely old gambling-addicted crone whose husband has been dead for twenty odd. When you catch yourself feeling sorry for her you try to remember the time Lindsay came in wearing jean shorts and Dora said she had a pretty face but "shame about thighs."

Say most nights Dora runs out of her hundo by six o'clock or so and from then until tenish when Kosta drives her home she just sits there in the glassed-off VLT room, staring at you with her tiny olive-pit eyes, making sure you're doing the job the exact way she'd do it if she still had full use of her hip joints. Making sure you're not wasting water or leaving the fridge door open or leaving the lights on in the office. Making sure you're not letting the band stack their gear in the middle of the floor or running the dishwasher when it's not completely full or letting empty glasses pile up on the VLT "machinies." Making sure your shirt's tucked in and your sneakers are clean and your collar is straight. Asking why you put on weight and when you're going to get a haircut. Telling you the new bartender, Andrew, is a "nice, handsome fella." Asking why you can't be more like him. As if you would ever ride a longboard and play keytar in a Weird Al cover band.

Let's say this is basically your daily life at work. Maybe most days you spend a solid ten to fifteen fantasizing about duct-taping Dora to her chair and shoving a dirty bar rag into her mouth. Other days you have to get Kosta to cover the bar while you pretend to use the toilet and just sit in there, biting your clenched fist. Assuming this is what you go through every day could anyone blame you if you stopped by the Parched Boar for a pint of Propeller on your way home after one particularly long shift when you were hungover all morning and well into the afternoon and did *not* get time to sneak a Caesar for hair of the dog purposes? And if you're already at the Parched Boar for

a pint is there anything wrong with putting one twenty into Royal Spins or Coal Hard Cash? Maybe that's just how you like to wind down sometimes, after a hard day of work. Besides, you made a pile of Coal Hard Cash of your own today and you can do what you want with it. Maybe tonight you have to drain your tips and take a few bucks out of the ATM but you get up in the end. Then maybe after the Parched Boar closes you have to head down to the casino for a bit of blackjack, and as usual you end up on top, or at least on top until you decide on a few more hands for funzies, and when you're back to even minus drinks you jump in a cab and go home because you're a good guy and you're done with the casino and all this bullshit.

Maybe when you get home Lindsay's sitting on the couch, reading that George RR novel that's taking her months even though you read it in three days. Maybe when you say hello she doesn't put the book down but speaks right into the pages, like she can't even look at you. Say her voice is deeper than usual, carefully measured. Maybe she says, "Drew, it can *not* be like this," and although you know she's right you're scared of what she means by "it." Maybe she asks why you didn't pick up your phone or respond to her texts and you say, "Relax Lindsay." Maybe she screams, "Don't fracking tell me to relax!" and you can't help laughing because even when she's genuinely raging she uses *Battlestar*-speak and refuses to actually swear. Let's say she throws the George RR across the room and it lands all splayed out on the floor in a way that makes you furious because all the pages will get creased and rumpled and she knows how seriously you take care of your comics and books and games. Maybe while you're staring at the splayed book she storms into her bedroom and you go into the den and play WOW for a while then order some za. Bacon and pineapple, her favourite.

Maybe when the za gets there you give the driver a good tip and put some plates out on the kitchen table and knock on the bedroom door. Maybe she doesn't say you can't come in so you open the door and see her in bed with the lights off, face lit with iPhone glow. Say she lets you walk up to the bed and lean in but when you try to kiss her she turns away. Maybe you tell her you got her favourite pizza and she says you smell like beer and she's not hungry. Maybe you say you're sorry and is there anything you can do and she starts in with the what're-you-doing-with-your-life thing, saying how you need a plan, saying how you're too smart to be working at a dive bar on Gottingen, saying how you have combined honours in French and Sosh, as

if you didn't know you had combined honours in French and Sosh. Let's say you turn your back and leave the room, muttering something stupid about hormones. The bedroom door slams which means she heard the muttering and you want to pause but don't and your feet just start taking you down the front steps and onto the street.

You didn't even mean to say that thing about hormones and you want to go back and tell her that you could never mean a thing like that, that you're going to get your life together, that you know you're more valuable than this and you can't take Dora's creepy black eyes anymore so you're going to quit and start over. Maybe you want to tell her about your plan to open a comic slash gaming store and how you couldn't possibly afford it if she actually has the kid. Maybe you want to confess that the kid will ruin you, drain you, sentence you to pouring flat drafts to pay for diapers and ridiculous tiny shoes. Maybe you want to stand outside her window and whisper the A-word over and over again while she sleeps because you think then maybe she'd wake up and tell you she decided she wants to do it and the two of you can just relax and be young and free and nerd-chic again.

