

Dressing on the Side

Yvonne Chantler stops on the red at the corner of Spadina and Main. Gripping the steering wheel, she lets the tears come. What does she do now? Go to the police? And say what? *Excuse me, Officer, but I think my ex-lover broke into my house yesterday and stole my cat. No, I don't have any proof. Yes, Malvolio has wandered away before. No, I've never known Gary to be physically violent.* They'd laugh her right out of the station.

She could tell her son once she reaches the restaurant. Explain how she met Gary at a dance over at the Legion eight weeks ago. How he treated her to fancy dinners and theatre tickets, extravagant gifts of perfume, jewelry. Yvonne touches the pearl at her throat and remembers the way Gary moved behind her to fix the clasp before telling her to undress.

No. Benjamin doesn't like it that his mother is dating, and at her age. Well, why not? Grandmother or not, she can still turn heads. Besides, she loves dancing. Ben knows that. And Kal wouldn't have wanted her to stop.

A car horn blasts when the light turns green. Yvonne blinks. She drives through the intersection, pulling over in front of Saint Joseph's Cathedral. She puts the gear into park and peers up at the Romanesque church. She was married here. Had Benjamin baptised when he was a baby. Her grandfather even donated one of the stained-glass windows, or raised money for it, so the story goes.

Movement, beside the church where the parking lot meets the alley. The man's back is turned, but it's Gary. Yvonne's sure of it—she'd recognize that stooped posture anywhere.

She broke up with him four days ago, but he keeps turning up—at the library where she plays Bridge, the Save-On Foods. Even at the Summer Shakespeare office where she still holds a part-time job, fundraising. Their relationship was only casual. He was someone to go dancing with and maybe share a few laughs. Someone to warm the other side of the bed.

It's not Gary. Just some guy looking for bottles. Didn't Kal always say she was prone to blowing things out of proportion? Yvonne hears him now: *Malvolio likely slipped out the door when you left for work yesterday.*

Yes, that's it. He's probably back at home right now, pawing at the screen door, meowing to be let in. And this thing with Gary? *Coincidence.* Yvonne takes a tissue from the glove compartment, adjusts the rear-view mirror and wipes the mascara from cheeks. But what if...? Yvonne looks for Gary's black Mercedes in the reflection behind her. Checks the side mirrors too. *Stop it, Yvonne. This is all in your head.*

Kal's right. Yvonne closes her eyes. She purses her lips and exhales the way he showed her, like she's whistling or blowing out candles. *Let your breath escape, until there's nothing left. Relax your diaphragm.* Kal learned the technique decades ago from an acting coach before he started teaching. *Inhale-2-3-4. Let your belly expand.* Yvonne remembers him practicing in front of the mirror each morning. *Out-2-3-4.* He taught it to his drama students at Cormac Collegiate and gave a workshop each summer as part of the festival—Breathing Your Life: Method Acting and Breath Control for the Amateur Stage. *Again.* Yvonne takes a second breath, this time humming the letter “m” before vocalizing on a vowel through the exhale. *Relax your jaw, your tongue. Lift your soft palette. Mmma-a-a-a.* The workshop had been Yvonne's idea, a

way to increase revenue for the non-profit community theatre. It worked too. Kal always could attract an audience. He played the lead in every summer production for thirteen years running. Until now.

Yvonne pulls a tube of lipstick from her purse. She checks the rear-view again, reapplies, blots. She should look into the history of that church window.

At the restaurant, Benjamin is already seated by the window. Yvonne crosses to join him, waving off the hostess.

“Sorry,” she says slinging her purse over the back of the chair. “I know, I’m late.” She smooths the back of her skirt before sitting opposite him. “Malvolio is missing.”

“The cat?”

Of course, the cat. He knows perfectly well it’s the—*Breathe, Yvonne*. “He’s just disappeared.”

Ben cocks an eyebrow. “Into thin air?”

Why does he insist on acting like a teenager? “I’m worried is all.” *Change the subject*. “Have you ordered?” she says, picking up the menu. “How’re the kids?”

