

Gregory Dirkson

Return Policy

5:28 am. The wind rocked the blinking yellow streetlights hanging outside the school. Inside the neighboring discolored brick apartments, the only lit window chronicled the packing of a young woman. A car navigated the streets for newspaper boxes and at each stop, a figure in a coat and gloves delivered blue plastic bags. The wind rushed down Main Street, leaving the elementary/middle school behind, and ricocheted off the exteriors of the Walmart, Stop&Shop, Dunkin Donuts, Chiles, local bars and small American restaurants in the center of the urban town. The transit bus, searching for morning commuters, left the station and passed the Drives and Avenues of the housing districts; raised ranches with two-car garages, no need for public transportation. Little movement or sound came from the cloned neighborhood, but a man was hitting the snooze button in his bedroom, instead of rising from the cotton sheets. On various properties, lights were on, showers were started, cars were warmed, and goodbyes were exchanged. The sky was still black.

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6:04 am. In the corner bedroom of a maroon raised ranch, Joe was running late. The broken lace of his “Wolverine” work boots, thin threads sprayed from the loose end, reminded him to get new boots. He didn’t have a problem with the stains, the dirt showcased hard work, but since he spent the day on his feet, he needed support.

After adjusting the blue, standard issue, workpants over the laces of the boots, he turned toward the cherry oak frame on the bedside dresser and sighed. He remembered how a passing elderly couple took the picture, while the four of them posed in front of “Layne’s Kitchen,” where they ate breakfast every morning on vacation in Portland, Maine. Joe

would order coffee, rye-toast, and the leftovers from the plates of the girls and Heather. Despite his unadventurous order, it was the best breakfast he had ever eaten. The visit to Maine was their last vacation as a family.

He was wasting time. A strict schedule kept the girls calm. Heather left on July 14th. He was helping hang whiteboards in the mathematics wing of the newly remodeled Monroe Middle School. When his phone vibrated and flashed the caller ID of “home” he thought it was Kelly or Rebecca wondering where he put the dog leash, since they always wanted to leave it in the middle of the floor, when it belonged in the closet. His answer of ‘it’s in the closet’ was met with ‘where’s mom?’

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8:04 pm. Inside a two bedroom apartment in the faded brick building, a cry from an unlit hallway clashed with the glow from the television screen. Veronica, sitting on the couch, relaxing, raised her hands to cover her ears while her gaze left the screen to the annoyance down the hall.

Veronica had already turned the television down to a barely audible level and kept her movements to the small shuffling of limbs. She didn’t want to deal with a problem. Another cry interrupted her. The show went to commercial. She placed the bowl of “butter-lover” popcorn on the glass edge of the coffee table, rested the remote on the “Cosmo” magazines beneath the bare lamp, and evenly folded the corona blanket into its corner position of the maroon couch.

With her feet planted, she stared down the hallway at the black screech. Veronica’s shoulders slumped as she exhaled. The cry from the darkness was reverberating in her head, a musical solo of need and loneliness. She knew the neighbors would be awake by now, but fuck them; at least they had buffering walls.

She rocked on the couch with her anger. Her eyes locked onto the partially open door, “What is your fucking problem?” Lunging from the couch, Veronica stalked toward the room, “You wanna cry? I’ll give you something to cry about.”

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6:17 am. Hearing the neighbor’s car pulling away from their house, Joe passed the closed bathroom and heard giggling from the dual-faucet sink.

"Morning. Breakfast in fifteen. Scrambled eggs with cheese and frog-legs." The girls gargled out "Dad" with toothpaste filled mouths. He smiled while descending the stairs. In the kitchen, he turned on the stove, started his coffee, placed bread in the toaster and grabbed three eggs, yellow American cheese, 2% milk, butter, and orange juice from the refrigerator. Each girl received half of the eggs, a piece of toast with orange marmalade, and a glass of orange juice. He poured his first cup of coffee and walked to the door that led to the back porch.

Heather never threatened to leave, but her unexpected absence from the house, immediately led to Joe's understanding that this was for good. After the phone call, he rushed home to find half of the suitcase set gone and his drawers emptied. There was no note. He was sitting on the edge of the bed when the girls came in the room and noticed the bare drawers and now spacious closet. Rebecca wanted to know if she went on vacation and the older Kelly began to cry.

