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Candlelight

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STEVEN LANG

CANDLELIGHT

SNACK FOOD—DON'T serve anything but snack food. That is what her intuition had told her. She remembered having read something once about avoiding utensils on first dates. Or maybe it was just her neurosis about the sound of fork tines grating across a man's teeth. She had not mentioned being easily irritated in her online profile. Still, the very idea of a dinner date (her first in months) had so nauseated her all day that a full meal was out of the question. It would be snacks and only snacks for her date with Leonard.

She lit four candles and set one in each corner of the carpeted ice fishing house. She had arranged it all beforehand based on a still life photo she had once seen by Henri Cartier-Bresson, although in the photo the candles were not lit, and they might have been oil lamps, and it might have been by another photographer (her memory of it was possibly a pastiche, and it may have been an etching), but she nodded to herself in approval anyway. Leonard was a photographer. An artist. And as an artist he would appreciate her efforts. And that appreciation, not the precision of her memory, is what mattered. Yet the inherent irony ("Candlelight" was the name of the online dating site where Jamie had found Leonard—was this indeed irony?) provided her with at least one clever line she could deliver to Leonard if the moment was right. Leonard had checked "sense of humor" in his

profile, and so had Jamie.

At this moment, Leonard was in his car in front of Jamie's house double-checking all of his camera gear. Jamie had requested that he bring his best equipment. He owned what was almost certainly the only medium-format digital camera in the otherwise pleasant but digitally-challenged northern Minnesota town of Bemidji, unless there was a similar camera he didn't know about at the university, one used strictly for technical purposes, such as at the end of a telescope or in a medical imaging lab. But Leonard was an artist, not a technician. And he was successful. Nearly every graduation photo, engagement picture, and wedding portrait in town bore his watermark. He was peerless for a very large radius, hundreds of miles. Most of those miles were farms and lakes, it was true, but nevertheless it was an area large enough to be seen from outer space.

Lenses, filters, batteries, flash—everything looked to be in order. Leonard zipped his camera bag closed and, per Jamie's instructions, made his way across her snowy front yard, around the back of the house, and down the hill toward the frozen lake. From the front, Jamie's house was nothing special—a modest, white brick house with a faux-Mediterranean facade that had seen better days. But around back it cascaded down the hill, three full stories with two large decks and stairs zigzagging up and down like an old walk-up tenement. Leonard glanced back at the house towering behind him. He believed he had noted it once years ago during a boating excursion on Lake Bemidji. He turned his attention to the lake, and spotted the icehouse not far from the shore. Week-old snow broke in crusty chunks

with Leonard's every step. Across the lake, the lights of whizzing, whirring snowmobiles shone like fireflies. The aurora borealis could be seen in the clear evening sky. He felt more alive than he had in months, if not years.

Inside the icehouse, Jamie was pouring handfuls of cashews and Craisins into a series of small tin cups. The blue-enamel-with-white-spots kind of tin cups. They were not vintage but they were adorable. There was no way she was going to blow this. No way, because Leonard was special. Granted, from a purely physical perspective, he was not all that attractive. But he had huge biceps, which he proudly displayed in his Candlelight profile photo. Jamie quickly reminded herself that it wasn't Leonard's biceps that made him special. It was his photography. He wasn't Cartier-Bresson good, but he was good. People knew his work, and not just in Bemidji. He had an online presence, the search-engine-optimized kind with thousands of followers and millions of hits. Jamie was a follower prior to finding him on Candlelight, the Northland's Premier Dating Site for Curious Adults. And from the moment she had clicked on his profile photo (which was immediately after she saw his bulging right bicep) she was sure that he was the one.

Jamie was thin and fit, though pale with a somewhat ruddy complexion that she hid beneath a layer of expensive makeup. She was nearsighted and wore oversized, thick-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses. She was not especially tall, but most of her height was in her legs. In fact, when she was a teen, she had learned to do the splits and she often did so across a piano bench when practicing scales. Her hair was naturally blond, but she

augmented its lustrous sheen with artificial highlights. Her eyebrows were preternaturally arched, like two ancient petroglyphs carved above icy blue eyes.

Jamie knew Leonard would have no trouble finding his way, since the icehouse was so near to the shore behind her house, a house that was, in her informed opinion, the nicest on Lake Bemidji. She had lived in it since she was a child. She would share this tidbit with Leonard if it came up in conversation. But she would not tell him that her father had carried her up the stairs every night when she was young—every night, that is, until the night he died alone out on the ice, drunk after a fight with her mother. She would not tell him she had run out onto the ice the next morning, barefoot, searching for her father, only to find him frozen stiff.