Ben sighs. “Mom, we need to talk.” His hand rests over a large manila envelope.

“Can’t we enjoy some lunch first?” She scans the lunch options. “I’m in the mood for a Denver sandwich.” Kal’s favourite.

Ben scowls. He looks out the window at the parking lot, thrumming his fingers on the table. He’s so unlike his father. She wants to reach across the table and loosen his tie, ruffle his perfectly combed hair. Life is meant to be lived, not managed, she wants to say for the

umpteenth time. That wife of his isn't much help either, the way she badgers him. Nothing is ever good enough for that woman.

Yvonne puts the menu down and places her hand over his, stilling it. "Sweetheart—," *Don't do it, Yvonne. It's neither the place or time.* "—is everything okay? At home, I mean?"

Ben looks at her, his face hard. "Why would you ask me that?"

"It's just... you seem a little—"

"What? Angry?"

Yvonne takes sip of her water. *Here we go.*

"Why do you suppose that is, Mom? What possible reason could I have to be angry?"

It's been the same argument for weeks. Ever since Ben came over one afternoon and found Gary in her kitchen, naked. *You never should have given Ben a key.* And he'd brought the kids. She's sorry Maddie and Wes saw her in a negligée, but Ben is only making it worse.

"You're making a fool of yourself, Mom."

"Sweetheart, please. Can we not—?"

"Sleeping with God-knows-who."

"That's enough. You don't get to—"

"What do you think Dad would say? Or do you think about him at all?"

"How is everything here? Are we ready to order?"

Yvonne smiles up at the waitress and ignores the fact that her forty-two-year-old son was just about to throw a hissy-fit. Can't they have one pleasant meal together? Yvonne orders the Denver and a salad, then—

Shit. It's Gary. On the other side of the restaurant, near the entrance. Yvonne can't swallow, can barely breath. She leans forward, shielding herself behind the waitress.

“Earth to Mom. She asked what kind of dressing you want?”

Yvonne blinks. “Right. Thousand Island. On the side, please.” Kal hated it whenever she ordered dressing on the side. *You always complain they never give you enough.*

Ben gives the waitress an apologetic shrug and hands her back the menus. “Same for me.”

When the waitress turns and leaves, Gary is no longer there. Yvonne scans the restaurant.

“Mom, we have to talk.”

Where did he go? *Maybe it was someone else—someone who only looks like Gary.* Except, he looked directly at her.

“Mom. Are you listening?”

A prickle nags at the nape of her neck. What if it was Gary she saw at the Cathedral? Did he follow her here?

Benjamin waves a hand in front of Yvonne’s face. Maybe she should tell him. He’s a lawyer after all. *But you don’t have any proof.* She could show him the jewelry Gary gave her, the gifts. *Sure. Go ahead. Show our son the necklace you accepted as foreplay. Explain how you wore it while he kissed you in that special spot.* Not that she’s ashamed. So she likes sex. So what? That part of her life doesn’t have to be over just because Kal...

It did feel a bit like cheating the first time. Yvonne hadn’t planned on bringing a strange man home. She hadn’t planned on going out all, except that it was Swing Night and Kal always took her dancing on Swing Nights. It still surprises her how easy it was, sleeping with—Tim? Tom? She remembers fixing herself a night-cap before pulling him to the bedroom. She took off her dress in the dark and pretended he was Kal.

The sex was easier after that, and better too. But she never let it last more than a few weeks. No. Best not to tell Ben anything. He's is angry enough as it is.

Ben lays his hand on the envelope again, sliding it between them. "Mom. We need to talk about this. Now."

Yvonne flexes her jaw. What could possibly be so important? Unless... Oh God. She looks around the restaurant again. Where is he? Gary only took a few pictures. He said it would be fun, for their eyes only. Oh, Jesus.

In the parking lot, outside their window, a black Mercedes drives slowly past. She can't see through the tinted windows, but it must be him. She stands, bumping the table with her thighs, spilling her water glass.

Ben grabs the envelop before water floods the entire table. "Mom!" he says. "What the hell?"