Joe spent summer nights reassuring the girls of their mother's love and safety while instituting a schedule to keep them from becoming too upset. His actions were successful. Today marked the end of the second week of February and both girls were doing fine in school. Kelly was enjoying her move into the middle school her father had helped construct, and Rebecca was the best in her fourth grade class at the multiplication table.

Locking the door, he waited in the dining room for them to come eat. An unlocked door meant she was still welcome. The stomping down the stairs broke his trance. Before they turned into the dining room, he readied a smile as they sat and drank juice.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" In mid swig, Kelly and Rebecca placed their glasses down, pushed out their chairs and hugged Joe. Grasping them with a bear-hug, he lifted them off the ground and their smalls kicks of annoyance were silenced by laughter. "Hey, stop messing around and eat breakfast."

They began to eat again and Joe warmed his coffee.

"Are we doin anything for vacation?" Kelly said while piling scrambled eggs on her marmalade-covered toast. "Brenda is from class."

"I won't have time until the summer. You know that."

Rebecca joined the pleading, "But, we never go anywhere."

"Yeah, why can't we?"

The girls stopped eating and stared at Joe while he sipped coffee. He ignored them while he sifted through envelopes on the counter and made their lunches. "Dad." He spread peanut butter and slices of banana on Rebecca's sandwich and only strawberry jelly on Kelly's. "Dad."

“We don’t have to go far.”

“Maybe camping.”

Kelly gave her sister the ‘that was stupid look, “It’s too cold to go camping.”

“Well, you’re not saying no good ideas.”

Joe corrected Rebecca, “It’s any good ideas.”

“I just wanna go somewhere. I’m bored.”

Kelly and Rebecca rose from the table, breakfasts finished and attention focused on persuading their father. A school bus drove by on its routine round-up of students.

“Come on Dad. Please.” Both were pleading and lightly tugging on his overcoat.

“We used to go all the time with mom.”

The pulling stopped, each girl backed away from their father, who was pressing his hands against the counter with his back to them. Joe closed the clasps of their lunchboxes, and spoke to the oak cabinets, “We’ll go on a day trip or something. Get your coats, we’re leaving soon.”

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8:12 pm. Veronica’s heavy steps contrasted the wailing. The clang of the elastic stopper, announced her presence. Holding onto the door, she loomed over the crib. Through the flickering the television screen, Veronica adjusted the blanket to cover the tangled mass of wriggling and wailing before closing the door. She changed into a pair of tight jeans, a revealing top, put on her heavy coat, grabbed her keys and license, left the television on, and walked out the door. Rather than wait for the bus, she walked across the street and followed Main Street until the warm doors of the bar near Walmart opened and offered her warmth and silence.

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10:37 pm. Inside the ‘Corner Café’, situated conveniently at the corner of Main street and the end of the consumer market, the lit television screens flashed sports highlights from the day and provided the only strong light in the room. Every patron was at the bar besides the man at the pool table and Veronica and a young man who occupied a table by the window.

Veronica teased the straw in her newly ordered strawberry margarita with her tongue. Two glasses containing overheating cubes of rose-colored ice were to her left. “Are you trying to get me drunk David?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d get drunk and take advantage of me.” Moving the drinks aside, she leaned over the table, allowing her breasts to rest and reveal, while kissing him. The fruit from her mouth combined with the cream from his white-Russian reminded Veronica of the Creamsicles from her childhood.

“That was nice,” he grabbed his drink and finished it.

Veronica licked the sugar from the rim of her glass. “You want to come over my place?” He nodded. She finished her drink and rattled the ice in her glass.

“We’ll take my car.” He quickly led her outside to his car. Veronica exhaled heavily, watching her breath dance and then disappear in the cold air.

Dave was holding out his keys to her, “Do you want to drive? I don’t like driving to places I don’t know at night.” “Nah, it’s not far and it’ll be worth it.” He unlocked the door and helped her in. As he walked over to the driver’s side, Veronica drank water from a discarded bottle on the floor and applied some lip balm. While the engine warmed, and the heat fought to produce warm air, Veronica kissed Dave and lightly bit his lip.

