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Nine Inches
stories

New York Times Bestselling Author
of *The Leftovers* and *Little Children*

TOM

PERROTTA

*Nine
Inches*



STORIES

TOM PERROTTA



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BACKRUB

THE FIRST TIME LT. FINNEGAN PULLED ME OVER, I actually thought he was a pretty decent guy. I mean, there's no question I was going over the limit, maybe thirty-five in a residential zone, so I can't say I was surprised to see the lights flashing in my rearview mirror. I was mostly just frustrated — disappointed in myself and worried about what Eddie would say when he found out I'd gotten a speeding ticket in the company Prius after just a few weeks on the job.

The cop who tapped on my window was older than I expected, a big, white-haired guy with a white mustache, probably not too far from retirement. He looked a little bored, like he'd asked a few too many people for their license and registration over the years.

“What's the hurry, son?”

“Just running a little late.” I glanced at the insulated pouches stacked on the passenger seat, in case he'd missed the magnetic decal on my door: SUSTAINABLE PIZZA . . . FOR THE PLANET WE LOVE. “I got stuck at the railroad crossing. I was trying to make up for lost time.”

That was the wrong answer.

“You need to be more careful, son. There's a lotta kids in this neighborhood.”

“I know.” I could feel my face getting warm. “It's just . . . I'm supposed to make the deliveries in thirty minutes or less.”

“Try telling that to a dead kid's parents,” he suggested. “Let me know how it goes over.”

He was just messing with me, but for some reason I found it all too easy to picture the scene in my head — the child's fresh grave, the weeping mother and the broken father, the pathetic delivery driver explaining that the tips are better when the pizza's still hot. It seemed like a plausible version of my future.

“I'm really sorry, Officer. It won't happen again.”

“Not *officer*,” he corrected me. “*Lieutenant*.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant.”

He squinted at me for a few seconds, as if coming to a decision, then brought his hand down hard on the roof of the Prius. The thump made me flinch.

“All right,” he said. “Get the hell outta here.”

“Really?” I was embarrassed by the relief and gratitude in my voice, as if I'd just dodged a murder charge rather than a speeding ticket. “I can go?”

“It's your lucky day,” he told me.

I WAS eighteen that fall and all my friends were in college — Evan at Harvard, Lauren at Stanford (w

were still scratching our heads about that one), Josh at Bowdoin, Lily at Northwestern, Carlos at Cornell. My best friend, Jake, was having the time of his life at Wesleyan — he kept inviting me down to hang with his new roommates, but my heart wasn't in it — and my ex-girlfriend, Heather, was chilling at Pomona, raving about sunny California in her status updates. That was my high school posse in a nutshell. We were the AP kids, the National Merit Scholars, the summer interns, the future leaders, the good examples. We enrolled in SAT prep classes even when we didn't need to, shared study tips and mnemonic devices, taunted one another with Shakespearean epithets, and made witty comments about the periodic table. We stayed up late going over our notes one last time, threw parties where we studied together for history finals. On Saturday nights, instead of getting drunk and hooking up, we popped popcorn and watched Pixar movies. It wasn't that we were anti-fun; we'd just made a group decision to save ourselves for college.

The only problem was, I didn't get into college.

I'd applied to twelve institutions of higher learning and got rejected outright by ten of them, including my safeties. I got wait-listed by two of my likelies, but neither one came through in the end. I got shut out, just like the kid in *Accepted*, except it was nothing like that because he was a slacker and didn't deserve to get in.

I totally deserved it. I mean, I got a combined 2230 on the SATs (superscored, but still), and had a GPA of 3.8, all Honors and APs, top ten percent of my graduating class in one of the premier public high schools in the state. Student Council rep, stagehand for the musicals, helped start a recycling program in the cafeteria. I ran cross-country all four years, even though I hated every tedious mile. But I did it, just so I could list a varsity sport on my transcript. Every goddam miserable thing I ever did, every shortcut I avoided, every scrap of fun I missed out on, I did it just so I could get into a decent college.

And none of it mattered.

My guidance counselor insisted that it was just a freak occurrence, a perfect storm of bad luck and rotten demographics. A record year for applications, too many international students, preferences for minorities and athletes, a need for geographic diversity, blah blah blah. But come on, not to get in *anywhere*? Even when kids from my own high school with lower grades and test scores got into colleges where I was rejected? Where's the fairness in that?

There was no logical way to explain it, but that didn't stop people from trying. Maybe I was too well-rounded for my own good, or my recs were underwhelming; maybe my essay was pompous, or maybe it was pedestrian. Maybe I hadn't done enough to set myself apart from the crowd, should have written about my lifelong passion for shoemaking, or my desire to someday design prosthetic limbs for transsexuals who'd stepped on landmines. Or maybe I'd just aimed a little too high, which was possibly true for Dartmouth and Brown, but those were my reaches, so that's the whole point. But what about Connecticut College or George Washington? Was that really too much to ask?

April of senior year was such a nightmare. Everybody else was all excited, hugging one another and squealing with delight, the future unfolding before their eyes — *Colgate! Hampshire! UVM!* And then they'd notice me, and everything would get all awkward and quiet, almost like somebody in my family had died. People just kept moaning and shaking their heads, telling me how sorry they were, how unfair it was, a complete injustice that shook their faith in the entire system, and I kept telling

them not to worry.

I'm on the wait list at Duke and Grinnell, I'd say. I'm sure something will pan out.

THE SECOND time Lt. Finnegan pulled me over — just a week after the first incident — he was all business. He took my license and registration, went back to his car, and wrote me a ticket for failure to obey a traffic sign, a moving violation punishable by a hundred-dollar fine.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “A hundred bucks? That’s crazy.”

“You have the right to contest this citation in the district court,” he informed me in a robotic voice. The lights on the police cruiser were flashing lazily, the whole neighborhood pulsing with red.

“Should you choose to do so, you must notify the court of your intention within twenty days.”

I didn’t reply, because there was no point in going to court. I’d definitely rolled through the stop sign — I wasn’t about to deny it — but I thought he could cut me a little slack. It was ten-thirty at night, and I was driving on a quiet side street out by the conservation land. I’d just made my final delivery — a lousy one-dollar tip, thank you very much — and there was no one else around, no one except for Lt. Finnegan, hiding on the dark street with his lights turned off.

“Shit,” I muttered. “I can’t believe this.”

“Excuse me?” Lt. Finnegan shined his humongous flashlight in my face. “What did you say?”

I raised my hand to block the glare. “Nothing. I was just talking to myself.”

He clicked off the light and leaned in. His broad face filled my window frame, just a few inches from my own. He wasn’t smiling, but I had the feeling he was enjoying himself.

“Do we have some kind of problem, Donald?”

“No, sir. There’s no problem.”

“Good. ’Cause I don’t see any reason why we can’t be friends.” He straightened up, tugged on his gun belt, and turned in the direction of his car. But then he swiveled right back.

