

Marie sat wide awake in the recliner of the small apartment living room facing towards her front door awaiting the arrival of her husband. Her foot tapped to a rapid tempo that her mind raced in sync with, her finger tapping on the offbeat creating a percussion section of anxiety. Her eyes quickly glancing over at the clock with the passing of each ten second interval, she watched the hands slowly creep farther away from the time Joey said to have their twilight dinner on the table. 1:15, 1:16, 1:17, 1:18; it was almost unbearable for her, he always got home at twelve. He had been pulling these late nights at the office for weeks now, "big sales period," he would explain to her, "we are moving a lot of product as winter starts waking up." Being the sales representative for a snow removal hardware company, it would make sense for them to be busy around this time she thought but, these twelve hour days have been changing her Joey. He barely got a chance to speak to her since he started working with these deals and when he did it was hardly flattering. The only thing that seems to come out of his mouth anymore is "make my figgin dinner, wash my good shirts, make sure you pick up the newspaper when you get done wait'n tables at Mel's, let me sleep Marie my boss has been bust'n my balls all damn day about gett'n his fuck'n reports done." She never even gets the chance to ask him about his day most nights except for these little dinners they do every Thursday before Marie's first day off.

Nights like these were really the only time she got to spend with Joey where he would actually look her in the eye and pay attention to what she had to say. It was nothing too fancy since Marie only had a few hours to run around town and get ingredients for something other than their usual cuisine of T.V. dinners or boxed macaroni and cheese. She would set the table with neatly folded cloth napkins and the good sets of silverware, or at least as good as they could afford. A final touch was the arrangement of candles about the center of the table Marie always put out in an effort to relive their first date at that little Italian café just a few blocks from North Fourth Street. Sometimes when their faces bathed in the dim flickers of candle light, Marie stirred with the butterflies she felt not three years ago. There were nights where even Joey would rest his eyelids half way and turn a quick smirk as if he were there with her at that table in the corner of Vinnettee's, tearing off pieces of bread sticks and dipping them into Vinnie's homemade olive oil sauce. But Joey's placemat had been empty since he'd left this morning and the fettuccini was getting cold sitting next to the drafty window.

She thought of the absolute worst watching the steam dwindle over the pot of sauce on the kitchen stove. What if he got into an accident on the way home, those roads are slicker every day now it seems? He hasn't called yet either so that must mean he's in the hospital or already dead. "Christ" she whispered to herself as she cupped her mouth with her hands, "that can't be it, the hospital would have phoned me by now. But Joey

always calls me when he's going to be late, and I guess he did call me not but an hour and a half ago...god dammit Joey what's taking you so long, you said 'twelve o'clock Marie, I want that dinner on the table and my gal all done up. I got something special for my girl tonight.'" What the hell did he mean by special, she thought? He hasn't done anything "special" in months; was it their anniversary? No that isn't until march and her birthday was last month. Was he going to take her out for dinner tonight to change things up a bit? But what place opens this damn late, she asked herself; diners and bars maybe but that wasn't really Joey's cup of tea. She stopped and opened her eyes wide, "is he having an affair?...oh Christ Marie now you're just being silly, he'll probably be home soon he's just running slow. You know how he is, always has to chat with Paulie in his guard shack before he leaves and that always takes a while."

Paulie was certainly a character. Joey always called him "his big Italian meatball" when they would all get together with Paulie's current flossie or whore he hired for his evening entertainment. They had known each other since grade school and over the years had become inseparable, spending every bit of their free time together getting into trouble and slaying women with their perfected wingman swagger act. One could imagine how long they could simply go on reminiscing over the good ol' days before Joey had to grow up and eventually managed to snag a catch like Marie. One thing Paulie always held on Marie was losing his gambling buddy at the race track. He would almost always beg Joey before we went home to come with him "one last time," he'd say "your big meatball has got a good deal going right now and I assure you my little canolli that it's gonna rock you fucking wallet with plenty of that nice salad to go along with this gorgeous desert over here" always pointing his thumb at Marie. She always held a little suspicion as to whether Joey was completely out of the gambling game but every time Marie would ask him, the answer was always "I gave all of that shit up for you Marie when I spent the last of my earnings on tat little ring on your finger." Even then, Marie just had an uneasy feeling and needed to make sure Paulie didn't make him one of those deals Joey couldn't refuse.

