

Newark

by

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The blare of a horn startles Nora out of her half-sleep. It's coming from outside the window to the left of her bed, from the parking lot of the Newark Airport Best Western. The hotel is a good fifteen-minute drive from the airport.

The reception area, where Nora waited behind a woman clutching a sleeping child while her husband argued with the old Indian lady behind the counter, smelled like a combination of curry and formaldehyde. On her way up to her fourth floor room she'd hit the wrong elevator button, disembarked one floor above her own, and found the halls piled with rolls of pink insulation and all the doors flung open, rooms lit bright and bare. There was something garish, something disquieting about all those gaping rooms, that made her turn her back and count, silently in her head, the seconds, the numbers ticking by – two, three, four, five – as she waited for the elevator to return.

Usually, Nora prided herself on not being easily daunted. Thirty-four years old and recently headhunted for an executive position at Pfargen, she liked to convey an image of bold intrepidness, with a little bit of bluster

thrown in. At 5'3" with blonde hair cropped in a pixie cut above her ears and a petite, athletic build, Nora looked even younger than she was. A little well-placed bravado helped establish her prowess in an arena that could be ruthless. Some of her colleagues found her intimidating, some endearing. She found she could judge a lot about someone's character, and how successful they'd be in the business, by those reactions. When she could smell their intimidation, she congratulated herself on how thoroughly she was able to disguise her own.

Nora traveled often for work and was used to minor but annoying inconveniences that came with the territory, but the events of this evening had left her exhausted and on edge. She had accepted a ride to the airport from the conference she was attending with two Account Execs from a different firm. They were assigned the same table for the final evening's banquet, everyone boozy and effusively friendly in that summer-camp-for-

adults atmosphere that pervades such events. As they chewed rubbery chicken and butter-doused carrots, a middle-aged man at their table had taken the moment to boast to the group that, after many years of practice, he'd successfully mastered the skill of autofellatio. The table went silent and the man's wife, seated beside him, sighed as if this happened all the time and muttered, "Well, I'm certainly not going to do it for him."

This became their shared joke as they drank into the evening at the hotel lounge. When the Account Execs realized Nora was flying out around the same time the next day and planned to catch a cab, they offered to drive her in their rental car. Mildly hungover, still laughing at the autofellatio man, and unfamiliar with New York/New Jersey roadways and landmarks, she hadn't realized until they drove beneath the "Welcome to JFK International Airport" sign that she was at the wrong airport and in the wrong state. She was supposed to fly out of Newark, forty-five minutes away. None of them had thought to confirm they were departing from the same airport.

The Account Execs felt bad, but they had their own flight to catch. Nora hailed a cab, implored the driver, who seemed amused at her plight, to get her quickly to Newark, begged her way to the front of security and raced, jewelry clanking, forehead dripping, pits sopping in her calf-length leather jacket, tights and knee-high boots, to the gate. The gate door was shut, but two attendants lingering nearby told Nora that passengers were still lined up on the boarding ramp, not to worry, just wait here.

She caught her breath, scanned Newark Airport. Floor tiles somewhere between off-white and Parmesan yellow. Fluorescent lights glaring off plastic bucket seats. Dunkin Donuts girls with feathered hair in heels and booty jeans and indoor sunglasses. The intermingled scents of burnt coffee, stale beer, pizza grease, vending machine perfume. Something lurid and lovely about it all at once. Nora felt a twang of affection for the place, but only because she was about to leave.

"You'll need to talk to rebooking. They're just past gate 9," an attendant said. Nora hadn't even noticed her approach. The woman was schoolteacher-stern, eyes squinty and serious on a round little face with caked on foundation and bright orange lipstick, and she gripped a plastic Big Gulp cup in her pudgy, orange-polished fingers.

"But they told me I could get on. They said the plane's still there." Nora looked around for the other attendants.

"Sorry. You missed the cut-off time." The woman

shrugged. "The door's been shut and your seat was already given away." She shot Nora a look of bored admonishment, sucked the last dregs of her drink noisily through her straw and began to turn away.

