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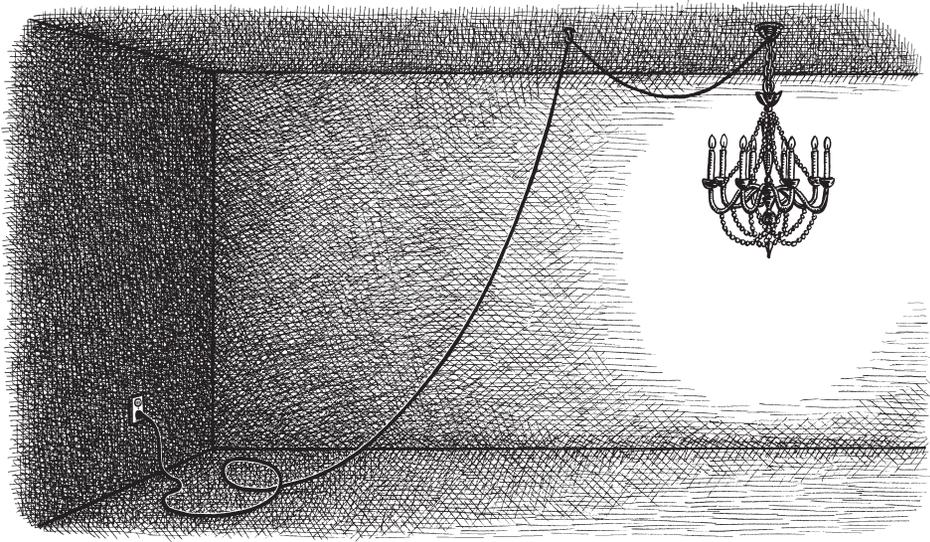
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THERE WAS A PERIOD of my life when I saw wombs all around me, and so of course the chandeliers were uteruses. Uteruses of crystal and chrome, suspended in air. Brass Fallopian tubes. Dozens of them hung in the shop. Some were gorgeous, some tacky. But none of them could be called hostile, like my own womb.

I'd been hired to sell the chandeliers, but mostly I dusted them. The store was in a strip mall on Route 83. Next door was the tobacconist's. Sometimes the tobacconist's mail was delivered to us by mistake, and I'd bring it to her. The walls of her shop were made to look like wood, but anyone could tell they were paneling. She had shelves full of cigar boxes in every color, their labels romantic, gilded, the letters Barnumesque. There were humidors and pipes

and ashtrays and lighters displayed behind glass. There was occasionally an old man smoking on the couch. From the back corner, a droopy dog looked out at the store. I suspected the dog had emphysema; sometimes I heard it produce a wet cough. But the tobacconist herself seemed in good health. I never once saw her smoke or pack her lip. She was petite and had luminous skin and wore a double-breasted blazer every day. Her fingers were ringless, her gray hair blown smooth. Each time I handed the tobacconist her mail, she gave me a piece of candy for my trouble. I picked a different color of candy every time, but they all tasted the same: cigar smoke.

I respected the tobacconist. She was elegant and important, an expert on her inventory: She alone, I imagined, knew the difference between

all the identical log-like cigars that sat snugly wrapped in cellophane, packed away, waiting to be transformed into taste and smoke. I thought often of what it seemed we had in common. We both sold things that lit up, but her days were spent giving people things that would ultimately disappear, while I helped people acquire things that never would. Chandeliers were lumbering, permanent décor, and I was starting to find there was not much to admire about permanence.

The strip mall looked out on Route 83, and when there were no customers, I stood at the front window and watched cars rush past. Near the end of the day, I watched for my wife's car. My wife was six foot two and made the beer at a brewery in Brookfield. The car was her dead grandmother's, and my wife hadn't had it cleaned since the woman died. I kept finding cough-drop wrappers and limp, years-old French fries between the seats. When my wife picked me up, she stank of malt and sweat, but I loved getting in the car, both because of pheromones, and because I was thrilled to leave the chandelier store behind. Some afternoons I was certain I'd spotted her car early—that silver sedan, there—and my heart surged with joy. My wife! She'd come early to save me from this incandescent hell. But then every silver car belonged to someone else, someone who left me behind.

