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# THE LATCH

KATHERINE L. HESTER

Everything was named for something it used to be, something it no longer was. This was supposed to be ironic or funny; on a good night, Kyle could spin it as both. Clad in requisite waitperson black, wrapped waist-to-ankle in his spotless bistro apron, he knew he had talent. To be good-looking! To be self-deprecating! To know when to engage in conversation and when to stand back from a table with arms clasped behind his back in the professional waiter's attentive stance! All these things took skill, even if it was a skill three-fourths of the world preferred not to notice.

But charm—Kyle had sworn off *charm*. Had shed it, along with the loft that until recently he'd shared with his girlfriend Meaghan. As well as any ability he might have once had to find yet another restaurant named for something it used to be either ironic or funny.

He stood at one end of the East Side Burglar Bar Company's ornate bar, eyeing the reflection of his hands in the age-flecked mirror behind the counter. He scowled at himself; selected a garnish from the *mise-en-place* bowls the bartender kept there. His reflected hand hovered, ghostly, over the first drink on his brown waiter's tray. A dimpled olive submerged and broke the skin of the liquor, submarine-like.

Before the Burglar Bar, Kyle had garnished drinks just as overblown as these at Fulton Bag and Cotton. Before *that*, he had trod, catfooted, between the four-tops at Confection. And so on and so on and so forth back to his starting point ten months ago, the restaurant around the corner from Meaghan's loft that had been supposed to tide him over for a month or two,

until he got a *real* job. El Matadero, with its Mason jars of rillettes, its duck confit, its clever name.

El Matadero's spare, high-ceilinged space that had once been a slaughterhouse was three restaurants ago: Kyle's past. His present was this: his hand moving from *mise-en-place* to stubby Old-Fashioned glasses, dropping in cheerful corkscrews of lemon peel; the raucous ten-top of women in the corner that kept placing order after order for cocktails so acrid and odd the alcoholic essence they contained might as well be extracted from pine cones or dirt-encrusted marbles.

Kyle hefted his tray. As he approached the long table, the redhead at its closest end turned toward him, lifting her hands to her hair.

"For you?" he asked, reaching for her empty plate. After working at El Matadero for four months instead of the two he'd planned on, he'd given up on irony and humor (and charm, he reminded himself now, whisking a sodden coaster from under a glass and replacing it with a new one). "Honey, he'll thank you for it," the redhead was saying. "I guarantee it." She picked up her glass and looked around defiantly, her face flushed.

"Not me," the woman beside her protested. "No way."

Ignored, Kyle continued doling out drinks.

"Honey," the first woman repeated, her drawl evidence she'd grown up somewhere other than Atlanta. She raised her martini glass to her lips, looked over it. She had had two more drinks than the rest of the table, but who was counting? Definitely not the women who sat with her, who Kyle had discovered referred to their Wednesday evenings at the Burglar Bar Company as *girls' night*. He continued tucking coasters under drinks, calculating how much each one might add to his tip at the end of the night. Rent was due on the first.

At least the ten-top, seated in John's section but always handed off to Kyle, usually left early, gathering coats and keys and the cellphones they'd dutifully squared on the tabletop when they sat down at the beginning of the evening.

"Nope," the second woman was saying, shaking her head. "Nope nope nope. No-way-no-how. Nobody's gonna get anywhere near that part of my body unless it's my husband!"

The rest of the table dissolved into laughter. Kyle stood next to the redhead, who was old enough—almost—to be his mother. He took orders for

drinks, took refuge in the semaphored language of waiting tables, in the raised eyebrows and nods that made him look helpful. The reality was that he was nothing of the sort.

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“I’ll see your Brazilian-waxed middle-aged ladies and raise you a . . .” John said. He stopped, stymied. He and Kyle were standing under the overhang on the loading dock behind the Burglar Bar, leaned back against the brick and staring out at the rain that sluiced in sheets from the building’s sagging gutters. “Aw, fuck, man.”

