

A close-up photograph of two women's faces, focusing on their eyes. The woman on the left has bright blue eyes, while the woman on the right has brown eyes. The image is dark and moody, with the women's faces partially obscured by shadows. The title 'DON'T YOU CRY' is overlaid in large white letters.

DON'T YOU CRY

'Single White Female on steroids...'
LISA SCOTTLINE

'Sensational'
METRO

'Powerful'
DAILY MAIL

MARY KUBICA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE GOOD GIRL

Mary Kubica

**Don't You Cry: A gripping
suspense full of secrets**

«HarperCollins»

Kubica M.

Don't You Cry: A gripping suspense full of secrets / M. Kubica —
«HarperCollins»,

No matter how far and how fast you run, the past will always catch up with you. In downtown Chicago, a young woman named Esther Vaughan disappears from her apartment without a trace. A haunting letter addressed to “My Dearest” is the only clue, leaving her friend and roommate Quinn to wonder, who is Esther really? And where did she go? Meanwhile, in a small lake town an hour outside of the city, a mysterious woman, Pearl, appears in the quiet coffee shop where eighteen-year-old Alex Gallo works as a dish washer. He is immediately drawn to her, but what starts as an innocent crush quickly spirals into something deeper and darker. As Quinn searches for answers about Esther and Alex is drawn further under Pearl’s spell, Mary Kubica takes readers on a taut and twisted thrill ride that builds to a stunning conclusion and shows that no matter how fast and far we run, the past always catches up.

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Praise for Mary Kubica

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– *Daily Mail*

'Gets right under your skin and leaves its mark.

A tremendous read'

– *The Sun*

'Pulse pounding'

– *Heather Gudenkauf*

'Sensational'

– *Metro*

'Fantastic ... I would recommend it to every crime fiction reader out there'

– Rebeccabradleycrime.com

'Memorable and riveting'

– *Lovereadings.co.uk*

'Stunning. Kubica is an author to watch'

– *We Love This Book*

'A complex tale of deceit, jealousy, fear and love'

– Crimethrillergirl.com

Don't You Cry

Mary Kubica



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For Pete

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[SUNDAY](#)

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In hindsight, I should have known right away that something wasn't quite right. The jarring noise in the middle of the night, the open window, the empty bed. Later, I blamed a whole slew of things for my nonchalance, everything from a headache to fatigue, down to arrant stupidity.

But still.

I should have known right away that something wasn't right.

* * *

It's the alarm clock that wakes me. Esther's alarm clock hollering from two doors down.

"Shut it off," I grumble, dropping the pillow to my head. I roll over onto my stomach and swim beneath a second pillow to smother the sound, throwing the covers up over my head, too.

No such luck. I still hear it.

"Dammit, Esther," I snap as I kick the covers to the end of the bed and rise. Beside me there are rustles of complaint, blind eyes reaching out to reclaim the blanket, an aggravated sigh. Already the taste of last night's alcohol creeps up my insides, something called a cranberry smash, and a bourbon sour, and a Tokyo iced tea. The room whirls around me like a Hula-Hoop, and I have this sudden memory of twirling around a dirty dance floor with some guy named Aaron or Darren, or Landon or Brandon. The same guy that asked to split a cab with me on the way home, the one that's still lying on my bed when I nudge him and tell him he has to go, yanking the blanket from his hands. "My roommate," I say, poking him in the ribs, "is awake. You have to go."

"You have a roommate?" he asks, sitting up in bed, yet beset by sleep. He rubs at his eyes and it's then that I see it in the glimmer of a nearby streetlight that glares through the window and across the rumpled bed: he's twice my age. Hair that looked brown in the hazy burn of bar lights—and under the influence of a healthy dose of alcohol—is now a pewter-gray. Dimples are not dimples at all, but rather laugh lines. Wrinkles.

"Dammit, Esther," I say again under my breath, knowing that before long, old Mrs. Budny from downstairs will be pounding the ceiling with the hard end of her sponge mop to silence the rumpus.

"You have to go," I say to him again, and he does.

