

~ **First Fiction** ~

Cathy Kodra

The Most Interesting Thing in the World

At the airport, Pearl sat and watched people go by. It was the best watching place, she found, because it was safe. Plenty of uniformed guards and no riff-raff. Riff-raff couldn't afford airline tickets.

The people, although decidedly not poor, were eccentric and varied enough to suit her. Tall, short, slim, stocky, fat, beyond fat, obese. Pretty, glamorous, ugly, bland, acne-pocked, clear-skinned, wart-infested, painted, tattooed, scarred, burned, pierced, birth-marked. Elated, broken-hearted, everything in between.

She loved the impersonal banality of watching people walk past. Saturdays were airport days for Pearl, and except for the faces, nothing much changed. Until one particular Saturday, when two startling events occurred—one minor, involving a rat, and one major, involving a man—and everything changed.

Pearl couldn't understand why people watched TV, except maybe for the History Channel, or when it was raining hard, pouring buckets outside, windows streaming, no visibility even with binoculars, maybe then you'd stay inside in front of the television with a nice glass of White Zinfandel. But here in Flynn, Tennessee, it was only seventeen miles to the sixteen-gate Flynn Memorial Airport. It wasn't an international airport, granted, but enough people of different races, ethnic groups, abilities, and disabilities passed through to keep her well satisfied.

On Saturday mornings, Pearl packed a huge, blue quilted tote bag with a neatly folded sweater, a notebook, five carefully-sharpened pencils, six Snickers bars, aloe lip balm, a comb, a mirror, chewing gum, her wallet, and a few of her favorite blue ink pens (she wouldn't write with

black ink—too stuffy and official looking, verging on mean) and headed out Route 27 to Flynn Memorial. She could have taken the interstate, but all those whizzing cars and angry drivers scared her half to death. Route 27 was civilized. There were gas stations and convenience stores if you broke down or got hungry. She always pocketed a little cash, left her wallet in the glove compartment of her charcoal-gray Toyota, parked in short term, walked up the ramp to the lower level baggage claim area, cheerfully and resolutely marched her smallish, wiry frame through the massive, automatic double doors and announced to no one in particular that she was meeting her grandson, who was flying in from Dallas. Or her niece from San Antonio, or her cousin from Sacramento. She kept the cities large enough and far enough away in case anyone asked her questions. No one ever did.

Pearl didn't know if any of her immediate family still existed, and she didn't want to know. Her Aunt Harriet had written years ago when Pearl's father died, and then again two years after that when her mother died. Pearl never answered either letter or made any attempt to go back north for the funerals. In fact, Pearl had grown weary of people close up, and she didn't like pets much, either. She liked birds and other animals from a distance but had never hoped to own any. She hung birdfeeders in her yard, lay carrots and bits of lettuce along her wooden privacy fence for the neighborhood rabbits, put out trays of dry cat food for the feral cats that roamed the woods behind her little bungalow, and gave an entire one-third of her yearly income—pension and Social Security combined—to the local food pantry. Pearl believed people should work for a living and earn their way in this world. She certainly had. Forty-eight years of nursing home and factory work. Nevertheless, she couldn't stomach the idea of anyone, anywhere, for any reason, including laziness, starving to death. Not even prisoners. Not even captors. Not animals, not vermin. Pearl knew what it meant to be hungry.

Her parents, poor as church mice, had sometimes made Pearl and her three brothers and two sisters rotate meals based on the days of the week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays belonged to the boys. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays were for the girls. If you were good. Sunday everyone got to eat, although that wasn't much of a bonus. Her mother had learned to stretch any little scrap of food into a meal, and Sunday was definitely scrap day. The days you didn't get a meal you might get two pieces of stale bread and a stomachache. Once, Pearl had gone six days without anything to eat. She couldn't remember if her siblings had done the same, but she supposed they had. Lucky for all of them that two of her mother's babies had been stillborn.