John had bequeathed the ten-top to Kyle on Kyle’s very first night at the Burglar Bar. Because Kyle was the patsy, new guy. Because, when the ten-top had been at the restaurant the month before that, they’d stiffed John. By now, Kyle had heard about the ten-top’s malfeasance more than once, although as far he could tell, it seemed to have been a one-time drunken oversight. The women at the ten-top wore sporty low-heeled shoes or perilously high-heeled leather boots and drape-y sweaters, and slung sensible-looking battered messenger bags over the backs of their chairs. They were, according to John, neighborhood moms who’d gotten into the habit of stopping off for a few drinks at the Burglar Bar after some sort of quasi-political, semi-regular educational meeting. They were not the sort, Kyle figured, who’d deliberately stiff a waiter. But also not the sort to spend much time talking about . . .

*I see your Brazilian-waxed middle-aged ladies and raise you a . . .* John had said. Would raise him a what? Kyle puzzled over it, waiting.

John didn’t say, just eyed the kitchen door, where Melinda stood waving an arm, her body outlined by the kitchen’s yellow light. “Later,” John said, knocking the coal from his cigarette. Kyle watched him set it on the ledge beside the kitchen door to come back to later.

“Anything for me?” he called as John headed past Melinda.

“They’re good,” she called back, meaning his tables. “Although I think the redhead at your ten-top needs another one.”

As far as Kyle had been able to see, the redhead actually didn’t need anything of the sort, but the Burglar Bar was not in the business of determining its customers’ needs. Nor, on a more microlevel, was Kyle. Who actually needed a cocktail chilled with two cubes of ice made of a particular type of

distilled water? The ice at the Burglar Bar Company was never cloudy, a pearl cast before the swine its customers probably were. Because—who the fuck really cared? Five or six years ago, the people who crowded into the Burglar Bar had probably been sitting in some other bar, in some other not-yet but about-to-be gentrified area of town, swilling down Pabst Blue Ribbon. What the redhead seated at the top of the ten-top really needed was to go home, to the husband she presumably had.

Although. Although there was an actual taste to the ice cubes at the Burglar Bar, pure coldness, an absence Kyle liked to crunch between his teeth. He eyed the run of red brick across the alley, the wall of the adjoining vacant building, the full moon appearing from between two wispy clouds. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Wind swirled the wet leaves on the run from the neighborhood lawns a block away; blew them into the alley between the two buildings. Kyle headed across the loading dock and slipped back into the heated clamor of Nicholas's kitchen.

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Inside Nicholas's kitchen, the cooks on the line toiled to the same sort of grinding music Hollywood movies apparently believed soldiers in Iraq did. Inside Nicholas's kitchen, there was organized chaos, there was bright light and high heat and on at least one night since Kyle had started working at the restaurant, there had been fire. The guys on the line all had on hairnets or sweat-soaked bandanas and barely glanced at Kyle when he walked in. None of them were much over twenty-three—another similarity to the Army, he supposed.

"You!" Nicholas leaned forward and shouted as Kyle turned sideways and tried to slide down the line. "Out! Get yourself the fuck out of my kitchen!" He scrubbed at his face with a swampy-looking dishcloth and peered into Kyle's face. "Industry night tonight," he added. "Kitchen open till four. You staying?"

Kyle shrugged.

Before he started working in restaurants, he'd imagined industries as factories whose jobs were all about to be outsourced. Now he knew better. Industry night was Nicholas's chance to concoct food far too indelicate to ever grace the restaurant's blackboard menu for people who worked in other restaurants, once they got off work. He watched Nicholas set a plate under

the heat lamp in a movement that revealed the rosy-fleshed ham that had been tattooed into the crook of his elbow.