She ran over and picked up the phone reaching for the small address book to look up the number for the plant's security office. She never called too often in order to check in on Joey but sometimes he needed a wakeup call from his home office to break him away from Paulie's never ending repertoire of old stories and recent tales of his sexual adventures with strange women. A man with an aged grizzled voice answered the phone. "Hello this is Lucky Bill at Snow Co. security, if you're a friend call me Lucky, if you're in danger or have a complaint call me Bill."

"Hello Lucky it's Marie"

“Oh well hey there missy, how’s the old dinner holding up? Is Mel still running the place or did his old ass finally croak out?”

“Oh no Lucky, he is still kick’n pretty good and the dinner is the same as always crawling with old kooks like you and the damn gossiping trio in the back with their morning scrabble games.”

“An old Kook huh?” he chuckled on the other line. “Well I’m gonna guess you must be hooting for your husband around these hours you little night owl.”

“Yeah Lucky he hasn’t been home or called for a few hours and I was wondering if he might still be chit chatting with Paulie and lost track of time and his stomach.”

“Well if he is he sure as hell don’t know how good he has it coming home to a warm meal this late at night. Usually the microwave is my best friend when it comes to dinner time for me since my wife works just like you. But anyhow let me give Paulie a buzz and see if his shady ass isn’t away from his post doing something he shouldn’t.”

“Thanks Lucky,” Marie replied waiting patiently for an answer. She heard rustling as old Bill wheeled his chair around his office to page Paulie expecting to hear some radio chatter bickering between the two night guards, but there was only a few repeated instances of the request “Paulie, I need a check in...Paulie, where are you at?...God dammit that man needs some serious life coaching about his fucking priorities.” She heard the wheels of his chair again over the open line, “Well Marie it looks like we are uhh, sending a search party out for your husband and his deadbeat friend. Christ, um, I would suggest just hang’n in their Marie I’m sure Joey will be home soon enough, Paulie does this kind of thing almost every night.”

Marie paused for a second, taking the phone from her ear to let out a sigh, “alright well thank you for checking anyway Lucky, I’m sure you’re right he’s probably on his way now.” As she set the receiver down on its perch she let out a long breath clenching her hair with both hands. Her body slumped back into the old recliner and she reached for a pack of cigarettes next to the phone. Striking up a kitchen match she took a long drag to calm her shaky hands and focus her mind on something else, even if it were only as long as her cigarette’s cherry burned steadily towards her finger tips, ticking away the brief bit of solace she had.

A knock at the door stirred her body in the creaky recliner as she fumbled to her feet to peek through the spy hole. Two men stood in suits on the other side of her door. Their hair had been slicked back just like the gangsters from those old mafia films, and one had a shoulder holster strapped across his chest almost intentionally revealing it to her

as a warning. She had never seen these men in her life and the gun just made her nerves all the more worse. All she could think is what in the hell Joey had gotten into with Paulie this time. They've had loan sharks put letters in their inbox and Joey had come home with bruises on his face before but never strange men showing up at the door. Marie opened the drawer of the end table next to the door to retrieve the 38. Special Joey had gotten her for her birthday last year and held it just behind her back as she opened the door with the chain lock still engaged. "How may I help you gentlemen?" She said in an anxious gentle voice, smiling to hopefully put on an act.

"Ma'am we're here to talk with your husband ehh, Joey, is he here right now?" the man on the right said peering in through the small slit in the doorframe.

Marie positioned her body in front of the door to block the man from getting a good look at the apartment and replied "no sir I haven't seen him or Paulie tonight."

"Paulie? Paulie Carfano? I never asked anything about him but that must be who he's with. You sure your husband aint here right now Mrs. Dalano?"

Marie winced, cursing under her breath she quickly came up with a lie to shoe them away. "Ah dammit...look I gotta ask if you're here to hurt my Joey, I know he probably screwed you two over somehow and I'm gonna give him a god damn piece of my mind when his ass gets home , but I gotta know you ain't gonna hurt my Joey."

"Mrs. Dalano we just want to talk to your husband about some business, and if you don't tell us where he is I can't promise you he'll come home nice and clean like you want him to. If you tell us now I swear on my motha's grave that I won't harm a hair on his pretty little head."

