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Zell

I KNOT NICK'S CAMOUFLAGE APRON under my boobs, unable to remember the last time I wore a bra, or preheated the oven. That's my widow style.

The brown sugar's as hard as a cinderblock, so I hack at it with a knife. But after that the preparation's pretty easy, and I stir my improvised ingredients into a smooth cookie batter. That's when I smell smoke, which is pretty jarring because there's nothing in the oven.

Or is there?

I flick the oven light switch, but the bulb's dead. All I can make out through the little window is a dark object on the top rack. It shouldn't be there; that much I know. Maybe I was supposed to check for foreign objects before preheating.

"Shall I let it burn, Captain?" I kneel, and Captain Ahab joins me. Gently I tug his velvet triangle ear. He snort-sighs, like the snuffle sound that horses make. He's unaware of the unidentified flammable object in the oven, which, any second now, will be swallowed in

flames. Or maybe Ahab *is* aware of the impending disaster and simply takes it in stride. He's Zen that way; it's his greyhound style.

"Aye," I say in Captain Ahab Voice—that of a sloshed but kindly pirate. "Let it burn. Yer a saucy wench, Rose-Ellen."

I pull *Meals in a Cinch with Polly Pinch* down from the counter and let Ahab sniff the magazine's special pullout section, where Polly's electric white smile and tanned, peachy skin shine. She's shown winking, her arms crossed, her head tipped coquettishly.

The winner of Polly's Desserts That Warm the Soul baking contest receives twenty thousand dollars. Twenty thousand. The exact amount Nick mentioned in his e-mail when he told me about the money he wanted to raise for the people of New Orleans as they rebuild after the hurricane and the floods.

"Now, tell me that's not fate. Yarr." I kiss Ahab between his eyes.

An alarm screeches. A smoke alarm. A fire alarm. A saucy-wench-trying-to-bake alarm.

Balls.

The object in the oven is officially on fire. Its azure and orange wings shoot up as if inflated, as if ready for takeoff.

Minutes later, still on my knees, I yank open the oven door. Rolling, oily smoke engulfs me and Ahab. Something grips my shoulder, and I look up at a hulk of boots and helmet and axe.

"Get out of here, Zell!" It's Chief Kent. I recognize his gravelly voice. He hooks his thumbs under my armpits and hefts me to my feet. He pushes me through the now-roiling smoke into his second in command, either EJ or Russ; through the smoke, in their bulky black fireproof suits, they both look the same.

Here they are, Wippamunk's finest beer-gutted volunteer superheroes, extinguishing a fire at 111 High Street, the home of Rose-Ellen Roy (née Carmichael): Zell—me, the woman whose husband,

Nick, died on their watch, in another world, another lifetime. Do they think I've done myself in? Torched my house intentionally? Do they think my head burst into flames?

"Get her out of here!" bellows this second rescuer. He shoves me into a third rescuer, who drags me through the kitchen, through the living room, out to the front porch, and down the cement steps. I scream, "Ahab! Ahab!" the whole way.

Somehow I slip and land belly up on my yard's thin, hard crust of snow. My attic, with its one boarded-up window, seems church white against the blue, blue sky. The attic I will not—cannot—enter.

RUSS SHEDS HIS FIREFIGHTER COAT, revealing spindly arms, a wife-beater undershirt, and reflective suspenders that flash in the sunlight. He kneels on the icy sidewalk that leads to my front porch. Shoveling was Nick's chore, along with car maintenance and—big surprise—cooking. I refuse to perform these tasks. I'll get to them later, I tell myself. For more than a year now, I've manually pumped my broken turn signal when turning left, eaten microwavable Polly Pinch meals for dinner, and stomped down two tire-width tracks in my driveway after every snowfall.

Russ holds a snout-shaped oxygen mask over Ahab's long nose. Ahab seems to think nothing unusual is happening, as if he's not breathing pure oxygen from a mask specifically designed for dogs that may have inhaled smoke. From time to time, he blinks.

I sit on the porch steps wrapped in a blanket from Engine 1747—incidentally, the year Wippamunk was incorporated as a Massachusetts town. Engine 1747 grumbles away in front of the house.

It's so cold, I can't really tell whether my nose is runny. I wipe it with the blanket anyway.

“Dogs dig me,” Russ tells Ahab. “That’s why I carry the mail. In my real job, I mean.” With his free hand he gives Ahab a thumbs-up sign, then smacks his flank so hard that Ahab stumbles.

“You okay, Zell?” Russ asks.

“Well, is Ahab okay?”

“Right as rain.” He grins and gives Ahab another flank smack.

“Then so am I, I guess. Right as rain.”

“Zell? Got a present for ya,” says Chief Kent. “Literally.” He groans as he eases down next to me on the steps. Chief is older-gentleman sexy, in the way of many park rangers, bagpipers, and commercial airline pilots. But right now his face somehow reminds me of an old brick, his silver hair pokes out crazily, and his boots dwarf my bare feet. He’s lived in this town his whole life, and he’s been the fire chief since the year I was born.