Born and raised in Chapman, New York, thirty-five miles south of the Canadian border, Pearl knew that her family wasn't the only starving family around. She knew kids at school, when she went to school, who stole food daily just to survive. Chapman was a windy, flat, dying town with ignorant, poor people who spawned ignorant, poor offspring. The population had never reached five hundred in all her years of growing up there, even counting the Mohawk Indian reservation five miles down the road. Chapman boasted a general store, a post office on the enclosed front porch of a Miss Amy Graham's house, a tiny Methodist church, and large fields of cows and corn. The children all walked to the school in the next town west of Chapman, that is, when the roads were plowed and no one was sick. Pearl couldn't seem to remember a time when the roads were clear and no one was sick. If there was such a time, it was when school was out, and it was summer. In summer, Pearl had stolen every spare minute away from washing dishes, doing laundry, mopping floors, helping with the haying, and feeding and milking three failing cows.

High up in the hayloft with her nose in a book, she read anything and everything she could get her hands on (her parents only had five books counting the Bible), and the ones she loved best were *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, both of which she read for the first time at age nine, and with equal devotion.

As a young woman, Pearl had become fascinated with starvation. She followed every piece of news regarding the fate of the European Jews during the war, and years later she read everything she could get her hands on about what happened in Germany and Poland. Elie Wiesel was her favorite author, but she read everything else she could find—nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. When the librarian in Flynn asked if she was of Jewish descent, Pearl said, “Yes, in a way.” The librarian stared at her strangely, and Pearl hurried off, another book about the Holocaust tucked under her arm. They were comforting, those books. Other little girls had been hungry. Other children had been much worse off than she.

The airport was safe. No one there ever appeared to be starving. No one had the gnawing pain, the broken nails, dull brittle hair, fragile bones, waning skin turgor, open sores, haunted eyes as empty as the stomach, the rage, the hopelessness, and finally the desperate cunning—a willingness to harm another for a crust of stale bread or part of a rotten apple. Because one could become obsessed, even possessed, one might trade the dark-haired girl child spared at birth for a cupful of weak onion broth. One would. It could not be denied.

Pearl would be seventy-eight in April. She was lean and strong for a woman her age. She ate voraciously, her birdlike eyes darting quickly this way and that, her mouth working in tiny, abbreviated thrusts that stopped on a dime if anyone met her eyes. A small halo of white hair quivered faintly with each thrust. She preferred to dine alone; in fact, she insisted on it. At the airport, she had a favorite restroom with a plaque on the door that read *Employees Only*. It contained a single sink with a mirror, one toilet, a narrow broom closet, and two locks on the door, one a button lock on the knob and the other a bolt. When she ate her Snickers bars or any additional snacks she purchased from the vending machines, that was where she went, safely locked in and cozy. And it was clean, usually. Sometimes, when the cleaning crew was too busy, stains appeared in the sink or a faint ring formed in the toilet bowl. Then Pearl would open the closet and remove a bucket, spray cleaner, and rag and go to town on the toilet and sink. There never was any Windex to be found, so she cleaned the mirror with the rag and clear water.

Sometimes the cleaning people would be nearby when she came out, but they had long ago stopped giving her warning looks and trying to guide her to the public restrooms. Only once, in the beginning, had anyone threatened to call security. That threat had been delivered in faltering English by a young Mexican man, but the older cleaning lady with him, also Mexican, had spoken rapidly and angrily in Spanish and no guard had appeared. At least not before Pearl made her hasty exit. Perhaps the cleaning woman found the candy wrappers in the restroom trashcan and understood. Or perhaps she was just kind. Or maybe it was the twenty-dollar bill Pearl tucked into the metal ring of the toilet paper holder at the end of each airport visit. The cleaning people always watched her until she was almost out of sight down the long corridor that led away from the security checkpoint for Gates 1 through 8, and Pearl always looked back just in time to see the petite, solemn Hispanic woman dart inside the restroom to retrieve the twenty. Of course, occasionally she wasn't working that day and someone else got the bill, but Pearl liked her best, and she usually worked Saturdays, so it mostly came out fine. The woman was thin, and Pearl hoped she spent the money on food. Most Mexicans weren't so thin, were they? Pearl didn't think so.