“Tell me something.” His voice was casual now, almost friendly. “What’s that mean? *Sustainable Pizza*?”

“It’s just a name. They use lots of organic ingredients and recyclable boxes. Some of the produce comes from local farms.”

“People like that, huh?”

“Some of ’em.”

“Is it better than regular pizza?”

“It’s okay. Kind of expensive. But the customers keep coming back.”

“Huh.” He nodded, as if that was good enough for him. “I’ll have to give it a try.”

I HAD two bosses at Sustainable — Entrepreneurial Eddie and Stoner Eddie. Entrepreneurial Eddie was an impressive guy, a twenty-four-year-old Middlebury grad who’d returned to his hometown to start an eco-friendly pizza restaurant that he hoped someday to grow into a regional, and possibly even national, chain. He was organized, ambitious, and charismatic, a crunchy-granola preppy with shaggy blond hair and the strapping physique of the rugby player he’d been in college. He happened to be Jake’s cousin, which was the reason I’d gotten the delivery job, despite my complete lack of work experience, and the fact that I’d only had my license for a couple of months.

I'm taking a chance on you, Donald. Don't let me down.

Entrepreneurial Eddie was always in charge when I started my shift, but he got replaced by Stoner Eddie at the end of the night, after the restaurant section had closed, and Malina and Jadwiga, the two Polish waitresses, had gone home. At that point, it was just me and Eddie and Ignacio, the Salvadoran pizza maker, who stuck around to fill any late-night delivery orders and help out with the cleanup.

Entrepreneurial Eddie could be tense and short-tempered, but Stoner Eddie absorbed the news of my moving violation with a philosophical shrug.

“That’s the way it goes, bro. The cops in this town are ballbusters. There’s no crime, so they have to make shit up to keep themselves from dying of boredom.”

“But a hundred bucks?” I whined. “I work for tips.”

“That’s how the government rolls, my friend.” The two Eddies were different in many ways, but they were both big Ron Paul supporters. “It’s all just taxes in disguise. Right, Ignacio?”

Ignacio looked up from the floor he was mopping and said something in Spanish. Eddie nodded and said something back. His accent was atrocious, but his meaning must have been clear enough, because Ignacio grinned and added another rapid-fire burst of commentary, to which Eddie replied, “*Verdad, bro, verdad.*” I wished I’d taken Spanish in high school instead of four years of Latin, which was utterly useless in the real world. It was my guidance counselor’s fault: he’d insisted that colleges liked students with “a classical background,” and who was I to doubt him? At that point in my life, I would’ve cut my arm off if *U.S. News & World Report* had mentioned that selective colleges were looking for amputees.

After we settled up, Eddie walked me to the front door. We were almost there when he put his hand on my shoulder.

“Yo, Donald,” he said. “You’re friends with Adam Willis, right?”

“Kind of.”

“Could you do me a favor?” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a serious wad of bills, and counted off five twenties. For a second, I thought he was reimbursing me for the ticket. “See if you can hook me up with some of that superior weed of his.”

I didn’t take the money. “Can’t you ask him yourself?”

“He never answers my texts.”

“He’s probably just busy. I’m sure he’ll get back to you.”

“Come on, bro. Help me out here. I got a big date this weekend.” His voice got soft and confidential. “I’m telling you, that stuff’s some kind of aphrodisiac. I smoked half a joint with Malina last week, and that was all it took.”

“Malina?”

“I know, bro.” He grinned at the miracle. “I’ve been working on her for weeks, and she wouldn’t give me the time of day. Couple hits of that magic bud, and the panties just slid right off.”

It was hard to imagine Malina’s panties sliding off for Eddie, or any guy around here. She was pale and chillingly beautiful, with sad eyes and a husky, disdainful voice. She always seemed vaguely offended in the restaurant, as if waitressing was beneath her dignity, and life a bitter disappointment.

“Wow.”

“I know.” Eddie tucked the money into my jacket pocket and patted me on the shoulder. “I’m

counting on you, bro.”

THE NEXT afternoon, I joined Adam Willis and his chocolate Lab for their daily hike through the woods behind the abandoned state mental hospital. It was creepy back there — lots of rusty appliances and old tires lying around, not to mention a tiny cemetery with maybe twenty unmarked headstones and a sign explaining that the graves belonged to former mental patients who’d died in the hospital: *THOUGH YOUR NAMES ARE UNKNOWN, WE HOLD YOU CLOSE IN OUR HEARTS*. I waited until we’d been walking awhile before I told Adam that my boss wanted to buy some of his weed.

“No way,” he said. “I don’t sell to strangers.”

“I could introduce you. Eddie’s a pretty good guy.”

Adam stopped and scanned the woods, shielding his eyes from the golden light streaming down through the red and gold treetops. It was mid-October, and the leaves had just begun to drop.

“Yo, Hapster?” he called out. “Where are you, dude?”

The question was barely out of his mouth when Happy burst out of the woods and onto the trail, his ears flapping as he galloped toward us, the usual look of crazed anticipation on his face.

“Dassagoodboy.” Adam crouched down, scratching Happy’s ears and slipping him one of the little bone-shaped treats he carried in his pocket. “Dassaverygoodboy.”

He gave the dog a booming thump on the ribs, and we started walking again.

“I don’t get it,” Adam said. “Why are you even involved with this? If your boss wants some weed why doesn’t he just ask me himself?”

“He did. He said he texted you a bunch of times and you never got back to him.”

“Damn right. I’m not gonna text some guy I don’t know. What if he’s a cop?”

“Eddie’s not a cop. He’s Jake Hauser’s cousin.”

“Jake Hauser,” Adam scoffed. “Dude never said shit to me.”

Adam and I had been high school classmates, but our social circles didn’t really overlap. We’d been close as kids — pretty much best friends — until his mom died of cancer when we were in seventh grade. He turned angry and distant after that, started listening to this dark metal, Slipknot and stuff like that, and hanging out with a druggy crowd. His dad wasn’t around a lot of the time — I heard he had a girlfriend in another town — and Adam did pretty much whatever he wanted, which was mainly just playing video games and getting high and skipping school. Whenever his name came up, my mother called him *poor Adam* and referred to him as *a lost soul*. I’m pretty sure he didn’t graduate.

I ran into him outside of CVS one day in September, after everybody else had left for college, and we got to reminiscing about the old days and the fun we used to have. He had his dog with him, and I had nothing else to do, so I tagged along on their afternoon walk. He texted me the next day, asking if I wanted to do it again.

Any time, he said. *Happy enjoyed the company.*

If you’d told me six months ago that I’d be spending my fall living at home and hanging out with Adam Willis, it would’ve sounded like a nightmare to me. But it was weird how normal it was starting to feel, like *this* was my life now, and Adam was way more a part of it than Jake or Josh or even Heather, who’d broken up with me a couple of weeks after she got to Pomona, sparing me the nightly

Skype updates about her awesome roommates and amazing professors.