The ham was the first tattoo in Nicholas's intended series: the principal agricultural products of Georgia. Corn. Soybeans. Pork. He'd told Kyle he envisioned them in a row down the inside of his arm, all in the pale 1940s pastels employed by an old encyclopedia. For now, though, he just had the one. For now, he just had his pair of German-forged herb snips and two semesters at Atlanta College of Culinary Arts, and Kyle, the roommate his succinct ad on Craigslist had conjured up. "Occupy my ass!" he turned back to the line and roared in what seemed to be a continuation of some debate he was having, with—

—who? Surely not any of the other guys on the line, most of whom were so quiet it was hard to know if they even spoke English. "Occupy my ass," Nicholas repeated, as if savoring the way the phrase sounded.

The night Kyle moved out of Meagan's loft, he'd texted Nicholas about the room for rent. Eighteen hours later, he moved his belongings into the rundown house Nicholas barely managed to own, six blocks from the Burglar Bar. Eighteen days after that, he started waiting on more or less the same table of middle-aged ladies as he is tonight, having been convinced to give the restaurant a shot by his new roommate/landlord.

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"You should investigate." John gave Kyle a sly look. "See if it's true." He was pushing through the double doors from dining room to kitchen; Kyle was headed in the other direction with a tray of food. John jerked his head toward the ten-top, which had gone beyond giddy into raucous, and past that into what even a generous bystander would have to call drunken.

Kyle would not investigate. Because *that* was another thing he'd foresworn. Irony, humor, charm. Sex. If he were to recite this litany to John, he knew John would look at him in dumb amazement. What on earth was left for him?

The dining room of the Burglar Bar contained its own particular drone—less vital, less angry, but also richer than the kitchen's. The indistinct blur of voices, the solid chink of cutlery, an almost-audible melody that seeped from the overhead speakers. Wilco? Spoon? Some sort of jangle. A rhythmic thud served as a counterpoint to the rest of the dining room's

noises, gathered them up, and together: the bartender was cracking ice for drinks, a showy procedure that required that large blocks of it be wrapped in three thicknesses of linen napkins and beaten with a wooden mallet. Kyle moved toward his ten-top, bent toward the redhead seated at the head of the table. “Another?” he asked her.

He figured she had a husband because the main thing the ten-top discussed seemed to be children. He had waited on them every second Wednesday for three months in a row now, and names he’d started recognizing floated to the surface of the conversation that looped idly around real estate and teachers and children’s foibles, recounted wryly, with an almost gloating note of praise.

So busy! Kyle’s ten-top was so overscheduled. He set glasses onto his tray, unable to imagine a sorrier excuse for a girls’ night.

Although to be fair to these women, what else should they be discussing? His own ex-girlfriend Meagan was probably sitting in some more moneyed twin to this restaurant, participating in her own version of a more childless girls’ night. How intellectual could such gatherings, named thus, actually be?

*You take things way too seriously*, Meagan had complained. After the two of them graduated, she’d quickly landed an admin position at a white-shoe law firm downtown, and Kyle had quickly landed *his* position—at El Matadero. Within months, Meagan had had an office with a closeable door bestowed upon her. Within months, Kyle had realized that he might *never* get any closer to a window with a view of downtown than he was in the moment when he walked into his girlfriend’s brand-new office to take her to lunch and discovered her and her assistant on top of her desk.

The redhead frowned as he squatted beside her. “Another?” he repeated. She nodded absently, head cocked toward the conversation between the two women seated across the table from her.

“I don’t know how she does it!” one woman was saying. “I don’t know how I do it! I don’t know how anyone does it!”

Kyle wasn’t familiar with the *it* they were referring to—children? Motherhood? Jobs? Life? Just the idea made a certain sort of bleakness settle on his shoulders.

The redhead looked at him. He was surprised to observe that she had beautiful eyes, a deep-flecked brown. Although right now they were swimmy, compliments of three of the Burglar Bar’s version of a Moscow Mule.

“You should eat something.” It slipped out before he thought. “Let me get you something from the kitchen.” She was old enough to be his mom, if his mom had had him at sixteen instead of thirty-nine, mathematics she was drunkenly incapable of engaging in. She looked at him gratefully, without, he was relieved to see, even a tinge of flirtation.