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Hunger was the most interesting thing in the world. Also the most terrifying and unforgiving. Hunger was more dangerous than nuclear weapons or holes in the ozone layer or poisonous snakes or leprosy or driving on the interstate. Hunger made people commit horrible, evil acts. Even poor old Eva was not as afraid as she was hungry, at least at one point.

Eva had been placed on the skilled wing of the nursing home, not the residential wing. That meant Eva was very sick, disabled, or dangerous to others or herself. When Pearl started working at Rainbow Haven, she worked residential for the first month. Verna would wander the corridor late at night, asking if anyone knew what street she lived on or where her house was, because she had forgotten. Roger masturbated nightly in his room, the door and his pebbly little black eyes wide open, his right leg and the stub of the left one braced firmly against the bleached sheets on his bed. Jennie, ninety-four, still painted charming pictures of the Holston River with the watercolors her niece brought her, but she grew increasingly tired and wanted only to remember the paintings she created in the past.

They were a little strange, some of these patients, but they were residential. They could wash themselves, feed themselves, and go to the bathroom mostly unassisted. Pearl put a sign up on Verna's door that read "Verna's House." She gave Roger an extra blanket and told him to shut the door and cover up, for God's sake. And she listened to Jennie's vivid descriptions of her artwork from thirty years ago, getting to the point in the monologue where Pearl had a burning question about a particular painting, only to find Jennie napping in the middle of a sentence.

One night at ten forty-five, Eva Friedman flipped her lid. Or had "another psychotic episode," as the doctor on call would write in his notes. Pearl always remembered the exact time because it was shift change, and none of the nurses or nurses' aides wanted to help a living soul if it meant five minutes of extra duty past their shift. Pearl was ordered to meet the supervising RN in Eva's room over on the skilled side since they were short on aides that night.

The nursing home was a large square with roughly half the square housing residential patients and the other half skilled patients, skilled meaning they had little or no skills, if you looked at it truthfully.

Pearl, not against panning for a little overtime pay, had willingly hurried over to Room 17 where the evening nurse was kneeling on the edge of the bed nearest the door, her hands wedged between old, bony knees, carefully delivering a doll from the depths of Eva's dry, shriveled vagina. Eva was howling, "The baby, the baby, please don't take my baby!" in her heavy German accent. Pearl stood there, perplexed, until the nurse turned slightly toward her and asked would she like to help or get the hell out and go home? Pearl asked what she should do and was told to get a washcloth and towel to bathe the baby and a blanket to wrap it in. Couldn't she see there was a baby being born here?

That was her first meeting with Eva, and the staff on skilled told Pearl what little they knew of Eva's story: a concentration camp in Germany in the early forties, a child taken from her at birth, no surviving family members, no knowledge of the baby's father. That same night, when Eva finally rested comfortably in the arms of Haldol, a tranquilizer used more often at Rainbow Haven than seemed safe, Pearl slipped back into Eva's room. She walked around the bed to the side facing the windows and sat gently on the edge of the mattress. She had clocked out after the birthing enactment and a short discussion with the supervising nurse, and now she could hear the crests and troughs of garbled conversation flowing from the staff meeting room down the hall. The three other patients in Eva's room were snoring, mumbling, and making various sleep-induced sounds in their respective corners. Pearl knew that the woman in the bed diagonal from Eva's had undergone a partial lobotomy for brain cancer before being admitted, but she hadn't yet been able to bring herself to stand beside the woman's bed to see that caved-in skull.