At the top of the hill, we sat down on a fallen log in the shade of the water tower. Adam took out his little one-hit pipe and packed it with weed. He offered it to me, and I shook my head, the way I always did, though I wasn't sure what was stopping me. In high school, I'd stayed away from weed because I thought it might interfere with my studies and sap my motivation, but what did that matter now?

"The thing I don't get," he said, in that squeaky, holding-it-in voice, "is how your boss even knows my number."

"Don't look at me. I didn't give it to him."

"And how'd he know I was selling?" Adam released a cloud of smoke so big I couldn't believe it had all been stored inside his lungs. "It's not like I'm advertising."

I shrugged, not wanting to tell him that it was common knowledge that he sold some kind of killer weed, the source of which no one could pinpoint. We lived in a small town, and you couldn't keep something like that a secret for long.

"You know what?" I said. "Don't even worry about it. I'll just give Eddie his money back. It's no big deal."

Happy was sitting at our feet, panting cheerfully, thick body heaving, tongue lolling sideways from his mouth. Adam leaned forward and kissed him on top of his big square head. When Adam looked up, I could see that the weed had kicked in. His eyes were cloudy, his face dreamy and trouble-free.

"Chill out," he told me. "I'll take care of you. I don't want to jam you up with your boss."

I DIDN'T realize I had a problem until my next run-in with Lt. Finnegan. This time I wasn't speeding and hadn't violated any traffic laws. I was just minding my business, heading back to Sustainable around nine-thirty on a Wednesday night, when an unmarked Crown Victoria popped up in my rearview mirror, that familiar white-haired douchebag at the wheel. There were no flashing lights, but he tailgated me for a couple of blocks before finally hitting the siren, a quick *bloop-bloop* to get my attention.

We were right by Edmunds Elementary School, the quiet stretch of Warren Road that runs alongside the playing fields. I pulled over, his car still glued to my bumper, and cut the engine. It felt like a bad dream, the same cop stopping me for the third time in less than two weeks.

I was fishing around in the glove box for the registration when he startled me by tapping on the passenger window — he usually approached from the other side — and yanking the door open. Before I could react, he had ducked inside my car and shut the door behind him.

The Prius was pretty roomy, but Lt. Finnegan seemed to fill all the available space. He reached down, groping for the adjuster bar, then grunted with relief as the seat slid back.

"That's better." He rotated his bulk in my direction. He was wearing civilian clothes, khakis and a sport coat, but he still looked like a cop. "How are you, Donald?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Not that I know of."

"Then why'd you pull me over?"

"I didn't pull you over."

“Yes, you did. You hit the siren.”

“Oh, that.” He chuckled at the misunderstanding. “I just wanted to say hi. Haven’t seen you for a couple of days.”

“Oh. Okay.” I nodded as if this made perfect sense. “I just assumed — ”

“I get it.” He laid his hand on my knee. “I’m sorry if I scared you.”

I waited for him to remove his hand, but he kept it where it was. I could feel the warmth of his palm through the fabric of my jeans.

“Umm,” I said. “You know what? I really have to get back to work.”

“You’re dedicated,” he observed. “I like that.”

“I just got hired. I’m trying to make a good impression.”

He tilted his head, giving me a thorough once-over. I was uncomfortably aware of his aftershave, sharp lime scent that mingled badly with the stale pizza funk inside the car.

“You seem a little tense, Donald.” He lifted his hand off my knee and placed it on my shoulder. “I bet you could use a backrub.”

I shook my head, but he didn’t seem to notice. His left hand was already cupping the back of my neck, squeezing and releasing, exerting a gentle, disturbing pressure.

Oh, God, I thought. This isn’t happening.

“Just relax, Donald. I’m really good at this.”

He slipped his hand under my collar, his fingers rough against my skin, tracing the knobs on my spine.

“Please don’t do that,” I told him.

He pretended not to hear me, shifting in the seat so he could get his other hand into the act. He went to work on my right arm, stroking and kneading my shoulder. I could hear him breathing raggedly through his nose, as if he were climbing a hill.

“Wow,” he said in this faraway voice. “Your deltoid’s really tight.”

“Stop it!” I twisted out of his grasp, scooting away from him until my back was pressed against the door. The violence of my reaction startled us both.

“Whoa!” he said, raising both hands in a gesture of surrender. “Jesus.”

“I don’t want a backrub,” I told him.

“Okay, fine.” He sounded a little hurt. “Take it easy, Donald. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Could you please get out of my car?”

He turned away, scowling at the empty street in front of us. There was something sulky and stubborn in his posture.

“I really don’t get you, Donald.” He said this with weird conviction in his voice, like we’d had some kind of long history together. “I just don’t understand what you’re doing with your life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve been asking around. People say you’re a pretty smart kid.”

“Yeah?” I was flattered in spite of myself, glad to know that people still thought well of me. “So?”

“So what’s the deal? How come you’re not in college?”

“I’m taking a gap year.”

This was the explanation my parents and I had agreed on, but I could hear how lame it sounded.

He heard it, too, and snorted with contempt. “A gap year to deliver pizza? What was that, your lifelong dream?”

I should have just kept my mouth shut. But I didn’t like the way he was looking at me, like he had the right to judge me.

“I’m trying to save some money,” I said. “I’m going to Africa in the spring to work in an orphanage. Is that okay with you?”

He didn’t answer right away, and I could see that I’d caught him off guard.

“Africa, huh? What country?”

“Uganda.”

“Wow.” He sounded skeptical, but I could tell he was impressed. “Good for you.”

Just then my phone started buzzing. It was Eddie. I held it up so he could see the display.

“You mind if I take this, Lieutenant? My boss is wondering where I am.”

MY STORY about the orphanage wasn’t exactly true, but it wasn’t just a load of random bullshit, either. For most of the spring and all of the summer, it had been an actual plan, the answer I gave whenever anyone asked about my future. It was a pretty good answer, too, which is probably why I dusted it off for Lt. Finnegan.

According to my mother’s Monday-morning analysis, the fatal flaw in my otherwise excellent college application had been a lack of genuine humanitarian service. She was pretty sure the admissions officers had seen right through my meager list of good deeds — a Walk for Hunger here, some Toys for Tots there, a weekend with Habitat for Humanity, a handful of cans for the Food Drive.

“There was no follow-through,” she pointed out. “It was all for show, like you were just checking some boxes.”

“I was,” I said. “I thought that was the whole point.”

Unbeknownst to me, she started doing some research on the Web, scouting out programs that offered young volunteers an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the less fortunate, putting their skills and ideals to the test in challenging third-world environments. She was especially impressed by an organization called Big Hearts International, whose mission was to connect college-age Americans with “the struggling but resilient children of sub-Saharan Africa.”

“Just think about it,” she told me. “This could be a real game-changer.”

“Africa’s pretty far away,” I reminded her. “And kinda dangerous.”

“It’s just for a few months, Donald. I really think you should consider it.”