The chandelier store made my eyes ache in their sockets. I would have preferred to work at the tobacconist's, or the Fannie May Chocolates, or even the submarine-sandwich shop, with the mealy bread and the piles of wet sliced meats. Anything would be better than spending eight hours a day trapped inside with our inventory. The chandeliers plugged into the wall and were controlled by a master switch that I was not permitted to touch. At night, when I closed my eyes, I could still see the bulbs, recast as blobs of purple and gold.

Even worse than the lights was the music. My boss, Lev, streamed Bach and Mozart from a subscription service, but he had not opted for the ad-free version. After every few symphonies, there was a commercial for legal counsel or fast food or discounted appliances. In one, a man offered solutions to debt. "Check me out on the

web," he said. "At h t t p colon slash slash w w dot freedom from debt dot com slash new take on life slash relief now slash Douglas." There was a pause, and then: "That's h t t p colon slash slash w w w dot freedom from debt dot com slash new take on life slash relief now slash Douglas."

Lev liked to talk to me about his son, who was a high-school gymnast, and about the chandeliers, which he thought of as the soul of the home. His favorite was the tiered one made of Murano glass. "If you read the stats on how many people's sex lives improve after they buy a chandelier, you'd want one too," he said to me once. I considered this. I wondered if it was obvious to Lev that in the past two years my wife and I only touched each other when, four times a month, she stuck a syringe of sperm inside me. Even then, she wore gloves. And recently we'd given up on that routine too. It had been a week since we told her friend, whose first and last names were Omar, who'd been so generous, that he could stop giving us vials of ejaculate on ice.

Lev came some nights to leave notes for me throughout the store. I'd find them in the morning. THEA, one note read, taped to the arm of a vintage brass fixture. DUST THIS. I dusted it, and then sat down and painted my nails lavender. The next day, there was a new note in the same spot: GOOD JOB THEA.

The chandeliers, Lev told me, were meant to be seen, not touched. But when he wasn't around, I didn't try to stop customers from fingering the strings of crystals. I said nothing when they touched the brass arms or pinched the fake flames that were made to flicker atop the imitation candles. People didn't come to be denied. They came with visions. They came with voids to fill. They came with checkbooks and credit cards. These people had high ceilings, and they wanted huge heavy nodes of crystal and brass; they wanted thousands of crystals dangling above them; they wanted Montgolfières and Neoclassicals. They came and pointed at the broad ones, the ones that cast refracted light onto the wall, and in awe these people reached out their hands, and I felt I was in no position to deny them the chance to feel what would someday hang out of reach.

I'D BEEN WORKING in the chandelier store about six months when the tobacconist came and asked me for help. She was sorry to bother me, she said, but she was having trouble with her computer. She had already called her sister for advice, but her sister was having a colonoscopy the next day, and drinking the prescribed laxative solution had turned her impatient and unkind. The look on the tobacconist's face: It made pity puddle inside me. I flipped the sign on the window and followed her next door.

In her dim shop, the tobacconist took me by the elbow, past a pyramid of boxed cigars and a rotating tower of luxury chrome lighters. She had a tight grip on me, like she was afraid I might turn back, but she let go when we were behind the counter, where she gestured to the glowing computer. On the monitor was a woman's dating profile. It took me a minute to realize: The woman was the tobacconist. There she was in JPEG form, smiling back at me from the screen. She seemed like a different woman than the one standing next to me—in the photo she'd uploaded, she was decades younger. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair lighter and cropped close.

I couldn't help myself—I looked too long at the screen. The profile stipulated that she was looking for women between the ages of thirty and eighty-five, and was interested in both casual sex and long-term dating.

My face went hot and I turned away, but the tobacconist exhibited no self-consciousness about granting me access to this information. She swatted the monitor like it'd offended her. "It won't let me click," she said, and pressed the mouse again and again. She dragged a finger across the keyboard, and nothing happened on the screen. "It won't let me do anything."

I showed the tobacconist that when you pressed three keys at once, the computer provided itself the opportunity to start again. When the screen went black, the tobacconist beamed in gratitude, then slipped out of her gray double-breasted blazer and dropped it on the back of her chair. Without it, she looked frail.

We stood stiffly while the machine purred itself off and on again. In those quiet seconds the tobacconist stared at the screen, and I stared

at the tobacconist. She didn't have the posture of a lonely person. Her hair, I thought, was too coifed, her jackets too sharp, for her to be lonely. Where had she stored her longing? I thought a person someday outgrew her need for other people, gave it up like a tacky pair of old shoes, but maybe I was wrong.

