

OFF THE BONE

Megan M. Erwin

We were only supposed to be there for one night, but when the wind farm in New Jersey called for a second interview, I had no choice but to stay behind. On the morning James left, he used my toothbrush and left it sopping wet on the sink. He restated the Plan as I moved a lint roller over his suit. He would return to the plant. He would get this job. He would come back for me. The sun was a smudge behind the trees when he got into the car and I walked to the end of the manicured lawn to watch him drive down to the gate of the estate. The guard let him out and he was quickly obscured by other people's fences.

James and I had arrived at his older brother's house late on Sunday afternoon, much to the surprise of the brother's wife. As we drove slowly

through the gated community, looking for their house number, James told me about their sparse sibling rivalry, long periods of his being ignored punctuated by the occasional black eye. Raymond and his Russian wife Masha had been married for four years, and her children were at their father's for the week. Our arrival had interrupted their evening meal, and while Raymond and James talked affably, Masha poked at her green salad like a petulant child. James and I milled around the foyer while they finished, and shared a sleeve of crackers in the bathtub after they had gone to bed. They were pleasant and cold, acted interested in the impending job interview. I was eager and queasy, awed by their casual wealth, and humiliated that we needed their hospitality. Everyone was assured that we would be gone first thing in the morning. And we were, though James and I came back, bearing news of the second interview with the wind farm.

Our return was greeted with veiled displeasure, and the request to move our things to the downstairs guest room. They had heard us fucking the night before, Raymond stated, and Masha wanted to avoid further disruption of their rest.

In the oppressively floral basement guest room, I slept fitfully. I should have stayed up after seeing James off. I woke sweaty, with a headache, and was glad that no one was in the giant kitchen when I came looking for

coffee. There were instructions on the imposing machine, and after pressing a few buttons, streams of espresso dribbled into a cup. The wood floor was cold beneath my feet as I cracked open the steel refrigerator. A note taped to the half and half told me Masha was at a spa for the week, the children would remain with their father's nanny, and the housekeeper would not be tending to me. Raymond would check in as his work schedule permitted. They were so happy I felt comfortable enough to make myself right at home. I went downstairs to find my cell phone, and text James that his brother's wife was going to have the housekeeper murder me.

The basement guest room was at the end of a long corridor, next to a stocked home gym. I grabbed my phone and went into the mirror-lined room. An elliptical machine faced a wall mounted T.V. and a huge bench set took up the other half of the space. Dark leather straps tumbled in a basket in the corner. I thought of the brother, Raymond, lifting heavy weights and psyching himself up to sell software to government defense contractors. He was the same height as James and twice his size, with a neck thicker than my thigh. I sat on the vinyl bench and checked my phone and wondered how I could have no service so close to Philly. I heard wet breathing and an ugly grey dog nosed in, a Weimaraner, all toenails and elbows, with spindly legs and the cloudy blue eyes of a blind man. It looked at me flatly, dumbly and I stood and walked around it, out of the room. The dog faced a colored stack

of rubberized dumbbells and continued its ragged panting, fogging the wall-length mirror. It had to be the wife's, too frail for a man like Raymond to own, not cuddly enough for her spoiled children to play with.

I went back into the bedroom and plugged my phone into the charger. My suitcase was up on a luggage stand, and I picked through it. I stuffed yesterday's underwear into a plastic bag and sat on the bed, considered what to do for the rest of the day. James and I had met at a bar, drunk, on St. Patrick's Day, and moved in together before the summer started. He was going to make a life with me. Now, I didn't know when he would get back, or what to do till he did. I heard the low hum of machinery directly above me and wondered what I would have to say to Raymond, who was probably home for lunch, checking I wasn't making off with their knick-knacks. The dog trotted past the door and its collar tinkled as it slowly mounted the stairs. It paused halfway up, sniffing the bottom of a short doorway that blended in with the wallpaper, except for the knob. It was about four feet tall, and I could see a band of light leaking out the bottom. I walked straight to it and with little effort, pulled it open. The interior was so bright, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust and pick out the rows and rows of labels.

Canned peaches and peas, tins of jerky, and vacuum-sealed packs of potatoes and rice lined the wall to the right. Two hulking generators took most of the immediate floor space, and in the back, careful double racks

cradled guns of varied make and model. Blankets, first-aid kits, and locked fireproof boxes filled the left wall. I could see a clipboard thick with paper on a hook. It looked like a supply closet for the end of the world. I craned my neck and made out a set of small earthen steps curving down and away behind the first bank of shelves. I reached up and groped for the chain of the too-bright bulb. It clicked off and the darkness felt thick. I quickly shut the door.