I follow the trail of noise into Esther's room. The alarm clock, a droning noise like a cicada's song. I mutter under my breath as I go, one hand dragging along the wall as I make my way down the darkened halls. The sun won't rise for another hour. It's not yet 6:00 a.m. Esther's alarm screams at her like it does every Sunday morning. Time to get ready for church. Esther, with her silvery, soothing voice, has been singing in the church choir every Sunday morning at the Catholic church on Catalpa for as long as I can remember. Saint Esther, I call her.

When I enter Esther's bedroom, the first thing I notice is the cold. Drafts of frosty November air sail in from the window. A stash of paper on her desk—held secure by a heavy college textbook: Introduction to Occupational Therapy—blows in the breeze, making a raucous noise. Frost covers the insides of the window, condensation running in streams down the panes of glass. The window is pushed up all the way. The fiberglass screen is removed, set to the floor with cause.

I lean out the window to see if Esther is there on the fire escape, but outside the world—on our little residential block of Chicago—is quiet and dark. Parked cars line the street, caked in the last batch of fallen leaves from nearby trees. Frost covers the cars and the yellowing grass, which fades fast; soon it will die. Plumes of smoke escape from roof vents on nearby homes, drifting into the morning sky. The whole of Farragut Avenue is asleep, except for me.

The fire escape is empty; Esther is not there.

I turn away from the window and see Esther's covers lying on the floor, a bright orange duvet with an aqua throw. "Esther?" I say as I make my way across the boxy bedroom, hardly big enough for Esther's double bed. I trip over a stash of clothes tossed to the floor, my feet getting tangled in a pair of jeans. "Rise and shine," I say as I smack my hand against the alarm clock to shut it up. Instead, I wind up turning the radio on, and a cacophony of noise fills the room, morning talk against the drone of the alarm. "Dammit," I swear, and then, losing patience, "Esther!"

I see it then as my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room: Saint Esther is not in her bed.

I finally manage to shut off the alarm clock and then turn on the light, grimacing as the bright light makes my head ache, the aftereffects of an overindulgent night. I do a double take to make sure I haven't somehow or other managed to miss Esther, checking under the heap of blankets lying on the floor. Ridiculous, I know, even as I'm doing it, but I do it nonetheless. I check in her closet; I check the single bathroom, my eyes scanning past the prolific collection of overpriced cosmetics we share, tossed at random on the vanity.

But Esther is nowhere.

Smart decisions aren't really my forte. They're Esther's. And so maybe that's why I don't call the cops right away, because Esther isn't here to tell me to do it. In all honesty, though, my first thought isn't that something happened to Esther. It isn't my second, third or fourth thought, either, and so I let the hangover get the best of me, close the window and go back to bed.

When I wake for the second time, it's after ten. The sun is up, and all along Farragut Avenue people scuttle to and from the coffee and bagel shops for breakfast, or lunch, or whatever it is that people eat and drink at 10:00 a.m. They're blanketed in puffer jackets and wool trench coats, hands forced into pockets, hats on head. It doesn't take a brainiac to know that it's cold.

I, however, sit on the small apartment sofa—the color of rose petals—in the living room, waiting for Saint Esther to arrive with a hazelnut coffee and a bagel. Because that's what she does every Sunday after singing in the church choir. She totes home a coffee and a bagel for me and we sit at the small kitchen table and eat, talking about everything from the children who cried their way through mass, to the choir director's lost sheet music, to whatever vapid thing I'd done the night before: drinking too much, bringing home some guy I barely knew, some faceless man who Esther never sees but only hears through the paper-thin walls of our apartment.

Last night I went out, but Esther didn't go with me. She had plans to stay home and rest. She was nursing a cold, she said, but now that I think of it, I saw no visible symptoms of illness—no coughing, no sneezing, no watery eyes. She was on the sofa, buried beneath the blanket in her comfy, cotton pajamas. Come with me, I'd begged of her. There was a new bar open on Balmoral that we'd been dying to go to, one of those chic, low-lit lounge types that only served martinis.

Come with me, I begged, but she said no.

I'd be a killjoy, Quinn, she said instead. Go without me. You'll have more fun.

