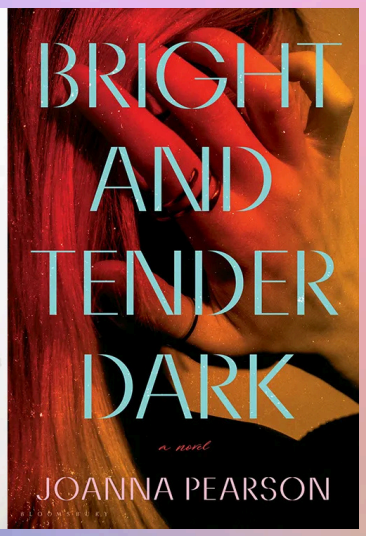
SHORT STORY NIGHT



Joanna Pearson stories have appeared in The Best American Short Stories, The Best American Mystery and Suspense, The Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and many other places!

Joanna Pearson

"Grand Mal"

Read this story and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, June 9th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises.
21 and older.

Virtual Interview!!!

Joanna Pearson

Grand Mal

My freshman roommate, Karlie, claimed that if you were being attacked, you had to throw a fit: fall to the ground, froth at the mouth, growl, fling your arms, spout gibberish. She demonstrated vividly, and with an ease that suggested she'd previously employed such a tactic successfully. She looked like a Holy Roller, someone in the grip of ecstatic revelation — nothing like an actual epileptic. I knew because my father suffered from epilepsy. But an attacker would hardly know the difference, Karlie promised. The exact details wouldn't matter. So go bananas with it. Vomit, if you're able. Let your eyes roll back in your head. The attacker would be so startled, so wary of whatever dread affliction or malevolent spirit had seized you, that he'd scamper off, harmless, into the shadows.

In another of the most vivid memories I have of Karlie, she's presiding over a group of our dormmates, passing out piping-hot break-and-bake cookies straight from the toaster oven along with hand-annotated chapter summaries printed from a book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. The girls, glossy-haired and chirruping like a cluster of morning songbirds, sit cross-legged atop her loft bed, sprawled across her lavender comforter. They perch on my desk, straddle my desk chair. Cooing abundantly, they fill the room with soft exhalations and murmurs of assent. Their sweet breath combines with the scent of fresh-baked cookies, mango body lotion, and tropical fruit hair conditioner, to turn the air madly, clashingly fragrant, like that in a fine ladies' boutique. Karlie, her very name like a filigreed pink greeting card, is leading a small group derived from a large, all-campus evangelical organization. She has a way of noticing the friendless and ushering them toward her, cultivating some secret specialness they each possess until it blooms. Already, at age eighteen, she holds herself with an unflappable maternal authority. Even then, as it's happening, this is a scene on which I can gaze but never truly enter, stuck outside, Little Match Girl–style, my

fingers icy against the metaphorical glass of a specific sort of faith, or lack thereof, that blocks true access. I have a chemistry exam looming. I am the sort of girl who takes looming chemistry exams seriously. There is no space for me — my seriousness, my worldly anxieties — here, in my own blessèd dorm room. I must trudge back to the library, but not before my roommate pauses and smiles. Karlie knows my type and pities me, handing me a cookie for my troubles. Even in this dismissal, she glows with a sanctified warmth. Everyone is a bit more radiant in Karlie's presence, and I am not immune.

This moment occurred, of course, before Karlie went through a phase of rebellion — a personal rumspringa during which she discovered drinking and the fact that *blow job* did not mean blowing gently against the nether regions of a person you love. Those were the innocent early days, when she still used terms like *front bottom* instead of *vagina* and collected lip balms flavored like pineapple soda and endorsed books that argued godly young women should refrain from kissing anyone until their wedding day. Submission to the right sort of authority, Karlie told me, was glorious. Liberating, even. It was a doublespeak so calm, so self-assured, that I envied her certitude.