"You are fucking kidding me," Nora said, cheeks beginning to burn, racing after the woman. "The plane is right fucking there."

"You'll need to talk to rebooking," the woman said as she held up a keycard, let her drink drop into a trash bin which had magically appeared beneath her hand, and disappeared behind a heavy, white door.

Nora tugged at the handle, but found it locked. She pressed the black buzzer beside the keypad again and again. She pounded her fist on the door, but nobody answered.

The blare of a horn startles Nora out of her half sleep. Then it is quiet, except for all the other sounds. The sounds seem louder after the horn, as though competing, like a pack of dogs howling in building crescendo after one dog starts, and Nora is certain she'll never get back to sleep. The heater, an old metal contraption screwed to the wall, buzzes and hums a rickety vibrato that builds until she fears it will detach itself and have a full on epileptic fit on the floor. The television is switched off, but it still emits a constant, high-pitched whine, the kind of noise you sometimes don't notice at all but, once it gets you, it's impossible to ignore. And there's some other noise that comes and goes at erratic intervals. She's not sure where it's coming from, maybe somewhere on another floor. Static? Or maybe a drill? Are they doing some sort of construction on the empty rooms above? Why would they do it at this time of night? Perhaps she should complain. But she's too tired to argue with that old woman at the front desk.

The room has odd dimensions. The floor is perfectly square, not rectangular like most hotel rooms, the ceiling is far too high, and parts of several upper walls jut out in irregular ledges and boxes that seem to serve no purpose. In the yellow light washing in from the parking lot, the walls cast jagged shadows, folding out of corners and slanting off furniture. She wishes the bar was still open so she could get the hell out of this room, camp out down there and sip gin and tonics through a bar straw all night, then stagger to her spot in the standby line in the morning. Yes, that would be an appropriate way to end this dismal journey.

"Standby," the agent at rebooking had told her, apologetically but firmly. At least she was nicer than the orange lipstick schoolteacher who had shunted her earlier. The agent scanned the list of available flights on

her screen, again clicked a few keys, and shook her head.

"Hey, can we get this line moving? Do you have to stand up there all night?"

Nora turned and faced the man three people back from her in the line that was growing behind the rebooking desk.

"No. I'm not done yet," she said, trying to resist the urge to either smack him, hard, or curl up on the floor and sob. She clenched her teeth and balled her hands into fists.

"You just stay right there until you're done. Don't worry," another man, next in line behind Nora, said loud enough so everyone could hear. He had dark blond hair that hung in a carefully unkempt shag across his forehead, thick eyebrows, a button down shirt tucked into olive wool trousers. Nora couldn't quite place his accent, words that sounded like they were stuck at the back of his throat until they finally tumbled forth into tight little consonants. Maybe Russian? Tiny insults and tiny redemptions, all magnified. Nora felt, for a moment, a gratitude bordering ridiculously on love.

Minutes later, standby ticket for the next day in hand, she leaned against a wall beneath an AED cabinet upon which someone had discarded yet another Big Gulp cup and a crumpled Wendy's bag. She inhaled a whiff of stale fries and considered her next move. Her suitcase, standing by the walkway a few feet away, toppled over and thumped to the floor and Nora stared at it, resented it, as if the suitcase, too, had turned on her. She decided not to pick it up.

The Russian man walked by, talking on his cell phone. He paused, looked down at the suitcase. He placed his phone in his pocket and turned to Nora. "This is yours?"

She nodded, and he reached for the suitcase and propped it back up.

"Now, that is better," he said with a soldier's nod and a mischievous grin. He was compact, solidly built, pale with a sharp nose and gaunt face that would have seemed severe were it not for his large brown eyes and thin, reddish lips that curled at one side as if they were about to divulge some sly secret. "So, you are stuck here, too?"