In Chief Kent’s huge hands is the object from the oven: a charred box the size of a human head, apparently made of hard plastic. The cube is deformed from heat. It looks like hardened lava coated with residue from the fire extinguisher. Its lid is sealed shut.

Chief Kent tosses it at me. I let it land, dense and heavy in my lap. I can tell right away there’s something inside.

It’s a present from beyond the grave. A present from Nick.

I always wondered where Nick hid his gifts for me. Several times a year, before Valentine’s Day or my birthday or Christmas, I snooped around the house. Invariably I inspected the same places: behind the coats in the closet, the unusable fireplace, the clothes hamper. Nick followed me from room to room on these hunts. “You’ll never find it!” he said, smiling with his mouth open.

Come to think of it, all his gifts—the small ones, anyway—emitted a certain odd, unfamiliar scent when first opened. A vaguely chemical, greasy, cavelike smell. The smell—I now know—of oven.

G.d. oven, Nick would have said. His father never allowed Nick

to say “goddamn,” but he preferred the abbreviation anyway, and the habit stuck.

“Zell!” Dennis trots up the sidewalk, waving his steno book. His J.Crew barn jacket has to be twenty years old, and a *Wippamunker* press pass flaps from the frayed pocket. The press pass is purely for show, because he’s the only press person here.

He stops at the porch steps. His face is ruddy with cold and adrenaline. He and Nick worked at the paper together for ten years. They were about as close as two coworkers can be.

“Zell, thank God you’re all right,” Dennis says. “When I heard the street address over the scanner, when I realized it was your house, I—” He blows air through his lips, puffing out his cheeks.

“I’m okay, Dennis,” I say. “I’m just the world’s worst cook. That’s all.”

“Anyway.” He licks the tip of his pencil; he always uses a pencil in winter because ink freezes. “Chief, cause of fire?”

Chief Kent pats my knee. “Ask Zell here.”

“Cause of fire?” Dennis repeats.

“*Meals in a Cinch with Polly Pinch*,” I say.

“Polly Pinch?” Dennis scribbles. “The celebrity chef?”

“That’s off the record,” says Chief.

The new guy pulls up and parks. He darts around the yard, snapping photographs, twisting his camera in all different angles. He peeks in my windows, then hurries over to Ahab, and the shutter clicks a few times in Ahab’s face as Russ kisses him through the oxygen mask. The new guy photographs Chief, who, as everyone in Wippamunk knows, hates being photographed. And he gets a few shots of barefoot, braless me, slouched on the steps with a singed plastic cube in my lap. I’m wearing a camouflage apron and a neon orange blanket.

I watch him spaz around. He’s got it all wrong, and that’s why

he's still, in my mind, the new guy, even though he took Nick's place at *The Wippamunker* more than a year ago. The contrast between his style and Nick's is glaring. Nick always strolled around casually before he took his camera out of his bag. He observed the scene, introduced himself, and asked for the homeowner's permission to take some photographs. "Let's not take ourselves too seriously," he was fond of saying. "Wippamunkers aren't Nixon, and I'm not Woodward and Bernstein."

The new guy bounds up the porch steps—Chief leans into me to avoid his swiftly moving knee—and continues snapping photographs inside. I hear him talk with EJ, who's in my kitchen, doing firefighter stuff, I suppose.

A moment later the new guy descends the steps. "No damage in there at all," he says.

"Wow, really?" I say, trying to sound cheery. "That's good news for me. Disappointing for you, I suppose, though."

He shrugs, fits the lens cap back on his camera, and walks to his car. I wonder what he knows about me. About Nick. And EJ.

A Wippamunk police cruiser pulls up to the house. France gets out, climbs the porch steps, and raps on my new neighbors' door.

"Hey, Zell," she says over the metal railing that divides the porch. Acne scars pock her thin face. Her eyes bulge slightly, and red ears poke out from under a low-slung cop hat. "You hurt?" she asks.

Before I can answer, the neighbors' door swings open. France shakes the hand of a tall man with close-cropped hair, hazel eyes, and cocoa skin. "Officer Frances Hogan," she says.

"Garrett Knox," says the man. "My daughter, Ingrid, and I moved here from the other side of town last month."

France reassures him that everything's okay; it was just an accidental cooking fire, and our shared house is no worse for wear.

“Glad to hear it,” Garrett says. “Thanks.” He waves to me—a quick flick of wrist—and flashes a warm smile before heading back inside.

My house is really half a house, a twin. During today’s regular mail route, Russ accidentally slipped the Knoxes’ copy of *Meals in a Cinch with Polly Pinch* into my mailbox. An understandable mistake, seeing as our mailboxes are side by side, epoxied to the vinyl between our doors.