I’d filled out the application in mid-May, when it became clear that I wasn’t going to be saved by the wait list at Duke or Grinnell. The way I figured it, my options were either Africa or community college, and I really couldn’t see myself at community college. By the time graduation rolled around, Big Hearts had already assigned me to an orphanage in Mityana, Uganda, not too far from the capital city, whose name I kept forgetting. Heather was almost as excited as my mom, clutching my arm, beaming at me like I was some kind of saint.

“This is my boyfriend, Donald,” she kept telling her relatives. “He’s going to Africa in September.”

That’s who I was for the rest of the summer, the Great Humanitarian and Intrepid World Explorer.

Friend to the Struggling but Resilient Orphans. If nothing else, this identity got me through a lot of awkward situations, gave me something to contribute to what would otherwise have been extremely painful conversations about distribution requirements, course schedules, Greek Life, and Facebook groups for admitted students. Jake bought me a pith helmet at a secondhand store, and I used to wear when we went to the beach or the movies, sort of as a joke, but also as a badge of honor, a token of my good intentions.

I swear, I was all set to go. I updated my passport, got my shots, read a whole bunch of books about AIDS and genocide and colonialism, even drove to Connecticut to meet with a volunteer who'd just finished the program, this skinny, haunted-looking dude whose arms and legs were mottled with bug bites.

"It's pretty freaky," he said, scratching himself like a monkey. "You wouldn't believe the poverty over there. But it's like the most rewarding thing I've done in my entire life."

The last two weeks of August were like one big going-away party, the population of well-wishers dwindling nightly until I was the only one left. I had a few days to finalize my packing and spend some quality time with my parents and little sister, who was starting her freshman year in high school. My mom baked a cake on my last night, and we sat around talking about what a great adventure I was embarking on, how I was going to learn some real-life lessons that couldn't be taught in any ivory tower. Then I skyped with a bunch of my friends and had a long goodbye talk with Heather, during which we both promised to be faithful during our separation. We'd had sex for the first time the night before she left, and we reminded each other how amazing it had been, and how we couldn't wait to do it again over Christmas vacation.

"I love you," she sniffled. "You take care of yourself, okay?"

"I'll be fine," I told her. "I'll see you soon."

That was it. I went to bed feeling brave and melancholy, ready for my big journey into the unknown. But when I woke up the next morning, I couldn't move. I wasn't sick; it just felt like my body had been sliced open and pumped full of wet cement.

"Come on, sweetheart," my mother said from the doorway. "You don't want to miss your plane."

"I'm not going," I said. "It's not fair."

She withdrew and my father appeared a few minutes later. He told me that I needed to get my ass moving, that I'd made a commitment and damn well better stick to it. He said there were orphans in Uganda who were counting on me.

"Fuck the orphans," I said.

"What?" I could see how shocked he was. "What did you say?"

But by then I was crying too hard to repeat myself.

...

I REALLY didn't know what to do about Lt. Finnegan. I thought about talking to Eddie, or maybe to my parents, possibly even writing an anonymous letter to *The Clarion*, our terrible local paper, just to let someone know what had happened, but I wasn't sure what good it would do. In the absence of any proof, it would just be my word against his, and I had a feeling my word wasn't worth all that much at the moment. The only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want to quit my job. I liked working at Sustainable and liked having a good reason to get out of the house at night. My parents were still

missed about Uganda and never missed a chance to remind me of how badly I'd let them down.

In the end, I decided to keep my mouth shut and my fingers crossed, and to drive as carefully as possible. I stuck religiously to the speed limit, checking my rearview mirror like a murderer with a corpse in the trunk, never failed to use my turn signal, and came to a complete and lingering halt at every stop sign, even though I knew it didn't matter. If Lt. Finnegan wanted to pull me over, he could do it whenever he felt like it, regardless of whether I'd broken the law.

To my surprise and immense relief, the safe-driver strategy seemed to work. Two weeks passed without incident, and I started to wonder if maybe I'd overreacted, letting a minor problem mushroom in my imagination into something more important than it really was. Very slowly, I began to let my guard down, to relax and enjoy the job again.

I was in an especially good mood on the Saturday after Halloween, which happened to be crazy busy. It was like half the town had suddenly come down with an uncontrollable urge for gourmet pizza and had all called in their orders at the same time. Amazingly, Eddie and Ignacio handled it without a single glitch — not even a botched topping or a transposed address — and the customers were unusually patient and forgiving. No one yelled at me for being late or forgot to tip. By the time the rush was over — it was a little after eight — I had a big wad of bills in my pocket and one last pie to deliver, to a guy named Roy in Starlite Court, an ugly brick apartment complex over by the train station, where a lot of senior citizens lived. I'd only been there once or twice before.

I found Unit 5 and pressed the buzzer for Apartment B. While I was waiting, a text arrived from Eddie asking if I wanted to party with him and the Polish girls after we closed up. He was a lot friendlier now that I was acting as his go-between with Adam, ensuring him a regular supply of what he liked to call the Magic Love Bud. The door opened and I looked up.

“Donald.” Lt. Finnegan's smile was warm and welcoming. “I was hoping it would be you.”

For a second or two, words failed me. I couldn't understand what he was doing here, standing in the doorway in a shimmery blue bathrobe with white piping. It looked like something a boxer would wear before a fight, except shorter, exposing a lot more thigh than anyone wanted to see on a guy his age. I must have been staring too hard because he reached down and tightened the belt. The robe was still pretty loose on top, displaying a triangle of tufty white chest hair.

“Pizza for Roy?” I finally managed to say.

“That's me. Large sausage, right?”

“That'll be sixteen dollars.”

“Could you bring it into the kitchen?” He took a step back and beckoned me inside. “I left my wallet in the bedroom.”

I was about to tell him that it was our policy never to enter the customer's home when it occurred to me that this might be a good time to make an exception. I stepped into the cramped foyer and followed him into the hallway.

“You go ahead,” he said, stopping outside the bedroom. “I'll be right with you.”

I continued into the kitchen, set the insulated pouch on the countertop, and pulled out my iPhone. I only took a couple of swipes to find the Voice Memo app and touch the red button to record. By the time he emerged, the phone was back in my pocket, and the pizza was out of the pouch.

“Smells good,” he said.

If I'd been him, I might've taken an extra minute or two to put on some clothes, but he was still just wearing that pervy robe. It was looser than before, providing an unobstructed view of his broad chest and bulging belly.

"I think you'll like the sausage," I told him. "It supposedly won some awards."

Lt. Finnegan slipped one hand inside the robe and began absentmindedly massaging his left pec. I was bright in the kitchen, and I noticed a pale scar on his knee, one of those old-time Frankenstein sutures, like the stitching on a softball.

"You hungry?" he asked. "I can't eat that whole pizza by myself."

"I'm on the clock."

"How about a drink then? I got soda and OJ. Beer, too, but that's probably not a good idea."

"Maybe just some water."