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By the time the ten-top got around to standing up and collecting their bags and coats, the kitchen had had time to slide into the weeds and back out again. Kyle pushed through the double doors and stepped away from the aftermath of frenzy: dirtied cook’s pans nesting precariously one atop another, a greasy residue on the floor, one of the sous-chefs sourly scraping a stockpot. He headed toward the bar to count his tips.

“Do you think you could get me a cup of coffee?” a voice asked. The red-head stood beside him, swaying a little in her elegant high boots, trying once . . . twice . . . three times to put an arm into a coat sleeve. She looked at him, smiling crookedly, and draped her coat over the back of the bar stool beside his.

Kyle looked over, hand arrested over the dollar bills he’d been unfolding and pressing flat against the surface of the bar. “Your friends?”

He couldn’t believe he was being propositioned, but even the fact she’d spoken to him was a worry. There were too many reasons she shouldn’t—age, sex. The fact that she had just spent—he calculated—forty-five dollars on four drinks and he was trying to come up with the share of the rent he needed to hand over to Nicholas in crumpled five dollar bills.

“Not my friends,” she said. She slid onto the barstool next to his. “My children are friends with their children. So we say we’re friends. But we’re not. Besides, I told them I was okay.” She took a deep breath. “So they left.”

Kyle looked away.

“But I’m not. Fine. I mean, I am, I only live six blocks from here. I’ll be fine once I get to my car, but I just didn’t want . . .” her voice trailed off.

There was something undeniably creepy—*Mrs. Robinson* creepy—about the fact that she’d even sat down next to him. “I used to work in a restaurant,” she was saying. She picked up the coaster on the bar in front of her and flipped it over. “Good times.”

This, he knew, was irony. One of the things he'd sworn he was giving up. He looked over at her. Her mascara'd eyelashes were wet.

"You're an idiot," he said. "I could be anybody."

"No," she said softly. "You're charming."

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On ten-top Wednesdays, if Kyle's section emptied early enough, he could clock out before midnight. Could leave the restaurant through the front door rather than the back, and walk through the still chilly, almost spring nights down the sidewalk, past the empty storefronts, some of them still with webs of broken glass in the corners of their windows. Through the block-long commercial district the East Side Burglar Bar Company had been supposed to revitalize, into the adjacent neighborhood, past the dilapidated bungalows, marooned at the edge of the commercial area by poor city planning.

One of those houses was, in fact, the place where he lived now, the view from its living room window of an overgrown yard containing a blunt-muzzled dog that lunged at a metal webbing of chainlink. Nicholas had ended up in possession of his house through a succession of familial hand-offs that obscured the fact the present economic climate had made it impossible to find anyone to buy his grandmother's house. The house next door, he said, had been boarded up since '08, and vandalized at least once since then for its copper.

Kyle stood up, ducking to avoid the redhead's wavering gaze, and thoughtfully wadded a twenty-dollar bill. "Coffee," he said to Melinda, who lingered behind the bar, where the bartenders kept a pot of Mister Coffee going for their own use.

A frown line creased the redhead's forehead as she watched him shove the bill into one front pocket of his black jeans. "What," she began in a puzzled voice.

"To throw at their feet," Melinda supplied, handing over a Styrofoam to-go cup. "If somebody tries to mug him. Then he'll run like hell. He's on foot."

Recounted out loud, to an impartial observer, it sounded much less impressive a strategy than it had when they'd conceived of it in the kitchen. Then it had struck Kyle as savvy and urbane, the sort of tactic employed by hipsters somewhere else, like, say, Brooklyn.

“On foot,” the redhead repeated. “You live around here? My car wouldn’t get towed, would it? If I left it in the lot and walked home?”

On the other side of the bar, Melinda snorted. “It probably would,” Kyle said.