Ahab and I were returning from a walk when I spotted *Meals in a Cinch* sticking out of my box. The headline promised to lift my spirits, so naturally I grasped the magazine and pulled it out, and saw Polly Pinch, midlaugh, surrounded by clean-cut teens all happily munching on carrots, apples, and a few other fiber-packed and wholesome after-school snacks. I read the teasers: PERK UP THE SPIRITS OF EVERYONE AROUND YOU! ENTER POLLY’S FIRST-EVER BAKING CONTEST AND WIN \$20,000!

It was that dollar amount—Nick’s same dollar amount—that did it. I headed inside, locked myself in the little powder room under the stairs, and read *Meals in a Cinch with Polly Pinch* cover to cover.

Garrett’s daughter, Ingrid, comes outside now, clomping across the porch in knee-high Uggs. She grips the railing and does some pliés. A too-big red ski hat caps her long auburn braids. She’s nine or ten, and her skin is lighter than Garrett’s, the color of sunlight on oak floors. “What were you cooking?” she asks.

“Good question,” Dennis mutters, licking the tip of his pencil.

“Flourless peanut butter cookies,” I say.

Dennis scribbles.

“Why?” Ingrid leaps off the porch, clearing all four steps and landing with a crunch in the snow.

“I was making them for you,” I say. It isn’t exactly true, although

I might have brought over a dozen, if they turned out all right. After all, I would've had to test my contest entry on someone.

"I'm allergic to peanuts," she says. She smacks her gum.

Russ releases Ahab to me and shoves the doggie oxygen mask back into its case. "Ahab should be back to normal in no time," he says.

I look around and realize that I'm surrounded by the people who went on The Trip with Nick. There are Russ and Dennis on the sidewalk a few feet away, Chief Kent sitting right next to me, Officer Frances leaning against the porch railing, and inside, EJ, whom I can hear rummaging around because, to rid the kitchen of smoke, someone propped open the front door.

Ahab takes a few careful steps toward me but stops when the girl throws her arms around him and kisses his forehead.

"Ahab likes you," Russ tells her. "You should deliver the mail when you grow up. Like me."

"I'm going to be a chef on TV," she says.

This cracks Russ up. He laughs like a doofus and yanks his suspenders and lets them slap against his puny chest. "Well, I'll be back tomorrow with your mail, Zell," he says once he's collected himself. "Hey," he adds. "Tomorrow's Friday."

"Our standing lunch date," I say. Russ has been bringing me lunch every Friday since Nick's memorial service. He's a few years older than me and he's always been big brotherly; in grade school he designated himself my "bus buddy," sitting next to me even when his friends called him to the back of the bus.

"What do you want to eat?" he asks.

I try to smile, but I don't quite succeed. I mean, I used my oven for the first time in years, and I ended up with firefighters in my kitchen, a cop on my porch, and a reporter on my lawn. Granted, I've known most of these people for years. But still.

“Surprise me,” I say to Russ, even though I expect nothing other than Orbit Pizza or leftovers generously donated by his wife. Which is fine by me, because otherwise I’d probably just skip lunch, like every other day.

Russ nods. “I’m full of surprises,” he says, and galumphs to Engine 1747.

The radio at France’s hip squawks. She turns the volume down and sighs. “Gotta go, Zell,” she says. “I’ll call ya later, okay?”

“Okay. See ya.”

She tips her cop hat to Chief and Dennis, trots to the cruiser, and drives off.

“Thank you, Officer Frances,” Ingrid yells after her. She scratches Ahab’s back. Her fingernails are chewed and sparkly with old nail polish. Ahab sidles up against her; his back meets the level of her waist.

Her eyes fling wide. “He’s leaning on me.”

“Greyhounds do that,” I say. “It’s his way of giving you a hug.”

Ahab’s big for a grey: ninety pounds. But he’s so gentle that she hardly even sways at his touch.

Chief Kent chuckles. “Nice hat, kiddo.”

She shoves the hat, which slipped to the bridge of her nose, up toward the crown of her head. “Thank you.” Then to me she says, “Do you like to cook?”

“I love to cook.” It’s a lie, of course. What I love is the thought of winning twenty thousand dollars. For Nick. For New Orleans. I never met those hurricane survivors, but he did. And because of them, he was a changed man. Maybe even a better man.

“You like Polly Pinch?” she asks.

I think of the impossible-to-avoid Polly Pinch. Her glowing face decorates cracker boxes in grocery stores all over America; she “pinches” a cracker between thumb and forefinger, holding it

teasingly above her open mouth. In her most recent Big Yum Donuts television commercial, her breakfast in bed arrives on a silver tray and consists of only a foamy latte. With a sleepy half smile, she blows the rising steam, swallows, and moans her approval.