After the candles and snacks were all set, she sat down on the old Coleman cooler that had belonged to her father. A beer would be nice, she thought, but it would be best to wait. She was relieved when a moment later a knock came at the door. She stood up. “Hello?”

“It’s Leonard.”

I know, she thought. He might have said something more creative. Something like, “Land Shark.” Or maybe, “Guess who?” And not, simply, “It’s Leonard,” which made no sense. “I’m Leonard” would make sense.

“Come in, Leonard.”

Leonard pushed himself into the door, which by design opened outward. Jamie waited for him to realize his mistake. When he finally pulled the door open and stepped inside, she stared at him and said nothing. Leon-

ard exhaled audibly, perhaps, Jamie thought, at the sight of the candles and cups of nuts and berries as well as her black bra showing through her white lambswool sweater. She was sure it was showing, even in this light, but it wouldn't hurt to check. She looked down. Seeing not much more than dim gray fuzz, she looked back up. Leonard's neck appeared to have a tic. Maybe he had a muscle injury, or a neurological problem. Or, Jamie thought, perhaps the tic was a sign that he hadn't taken anything for his nerves, as she had, and that was both encouraging and depressing. She felt in her own jaw that she was tense as well, but believed that the prescription tranquilizer was already subduing her nerves effectively, and perhaps it was.

"I made snacks." Jamie gestured toward the tin cups.

"Nice. I brought a bottle of wine."

"Oh jeez," Jamie shook her head. "I don't have a corkscrew out here."

"No problem. I know a trick."

"Hum." Jamie wondered if wine mixed with tranquilizer might not be a good combination, or at least not yet. Leonard was closer now and Jamie could see his biceps bulging beneath his navy peacoat. She fixated for a moment. Not too long, but long enough that she felt the tranquilizer at work. Leonard stood stiffly, and didn't appear to be impressed by the candles. She wondered for a moment if she had made a mistake.

Leonard, too, thought he might have made a mistake, that quite possibly this woman and this date were not at all what he had hoped for. Leonard was tall and formerly athletic, but his chosen profession and life

circumstances did not lend themselves to an abundance of physical activity. He was not keen on dried fruits. He preferred steak. Leonard was hungry and had expected a meal, not snacks. He could have accepted a picnic of some sort, or at least a delivery pizza. But not trail mix. And he would have preferred to be in her house, or at a restaurant, or at least a coffee shop, not in this silly frozen box. He wasn't a boy and didn't want to act like one. This was putting it mildly since he lived with his mother and slept in his childhood bedroom in her basement. What he had hoped for from this date was an excuse to never go back. Perhaps, at age thirty-six, the idea of dating his way out of his mother's house was simply too much to ask. Still, Leonard couldn't bear the thought of having no hope at all, so he set his camera bag down and handed Jamie the bottle. "Peruvian Merlot."

Jamie looked at the label and set aside her trepidation. "So what's the trick?"

"You just unscrew the cap." Leonard smiled.

This was the humor! She knew it would happen, but she didn't think it would be so soon. And she didn't think it would be this good. Then she looked at the bottle again. In the dim icehouse there was no way to be sure one way or the other.

"It's not a screw top," Leonard said. "That was a joke."

Jamie set the bottle down. "Yes, I understood that to be a joke."

Leonard unzipped his camera bag and pulled out the impressively large Hasselblad digital camera. He removed the lens cap, checked the lens for dust, then replaced the cap. Jamie's head was spinning. "Take off your

shoes, Leonard. Get comfortable.”

“What?”

“I mean, here, have a seat, on the cooler.”

She pushed the cooler toward Leonard with her bare foot.

“Okay. But, where are you going to sit?”

“I’ll be right back.”

Leonard watched as Jamie, still barefoot, swung the icehouse door open and marched up the snowpath to her backdoor. A sensor tripped the floodlight, and she entered the house. Leonard sat down on the cooler, then stood back up and closed the icehouse door. No reason to freeze. He looked down at the cooler and then opened it. Inside were twelve bottles of Grain Belt beer along with a bottle of water and a few plastic bags filled with cashews and dried berries. He had been so sure she was the one, too. But these were terrible choices. He felt a deep sense of loss and a twinge of betrayal. Not just because of her pretty face, which appeared to match her profile picture exactly (a first), but because her bare feet spelled doom. She hadn’t mentioned wanton disregard for the elements in her profile, which he’d printed off and kept in his shirt pocket all week. Still, she was a piano teacher, as his own mother had been, and Leonard desperately missed the sounds of the thirty-minute lessons she used to give to neighborhood kids when he was a boy. For his own sanity, Leonard needed to keep an open mind.