Despite all this, Karlie possessed a brutal practicality. While her providential faith armed her with untroubled optimism in many respects — God would guide her through that Spanish quiz she hadn't studied for! — she had an array of strategies when it came to certain exigencies. She was a collector of tips gleaned from Oprah, ways to jab a pickpocket in the throat or how to escape from a trunk in the event of a carjacking. She could change a flat in the time it took AAA to show up; she could remove a stain from white linen with her own spit. God would nod approvingly. She was prepared: pink Mace, a dainty purse-sized first aid kit, double-sided tape to secure a bra strap, emergency tampons, granola bars, a Swiss Army knife.

Not three years after we met, Karlie was dead.

It happened during the latter days of Karlie's apostasy, when she'd reportedly started to consider a return to the fold as prodigal daughter. Her story would have made for an excellent faith journey, real road-to-Damascus stuff for the fresh converts. But that night, she'd gone out drinking. It was the end of winter break, early January, most students yet to return to town. According to those who'd accompanied her, Karlie had stayed out until the wee hours. When no one heard from her over the next two days, a friend finally went to check her off-campus apartment. She found Karlie's body right there on the living room floor. Violated. Murdered. The apartment showed no signs

of forced entry. It appeared she'd invited the killer, whoever he was, into her home — welcomed him, even. The story of her murder was covered salaciously by reporters for months.

We were no longer close at that point, but my friends knew that Karlie had been my freshman roommate — that she'd left me little prayer notes and Easter baskets and had generally treated me with all the love and attention a kindergarten teacher might bestow upon a reluctant student. During her time in the wilderness, I'd met up with Karlie once or twice for a drink, leaving at the point when she began to get flirty with whichever frat boy happened to be standing nearby. Her business, I figured. Whichever version of her I got, who was I — lonely and awkward, still overcoming the stutter that had plagued me throughout my childhood — to judge?

"She was magnetic," I told my friend Sari. We were studying together in the stacks not long after Karlie's death. "She wasn't supposed to end up like this. She didn't deserve it." Even though I hadn't bought into everything Karlie believed, I still thought of her as fundamentally *good* — a genuinely devout person, someone merely trying on wildness for size.

Sari made a little sucking sound through her teeth and looked hard at me. We knew better, of course. *I* knew better, or should have. Nobody deserved to end up murdered. It wasn't right to turn Karlie into an old-fashioned morality tale, an innocent led astray. But it was also hard not to fall back on old habits, not to provide myself reassurance, to seek out the fatal flaw and correct for it myself with numerous precautions. Never be a woman out alone, in the dark, after drinks. Never invite the enemy in. Punishments abounded.

I thought of Karlie's trick. I wondered if she'd even had the chance to try it: a practiced series of convulsions while she uncapped her Mace. I told Sari about this, but she just shook her head. We volunteered for an intimate partner violence support line; we were minoring in women's studies. We were already practicing our world-weariness. We thought we knew things.

"Come on, Joy," Sari said. "You know it doesn't work that way. I mean, I could argue that the safest thing for all of us would be just to rid the world of men. But you wouldn't want that, would you."

She wasn't really asking a question. Face burning, I turned away. Sari had recently learned about my sociology professor and me — it was a thing that was not a thing, not really. And it was over now, besides. But it had been *something*, this non-thing that we both instinctively kept hidden. I was still consumed by it; I thought about it all the time.

Him, my professor. Professor Hendrix. Sari did not approve. Now, cheeks still hot, a queasy feeling overtaking my insides, I thought of my roommate. Had I somehow invited this trouble? Had I unleashed it upon her? An unwitting snake with an apple? Only I'd wanted to taste the apple too. I'd wanted to gobble the whole thing.

Sari and I didn't speak of Karlie again. Long after graduation, Sari and I have remained in contact, trading emails now and then. She's an ACLU attorney who works with Title IX complaints, a dedicated person who lives by her principles. I'm a person who has, admittedly, dined out a few times on the story of my roommate's death. Everyone's interested in murder as long as it doesn't touch them. The story makes for rapt listeners, granting me the weirdly exalted status of the true-crime-adjacent, shameful and delicious. I always whisper an apology afterward, feeling the sordidness of my own soul.