Nora would have brushed off the attention of a male stranger unless she had some professional incentive to do otherwise, but, in her current state, she welcomed the bit of camaraderie. She told him her story of ending up at the wrong airport, missing her flight, even the autofellatio man who had started the whole trail of events.

"Well, you definitely deserve a seat on your plane more than me," he said. "I was an idiot. Sitting here talking away on my phone and I didn't hear when they announced a gate change. Next thing I knew the plane was gone."

"In Newark, of all places," Nora said, shaking her head. "I remember the last time I was here. It was three, maybe four years ago. Everything seems exactly the same. This place is like a recurring nightmare."

"Yes, that's a very appropriate way to put it," the man laughed. A glossy postcard slipped out of the black bound notebook tucked under his arm, drifted to the floor, and he reached to retrieve it. Nora noticed on it a photo of what appeared to be a woman clad in a skimpy, leopard-print costume. "I fly through here a lot for my work," the man continued. "I was stuck overnight once before. I just rented a car and drove around all night. Got a little lost, slept a little here and there, drove some more. It was cheaper than a hotel. Ended up in some strange places, though. This is a strange city."

He trailed off and Nora waited for him to continue, but it became clear he wasn't going to. They were silent for a few seconds.

"Well, I'm going to go find myself a hotel and get some sleep," Nora finally said.

"Good luck," the man said. Again, that quick salute of a nod along with a tiny, conspiratorial grin. "Sweet dreams, I hope," he winked.

"Thanks," Nora said. "Pleasant dreams to you, too."

The blare of a horn startles Nora out of her half sleep. For a moment she can't remember where she is. Shadows hum. Heater whines. Drill sounds wash out of corners. What? She sits straight up. Doesn't want to touch anything. Is struck by the feeling that everything is irreversibly backwards.

She's felt this way before. The first time she remembers is when she was a child of six or seven years old. She'd woken up at night, sick with a high fever, and she couldn't open her eyes, couldn't move a fingertip, because any vision or sensation would confirm what she knew to be true: everything was backwards. Not just theoretically backwards, but physically backwards. Every piece of furniture, every floorboard, every tree and car and street sign and blade of grass. Every particle of dust on her windowsill. The corners of her room where the walls met the ceiling and the floor. The very sheets she lay tangled in. It was so immense and so terrible that she lay motionless for how long? Minutes? Hours? Reeling with this overload, this irreparable dissonance,

daring herself to open her eyes and look. But what if it were so? What then? What then? Until finally she fell back asleep.

She's felt it several more times since. Sometimes during fever. Once while driving alone late at night. Once in the middle of a board meeting, of all places, and she excused herself to the bathroom, slapped her own face over and over to snap out of it. A great ocean is what it sometimes feels like, this infinity of backwards. Even when it comes to her more gently, like tonight, at the precipice of sleep and wake. She likens it to finding herself cheek down on the splintery wood-slat deck of a ship drifting out at deep sea. One scratch, one crack, almost indiscernible at first, but a reminder of how many things are broken. And now she can feel the roughness of every little molecule of the wood, the shifting and surging of thousands of feet of water beneath, the vastness of being weeks from any harbor, the lingering nausea. Only her pillow is the deck and everything else is the ocean and she can turn over and over and over again to try to seek comfort, but nothing works.

The blare of a horn startles Nora out of her half sleep. A few seconds later the horn comes again, this time a longer, angrier blast. She sits straight up, flings off the sheets and stiff bedspread so they fall in a heap from the foot of the bed, jumps to the floor and stubs her toe on her suitcase as she yanks on her skirt and sweater and boots in the dark. She slams shut the door, takes the stairs instead of the elevator down floor after floor to the lobby, which smells even more strongly of curry now and yes, there's the old Indian woman at the desk, silent, eating out of a bowl with a spoon. As Nora walks by, the woman looks up at her and smiles all knowing and proud like a mother sending her daughter off to the prom. Out the glass door and cold slams her hard in the face. In her haste she's forgotten to put on her tights or jacket. The car is running, headlights blazing in the dark lot, a little red Chevy with a Hertz Rent-a-Car sticker on the windshield. She opens the passenger door, sits and pulls the door shut.