Yvonne freezes, her eyes darting between her son, the table, the window.

The waitress rushes over. "No problem," she says, pulling a white serviette from her half-apron and mopping the expanding pool. "Happens all the time."

The Mercedes idles in the parking lot. Yvonne turns.

"Mom!"

"I'll be right back," she calls over her shoulder. Ben must think she's crazy, but Gary's gone too far. She pushes through the front doors.

Yvonne liked Gary's car the moment she saw it. Black pearl finish. Leather interior. The complete opposite of their battered old Ford.

“We don’t need a fancy car,” Kal used to argue whenever she’d suggest an upgrade. “We’re theatre people.” As if that settled the matter. Not that they could have afforded a new car anyway. They lived comfortably enough on what Kal made teaching ten months of the year, but anything extra was invested in the theatre. In that department, Kal only settled for the best—the best costumes, the best set design. They even went into debt some years. It’s why Yvonne started helping on the fundraising side, worried Kal might bleed them dry. *There you go, blowing everything out of proportion again.*

When it came to his craft, Kal was a perfectionist. Ticket holders would flood the amphitheatre summer after summer just to watch Kal play King Lear, Prospero, MacBeth. The Tribune raved about his Hamlet. Still, it would have been nice to have had a little more financial stability. Benjamin would probably agree. Sure, they’d gone to see Brian Dennehy play Sir Toby Belch in “Twelfth Night” at Stratford, but on the whole, their little family had often done without. She suspects it’s why Ben went into corporate law, the desire for nice things after a lifetime of second-bests. When Gary came around with his flashy car and presents, she admits she wasn’t immune.

The night Yvonne met Gary she was newly single—again. She’d just broken up with a nice man named Barry. He’d wanted her to meet his children, his grandchildren. It’s amazing how quickly these men talk of marriage, their wives not yet turned cold. Yvonne knows what it’s like to be lonely, but what she can’t understand is wanting to get married again. As if anyone could replace Kal. She said all this to Gary when he sidled next to her at the Legion two months ago. So why won’t he leave her alone?

The black Mercedes is boxed in at the far end of the restaurant. Gary’s only way out is to drive right past her. For a second, she reconsiders. What does she really know about him? Or

what if Kal is right and this is all in her head? *But the envelope. First, the cat. Now this?* Enough is enough. Yvonne marches towards the vehicle, her heels click-clicking on the asphalt.

Ben's jaw drops as she limps back to the table. She knows what she must look like—nylons ripped, knees scraped. The high-heel on her left shoe drags like a piece of stuck toilet paper. At her chair, she rips the heel free, unzips her purse, and drops it inside.

Ben stares, like he's eight-years-old again.

"It's nothing," she says, sitting down. "I'm fine." Yvonne dips a napkin in her water glass and presses it to the worst of her two knees.

Ben doesn't take his eyes off her.

"It's silly," she says. "Really. I went outside for some fresh air. There was a car—"

"You got hit by a car?"

What should she say? *Yes. Your mother was nearly killed by a crazed maniac out in the parking lot. Now will you forgive me?* Yvonne flicks a piece of gravel from her palm. She spooked when the Mercedes started rolling towards her. Turned too quickly and tripped over the curb. She fell face-first into a large caragana bush.

"My heel got stuck in a crack in the pavement," she says. "I turned my ankle and fell, just like an old lady. That's all."

"And the car?"

Yvonne's cheeks warm when she remembers the young woman in the Mercedes—mid-thirties, perfect hair—rolling down her window, asking if Yvonne needed any help.

Ben sits back and sighs. After a moment, he reaches for the envelope and opens it. He pulls out a series of legal documents. A brochure for West Haven Cemetery.

“Mom. It’s time we went through all this. Dad’s will. His insurance policy.” Ben’s voice is softer now. Almost gentle. “It’s been nearly a year and we still haven’t interred Dad’s cremains.”

He looks tired. So tired and so much like his father. Yvonne tilts her head. She doesn’t want her mascara to run again.