Moonlight streamed through the windows on the back wall of the room, its pale sheen spilling across white sheets on the bed parallel to Eva's and onto Eva's craggy profile. Pearl noted the way the light glowed within Eva's pendulous left earlobe and then passed through it, how it rippled on the folds of her wrinkled neck. She leaned over and inhaled, pulling the sour smell of aging flesh, mingled with scents of baby powder and lemon glycerin, deep into her

lungs. She watched Eva's frail chest expand and deflate slowly, treacherously. Pearl laid her left hand lightly over the left side of this chest and imagined she felt Eva's old, worn heart tapping faintly but steadily.

In a quick, stealthy swoop, Pearl bent down and unlaced her white shoes, pushing them off one at a time, and gently swung her feet up onto the narrow cot, settling her own small body next to Eva's. Pearl balanced cautiously because she was off the bed as much as she was on it. The side that was half-on sensed the slight warmth from Eva's limp frame. Pearl turned her head and watched the moon, feeling a contentment she'd not known before. She stayed, motionless, listening to Eva's slow breaths until they were drowned by the swell of voices coming through the now-open door down the hall. The aides would be around on Changes shortly, checking bed sores, turning patients, and changing soiled sheets.

Pearl left the bed, donning her shoes and gliding away down the hall, beyond the far corner, and through ponderous double doors into the bracing night air.

The very next morning, Pearl marched down the hall to the director's office and asked to be transferred to third shift on the skilled side of Rainbow Haven. Pleasantly surprised and not one to squander an advantageous request, the director of nursing promptly obliged.

Thus started Pearl's long acquaintance with Eva and many nights of delivering the doll, hiding the doll, promising to hold and protect the doll, and bringing the doll back to Eva for clandestine visits. Pearl loved to talk to Eva, to comfort her, to try to get her to eat.

One night Eva was parked out at the nurses' station, a member of a half circle of Geri chairs filled with residents eating their bland dinners. A young aide was attempting to feed a reluctant Eva—a gaunt, bony, undernourished Eva.

"Come on, Eva," the impatient aide muttered. "You need to eat." On each upward swing of the fork, the aide repeated this mantra in the same singsong voice. "You need to eat. You're getting thin. You need some healthy food."

Pearl stood watching from the end of the nearest corridor, and she saw Eva's face get the stubborn, scared look that forecast an outburst—the down-turned lip, the faint scowl. She knew Eva well enough by now to know that she was suspicious of the food, hungry but angry, and you could only push her so far. Just as Pearl edged forward to signal the aide who was chanting *You need to eat* one final time, Eva swung a long arm forward, knocked the fork out of the aide's hand, mashed potatoes flying into the unsuspecting girl's blonde bangs, and yelled in her guttural, surprisingly deep voice:

"I'll tell you what I need! I need a good stiff cock, that's what I need! Now get the hell away from me!"

The aide hurried off, brushing futilely at the potatoes stuck in her hair, crying and cursing under her breath. Another aide moved in quickly and started wheeling Eva toward her room as an elderly man in the semicircle brought trembling hands up from his lap and applauded weakly three times, a thin smile tracing his lips. His name was Alvin, and he could often be seen stark naked, wandering the corridors and insisting to any scolding nurse that he was indeed wearing clothes. He had ruined one large section of orange carpet next to an emergency exit with his nightly habit of pissing in only that particular spot. His lovely, sane wife came every single day of the year to help care for him. She treated him tenderly and lovingly, even when he tried to pinch the nurses' behinds. *He never used to be that way*, she'd explain to the staff each time it happened, as if they wouldn't understand.

Pearl quickly grew protective of Eva during those months on the skilled side, and she watched and waited for signs of improvement. She wanted Eva to be well, to understand that the war was over, that her baby was no longer in danger. At the very least, she wanted Eva to trust

her, to allow Pearl to feed her, but that was not to be. Eva was suspicious and irrevocably damaged by history.

Once, on one of the last nights that Pearl took care of her, Eva motioned Pearl to her bedside, a sly grin touching her old, trembling lips.