Polly Pinch is about the furthest thing you can imagine from the bifocaled, orthopedic-shoed Ye Olde Home Ec Witch—Mrs. Chaffin, who taught home economics at Wippamunk High School eighteen years ago. And until today—as I pored over the magazine and learned all about this dessert contest—I never knew how much I liked her. Polly Pinch, that is.

“I adore Polly Pinch,” I say.

“You gonna open your present?” Ingrid asks. She points at the hard cube in my lap—the present from Nick that apparently was hidden in my oven for at least a year and three months.

I don’t answer.

“Come on,” she says. “Don’t you want to know what’s in the box?”

“Oh, there’s nothing in it,” I say.

Chief and Dennis exchange glances, which I pretend not to notice.

She skips over to me; Ahab, who was leaning against her, shuffles on the ice.

“There is too something in it,” she says. Playfully she snatches the cube from my lap, holds it to her ear, and gives it a shake. It makes a solid knocking sound, like a toddler’s toy, or wooden spoons.

“Please give that to me?” I stand barefoot on the icy sidewalk. The blanket pools at my ankles.

She hesitates, giggling. But I’m not playing. “Give it back,” I say.

“Easy, Zell,” Chief says. He stands and steps toward me, patting the air.

“Come on, Zell,” says Dennis. “She’s only teasing you. You need to put shoes on.”

The bottoms of my feet burn on the ice, but I can’t take my eyes off the warped cube in the small, honey brown hands of my girl neighbor.

Chief positions himself between me and her. He gives me a stern look and gently takes the cube from Ingrid, who gives it up easily. As bravely as she can without crying—I know she’s swallowing tears because I recognize the effort—she whispers, “I like your dog.” She stomps up her steps and slams the door behind her.

My feet are now totally numb. I kick the blanket.

And then EJ, from my kitchen, hollers, “I think we’re all set, Chief.”

I hear EJ walk around inside. I hear the legs of my kitchen table and chairs scrape the floor.

“There’s nothing in it,” I say.

“Okay,” says Chief, handing me the oven present. “There’s nothing in it. Whatever you say, Zell. Whatever you say.”

“Of course there’s nothing in it,” says Dennis. “Now, cover up your feet before they get all frostbit.”

I sit back down on the steps and wrap my feet in the blanket. I set the cube in my lap and finger the lid, melted and gnarled like a swollen lip. Ahab whines and steps toward me. I stroke his head and lower my face to kiss him. A tear sneaks from my eye and is absorbed in the dense, whiskered pucker of fur that is the equivalent of a dog eyebrow.

“Ay, Chief!” EJ calls from inside.

“Can you please get EJ out of my kitchen?” I say. “I just can’t—I’m sorry, but—”

“Sure,” Chief says. “Sure thing, Zell.” He sighs and goes inside.

Dennis unclips his press pass and stuffs it into his pocket. He grips

my shoulder in a fatherly gesture. “Be well,” he says. A moment later, I watch his car bounce down the road.

Soon EJ and Chief emerge from my house and tromp down the steps.

“Zell?” Chief says—meaning, good-bye.

EJ doesn’t speak to me, of course—he hasn’t since The Trip. I think he’s afraid of me. I can’t blame him, because since Nick died, I haven’t exactly been approachable, despite my efforts.

EJ stoops and softly tugs the blanket from my feet. Our eyes don’t meet.

He and Chief join the other firefighters aboard Engine 1747. Russ drives, skinny, bare-armed Russ at the oversize steering wheel, bouncing down potholed High Street. Engine 1747 turns the corner. Puffs of gray, greasy exhaust hang over the street and fade, and the world is quiet again.

And save for Ahab, I’m alone. Just like that.

Ahab follows me into the kitchen, where I admit the new guy was right: There’s no damage at all. The odors of smoke and fire extinguisher linger, but the room doesn’t look any different than it did before the fire, except maybe a bit cleaner, somehow.

I smell something else. Coffee. Apparently, EJ brewed a half pot. Not for himself, I know, because I don’t find any used mugs in the sink or dishwasher. He brewed it for me. I pour some and drink it black.

Ahab wants cookie dough. He cocks his head, dipping the eye-patch side of his face toward the floor. He doesn’t really have an eye patch, but his fur’s Holstein pattern makes it look so.

I pinch a dollop of dough and drop it into his elevated dish. He laps it up and nudges my hand for more, so I give him another peanut-buttery blob.

simply *from* scratch

“Arr, Zell. I woulda chowed *all* yer treats. Cooked or uncooked. Every last bloody one. With or without a noggin o’ rum. Yarr.”

I think of Garrett Knox’s daughter and her peanut allergy. She doesn’t know what she’s missing: peanut butter’s salty-sweet creaminess. I’ll bet she doesn’t even have a memory of peanuts—no memory, no taste. A clean slate, a blank wall.