"You've probably woken the entire hotel by now," Nora says, crossing her arms over her chest and rubbing her shoulders to get warm.

The man in the olive wool pants with the Russian accent smirks, shrugs.

"Am I in trouble?" he asks and winks at her. He shifts the car into gear and pulls around the hotel and out of the lot. As they drive onto the dark, empty road heading away from the airport, Nora looks back and can see that all the rooms on the uppermost floor of the hotel, the one above her own floor, are still lit, glowing like a halo atop the Airport Best Western.

"I made up a song about your man, the one who can suck himself," the man says. "You want to hear?"

Nora nods. They're on a divided highway now and a few trucks race past them in the left lane, big and barreling fast like running rhinos, and she can feel the tiny Chevy tremble.

"Okay," the man says, and he begins to sing in an off-key nursery rhyme sort of melody:

*Newark, I'm touching my toes,
But one of these days I'll be ready to blow.
Newark, you twist them and turn them,
I'm under my kneecap and over my sternum.
Oh, Newark, you're wild and I'm broken,
If I don't come soon, you can call me misspoken.
Oh, Newark! Newark! Newarkwwww.....wark!*

These last three Newarks he sings louder and louder, drawing the last one out long and shrill and then bending over his arm in a seated, mock bow at the end. Nora claps her hands.

"See, you're glad you came now, aren't you?" he asks.

"I am," Nora says.

"And do you want to know where we're going?" He reaches into the compartment on the door and pulls out a grey plastic flask, takes a swig and offers it to Nora.

"I think I'd rather be surprised." Nora accepts the flask and puts it to her lips. The liquid is syrupy sweet and boozy, some sort of honeyed brandy or liqueur, and it warms her as it spreads down her body. She licks her lips, takes a second, longer sip.

"Naughty! You're a naughty one!" the man says, and he clicks his tongue to scold her. "You don't even know my name. You don't know where we're going. You don't know what's in that flask. I could be giving you roofies. Or arsenic!" He laughs. "Arsenic!" he says again, as though it's a fantastic joke.

"Well, you drank it." Nora takes a third swig, passes the flask back. "So what's your name?"

"Because you asked, I'll tell you," he says. "I'm Jan." He extends his hand and Nora takes it and doesn't let go. "But you can call me misspoken." He laughs, squeezes her hand. "Call me misspoken, call me Miss Spoken," he sings. "Call mee... Miss Spoken!" he continues to sing, flooring the Chevy as fast as the tiny box of a car

can go through the gleaming dark of the New Jersey highway.

About ten minutes later, Jan veers off an exit. They are in a semi-urban, semi-industrial district on the outskirts of the city. The streets are better lit than the deserted area near the airport, but there are few other vehicles and it's very quiet. They drive past red brick buildings with dark windows, beneath a concrete overpass slashed with red and white graffiti, past a row of storefronts – nail salon, vacuum supply shop, dollar store, payday loans mart – with metal grates pulled down over their fronts. They pass a brightly lit pizza-by-the-slice joint with two cop cars parked out front. It should be forlorn, even unnerving, this strange and empty place, but Nora feels at peace. She strokes Jan's hand.

"Thank you for trusting me," he says.

Nora feels full of warmth, maybe a little tipsy, but mostly flushed all over like a million tiny flares are dancing over her skin. She wishes they could drive like this all night.

Jan turns a corner onto a street lined on either side with long, warehouse-like grey buildings, and parallel parks behind the only other two cars around. Nora follows him out of the car and over to a shallow vestibule with a dented metal door and a keypad beside it. As Jan reaches for the keypad, the door opens and an enormous man falls out directly toward Nora. A surge of fear runs through her and she ducks, lands on her knees on the rough sidewalk and feels them scrape and burn. She looks up and sees a second man, skinnier in jeans and construction boots, exit behind the first.