Marie could sense the man's fingers crossed behind his back, these weren't those kind of guys to stick to their word, especially when they probably whacked their mothers for their savings accounts and family heirlooms to pawn off for half of what they're actually worth. Real fuck'n scum bags she thought to herself. "Well gentlemen if I have your word I heard from Paulie's boss that him and Joey were headed down to the old Black Cat club to have a few beers or whatever they usually do with that group of guidos and their slicked up hair."

"Well see Mrs. Dalano here is the funny business with that bit of information...you see we just came from The Black Cat and neither Paulie or your husband was there take'n shots of grandma's cough syrup, and why would they be headed to a bar after they decided to steal from a guy with friends like us?"

“I thought you said you weren’t going to hurt my Joey?”

“I did ma’am and you can shoot me dead here with my own gun if I do, but I didn’t say anything about his pretty wife who likes to lie to the men knock’n on her door at one o’clock in the friggin morn’n.”

Marie rested the snub nose barrel of the revolver on the door waiting for the men to draw their weapons. Her hands shuddered, a chill ran up her spine, she could feel her heart beating furiously in her chest and her breath shorten dramatically. Her words came with difficulty as she responded to the men. “Well mister... I haven’t seen him since he left this morning. I had dinner ready two hours ago and... he still hasn’t showed up.” Her finger moved from the cylinder and rested on the trigger and her thumb on the hammer, ready to react if they tried anything fast.

“Mrs. Dalano would you mind unlatch’n that door so we can do things nice and easy, Tony’s shoulder is a little tense from last week and I’m sure you don’t want your land lord throw’n a hissy fit about a broken door frame. We can talk like adults if you cooperate, do you understand Mrs. Dalano?”

She choked on her words as they came out, “well, I guess that is the easier way, we don’t want to cause a scene now do we?” She paused and looked down at her dress and bit her lip in frustration. “ Would you boys...um mind letting me slipping into something more appropriate, tonight is me Joey’s date night and we don’t tend to get out much on these nights if you catch my drift” she tried to make a fake smile and little chuckle.

The man grinned, “As long as this door comes open when you’re finished Mrs. Dalano I think we’ll be just fine with that.”

Marie closed the door quickly and rushed back into her room to catch her breath as her heart felt like it was about to fracture her rib cage. She took several deep breaths and muttered to herself “fuck...fuckiing God dammit Joey, what in God’s name did you get yourself into, and fucking Paulie. Joey why did you listen to him? I’ve told you so many times to ex him out of your life, that he never does you any good, always dragging you into things you don’t want to do. And then Jesus Joey, now I’ve got two men at my door threatening to break the damn thing down if I don’t let them in. Why did I ever put up with this shit Joey, for so damn long.” She fumbled for the phone and dialed 911. The dial tone rang three times before the dispatcher picked up.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

"Hello my name is Marie Dalano, I live in apartment 32 C at 788 west Apple Wood Boulevard and I have two fuck'n guys trying to get in my front door, Jesus... they've got guns and everything and I think they're here for my husband."

"Ok ma'am can you describe the men for me?"

"Yeah they look like a pair out of an old mobster movie you know white, about 5' 11", nice suits, slicked back black hair, and clone you can smell a mile away. The one guy is real broad chested and looks like the muscle between the two."

"Are they still at your door?"

"yes they think I'm changing into something decent, Christ just send an officer over please, I'm afraid they're going to kidnap me in order to get to my husband."

"Marie are you coming back to let us in or are we gonna have to come get you?" The man yelled through the bulky front door. "You got about ten seconds before Tony and I come in to get you."

"Shit...um I gotta go."

"Miss please stay on the line, and do not open that door, just wait for police to arrive and resolve the situation."

"Ten, nine, eight, seven"

"I really have to go just send your boys this way." She set the receiver off of its perch beside the bed and ran to the door way, gun still in her hand. "Jesus Christ, okay Marie what now, what now?" Her lungs were on fire, almost light headed from trying to control her breathing and settle her mind. It was no use, these two bulky men were about to burst through her front door and do god knows what with her.

"Five, four; do you really want me to have to do this Marie? I assure you I won't be as nice as I have been if I get to zero."