“Ow.”

“You don’t like it rough?” She smiled and Dave came in for another kiss, but she denied him.

“Take a left out of the bar onto Main. At the third light, after the school, take a left. It’s the first complex on the right.” Once out of the parking lot, Veronica rested her hand on his crotch. She massaged him through the jeans, using the friction of the fabric to make him erect.

She undid his belt, buckle, zipper, and held him in her hand, bent over and took him in her mouth. His moans and pelvic gesticulations monitored his enjoyment and established a pace for her to follow. Dave’s free hand rubbed her lower back and grabbed her ass mirroring the movements from his groin.

Veronica felt his joints stiffen and stopped, allowing him to calm down. “I want to save that for later,” she said, wiping the corners of her mouth. “Take a right here.” He parked the car, readjusted his clothes, and accompanied her toward the apartment.

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6:55 am. Joe parked close to the sidewalk directly in front of the entrance to the elementary/middle school. “Have a good day girls. Zip up your jackets.” Leaning into the back seat, he kissed each girl on the cheek and gave a quick smile. After good byes and the shuffling of heavy book-bags, he watched Kelly and Rebecca enter the doors that connected the middle

and elementary schools. Only when they were both safely in the building did he move so other parents could drop their kids off in the front of the school.

The office knew Heather had left and was under strict orders to notify him if she appeared. Joe nervously hoped that one morning, while Kelly and Rebecca walked into school, she would be there to greet them. They wanted their mother back and he wanted answers.

Parking in his assigned spot, Joe killed the engine and the rest of his coffee from the morning. He gathered the tools needed to survive the day, coffee mug, lunch consisting of two apples, ham sandwich on rye, and three chocolate-chip cookies, wrapped in a plastic Wonder bread bag, and the latest Steven King novel. He read during his breaks to avoid the conversations of the custodians who worked under him. He popped a piece of gum, chewed it five or seven times while putting on his gloves, and spit it onto the cracked, faded yellow line on the pavement while closing the door of the car. Stretching he turned toward the service entrance, vision clouded by his breath.

The wind cut his face and the short walk to the entrance made his eyes water. The door was slightly stuck because the brisk exterior air and the controlled interior heat battled for supremacy among the joints and insulation that surrounded the heavy metal door. Using all his weight, Joe pushed down, pulled on the handle, and the heat welcomed him, a dying act before exiting into the harsh conditions of a January morning.

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11:05 pm. In the glow of the blinking stoplights Dave and Veronica walked up the darkened cement stairs. Dave still grinned when they closed the door on the chilling night temperatures.

“That was amazing.”

“I’m glad you liked it. There’s more.” A low murmur of isolation and the television greeted her when she opened the door. Veronica hoped the child’s mumble was only audible because her ears were accustomed to listening for it. Grabbing him by the belt, she led him toward the closed, complaining door into the bedroom.

“I want you to fuck me.” He gave no verbal response, but lifted her shirt over her head and unhooked her bra. She removed his pants for the second time, while he cupped and grazed the sensitive surface of her swollen breasts.

He placed scattered kisses on her neck, until he eventually reached her left breast. His hot breath and lips were a welcoming touch from the hungry mouth that usually hung from her breasts. The desire to have them caressed rather than sustain life was overwhelmingly erotic and she felt the wave of an orgasm rush over her.

Returning to him, she lowered his pants, while he tried to remove his shoes. In his urgency, he kicked his foot and flung a shoe into the wall shared with the crib. The low muttering from the wall became an awakened scream. As the volume escalated, he deflated in her hands.

“What the fuck?”

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7:01 am. Missing from Joe’s usual entrance was the jovial chitchat of the other staff members while waiting for his daily tasks. Silence accompanied him to the break-room where Joe opened the refrigerator, moved the Pepsi bottle and the creamer to the side, placed his lunch behind them, and barricaded his food with the two misplaced liquids and a bottle of ketchup. He punched in and reached for the coffee pot. It was empty.