"Sorry, man," he says to Jan. He reaches for his friend who is now bracing himself against the wall of the building, vomiting noisily, and they stumble off down the street, the skinny one holding the big one up.

"Assholes," Jan says, spitting on the ground behind them. He helps Nora up and they enter the now open door. Inside is a small foyer, painted mustardy yellow that is peeling in spots, with several metal apartment-style mailboxes and a wood staircase leading up. Heat cranks from the wall and there's a strong musty smell, like a grandmother's attic, but it is otherwise clean and brightly lit. Nora follows Jan along a wooden banister up four flights of stairs, down a narrow hallway, and they arrive at a white door on which a poster is taped – a picture of a woman with long red hair, wearing a tiger-striped mini-skirt and tube top rimmed with black fur, pointy plastic ears, and a skinny black tail held out behind her with one hand while the other hand is extended like a claw. Nora recognizes her from

the postcard that fell from Jan's folder in the airport. "Tigress Tanya," the sign reads, in white, curling letters. "Please come in. \$20/10 minutes."

Jan presses a black buzzer to the side of the door. They wait silently a minute and he presses it, again. Another minute passes, and Nora feels disappointed, as though she cannot leave without knowing what's behind that door. She reaches for the buzzer, presses it a good ten seconds. The lock on the door clicks and they enter.

Inside it is silent, empty and dark, lit only by a small lamp that casts wide, mushroom-shaped shadows on the maroon-painted wall. Jan flops down on a black, faux-leather couch pushed against a wall and motions for Nora to join him. The only other furniture is a small wooden table on which the lamp sits, along with a box of tissues and a ceramic bowl filled with dried flower petals. Opposite the couch, about eight feet away, a black velvet curtain drapes from ceiling to floor across that entire side of the room. Jan reaches for Nora's hand, lifts it to his face and gently kisses her wrist.

"I didn't really miss my flight," Nora says.

"You mean you are actually flying right now?" Jan asks. "You could have fooled me."

"No, I mean I did miss it. But I did it on purpose. I got to Newark with plenty of time."

There are several soft footsteps, as if someone is trying to move without being heard, and the curtain shifts slightly. Then silence and Jan looks at Nora to continue.

"I was..." Nora pauses, searches for words that won't sound foolish. "I was just struck by this overwhelming sense that something was off. I was sure something terrible was going to happen, like the plane going down or... I don't know... I've never done anything like this. I hid out in the airport bookstore, pretending to read. Finally, I decided I was being completely stupid and ran for the gate, but it was too late."

There is more quiet rustling behind the curtain, a tiny click, and there's the crackle of old vinyl as music begins, a piano tune, quiet and sad. A few measures in the melody grows more upbeat, and Nora recognizes it, the classic circus waltz from the cartoons of her youth, though she doesn't know its name. The curtain squeaks open, slowly, and behind it stands a metal pole with two shag, black rugs laid to either side. A tall halogen lamp casts light upward to the ceiling and down over the makeshift stage. From between a second, rear set of black curtains, Tigress Tanya springs in a dancer's leap and lands before them. She flips her hair to one side, stares at Nora, snarls.

Black whiskers are painted across her cheeks and she's wearing a different costume from the one on the poster, a tiny, tiger-print bikini, ears, a tail and nothing else. Her feet are bare and her toenails are painted bright, tiger orange.

Tanya rises to her feet, smiles, and begins to dance. Her skin is pale white, almost incandescent in the dark of the room, and tiny freckles spatter her arms and legs. She is slow and seductive at first, rolling her hips into the pole and crawling along the floor, breasts grazing the shag carpets, long red hair sweeping down her back. She unties her bikini top and tosses it aside. Her nipples are so light, so cotton candy pink, they almost disappear, and Tanya draws circles around them with her orange-painted fingernails. Nora cannot turn away. She grips Jan's hand tighter. She can feel his movement on the couch, that he is stroking himself with his other hand.

