Chelise

C. Randall Nicholson

To the voices that are heard only by God

Chelise never remembered her dreams, if she had any. Sleep, for all intents and purposes, was oblivion. And oh, it was exquisite.

 But the passage of time couldn’t be measured in that state; and so seven hours were as the blink of an eye, and all too soon she was jarred back to reality by the voices of her clock radio. Whether singing classic hits or reading the news, it didn’t matter; they were every bit as grating and unpleasant as the blaring or ringing of an alarm. Grating and unpleasant because they announced the arrival of another day, and the fact that she would have to get up and face it.

 Today they were the voices of the Bangles, singing “Manic Monday” as if to rub in the fact that she had not only another day, but an entire week ahead of her. Still, maybe not an entire week of just the same. Something inside told her that something big was about to happen, something important. Good or bad, she couldn’t say, but knowing her life it was really a no-brainer. With any luck it was just the upcoming ad campaign.

She swore loudly, then took a deep breath and rolled out of bed. She glanced longingly for a moment at her nightstand – no, not now, not before work. Maybe later tonight, or tomorrow night even. She could wait. She could be strong.

 Chelise showered, got dressed, and spent a minimum of time applying makeup and arranging her thick auburn hair; there would be time for that later. She took care to avoid making eye contact with herself in the mirror; she always hated what she saw there, and sometimes it sent her into a mania that scared her in its intensity. She went down to the kitchen where, like the good little boy he was, her four-year-old son Holden was already at the table waiting patiently for his breakfast.

 “Good morning, mommy,” he said.

 “Good morning, sweetie,” she said. “What flavor do you want for breakfast?”

 “Strawberry!” he shouted joyously.

 “Good choice.” She took a couple of strawberry Pop-Tarts from the stash in the cupboard and put them in the toaster. As she did, she winced at the clutter on the counter and the kitchen table. For how little she could afford, she somehow ended up with all kinds of junk, and was always feeling too out of sorts to clean it up. Tonight she would, she told herself, knowing it was a barefaced lie.

 “Mommy,” said Holden, “can we have pancakes someday? At Derek’s house they have pancakes sometimes.”

 “Oh, uh, sure, sweetie,” said Chelise, feeling a sharp twinge of guilt. “It just takes more time and, uh, skill to make pancakes, that’s all. Maybe on the weekend.”

 “Yay!”

 Pancakes. A simple request, for a relatively simple recipe with cheap ingredients, no doubt. But she felt paralyzed, helpless to grant it, insecure in her culinary skills. She was already failing at motherhood in so many ways that she didn’t need another to add to the list. Maybe on the weekend – she hated to think that was a lie as well, but she knew it was. Hardly her worst, though.

 While Holden was eating she grabbed a glass of water and a stick of celery from the fridge. She had to watch her weight, after all. She was still gnawing on it when Holden finished, and they left the house and walked down a few blocks to drop him off with her friend Kathy as they did every morning. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and children were already out drawing on the sidewalk with chalk, but this did nothing to improve her mood.

As they approached, Holden ran to go play with Kathy’s son Derek while she came out to talk for a moment. “How are you holding up these days, Chelise?” she asked.

 “Oh, great,” Chelise lied. “Just great.”

 “Work’s going well?”

 “Yeah, it’s great.” That wasn’t a lie. It was going great, just not for her.

 “Just hang in there!” said Kathy, slapping her on the shoulder. “We’ll have a girl’s night out sometime soon. You really need to de-stress, I can tell.”

 “Oh, I have ways of de-stressing.” That wasn’t a lie either. The trouble was that none of them were permanent and all of them had side effects.

 “Good. Okay, see you later. I’ll take good care of him.” Kathy waved, then turned around and walked back to the house, where Holden and Derek were already sword fighting with sticks. With a heavy sigh, Chelise waved back and headed off to work.

 She knew from reading *Dilbert* since childhood that hating one’s job was normal. Her father, who’d brought the strips home from his comic calendar for her to read every weekday, had always said “Do what you love, love what you do”, but she knew that was bullshit because every job had its share of drudgery and nothing could be fun all the time. Still, that reality provided her little comfort. In fact, she envied those cartoon characters’ workplace woes.

 Her job had been fun at first, and she’d loved it. That had been before it started to ruin her life and make her yearn for oblivion. She hadn’t mentioned it to her father because she hadn’t spoken to him in years, and figured if she did he would probably disown her.

 She walked to the bus stop, then took the bus halfway across the city and walked the remaining blocks to the studio. It was a plain, nondescript building with no signs, giving little indication of the activities that went on inside. As she opened the front door and stepped into the dingy, spartan interior her nostrils were assailed by a miasma of tobacco, weed, and other less savory odors. Such facilities weren’t all this bad, of course. She’d worked in nicer ones. But right now she literally couldn’t afford to be picky.

 Rick, the security guard, gave her a polite nod as she walked past him to the dressing room. She returned it, but her eyes were already drifting to the set, where scenery and props had been left up over the weekend. She remembered where they’d left off filming and she knew what would come next, and she shuddered at the thought. On the plus side, she could finally get it over with and stop dreading it.

 Along the wall, a few cockroaches scurried away as she approached the door. The dressing room was overcrowded and full of chatter as usual. Chelise gravitated toward her own little posse – Darlene, Violet, and Steve – who greeted her cordially as she approached.

“How was your weekend?” asked Darlene.

“Great,” she said, sitting down and beginning to style her hair properly. “Partying hard, as always.”

“And you didn’t invite me?” said Steve, pouting. “I thought we were friends.”

“Sorry, it wasn’t your type. Booze only.” Chelise looked around and frowned. “Where’s Emily? She’s been gone for like a week now.”

 The others nervously glanced at each other.

 “I don’t know,” said Darlene. “Maybe the same as Mary…”

 Chelise shuddered at the thought.

 “God, I miss her,” said Steve. “She was irreplaceable.”

 “Calm down, she doesn’t have HIV,” said Violet. “She actually called me the other day, and told me she ran off with the Pink Cross.” She rolled her eyes.

 “The what?” asked Chelise.

 “I guess it’s some organization to ‘help’ people like us,” said Violet. She rolled her eyes again. “People need to mind their own business. The way I see it, if you don’t like it here, fine, just leave. More for the rest of us, eh?”

 “Yeah,” said Chelise, wondering who she was trying to convince. “Totally.” She finished with her hair and started on her mascara.

 “Don’t let Rachel hear about that, either. She’s pissed enough this morning as it is.”

 “Why?”

 “I don’t know. Probably because –”

 “Look alive, people!” said Rachel, entering the room.