Want me to stay home with you? I asked, but it was a halfhearted suggestion. We'll order takeout, I said, but I didn't want to order takeout. I was in a new baby-doll dress and heels, my hair was done, my makeup was on. I'd gone so far as to shave my legs for the night; there was no way I was staying home. But at least I offered.

Esther said no, go without her and have fun.

And that's just what I did. I went out without her and I had fun. But I didn't go to that martini bar. No, I saved that for Esther and me to do together. Instead, I wound up at some shoddy karaoke bar, drinking too much and going home with a stranger.

When I came home for the night Esther was in bed, with her door closed. Or so I thought at the time.

But now I can't help but wonder as I sit on the sofa, considering this morning's turn of events: What in the world would make Esther disappear out the fire escape window?

I think and I think, but my thoughts only land on one thing: an image of Romeo and Juliet, the famous balcony scene, whereby Juliet professes her love for Romeo from the balcony of her home (which is more or less the only thing I remember from my high school education, that and the fact that a pen barrel makes the best artillery for shooting spitballs).

Is that what sent Esther clambering out the window in the middle of the night: a guy?

Of course at the end of that tale, Romeo poisons himself and Juliet stabs herself with a dagger. I read the book. Better yet, I saw the movie, the 1990s adaptation with Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio. I know how it ends, with Romeo drinking his poison and Juliet shooting herself in the head with his gun. I think to myself: I just hope Esther's story has a better ending than that of Romeo and Juliet.

For now there's nothing to do but wait, and so I sit on the small rose-colored sofa, staring at the empty kitchen table, waiting for Esther to arrive home, regardless of whether she spent the night in her bed or crawled out the third-floor window of our walk-up instead. That doesn't matter. I still wait in my pajamas—a waffle henley and flannel boxer shorts, a pair of woolly slipper socks prettifying my feet—for my coffee and bagel to arrive. But today they're a no-show and I blame Esther for it, for the fact that this day I'll go without breakfast and caffeine.

* * *

By the time noon rolls around, I do what any self-respecting adult might do: I order Jimmy John's. It takes a good forty-five minutes for my Turkey Tom to arrive, during which time I convince myself that my stomach has begun to digest itself. It's been a solid fourteen hours since I've had a thing to eat, and what with the surplus of alcohol, I'm quite certain I've got the whole stomach bloating thing going on like those starving kids you see on TV.

I have no energy. Death is imminent. I may die.

And then the buzzer beeps from the first floor and I rise quickly to my feet. Delivery! I greet the Jimmy John's guy at the door, handing him his tip, a few measly dollars I manage to find in an envelope Esther stuck in a kitchen drawer with the description Rent.

I eat my lunch hunched over an industrial iron coffee table, and then do what any self-respecting human might do when her roomie has gone AWOL. I snoop. I let myself into Esther's room without a hint of remorse, without a whisper of guilt.

Esther's room is the smaller of the two, about the same size as a large refrigerator box. Her double bed spans the room, popcorn wall to popcorn wall, leaving hardly anywhere to walk. That's what eleven hundred dollars a month will buy you in Chicago: popcorn walls and a refrigerator box.

I slip past the foot of the bed, tripping over the pile of bedding that's still left on the scratched wooden floors, and peer outside at the fire escape, a collection of ladders and platforms in steel gratings that adheres to Esther's window. We joked about it when I moved in years ago, how she got the smaller room, but by virtue of the conjoined fire escape to her window, she'd be the one to survive a blaze should the entire building one day go up in flames. I was okay with that. Still am, really, because not only do I have a bed and a desk and a dresser in my room, I have a papasan chair. And the building has never once caught on fire.

Once again, I find myself wondering what in the holy hell would make Esther climb out her fire escape in the middle of the night. What's wrong with the front door? It's not as if I'm worried because, really, I'm not. Esther's been on that fire escape before. We used to sit out there all the time, staring at the moon and the stars, sipping mixed drinks, as if it was a balcony, our feet dangling over a repugnant Chicago alleyway. It was sort of our thing, spreading out along the uncomfortable steel gratings of the dingy black fire escape, sharing our secrets and dreams, feeling the lattice grilles of the unforgiving metal dig into our skin until our backsides fell asleep.

But even if she was there last night, Esther certainly isn't on the fire escape now.

Where could she be?

