

Short Fiction

1. Thursday, Cold Clear and Sunny

She slid into the store on her red rain boots—warm, heavy, but not the right material for ice on top of snow, and the entrance to the vintage store “Lambs to the Pasture” wasn’t shoveled. A slip and fall could be a lawsuit—Better Call Saul, she reflected with silent irony. No one knew who Saul was and he was a fictional character anyway. A real lawyer would probably want a retainer, she thought.

The owner of the store was sitting behind the counter on a high stool wolfing down bacon and eggs. The smell of bacon filled the place.

“Smells good,” she said to Cookie, the owner. He smiled, unable to open a mouth full of eggs. His name, Cookie, was on the flyer she saw outside Starbucks years ago and from that point on had begun a loyal and regular visitation habit. *“Lambs to Pasture: Cookie’s Consignment. We have everything and the kitchen sink.”* Corny, but probably true, she reflected.

Cookie did sell everything on consignment. She loved coming in and finding little treasures—a blue bead necklace, pearl earrings, a faux fur vest—there was always something interesting—the customers were Lambs to Pasture here.

“How’s business?” she asked.

“Slow. It’s February.”

“It’ll pick up in the spring.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.” Cookie finished his plate of eggs and bacon and disappeared behind the curtain. She imagined he had a full apartment with a kitchen back there. His wife of thirty-eight years, Margie, was in a wheelchair. He cared for her full time with a little help from his sister, most of the time it was just the two of them. She was often seen wheeling around the store, straightening shelves of junk and talking to customers. But today she was in the back.

“How’s Margie?” she asked when Cookie came back through the curtain.

“Sleeping in the back.”

“How is she?”

“She’s gotta have another operation.”

“Oh.”

“We’re leaving.”

“Leaving Chicago?”

“Yeah. Her disability and this store ain’t making it. The rent’s too high and it’s only gonna go up.”

“Where are you going?”

“Elkhart, Indiana where her folks are.”

“I see. Wow. We’ll miss you.”

“No you won’t.” He stared at her.

“Wee, I don’t want to argue with you—you seem so sure, but yes, I will genuinely miss you.”

“Two weeks after I’m gone you won’t even think about me.”

“Ok.”

She walked around the looking at a few things here and there. An incense holder caught her eye. After what he told her she felt she ought to buy something. She found a yellow cotton sweater from L.L.Bean and wondered who the original owner was. That was the thing about pre-owned clothes—they carried with them some kind of cellular memory of the previous person—something rubbed off from their skin or something. It was washed of course, it smelled of detergent and clean cotton, but there was another energy there she couldn't place. Had the owner been a hopeful, young person coming to Chicago looking for opportunity and a future in the city of Big Shoulders?

The city might have big shoulders, she thought, but none of them to cry on.

"I'll buy this," she said handing Cookie the sweater.

"Eight dollars," he told her.

She gave him a ten.

"Keep the change."

"Thanks," he said and cracked a rare smile.

"Things'll pick up in the spring," she repeated, reiterating an untruth like a dumb lamb following a bird into a gully.

Cookie looked at her and gave a half laugh. He understood. One has to keep up these appearances in Chicago, even if it's a lie.

"Later," she said and as she walked out, the bell above the door rang.

2. Rolling Bag

I was having an affair with my therapist. She wasn't scrupulous and quite honestly neither was I. She was a lousy therapist but I liked her anyway. Mostly it was sex. She was a gnarly demanding bitch in bed and I like that kind of woman. Had no fear of her telling anyone—she'd lose her license and she was making good money listening to the stories of veterans from the war of life, as she called her patients. It didn't occur to me that maybe she saw me that way too, but probably not. I was pleasing her in ways they couldn't, right?

No, I was not one of those I am glad to say. I just wanted someone to bitch to once a week, but it turned out to be something more, as I mentioned.

I bitched to her about my boss who was embezzling money from the company I worked for. I wasn't in accounting my job was brand marketing however fat Tom was doing some weird shit with the books. My assistant told me about it one day when we were having a smoke outside by the dumpsters.

"I don't want to hear this," I told her, (my assistant, Lynda) because that makes me an accessory."

"Too bad, I already told you," Lynda said, smiling and blowing smoke out of her teeth.

"You bitch."

"I know you screw your therapist—I could report her too."

"How do you know that?"

"Cause you told me that drunk Tequila thing at Night Rush."

"Night Rush?"

“The Bar on Margaret Street?”

“Oh yeah.. You don’t know her name.”

“I could find out.”

“How? Hit me over the head and hypnotize me?”

Lynda lit another cigarette and slapped me on the arm. We were comrades. Sort of. It was work. No one has your back at work—each man or woman for him/herself. I knew exactly how far to go with Lynda and that she secretly wanted to fuck me.

“You’re just jealous,” I said.

“Fuck you.”

“In your dreams,” I told her and looked over my shoulder. There was fat Tom coming up on my left.

“Hi Tom.”

“Hi.”

“Hi Tom,” Lynda said.

“Hi.”

He went inside.

“He’s stolen more than 150K from two accounts he’s managing,” Lynda said *sotto voce* even though no one was there but us.

“How many accounts is he managing altogether?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.”

“How can he get away with this?”

“He’s good,” she said and stomped on her second cigarette with a vengeance.

“I wish I could be good at it. I could use \$150K.”

“Forget it asshole. You’re too good looking.”

“It’s always fat guys that get away with shit.”

“Not always,” she added with a cryptic little wink.

My wife was crazy. She quit her job as a fitness coach to design art installations with a kid who looked like David Bowie in his Ziggy phase. I suspected sex was the motivation but I didn’t give a shit. I was screwing my therapist so gander and goose, you know?

I was not prepared for her to confront me in our kitchen one night while I was loading the dishwasher.

“Did you unload the clean dishes first?”

“Of course!”

“Of course?” She snorted a laugh. “Glad to know you finally figured this out.”

“What’s up Crystal?”

“I am leaving.”

“Ok.”

“I came into a huge wad of money and I want to take off and get a clear head.”

“What?”

“Maybe New Zealand.”

“What about Ziggy?”

“Ziggy?”

“Your Bowie look-alike.”

“Oh fuck you, he’s history. If you must know—it’s your boss.”

“Fat Tom?”

“Fat RICH Tom, you mean.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? He embezzled that money! He’s about to go to jail, you moron!”

“You are a moron, honey, because he’s made it look like you did it. So there. And he’s left town now. I’m meeting him.”

“In New Zealand?”

“None of your business.”

She grabbed a rolling bag from under the desk in the hallway and rolled out the door. I slammed it after her. I won’t miss her, I thought.

Everything happened fast. I won’t go into detail but in 15 months I ought to be released and then I can start hunting those two assholes down.

Thank God we never had kids.

My therapist told me she was terminating therapy—she can’t continue with a known felon.

I agreed even though I knew I was not a felon.

On the other hand my mother and my brother both thought I did it. The never loved me anyway. There’s always a tightrope to walk when you are a vulnerable, aware person like me.