Though she sometimes starred alongside them, at her age – early thirties – she was of more use helping Adrian with the technical aspects of their work. Though she was technically second-in-command, sometimes it was hard to tell. The people in the dressing room gave various sentiments along the lines of “Good morning” but refused to meet her piercing gaze.

 “All right, a few housekeeping items,” she said. “First the bad news. Viewership has fallen off by about .2% over the last couple weeks. I know, I know, it’s not a lot, right? But that means the competition is cutting into us more. And that’s unacceptable.”

 “So we’ve got to be even sexier, huh?” said Violet, batting her eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion and tugging on a shirtsleeve to expose a bit more cleavage.

 “Much. Adrian can talk to you about that. Now here’s the other thing,” she said, “the big thing. We’re going to start that huge ad campaign, right? I’ll need some of you to be in that. Now obviously, since this is going public, we can’t have you do your usual brand of acting, but –”

 “Rachel!” boomed a voice from outside. “What the hell is taking you so long? Time is money!”

 “Just a second,” she called back. “Okay, I’ll finish explaining later. It’s showtime.”

 Chelise hurried to dab a bit of makeup on her thigh where, a few months ago, she had impulsively carved the word “WHORE” with a shard of broken mirror. After coming to her senses she’d been terrified that her career was over, but the scars had healed nicely and were now barely legible. Finishing that, she stood and hurried out after the others.

 “Let’s go, let’s go,” said Adrian, clapping his hands as they exited the dressing room, his ponytail bobbing with impatience. “I want higher production values today, all right? A hundred and ten percent. No slacking.”

 What an asshole, Chelise thought, as she always thought when she saw him, because it was true. Sometimes she fantasized about him being hit by a bus.

 He lit up a cigarette. “You and you, up first,” he said, pointing at her and Steve. “Remember your places? Great.”

 Her heart started to pound. This scene would be bad enough, but in the next one they would be joined by another actor, and Adrian had refused to tell her who he was. She’d been wondering about it all weekend. Now she saw him standing off to the side, looking over his script, waiting to step in. Her heart sank.

 “Jesus Christ, he’s like fifty,” she muttered under her breath.

 “Oh,” said Steve, sounding no more enthusiastic. “Yeah, wow.”

 “Is there a problem?” Adrian demanded, as if daring her to speak up.

 For a moment she actually considered refusing to go through with it, but only for a moment. Her rational thinking quashed that impulse and reminded her that if she did, she would have to pay a three hundred dollar kill fee for ruining the shoot, and probably lose her job altogether. In either case, Holden would go hungry, and that was out of the question.

 Suppressing a wince, she said, “No, sir.”

 “Then move your ass! Time’s wasting.”

 There was no point in stalling. Chelise picked up the handcuffs that were lying on the set. Steve picked up the riding crop, looked it over, and looked back at her. “It’s showtime,” he said, with a look on his face that added, “What can you do?”

 She tried to find a happy center, to regain some aspect of the oblivion that the Bangles had so rudely yanked her out of this morning. It didn’t work. It never worked, but she never stopped trying. At least her heart rate didn’t accelerate quite so much as it had the first few times.

 “Quiet on the set,” said Adrian. “We’re rolling!”

 Chelise knew exactly what to do, because she’d gone over it thoroughly and done similar things many times in the past. In this scene, the script called for her to be in pain, terror, and humiliation. It didn’t require very much acting on her part.

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 “I guess that was adequate,” said Adrian at the end of the day. “For most of you, anyway. Tomorrow, we’ll – *what*?” he snapped as Rachel pulled on his shirtsleeve.

 “It’s the *Tribune* on the phone, sir,” she said. “Donald Hilton’s speaking about neuroscience stuff and they want to get our side of the story.”

 “FTND?”

 “Yes, sir.”

 “Shit, when it rains, it pours. Tell them I’ll call back.” He suddenly looked even more agitated than usual. “All right, go home, people. Same time tomorrow.” He dismissed them with a wave of his cigarette.

 As Chelise emerged from the building, it hurt to walk, and she wobbled a bit. As soon as she got home she would take a hot bath, but first she had to go pick up Holden, and that would require a detour. She hoped she didn’t pass out in the meantime.

 Behind her, Violet was talking on her phone. “Yeah, the shoot went great, mom. Thanks for the superior genetics. *No one* has a rack like me.” She cupped her hand over the phone and added, “No offense.”

 “None taken,” said Chelise, not even looking at her. She had other things to worry about.

 “Yeah, I’ll be over for dinner in a half hour – what?” This was directed at Darlene, who had come out of the building and run up beside her.

 “Where’d you say Emily went?” asked Darlene.

 “Pink Cross. I wouldn’t bother with her, though. I’m sure she’s too good for us now.”

 Chelise tuned them both out and kept walking. Pink Cross – she considered Googling it, but what was the point? If she could have left this job, she could have done it on her own. Unless they had a magic money tree she didn’t see what they could do to help. Emily would probably be back in a few weeks, tops. Besides – it sounded like a religious group, and that was the last thing she needed.

The light was in her favor as she reached the crosswalk; one thing, at least, was going well in her life. She gave a friendly nod to Becky and Samantha, the prostitutes on the street corner, who stared lethargically back at her. At least they made no pretenses about what they were, she thought. At least they didn’t put on a façade.

 The bus stop was crowded and seemingly allowed her to disappear. No matter how attractive or weird-looking, no one drew a second glance in this throng of people all just wanting to get home. At least, not usually. Today was an exception, as Chelise quickly realized when she was approached by a pair of smiling women in conservative skirts and black name tags, who seemed to be honing in on her.

 Their smiles seemed more genuine than any she’d seen on an adult face in a long time, and it creeped her out. More bizarre still, as they came closer she felt some kind of peaceful, happy aura that she couldn’t put her finger on. She recoiled inwardly at the feeling, like an animal exposed to sunlight after living in a basement for years.

 “Good evening,” said one of them, extending a hand. “I’m Sister Evans, and this is my companion, Sister Lashomb.”

 Chelise didn’t shake the proffered hand, but recognition dawned. “Oh, you’re those weird anti-gay people,” she said.

 The other missionary’s smile wavered for just a second, but Sister Evans didn’t miss a beat. “No ma’am,” she said. “God loves all His children, which is why –”

 “The hell he does,” said Chelise, turning away. “Not me.”

 “Why do you say that?” asked Sister Lashomb.

 “None of your business,” said Chelise.

 “I understand that feeling,” said Sister Evans, the more talkative of the pair, “but I promise you that no matter *what* we’ve done, God will always –”

She’d heard it all before, and she wasn’t buying it. “I’m not in the mood to talk, all right?”

 “No problem,” said Sister Evans. “May we leave you with a pass-along card?”