I was delighted by my discovery of the stockpile, so curious about who was hoarding generators and creamed corn, him or her, that I almost bounded up the stairs to ask. I walked down to the other end of the corridor, running my fingers along the slat of the chair rail. The hallways of the house were lined with photographs, mostly of the wife, Masha, and her two pale children. They were themed according to room, babies in the tub near the bathroom, kids in swimsuits next to the sliding glass doors to the pool. I stood in a carpeted alcove with a bar, where the steps to the patio widened. I looked at a long photo of the wife by herself, a disembodied, ringed hand on her waist. I knew from conversations on the long drive out that this Russian did one ad campaign for a jean company, then met and married her former husband. She had two blonde children in as many years, then divorced the rich old man and acquired half. However, I did not envy this hipless, lipless woman. She earned her money by suffering through the

clumsy ministrations of a bald man twice her age. She provided the older brother with a pre-fab family. I wondered if I could have done the same. I squatted and opened the glossy cabinet and surveyed the bottles of expensive booze, graded from black to clear in the interior. I thought of the cache of ammo and dehydrated meat next to the steps. I filled a tall glass with good whiskey for later and put it next to my bed. After all, the housekeeper would not be tending to me.

To pass the time, I went for a run. I yelled before I left the house, and had to push the old dog back to keep it from squeezing past me, out the door. Raymond or the housekeeper or whoever was deep in the bowels of the house. Mexican landscapers descended like a S.W.A.T. team on the neighbor's lawn as I loped past, and I could taste grass in the air. Automated sprinklers clicked, and as I cleared a slight hill, could see the rest of the carefully designed neighborhood rise in a structured pattern. The houses were all giant pastel stucco things, wedding cakes with attached garages and in-ground pools. They became more opulent the farther I ran from the guard shack at the entrance, each larger than the last. Cautious lines of hedges protected the picture windows and the driveways were empty, save for landscaping trucks, pool cleaners' vans, the Honda Civics of dog walkers and decorators. I thought about potatoes and lock-boxes and guns stacked

in pristine cellars all along the street, wondered if every house was as well stocked as Raymond and Masha's, if all houses were supposed to be. I ran hard and felt every cigarette I'd ever bummed and all of the lawns were an artificial too-bright green that crackled in the waning light. Clouds were forming in the sky. I followed the sloping blacktop, back past another Security shed, fire hydrant, a patch of deserted tennis courts. The houses blurred together, and I almost ran right past the brother's shiny mailbox. I sprinted up the driveway.

I was sucking water straight from the kitchen faucet when he spoke.

"So, you're a runner?"

I nodded, startled and gasping, wiped my dripping chin. Raymond was seated at the breakfast nook, his solid frame bent into the carved wooden bench. He had a heavy square head, like a bag of flour, balanced above an unknotted tie. His suit jacket was balled up on top of the table and newspapers fanned out in front of his large elbows. He looked at me expectantly.

"And, Jessica, what is it that you do?"

"I'm not working at the moment, actually. I started a degree in Communications. I bartend sometimes. But nothing right now." I was starting to catch my breath and was suddenly aware that the front of my

shirt was soaked from the faucet. I could see Raymond's eyes flick around as I spoke.

"How long till Jimmy comes back? You going to do something productive in New Jersey if he gets this thing?"

"Oh, of course. There aren't that many wind farms in the Mid-Atlantic region and I can really do anything. I've worked as a receptionist before. And it's a good job for him. Benefits. I can find work anywhere." I had given this speech several times to various acquaintances. It felt nice to have a satisfactory response at the ready.

"Are you kids happy?" He stretched the word out and made it sound undesirable. I thought about James, in our small apartment, about the gummy loaves of bread and three-chord songs we made. I wondered if Raymond and Masha had sex in the afternoons too, if they did at all.

"Yes. Very much so," I said. He cocked his head and rapidly gathered up the newspapers.

I was getting cold from being sweaty in the air conditioned kitchen, and was wondering if James had called me. I thought about the beef jerky in the crawlspace, wondered if I could eat some without disrupting the inventory. Raymond stifled a deep yawn and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "I can smell you, Jessie, from way over here. You stink like sweat. Like salt."