He closed the cooler and sat down. A moment later he stood up again, removed a beer from the cooler, and twisted it open. Why not? he

thought. He removed his camera from its carrying case and hung it around his neck. The familiar apparatus pressing against his chest was comforting. With a beer and some of these nuts and berries and maybe later a tin cup of wine and some good conversation what could possibly go wrong? Probably everything. He sat down again. In the far corner a cast-iron teakettle hummed atop a vintage propane stove/heater combo that matched the cooler exactly.

When Jamie returned, she was carrying an auger and wearing pink bunny slippers. She was also wearing pink bunny ears. The ears were held in place by a plastic band which compressed and poofed her long, wavy hair, but not enough to hide the modest tiara above the band. Leonard was beside himself. How did she know? Also, he was glad she was no longer barefoot, because he knew he would say something about it eventually, and it might come out wrong. Wrong for a first date. Or really any date. Just wrong, like something he'd have said to his mother, such as, "I'd put on some fucking socks and shoes if I were you. This isn't Antigua." Leonard knew that one of his weak points was this kind of talk (although he had not noted such talk in his Candlelight profile). Still, he felt he should say something now about the slippers, something positive. He could do this while disassociating it from her having been barefoot earlier.

"Nice slippers. Were your feet cold?" Leonard quickly realized he had largely failed to disassociate his judgment about her bare feet from his comment about the slippers. He held his breath and waited.

"Not really. I just thought, you know, maybe you were into bun-

nies.” Jamie rotated the toes of the bunny slippers toward each other and bent her knees slightly. Her cream-colored stretch pants clung to her thighs like hot wax. She set the tip of the auger down in front of her and leaned on it with both hands.

“Oh, well, yes, there’s an interest there.” Leonard was confused. “But I don’t remember having noted that in my profile.”

“You don’t? I could have sworn you had bunnies checked.” Jamie knelt down next to the propane stove. She ran her fingers across the carpeting with one hand and held the auger with the other.

“Bunnies is an option?” Leonard wasn’t sure he’d have checked it even if it were. Leonard became concerned. Or was it that he was embarrassed? He wasn’t sure. Had he accidentally posted some of his bunny photos somewhere? If so, that wasn’t the end of the world, since she was clearly receptive, and of course the photos were always tasteful. Maybe it was going to be okay. This was when Leonard saw the tail. Jamie had strapped a furry, pink rabbit tail around her waist—a little lower than her waist, actually—and as she knelt to tend the teakettle (which was heating up nicely) the tail perked up a bit.

Jamie turned back and saw that Leonard had taken a beer from the cooler without asking. He hadn’t checked presumptuousness in his profile, but there he was with a beer in his hand. Still, it was not as if she had meant to drink it all herself. Perhaps Leonard had not been so presumptuous after all. Jamie realized she was staring at Leonard.

“So, how did you know?” he asked. His eyes carried an expression

of relief, but his lips were inquisitively pursed. He had not yet decided if he was turned on.

“How did I know what?”

“About the bunnies.”

“Just a hunch, I guess. I’m very intuitive.” Jamie opened the teakettle and peered inside. The truth was that she had stalked him. She covered the teakettle and focused again on the carpeting. The green shag she had installed in the icehouse, meant to look like Easter grass, looked more like the deep rough of a professional golf course. This was a special remnant sourced from a fancy Las Vegas hotel, or at least that’s what the Craigslist ad had said, and she had no reason to disbelieve it because she had never been in a fancy Las Vegas hotel, not even in the lobby. “Would you like some nuts and/or berries?” She asked. “They’re the expensive kind, from the co-op.”

Things were starting to gel. Leonard held out his hand and Jamie poured some cashews and Craisins into his open palm. He moved to eat them, but she told him to wait. “Hold out your hand like this.” She held her left hand out flat in front of her as if offering an hors d’oeuvres tray. Leonard copied the gesture, balancing the small mound of nuts and berries on his left palm. Jamie leaned in to eat them as a rabbit might, and Leonard felt a sensation that was less arousal than opportunism. With his right hand he quickly gripped his camera and switched it on. Jamie pulled her lower lip into her mouth, advanced her upper teeth, and tipped her nose back. She looked up at him for the photo. Leonard expertly adjusted his camera settings for the relative darkness, capturing a sharp, clean image even in the

dim candlelight.