“Take the baby, she’s yours,” Eva whispered. “Just bring me a cup of broth with a little meat, and you can have her.” Her yellow teeth broke free of the lips for a moment, forming a hideous, malevolent sneer.

Pearl collapsed on the edge of Eva’s bed and sobbed, unhinged, and the head nurse on skilled told her later the same night that she was too emotionally invested to work in a nursing home. Three days later, Eva died in her sleep, the doll clamped between her knees. Pearl turned in her keys and a hastily scrawled resignation and never looked back. For the rest of her working years, she remained anonymous and detached, on one assembly line or another.

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This particular Saturday was cool, the sky filled with dark streaks of cirrus clouds, the air soft with autumn moisture. Pearl loved the way southern air felt on her skin. It made it feel supple, younger. She never missed the cold, dry air of Chapman or the flat farmland; she’d not been back in years. Flynn had been home for a long time now. It reminded her of the Adirondacks far south of Chapman, the beautiful blue-tinged mountains that cradled clear lakes and small, carefully tended communities between Plattsburgh and Albany.

Stepping briskly off the edge of the patio, she made her way out to the clothesline, a white rope stretched between two oaks in the backyard. She took down a pair of jeans and her gray sweater, tucking clothespins into the pocket of her flowered housedress, humming to herself. Pearl brought the clothes back to the patio and draped them over a lawn chair. Picking up two plastic buckets, she made her way around the perimeter of the yard, dropping morsels of food along the fence and filling empty aluminum trays with dry cat food. There was no need to leave water; the little creek behind her fence was full this October thanks to the abundance of rain. She stopped to watch a cardinal at the base of one of her feeders; he was picking his way through oak leaves to find fallen sunflower seeds. Pearl appreciated the redness of him this early in the day, and it cheered her to see him eating so determinedly.

An hour later, after biscuits and mint tea, Pearl was on the road to the airport. She felt hesitant today and didn’t know why. Maybe it wasn’t a good day to go. Her stomach was unsettled—the mint tea hadn’t agreed with her this morning. She couldn’t imagine what else she’d do on a Saturday, however, so she drove on, never topping forty-five miles an hour.

When Pearl reached Flynn Memorial, there was an ambulance parked outside. *Not good*, she thought. Maybe there had been an accident or someone had a heart attack. She hoped it wasn’t Petra, for by now she knew the Mexican custodian’s name. She had glimpsed her nametag two visits ago. It wasn’t intentional, as Pearl didn’t particularly *want* to know her name. It would be best if she didn’t know the woman’s name, she felt. There needn’t be any familiarity between them.

Shuffling tentatively toward the double doors, Pearl sniffed the air. Sometimes she could smell things other people couldn’t. Sometimes she really could smell danger, although she knew it was only a saying. Danger smelled metallic, though it wasn’t worth telling anyone that. They’d just think she was crazy.

A furtive movement caught her eye to the left of the entryway, a grayish-brown streak that scurried behind a trash container. She stopped and then saw the rat slinking toward a piece of bagel nearby on the sidewalk, bright, beady eyes taking in her presence. Suddenly, the rat darted

across the concrete directly to Pearl, and lightly, ever so lightly, touched the tip of his nose to the toe of her black sneaker. Then he was off, tugging at the morsel of bread that was half as big as he was, gradually pulling it safely into the space behind the garbage bin. *Amazing*, thought Pearl. She actually saw a whisker brush the material of her sneaker. Never particularly afraid of mice or rats, for they had been frequent residents in the barn of her childhood, she had remained stock still while it checked her shoe. Perhaps the sneaker smelled of some sort of food. Maybe she'd stepped on something edible while crossing from short-term parking to the entry of the airport. Still, it was bold. She'd never seen any rodents around the airport before, inside or out. This was certainly a first! A few people wheeled luggage past Pearl and the rat as it all happened, but no one seemed to notice a thing.