Marie looked at the revolver in her hand as it trembled almost uncontrollably. Her mind raced thinking of her only two options, let these boys come in here, tie her up, and more than likely kill her and her husband when they get what they need, or use what little skills she had learned when Joey took her to shoot the damn gun last week, maybe poke a few holes in these bastards before the cops decided to show up and clean up the mess. "Fucking Christ Joey, why?" Marie whispered hoarsely under her breath with her eyes closed. She breathed deeply with tears now in her eyes and face flush with

red. The man's countdown now inched by in slow motion, his words long and drawn out in a low tone. The hairs on Marie's neck stood up as if she were in a lightning storm. The half withered candles glimmered in Marie's glossy eyes as they fixed on the sauce pot that lacked its former steamy rim, now luke warm and crusted on its surface. Sweat ran down her forehead, trickling all the way down to her palms that clenched the rubber pistol grip. Her thumb fumbled with the cylinder release alongside the pistol's steel frame where she counted a fully loaded six rounds.

"Three," *click*, the first catch of the hammer was the safety Marie remembered, hearing Joey's voice in her head "now honey you can't shoot at all when it's here, it locks that trigger tighter than a bulk head safe."

"Two" *click*, the second released the cylinder so you could rotate it and load it, she pictured herself at the range fumbling with the small brass shells to fit them in each little hole. Their smooth casings cold and gold colored with the bullet resting at its end.

"One"*click*, the third was the kill switch. It locked back the hammer just half an inch behind the casing and made the gun "hot" as Joey put it. "Now when you're ready squeeze, don't pull. You won't hit shit if you jerk the thing." Joey's lesson echoed in her head almost narrating her through her possible end. Marie's hands started shaking less, her husband's voice soothed her screeching nerves. "Now take a breath and hold it."

"Zero," *boom**boom**boom**boom**boom**boom*....She fired in a wide spread trying to aim where she remembered the men last stood. Her ears rang with a high pitched tone that progressively increased its volume until she heard the two men bickering and swearing wildly in a muffled slur. Her vision faded in and out as she held her breath waiting for the returning volley of bullets.

"Who the fuck are you?" the smaller man yelled on the other side of the door. "Why don't you help my ass up, I'm fucking bleeding here. You know what Tony, shoot this guy he's seen too much."

There was a slight pause. Marie held the lump in the back of her throat she was unable to swallow. Closing her eyes she waited.

*Bang**Bang*. The hallway fell silent. The gut retching fear made Marie's insides twist in knots. She continued to hold her breath until she could feel her face turn blue and her limbs growing limp.

"Marie?" *knock**knock**knock* Are you in there?...It's ok love, it's Joey, I'm here."

She opened her mouth to gasp for air. The gun dropped to floor as tears filled her eyes once more creating longer trails of black eyeliner. Almost tripping over her own feet, she managed to fumble with the chain lock and dead bolt with her sweaty palms and finger tips. Upon opening the door she wasted no time burrowing her face into Joey's white dress shirt, smearing black all over its wrinkled fabric.

They embraced each other with only the sounds of Marie's muffled cries and the ambient hum of overhead florescent lights. Joey broke the silence, "It's ok baby I'm here, they're dead...I can't believe this happened...I'm so fucking sorry, I should have never agreed to this. God I'm glad they didn't fucking touch you." Marie still dug her face into Joey's chest, shaking as if it were subzero temperatures in the hall. "Breath baby, breath shhhhh...listen I know you're scared right now, this should have never happened and I promise I will explain everything but right now we have got to get out of here, okay?"

She pulled her head from his chest to speak in a broken hysteria, "You want me to fucking leave right now Joey? I just fucking shot at two strange men who were gonna bust down this door and put a god damn bullet in my head... and you want me to leave with you? The same men that were suppose to come and take you away and leave you in some ditch? Joey I can barely stand right now, let alone deal with you trying to tell me everything is ok. It's not Joey! I don't know what the fuck you did and what Paulie talked you into, but Christ was it really worth it to put your wife in harms way? I need a god damn explanation Joey, how do I know we aren't gonna get shot at leaving here? Where are we going to go? It's not like these guy's boss isn't going to send another set of guys our way to finish the job."

"Marie, Marie just breath okay?"

"Don't 'Marie, Marie' me. Ever since you left this morning I've been worried sick...oh god I feel like I'm gonna puke."