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*This Too Shall Pass.* Even if the sentiment wasn’t revealed by the slinky black tank dress that bared Melinda’s arms, Kyle would know of its placement. Below her bluebird of happiness tattoo, above the neat hatchmarked row of scars that laddered both her arms from ink almost to wrist.

Lovely Melinda, so skeptical and knowing, his landlord-roommate’s girlfriend, who sat at the kitchen table of the house Nicholas owned, eating bowls of cereal in the midafternoon, clad only in a camisole and panties. Lovely Melinda, whose past was as checkered as everybody else’s. Though it was hard to reconcile her mild blue eyes with the deliberate artistry of the scars Kyle suspected she must have once razored into her arms.

Melinda looked at him, her expression wordlessly telegraphing the sentiment: *don’t do it*. But the redhead had already started fumbling in her oversized leather bag for her car keys. All that was required of him was to deposit her at her house six blocks away. Once he parked her car in her driveway, it would be easy enough for him to backtrack to Nicholas’s. She extracted a ring weighty with keys with a look of triumph and held them outstretched toward him.

“Since you’re walking anyway, right?”

The way she swayed on her feet—toward him, away—what could he say?

That it swayed him? Melinda turned away with a shrug, as if she had overheard the absurd excuse. The Burglar Bar had divested itself of its first shift of customer, was revealing its true nature. At one end of the bar, the bartender bashed ice in a monotonous crescendo that battled with the sound system’s backbeat. Someone in the kitchen was singing loudly, a beautiful tenor. The air was unctuous with the smell of sizzling pork fat. Industry night’s late night menu of family-style service and twenty bucks paid at the door meant that John was having to yank four-tops together, his tie loosened around his neck and flung over one shoulder.

“Have fun,” Melinda told Kyle, in the same tone of voice she might have

used to say *you moron*. But he had already helped the redhead into her coat, was herding her between the two-tops scattered across the floor in an awkward dance step. The bartender was twisting the volume knob on the sound system.

Kyle led the redhead through the front door and let it swing shut behind them. They hesitated for a second on the sidewalk while she fumbled her coat closed. He turned his back on the sight of her long elegant fingers, so uncertain on the row of buttons. The ribbon of asphalt ran next to the median like a strip of dark chilly water. The telephone pole that stood sentry beside them was armored with creosote and staples. *Family Man!* announced the cardboard sign nailed to it at shoulder-height. *I Buy Houses!*

The traffic light gave off an audible clank as it changed in their favor. The redhead took a deep breath. “My car’s over there,” she said, gesturing at the lot across the street, dotted with beer cans, glinting with shattered glass, the aftereffects of what Nicholas tended to sum up as a *good night*. All that lay between the restaurant and street was a distance of—what?—four feet at the most. But in other ways, the distance seemed immeasurable, light years.

Kyle shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped off the curb.

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The car parked in the lot across from the restaurant was a Subaru. Its interior smelled strongly of old apples, of something sweet gone past its sell-by date. Kyle slid behind the wheel as the redhead leaned in the passenger side door and began to gather up the crayoned drawings that covered her seat. The sheer domesticity of her vehicle made it hard for him to think of anything to say. She reached for her seatbelt and snapped it into place with a businesslike gesture.

How long had he lived here? she asked as he pulled out of the lot. Her bright tone—the same that had carried across the restaurant for most of his shift—made it obvious her thoughts were elsewhere. She looked out the window, squaring the stack of papers in her hands.

“You turn here.” She indicated the neighborhood street with a wave and then unbuckled her seatbelt and twisted her body to lean between the seats. She deposited the papers in her hands on the back cushion.

The neighborhood had changed so much, hadn’t it? she continued, once

she had twisted back and was staring again out the window. Her movement had sobered her up or loosened her tongue, Kyle wasn't sure which. The previous owners had taken *that* house down to the studs. She waved a hand. Before that, it had been a crack house. How long had he said he'd lived around here?

"I stripped at least seven layers of paint off every single piece of woodwork in the house when we first bought it," she continued. "With dental picks. Seven layers. One of them was magenta."