I peer inside her closet. Her favorite boots are gone, as if she put on her shoes, opened the window and climbed outside with intent.

Yes, I tell myself. That's exactly what she did, an assumption that reassures me that Esther is just fine. She's fine, I tell myself.

But still. Why?

I stare out the window at the quiet afternoon. The morning's coffee blitz has given way to a caffeine downer; there's not a soul in sight. I imagine half of Chicagoland perched before the TV, watching the Bears claim another stunning defeat.

And then I turn away from the fire escape and begin my search of Esther's bedroom. What I find is an unfed fish. A heaping pile of dirty laundry spilling out of a plastic hamper in the closet. Skinny jeans. Leggings. Leggings. Bras and granny underwear. A stack of white camisoles, folded and set beside the hamper with care. A bottle of ibuprofen. A bottle of water. Grad school textbooks piled sky-high beside her ready-to-assemble IKEA desk, in addition to the one that lies on top of it, holding random papers in place. I set my hand on a desk drawer handle, but I don't look inside. That would be rude, somehow, more rude than riffling through the items left on top of the desk: her laptop, her iPod, her headphones and more.

Thumbtacked to the wall I find a photograph of Esther and me, taken last year. It was Christmas and together we stood before our artificial Fraser fir, snapping a selfie. I smile at the memory, remembering how Esther and I trekked together through mounds of snow to collect that tree. In the picture, Esther and I are pressed together, the boughs of the evergreen prodding our heads, the tinsel getting stuck to our clothing. We're laughing, me with a complacent smirk, and Esther with her gregarious smile. The tree is Esther's, one she keeps at a storage facility down the street, a ten-by-five box where, for sixty bucks a month, she keeps old guitars, a lute and whatever else she can't fit into her pint-size bedroom. Her bike. And, of course, the tree.

We'd gone to that facility together last December, on a mission to find that Christmas tree. We trudged through embankments of newly fallen snow, our feet getting stuck in it like quicksand. It was snowing still, the kind of snowflakes that poured down from the sky like big, fat, fluffy cotton balls. The cars that lined the city streets were buried deep; they'd have to be dug out or wait for a forty-degree thaw. Half the city was shut down thanks to the blizzard, and so the streets were a rare quiet as Esther and I slogged along, singing Christmas carols at the tops of our lungs because there was hardly anyone around to hear. Only snowplows braved the city streets that day, and even they skidded along in a zigzag line. Work had been canceled, for Esther, for me.

And so we plodded to the storage facility to hunt down that small plastic tree to haul home for the holiday season, stopping in the concrete corridor to do a giddy dance for the security camera and plunging ourselves into hysterics as we did. We imagined the employee—a creepy, quiet introvert—sitting at the front desk, watching as we danced an Irish jig on screen. We laughed and laughed, and then, when we finally stopped laughing, Esther used her padlock key to let us inside and we began to search unit 203, me prattling on and on about the irony of that number, seeing as my own parents lived at 203 David Drive. Fate, said Esther, but I said it was more like a stupid coincidence.

Seeing as the tree was disassembled and stuffed in a box, it was hard to find. There were a lot of boxes in that storage facility. A lot of boxes. And I inadvertently stumbled upon the wrong one apparently, because when I lifted the lid of a box and exposed a mound of photographs of some happy little family sitting beside a squat home, lifting one up and asking of Esther, Who's this? she snatched it quickly from my hand and said point-blank, No one. I didn't really have a chance to see the picture, but still, it didn't look like no one to me. But I didn't push the issue. Esther didn't like to talk about her family. That I knew. While I groaned and griped about mine all the time, Esther kept her feelings on the inside.

She tossed the picture back in the box and replaced the lid.

We found that tree and lugged it home together, but not before first stopping by our favorite diner where we sat nearly alone in the vacant place, eating pancakes and sipping coffee in the middle of the day. We watched the snow fall. We laughed at people trying to drag themselves through it, or excavate their cars from pyramids of snow. Those who were fortunate enough to dig themselves out called dibs on their parking spots. They filled them with random things—a bucket, a chair—so no one else would park there. Parking spots were like gold around here, especially in winter. That day, Esther and I sat in the window of the diner and watched this, too—we watched our neighbors lug chairs from their homes to stake a claim in the scooped-out parking spots, ones which would soon fill again with snow—feeling grateful all the time for public transportation.