They eventually arrested someone for Karlie's death and charged him: a loner who hung out regularly downtown, picking up odd jobs and panhandling — someone most of us recognized on sight — who, it seemed, had developed an obsession with Karlie. He'd previously been picked up only for minor charges: Peeping Tom antics, public indecency. I watched him on the news footage: shuffling along in shackles, mouth agape like a fish flung ashore, bewildered eyes. He had an intellectual disability and lived with his elderly mother. It troubled me, the whole thing. But life, for the living, went on.

And then, all these years later, a letter arrived. From Karlie.

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The letter was a sort of time traveler — worn with the years, the envelope written over and crossed out, originally addressed to my college apartment. It had made a long and improbable voyage through time after clearly having been tucked away somewhere and forgotten, found, redirected, forwarded. A miracle. I dared not open it.

The letter hit me at a bad time. I was taking long walks by myself at night, thinking, watching people live their lives behind windows, skittering out of the way of oncoming traffic. I'd been having a lot of trouble sleeping.

Karlie had been on my mind even before I got the letter: I'd recently happened on an article online about the guy who'd written *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Now he regretted it. He was divorcing his wife and leaving his pastorship. He'd lost his faith and no longer identified as a Christian. It all seemed too sad to warrant any schadenfreude.

I was getting a divorce myself.

My husband and I had spent the year I approached forty debating whether or not we would try to have a third child — a luxury child, my husband quipped, as if the child were an expensive tennis bracelet. This theoretical child, an indulgence, would be wonderful, but wearying, I conceded. We were already too exhausted to have sex, which seemed a necessary prerequisite to obtaining said luxury child. Plonking ourselves down in front of the television, we'd sometimes touch hands. It was the best we could do. We ultimately decided to forgo the metaphorical tennis bracelet in the name of salvaging our marriage. By then, however, my husband seemed to think there was no longer a marriage worth saving. He'd moved on, peremptorily, it turned out. Without my knowledge and against my will.

You're fundamentally unhappy, my husband said. *It oppresses me.*

I'm not depressed.

I didn't say you were. Fundamentally unhappy. It makes me unhappy too. Your unhappiness makes it hard for me to breathe.

He made unhappiness sound like the core feature of my personality. A suffocating force. The way that I looked at the world, pinched and vigilant, bracing for fire ants, falling branches, and tax deadlines rather than celebrations. But my unhappiness allowed me to get things done.

The divorce had turned bitter. There was money involved — my husband's, originally — and I'd come to the slightly paranoid conclusion he would stop at nothing to keep it. But this wasn't even the part that was getting to me. It was the fact that my husband was now having a third baby without me — with a younger woman he'd met through work, fresh cheeked and fresh egged. It was insulting in such a classic and retrograde way that I felt I couldn't mention it to anyone, that I must feign a carefree attitude about the whole situation. Let some other woman's pelvic floor get busted out like an old screen from its frame. I had better things to do.

I'm sorry, goose. XOXOXO

Karlie had written this on the envelope's exterior, rounded letters along the edge, smudged but legible.

The words rippled through me, giving shape to an inchoate thought that had been dormant inside me for all these years, a virus awakening, tingling through my nerves again.

I decided to find my old professor. It was a damp gray day when both my sons were at their father's. The house was too quiet without them, suffused with a ghostly absence. In the bathroom mirror, the face that stared back at me belonged to a haggard old woman.

My professor and I had not communicated in years. He'd moved during my junior year to take a position at a small liberal arts college in Georgia. But now, he'd returned here, back to the university town where I still lived, the place where he'd begun his career, to retire. I'd heard of this through a loose network of his former students, all admiring, all filled with unrequited intellectual adoration. I both scorned and related to these former students. My professor had seemed old when I'd been his student, but now, of course, he would be a senior citizen inarguably. I worked for a women's health nonprofit, and I wondered if he'd find conversation with current-me engaging. I assumed he was still interested in the things he'd studied over the course of his career: nondenominational Protestantism, cults, the prosperity gospel, televangelism. Younger women.