My face flashed hot and I struggled for something to say. I shifted my weight and a drop of water fell from my chin to the floor. My sneakers squeaked. He smiled really sweetly at my discomfort and as I turned, stunned, to walk to the guest bathroom in the basement, he called after me. “Hey, don’t pout. I’ll keep you company today.”

When I got out of the shower, I could hear the T.V. talking upstairs, and rain sluicing through the gutters. I checked my phone again, and again it was fully charged with zero bars. I tossed it back on the bed and paced the room and thought about what to do: I could sneak one of the cordless house phones and call James, tell him what was happening, that his brother was smelling me. I could ask to borrow the phone, and maybe make myself a sandwich. Or I could walk upstairs in my towel and spread out on the leather sofa, rest my wet head on the brother’s thick lap, pass the time that way. I settled on dressing and going to talk to Raymond like a normal adult. I went up the stairs two at a time, and didn’t even look at the little door with guns behind it.

He was on the couch in the den, a smallish sunken room with bookcases and rich furniture and a giant entertainment center. He glared at his gleaming white laptop as I fidgeted in the entranceway. “Have you heard

from Jimmy?” He sipped from a wide coffee cup and the ugly dog was curled in front of a low table.

“No. Not at all actually. There’s no reception out here. Even upstairs or outside. Zero bars.” I coughed and my stomach growled.

“You should take the car to the end of the road, near the BP. That’s where my reception picks back up. This house is in a bad spot.” Raymond shifted his weight to dig in his pocket and I noticed he’d changed into shorts and a t-shirt. He was less formidable now.

“I can just walk to the end, it isn’t far.” I didn’t want him to help me. And he didn’t even offer the landline. I could just walk to the gas station and call James and maybe buy some food.

“Don’t be a child. It’s raining. Take the Navigator.” He tossed me a set of heavy keys.

“Fine.” I pursed my lips. “I won’t be long.”

“And quit pouting, Jessie. You’re a big girl. He’ll be back soon enough.” Raymond tapped the keyboard with an authority that made me want to kick the laptop off his knees.

“I am not pouting, Ray. I am just . . . hungry.” My voice was low and I almost brought up the first-aid kits in the crawlspace. His eyes never left the screen and he licked his lips. I turned to go and I heard the dog whine on the carpet and then the T.V. voices got louder.

There were new-looking cars in the dim garage, and a huge black Lincoln chirped to life when I pushed the button on the keychain. It was cold and damp from the rain outside and I could see grey daylight through the hinges in the door. The car clicked open and I climbed up into the cab, thick leather smooth against my arms, and rested. It smelled like cigars and cologne and coffee, pleasantly stale: It was his car, not hers. I knew it was him who was saving, stockpiling, and I imagined him, sweating and stooping, carefully stacking cans in the too-bright closet. I wanted to know what Raymond was preparing for, if he would save me when it happened. I craned my neck, adjusted the mirror, pulled the cool seatbelt across my chest. I pressed the garage door opener and the drumming of the rain grew deafening. The car started and barely vibrated as I stammered my way out. I eased the huge SUV back and groped for the wiper controls with my left hand. The Navigator was almost backed out, almost free to pull down the driveway, when I felt a bump and heard a shrill yelp. In my side mirror, I saw the miserable old dog limp away, into the open maw of the garage. I breathed in deep and the car drifted back, slowly crunching gravel, then hitting the retaining wall. I opened the door and slid out of the car and stared at the patch of rapidly thinning blood that bloomed like a poppy on the white stones. The car hummed solidly and I looked over my shoulder at the open

driveway, pitching away like the inflatable slide from a downed aircraft. I stood still in the rain. Ray did not come out of the house. I climbed back in the car and reclined the seat, turned off the engine, then curled on my side.

I stayed in the car for a long time, tensed and waiting. The rain went on for a while, then slowed to a steady drip. I watched the sky get darker around the edges and counted my breaths. I heard a car pull in the driveway, crumple the gravel and stop. I waited, then craned my head up. A short man in a poncho got out of a small hatchback with different colored panels. He carried plastic bags to the front door and rang the bell and when Ray answered, I ducked and waited, stupidly, as if he wouldn't know where I was.

The car started up again and the short man piloted it down the driveway. I looked, and saw that Raymond had gone inside and that the blood had been rained away. And I wondered how it was that James had not come back yet. I got out of the car, hesitated, and walked through the garage, into the house.