Jamie asked Leonard to move aside. He complied, and she reached into the cooler for a beer for herself. Just then she remembered the wine. Maybe wine would be okay after all.

“So,” Jamie said, “if that wine’s not a twist-off, what’s the trick?”

“You just remove the wrapping and start bumping the bottom of the bottle against the wall. The cork moves a little bit with each bump, and in no time you can just pull it out.”

“Let’s see you do it.”

Leonard reached for the bottle. It was difficult to remove the wrapping with his fingernails, so he pulled a pocketknife from his camera bag. Leonard slid the tip of the knife under the wrapping and pierced it. (Jamie’s heart jumped when she saw the knife blade gleaming in the flickering light.) Leonard spun the wrapping off the bottle, then slipped the knife, still open, into his shirt pocket. He examined the pink indoor/outdoor carpeting that covered the icehouse walls. Perfect. No risk of breaking the bottle. He tested a wall until he found a stud and then began the process. With four or five controlled blows, the cork was more than halfway out. From there, he easily removed it. Leonard smelled the cork and smiled.

“Let me smell.” Jamie tipped her head back.

Leonard held the cork in front of Jamie. She sniffed it, wrinkling her nose, nodding. “Smells good, Doc.” She then bit down on the cork and didn’t let go. Neither did Leonard. Jamie kept at it, trying to bite the cork in half, but Leonard was too strong. He soon pulled the cork from Jamie’s

gnawing teeth.

Leonard examined the cork. There was a wash of blood, some of which was also on his thumb. End of date, Leonard thought. Too bad it had to come so soon, with spilled blood no less. Leonard was not into biting. He pulled a lens cloth from his camera bag and sacrificed it to clean the blood from his thumb and from the cork.

“I’m sorry,” Jamie said. “I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

“It’s alright. You didn’t bite me,” Leonard said. “It must be your blood.”

“I bit my tongue, pretty hard. Can you look?”

“You want me to check your tongue?”

“Yes.” Jamie stood and held her mouth wide open.

Leonard was not able to see any blood, or much of anything at all. “It’s too dark.”

“Can you take a picture? Does that thing have a flash?”

Leonard was wondering if Jamie had any cavities, and what they might look like in a photo, because he hated the way fillings looked. Especially big, ugly fillings, like his mother’s.

“I have a flash in my bag.”

Leonard reached into his equipment bag and pulled out a large flash unit. It looked like something from the 1940s, like a giant lollipop. He attached it to the camera and pushed a button. The module came to life with a robotic whine. Jamie held her mouth open again and stuck out her tongue. Leonard focused and took a photo. The picture revealed nothing

unusual, and, to Leonard's relief, no visible fillings.

"Let's try another one," Jamie suggested. She held her mouth open again, with her tongue in another position. Leonard tripped the shutter and this time he could see where she had bitten herself. It was a fairly mild wound, but still bleeding.

"Let me see."

Leonard showed her the photo.

"Ah." Jamie removed her rabbit ears and sat down on the floor. Using one of the same tin cups, she poured out some wine and took a sip. She held the wine between her tongue and cheek, and it soothed the wound as much as it stung. Leonard sat down next to Jamie.

"This is fun!" Jamie let this burst from her subconscious, not because of the wine or the tranquilizer, but because the pain of the bite brought back a memory. She had bitten her tongue as a young girl on the day of her first piano lesson.

"Yes, this is fun." Leonard wasn't sure why he said that. In some sense it seemed natural to agree. But soon he corrected course. "I was concerned about your bare feet. It's too cold to go around like that. Common sense, really."

Jamie tested the continued effect of the tranquilizer against this statement.

"This is the dead of winter," Leonard continued. "In Bemidji. And we're on a frozen lake, at night. I think that speaks volumes about the appropriateness of proper footwear."

Jamie was going over his profile again in her mind. She didn't remember seeing asshole checked anywhere, but she planned to look again as soon as time allowed.

"No, wait," Leonard said through clenched teeth. "It's none of my business. Bare feet are a thing for me. It's an issue I have. Entirely personal." Leonard exhaled slowly.

"But it is quite cold," Jamie offered.

"Well, yes."

"So which is it?" Jamie asked. "Your personal shit, or my personal shit?"

Leonard would be checking her profile for any mention of personality disorders. It was possible he had missed something. With no other viable options, he decided to move on, for now.