And then Esther and I carried that tree home where we spent the night prettifying it with lights and ornaments galore, and when we were done, Esther sat crisscross-applesauce on the rose-colored sofa and strummed her guitar while I hummed along: “Silent Night,” “Jingle Bells.” That was last year, the year she bought for me a pair of woolly slipper socks to keep my feet warm because in our apartment I was cold twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I could hardly ever get warm. It was a thoughtful gift, an attentive gift, the kind that proved she’d been listening to me as I complained time and again about my cold feet. I look down at my feet and there they are: the woolly slipper socks.

But where is Esther?

I continue my search, for what I don’t know, but I find stray pens and mechanical pencils. A stuffed animal from her childhood days, ratty and worn, hides on the shelf of a piddling closet whose doors no longer run on the track. Boxes of shoes line the closet floor. I peer inside, finding every last one of the pairs to be sensible and boring: flats, loafers, sneakers.

Absolutely nothing with heels.

Absolutely nothing in a color other than black or white or brown.

And a note.

A note tucked there on top of the IKEA desk, in the stash of paper beneath the occupational therapy textbook, among a cell phone bill and a homework assignment.

A note, unsent and folded in thirds as if she was on the verge of sticking it in an envelope and placing it in the mail, but then got sidetracked.

I put the cap back on the water; I pick up the pens. How was it that I never realized Esther was such a slob? I muse over the thought: What else don’t I know about my roomie?

And then I read the note because, of course, how could I not read the note? It’s a note, which is all sorts of stalker-ish. It’s typed—which is such an anal-retentive Saint Esther thing to do—and signed All my love, with an E and a V. All my love, EV. Esther Vaughan.

And that’s when it hits me: maybe Saint Esther isn’t such a saint, after all.

Alex

One thing should be clear: I don’t believe in ghosts.

There are logical explanations for everything: something as simple as a loose lightbulb. A faulty switch. A problem with the wiring.

I stand in the kitchen, swallowing the last of a Mountain Dew, one shoe on and one shoe off, stepping into the second of the black sneakers, when I see a spasm of light from across the street. On. Off. On. Off. Like an involuntary muscle contraction. A charley horse. A twitch, a tic.

On. Off.

And then it’s done and I’m not even sure if it happened anymore or if it was just my imagination playing tricks on me.

Pops is on the sofa when I go, his arms and legs spread out in all directions. There’s an open bottle of Canadian whiskey on the coffee table—Gibson’s Finest—the cap lost somewhere in the cushions of the sofa, or clutched in the palm of a clammy hand probably. He’s snoring, his chest rattling like an eastern diamondback. His mouth is open, head slung over the arm of the sofa so that when he finally does wake up—hungover, no doubt—he’s sure to have a kink in his neck. The stench

of morning breath fills the room, exuding like car exhaust from the open mouth—nitrogen, carbon monoxide and sulfur oxides flowing into the air, making it black. Not really, but that's the way I picture it, anyway—black—as I hold a hand to my nose so I don't have to smell it.

Pops wears his shoes still, a pair of dark brown leather boots, the left one untied, frayed laces trailing down the side of the sofa. He wears his coat, a zippered nylon thing the color of spruce trees. The stench of old-school cologne imparts to me the details of his night, another pathetic night that would have gone scores better had he thought to remove his ring. The man has more hair than a man his age should have, cut short, and yet bushy on the tops and sides, a russet color to tag along with the ruddy skin. Other men his age are going bald, thinning hair or no hair at all. They're getting fat, too. But not Pops. He's a good-looking guy.

But still, even in sleep, I see defeat. He's a defeatist, a calamity much worse for forty-five-year-old men than love handles and receding hairlines.

He's also a drunk.

The TV is on from last night, now playing early-morning cartoons. I flip it off and head out the door, staring at the dumped home across the street where I saw the light coming just a few minutes ago. On, off. It's a minimal traditional home, school-bus yellow, a concrete slab in place of a porch, aluminum siding, a busted roof.