 “Sure, whatever.” Anything to make them go away. Chelise took the card from Sister Lashomb and grunted a quick “thanks”. Glancing at it, she saw a picture of Jesus and Mary Magdalene standing in front of the empty tomb, a story she vaguely remembered from childhood. There was no trash bin handy, so she stuffed the card in her purse with all the other junk.

 “Have a great night,” said Sister Lashomb.

 That wasn’t likely, Chelise thought as she rode home. She almost had to laugh, though. Who did these people were, thinking they could solve her problems with some magic Jesus stuff? A couple of girls from Utah, or Idaho at least, where they probably didn’t know people like her even existed?

 That night, like most nights, she ordered pizza for dinner. She brought it into the living room, where Holden was already watching TV, and then let out an involuntary groan of pain as she settled down next to him on the couch.

 He looked at her, worry reflected in his innocent brown eyes. “Are you okay, mommy?” he asked.

 “Yeah,” she lied quickly. “Yes, mommy’s fine. I just, ah, fell on the sidewalk this morning.”

 “Poor mommy, you have so many accidents.” He snuggled up closer to her and kissed her on the arm. “All better, right?”

 She forced a smile and patted him on the head as her heart twisted with guilt. Holden was the only bright spot in her life, her only reason *for* life, the only person who kept her from just ending it all; and she couldn’t even enjoy him. She lied to him, kept him in the dark about everything, as if he were just another acquaintance. But what was worse, she couldn’t provide either the material things or the quality time that every child needed. She knew she didn’t deserve him, and he deserved better. Much better.

 He was a blessing, but also a punishment, perhaps God’s way of reminding her every day of her unworthiness. *Why did you send him here, to me? Wh*y*?* She knew it was a rhetorical question. God never answered.

 He snuggled up closer still, and she winced as he brushed her sore ribs. “I love you, mommy,” he whispered.

 She wanted to cry, and not in a good way. Her voice trembling, she said aloud, “I love you, too.” But in her head she said, *You shouldn’t*.

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The next morning Chelise was yanked from her precious oblivion back into her weak, sore body by the voices of The Police singing “Roxanne”, as if begging her not to go to work. But her name wasn’t Roxanne, and they didn’t know her from a hole in the ground, so she swore and rolled out of bed. Glancing at the nightstand, she smiled – tonight, maybe. Then she went through her morning routine, dropping Holden off at Kathy’s and taking the bus to the studio.

“Have you heard anything else from Emily?” Darlene asked Violet in the dressing room.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” said Violet. “She called to pester me again. I told her to mind her own business. Goddamn traitor.”

“Why, what did she –”

“Shhh!” Violet hushed her as Rachel walked in.

“You and you, move it,” said Rachel, pointing to Violet and Chelise. “We need you to head down to the plaza and meet with a reporter from the *Tribune*. Get him off our backs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Violet with enthusiasm.

“Can I go too?” asked Darlene.

“No,” Rachel snapped. “We don’t need to send the whole studio down.”

“What about me?” asked Steve. “You know, to offer the male perspective?”

“No one gives a shit about the male perspective,” said Rachel. “Just be quiet and do your job, all right?” She stormed out. Steve risked his career to flip the bird after her.

Chelise and Violet quickly finished applying their makeup and left the dressing room, almost bumping into Adrian and making him spill his coffee. “Watch it,” he snapped. “You’re off to see the reporter, eh? Don’t blow it.”

Violet giggled. “You guys are so tense about everything lately,” she said. “Why? The media’s on *our* side, aren’t they?” She let out a partially stifled squeal as he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her in close.

“Usually,” he said, blowing cigarette smoke into her eyes. “And we’re going to keep it that way. Understand?”

“Y-yes sir,” she said, visibly shaken. He let go of her and pushed her aside as he walked away. She brushed herself off, regained her composure, and smiled at Chelise as if nothing had happened. “Come on, let’s not keep him waiting,” she said.

On the bus ride over, Chelise tried to avoid thinking about this revolting turn of events. Here was a golden opportunity to tell everything, to explain to the world – or at least the city – what a nightmare her life was, and why. But she couldn’t. She knew better than to bite the hand that fed her and her son, no matter how vile and disgusting that hand was. And she knew the hand knew that she knew. That was why she and Violet had been chosen over, say, Darlene, who seemed unsure of herself lately and wasn’t wise enough yet to hide it.

“I’ll do most of the talking,” said Violet. “Follow my lead, all right? Upbeat and positive.”

“Sure,” said Chelise. She didn’t feel much like talking anyway.

They met the reporter at a table outside a café looking out onto the plaza. It smelled delicious, reminding Chelise that she could never afford to eat at such a place. The reporter shook their hands and introduced himself, and an umbrella shaded them from the worst of the bright sun as they sat down. A smartphone was set on the table to record their words.

“Now, I guess you know what this is about,” he said. Chelise had already forgotten his name. “An organization called Fight the New Drug is having a –”

Violet hocked a loogie on the sidewalk at the mention of that name. “Sorry,” she said, clearing her throat and looking back at him with bright eyes. “Continue?”

“Er, right. So, I’ve talked to your supervisor already, but I wonder what you, regular employees, think about Dr. Hilton’s presentations and the neuroscience research behind them.”

Violet snorted. “Look, I don’t know about this neuroscience stuff,” she said, “but if you ask me, it’s a bunch of scaremongering. I mean, there are other scientists who say sex addiction is a myth, right? Why don’t these ‘Fighters’ have any of them speaking?”

“Everyone has an agenda,” added Chelise, nearly wincing at the irony.

“So you don’t think it’s valid, then?” the reporter asked.

“No,” said Violet. “That’s what we just said. It’s nonsense.”

“Well –” said Chelise, unwilling to let the issue go so quickly. She didn’t actually have an opinion on this, since she tried very hard to not read about things that reminded her of her job, but she had to sympathize with anyone who was an enemy to Adrian and Rachel, even though that technically made them her enemy too. “Maybe there are *some* people who –”

“Yeah, maybe some,” Violet interrupted, giving her an annoyed look. “But we’ve got alcoholics too, and that doesn’t mean we should bring Prohibition back, does it? People have to know their own limits. That’s their own problem.”

“Right,” said the reporter. “So, you don’t support mandatory web filters like they’ve done in the UK.”

“Oh God, don’t get me started. That was more religious fascism than I’d expect from a nation of atheists. And it doesn’t even work, so, you know.”

“Do you think something should be done, though? I mean, you’re obviously marketing toward adults, but there have been a lot of concerns expressed lately about kids, really young kids, being exposed to –”

“Not our problem. They can drink beer, too, if their parents let them. It’s the parents’ job to keep an eye on their own kids, right? We’ve got a thing called the First Amendment, and that means it’s not up to us to curtail our freedom of expression. If other people are offended or worried about it then they need to cope somehow.”