"Ok let's get you a chair, sit down honey and keep breath'n." Joey guided Marie into the room as she hobbled into the old recliner. Joey ran to the kitchen to get a glass of water and handed it back to Marie. "Here drink something, your sweat'n buckets." She accepted the glass and gulped down half of it, burring one of her hands in her hair. "Look Marie, I know I fucked up, I mean real bad, worse than ever, hell probably more than ever could have. But listen if we don't get the hell outta here in the next ten minutes, this life we have right now, this ugly face you're look'n at with your beautiful brown eyes, it'll be look'n back at you through big sheets of bullet proof glass with a telephones hanging from both sides and wear'n an orange jump suit. Hell we might not

even get there. We both may be look'n up at three feet of dirt and no grave stone for the police to find us. Listen I've got two plane tickets to get us halfway across the states where we can take the money I stole from these ass holes and start fresh again. We'll change our names, change our address, our phone number, all of it. Then these guys will never look our way again; we'll be safe Marie. No more shooting, no more gambling, no more barrowing."

"But Joey what about my mother and my sister? My auntie Lorane? Am I just suppose to leave them behind too so you can live a safer life with your wife? Joey I love you, I've always loved you but this whole fucking thing has got me thinking that we have to have a talk about our marriage."

"Jesus Marie, you know if you stay that they'll come looking for you too? You put bullets in two of their guys and you think you get to walk away from this? No Marie you are in this just as much as me now. I didn't want it to be this way but I can't go back and fucking change this. Marie don't think I want to take you away from your family, especially your motha but you've gotta understand that they are in danger too if we stay here. We have to leave for us and our families, so we're all safe and nobody has to get strange fellas knock'n at their doors with guns and orders to kill. Now please Marie just grab a few things you can fit in a carry on, some Tylenol or perquisites, and let's get out of here before more of these goons show up."

Marie set the glass of water down on the table next to the phone and pressed her head between her hands. There was a certainty in Joey's voice that Marie knew all too well. It was an air of confidence that somehow reassured her that this was what she needed to do. It seemed so surreal to her, she was now a criminal on the run with her husband's poor life choices, was about to lose everything and start almost completely over, and yet as she kept running it through her mind the thought seemed less and less ridiculous. After a few deep breaths and a few dabs with a cloth on her eyes, the reality set in and she knew that Joey's plan was her only way out. She swallowed the knot at the back of her throat and said "alright Joey..." she sniffled, "what all can I bring with me?"

He held her hand and brushed his hand through her hair, "You remember that little carryon bag I got you last Christmas for our vacation this summer?" Marie shook her head. "Whatever you can fit in that in the next five minutes." Joey looked around the room and settled on the undisturbed kitchen table. "Did you do all of this for me?"

Marie nodded and laughed, "yeah...it's all probably cold by now but I made your favorite fettuccini and I went and asked Vinnie how to make his special bread stick sauce. Of

course he never gave it to me but, he was nice enough to send a batch home with me.” Her eyes focused on Joeys hands holding hers.

Joey pushed her chin up to look him in the eyes, “Marie...how did I ever come to deserve such a beautiful girl like you? It looks just like the little table on the night we went out, maybe even better. Now come on go grab your things and we’ll continue this dinner when we don’t have bastards chasing us with guns, how does that sound eh?”

He had such a charm over Marie, a spark that never failed to light the kindling of a roaring fire. Just the way his eyes peered into her told Marie that he really loved her in every way, that his life wasn’t complete without a gal like her by his side every waking moment of his certainly unique life. She knew that her mother would think she was crazy for staying with the man after everything that had just happened, and she sure as hell would be giving the bastard a lot of hell when they got a moment to sit and talk, but she loved him. Knowing too that life without the lug wouldn’t be living at all.

So Marie packed the essentials, toiletries, an old picture frame of their wedding, and the little address book just in case she got to call her mother when things cooled down. Joey grabbed her black leather coat and helped her into it, brushing his hands down the sleeves and looking her over. “Are you ready to go?” Joey asked in a quick reassuring tone.

She looked at the table where the candles had nearly burned themselves out and the food had not stirred an inch. A few breadsticks were still left half eaten from when she was snacking waiting for the sauce to come to a boil. It’s just like that night at Vinnete’s Café she thought to herself. After the breadsticks, we never even touched our food, just talked until the candles went out and Vinnie had to go home to his wife. Taking a deep breath in through her nose Marie basked in the nostalgia and finally replied, “Yeah...I think I’ve always been ready for this.”