Because Kyle lived in a house where the trim in the bathroom had been painted gold by Melinda, he could believe this. He murmured politely, the same way he agreed with customers at the restaurant, who looked at its brick walls and exposed ductwork and sometimes made the same sort of observations. That the neighborhood had changed; that they themselves had lived there long enough to be a part of its transformation. As if the fact that they were spending twenty-five bucks on an organic roasted chicken breast sitting in a pool of balsamic vinegar reduction somehow proved they had had a hand in any of the changes they were pointing out; as if any of those changes were germane to anything that actually mattered in the long run.

Twelve years! the redhead said.

It sounded like a life sentence. Kyle looked over, made an interrogatory sound.

"Since we moved in." She sighed. "I spent every night for the first nine months we were in it stripping all that paint from the woodwork. One day, when I was on the way home from work, I saw this absolutely beautiful front door, just lying there on the curb a block down from our house, about to be thrown out. Stained glass. And solid! You wouldn't believe how heavy it was. I went home and got my husband and then he and I walked down and carried it home together, like this." He cut his eyes toward her and saw she had raised her hands over her head.

At his look, she dropped them. "Turn right, here," she said, folding them in her lap.

"And this—" at the urgency in her voice he tapped the brakes—"is it. Stop here." She jerked her chin at the house that sat at the top of the series of concrete steps. Light spilled from the front windows onto the lawn, threw the rounded bushes at the foundations into bright relief.

As he set the parking brake, a finger of nostalgia ran down his spine.

Once, he thought. Once, he had been in high school and had ferried dates home in his dad's borrowed Honda, to houses like this one. The brief moment when he pulled up at the curb, after he twisted the key in the ignition to kill the engine, had resembled this. A little. Or maybe the redhead's tipsy melancholy was just catching.

"Here you are," he said.

She let out a sigh and turned to look at him. "I know how crazy this sounds," she said. "Absolutely fucking crazy. But would you come in, just for a second?"

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"Nice house," he said as she pushed open the front door and hesitated on the threshold, because why else had she stopped there? Clearly he was supposed to.

She gave a bark of laughter and stepped into the room. "Not nice enough," she said. She tossed her purse on the leather sofa that hulked to one side of the door and nudged off her shoes, toes of one foot to heel of the other in a movement that had to be habitual, extending a hand toward his elbow for balance. "Let me make you a cup of tea or something."

*Tea!* he imagined Nicholas snorting. He knew he should step forward. Or back. He looked down, instead. The redhead's bare feet were pale and bony against the polished hardwood floor and it seemed churlish not to join her. He stooped, to undo the laces of his own shoes.

Her voice stopped him. "No need," she said. "I just take them off out of habit. The house is such a wreck these days, I don't know why I even bother."

Her brittle, conventional tone, along with the statement itself—so obviously an untruth—seemed to contain within itself the expectation that he demur, so he did. He straightened and looked around the room. The squat matching lamps at each end of the sofa threw soft pools of light onto the gleaming floors, revealed the sofa's leather flanks. Three television remotes were aligned in a neat row at one end of the long coffee table. Wreckage? There was none.

"Every time we finished one project, we'd think of another," she was saying. "As soon as we finished painting the whole house, the first rooms we'd done already needed a new coat." She stopped. "Kids," she added. "All those sticky hands leave fingerprints."

If there were kids—there wasn't any evidence of them now. The house hummed, with silence, with the presence of expensive electronics. An astringent chemical smell hung in the air; fresh paint, he thought, or some sort of cleaning compound. *Once*, he found himself thinking. *Once*, and not even all that long ago, he had had a girlfriend. One who on weekends occasionally babysat kids whose parents, partners in the law firm where she worked, lived in houses like this one. Even more occasionally, she invited him along when she did, and after she read stories and turned off lights and fetched glasses of water, the two of them wandered through the rooms hand in hand, floored by the expensive squalor in which they found themselves.