“Right,” said Chelise. “But I do think –” Violet kicked her under the table, but she had to say something, after all. She imagined Holden and Derek surfing the internet at Kathy’s house and stumbling upon pictures that could set them on a horrible life path – pictures of her. “They could install their own filter, like K9 or something. And I do think there should be more awareness, I guess. It’s not kid stuff.”

“Right, obviously not,” said Violet impatiently. “We’re on the same page with that.”

“I take it you like your jobs?” said the reporter.

“Damn straight,” said Violet as Chelise forced herself to nod. “It’s great for a strong, independent woman to do what she wants, you know? And I think that’s another part of this scaremongering thing. It’s not just that the morality police want to stop our freedom of expression, but they also have a problem with women specifically.”

“White males,” said Chelise. “Like everything else, I guess, white males are to blame.” She hoped that statement would be too ludicrous for newspaper readers to take seriously, but then realized with a sinking feeling that she was probably overestimating them.

“So what do you think Fight the New Drug’s main motive is?” the reporter asked.

“Pushing their religion,” said Violet. “They say they’re non-religious, but they were started by a bunch of Mormons, right? So religion trumps science and the First Amendment any day.”

“I hate religion,” said Chelise, and that was true. She thought of the missionaries she’d met yesterday, and how disgusted they’d be if they knew what she did for a living or what she was telling this guy now. It would have been funny if it weren’t so depressing – not nearly as depressing, though, as her own religious upbringing. She unconsciously touched her fingers to her lower neck, where a small crucifix had once rested.

After a few more formalities the reporter stood up and shook their hands again. Chelise made him promise to keep her anonymous, and then they parted ways, the women heading back to the bus stop. Chelise took her sweet time, not being in any rush to get back.

 “Well, Chelise,” said Violet, sounding cold, “don’t you think you rocked the boat a bit much?”

 “Sorry,” said Chelise. Had she gone too far? Would there be repercussions? “I just figured if we were upbeat, positive echoes of each other, he’d find it suspicious.”

 “Doesn’t matter. The truth is the truth, and the truth is we’re damn lucky to be a part of this, right?”

 “Well…” Chelise didn’t know what to say. How could two women in the same job, facing the same horrors day in and day out, have such different experiences? Was Violet the one with a problem, or was she? It must have been her. It always was.

 “Wait, hang on.” Violet pulled out her phone and dialed a number. “Hey, mom? Yeah, it’s me. Just wanted to let you know before I forget that I’m gonna be in the newspaper. Tomorrow or Thursday, probably. I don’t know how many of my quotes they’ll fit in…”

 Their conversation over for the time being, Chelise was spared having to come up with an answer.

 When they arrived at the bus stop, she half-expected to see the missionaries again, but that had been a different time of day and a different bus stop anyway. Relax, she told herself. Of course, it was hard to relax when she knew she’d have to finish filming yesterday’s scene as soon as they got back to the studio, but at least it was almost over. Then they’d be starting a new film and moving on to expository scenes again.

 “Sorry about that,” said Violet, hanging up her phone. “Do you ever call your parents?”

 “No,” said Chelise. “Not for four years.”

 “Ah,” said Violet. “Not supportive of your career, eh? That bites. Hey, lift up your shoulders, okay? You did fine. We just got ourselves some free publicity. Things are looking up.”

 Chelise was bewildered. Was there no one who understood? The problem really *was* with her, then.

 Then Violet’s own smile wavered for just a moment, and she rubbed at the back of her head. “Let’s hope Adrian and Rachel like the article,” she mumbled under her breath.

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 Being pulled out of oblivion never became any more fun, but today the horror was somewhat ameliorated by the realization, through Chelise’s sleep-fogged brain, that it was payday. Not only that, but the day of the weekly party at Steve’s apartment. And not only that, but the final day of the work week, leaving her with two days to spend time with Holden and try to forget about her life. On her radio, the voices of Loverboy sang out “Working for the Weekend”.

 “Hell no,” said Chelise.

 She dropped Holden off and went to work as usual. There seemed to be a slight spring in her step, but in actuality it was just that the pain from Monday’s and Tuesday’s shoots was beginning to wear off. Today, thank goodness, they were only shooting expositional scenes, and being prepped on the upcoming ad campaign.

 Then Rachel handed her the paycheck, and her heart sank even further than its usual default position.

 “No,” she said. “No, this can’t be right…”

 She was accustomed to not getting as much as she would have liked, of course, but this – this was a substantial reduction. Whether the government had taken more or she’d just been docked in pay, she didn’t know right off the bat, but it didn’t matter. She didn’t know how far she could stretch this much.

 “Don’t talk to me about it,” said Rachel. “Not my thing.”

 She went to talk to Adrian, who was still standing out on the set, holding a copy of yesterday’s newspaper with the article about Fight the New Drug. He hadn’t said a word about it yet, so they’d all been walking on proverbial eggshells for the past two days. Maybe that was why she hadn’t gotten a raise – but she’d read the article herself, cringing the whole time, and most of her quotes weren’t even in there. If he was upset, it shouldn’t have been her fault.

In any case, Steve had gotten to him first. “Look, I can’t even make rent this month,” Steve was saying, his voice rising a couple octaves with worry. “Isn’t there some way –?”

 “Who do you think I am, Hugh Hefner?” snapped Adrian. “You think I’m just rolling in dough myself?”

 “I don’t know. Maybe…”

 “Look, you think people visit our site to see *you*? Okay, some of them do. I don’t know how many. But you’re not the main attraction, all right? Supply and demand.”

 “Oh,” said Steve, raising his voice, “so you’d pay me more if I wore a long wig and a naughty schoolgirl uniform?”

 “We might,” Adrian retorted, then gave it a second thought. His eyes lit up. “Yes, we might.” He looked around Steve at Chelise. “Hey, Chelise, we’re gonna try dressing you as a boy next week.”

 Why not? It would actually rank among the least degrading things she’d done here. But that wasn’t her concern right now. As Steve stormed off in exasperation, she stepped forward. “Um, sir –”

 “You’re not satisfied either.”

 “I – I know you’re not rich, sir, but I have –”

“Listen, you know why I’m picking *you* to be the boy? I’m doing you a favor. You need more pizzazz, more versatility. People aren’t satisfied with the same old shit. In fact, views of your videos and pictures have fallen off by five percent. *Five percent*. But Violet’s have gone up by twice that much.”

 “More versatility?” she said, not understanding. “You’re the one directing us.”