I put Nick’s camo apron back where I found it, under the sink. And there I discover, in the trash can, heaps of soot-blackened paper towels. EJ, all that time, was cleaning my oven, cleaning my kitchen.

I notice the magnetic notepad on my refrigerator. The top sheet bears slanted, blocky man-handwriting: HEY, ZELL, TIME WE TALKED, COME DOWN TO THE MUFFINRY, ANYTIME, PLEASE

EJ’s business card is tucked under the magnet, as if I don’t know where the Muffinry is. The card reads,

EJ “The Muffin Man” Murtonen!

Come to Murtonen’s Muffinry at 900 Main Street
in beautiful Wippamunk, Mass., for the best muffins
and coffee west of 495, or your money back!

FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS NOW, my heart does this weird thing, at weird times. Like now: four in the morning. The weird heart thing is sort of like being a widow—familiar by now, and yet completely foreign.

My heart thumps fast and hard. I sit up, gasping, and press my back against the headboard, which Nick trash picked and I painted midnight blue with silver stars of different sizes. Next to me, Ahab lifts his head. His eyes flash in the dark.

I count the seconds that pass during the spastic beats: six. Then the beats stop altogether, and I count the seconds that lapse during that weightless absence of internal thump: five.

My heart goes back to normal, plodding along steadily, calmly, unremarkably.

I turn on the light; I won't sleep. Ahab knows it, too, so he stands and eases himself down, daintily stepping on the footstool Nick trash picked for Ahab's exclusive use because, as he got older, jumping from our bed proved challenging, and a few times he slid right off the mattress and crashed to the floor, his legs splayed beneath him.

He follows me down the hall. I stand in the doorway of my office—I draw medical illustrations for a living—and inhale the scents of wood, wax, and eraser. I caress the slack jaw of the skeleton that hangs from a wheeled stand just inside the door. “Hi, Hank,” I whisper.

Hank was Nick's name for the skeleton.

I'm hit with a Memory Smack; they plague me quite frequently. I was erasing something—an errant pencil mark alongside a tibia, or maybe I misspelled *brachiocephalic*—when Nick poked his head in my office door.

“You need a break,” he said. He sang “Welcome to the Jungle.” He took Hank down, held his wrists, and made him dance like Axl Rose: legs kicking out to the side, arms waving, hips swaying.

That was when we first moved in.

As so often happens when you're a widow, one Memory Smack leads to another, without regard to sequencing or time, and this second Memory Smack is from a trash night not so long ago: Nick beeped the horn and backed our crappy blue car into the driveway. Ahab and I watched from the door as he filled his arms with loot from the trunk. He smiled, took the porch steps two at a time, and planted a noisy kiss on my lips.

“Hope we like Gladys,” he said.

“Who?”

That sharp autumnal smell clung to his dark hair. That smell of outside things receding into cold air. We in Wippamunk appreciate that process—it could be said we *worship* it—the annual beauty of fading, withering, and disappearing. That’s our New England style.

Nick dropped his trash-night loot on the couch. We inspected it: a turntable, and a milk crate containing a complete collection of vinyl records by Gladys Knight and the Pips—in total, thirty-six albums.

The turntable and the albums were the very last things he trash picked.

The Memory Smack ends. Its edges turn black, and the scene shrinks until I can no longer see it, or smell it, or hear it.

Real time, real place.

Next to me, Ahab sniffs Hank’s kneecap.

“Blimey, Hank!” I say softly, in Ahab Voice.

We continue downstairs, leaving Hank swaying slightly.

I Velcro Ahab into his gray fleece coat and tuck his ears into the elastic face hole. I tug a neoprene booty over each paw.

I zip my boots over my pajama pants, bundle my coat and scarf tight. I retrieve the warped, singed cube from a shelf in the living room, where I left it among Nick’s dad’s pottery. Even as the cube’s contents knock around inside, I tell myself it’s empty. The present feels heavy, though it probably weighs only a couple of pounds. I tuck it under one arm and clip on Ahab’s leash.

We step outside, and the cold knifes through the thin cotton covering my legs. We slip and slide down High Street, past a uniform row of prefab colonial-style homes, all painted shades of tan, though in the dark they’re a luminous, moonish color.

We pass Bedard’s Orchard. Here Ahab sniffs expectantly for

Mr. B.'s fat orange cat, which he loves to try to chase, but the cat's not around tonight.

We pass the three-room police station and turn left onto Main Street. Ahab tries to cross because he thinks we're headed for the high school football field, where I let him off leash to run around. But we aren't headed for the high school tonight. Instead we climb Main Street, past the junction of Route 331. No cars. No traffic to speak of.

I feel the skin on my face tighten. I try to smile. I try to frown. It's so cold, I can't do either.

We pass the town hall and the town common and the cemetery, where gravestones from the eighteenth century tilt like bad teeth.