The music continues to accelerate and Tanya moves faster, grinning, skipping, swinging round and round the pole. Now she is jumping foot-to-foot, rug-to-rug, like a child playing hopscotch, breasts smacking against her ribs, but she's no longer smiling. She looks serious and determined, staring at her feet as if it is taking all her concentration to keep from falling. And then she does fall. Her heel skids as her foot lands on a carpet and she collapses to the floor with a thud, gives a little cry, one leg twisted awkwardly behind, head hung low, hair draped over her face.

Nora wants to help her up, but she feels as if she cannot rise from the couch. She just keeps staring. The music continues, piano keys zipping and pinging, fast and jovial. Tanya flings her hair from her face, crooks her neck around to stare back at Nora. Her face is rounder, squintier, not the same. Caked on foundation and bright, too bright, orange lipstick. She reaches beneath the back curtain, pulls out a Big Gulp cup, brings the straw to her lips and takes a long, gurgly sip. Nora turns to Jan in alarm, but he is bent over himself, his pants by his ankles, his face buried in his lap.

The blare of a horn startles Nora out of her half sleep. She rolls over, pulls a pillow over her head to mute the sound. The horn blares again, louder and longer. And then again. And again. Longer each time. Then that drilling sound starts up again, coming from above, whirring and grinding and making the whole room shake. Nora pounds her fist into the mattress in anger. She jumps from the bed and flicks on the light. The room is a bright empty square. All the ledges and protrusions are gone. So are her suitcase, her clothing, the television, and all furniture except the bed. The horn

blares four more times in quick, rhythmic succession. The drill sound buzzes and the walls vibrate. There is a small pile of clothing folded neatly in one corner of the room. Nora examines the garments, a leopard print bikini, a headband affixed with plastic ears, a fuzzy, pin-on tail. Slowly, she dresses while the horn blares again and again.

Down in the lobby the smell of curry is so overwhelming Nora can barely breathe. The old Indian woman at the desk is eating rapidly, slopping some indiscernible food in big gulps from bowl to spoon to mouth. She doesn't even look up when Nora passes. The horn, again. There is the little red Chevy, parked out front, engine rumbling. Nora walks around to the driver's side, flings the door open. Startled, Jan looks up, his hand part way to the horn, thin lips curled into a half-baked grin, half pride and half deference, like a child caught in some wicked prank. Nora cocks her head to motion him out of the car and he obeys. She climbs into the driver's seat, adjusts it forward to her height, and he walks around and gets in the passenger side.

"A fine evening for a drive, wouldn't you agree?" Jan asks. He laughs and laughs, as if he's just said the funniest thing. Nora remains silent and finally he stops, shrugs. "All serious these days, are we?"

Nora shifts the car into gear. She pulls past the hotel entrance. Through the glass doors she can see the Indian woman still slurping. Nora pulls slowly around the rear of the hotel, the lights from the top floor casting a long, bright arc across the outer reaches of the parking lot. She pulls past the far end of the building, where dumpsters stand in a row like sleeping mammals, and back around to the front where they started. Nora puts the car in park and turns it off. They both get out.

"When did you know you were going to take me home with you?" Jan asks. "How long after you first saw me?"

"As soon as I heard your voice in line at the airport," Nora says. It's freezing in the parking lot in the leopard print bikini, but she doesn't shiver or show any sign of discomfort. "I decide these things quickly. Good intuition, I guess."

"I knew you would even before then," Jan says. "I knew it as soon as I saw you." He opens the hotel door for her, but she motions for him to enter first. The Indian woman is no longer at the front desk and the counter is a mess, strewn with empty, curry-crusted bowls, dirty spoons, crumpled napkins. They board the elevator and Nora hits the button for the top floor.

They can hear the noise before the elevator door opens, louder than ever, whirring, clanking, buzzing, and then a grinding, squealing sound like something heavy is being dragged across a hard surface. They disembark to a hallway crammed with insulation rolls, wood planks, buckets of nails, paint cans. Shreds of pink insulation are littered everywhere, like a cotton candy machine went haywire and blew it all about. All the doors are still open. Nora walks to the nearest one and Jan follows.