I could find him. I knew all his old haunts. The youthful me inside myself, still a hopeful girl, alert to every tender shoot, thirsting for beauty, for love, gave a little flutter like a wintering bird catching a ray of light. He is elderly, I reminded myself, and you are very sad. This is nothing, I told myself. You will find him and have a drink, catch up. He is simply an old mentor, an elderly friend. But my skin flushed and prickled at the thought.

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"Kneel down here," my roommate said.

It was cool outside, the leaves brushed with the first reddish tinge of fall. Karlie had wrapped a long woolen scarf around her neck, and that, combined with her green peacoat, made her look like a girl from a college catalog — bright, perky, ready to learn. Wearing only a thin long-sleeved shirt without a jacket, I shivered beside her. We were in an outdoor amphitheater that belonged to the college, a wooded place surrounded by trees. Her friend Jamie — a born-again kid from Mount Airy, hopelessly blond and handsome, a smiling, musical-loving boy who, it seemed, had translated all his repressed desires into a kind of ebullient evangelism — had come with us. The homoeroticism of the Jesus Jamie described was so painfully obvious, my cheeks reddened whenever he spoke of him.

"There," Jamie said, touching the nape of my neck gently, guiding my head forward. Through the trees we could still hear the sounds from campus, which was not so far away: students shouting, music playing from a boom box in one of the quads.

Karlie and Jamie had brought me directly here from a small

on-campus meeting room in which several of us had gathered to listen to Kent, one of the professional leaders of the all-campus evangelical group, sharing his personal faith journey. Kent was older, handsome in the way of an outdoor educator, and his voice had trembled at key moments when he'd spoken.

"Ask him to enter you," Jamie said softly, kneeling beside me. I could feel the afterglow of Kent's testimony still, all that promise. The Holy Ghost was coiled somewhere nearby, ready to unfurl into an all-seeing, all-knowing mist. "Ask Jesus to enter your heart."

Karlie kneeled beside me, her knee touching mine — a meaningful heat transmitted. Or maybe I was just cold. I glanced at her.

"Go ahead," she said. "Ask him."

The sun was already dropping somewhere out behind the trees, the road, the hill, and I could hear the whoosh of traffic. Jamie's eyes were closed. He seemed to radiate peace, beneficence. Karlie, too — she tipped her head back, her lips parted slightly, as if she were awaiting some divine dispensation. I wanted that, too: I wanted free of my loneliness. Already, I'd gone to frat parties with two other girls from our dorm, pleasantly ordinary college students who wanted all the trappings of a pleasantly ordinary experience: beer pong, formals, all-nighters, pizza. I'd stood in a corner stiffly, until a boy with a pock-marked face had sauntered over and asked if I was in his anthro lecture. When I'd been unable to formulate any answer, he'd left me standing there, alone.

I asked God, forming the words neatly in my mind like a prayer. Jamie gave my hand a squeeze, and I saw Karlie's lips moving, offering some intercession on my behalf.

I waited. Nothing happened.

Finally, as if we'd all agreed to it, we stood up. Jamie and Karlie were beaming at me.

"You did it, Joy," Karlie said, and there was a new lightness I felt in my head, a strange, ebullient, hollowed feeling — but maybe that was the cold, the rush of blood from my head to my feet.

"Joy!" Jamie said, giving my name its full meaning and weight, my name, which had always clung to me like a cruel parody. How had my parents not known better than to give me, their sallow, serious, frowning daughter, a name of elation?

"Thank you," I said, although I didn't know what I was thanking them for.

The next day when I went to my professor's office hours, I felt emboldened. No one had ever taught me to flirt, so my only coyness,

my one move, was to play contrarian: I told him what had happened. My recent salvation. He chuckled slightly.

"Another soul saved, another notch on their belts," he said, turning to the shelf of books behind him, moving several volumes to pull out the bottle of bourbon he kept there. From his desk drawer, he withdrew two glasses and poured us each a drink.