He took two glasses from the dishwasher and filled them straight from the tap. We never did that at home, only drank from the Brita pitcher. We sat down at the table and touched our glasses.

"Cheers," he said. "It's nice to have some company."

I let that pass, even though *company* hardly seemed like the right term for the guy who delivered your pizza. He smiled at me. His expression was shy, strangely boyish.

"I like you, Donald. You're really easy to talk to."

I took a sip to calm my nerves. The water was tepid, with a sweet, chemical aftertaste.

"We hardly know each other," I said, speaking slowly and clearly for the benefit of the recorder. I didn't feel great about what I was doing, but I knew it had to be done. "We only ever talk when you pull me over."

"I know." He laughed, like this was a cute story we would someday share with our friends. "It's crazy, right?"

"You pulled me over three times last month. And the third time, the night you were in the unmarked car, you tried to give me a backrub. It kinda scared me, Lieutenant Finnegan."

He stiffened a little, and I could see I'd hit a nerve.

"Look, Donald, I'm really sorry about that. I got carried away, you know? I do that sometimes. But I hope you'll give me another chance."

"What do you mean?"

He gave me a sly look, like he thought I knew exactly what he meant.

"I mean, you can't get a good backrub in a car. You need to be able to take your shirt off, stretch out on a bed, and relax." He reached across the table and laid his hand on mine. "Why don't you come by after your shift tonight. That way we can take our time."

I slid my hand out from under his and stood up.

"Please listen to me, Lieutenant Finnegan." My voice was shaky, and I was surprised to realize I was on the verge of tears. "I don't want a backrub. I didn't want one when you pulled me over, and I don't want one now. I think you have a problem, and you should probably get some help."

"Whoa, hey." He held up one hand, as if he were stopping traffic. "I'm just trying to be nice here."

"And just so you know" — I held up the phone — "I've been recording this entire conversation."

It took him a few seconds to process what I was telling him. I could see it in his face, that awful moment of clarity.

“Jesus, Donald. Why would you do that?”

“Look, I don’t want to get you in trouble. I’m just asking you to leave me alone. Is that so hard to understand?”

I waited awhile, but I never got an answer. I wasn’t even sure he’d heard the question. He just lowered his head into his hand and started cursing softly, telling himself how fucking stupid he was, how he knew this was gonna happen, how he’d told himself to stop and had kept on doing it anyway, and now he was totally fucked, wasn’t he, muttering this pitiful monologue that followed me all the way down the hallway and out the door.

A YEAR and a half went by before the next time I got pulled over. Lt. Finnegan was retired by then, forced to leave the department after a bunch of people had complained about his strange behavior. Apparently, I wasn’t the only young guy in town who’d gotten a backrub along with his traffic ticket. It was a minor scandal for a week or two, but they hushed it up somehow, and he managed to leave the force without facing any charges or losing his pension. Last I heard, he was living in Florida.

Lots of other things had changed, too. I’d become Eddie’s right-hand man at Sustainable, managing the original restaurant while he opened a new one in Rosedale. We were working hard, making good money, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever have the time or the patience to go back to school. Shortly after my nineteenth birthday, I’d moved out of my parents’ house, into a studio apartment across the street from the bike shop. The rent wasn’t too steep, and I needed the privacy now that I’d gotten together with Karen, one of the new waitresses we’d hired after Malina and Jadwiga had gone back to Poland. We got along okay, though she could be kind of moody and relied on me for pretty much her entire social life, not that I had a whole lot to offer in that department. Mostly we just got high and watched TV.

I’d lost touch with most of my high school friends, but hadn’t made any new ones except for Adam and Eddie. The three of us had gotten pretty tight over the past year, ever since we’d started our weed business. Using Eddie’s money and Adam’s connection, we’d developed quite a sideline, buying in bulk and selling to a handful of carefully selected clients, moving a pound here and a kilo there, lots of profit with what seemed like minimal risk. We transported our product in Sustainable’s delivery cars hidden in pizza boxes tucked inside insulated pouches. It was my idea, and I was pretty proud of it. You could drive right up to the front door of a dealer’s house, make a cash transaction, and no one would suspect a thing.

So I wasn’t nervous that night in April, heading over to Rick Yang’s house — he was one of our best customers — with a large onion-and-pepper in one box and a pound of weed in another. I’d done it a dozen times before, never a problem.

It all went down so fast. I barely had time to register the lights in my rearview mirror when I saw two more cop cars right in front of me, blocking the intersection. I got out with my hands on my head like they told me to, and the next thing I knew I was lying facedown in the street, with my hands cuffed behind my back.

It’s funny what goes through your head at a time like that. I didn’t think about my parents, or about Eddie and Adam, or even about Karen. I didn’t wonder about what kind of trouble I was in or consider how my life might have been different if I’d gone to Uganda. What I thought about while they

searched the Prius was something I'd almost forgotten, a stupid thing I'd done while applying to college.

The applications were due on December 31, and I'd left my safeties to the last minute. I was just sick of the whole process by then — it had consumed almost a year of my life — fed up with answering the same useless questions over and over, tailoring my responses to whoever was doing the asking. It was ten o'clock on New Year's Eve, and there I was, sitting at my desk, staring at the question *Why Fairfield?* and I guess I just lost it. Instead of repeating my usual bullshit about a liberal arts education, I went ahead and told the truth: *You're my Safety School, motherfucker!* And then I pressed SEND before I had a chance to stop myself. It felt so good I did the same thing for Roger Williams and Temple. I'd never told anyone about it, not even when people were scratching their heads, wondering how it was possible that an honor student like me had been rejected by all three of his safeties.

That's what I was thinking about when they found the weed. I was thinking about the kid who'd filled out those applications, remembering how cocky and obnoxious he'd been, so sure of his own worth, and the world's ability to recognize it. I was lying on the street with my cheek pressed against the blacktop, thinking about what an asshole he was, and how much I missed him.

GRADE MY TEACHER➔

SIXTH PERIOD WAS ENDLESS. VICKI stood by the Smart Board, listening to herself drone on about the formula for calculating the volume of a cylinder, but all she could think about was Jessica Grasso, the heavy girl sitting near the back right corner of the room, watching her with a polite, seemingly neutral expression. It was almost as if Jessica grew larger with each passing moment, as if she were being inflated by some invisible pump, expanding like a parade float until she filled the entire room.

She hates me, Vicki thought, and this knowledge was somehow both sickening and exciting at the same time. *But you wouldn't know it from looking at her.*

Vicki hadn't known it herself until last night, when she read what the girl had written about her on grademyteacher.com. She had stumbled upon the post while conducting a routine self-google, exercising a little due diligence so she didn't get blindsided like her old friend and former colleague Anna Shamsky, a happily married mother of three who'd lost her job over some twenty-year-old topless photos that had appeared without her knowledge on a website called *Memoirs-of-a-Stud.com*. The site was the brainchild of an ex-boyfriend of hers — a guy she hadn't thought about since college — who had decided in a fit of midlife bravado that the world needed to know a little bit about every woman he'd ever slept with (“Anna S. was a sweet innocent sophomore with boobs to die for,” he wrote. “When I was done with her, she could give head like nobody's beeswax”). The surprisingly steamy photos — Anna's youthful breasts totally lived up to the hype — had spread like a virus through the entire Gifford High School community before the subject herself even remembered they existed, and by then there was nothing to do but submit her resignation.