 “And don’t you forget it. But I can only use what I’ve got to work with, okay?” He took out his cigarette, and her eyes watered at the carcinogenic stench as he gestured with that hand over the length of her body. “In fact, there’s the other problem. If you were younger –”

 “Younger?” Along with her temper, images of bus tires rolling over his torso rose in her mind. “I’m barely twenty-two goddamn years old!”

 He shrugged. “Supply and demand. I don’t choose the demand, I just supply it.”

 “Please, sir,” she said, desperation overcoming her anger, “I have a little boy at home. I need to –”

 “And whose problem is that?” Rachel, who had followed her, butted in. “When you got pregnant you knew there were other options, right?”

 “Not for much longer. Damn Republicans,” Adrian muttered.

 “No one made you have that kid,” said Rachel. “None of the others had kids. Does Violet have stretch marks? Does Darlene? Or Steve? Maybe if you’d thought of that you would be getting a higher paycheck!”

 “Yes, but –”

 Adrian stepped forward and backhanded her across the face, sending her sprawling to the dirty floor. She sat for a moment, registering the sting in her cheek and tasting the blood in her mouth.

 “Get up and get out,” he said. “I don’t have time for this.”

 As she stumbled to her feet, trying to retain any shred of dignity that might happen to remain somewhere within her after the last few years, Darlene stepped up to Adrian and Rachel, holding her own paycheck.

 “Um, sir –” she began.

 “You want to discuss a raise?” said Adrian, his voice noticeably softer.

 “Yes, sir.” She giggled.

“Very well. Let’s go to my office and I’ll see what I can do.” Grinning, he put an arm around her waist and led her off.

 Chelise rolled her eyes. Apparently being twenty-two years old and having stretch marks already disqualified her from that kind of “raise”. It was just as well; given the choice, she wouldn’t touch Adrian with a ten-foot pole. But while these negotiations were over, her financial worries were far from it. To say nothing of her self-image.

Had her prime really already passed her by? Were her views really falling along with her attractiveness? She’d been a star, back in the day. Even gotten some fan mail, which was unusual and kind of creepy. Mostly from some weird guy named Michael. But he hadn’t emailed the company in months, and maybe he had stopped watching her too. Great. If she couldn’t be successful in this industry any longer, than her entire rationale would crumble, and she would have to hate herself even more.

She was in such a foul mood that instead of going straight to Kathy’s house and then home, she arrived at Steve’s apartment early. To her surprise, Violet – the only one of their little posse who hadn’t complained about her paycheck – was already there, holding a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. On Steve’s iPod, the voices of Say Anything were singing “Walk Through Hell”.

 “Might as well make this party the biggest one,” said Steve, heading into the kitchen, “because it will probably be our last, after they kick me out of here.”

 “I’m just stopping for a quick buzz,” said Chelise. “I have to pick up Holden.”

 “Sure thing,” said Steve, coming back in with another bottle of Jack Daniels. “You can use the vaporizer first.”

 “Thanks,” she said, sitting down in his large beanbag chair and sticking the tube in her mouth. Within moments she was experiencing a state of relaxation that, while unable to counterbalance the usual ugly feelings in her heart, was almost as nice as the oblivion of sleep. Furthermore, the passage of time went by at a reasonable pace, not as the blink of an eye, and so she was able to savor it more thoroughly.

 But everything had to come to an end sooner or later. “Save some for the birds,” grumbled Violet.

 “Sorry,” said Chelise, handing it over. Without missing a beat her other hand reached out for Steve’s bottle. “Hey barkeep, you know the drill.” He poured her a glass and she guzzled it down with enthusiasm. “Ah!”

The alcoholic nectar warmed her throat as it went down and sent tingles into her toes. She held out her glass again, and Steve obliged.

“Where will you go?” she asked him after guzzling the second glass.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I know a guy in Vegas who owes me a favor. But this is the only skill set I have, really.”

“Nah. You’re also a decent human being.”

“My folks would disagree.”

“Yours too? Damn.” Chelise took another turn with the vaporizer and inhaled in thoughtful silence for a moment.

Unexpectedly, Violet began to talk. “I like myself,” she said. “Do you?”

 Chelise nodded, lying. Steve said, “Yeah, I like myself all right, I guess.”

 “No, I mean me. Do you like me? Cause I do. A lot. Totally.”

 “Me too,” said Steve.

 “I have superior genetics, you know. That’s how come I look so good naked. Really. And that’s why I like myself. So much. Really.”

 “Er, good for you. Chelise, can I have a turn with that?”

 “Sure.” Chelise handed the tube over. Once again, the moment she stopped inhaling the THC vapors, the feeling of relaxation disappeared. She took another glass of beer and became a little more numb. “Yeah, you’re great, Violet,” she said. “We love you.”

 “Want to pass the needle around?” asked Steve.

 “Not right now,” said Chelise. “I’ve still got to pick up Holden.”

The next thing she knew, Darlene was walking in the door. “Hey, guys,” she said.

 “Darlene!” said Chelise. “Wow, everyone’s here early tonight!”

 Darlene looked confused. “Early? It’s seven thirty.”

 “Shit!” Chelise bolted to her feet, then wobbled and fell over backwards, fortunately having the beanbag chair to break her fall. “Shit!” she repeated. “I have to pick up Holden! Where did the time go?”

 “You were zoning in and out over there,” said Steve. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

 “Darlene, you like me, don’t you?” said Violet.

 “Oh, here,” said Darlene, crossing the room and helping Chelise back to her feet. “I’ll walk you to the door, all right?”

 “Ugh.” Chelise leaned on her shoulder.

 “Answer me!” Violet wailed.

 Once outside, Darlene became more talkative. “Listen, I’ve really been thinking about this Pink Cross thing,” she said. “After work I actually got in touch with Emily. She’s been trying to get to us through Violet, but –”

 Chelise’s drunk brain didn’t entirely understand what Darlene was saying, but it knew it should agree with her. Her mouth, however, began speaking on its own. “Not interested,” she said. “Violet was right; if you don’t like it here, just leave. Besides, ‘cross’, that sounds like a religious group. I don’t like religion. I used to wear a crucifix necklace every day, but I haven’t for four years because it was making me a hypocrite.”

 “But you need to take care of yourself, and you need to take care of Holden,” said Darlene.

 “No shit. That’s *why* I need to stay here. That, and I want to, I mean.”

“Adrian and Rachel aren’t here. You can drop the act. Look, I’m still not even sure if I’ll talk to these people, but I’m considering it. You should too. Let me give you their number, just in case.”

 “Darlene –”

 “Please.”

 “Whatever.” Chelise wasn’t clearheaded enough to form a coherent argument, so she took the path of least resistance. Her drunk fingers fumbled around in her purse for something to write on and then handed it over to Darlene, who scribbled some digits with a pen.