Let's say while you're mulling this over you somehow wind up outside your workplace. Maybe you have a personal rule against coming here drunk but you decide you're not *that* drunk and go inside. Maybe your personal rule is actually Kosta's rule, due to certain past moments of indignity. Maybe it's customer appreciation night and Dora and Kosta are already gone so the only people working are the two night bartenders, Jerry and Andrew, and the one-eyed security guard, Ralph. Say you know the band and you don't love bluegrass but you make a big show of stamping your feet as Jerry gets your double whiskey soda. Maybe there's a packed house because drinks are extra stupidly cheap on customer appreciation night. Say there's a guy with a fashion mullet right next to you at the bar, closer than you'd like anyone to be right now, and when you give him the death stare he does not back away fast enough. You take a deep breath and chug some whiskey soda and walk away, down to the front of the stage.

Maybe there are no attractive women on the dance floor but Harriet smiles hello and you take her by the hand and spin her. Maybe she throws her head back and laughs and even though she has smoker's mouth and looks grandmotherish you feel like everything is possible. Maybe then you feel pathetic for being such a stupid drunken optimist but you dance the song

out anyway and then Harriet goes to the washroom and the band announces their last tune and starts to play. What if, at this point, you glance across the crowd and see Mr. Fashion Mullet standing there, totally ignoring the music, hunching over his iPhone. Maybe then you walk over to him and slap the phone onto the floor and say, “WTF dude? Show some respect.”

Let’s say he throws his drink in your face and you feel the exact rush that you’ve been wanting to feel as you lunge forward and drill him in the chin. Maybe he’s on the ground and you keep going, landing five or six or seven quick jabs. Maybe you have always been good at this, always loved it, and you just watch your hands, loving how fast they can move—crackcrack-crackcrackcrack. Let’s say you stay in control, hit him just hard enough that he’ll be hurt but basically okay. Maybe you stand up, feeling great, until you see Ralph walking towards you, his single eye flaring discipline, and remember where you are. Maybe Ralph grabs your wrist, twisting your arm behind your back, saying, “You asked for it.” Maybe the pain is exhilarating and as Ralph leads you out you ask him whether he’ll tell Kosta and he says sorry but he’ll have to.

Let’s say when you get outside Lindsay’s standing there, her face bloated, her eyes small and red. Maybe you ask how much she saw and she says enough. Maybe she asks how much you had to drink and you hold two fingers up and say “too much.” Maybe she says that is so not cute this time and you turn to walk away, no idea where you’ll go, but she grabs your shoulder and says, “Drew. Come home. Pizza’s getting cold.”

What if you swell with a weird warm closeness that you’ve never felt before? What if it’s really good but also worse than ever because you know she’s still pregnant and she’s still not *the* girl? Maybe you imagine Dora in her lonely high-rise apartment, looking out over the Bedford Basin and remembering how she used to go to Crystal Crescent Beach with George back in the Palaeolithic Era, how she loved to rub sunscreen on his disgusting brown gut, watch the coarse black hairs go greasy. Maybe this makes you super desolated because even if you make it to eighty-whatever you’ll have nothing left but a sore liver and regret.

Do you take her hand and walk back towards the two-bedroom with the cold pizza and the splayed George RR? Do you place a tender palm on her belly and imagine whatever beautiful, talented future might be growing inside it? Do you realize that on some subterranean level you might have

shitkicked Mr. Fashion Mullet because you knew that that way you'd have no choice but to leave Dora and the machines and this vampire of a job? Do you realize that maybe Lindsay is as close to *the* girl as you've got so far and maybe people aren't *the* person without some serious effort? Do you think about all the fuckups who used to have like seventeen babies back before contraception and how those kids generally turned out okay, or at least survived like fifty per cent of the time? Do you think that stupid ridiculous thought that's been gnawing at you since you learned she was pregnant: maybe if you just have the kid you'll get healthy and start going for runs and join your friend Dale's soccer team and start saving for a down payment and learn what RRSP stands for and everything else will work itself out? Or do you squeeze Lindsay's hand, sweet but non-committal, thinking you have some tall cans in the fridge and there's a new ep of *Walking Dead*?