Vicki didn't have to worry about nude photos — she'd never posed for any, not even when her ex-husband had asked her nicely — but that was just one risk among many in a dangerous world. She told herself she was simply being prudent — in this day and age, googling yourself was just common sense, like using sunscreen or buckling your seatbelt — but she was sometimes aware of a tiny flutter of anticipation as she typed her name into the dialog box, as if the search engine might reveal a new self to her, someone a little more interesting, or at least a little less forgettable, than the rest of the world suspected. She remembered feeling oddly hopeful last night, just seconds before she found herself staring at *this*:

OMG my math teacher Vicki Wiggins is an INSANE B*#@&! One day she called me a FAT PIG for eating candy in class. I know I'm no supermodel but guess what she's even worse! Hav u seen the panty lines when she packs her HUGE BUTT into those ugly beige pants? Hellooo? Ever hear of a thong? Everyone cracks up about it behind her back. She might as well be wearing her extralarge granny pants on the outside. Vicki Wiggins, you are the pig!

Vicki's first reaction to this was bewilderment — she honestly had no idea what the writer was talking about — followed by a combination of searing embarrassment (she'd had her doubts about those beige pants) and righteous indignation. In her entire career — her entire adult life! — she'd never called anyone a fat pig. She wouldn't dream of it. As a woman who'd struggled with her own weight, she knew just how hurtful such epithets could be.

What made it even worse was that she realized she was making a mistake even as she clicked on the link, violating her long-standing policy to stay as far away from grademyteacher.com as possible. It was just too depressing, and she wasn't even one of the truly unpopular teachers, the unfortunates whose names were flagged with a big red thumbs-down icon — people like Fred Kane, the marble-mouthed biology instructor whose average score was 2.4 out of 10, or Martha Rigby (a mind-boggling 1.8), the ancient English teacher who regularly referred to the author of *Great Expectations* as Thomas Dickinson. Vicki herself was stuck in the middle of the pack (5.5, to be exact), with fewer than a dozen comments to her name, most of which contained a variant on the phrase "Boring but okay." By contrast, Lily Frankel, the lively and hip young drama teacher, had received a whopping sixty-two reviews for an overall rating of 9.3, highest on the entire faculty, thereby earning herself a coveted smiley face with sunglasses and a crown.

Vicki read the post over and over — the author was identified only as "Greensleeves," a pseudonym that meant nothing to her — wondering what she could have done to provoke such a hateful and dishonest attack. You'd think that if someone despised you enough to call you an insane bitch, you'd have a pretty good idea of who it was, but Vicki's mind was blank, unable to produce a suspect. It wasn't until she gave up and went to bed that the answer came to her, almost as if it had been jarred loose by the impact of her head against the pillow.

SHE'D BEEN circulating through her classroom during a quiz — this was back in February, either right before or right after winter vacation — when she spotted Jessica Grasso munching on a Snickers bar. Some teachers allowed snacks in class, but Vicki wasn't one of them, and she'd been teaching long enough to know that you had to stick to your guns on stuff like that. Not wanting to embarrass the girl who'd never given her any trouble, Vicki tapped her on the shoulder and spoke in a barely audible whisper as she held out her hand.

"Please give me that."

Instead of surrendering the contraband, Jessica took another bite. She was a big girl with a pretty face — except for the ridiculous raccoon eyeliner — and sleek dark hair that swept down across her forehead, partially obscuring one eye. She chewed slowly, taking a languorous pleasure in the activity, staring straight at Vicki the whole time.

"Did you hear me?" Vicki demanded, this time in a normal voice.

Jessica's expression remained blank, but Vicki detected a challenge in it nonetheless. She began to feel foolish, standing there with her hand out while the girl gazed right through her. It was possible — she wasn't clear on this point in retrospect — that Vicki lowered her gaze, taking a moment or two to perform a less-than-charitable assessment of Jessica's figure.

"It's not like you need it," she said.

Jessica blinked and shook her head, as if maybe she hadn't heard right, and Vicki took advantage

of her confusion to snatch the candy bar right out of her hand.

“Hey!” Jessica cried out, loudly enough that several heads snapped in their direction.

Now it was Vicki’s turn to do the ignoring. She marched back to her desk and dropped the stub of the Snickers into her empty wastebasket, where it landed with an unexpectedly resonant thud. By now everyone in the room was looking at her.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,” she told them. “Food is not allowed in this room.”

That was it, the whole ridiculous, deeply forgettable incident. Vicki was more than willing to admit that it wasn’t her finest hour as an educator, but she hadn’t called anyone a fat pig and didn’t think she had anything to apologize for. If anyone was at fault it was Jessica, who’d knowingly broken a rule and then treated a teacher with blatant disrespect. So it was frustrating for Vicki — humiliating, even — to see herself portrayed in a public forum as a nasty woman in unflattering pants, nothing more than a joke to the kids she was trying to help.

Like a lot of people her age, Vicki had grown accustomed to taking the punishment life dished out. Most of the time she didn’t even bother to complain. But every once in a while she found it necessary to stand up and defend her dignity — her worth as a human being — and this was apparently one of those occasions, because after the bell rang, instead of sitting quietly at her desk and organizing her papers as the students filed out, she found herself moving toward the door with an unusual sense of purpose, arriving just in time to form a barrier between Jessica Grasso and the hallway. She couldn’t deny that she derived some pleasure from the look of confusion on the girl’s face, the slow-dawning knowledge that she’d been busted.

“Greensleeves,” Vicki told her. “You and I need to talk.”

THEY SHOULD have had it out there and then, when Vicki had a head of steam and the element of surprise working in her favor, but Jessica was rushing off to a big chem test; apparently Mr. Holquist took points off if you were late, even if you had a pass. She offered to come back right after school let out, but Vicki had to nix that due to a faculty meeting. Not keen on hanging around for an extra hour, Jessica suggested postponing their talk till the morning. Vicki was adamant that it couldn’t wait that long, and after a brief, somewhat hectic negotiation, they settled on Starbucks at four-thirty in the afternoon.

As soon as she sat down with her cup of green tea, Vicki began to suspect she’d made a mistake in agreeing to meet in the coffee shop, the atmosphere too mellow and unofficial — Joni Mitchell on the sound system, retired men playing chess, young hipsters tapping on their laptops — for the kind of chilly confrontation she’d been rehearsing in her mind. This conviction only deepened when Jessica arrived a few minutes later, waving to Vicki and miming the act of drinking as she took her place on the coffee line. The girl seemed perfectly happy to be there, as if the two of them were regular coffee buddies, and Vicki found herself momentarily disarmed, unable to muster any of the feelings of anger or shame that had made this rendezvous seem so urgent in the first place.