Ahab has no idea where we're going, but he takes the lead anyway, heading past the Congregational church, the Cumberland Farms, Wippamunk Gift Shoppe, Big Yum Donuts, and the gas station.

Main Street is dark, still, and lifeless—except ahead, where a traffic light blinks in front of Murtonen's Muffinry. Its windows are steamed. The smells of coffee, warm butter, and sugar waft into the empty gravel parking lot, and inside, yellow lights glow. From behind the building the butt end of the Muffinry van sticks out. I can just make out its edible-looking letters, the bite marks in the y.

EJ's massive shape moves inside the Muffinry's big bay window. He takes chairs down from tables.

Ahab and I continue on. But I stop abruptly when he growls. He never growls.

I scan my surroundings, trying to see what he sees—what makes him growl. But it's so dark, I can't see much, even with the blinking light. I realize I shouldn't have stopped, because now—standing in the parking lot with my breath hovering over me in icy puffs, stupidly gawping at Murtonen's Muffinry's gray-and-maroon-striped awning—I lose my nerve. Maybe I'm not ready to talk to EJ. Maybe I'm not ready to open Nick's present.

simply *from* scratch

The air smells of gasoline, salt, and sand from the road, and EJ's muffins. EJ "The Muffin Man" Murtonen's delicious, cakey, moist, huge, Best of Wippamunk Award-winning muffins.

In my chest, the bottom drops out again, and my heart is suspended in beatless silence. Four frozen seconds. Five frozen seconds. Six. I really should call back Dr. Carrie Fung. But maybe if I don't, something bad—bad enough—will happen. After all, there's a lot for the human body to sabotage, so many gloriously fatal mistakes it can make. If I never return Dr. Fung's calls, some bad-enough heart episode might occur, and the event will lift me right off my feet, straight from this parking lot, straight up from Wippamunk, straight up from life. I'll float around beautifully—like dandelion fuzz spinning off a stem, like a tangle of Ahab's fur swept along the kitchen baseboard by cold wind when I open the back door to let him in. I'll be reunited with Nick. And we'll float around together, stunningly.

But the heartbeats return, as they always do: fast at first, then normal.

I'll walk home. I'll cue Gladys and the boys and fall asleep with my lips resting in the little indentation behind Ahab's ear.

"Ahab!" I whisper. "Come on, Cap'n."

He growls once more toward the parking lot, but he comes to me, because he always comes to me. And we head out again, back the way we came, toward High Street. Toward home.

"Harr, Zell, yer a yellow-bellied milksop," I say.

EJ

Three and a half hours past midnight. Main Street is a black-and-blue ghost-town version of its daylight self. It's a strange time to

know the world—firmly settled in neither night nor day. And just as the Muffinry van groans with protest when he turns the key, EJ himself needs a little coaxing. He rubs his face with both hands, allows a few body-shuddering yawns, and forces his palms to grip the numbingly cold steering wheel. (Finnish Americans are too tough for gloves, his dad always said.) He lets the engine idle for a few minutes, backs from his driveway into the bruised-looking world, and drives to the Muffinry.

Once there, he preheats the ovens. Turning the knobs—slippery with grease even after a good cleaning—he thinks of Zell’s sooty oven. He’d known for years that Nick hid Zell’s presents there. EJ knew she wasn’t much of a cook, but he didn’t know she *never* cooked. And the fact that it took her, presumably, at least a year and three months to discover this particular present, whatever it is—the fact that she literally hadn’t touched the oven in that long—well, that fact makes him feel for her even more.

He mixes the blueberry muffin batter (sugar, flour, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, eggs, butter, vegetable oil, milk, and frozen blueberries that he picked himself in July at Wippamunk Farms). He pours the batter into extralarge muffin tins. At Murtonen’s Muffinry, there are no bulk orders of premixed batter squeezed from plastic bags. He didn’t graduate first in his class at Johnson and Wales for nothing.

He repeats the process for the corn muffins, then oat bran, chocolate, pancake, cinnamon apple, and zucchini tomato. He slides the trays into the ovens and sets the timers. A quick survey of supplies satisfies him that everything is stocked: cups, napkins, sugar packets. In an effort to impress Charlene—and she was impressed, because her last letter included a postscript that said, “Good boy for going green!!”—EJ recently switched to eighty percent recycled paper cups, unbleached napkins, and raw sugar. Organic ingredi-

ents are the next step, he thinks. Or maybe Fair Trade. He makes a mental note to learn the difference.

At the coffee station he tears open a bag of regular and takes a deep sniff as he dumps the grains into the filter. He repeats the process for decaf and all the winter flavors: eggnog spice, crème de menthe, butterscotch. Then he makes a pot of his own invention: New Orleans. He dumps regular grains into the filter and lays a few roots of chicory over the top.