I had been meeting him here, after class, regularly for months now, since the day he'd noticed a particular question I'd asked in class about the First Great Awakening. There must have been a clue in my voice, in the way I'd gazed at him, that conveyed friendlessness and hunger. *Preacher's kid*, he'd said, pointing at me with one long, pale finger after the rest of the class had left. *You're lost. I get it. I was a preacher's kid too.* I had nodded, although technically I was unsure if I still counted as a preacher's kid. My father's seizures had grown worse. What for so long he'd managed to frame as a divine gift, the hand of God descending only rarely and electrifyingly, bestowing ethereal visions during his postictal states, had now turned to something vicious and frequent. A curse. It had soured my father's mind, leaving him gray faced and distant, hardly able to get out of bed. *A turning of the spiritual milk*, he had said. My mother had helped him negotiate a medical leave. On recent visits, the only times I'd seen him get out of bed was shuffling to microwave a mug of soup. He hadn't set foot in the church for over a year. My father, it seemed to me, was now more lost than I.

My professor told me he'd found himself similarly bewildered by the vastness of his large university back when he'd first arrived as a student. Full of questions, just like me. *A familiar story*, he'd said, nodding knowingly, although I'd actually told him very little. It felt like a magic trick, the way he'd read me so easily.

"No, it wasn't like that. They're my friends," I said, but the flush of the cold amphitheater returned to me then, my cheeks growing hot once more. I wasn't just another heathen converted, a tally mark on their scorecard.

He shrugged and took a sip from his glass, gesturing for me to drink also. I did, unable to tell if the burning in my throat was the threat of tears or the alcohol.

"I'm sure they are."

"Anyway, I felt it," I said, which now, with some distance from the experience, almost didn't seem like a lie. "It felt different from before. From back home. In my old church. This felt real." Already, it seemed, the sip of bourbon was making me bold — or maybe it was the illicit atmosphere of these meetings, which had become more and more

regular, in my professor's office, sharing drinks. Something pulled taut between us, invisible, daring one of us to be the first to pluck it.

"Oh, yeah?"

He raised an eyebrow, his eyes twinkling in amusement. Behind him, there was a photo: of him and his wife before the Parthenon. She looked like a nice woman, ordinary — which made me hate her all the more.

"Yeah," I said, and as we talked about my experience, I could feel a kind of effortless revision happening: the cold air a kind of clarity, the rushing sensation in my head when I'd stood up like being reborn, a God-ghost burrowing into my chest parasitically, causing a blossoming of my hard little unripe heart.

"Do tell."

"I felt faint. Like something was coming over me. A mystery. It was weird."

In my mind, I was articulate, sensitive to the vagaries of experience — but with my professor, I still used the crude monosyllables of late adolescence. It was like the blaze of my professor's intelligence rendered me stupid. He drank the rest of his bourbon in a gulp, but I could see through the blur of his glass that he was smiling, trying not to laugh.

"That feeling of mystery," he said, "is probably something we could summon right here. In this dusty little office. It wouldn't take much."

"That's not what Karlie says," I told him. I shared with him what she'd told me of signs she'd received: a message intuited from a bit of green ribbon blowing directly into her path, a butterfly alighting on her nose and filling her with an extraordinary sense of comfort, the time she'd been half asleep and swore she witnessed a seraphic messenger, felt the distinct pressure of heavenly hands on her shoulders while she prayed.

My professor nodded. I could still see amusement in his eyes. He poured himself another bourbon.

"I'd like to meet this Karlie," he said. "She sounds like a real wonder."

I shrugged. Perhaps he was joking, but people did say that about Karlie, who was very convincing, and also beautiful in a soft, womanly way. She had large eyes and a pretty mouth and face, the full arms of an old-fashioned milk maiden. Everyone loved her — Kent, the other leaders of the evangelical group, her peers, the rest of the girls in our dorm. She looked like someone from a Vermeer; I'd seen those paintings in my art history class and had thought of Karlie immediately. The whiteness of her cheeks, that untouchable gaze of hers.

He seemed to intuit my thoughts because he pulled himself closer,

scraping the chair across the floor. He let the scoop of his hand fall on my knee, where it rested warmly. His face was across from mine, our breath mingling. This was the closest we'd ever sat.

"I mean as an interview subject," my professor said softly. He was writing a paper on young evangelicals. "If she's willing to participate."