 “Thanks,” said Darlene. “Just consider it. Oh, and here’s the website for Fight the New Drug, too. You know, while I was in Adrian’s office this afternoon, he started bitching about them. Seems he’s not just afraid of this presentation with Dr. Hilton, but also that as soon as he unveils our ad campaign, they’ll retaliate with their own parody of it.”

 “Good God,” said Chelise, beginning to wobble again. “Why’s everyone talking like we’re in full retreat mode? .2 percent is a catastrophe? This is still the most profitable industry in the United States. It’s a *secure* industry.”

 “How much profit are *we* getting?” asked Darlene. “How secure do *we* feel?”

 The words would have cut straight to her heart, had they not been intercepted by her addled brain. “You’re plotting a rebellion or something. This is crazy.”

 Darlene shrugged sadly. “What can I say? Adrian’s not as good a kisser as you.” She handed back the piece of paper with the phone number and website on it.

 Chelise accepted it. There was no trash bin handy, so she stuffed it into her pocket. Then she threw up and passed out into sweet, sweet oblivion.

\* \* \*

 “Oh shit,” Chelise muttered to herself, running as fast as her legs could carry her. “Oh hell, oh shit…”

 She arrived at Kathy’s house, ran up the steps and banged on the door. She was supposed to have picked Holden up around five, or six at the latest; now it was after nine. She didn’t know what had come over her. Usually she could wait until after she’d gotten him home to go party at Steve’s place. Why the impatience now? She could only guess that the feelings in her soul had gotten steadily worse and harder to bear, like the proverbial frog that didn’t notice its pot of water heating up. And like the frog, she would sooner or later reach boiling point.

 “Hey!” said Kathy, coming to the door with Holden in tow. “I’ve been trying to call you! I was so worried!”

 “I’m so sorry,” gushed Chelise, and she meant it. “I was out. I passed out from, uh, stress.” Well, that was true enough, in a sense.

 “Oh, you poor dear. Have you seen a doctor?”

 “Yes,” she lied.

 “No more procrastinating. Girls’ night out *tomorrow*, understand? We need to kill this thing.”

 “Yeah, sure. Thanks for taking such good care of Holden.” She picked him up. His eyelids were already drooping, and she didn’t want to make him walk.

 “My pleasure, as always,” said Kathy. “Just let me know if you ever need me to watch him for longer, okay? I’m more than happy to.”

 “Okay. Thanks. Good night.” Chelise waved and left.

 As she walked home with Holden nodding off in her arms, her usual guilt came crashing back down on her tenfold. Stoned out of her mind, then passed out drunk, while her son waited for her to take him home. That was almost worse than the way she made her living, the fact that she lied to him about it, and her usual failure to meet his needs. He deserved so much better.

 “Are you hungry?” she asked him.

 “No,” he mumbled, still half-asleep. “We ate pancakes. For *dinner*.”

 Great.

After that, he was asleep, and they didn’t talk. But as she tucked him into bed, his eyes flickered open for a moment. “I love you, mommy,” he whispered.

 Her heart felt as if it had been gouged with a mace. Unable even to reply, she turned and ran, tripping over her own feet, to her own bedroom. She’d declined Steve’s offer earlier, but now she couldn’t wait a moment longer. She opened the nightstand, retrieved the syringe there, and injected it into her arm. Immediately she felt a rush of warmth even better than the vaporizer.

 “Ahhh…” she said.

 She told herself that she only used it a couple of times a week; that it was a habit, not an addiction, and that she would stop before it got to that point. But she knew she was lying to herself, just like she lied to Kathy, to the reporter, to her own son – to everyone who wasn’t a boss or co-worker. And not even heroin could numb the horrible feelings that were tearing her apart.

 Really, how had she sunk so low? Where would it all end? Where? Her life was out of control, like a sick puppet show where the protagonist was self-aware yet helpless to alter her circumstances. Who was pulling the strings? God? And what a terrible role model she was for her son. He deserved better. So much better.

 So much better…

 *“Thanks for taking such good care of Holden.”*

 *“My pleasure, as always.”*

 *“…such good care…”*

 *“My pleasure…”*

 She slapped herself in the face. Of course. Why hadn’t she thought of that? It was so obvious. Now she knew what this entire week, no, entire month – no, what her entire life had been leading up to.

She’d felt obligated to keep enduring the hell that was her career, the hell that was her life, because she needed to keep taking care of Holden even if she did a shitty job at it. Yet now she saw, with a clarity that almost made her laugh at her own shortsightedness, that he actually would be better off without her after all.

There were others who could do a better job, others who could give him what he deserved. Kathy was one, but she wouldn’t even have to do it herself. She could find someone else. Chelise felt a little guilty about burdening her with this on such short notice, but it was for the best in the long run. She had to do what was best for her son, and that would be to get herself out of the way.

 With that, Chelise was down to business. Should she leave a note, or a video? No, no one would care enough to make that worth her while. Right then, to the process itself…

 She knew the preferred method of workers in her industry, and though she wasn’t sure why it was popular, she understood her own rationale. In moments she had a rope, materialized from a drawer somewhere, and her fingers were tying the knot on their own as if they had been genetically preprogrammed to do so. It seemed fitting, somehow, to die as she had been living, with her body on display, divorced from all context and humanity.

 She attached the rope to the ceiling, got a chair, and stood on it. Taking one final deep breath, she looped the noose around her neck. The rope felt surprisingly cool and smooth against her skin. She took a step –

And slapped herself. What was she thinking? The last thing she needed was for Holden to find her corpse dangling from the ceiling. He’d be scarred for life. In fact, other methods – shooting or poisoning, for instance – were ruled out by the same reasoning. She needed to just disappear, so that he’d never know what happened. When he grew older, perhaps he’d have some vague memories of an auburn-haired woman who’d once had some significance in his life, but that would be all, and it would be for the best.

 Of course. The perfect idea came to her. She removed the noose and stepped down from the chair.

 Chelise quietly opened Holden’s bedroom door and took one last, long look at her sleeping angel. Then, not allowing herself to look back, she practically ran downstairs and out the door to hail a taxi. One arrived and carried her off into the night as, on its radio, the voice of Michael Jackson sang “Will You Be There”.

\* \* \*

 At the edge of a bridge several miles away outside the city, a young and tormented woman stood and stared down at the churning waters below. Even if one somehow avoided the sharp rocks just beneath the surface in several locations, the current was too strong to swim against, and even the temperature of the water could be fatal after prolonged exposure. It was as if this river had been expressly designed for the purpose which this young woman was about to use it for.

 Designed – designed by God, perhaps, who had abandoned her, who had stopped loving her, for good reason. God who was now watching silently as she went to her well-deserved fate. Or did he even exist? She considered that, then shrugged and decided it was moot at this point.

