Or What

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Lance walks briskly from the store to the pickup, his hands prone as if to hold footballs, and gets in. “They said you already had your prescription sent to Moab. And to Monticello. And to Cortez.”

Gretta tries to gather her thoughts. She remembers calling and sitting in the parking lot in Moab—Para Español, marqué uno—maybe calling Monticello, but she didn’t pick anything up.

“Did you hear me? First you had a refill sent to Moab, then you had it sent to Monticello, then you called from Cortez—”

You couldn’t have made it to Cortez, could you have? “I know one thing, I didn’t pick anything up. Or I’d have it.”

“You have kids, Gretta. You can’t do this again.”

“What?”

“You know what. Why are you trying to get three months’ worth of Dilantin?”

“I’m trying to get one month—just my prescription. I’m out. Totally. I ran out last week—”

“Last week?” he shouts.

She is so nervous, she can’t seem to talk. There is so much time she can’t account for. So much has been left unexplained. What does she know? The ambiguity presses, it pushes, it forces itself on her, and she just sits there, wishing for the moment to be over. “I mean, maybe not a whole week.”

“Christ, Gretta, you can’t just go off it like that.” He chews his bottom lip; his eyes dart. He doesn’t sound really angry; maybe he’s just thinking. “Are you saying you didn’t pick anything up from Moab?”

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“No.”
“Or anything from Monticello? Or Cortez?”
She’s pretty sure she didn’t so much as walk into a store in Monticello, except to fill up at the gas station. And Cortez—nothing comes to mind. Of course, that’s nothing new. She could check her pack, her receipts, her phone, but she doesn’t want to call attention to her craziness.
“No.”
“What about the LSD?”
“What LSD?”
“They found a hit of acid in the pickup. You’re damned lucky…. Fuck. Are you going to do it again, or what?”
“Do what?”
“You know what I’m talking about.”
Depends on whether you’re coming home, she thinks, but feels guilty even thinking of it. She would never blackmail him with suicide. Not intentionally. There’s a lot she would do—drop a naked guy off at the side of the road, for instance; maybe even give James the green light, finally—but she wouldn’t try to make someone feel responsible for her suicide.
“I promise I won’t.”
“Because you can’t leave Tulip and Braden behind. If you’re going to pull something like that, you need to tell me. Seriously. It’s not fair to them.”
“You left them behind.”
“It’s not that I left them behind. I’ve been…rearranging. I’ve been trying to sort everything out, make a plan, save money. I never intended to leave them and not come back.”
“Come back, or come back for them?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know? Whether you planned to take my children away from me?”
“I mean, one minute you’re in the hospital, the next minute you’re being hauled off by cops…what am I supposed to do?”
“That was one time. One time I went to the hospital…it was the seizures. You heard the neurologist.”
“I heard him say psychosis was rare.”
“And only one time have I gone to jail.”
“Not including last night—”
“They didn’t charge me with anything, did they? They took me to Angela’s.”
“They could have. You could’ve got a DUI, possession, resisting arrest—”
“I’m there for them. I read to them. I take them to the zoo, to the children’s museum, to the planetarium. I take Tulip to school, Braden to daycare, we do flashcards together…I go grocery shopping. Do you go grocery shopping?” Gretta has a hard time holding his stare, even though it’s fast becoming less resentful and more conciliatory.
“Braden knows his colors. You didn’t know that, did you? And who are you? Three DUIs.”
Lance starts up the pickup again. “That was a long time ago. I changed.”
“I’ll change.”
“You always say you’ll change.”
He has her: she always says she’ll change.
You’ll change? Okay, who has the upper hand, here? Let’s think. Who takes off on a dime?
“You’ll get into a program?”
“What, like rehab?”
“Fuck.” He turns the pickup off again and rests against the steering wheel.
Good thing the starter’s fixed, she thinks. And, Should I rub it in? No man to fix my vehicle, no way. And, Why should you have to tell him anything?
He seems to be crying, or maybe he’s shaking from laughter, she can’t tell for certain. She doesn’t have a job—she can’t even pay for daycare in order to work at twelve cents a word—so she has the time for rehab, but not the money. Can the state really turn her away? She’d
looked into it before; no real welcome mat presented itself, which seemed to be a sign that she didn’t need it. Maybe Lance’s plan is to get her into rehab then spirit her kids away from her. They could be raised by the woman with the baby, by Lance’s girlfriend. *Do you have to use that word?* And, *You could just consider it a chance to get straight.* But why couldn’t she just stop? Let sobriety *transpire*? She’s cut way down for the Dilantin, until the past couple of weeks. Surely she could cut herself off. *Can’t I?* She realizes the trip was indeed a very bad idea. If she had totally dried out instead of become saturated right before her little adventure…but then she never would have made it out of Salt Lake City. She would have waited for a call. And waited. And waited. Just as she had been waiting for months.

“And while we’re on it, what about the shovel?”

“The shovel?”

“No. Stop. I don’t even want to know.”

“What shovel?”

“The bloody shovel they found in the pickup! The blood on the seat, on the seatbelt. You know, they kept the shovel. Just in case. It was a big fucking favor to me they even brought you home. What have you gotten yourself into? Never mind. I don’t even want to know.”

“A fox. I hit it. I put it in the car—I strapped it in. The shovel…I had to scrape him off, you know. The fox…it’s at a hotel.”

“You strapped a dying fox into our pickup? Is this like the magpie that took your wedding ring? The snow boy that wandered into the driveway? The Russian indigent that lit the shed on fire? The wind storm—”

“Oh, forget it. You don’t want to know, right? You don’t even want to know.” Theirs, she realizes, will be a long drive home—longer, in some respects, than the drive to get here.