"Eat, then," Pearl said under her breath. "Eat, little one." She felt a sudden wave of nausea and truly regretted the mint tea.

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When Richard, the hired hand from Quebec, came into the barn that night, the metallic smell hung in the air alongside the sweet smell of hay. When he moved toward where Pearl stood in the stanchion with the pregnant cow, she had smelled it, and she'd moved backwards so quickly she fell into the hay under the cow's big triangle of a head. The man moved even quicker, unbuttoning the straps of his overalls, dropping them, and pinning her against the hay, pulling her skirt up and her panties down in one swooping motion as though he had done this a hundred times before. He snarled something in French and then thrust himself inside her. She remembered worrying that the cow would panic and step on them, but it never did. It chewed and watched them curiously, nothing more. Minutes later there was blood in the hay beneath her and her stomach was cramping, but otherwise you'd never know anything strange had happened.

The next morning, Richard and his bundle of clothes were gone. She never learned his last name; he was just Richard around the farm. Pearl didn't dare tell her mother or father because there was always the chance that this was something punishable by taking away her portion of food, or by a severe whipping, or both. Her backside already smarted from being bounced into the hard floor under the hay. Besides, what was there to tell? She could hardly describe what had happened. She was only eleven and not good at describing things she didn't understand. She thought it was probably shameful and best left unsaid as were many things in the confusing world of Chapman, New York. She simply wiped the blood away with a cloth hanging nearby on a nail, hid the cloth under a mound of hay in the corner, pulled her panties back up, and continued tending to the cow.

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Pearl headed toward the escalator where paramedics were assisting an elderly Asian woman who apparently had tried to ride up the moving stairs carrying two cumbersome-looking bags. She was sitting on an escalator step, now stationary, and rubbing her ankle. One of the paramedics squatted by her side while the other stuffed clothes back into the bag that had opened and spilled its contents. Pearl was glad, not that the woman was hurt, but that it wasn't serious and that Petra was okay after all.

Pearl detoured to the left, took the elevator to the second floor, and hurried over to the rocking chairs that lined the hall leading to the checkpoint for Gates 1 through 8. She had seen nothing to justify the faint metallic smell that greeted her nostrils once inside the building, nothing other than the Asian woman's mishap. Despite being a senior citizen, Pearl hadn't lost

any of her sense of smell as far as she could determine. Anyway, the scent was already starting to fade, and it wasn't *always* a sign of danger. Its memory was replaced by Starbucks coffee brewing nearby and competing with the marvelous aromas of warm, soft pretzels and bacon. Her stomach rumbled, and she thought she might make a trip to the restroom earlier than usual.

A corner of Pearl's brain noted the man with the cane who also always came here on Saturdays. He was sitting on a bench a little farther along the corridor, next to a potted plant that partially concealed his upper body. He looked to be about sixty-five, balding, an unremarkable face, really, and he usually wore a plaid shirt of one color scheme or another, as he did today. Hunter's red plaid. She never saw him walk, so she didn't know whether he truly needed the cane or not. It might simply be a prop to garner sympathy. Maybe he sat at the airport on other days, too. At first it had made her a bit nervous, his presence in the corridor each time, and he apparently not flying anywhere or meeting anyone, but he never seemed to take note of *her*, so eventually she gave him the same recognition she afforded the large *Schefflera* plants stationed by alternate windows. She chose a rocker now and dragged it slightly aside so that she was angled toward people approaching the gates. She plopped her blue bag into her lap, pulling out the gray cardigan and settling it onto her old shoulders. Glancing up after she yanked it closer around her sides—airports were the chilliest places, their only drawback—she saw Ned coming toward her, pulling a bottle of beer from the deep side pocket of his denim overalls. He carried no luggage, she noticed. She wasn't especially surprised to see him, even though he'd been dead for almost thirty years.