 Chelise stared at the waves, icy black in the darkness, lashing out with their spray, beckoning her to come forward and partake of deliverance from torment, offering something she’d craved every waking moment of her life for the past few years, something she’d attempted to capture for herself but only succeeded in getting transient counterfeits of. Yes, they promised true, blissful oblivion. Now that it was so close, after so long, the thought was almost arousing in its grandeur.

 Her heart rate and breathing had slowed as the effects of the heroin wore off, and she was altogether drowsy, but the cold night air was helping her stay awake. She climbed over the railing so that her feet were balanced precariously on the lip protruding over the other side and only her arms, reaching back behind her, kept her from tottering over. Now, the natural human instinct for self-preservation gave her pause. This was a big decision, after all. It had already been made, but she had to come to terms with all its implications first.

 Headlights swept over her as, behind her, a vehicle crossed the bridge. Whether the driver saw her or not she couldn’t tell, but in any case it didn’t stop or even slow down. She was as alone as she could hope to be.

 A gust of wind lowered the temperature even further, biting into every inch of exposed flesh, and instinctively she jammed one bare hand into her pocket, sacrificing half of her balance. There, her fingers were surprised to find a piece of cardstock. She hadn’t meant to take anything with her. Taking it out and squinting into the darkness, she saw that it was a card with a number and a web address scrawled across it.

 She was confused; then she remembered the events that had taken place before she’d passed out. Darlene had given her this information that she had no intention of using, certainly not now. The rejection of her crucifix necklace had been merely symbolic of her rejection of religion altogether, because it had rejected her first, because she had long since ceased to be deserving of God’s love. She still vividly remembered her pastor yelling at her that she was going to hell. Maybe she was, but it couldn’t be worse than earth.

 There were other words printed on the paper, and she could just make out the largest ones. With a gasp, she turned it over and saw again the picture of Jesus with Mary Magdalene. It seemed like a year since the missionaries had given her this pass-along card, yet it had been less than a week. The details were hard to make out in the darkness and Jesus could have been reaching out to any woman, perhaps even herself. No, that was ridiculous; Mary was a decent, worthwhile woman, someone he would actually talk to.

Another vehicle passed, not stopping or slowing down. Chelise put the card back in her pocket and jumped.

 She felt the cold air on her face, through her hair, heard it whistling past as the waves rushed up to meet her. Then the water chilled her to the bone, followed by a sting as it entered her nose and eyes, and a blaze of pain in her head where she’d dashed it open on a rock. The warmth of her blood mingled with the coldness of the water, which she could almost feel seeping into her brain. Then she was being carried away, already losing consciousness. She closed her eyes and smiled.

 She opened them again and shivered as another gust of wind brought her out of her vivid hallucination.

Well, that hadn’t been so bad. now for the real thing. Her leg muscles tensed and

 “You!”

 She nearly lost her grip and toppled off, rather than jumping, as the voice scared her half out of her skin. Turning, she saw that a man had approached during her stupor, standing on the other side of the railing, pointing an accusatory finger at her. She smelled the familiar odor of alcohol on his breath.

 She regained her composure and squinted, trying to make out his features. “What? Do I know you?”

 “No,” he said, “but I know *you*.” His finger began to tremble with some emotion – fear, anger, or both, she couldn’t tell.

 “Great. So, do –”

“You’re the bitch who destroyed my marriage.”

 “What?”

 “Oh, yeah. Not just you, but mostly. You’ve been my favorite ever since you started out. I’ve followed your career. I knew you lived nearby, but I never dreamed I’d actually meet you…”

 “I’m flattered,” she said, wishing he would go away and let her get this over with. “Now, if you’ll excuse me –”

“You came between me and my wife,” he said, getting angry again. “You turned her from the light of my life into a nuisance, and she was upset that I couldn’t get it up in bed without you or one of your friends. Now she’s gone, and my kids too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and now I’ve realized my life is shit and I don’t want it to continue.” He clambered over the railing and joined her in her precarious position.

 Chelise was a bit stunned at the odds of running into her biggest fan here, of all places, but confusion was quickly replaced by anger. “So it’s my fault?” she said, raising her voice and beginning to gesticulate wildly with her hands. “It’s always my fault. I’m just a vile, disgusting whore who’s not even good at being a vile, disgusting whore, and I break all the commandments so everything is my fault.”

 “Yeah, well,” he stammered, “*I* don’t think you’re disgusting, but my wife –”

“Look, asshole, did I hold you at gunpoint and make you watch me? It’s a free country. I make a living how I want and you do what the hell you want with your spare time. Leave me out of it.”

 He opened his mouth to protest and raised his hand as if to slap her. Then he suddenly slumped down and burst into tears. “You’re right,” he said, his voice quavering. “You’re right, I’m sorry, I don’t know what – don’t know what came over me…”

 “Whatever,” she said. “I’m used to men yelling at me. Women too, sometimes.”

 “But it’s somebody’s fault,” he said, beginning to babble. “I don’t want it to be my fault. How can it be? I tried to stop, really I did. I didn’t want to become – what I was becoming – but I couldn’t stop. I just couldn’t. I tried so hard.”

 “I’m sure.” Her anger was gone, but she still wished he would go away.

 “It’s not fair. Why did this happen to me? This doesn’t happen to most people. But everyone does it. Everyone does it.”

 “So you’re like a guy who can’t hold his liquor,” said Chelise, not feeling particularly sympathetic. “Should have considered that before you started.”

 “I was twelve,” he said, getting angry again. “Twelve. A twelve-year-old’s supposed to have that kind of foresight? Anyway, I found it on accident. Not my fault.”

 “Of course not,” she said sarcastically, but all of a sudden her heart wasn’t in it. She realized he was in the same situation as her – another character in the sick puppet show whose only escape was to cut the strings.

 There was a moment of silence as she contemplated this, and then he started getting angry again. “What’s the big deal, huh? Jesus, it’s not even real.”

 “It’s real enough,” she muttered, refusing another shouting match.

 “Yeah? Don’t try to make yourself the victim in this. It’s your goddamn *choice* to –”

 “I got into it when I was seventeen.”

 He blinked. “Wait, what?”

 “Did I stutter?”

 “But that’s –”

 “No shit. I started with my own selfies, and then found a company that was – careless in its hiring practices.” She let that sink in, then continued. “Those were the good days. I had some self-esteem but not a lot of wisdom. Now – well, I was going to say the status quo is reversed, but actually I have neither.” And before she knew it, she was explaining her life to this complete stranger as he listened in stunned silence.

 “Wow,” he said after she’d finished and he’d had a moment to digest the information. “I – I’m so sorry. If I’d known that I was helping destroy someone’s life –”

 “Same here,” she whispered. “Same here.”