This house, though, was neat as a pin. "The kitchen was the last thing left to do," the redhead said, crossing the living room. "We talked about it—oh, for ages." She stopped in the doorway and gestured him farther into the room. "After that we'd be finished. The house would be perfect."

"Twelve years," she repeated as she led the way down the hall. "It took longer than we'd thought. And then we had to take a couple of years off, of course. Because of the downturn."

The woodwork she'd painstakingly removed every speck of paint from gleamed darkly as he followed her. "We had no idea how long redoing a kitchen would take," she said over one shoulder. "Dust tracked everywhere. All that banging and hammering! I had to wash the supper dishes in the bathtub for months."

This was the same sort of monologue the Burglar Bar seemed to encourage in its patrons, preoccupied as it was with its own recent transformation. The solid lick of its bar had been crowbarred from a former brothel in Savannah. Or so claimed the eight-point Helvetica on the back page of the restaurant's menu, which Kyle had been expected to memorize. A floral fretwork of iron welded by an up-and-coming artist obscured the fact that the building, like its original namesake, still required burglar bars on every single one of its windows. Kyle murmured assent, the same way he did in the restaurant. There was something lulling about her rote chatter. She padded along the hallway ahead of him. The walls to either side of them were hung floor-to-ceiling with photographs, all in tarnished silver frames. They shone in the dim light, a tasteful assemblage. Dark eyes and shy smiles peeped out at him from behind the glass of each one, the two children in them growing older the further he went down the hall. Although—there were gaps here

and there in the progression, as incongruous as the photographed children's missing teeth. "Every little detail, you know?" the redhead was saying. "You've got to decide every single one. Light fixtures. Tile. Paint. Everything. You have any idea how many drawer pulls exist for kitchen cabinets?" She stopped in a doorway. "Thousands. Our contractor had catalogues if there was anything I ever wanted to take a look at. Full of the most beautiful stuff! Tile. Faucets. Cabinet knobs. He was happy to swing by the house with them anytime. Who besides him cared about the details as much as I did?"

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The plan had been just to open everything up. To make the floorplan more contemporary while still staying true to the house's character. "We knew what we wanted to take out wasn't a load-bearing wall," she said as she continued down the hallway. Her low voice was an unfurling ribbon. Kyle nodded, even though she couldn't see him, even though he was only half listening. "The house basically has good bone structure, you know?" She stopped in a doorway. "It's just that nobody lives like that anymore, in little boxy rooms, all sealed away from each other." She felt along the wall; gave a flick of her wrist.

Restaurant kitchens were their best selves at night, when the line was on a roll and the spatter of grease in fry pans rose to a practically electrical pitch, but a kitchen in an actual person's house was never like that. Night made kitchens lonely, denuded of purpose, for all that—maybe because?—people tended to congregate in them at parties. The redhead moved into hers. Behind her, Kyle stopped short.

The harsh overhead light, the glossy floor-to-ceiling cabinets, the ugly, luxurious blotch of the granite counters—all those were to be expected. *Were* what he'd expected, from the second he set foot in the house, the redhead filling the awkward air between them with her talk of remodeling. Not for nothing had Meaghan sat there in the loft her parents' generosity had helped her acquire, paging through magazines Kyle always referred to as *house porn*.

What he hadn't expected was the way the tile floor in the very center of the room had been yanked up. Or that the redhead would edge her way past the hole in her floor to the sink, calmly disregarding the wreckage. He stared at the large heart-shaped hole in the middle of floor.

The redhead tipped a teakettle under the faucet, her back to the drips

and brushstrokes of red paint above the stripes of subflooring the hole in the tile revealed. It must have been cut with some sort of tool; the edges of the hole were almost surgically precise.

“I should go,” he said. She set the kettle on the stove. As she twisted a knob, the pilot light tap-tapped until it caught. “Wouldn’t it be better to keep your shoes on?” he couldn’t help adding.