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They met when she was nineteen and dying to leave the farm. He worked for her father briefly, and then one night after all the work was done, Ned and Pearl just walked away. She didn't suspect her parents had minded too much. They still had younger children to feed, although by then the farm was doing some better with twenty-five head of Holstein cows, one bull, pigs, chickens, and two fine-looking roosters. Ned had a ruddy, good-natured face, and he liked her cooking. She fed him well, and he wasn't as rough as the hired hand had been. And he spoke English. Pearl wanted babies and a house of her own. Babies she could love and feed, who would never go hungry. Ned could give her all that. They walked the entire way to Ellenburg Depot, and then hitched a ride in the back of a truck down the turnpike to Plattsburgh where, within two days after the civil ceremony, Ned had arranged a ride to Albany with a man who had business down there. Ned promised her a proper engagement ring as soon as they got settled in Albany. The wedding ring itself was nicked and dull; she didn't know where he got it, but she didn't want to complain.

They stayed in Albany for over a year. Ned worked for a dairy farmer just outside the city, riding back and forth daily with two other men, and Pearl took in wash and sold her pies and bread to the store underneath the room they rented. Soon it was clear that something was wrong with one of them, because her curse never ceased, month after month. She grew to hate the little room over the store, with its small stove and bed shoved up against the wall. She began to complain to Ned in subtle ways, then soon in overt ways, until finally he gave in and said they could move. Where to, she had wondered, and he told her he had a cousin in Tennessee, north of Knoxville. She thought he acted a bit odd, but he said they could stay with this cousin.

"What's his name?" Pearl asked.

"What'n the hell difference does it make?" he'd answered, and Pearl let it go at that, because lately Ned had shown another side to his good-natured countenance. He drank after work—he didn't tell her, but she could smell it on him when he came up the stairs and into the stuffy, drab

room. He didn't want sex as often anymore, and she suspected he saw other women. Sometimes she caught a light scent of perfume underneath the pervasive odor of manure.

One night she asked about the engagement ring he'd promised, and he said, "A woman like you don't need no engagement ring," grinning cruelly at her crestfallen look. Pearl cried a few tears, but the next morning she started plotting. She hid a little money aside each time she sold a pie or washed and ironed other people's clothes. Not enough so he'd notice, but enough to buy a bus ticket and some food to hold her over a day or two. She wrote to her family and told them she and Ned were moving to Tennessee. It was the second letter she'd written home. The first brought a short note from her mother. All it said was, *Well, you've made your bed. All the best, Ma and Dad. P.S. Please don't ever send for money. You know we don't have it.*

The second letter never elicited any response, but Pearl thought maybe they answered and she never got it. After all, she moved rather suddenly and didn't leave a forwarding address for lack of having one. Later on she wrote from Flynn, but nobody ever replied. She told her mother in that letter that she was a divorced woman, but it wasn't so. She couldn't afford a divorce, and she didn't know if a judge would grant her one, so she pretended it was true and after enough years it felt true.

Two weeks, six hours, and thirty-seven minutes before she was going to pack up her few things, lock the door, and place her note to Ned under the doormat next to the key (for she had it planned to the minute when she would leave him), Pearl got her own surprise. Ned left her instead. He didn't show up for two nights in a row, which wasn't that unusual anymore. Sometimes he stayed over at the farm. He got sick of traveling back and forth, he told her. By the third day, though, a Friday, she was worried about a farm accident. He did run the tractor sometimes, and it was haying season. Saturday was a workday for him, Sunday being the only day off, so Saturday morning Pearl made the bed and did their own wash and hung it out back of the store on the little clothesline the landlady, Mrs. Brantham, let them share. After climbing back up to the room to fix her hair and look presentable, she headed down the steep, dark stairway again to ask Mrs. Brantham, who also ran the store and bought Pearl's baked goods, if she could beg a ride out to the farm where Ned worked, as he'd turned up missing. Pearl was practicing her little speech about how he might be hurt or dead, and how she'd bake a week's worth of pies and bread in payment, when the door at the bottom of the stairs opened, letting in a shaft of bright light and the two men Ned rode to the farm with.