When the computer glowed again, the tobacconist asked if she'd need to start from the beginning, and I said she would; her work had not been saved. She looked like she might cry. She said, "It took me all morning to pick a photo of myself. And then the typing—the typing takes forever." We were both relieved when I offered to help: she because the work would be easier, and I because I had a reason to stay.

When the tobacconist told me what to write, her voice took on a thrill I hadn't heard—throaty and melodic and strange. The information rushed from her, as if she was helpless to withhold it. She told me to say she was fifty-eight. She wanted them to know she liked estate sales, Edwardian poetry, bird-watching, the nightly news. She had been in the tobacco industry for decades. "I believe we are living in the golden age of tobacco," she said. "Did you get that?"

I nodded. She said, "I was married to a man for many years," but then she told me not to include that part. She said she'd like to include a description of her dog, the very dog who was watching me from the floor, blinking in a bored way, whose name, I learned, was Theodore. She'd been on the waiting list to adopt a dog like Theodore for years, and then one day she got a call that her time had come. She drove nearly two hundred miles to a farm in Wisconsin, and there he was, waiting in a plastic bucket. The whole drive home, she kept pulling over to give him the chance to pee on the side of the road. She loved him dearly, but Theodore had been challenging to train.

I tried to imagine what kind of person would be interested in this information, and I briefly considered ignoring the tobacconist and curating her profile myself. I would describe her as she had existed in my mind: attractive and full of conviction. Lustrous hair, adorable ears. Pretty and poised. Someone who was known for her good taste and candor. She'd been to all the glamorous

places, I was sure: Monaco and Milan and all the islands named after male saints. I could have said a million things I was sure were true of the tobacconist, all the things that had drawn me to her, but I conceded that perhaps the tobacconist, rather than I, was the expert on herself.

The tobacconist showed me the photo she wanted to use—the one that had been frozen on the computer screen before—and when it was uploaded, I clicked Save, and I decided the time had come for me to say something about myself. I told the tobacconist I had met my wife online, and so I had a good feeling about the tobacconist's prospects; she was bound to meet someone.

The tobacconist got this knowing look. "Ah," she said. "Your wife. The woman who comes each day in the silver car."

"That's her," I said.

"I hope for that kind of luck," the tobacconist said. Then she picked up her jacket and slipped an arm through a sleeve. Her other arm got lost, looking for a way in, and she twisted her hand in the air, desperate for the slot. I reached out and raised the sleeve to her.

When she turned, she thanked me, and handed me a piece of butterscotch. It tasted like ash, but I sucked on it until it disappeared.

THAT AFTERNOON, a woman in a green Fannie May apron came into the store. She had dark hair and wire glasses. A cell phone was pressed between her shoulder and her cheek. "It's hard to say," she told her phone. "It's really hard to say. I think the medicated shampoo only works sometimes. They lay eggs, you know. The best thing is to just cut it off."

From behind the counter, I asked, "Can I help you find anything?"

The woman did not turn to look at me when she spoke. "No, I'm good," she said. Her voice was singsongy. Then, into her shoulder: "No, not you. I was talking to this lady."

I watched the woman remove her eyeglasses and stick an entire lens in one mouth, then the other. They came back foggy, and she wiped each with the corner of her apron. Satisfied, she replaced the glasses. "I say just shave the head."

When she turned to go, she reached out and

gently spun the Murano glass. I called, "That's one of my favorites." I lied. I don't have favorites. I don't have any I like.

The woman didn't turn back, and then the door swung shut.

LATE IN THE DAY, the tobacconist came back into the chandelier store, breathless with excitement.

She had a date, she said. "A date! I just had to tell you."

"Oh, how thrilling," I said, and smiled. But envy kinked up inside me. The breakneck speed with which her prospects had changed!

When I walked out to my wife's car that evening, I saw the tobacconist buckled into the driver's seat of her car. She was sitting up straight, her face near the rearview mirror, and with one hand she pushed a mascara brush through her eyelashes. There was a moment, before my wife drove away, when our eyes met in the slim mirror and the tobacconist saw me looking.

On the drive home, my wife told me about the beer she had made that day. She spoke of milling and mashing and fermenting, of tanks and hops and wort. She always described her work like I understood, which was generous, or perhaps delusional. For years she'd been telling me about brewing beer, and I'd always nodded along, but the words meant nothing to me. I still didn't know the difference between a lager and an ale, and it was far too late now to admit it. But my wife did not need to know I was following along. I could have been anyone, any warm body in the passenger seat, and she would have said all the same things.