The kitchen was warm and fragrant and my mouth started watering. I dropped the keys onto the counter and remembered that I was cold and hungry. Ray was stood at the island in the middle, pulling a lid off a foil tray of steaming artichokes. There was a chicken and a bowl of roasted potatoes,

each sending thick plumes into the air from their silver nests. I could see two place settings at the breakfast nook. He glanced at me. "You need to go change. You're wet and sticky. Go change and then we'll eat." He smiled. I hoped that somehow he didn't know I ran over the ugly dog.

I padded down the stairs and saw that the little door in the wall was ajar, the bright light back on. I didn't look inside and went and put on dry clothes, threw the wet ones into the shower. I gulped from the glass of whiskey at the bedside table, combed my hair in the mirror while it burned and warmed my throat. The wife's face smiled dully from pictures as I hurried down the hall and up the stairs, past the little door to Ray.

We ate like animals, picking at the chicken, pulling and sucking the artichokes with no regard for the facts, that he was married and I was engaged to his brother, that I was scared of him. I pulled off a crisp sheet of skin, crinkled it into my mouth. Ray stuck the length of a leg between his teeth and pulled the meat off the bone. I gulped from my glass, fork idle at its side, and I could smell the butter ringing my mouth. Once it was over, bones piled, and we sat satiated, faces and wine glasses and fingers smeared with grease, he spoke. "You said you were hungry."

"I was. That was real good, Ray."

“I am a very capable order-er of takeout,” He smiled and I could see how he looked like James, how they had the same jaw and hairline and ears. We sat and he glugged the last of the wine into my glass. He relaxed back in the bench and rubbed his day’s whiskers, leaving a shining streak on his cheek. I chewed my lips, tasted the salt from the meat.

“I looked in your room today. With the little door. You’re real organized.” I watched his eyebrows. He smiled and looked at me steadily.

“You never know, Jess. You just never know.” His eyes were kind but I could see the sinews of his thick neck move, the muscles clenching.

“I never made it to the BP.” I started licking the juice off my hand, sucking the slivers of flesh from under my fingernails.

“I know Jessie. You dented my Lincoln. And you backed over the dog too. Masha’s dog.” He was looking at my mouth and rotating the base of his dirty wine glass. He cleared his throat. I felt tears prickle my eyes and looked down, mortified that I had killed his dog and scratched his car right as he was ordering me dinner. I thought about how he knew that I knew about his stash under the stairs. I thought about how I could pay for the dent in the big car. I wondered if James would be mad too, if he even had to know.

“Come on Jessie. Let’s just get it over with.” He scooted out from behind the table and motioned to me. I stood up and he put his big hand on my shoulder and guided me through the dark interior rooms of the house.

I walked slowly, pushing my feet through the thick rugs on the floor. He was steady beside me, emitting a warmth and sense of duty that made me stick close. We walked through the darkened corridor, shiny frames straight on the textured wall. I wiped my mouth and rubbed my slippery fingers together and looked ahead. Dark drops had splattered the floor and baseboards of the hall, weaving past open and closed doors. We went to the end and stood in the open archway of the sunken room. "Here," he said, squeezing my shoulder.

In the den, on a low table, was a very shiny black gun. On the carpet, below the table, the ugly dog was on its side. The dark carpet looked wet and I could see red bubbles on the long grey snout. It was breathing still and it sounded like percolating coffee. I began to cry and Ray nudged me.

"Pick it up, Jess." I stepped forward and leaned to grasp the handle. It was heavy in my loose grip. He came up behind me and I leaned back into his broad chest, breathed deep and closed my eyes. I thought about James driving in New Jersey, in the rain, wondering why I hadn't called him. I thought about the stupid rich wife and her two kids wondering about their stupid ugly dog. I thought about the little hoard under the stairs and wondered where the earthen steps led, and if it could really keep us safe. I felt Ray's breath on me and could smell the metallic richness of the blood

rising and he slid his hand down my arm and fit his fingers around mine, around the trigger. He brought his other arm over my face, clicked back something on top of the heavy gun. I squeezed my eyes shut, and braced for sound. With the hand not supporting my arm, he was smoothing my neck, then tangling his fingers in my hair tightly, and pulling. I felt his chin grind on the top of my head. He pulled my hair again, hard. Then we squeezed the trigger, together.

Megan M. Erwin is a recent graduate of the NEOMFA. She lives in Ohio and works in an office.