 “But it’s not your fault. You were just doing a job. I was neglecting my family –”

 “So was I. I was trying to do the right thing for him, but – I wasn’t.”

 They turned and stared at the river for a few minutes. The only sound was the water lapping against the bridge pylons.

 “Well,” she said, “it was nice to meet you –”

 “Michael,” he said.

 “Michael. And you already know me. Anyway, that was really therapeutic, but I still don’t want to live, so –”

 “Me neither.”

 “Ladies first?”

 “No!” he said, suddenly getting alarmed. “I don’t want you to – you deserve to live.”

 “I don’t want to.”

 “Yeah,” he said, looking at her sadly. “That’s the real trick, isn’t it?”

 “Are you going to stop me?” she challenged.

 “I’m going to try.”

 She feinted a lunge forward. He grabbed her hand, nearly crushing it. She glowered at him. He started to laugh.

 “What?” she demanded. “What’s funny?”

 “Oh, nothing much,” he said. “It’s just weird… I’ve seen so many pictures and videos of you, but I never noticed the color of your eyes.”

 “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

 He laughed harder. “I don’t know.”

 “You’re drunk. You can’t even see my eye color in the dark.” She shook her head. “Whatever. I’ll come back and take care of this when you’re not around. Goodbye.” She climbed back over the railing to solid footing.

 “Wait!”

Chelise stopped. Not because of his plea, but because she realized that now, as of five minutes ago, she was no longer in this alone. Someone more or less understood where she was coming from, and didn’t condemn her. It was unbelievable – a strange, unfamiliar feeling, yet a pleasant one. It felt better than oblivion – better, even, than being stoned. And that was saying something.

 She wondered if there was a way to get more of it. And then she realized that maybe such a way had been staring her in the face all along. The odds against this encounter were incredible, and it reminded her of the guardian angel in “It’s a Wonderful Life”. Then there was that strange, good feeling that had surrounded the missionaries. Maybe someone *was* looking out for her – but why? Lots of people killed themselves and God didn’t stop them. Why would he intervene for her, of all people? Why did she need to stay alive?

 Chelise realized that maybe she needed to stop recoiling and try to find her purpose, if she had one. She could always come back here later if it didn’t work out.

 “Michael –” she said, taking out the pass-along card.

 “Yeah?”

 “I might know some people who can help both of us,” she said. “A lot, actually.”

\* \* \*

 Chelise didn’t usually remember her dreams, but she did on occasion. Sometimes they were good dreams that were, like the oblivion, a pain to wake up from. Other times waking up was a relief, for they were ugly dreams that vividly replayed in her subconscious the life she’d left behind.

 Sometimes those latter dreams happened while she was still awake. They were triggered by little things, like seeing a man on the bus reading *Hustler*, or smelling cigarette smoke and being reminded of Adrian, or even by hearing the lyrics of what often passed for music these days. Given all that, she shouldn’t have been so surprised a few weeks after her epiphany when her new therapist uttered the words “post-traumatic stress disorder”.

 “What?” she said. “That isn’t possible. I haven’t been through a war or anything.”

 “No, but you have been through traumatic stress. From what I understand of your workplace conditions, and the way your employers allegedly treated you…”

 “Yeah,” said Chelise, thinking back. “But I think that was just the icing on the cake, you know? Even if I could’ve found one of the better companies, I think that entire line of work was just a toxic environment.”

 “There seems to have been some cognitive dissonance between your values system and your lifestyle,” the therapist agreed. “In this case, I think a set of religious guidelines were imposed on you by your parents, and you were unable to reconcile your own career path with it.”

 “Yeah…” said Chelise, still unsure what to think at this point, though she was now inclined to disagree that this was a negative thing.

 “I’ll recommend some medication for the PTSD,” said her therapist.

 Great. One more thing she couldn’t afford. She hoped the Pink Cross would see this thing through to the end.

 Still, life was improving all the time. She felt overwhelmed by the love and support of people she knew barely or not at all, and especially by the higher power that she now felt channeled into her being. She had vowed to return the favor by reaching out. As soon as she left her appointment, she tried again to call the *Tribune*, but again they refused to answer. Then she tried Darlene, with more luck, as it was during her lunch break.

 “Hey,” said Darlene. “How has life been treating you?”

 “Great, just great,” said Chelise. “And you?”

 “It’s all right, I guess.”

 “How are things at work?”

 “The ad campaign is almost ready.” There was a trace of concern in her voice. “Your sudden departure set us back a bit, but Rachel has already found a replacement. Name’s Alicia. Fresh out of high school, and just ecstatic to be here. She and Violet get along well.”

 “I’m sure they do,” said Chelise, feeling sick to her stomach. “And Steve?”

 “Still around. He made rent by cutting down on the drugs, but it’s been rough on him.”

 “And you? When are you getting out?”

 “Someday,” said Darlene. “I’ll be ready someday…”

 Chelise could partially understand why her friend, who had played such a role in getting her out, had then done a 180 and decided to stay herself, at least for the time being. Leaving was a big commitment, a big change, and it carried so much uncertainty even now.

 What to do, to help her old friends? What to do, to counteract the ad campaign? She didn’t know, but she would think of something. She had to. That, she had determined, was the reason she was still alive.

 The next morning, humming along to the voices of Electric Light Orchestra singing “Mr. Blue Sky”, she got out of bed without swearing once and commenced getting ready for the day. Glancing at her nightstand, she felt a wave nausea and achiness; a reminder of the withdrawal symptoms that had nearly convinced her to kill herself all over again. She looked away quickly. She’d have to burn it and get a new one with no memories attached.

When she arrived in the still-cluttered kitchen, Holden beamed up at her with his bright, innocent eyes. “Good morning, mommy,” he said.

 “Good morning, sweetie,” she said, giving him a kiss on the forehead. “What would you like for breakfast?”

 “Pancakes!” he said.

 “Coming right up,” she said with a touch of nervous anticipation. Though her first few attempts had come out looking like the contents of a naughty child’s Christmas stocking, she felt she was getting the hang of it. Confidence was the key.

 “Are the missionaries coming today?” Holden asked.

 “No. Tomorrow,” she said.

 “I can’t wait!”

 She smiled. She wasn’t quite that enthusiastic herself, but she appreciated the light that came into his eyes. And maybe one of these days, having guests over would be enough incentive to clean the kitchen.

 As they ate pancakes that were mostly edible – much better than water and celery, at least – Holden touched her arm, getting sticky syrup on it. “I love you,” he said.

 Chelise smiled; and for one of few times in the last few years yet one of many in the last few weeks, it was genuine. “I love you, too,” she replied, fingering the crucifix around her neck. “I love you, too.”