Joe always told himself that his underlings made coffee for him, to appease the god of their job. He knew this was untrue because just like him, they needed coffee to function, but he could always count on a filled, steaming pot of black coffee when he arrived. This was the first morning that he could remember without coffee. “Bastards.” Opening the cabinet in front of him, Joe found the filters and the Folgers original. While fumbling with the gold plastic cover he surveyed the break room for the first time. As his fingers searched for the scoop and measured out the proper amount of ground beans, he noticed the jackets thrown on the table with the corresponding employee’s lunch anchoring the various heavy jackets to the table. All of his employees knew that Joe was a strong advocate for neatness; their work represented him, and he didn’t allow sloppiness. His anger was rising but then he noticed the assigned mugs were still hanging over the sink, dry; they had not brewed coffee.

Footsteps approached the door. Frank, the overnight custodian, opened the door, red-faced and breathing-heavy. “Hey Joe. You...uh...gotta come with me.” Frank did not motion for Joe to follow, only turned and began striding away from the half-opened door.

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11:16 pm. Veronica didn’t want the intensity to end. She kept stroking him, helping to regain his lost erection. She quickened her pace.

“I’m sorry. Just ignore it.”

“Where is that...”

“It’s my baby. Come on, I want to...”

“Are you serious.” Dave focused on the adjacent wall, “I’m sorry. I can’t.” The screeches from the other room functioned as theme music as he raced to find his clothes and place them where they belonged on his body. Talking over the cries from the other room, Dave tried to understand, “Why did you bring…you left…thanks…I gotta leave.” He left. Veronica stood in the room, half-naked, and waited for him to come back; hoping he forgot something.

After hearing his car drive down the street, Veronica locked the door and slumped to the floor. Tears landed on her bare chest. The unattended cries continued, “Shut up!” A louder howl came from the room, as if in response or to compliment, “You ruin everything.”

Rising from the floor, Veronica went to the bedroom and dressed in warmer clothes. She put on her coat, gloves, and a scarf before walking into the closed room. Picking up the bundle of blankets, Veronica cradled the child against her insulated body.

Human contact calmed the baby and the shrieks became muffled sobs. Veronica tightly wrapped the blanket, grabbed her keys, turned off the television and the lights, and walked out the front door.

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7:07 am. Joe forgot the coffee and started after Frank. Even with a wind-beaten face, Joe could tell that Frank was upset about something. “What’s the problem Frank?”

Frank did not turn or respond. He continued at his purposeful pace leading Joe past the supplies and tools that constructed his job description, to the door leading to the dumpsters. Joe had placed a banner over the doors a couple of years ago in the hopes of enlightening some of his coworkers, “Only Throw Away What You Can Easily Replace.” Recently he had felt mocked by these words when passing beneath them. Frank held the door and pointed toward the open dumpster where three other custodians were congregating. The low murmur, slight head nods, and shuffling of feet was reminiscent of when younger, Joe would collaborate with friends to avoid punishment. All three turned and looked past him, hands covering their mouths.

“Gentlemen. Why are we...” Collectively they nodded toward the dumpster and Joe walked through them and the slight maze of trash bags, proving that they began to work, to reach the opened half of the large bin. Resting his hands on the steel lip of the bin, Joe peered into the mass of disposable education. Among the collage of waste, lying atop the heaps of black plastic, was a light pink, misshapen bundle.

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11:23 pm. Veronica saw the G-bus approach around the corner. She held the bundle tight to her chest, underneath her thick coat, to protect the young child from the cold. Rising from the bench inside the routine bus stop by the school, she approached the opening doors, smiled at the female driver, and scanned her commuter pass. The bus was empty. Veronica sat down in the middle, zipped her coat down a little, and revealed the bundle she was protecting. Looking down on the rose-colored cheeks, Veronica brushed a couple pieces of hair from the child's face. The face that earlier expressed contempt, now symbolized peace with closed eyes and a slightly open mouth; Veronica was mesmerized by the silenced child. Then the eyes opened and matched her mother's stare.