"Pearl?" The taller one squinted up at her.

"Oh, Lord, he's dead?"

"No, ma'am. He done run away. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of him for three days now. He asked for an advance on his pay, and Mr. Dobbs, he obliged. Ned told him you was in the family way and needed a doctor's care."

"It's a lie." Pearl sank to the stairs. "It's a damn lie."

They asked if they could do anything, and Pearl said no. Then she thought for a moment and asked where Ned had gone off to, if they didn't mind saying.

Again the tall one spoke, the other keeping his eyes down for most of the conversation. "We heard he ran off to Cobleskill with... well, maybe with a certain woman. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this..."

Pearl had smiled a thin, tired smile full of the past months. "Don't you worry about me. It was good of you to come let me know."

Some years later, Mrs. Brantham would send Pearl the newspaper clipping from Albany, announcing the death and listing no next of kin. The obituary said the cause of death was a bull that pinned Ned to the fence he was mending, crushing his internal organs.

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As the man with the beer walked closer, Pearl realized it wasn't Ned, not by a long shot. Ned would be far more stooped by now, and this man didn't have Ned's red face and beefy arms. This one was darker complected, and as she examined him more carefully, she noticed that the bottle in his right hand was not a bottle at all, but a pipe wrench. *A pipe wrench.* And the man was not in a custodial uniform like Petra's, nor was he wearing a security uniform. Pearl was very familiar with the security uniforms—navy blue pants with crisp white shirts that displayed blue patches on both shoulders and a yellow emblem over the heart. The upper middle backs of the shirts said **TSA** in large, bold letters. Those shirts made Pearl feel safe.

Pearl was momentarily confused. In the background, a familiar man's voice droned... *please do not leave luggage unattended at any time... report any unattended baggage or suspicious behavior to airport security immediately...* and at first Pearl thought the voice belonged to the pipe wrench man, or Ned. But Ned was dead, wasn't he? The pipe wrench man had Ned's eyes, and for a moment Pearl's eyes locked with his as he swung his lowered head from side to side furtively. She saw it then, that same meanness, that disregard for others. She felt a bit foggy, and there was quite suddenly a hard, painful knot in the middle of her chest, and she tried to shout something, a warning—she didn't know exactly what—but she needed to warn someone. The only sound that escaped her lips was a pitiful squeak. The last thing Pearl noticed as the space around her faded to dark was that other people were finally starting to run.

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The small-boned, Hispanic custodian found the tan notebook right where the old lady had been slumped over like a sack of potatoes when they packed her up on a stretcher and took her away. Right after another custodian assisted the guy with the cane into a wheelchair and whisked him out of the corridor, and shortly after the man with the pipe wrench was cuffed, read his rights, and taken to be interrogated. The next day he was on the five o'clock news, telling how he was innocent, just a plumber trying to help out, trying to get a job at the airport. No one would give him a job, he complained. He was dark skinned and mistaken for Middle Eastern, but it finally came out that he was Cherokee. He was taken to Scott County Medical Center and placed in the small psychiatric ward. The only thing revealed in the news after that was that he was an alcoholic and malnourished.

Curious about what an old woman who stashed twenty dollar bills in an employee bathroom might write, the custodian took the tan notebook home to her daughter and asked her to read it out loud, translating to Spanish. The daughter read the first twelve pages, seven of which held the brief beginnings of letters to the woman's mother, written in blue ink and apparently never finished and mailed, and five of which contained grocery lists in pencil. Long lists, three columns per page, of all kinds of vegetables, meats, fruits, beans, desserts—almost any food one could imagine. When the daughter informed her mother, still in her airport uniform, that the remaining dozens of pages contained only more grocery lists, the custodian said she could throw the notebook away. It didn't seem important enough to return to the old woman, and who knew where she was anyway, or if she was even alive. Who could know anything about such eccentric people?