I nodded. Other powers seemed to be working on me then — the bourbon, the cramped space of the office, my professor's hand on my knee.

"I'll show you that feeling of mystery," my professor said, his voice turned very soft, very close to my ear. "We can surely conjure it."

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I found my professor at the bar. It was the one nearby campus that he'd frequented back in his teaching days. I'd seen him there many times: flanked by eager graduate students and seniors from his honors seminar, hands awhirl as he spoke, basking in the glow of all that attention. I'd never gone. I'd never been invited, but I'd walked past many times, crunching through the leaves and stealing jealous glances through the window. I was no one, I'd had to remind myself — even with those long, bourbon-soaked talks during his office hours, the way my professor had touched the back of my neck just so, a feeling like the Paraclete summoned. I was no one. It was all subtext without text.

Now, my professor sat in the booth alone.

He saw me standing outside and waved. It felt like he'd been waiting for me to appear, like the whole thing had been prearranged, predetermined. I pushed open the door and walked up to him, watching his inscrutable smile. There was always part of him, I'd felt, that was gently amused and laughing at me. I found that I wanted to leave already.

"Joy!" he said, like he meant it, my name.

He looked so old, so shrunken and wizened, that I almost couldn't bear it. I still felt the same inside, an earnest college girl, but I wondered if he thought the same seeing me. I was middle-aged; he was an old man.

"What are the odds? Sit, Joy, sit!"

His smile hurt me. He seemed to be recalling an oft-told joke, grateful, like I reminded him of a time he'd loved and forgotten.

"It's good to see you," he said. He was already beckoning to the waitress and ordering me a drink — bourbon, like old times. I didn't have the heart to tell him that it was something I'd only pretended to like, for his sake.

I sat down in the booth across from him and looked directly into his face. Words would not come to me. The unopened letter from my past, from Karlie, was in my bag.

"You could say *It's good to see you too*," my professor said, and his voice was jovial, but I could see the mildest irritation in his gestures, in the way he picked up his glass quickly and drank.

"I read something and thought of you," I said, telling him about the article I'd seen on the *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* guy, the tawdry sadness of it. I mentioned my own divorce, making light of it, easy-breezy, like a fun-time girl. He laughed in his old way again, as if I were unbearably precocious, but then his laughter sputtered to a cough.

I'd never quite liked his laughter, I realized — the smugness it held. My anger toward him was finally coalescing after all the years of uncertainty, and I could feel it burbling up now, like the need to retch.

"Karlie," I said quietly. "Why? Why did it have to be her?"

A look passed over his face quickly, darkening it, but he remained impassive. Carefully, he folded up his napkin into triangles and then took another sip of his drink. There was music playing, an old B-52's song from another era that might as well have been an age of buggies and oil lamps — we were insulated by the music, the clatter of silverware, the voices of other customers. I felt alone with him, in a strange bubble of privacy. *Roam if you want to* . . . Finally, he spoke.

"People are complicated, Joy," he said slowly. With one knobby finger, he traced the circumference of his glass, then held it up to the dying light from the window, as if inspecting it for impurities. "Karlie was very complicated. I think you may never have fully appreciated that."

"She was my friend."

"No doubt of that. I like to think she was mine as well." He sighed very deeply. The B-52's were playing and playing, *without wings, without wheels*, with a Möbius strip–like endlessness, and the dusky bar seemed to be the maw of some sick carnival ride. "It was a tragedy," my professor said softly, in the special, fatherly voice he'd used when I was riled. I'd always hated that voice, which indeed reminded me of my own father — sunken eyed and silent, his uncut hair fanned out against his pillow pitifully, like a failed saint.

"You killed her," I said quietly. "Karlie. My roommate. Or you might as well have. It was your fault. She was so good before she met you. You ruined her."

At this, he laughed, but his eyes had turned hard, bleak.

"Joy," my professor said slowly, dabbing at his lips with the folded

napkin. His hands were liver spotted now, with none of the power I recalled. "I know you're under a great deal of stress. With your divorce. I'm going to ignore what you just said. You're beside yourself."

But I could not stop myself. All those old days rushed back to me.