Inside the room, perched on the edge of the bed in a lotus pose, is the autofellatio man. He is naked and his paunch, flecked with grey and black hair, hangs down onto his upper thighs, hiding his genitals. His eyes brighten and he smiles in happy surprise when he sees Nora and Jan, like they are long lost friends. He rolls his eyes and nods toward the corner where the orange lipstick schoolteacher woman sits with her back to them, clutching her Big Gulp cup. Then he wriggles his shoulders, straightens his posture, clears his throat as if he's preparing for a grand performance.

"Newwwwww...wark," he sings. "I'm touching my toes." At this he pokes his left big toe with his right pointer finger, then the right big toe with the left pointer. "But one of these days I'll be ready to blow." He winks.

The orange lipstick woman turns to face them from her chair, shakes her head in exasperation. "Well, I'm certainly not going to do it for him."

Nora grabs Jan's hand and yanks him back out into the hall and into the next room. The air inside this room is thick with a sickly, chemical odor, like the formaldehyde scent Nora noticed earlier, but much stronger, and she holds her breath to keep from gagging. Her eyes water and sting. There are sheets of insulation nailed to all the walls and unfurled across much of the floor. The puffy, pink room is like a digestive tract. The autofellatio man is seated on some insulation, body contorted, one hand pulling his leg by the ankle and twisting it upward, head tucked beneath one knee, the other hand gripping his cock and stretching it toward his mouth. He notices Nora and Jan and, again, flashes a big grin as if he is delighted by their unexpected arrival. He clears his throat.

"Newark, you twist them and turn them," he sings. He shifts his hips, then his shoulders side-to-side in a silly little dance. "I'm under my kneecap and over my sternum."

The orange lipstick woman backs through the door dragging a roll of insulation in front of her with one hand, gripping her Big Gulp cup in the other. When she sees the autofellatio man, she snorts and lets the insulation roll fall to the floor with a thud. She peels the

lid off her Big Gulp cup, marches up to the man and dumps the contents of the cup, brown liquid and ice, over his head.

Trying to hold back their snickers, Nora and Jan scramble out of the room. They can hear the loud rumble of drilling coming from the next room, the last one on this end of the hall.

"Newwwwww...wark," comes a man's voice from inside, longer, slower, less cheerful than the earlier singing. "You're wild and I'm broken."

Jan lifts Nora into his arms and carries her, like a bride, through the doorway and into the last room.

There is sawdust scattered everywhere, like a fine blanket of snow. The room is bright and empty, but for the bed. The bed is pieced together all wrong, as if built by a toddler with a hand drill. Rough wood slabs are connected haphazardly at awkward angles, jutting out in all directions. Nails protrude in dangerous places. There is a mattress laid across the top, but it slopes severely to one corner and looks as if it would collapse if any weight were put on it. A long flat beam of wood, splintered and shredded, is set upon the head of the mattress where pillows should be.

"Would you like to know what I'm building?" Nora asks. "This is my boat. My boat that sails the broken sea. I've been working on it all night, ever since we met. It's going to take us home."

Nora takes Jan's hand and leads him to the bed. Carefully, helping each other not to disturb the structure's delicate balance, they climb onto it and lie down side by side. Now the room is dark.

"I'm afraid," Jan says. He begins to cry, at first a quiet murmur, and Nora strokes his arm with her fingertips. His sobs grow louder and louder and Jan is shaking, convulsing, howling like a savaged animal.

Then Nora hears the first creak. She traces her finger gently along Jan's collarbone. A snap as the first slab of wood gives way. Then everything is crumbling, splintering, nails popping loose, limbs tangled in fractured planks, the massive noise of it drowning out Jan's cries, drowning out someone screeching "Newwwwww...wark" in the distance, drowning out all but the mighty growl of the vast ocean swirling into view below.

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