Our condo had belonged to my wife before it belonged to us. She was the first woman I had ever lived with. I'd only had male roommates, nice boys who studied medicine and liked fantasy role-playing board games based on medieval myths. They wore headphones most of the time and ate meals that came frozen in individual portions, packed in boxes: pizza bagels, pigs in blankets.

My wife prepared meals of many parts. That night she boiled lentils and cut tofu into cubes, put a sheet of broccoli in the oven to roast.

I put silverware on the table and told my wife about the woman in the apron who'd come in and

spoken about lice. “Now I’m afraid I have lice too,” I said, and looked for a reaction on my wife’s face. This was not true, of course. I only wanted my wife’s concern, to feel her hands on my head.

But then the smoke detector shrieked at us—the broccoli had been forgotten, and smoke was streaming from the oven.

My wife snapped off the oven and turned to push a window open, then stood on a chair to twist the squawking device from the ceiling.

“Here,” I said, and reached to take it from her, but she ignored me and stepped down, the disc in one hand. She pushed the reset button and, when it was silent, placed it on the counter.

I said, “Wow, what a godsend that thing is. It seems we’re living in the golden age of smoke detectors.”

“Yeah,” my wife said, after a second. She pulled the broccoli from the oven and let it drop into the trash.

I was being punished, I knew. My wife hadn’t said as much, but I knew she was disappointed that for all our trying, I kept being not pregnant. My infertility seemed karmic, deserved. All my youthful larks, the flings and indiscretions—I’d been a fool to think there’d be no repercussions. The hooky and the pot-smoking, the speeding on the interstate, the Cheetos, the nights of a hundred beers, the nail polish that contained trace amounts of lead. I’d always thought my fertility would last forever. A body shouldn’t be expected to reward a person like that. A body shouldn’t be expected to forget.

Later, after my wife fell asleep, I stared up at the ceiling and tried to remember what I had used as a password, back when I’d had an online-dating profile. Probably the name of a TV show I’d liked at the time, or a street where I no longer lived. Even the solutions to the security questions, I was sure, were answers I could not come up with now.

LEV HAD LEFT ME a series of Post-its, stuck in a row on the cash register. There was one word on each: THEA. DID. SOMEONE. TOUCH. THE. MURANO. GLASS? The last Post-it was a frowning face.

I was showing a young man a Tiffany pendant lamp with six stained-glass parrots sitting atop.

“It’s one of our most popular models,” I said. It wasn’t.

“I like the colors,” he said, and touched the glass. “But is there a way to detach the parrots?”

There wasn’t. As the man stared at the chandelier and tried to understand this, the tobacconist appeared at the door. With relief, my face unfurled. I turned away from the parrots.

“Oh,” she said, when we met eyes. “It was awful. Just awful.”

She proceeded to tell me, while the man listened, how the woman she’d met turned out to work as an actuary. And she had braces. “Now I know why in her picture she’s smiling with her mouth closed,” she said, and shook her head.

“Anyway,” the tobacconist went on. “I have this splinter.” She showed me a palm, where a tiny bit of wood was lodged in the skin. “Do you think you can take it out?”

There was a symphony playing on the radio when I reached for her hand—something with many flutes and trills. The man had started playing with the switch, making the parrots blink on and off. I slipped the sliver free, and while the tobacconist and I were still touching, the radio switched to a commercial for a special on a fourteen-inch meat-lover’s pizza.

I did not tell my wife about this moment, and I did not tell my wife the next day when the tobacconist came to me to ask me to fasten a bracelet, or the day after that, when she needed me to snip a tag from her blouse, or the times she asked me for aspirin or a paper clip or a thumbtack, all things small enough that my hand touched hers in the exchange. I did not tell my wife about the time the tobacconist asked me to work gum from her hair, gum I imagined—hoped—she’d stuck there just for me to ease out. I did not tell my wife that every day there was a new reason for us to touch, because I had no reason to believe, each time the tobacconist came to me, that she’d ever need me again. It never seemed possible, from where I stood in my million-watt room, that she would ever want anything more. And so each night I sank into the passenger seat of my wife’s sedan. I shut the door. I told her my day was fine, just fine, and then I turned and reached for the seatbelt so I could strap myself in. ■