“Sorry I’m late.” Jessica smiled as she took her seat, her cheeks rosy from the damp April breeze. “My mom made me fold the laundry.”

“That’s okay. I just got here myself.”

“Mmmm.” Jessica sipped from her enormous drink, a clear, domed cup full of what looked like a

milk shake with whipped cream on top. “This is awesome.”

“What is it?”

“Venti caramel Frappuccino.” She held out the cup. “Want some?”

Vicki was horrified — there must have been a thousand calories in there — but she just smiled politely and shook her head. What Jessica ate and drank outside of class was none of her business.

“I’m fine with my tea,” Vicki said. “How’d you do on your chemistry test?”

“Terrible.” Jessica gave a cheerful shrug, as if *terrible* were a synonym for *pretty good*. “I suck at science even worse than I suck at math, if you can believe that.”

“You don’t suck at math. I just don’t think you apply yourself.”

“That’s exactly what my dad says.”

“You should listen to him.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. They were honey-colored, and there was an appealing cluster of freckles spattered across the bridge of her nose that Vicki had never noticed before. *It’s the makeup*, Vicki thought. *She’s not wearing that awful makeup*. She wished she knew the girl well enough to tell her she was better off without it.

Something caught Jessica’s eye and she leaned to the left, a look of such longing on her face that Vicki couldn’t help turning to see what had caused it. At a table near the front window, a slender blond woman in a boldly patterned wraparound dress was flirting with a cop, a big-bellied, broad-shouldered man holding a coffee cup in each hand. He said something that made her laugh, then reluctantly took his leave, shuffling backward out the door so he could keep his eyes on her for as long as possible. When he was gone, the woman smiled to herself and reflexively checked the messages on her cell phone. Vicki felt a sharp stab of envy — something that happened to her several times a day — irrational hatred for the smug woman coupled with an intense desire to *be* her, or at least to be looked at the way the cop had looked at her.

“So you read it, huh?”

Vicki turned around, her mind a beat behind the question. She felt flustered, as if Jessica had caught her in a private moment.

“Excuse me?”

“That thing I wrote? That’s why you wanted to talk to me, right?”

“Yes.” Vicki straightened up, hoping to regain some of her teacherly authority. “I was hurt by it. You said some really awful things about me.”

Jessica nodded contritely. “I know.”

“You really need to be more considerate of other people’s feelings.”

“I didn’t think you’d read it.”

“Well, I did.” Vicki’s eyes locked on Jessica’s. “I cried myself to sleep last night.”

“Wow.” Jessica didn’t seem to know what to do with this information, and Vicki wondered if she made a mistake in revealing it. “I’m really sorry.”

“I’m only human,” Vicki continued, a slight tremor entering her voice. “You think I like reading about my big backside on the Internet? You think that makes me feel good about myself?”

“Well, how do you think I felt?” Jessica shot back. “You called me a fat pig.”

She said this with such conviction that Vicki couldn’t help wondering if it might actually be true,

if she really could have said something so mean and then repressed the memory. But it didn't make sense. If she'd called Jessica a horrible name like that, she would have remembered. She would have gotten down on her knees and begged for forgiveness.

"I never said that." Vicki's voice was calm but insistent. "You know I didn't."

"But you thought it." Jessica was blushing fiercely. "I remember the way you were looking at me. Judging me. *You don't need that candy bar.*"

"No," Vicki murmured, but the certainty had drained from her voice. "I wasn't judging you." Jessica took a long pull on her Frappuccino, squinting at Vicki the whole time.

"I didn't ask to be fat, you know."

"You're a lovely girl," Vicki told her. "You have a very pretty face."

"My mother tells me that five times a day."

"It's true."

"I used to be really cute." Jessica laughed, but all Vicki heard was pain. "People used to tell me I looked just like my big sister."

"How old's your sister?"

"She's a senior. Jenny Grasso? Cheerleader? Like the hottest girl in the whole school?"

"Oh." Vicki knew Jenny Grasso. You couldn't spend a day in Gifford High School and not be aware of her. It was like living in America and not knowing about Britney Spears. "I didn't realize that the two of you —"

"Why would you? It's not like we have the same last name or anything."

"It's a big school," Vicki replied lamely. "You could be cousins."

Jessica shook her head. She didn't seem upset, just defeated. "Her clothes are so tiny. You can't believe she fits in them."

Vicki had never taught Jessica's sister, never even spoken to her, but she had an oddly vivid image in her mind of Jenny Grasso walking slowly past her classroom in tight jeans and a pink tank top, clutching a single red rose.

"Do you get along?"

"Sometimes. I mean, she's pretty nice most of the time. But it kinda sucks living in the same house with her. Boys are always texting her and she's always going to the mall with her friends and coming home with these really cute outfits. It's just — her life's so great and mine . . ." Jessica's eyes pleaded with Vicki. "Sometimes I want to kill her."

"I don't blame you."

"I don't see why she gets to have all that and I don't. It's like I'm being punished and I didn't do anything wrong."

"There's no justice."

Jessica nodded grimly, as if she'd figured that out a long time ago. "You want to see something?" She picked up her phone, took a couple of swipes at the screen, then handed it to Vicki. "I mean, look at this."

Even on the small screen, the photograph was heartbreaking. It had been taken on prom night, the two Grasso sisters — the fat one and the pretty one — standing side by side on the stoop of a pale blue house, the camera far enough away that their bodies were visible from the knees up: Jenny in a slinky

low-cut yellow dress, not smiling but looking deeply pleased with the world, Jessica in a tentlike hoodie, grinning till it hurt, her face at once large and indistinct, one beefy arm draped over her sister's delicate shoulder.

Poor thing, Vicki thought as she handed back the phone.

"I know," Jessica said, as if Vicki had spoken the words aloud. "Story of my life."

"Believe me," Vicki told her, "I know just how you feel. I mean, I was never petite or anything, just normal-sized. But then I put on fifty pounds when I was pregnant with my son. Fifty pounds, can you believe that? And I couldn't take it off. I did Weight Watchers, I fasted, I exercised, I tried every diet in the world, but I just got bigger and bigger. It was like my body was saying, *Guess what, this is how it's gonna be from now on. Better get used to it.* My husband told me he didn't care, said he loved me no matter what, but a few years later he left me for a Chinese woman, I don't think she weighed a hundred pounds. They have three kids now."

"He sounds like a jerk."

"I loved him." Vicki flicked her hand in front of her face as if it wasn't worth talking about. "That was almost twenty years ago."

"You ever get married again?"

"Nope."

"Any boyfriends?"

"Nothing serious. I was a divorced working mother. Not young and not thin. My phone wasn't ringing off the hook." Vicki hesitated long enough to realize she was making a mistake, then kept going. "For a lot of that time, I had a crush on another teacher."