The child blinked and twitched slightly, but steadily held her mother's eyes. Veronica avoided the glare by focusing on the darkness of her surroundings. She watched the passing of street signs and faded yellow lights of the bus's route. Before she had the child, she would regularly ride the buses late at night. She would pretend she was on a vacation, and reword street signs to make them unfamiliar, creating the illusion of a new setting, where she would meet interesting people who wanted to know about her.

The driver interrupted the memory of her nightly vacations.

"Darling, why are you out so late? And with a baby?" The woman was watching Veronica in the large mirror above her seat. Veronica smiled and hoped the driver would leave her alone.

"Having trouble sleeping?" Veronica nodded her head, looked down at the motionless face of her daughter, and to the back of the bus. Her attention focused on the helpline advertisement she frequently saw on public transportation. She figured that people who needed help, probably found themselves on public transportation more frequently than those that didn't. She was repeating the number at the bottom of the yellow sign.

"Girl or boy?"

"Girl."

"What's her name?"

"Gabriella."

"That's a beautiful name."

The street names were becoming familiar again. Knowing that she was close to home, Veronica stood and rang the bell to end her journey. As the bus rolled to a stop, the driver called to Veronica, "Care for another trip around? I could use the company and I think you could..."

Veronica stepped down the steel steps onto the black asphalt. She walked toward the entrance of the school where a pay phone rested. While attending the school, Veronica had used the pay phone regularly to call for a ride home from her grandmother. Walking into the open booth now, she wedged the receiver between her head and the child's while she dialed the number from the sign.

She let the phone ring once and hung up; she didn't need help. Walking around the back of the school, she remembered games of tag and four-square in between the parking spaces for the maintenance workers. The cry of her daughter reminded her why she was here.

Walking through the motion triggered light from the side of the newly built brick building, she entered the night beyond the yellow glow with outstretched arms, and became the darkness.

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7:12 am. Joe reached in and felt the cold comfort of tightly wrapped cotton. His fingers traced the folds while he lost his stability, fingers and hand shaking as he reached the top of the stiff fabric. Through the cloud of his hot breath, he gripped the loose flap of the knot, used for security, and unveiled the face of an infant.

His hand retracted and covered his mouth. He wanted to cover his eyes but couldn't pull himself away. Thin strands of blond hair trembled in the wind, offering no protection to the underdeveloped scalp. The skin was pale blue and stretched, resembling an elderly man with wrinkles and visible veins. Two paths of mucus lead from the nose to the slightly ajar mouth, twisted and taut, revealing graying gums, the pink faded from the repetition of unanswered cries. And the eyes. Joe traced the trail of frozen tears from the corners of the mouth, past the clogged nostrils, to the closed eyelids. Iced over. Joe was glad blank eyes were not staring at him, but he imagined the fear associated with unrequited pleas for help while frantically searching for guidance in frozen darkness.

Joe broke from his trance and placed the blanket over the face once more, protecting the young child from his obtrusive stare. With both hands, he cradled the solid body, lifted it out of the bin, and brought the cold weight against his chest.

"Joe. We didn't know...what should we do?"

"Who could?"

"Should we call..."

The intensity and urgency rose in their voices while Joe sank to the cool pavement and leaned against the dumpster. Resting his chin on the frozen bundle in his hands, Joe began to rock, trying to create heat through friction. "Call an

ambulance. I'll wait here." He spoke to the unresponsive lump in his arms, ignoring the men standing over him. "Maybe she'll come back."

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9:38 am. Inside the bus station, Veronica waited for the ticket person to arrive. She listened to the pointless conversation of the drivers coming through the supervisor's two-way radio on the counter. When the Greyhound sales representative arrived, 40 minutes late, Veronica formed an individual line.

Looking over her left shoulder, Veronica checked her bags. All three were still in the fortress design she left them in; she did not want to lose her seat close to the exit and the chance to be the first to choose her position for the ride.

The woman behind the counter seemed annoyed that her lateness was noticed and she wore her impatience. "You ready?" Veronica approached the glass screened counter. "Where and how many?" the woman's voice shot underneath the glass through the small dip in the counter.

"One ticket please," Veronica replied. "Anywhere in Florida. I hate the cold."