No one lives in that house. No one wants to live there any more than they want to have a root canal or an appendectomy. Many winters ago, a water pipe froze and burst—or so we heard—filling the inside with water. Some of the windows are boarded up with plywood, which some of the wannabe gangs defaced. Weeds choke the yard, asphyxiating the lawn. A rain gutter hangs loosely from the fascia, its downspout now lying defunct on the lawn. Soon it will be covered with snow.

It isn't the only house on the street that's been abandoned, but it is the one everyone always talks about. The economy and the housing market are to blame for the other rotten, forsaken homes, the blight that abraded the rest of our homes' value and made a once idyllic nabe now ugly.

But not this one. This one has its own story to tell.

I ram my hands into the pockets of a gray jacket and press on.

The lake this morning is angry. Waves pound the shores of the beach, sloshing water across the sand. Cold water. It can't be more than thirty-five degrees. Warm enough that it hasn't thought to freeze, not yet, anyway—not like last winter when the lighthouse was plastered with ice, Lake Michigan's swell frozen midair, clinging to the edges of the wooden pier. But that was last winter. Now it's fall. There's still plenty of time for the lake to freeze.

I walk a body length or two away from the lake so my shoes don't get wet. But still, they get wet. The water sprays sideways from the lake, the surf a solid four-or five-foot high. If it were summer—tourist season—the beach would be closed down, dangerous swimming conditions and rip currents to blame.

But it's not summer. For now, the tourists are gone.

The town is quiet, some of the shops closed until spring. The sky is dark. Sunrise comes late and sunset early these days. I peer upward. There are no stars; there is no moon. They're hidden beneath a mass of gray clouds.

The seagulls are loud. They circle overhead, visible only in the swiveling glow from the lighthouse's lantern room. The wind whips through the air, upsetting the lake, making it hard for the gulls to fly. Not in a straight line, anyway. They float sideways. They flap their wings tenaciously and yet hover in place, going absolutely nowhere like me.

I pull my hood up over my head to keep the sand out of my hair and eyes.

As I crisscross the park, heading away from the lake, I pass the old antique carousel. I stare into the inanimate eyes of a horse, a giraffe, a zebra. A sea serpent chariot where a half dozen years ago I had my first kiss. Leigh Forney, now a freshman at the University of Michigan, studying biophysics or molecular something-or-other, or so I heard. Leigh isn't the only one who is gone. Nick Bauer

and Adam Gott are gone, too, Nick to Cal Tech and Adam to Wayne State, playing point guard for the basketball team. And then there's Percival Allard, aka Percy, off to some Ivy League school in New Hampshire.

Everyone is gone. Everyone but me.

"You're late," Priddy says, the sound of a bell overhead tattling on my overdue arrival. She stands at the register, counting dollar bills into the drawer. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen... She doesn't look up as I come in. Her hair is down, tight curls of silver rolling over the shoulders of a starched no-nonsense blouse. She's the only one in the room who's allowed to have hair that is let down. The waitresses who beetle around in their black-and-white uniforms, filling salt and pepper shakers, bowls of creamer, all have theirs tied back in ponytails or cornrows or braids. But not Mrs. Priddy.

I tried to call her Bronwyn once. That is, after all, her name. It says so right there on her nametag. Bronwyn Priddy. It didn't go so well.

"Traffic," I say, and she sniggers. On her ring finger is a wedding band, given to her by her late husband, Mr. Priddy. There's speculation that her incessant nagging was the cause of his death. Whether or not it's true, I can only assume. She has a mole on her face, right there in the sallow folds of skin between the mouth and the nose, a raised mole, dark brown and perfectly round, which always sports a single gray hair. It's the mole that makes the rest of us certain Priddy is a witch. That and her maliciousness. There's rumors that she keeps her broom in a locked storage closet off the kitchen of the café. Her broom and her cauldron, and whatever other Wiccan things she needs: a bat, a cat, a crow. It's all there, tucked away behind a locked metal door, though the rest of us are sure we hear them from time to time: a cat's meow, the crow's caw. The flapping wings of the bat.