The wine-colored polish on her toenails was no more—or less—chipped than the silver that graced Melinda’s. At Nicholas’s house, Nicholas had no use for any kitchen implement as single-purpose as a teakettle, and Melinda propped her feet on the Formica table, revealing their grimy undersides to the world. When Nicholas and Melinda got home from the Burglar Bar, they just ran chipped mugs under the kitchen tap and set them in the microwave to boil. After, they dunked tea bags into the heated water in stoned silence, watching dawn lighten the kitchen window. Was he being punished for wanting to avoid their nightly tête-à-tête? “I mean, that tile’s all broken.”

The redhead looked down. The little tattoo on her ankle had gone greenish with age. “Green tea, black tea, white tea,” she said. “Lapsang souchong. I’ve got a whole pantry full.” She started across the room as if the words HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY BITCH hadn’t been painted on what was left of her kitchen floor.

“The workers found this doorway when they started pulling off the dry-wall,” she said as she opened a door. “Completely unexpected. The only thing we could figure out was that there must have been a pantry in here when the house was built.” She stood on her toes and reached for the upper shelf. “Some owner after that must’ve just covered it back up. We had no clue it was here.”

Boxes and bottles stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her in uniform plenty. She slipped a box of tea from the shelf and turned. “So we thought—why not just incorporate the fact the empty space was already here into our new design? Our contractor knew a guy who did beautiful cabinet work. We could have whatever we wanted. Built-in shelves? A wine cooler? A bar sink? The sky was the limit.”

He watched from the doorway. She skirted the hole in the floor and returned to the counter, her fingers busy unfolding the waxed paper lining the box of tea.

“I know how ridiculous it looks.” Her voice was low. “To spend thousands putting a closet back into a house exactly where there was one in the first place.” She set teabags in the mugs and mechanically poured water over them. Steam rose; mingled with her words. She turned from the sink. “You’re thinking nobody’s that fucking stupid.” She handed him a mug, glancing at the clock hung on the wall above the door. “Nobody’s so stupid they live someplace for twelve years and don’t notice the inside of their kitchen is three feet smaller than its outside.”

Who really looked at rooms? *Weren’t* they just boxes you lived in? “Walls?” he echoed. “The *floors* are more of a problem.”

“Knocking,” she said abruptly. “No, not *knocking*—banging. On that brand new door. I hear it every single night now.” She took a breath. “The first time, I jumped out of bed and ran in here, but it had stopped before I even got the light on. So I went back to bed. And then it started up, all over again.”

“Imagination,” he suggested. “Mice?”

“Imagination,” she repeated. She stepped forward and reached for his hand. “I’ve heard it the last three nights. It always starts up at the same time.” She walked him across the room before he had time to yank his hand away. “Which is just about now. Somebody covered the old doorway with drywall. But when our contractor had it pulled off, there was still an old hook-and-eye latch. She dropped his hand to press a finger to the divot in the wood halfway up the frame. “Right there.”

No one who didn’t know would notice, but he could see the dimple that pockmarked the wood. “A latch,” he said. “So?”

“On the outside of a door?”

A soft tapping had started up at the inside of the pantry door. Tentative, hardly a sound at all, the faint flurried rapping a polite Morse code. “My husband took the kids when he left,” she said. “The noise didn’t start until that night, after they were gone. Once I was here by myself. There’s been nobody but me to hear it.” Her eyes met his for the first time since the restaurant. Still beautiful, no longer watery with drink.

After he had moved out of Meaghan’s loft, he wrestled four black garbage bags stuffed full of his clothes into Nicholas’s house. Nicholas himself helped him muscle up the front steps the battered black bookcase he and Meaghan

had purchased at Ikea in the throes of young love. And then he had unloaded the car automatically, his heart over-full with its own aggrieved accounting.

“Listen,” the redhead said.

“I don’t hear anything,” he said quickly, but as the knocking gained confidence, he couldn’t help but take a step away from it, into the wreckage of the room.