He buys the chicory root from Charlene. Before he even stepped foot inside her café he knew she baked from scratch; he could tell by the aroma out front, on the sidewalk. The aroma of real butter, real flour. When the bells tinkled his arrival, she emerged from a back room. A taut apron accentuated her soft belly and ample hips. The body of a real woman, he thought; the body of a woman who takes her sweets seriously.

He ordered eight coffees. She laughed—eight coffees!—and set to pouring. He admired the exaggerated concavity of the small of her back, which made her round butt protrude invitingly. Black shiny hair curled around her pale ears and gave her the look of an imp.

She turned and smiled and handed him a tall cup of chicory-flavored coffee. “Yours is free,” she said in a warm, slow drawl.

He took the cup from her small hand and thanked her. He noticed her diamond-shaped mouth.

She glanced outside at the Wippamunk interfaith van waiting in the street. “You from up north?”

“Uh, yes,” EJ heard himself say.

“Drive all the way down here to help out with the Katrina damage?”

“Yep,” his voice said again.

She smiled. “Some sort of volunteer group you’re with?”

He didn't answer. Shadows smudged the skin under her eyes; batter streaked her wrists. We're made of the same stuff, EJ thought. She probably smells like coffee and sugar even after a shower. She probably relishes small talk with customers, and moments alone scraping silver bowls with white spatulas.

The bells jingled; Nick stood in the doorway. "Need a hand, Silo?" Nick asked. He always called EJ Silo, because that's his shape: tall and thick. Nick approached the counter, and Charlene handed him a tray that secured four cups of coffee.

"They're all on the house," she said. She screwed three more coffees into another tray and filled a paper bag with creamers, sugar packets, and stir sticks.

Nick spoke with Charlene in that genuine, friendly way of his. Told her all about The Trip, their work, where they were staying, what they were doing.

Charlene nodded, eyeing EJ. "Come back tomorrow, if you can," she said.

"Oh, we're only going to be in the touristy section today," EJ said. "Because—"

"We'll be back tomorrow," Nick said.

They finally left the café, each carrying a tray of coffee. Nick paused on the sidewalk. "Look at me," he said.

"What?" EJ stopped beside the van. His eyes met Nick's.

Nick laughed in that total-body way of his.

"What?"

"You know what." Nick jerked his head in the direction of the café. "You're totally macking on that cute Cajun coffee-shop chick. You've got the exact same look on your face as when you were twelve and France asked you to dance to 'Stairway to Heaven.'"

"Shh," EJ said. He glanced at France inside the van; Russ appeared to challenge her to a thumb fight, and she was ignoring

him. It had been a very long time since EJ felt anything for France, and vice versa. It had been a very long time since EJ felt anything for anyone.

He sensed his cheeks reddening. “Don’t say anything,” he told Nick.

“I won’t.” Nick laughed again. “You dog.”

Russ slid the van door open and took the tray from EJ. “What’s funny? I always miss it.”

“Nothing,” EJ said. “Absolutely nothing.” He took his seat next to Russ. But EJ smiled as he helped distribute coffee to everybody—Russ and France and Dennis, Chief and Father Chet and Pastor Sheila, who was driving—and he smiled the rest of the day.

Every three weeks since, each shipment of chicory root from New Orleans comes with a handwritten letter from Charlene. It usually starts with something like, “Thanks for your order. How’s life in the Great White North?” as if Massachusetts is all impenetrable frozen tundra.

Charlene’s never been to New England. He fantasizes about hosting her, showing her around town, all his favorite spots. The summit of Mount Wippamunk (though he’d probably have to drive her to the top because he’s so out of shape); the second floor of the old fire station, with its antique brass pole and pool table from 1892; the bench in his own backyard, which looks out over Malden Pond. He’ll show her his mother’s name carved in the back of the bench. His father made it for his mother. His father always tinkered, always made things. The bench was the last thing he made before the divorce.

EJ can’t believe it’s been more than a year since he’s talked to Charlene in person. He can’t believe that all that time, she’s continued to write, e-mail, text, and even, from time to time, call. When his cell phone beeps at four in the morning, he knows it’s Charlene.

He was supposed to visit her once, in August. She invited him, and he made all the arrangements; he planned to take off two weeks and drive down. He even bought an extremely small diamond pendant at the Greendale Mall, but he returned it after she wrote, in her very next letter, about the atrocities of diamond mining, and some awareness rally she attended. He fretted about not having a gift and briefly felt sorry for himself that Nick wasn't around to give him advice.

But Charlene's mother died unexpectedly, and she called and tearfully said he shouldn't come. She kept apologizing, and he kept saying, "No, no, no need to apologize." That was half a year ago, and she hasn't re-invited him.

EJ pours himself a cup of New Orleans. He sips while flipping the chairs one-handed. Near the window, which is fogged from the ovens, he notices movement outside. He peers into the street and is startled to see a person there, a very bundled-up person. It could be anyone, and EJ squints before he notices Ahab. The Captain is unmistakable. He's the only greyhound in Wippamunk, and the town's only ninety-pound dog that wears a coat and boots six months of the year.