Jessica's eyes widened. "At Gifford?"

"I was crazy about this guy. He was divorced, too. We ate lunch together every day, went to the movies with a group of other single teachers, even played on a coed softball team. It was a lot of fun."

"Was it Mr. Oberman?"

"*Mr. Oberman?*" Vicki couldn't help laughing. Dan Oberman was a slovenly history teacher, a sadsack who lived with his mother and had been wearing the same three sweater vests for the past ten years. "You think I'd have a crush on Mr. Oberman?"

"He's not so bad."

"Anyway, I got really motivated about walking every day and watching what I ate, and I lost about twenty pounds. I could see he was looking at me in a different way, complimenting my outfits, and you know, just paying attention, and I finally decided to go for it. At the faculty Christmas party, I took him aside and told him how I felt. He said he had feelings for me, too. He drove me home that night and we . . ." A bit late, Vicki's sense of decorum kicked in.

"You hooked up?" Jessica pretended to be scandalized. "Was it Mr. McAdams?"

"He's a married man."

"Come on, just tell me."

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that we had that one night together and I was so happy. I could see my whole life laid out in front of me." Vicki laughed at herself, a short, scornful bark. "But he didn't call the next day, or the day after that . . ."

"Or the day after that," Jessica continued. "Been there."

“Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore and I called him. He got all serious on me. You know that voice, like a doctor telling you you’re gonna die. *You have to understand, Vicki, I like you a lot but what happened the other night was a mistake. I had too much to drink, blah, blah, blah . . .*”

“Let’s be friends,” Jessica added knowingly. “That totally sucks.”

“I’ll tell you what sucks. Three months later he got engaged to a pretty, young gym teacher. And guess who got invited to their wedding? Good old Vicki.”

“Mr. Turley?” Jessica gasped. “You hooked up with Mr. Turley?”

“It was just that once.”

“He’s cute for an old guy,” Jessica said. “Didn’t Ms. Leoni just have a baby?”

“Yeah. Sweet little boy.”

“Ouch.”

Vicki nodded. *Ouch* was right. She didn’t tell Jessica about how drunk she’d gotten at the wedding, how the bride’s mother found her crying in the bathroom and listened to Vicki’s confession of her love for the groom with surprising compassion, telling Vicki that she understood how hard it must be that she’d gone through something similar back when she was single. *You have to forget him*, she said. *You have to move on with your life.*

Jessica slurped the last of her Frappuccino and studied Vicki with a look of anxious sympathy.

“You think you’re ever gonna meet someone else?”

Vicki wasn’t surprised by the question. It was something she’d asked herself frequently in recent years. If she’d been honest, she would’ve said that she’d come to the conclusion that Mr. Turley had been her last shot, and that she’d pretty much resigned herself to spending the remainder of her life alone. But it was clear from the way Jessica was looking at her — hungrily, with the kind of focus Vicki rarely inspired in the classroom — that she was asking an entirely different question.

“Of course,” Vicki told her. “Of course I’ll meet someone. I just have to be patient.”

THAT NIGHT she ate dinner alone, graded some homework assignments she should’ve handed back a week ago, and called her son, who was a junior at Rutgers. As usual, Ben didn’t pick up, so she just left a brief message: *Hey, honey, it’s your mom. Give me a call when you get a chance. Love you.* Then she watched an episode of *CSI: Miami* and the first part of the news before finally working up the nerve to turn on her computer.

She wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. She and Jessica had parted on good terms, joking in the Starbucks parking lot about heading across the street to Bruno’s for a large sausage-and-pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. It was early evening, and the light had seemed unusually soft and forgiving as they said goodbye. Left to her own devices, Vicki wasn’t much of a hugger — she saw how people hesitated sometimes, and it took a lot of the pleasure out of it — but Jessica didn’t share her qualms. Before Vicki understood what was happening, the girl was moving toward her with her arms out, their two bodies bumping together, the sensation so familiar it was almost as if she were embracing herself.

“So,” Jessica said. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Vicki felt a sudden odd emptiness as the girl let go. She was surprised to realize that she was close to tears “You have a nice night.”

Jessica had promised to delete the offensive post on grademyteacher.com, and Vicki was pretty

sure she trusted her to keep her word. Still, she felt a vague sense of foreboding as she scrolled down the alphabetical list of Gifford teachers — there was Becky Leoni (6.7) and good old Sam Turley (7.2) — a queasy suspicion that something unpleasant was about to unfold.

But it was okay. The post was gone, wiped away as if it had never even existed. Vicki felt a moment of pure satisfaction — justice had been done, a crooked thing made straight — as well as a rush of affection for the girl, who really was a lovely person despite the awful things she'd written. Her attack was just a projection, an attempt to displace negative feelings for herself onto someone else. Vicki understood all too well how that sort of thing worked.

Her relief didn't last for long, though. Without meaning to, she found herself reading the review that had taken the place of Jessica's at the top of the Vicki Wiggins's page on grademyteacher.com. It was several months old, written by a student who called himself "Mr. Amazing":

All in all Ms. Wiggins is a pretty good math teacher, except she's pretty strict about stupid little things. Like she gave this one kid detention cause his cellphone rang in class. Ok he should have turned it off, but was it his fault that someone called him? But like I said she's not that bad. I don't care what anybody says there is no way she's more boring than Mr. Ferrone.

Vicki had read this post when it first appeared and had barely given it a second thought. It was actually pretty good as far as these things went — Mr. Amazing had given her a higher-than-average overall rating of 6.0 — but right now it just seemed heartbreaking. Was this what she would be remembered for when all was said and done? That she gave some kid detention for a minor offense? That maybe — just maybe — she wasn't as mind-numbingly dull as Dennis Ferrone?

I have so much to offer. And no one even notices.

For a few seconds, she thought about approaching Jessica after class tomorrow, suggesting that she post a new, more generous review on the site just to set the record straight. But it was a lot to ask. And the thought of making such a request was embarrassing beyond words.

She wasn't sure why it mattered so much, but it did. It just did. Why wouldn't it? She was a good person, she worked hard, and it seemed crazy — crazy and wrong — that these things went unacknowledged.

It turned out to be easier than she expected to register on grademyteacher.com. You just typed in an e-mail address and checked a box that said I AM A STUDENT AT GIFFORD HIGH SCHOOL. She chose the username Frappuccinogrrrl and wrote the following in the comments box:

My math teacher Vicki Wiggins is really nice. She's pretty and really cares about us kids. Like if you were having a problem she'd meet you after school and try to make you feel better because she just wants everybody to be happy. And she knows a lot about math too.

There was more to say — much more — but space was limited and she decided to stop there. She checked her work, pressed SEND, and turned off her computer. There would be time enough in the morning to wake up and drink a cup of coffee, then maybe google herself before heading off to work. It would be nice, she thought, clicking on her own name and, just for once, finding something that felt like the truth.

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