"At this time of day?" Priddy asks about the traffic. But on her face, there's a smile there somewhere, under the peach fuzz that seriously needs to be waxed. She compensates for it somehow, for the peach fuzz, by drawing eyebrows on—dark brown on hair that is meant to be gray—to take the attention off her 'stache. Priddy pauses a moment in her counting to raise her eyes up off the dollar bills, as I stand there in the entryway stripping off my sandy jacket, and she says to me, "Those dishes aren't going to wash themselves, you know, Alex. Get to work."

I think she secretly likes me.

* * *

The morning comes and goes as they always do. Every day is a rehashing of the day before. The same customers, the same conversations, the only difference is a change of clothes. It goes without saying that Mr. Parker, who walks his two dogs at daybreak—a border collie and a Bernese mountain dog—will be the first to arrive. That he'll tie the dogs up to a streetlamp outside and ramble inside, the soles of his shoes leaving leaf clippings and muddy footprints before the display case, which I'll later be called upon to wash away. That he'll order coffee, black, to go, and then let Priddy talk him into some kind of pastry, which erroneously claims to be homemade, which he'll say no to twice before he says okay, sniffing the air for the faint scent of yeast and butter that isn't even there.

It goes without saying that at least one waitress will spill a tray full of food. That nearly all of them will gripe about the inadequacy of the tips. That on the weekend, the morning customers will loiter around, drinking endless cups of coffee and shooting the shit until breakfast blends into lunch and they finally leave. But during the week, the only customers hanging around after 9:00 a.m. are retirees, or the school district's bus drivers who double-park their Blue Birds in the back lot and spend the morning kvetching about the disrespectful nature of those in their care, namely all children between the ages of five and eighteen.

There are no unknowns this time of year. Every day is the same, unlike in the summer months when random tourists appear. Then it's a crapshoot. We run out of bacon. Some egghead wants to know what's really in the chocolate croissants, leaving Priddy to send one of us to drag the box out of the trash in back and see. Vacationers snap photos of the café name in the front window; they take pictures with the waitresses as if this is some kind of tourist attraction, a hot-spot destination,

spouting on and on about how some Michigan travel guide claims ours is the best coffee in town. They ask if they can buy the cheap mugs that bear our name in an old-style font, and Priddy will up the price from the bulk fee she pays—a dollar fifty apiece—to \$9.99. A rip-off.

But none of this happens in the off-season when every single day is a rehashing of the day before, the same of which can be said for today. And tomorrow. And yesterday. At least that's the way the day sets out to be as Mr. Parker arrives with his two dogs and orders a coffee, black, to go, and Priddy asks him if he'd care for a croissant, which he says no to twice before he says okay.

But then at the end of the morning something happens, something abnormal, making this day different than all the days before.

My Dearest,

It's one of the last memories I have of you, your arms clinging to her neckline, the gentle curve of her breast pressing into your skin through the thin cotton of a wispy white blouse. She was beautiful to say the least, and yet it was you I couldn't take my eyes off of—the shimmer of your skin and the radiance of your eyes, the gradual curve of your lips as she traced over them with the pad of a forefinger and then placed her own to yours. A kiss.

It was through the window that I saw you. I stood there, in the middle of the street, not hiding in the shadows or behind trees. Smack-dab in the middle of the street, impervious to the flow of traffic. I'm surprised she didn't see me, that she didn't hear the blare of a car horn suggestion that I move. Recommending it. But I didn't move. I couldn't be bothered. I was too busy watching the two of you gathered together in a warm embrace. Too intrigued and too angry.

Maybe you did. Maybe you did see me, but only pretended not to see or hear.

It was nighttime, just after dusk as I pressed my face now to the glass to see inside. The curtains were open, every single light in the house on as if you wanted me to see. As if you were gloating, rubbing it in, exulting in your victory. Or maybe that was something she came up with all on her own: leaving the lights on so that I could see. It was, after all, her victory. Like a spotlight illuminating dancers onstage, the way you laughed, the way she smiled, no one noticing my absence because I'd already been replaced as if somehow I'd never even been there in the first place.

Except that you weren't onstage at all, but rather in the living room of a home I was meant to share with you.

I have to know: Did you see me? Were you trying to make me mad?

All my love,

EV

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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