After I'd introduced Karlie to my professor, she'd agreed to participate in his research. They began to meet regularly.

I'm teaching him things, Karlie told me. *I'm sharing the Gospel*, and her eyes shot heavenward, but I could see the way a blush rose up her neck, the extra care she put into her appearance before they met. And I saw the tiny bruise on her neck, a devil's kiss. I'd begun loitering in the hallway outside my professor's office, trying to catch glimpses of them together, trying to comprehend exactly what was going on — although I knew. Of course I knew. I lingered near the departmental building, waiting to see them exit together, watching over time as a casual familiarity grew ever so subtly between them: his arm on her shoulder just so, Karlie wearing his sweater as it got colder.

When I stopped showing up to my professor's office hours after class and he said nothing at all, that was the end of it for me. I finished out the semester but turned taciturn in class, reluctant, careful to do only the bare minimum. Professor Hendrix never sought me out or asked why. It was like whatever we'd once shared had simply been a figment of my own imagination.

"It was your fault," I repeated, although I was hardly sure why I was saying it. Karlie had made her own choices. There was another man in jail, DNA evidence. Open and shut. This man across from me, my former professor, was pitiful now, impotent, a king dethroned. Maybe I was simply cruel.

I put the letter from Karlie onto the table for him to see, like it was proof.

He shook his head and put his hands into the sparse hair at his temples, pressing as if to stop an ache in his head.

"You were jealous," he whispered. "You wanted me to cross that line with you."

"No."

"You hated her."

I thought then of all those days I'd waited outside his office, listening to voices inside — his, Karlie's. She'd laugh softly, he'd murmur something, she'd laugh again, but soon there were other sounds. I'd stood by the door listening, a terrible heat spreading over me.

The truth is that my professor never so much as kissed me, although his every gesture had seemed to promise it: fingers on my shoulders,

my back, sending shivers down my neck. His breath behind my ears, at the nape of my neck. The barometric pressure between us thick, ominous. Promises, signals, implications, leaving me like an arrow pulled back on a bow but never released into flight.

"I never hated her," I said.

He shook his head again, like it was all very sad to him. He took another drink. I saw he still was in possession of his most notable attributes: superciliousness, composure.

"Poor lost preacher's kid with her sick-in-the-head daddy."

I stood to leave, my bag knocking over my bourbon and spilling it on Karlie's letter. I gave a little gasp and tried to rescue the letter, but it was already wet. I plucked it from the puddle of liquor.

"I'm praying for you," he said.

I scoffed. There was bourbon dripping from Karlie's letter onto the toes of my boots.

"God, I hate you."

I meant it every possible way.

He didn't answer me. He said nothing when I left.

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Outside the bar, I stood on the corner, catching my breath. My teeth chattered. It had grown colder now, but not nearly as cold as I felt, and it was already dark although barely after 5:00 p.m. I pressed a cocktail napkin I'd grabbed against the damp part of the letter.

Karlie and I were close only freshman year. By the time sophomore year ended, I rarely saw her. I'd stopped speaking to Professor Hendrix entirely by then. By junior year, I'd moved to an off-campus apartment with Sari and some of the others I'd met in my women's studies seminar. *Simpatico folk*, we called ourselves. It was a relief not to be seeking some grander plane of being. I felt at ease with my new friends: slump-shouldered former high school nerds made good; vigorous people who invested themselves in things like the college radio station or environmental action campaigns or slam poetry.

With Karlie, I remained pleasantly aloof. We met up only now and then before she died, and we never again spoke of Professor Hendrix. He left for his new job soon after her death.

I tried to shake off the thought of him — a mean old man. Pathetic. I walked away from the bar, ignoring the clusters of laughing students who clotted the sidewalk. Of course Professor Hendrix did not rush out trying to stop me or apologize. I did not turn around to see, but I

knew he would be seated peacefully in his booth, finishing his drink in neat sips, untroubled by our encounter.

My husband's lawyer had sent another threatening email to me, trying to get me to sign a bunch of papers, accede to his demands. I hadn't yet. He'd riled the defiant part of me. I wouldn't go down without a fight.