EJ recognizes Zell's yellow hat and mittens. The same Zell who caught lightning bugs in jars with him and Nick when they were seven or so. The same Zell—her bangs sprayed into an unmoving claw—who sat next to him freshman year in Ye Olde Home Ec Witch's class, sampled a blueberry muffin from the first batch he ever made, and said—even after Ye Olde Home Ec Witch gave her a detention for talkingLM—"TNOPhese're amazing, Eege. You should be a baker or something. Seriously."

So this is it, EJ thinks. She got his note, and now, finally, they're going to talk.

Something is under her arm—the present. The oven present from

Nick. Good God, EJ thinks; maybe she wants him with her when she opens it. He swallows hot coffee and stretches his free arm over his head. Good God. What the hell will he say to her?

Ahab leads Zell. They turn into the lot and approach the Muffinry. But they both stop short. They look at something, or *for* something—the source of an odd noise, maybe. EJ cranes his neck, but all he sees is blackness. Suddenly, Zell and Ahab turn around and practically run down the sidewalk, back down Main Street and out of view.

“Lost her nerve,” EJ says. He sips some New Orleans and flips a chair. “Lost her nerve.”

Moments later headlights sweep the parking lot. EJ checks the clock on the wall: The little wooden spoon is on the four and the big wooden spoon is on the six, which means Travis is late as usual. At least he’s consistent.

The bells of the front door tinkle as Travis enters; the bristles of the mat make a scratching sound as he wipes his boots.

“Morning, hey,” Travis calls.

“Morning.” EJ opens the back door. He’s about to toss a big empty butter tub into the recycling bin when a sort of silent command to be still grips him. His whole body seems infused with a wide-eyed and tingling awareness; if he had hackles, they’d be fully upright. It’s the same skin-prickling, pupil-dilating readiness he experienced just before Nick’s passage. That’s how EJ thinks of it: not Nick’s death, but his passage. Not something randomly, regrettably horrible, but something noble, like fate. Or at least like something Nick wouldn’t protest, were he made to understand the events that would take his life.

EJ got the terminologyLM—“tNOPhe passage”—from Charlene. Early on he wrote to her about his nightmares in which he witnesses, over and over, what happened to Nick. She wrote back that all survivors have nightmares; it’s a symptom of post-traumatic

Alicia Bessette

stress disorder. She wrote about “the passage” of Katrina victims: “They didn’t die. They experienced a passage into somewhere else. That’s what I truly believe.”

EJ grips the empty butter tub. Goose bumps form along the nape of his neck. Something approaches—possibly the same creature that distracted Zell and Ahab moments ago. He takes a step back and thinks about black bears raiding trash barrels, then remembers it’s winter, and bears are hibernating. Maybe it’s a mountain lion, he thinks; they’re rumored to roam the area.

Near the recycling bin, movement flashes—filmy, alien green eyes appear. The eyes are followed by a cat, lumpy and practically lop-sided with fur balls, a little potato sack with legs. It sits and meows. Old Man Bedard’s cat. A true barn cat.

EJ laughs. “Bastard,” he says. “You scared me.” He tosses the butter tub into the bin, and the cat scampers toward the street.

Nick

November 2, 2006

From: nicholas.roy@thewippamunker.com

To: rose-ellen@roymedicalillustration.com

Hello, Pants.

We are setting up our sleeping bags in the lunchroom of the school, which has already been rebuilt in the year-plus since the hurricane. It sort of sucks to be sleeping on a cafeteria floor, but I remind myself that it’s better than being homeless like so many of these people were, and still are, in many cases, or so I’m told.

We finally rolled into town at night, so I couldn’t see much because it was dark. But I guess tomorrow I’ll get the lay of the

simply *from* scratch

land. They'll be gutting one little house. By *they*, I mean everybody else but me and Dennis: Pastor Sheila, Father Chet, Chief Kent, France, EJ, and Russ. I mean, technically Dennis and I are supposed to remain unbiased outsiders as they work. He'll report on the missionaries; I'll take pictures. We'll do a story and photo-essay for *The Wippamunker* when we get back. Shouldn't be too hard.

How was your cardiology appointment? I told Father Chet and Pastor Sheila that you were having some heart issues, and now they are praying for you. That sort of freaks me out, their praying, but they are "people of the cloth," so I guess I should expect it. They even had us all praying in the van at one point. The eight of us holding hands with our eyes closed.

Anyway, I think you're going to be fine, Pants. I feel it. Seriously, Zell—when I get home I'll go to all your appointments with you, every single one. But hopefully you won't have many more appointments, because you're going to be all right.

When you write back tell me what the doctor said.

Take care of those perfect 34Cs. I will nuzzle them in my dreams.

I will write to you every day and call you when I can.

Nick