Instead of walking back to where I'd parked, I headed the opposite direction, entering a part of town close to campus where there were million-dollar houses and streets shaded by stately trees. My hands were still shaking, so I stuffed them into my pockets. The boots I wore were a half size too small and pinched my toes. I walked anyway.

I was walking to my husband's house — the new house he shared with the woman who would be his new wife, my replacement. When I got there, I stood at the foot of the drive so I could see into the glowing windows of their kitchen.

There were silhouettes moving: my husband, my sons, the new woman with the baby inside her. I could see them as shapes, like figures in a shadow play. Maybe if I looked long enough, I would really see. I watched them readying dinner and wiped my cheek in the dark.

Karlie's letter was in my pocket, half ruined. It was too dark to read, but I pulled the letter out anyway. I opened the envelope and turned on the light from my phone.

Dear Joy,

I wanted to thank you for introducing me to Prof. H. I also wanted to say I'm sorry — I know in becoming close to him I took something from you. But he's not a good man. And I'm not just saying that to make you feel better or justify anything. I know you've been following me. I've seen you. I saw you duck into the stairwell when we were leaving Howell Hall. And I saw you that day you were standing just outside his office, pretending to look at a bulletin board. Another time you were sitting at the coffee shop across the way wearing sunglasses, but I pretended not to notice. I didn't want to embarrass you. I don't blame you. I'm not so selfish that it doesn't hurt me to think of you hurt, alone, seeing us together. But you're not a very good spy, Joy, and now that you've started coming to my apartment — watching me at night, from outside my bedroom window — it's too much. Unsettling. You should know I've cut things off with him. The whole thing was a mistake, Joy. So you can stop trailing me after I park my car. I've heard you in the bushes when I leave here at night. Or sometimes when I'm coming home. You don't have to hide anymore, Joy. I get it. I'm not mad. Let's talk, please. Next time I hear you out there, I'm just going to open the door and invite you in. We'll drink tea and eat cookies

and it'll be just like the beginning of freshman year all over again. If you'll accept my apology. I'm sorry! I love you, goose. — Karlie

I blinked, and blinked again, then folded the letter back into its envelope. A precious, perishable thing. She'd understood how I felt the whole time. And yet: she was wrong. I'd never been following Karlie. I'd only been following him. My professor. A sick, strange sadness uncurled in my stomach.

A door of the house opened, and out came someone into the dark. I heard the clunk of a trash can being pushed toward the curb. I clicked off the light in my phone quickly and held my breath, motionless.

The wheels of the trash can rumbled closer and closer to me, and then stopped. There, in the dimness, I saw her. She swam into focus, a shadowy woman-shape with the unmistakable swell of pregnancy. Her eyes seemed feline, reflecting ambient light from the other houses.

"You," she said, her voice like a knife. "You again. You're trespassing. I could call the cops."

She moved closer to me, her belly a taunt.

"You've got to stop doing this," she said. "You've got to leave us alone."

I heard the door of the house open again and someone step out.

"Maggie?"

That was the woman's name. It was my husband's voice saying it. I could see his outline, backlit on the porch, as he peered into the darkness.

"You alright?"

I gripped Karlie's letter tight in my fist, but I let the rest of myself slump to the cool concrete. I lay on my back, looking up into the starless sky. Then I let all that feeling course through me. Unlike Karlie, I knew how to do it right. I'd seen my father so many times. I'd watched it happen, an ungovernable force, a wordless thing, like being possessed by something — God, perhaps, or a lesser demon.

"Jesus, John. There's something wrong with her. She's . . . Are you OK?"

"Joy?"

I heard the stricken sound of my husband's voice, his feet pounding down the path — my husband, running to my aid, running because worry is merely one step away from love, and love, one step away from hate.

My arms seized and jerked like I'd been shot through with electricity.

I let my head fall back, my mouth foam. My arms stiffened and jerked from their sockets. My tongue had gone rigid in my mouth. I let her scream at it, at my display — she and my husband, hovering over me like two abiding angels — although this time, it truly felt real. Like getting struck by lightning. Or holiness, submitting once and for all.