"So, what's with the auger. Do you actually fish in here?"

A subject changer. Jamie noted this, feeling it was best to play along.

"No, it's too shallow to fish here. The auger's just for show."

"Sounds like fun."

Jamie raised an eyebrow, stood, and tiptoed behind Leonard to pick up the auger. She then kicked a thin, carpeted panel on the floor to one side revealing a patch of ice below. She placed the tip of the auger on the ice and began turning, cutting deftly through a few inches.

"It's a ten-incher, so a little slow going, but more bang for your buck if you know what I mean. Here, you try it." Jamie stepped aside and

offered the auger to Leonard.

“I’ve never augered.”

“Don’t worry, it’s easy once you get it cranking.”

Leonard set his camera on top of the cooler and took the auger from Jamie. He soon got the hang of it, and easily cut through what appeared to be a foot or so of ice. He pulled the auger up and leaned over to examine his work. When he did, the knife slipped from his pocket and began to fall. Leonard instinctively grasped at the air as if he were attempting to bare-hand a ground ball, but the knife fell right through and into the water. Leonard dropped to his knees as water splashed up hitting him in the eye. He wiped away the lake water and bit down on his own tongue to prevent himself from declaring that in no way, shape, or form was he crying. It was dark, but Jamie believed she could see ripples on the surface of the water in the shape of concentric hearts.

“This is horrible. My father gave me that knife when I was a scout.”

Jamie didn’t know what to do. She thought maybe a distraction was in order. “Take my picture, Leonard.”

Leonard looked over at Jamie. To his surprise, she had removed her sweater. Leonard picked up his camera and popped on the flash. Jamie knelt by the hole, held her face to the ice, and smiled up at him. Leonard worked to frame the shot. A storm of ATVs could be heard whizzing at some distance across the lake.

“Wait, I need the ears.”

“Maybe just one without them.”

“No, with.”

Jamie reached for the ears and put them back on. She then lay across the carpeting with her face just above the icy water. Leonard stood directly above her, focused the camera on her cheek, and took a picture. He looked at the photo and his neck throbbed when he realized the flash had penetrated the water. There appeared to be a reflection in the photo from something beneath the surface.

“Look at this.” Leonard showed Jamie the photo.

She sat up and noted that he had cut off the ears. Decisive moment, ruined.

Leonard waited.

Jamie didn't respond at first, but soon she saw past the problematic composition. “The knife!”

“How deep is the water here?”

“Maybe three feet.”

“Do you think I could reach it?”

“You could try.” Jamie took another sip of wine.

Leonard pulled off his jacket and began to unbutton his shirt. There were several tattoos, as advertised. Nothing obnoxious. A foamy beer mug on his forearm, a black cat on his tricep, and a broken heart on his chest. And his biceps were exactly as portrayed in his profile. But now it became apparent that he was not equally fit in the abdomen, chest, or shoulders. This was a disappointment, but one that could be remedied, Jamie believed, by daily trips together to the gym.

Once topless, Leonard shivered (a shiver which transmitted itself to Jamie's spine) and knelt beside the hole. Leonard imagined he'd have to be careful not to get cut, but first things first. He needed to be able to touch the bottom. He plunged his arm straight down into the water. The initial shock of the cold made him wish he had taken a gulp of wine first, but it was too late now. He lowered his shoulder toward the frigid surface. His fingertips brushed against a few wispy weeds, but he couldn't reach the bottom. He pulled his arm back up.

"Wow, that's quite a sensation." Leonard looked at his arm, and casually but suggestively flexed his bicep muscle.

Jamie hopped over to examine his arm, touching his bicep (too soon?), which was warmer and softer than she had anticipated.

"Let me try," Jamie said, retracting her hand. "I think I can reach."

"Are your arms longer than mine?" Leonard was sure they weren't, but he didn't want to extend any further judgments. He began to put his shirt back on. "I doubt it." This statement, he immediately realized, was indeed a type of judgment.

"Not with my arm. With my leg. I can pick up anything with my toes. Even a pocketknife. I bet I can reach it."

Leonard pulled his shirt back on and buttoned it up. Jamie watched, wondering if she should put her sweater back on at this point. There was no need to overthink things, she decided. She kicked off the slippers and looked at Leonard in earnest. "I'm going to take off my pants. No pictures."

Leonard didn't put the camera away, but he did replace the lens cap. Jamie thought about this for a moment, because, although she had asked him to bring the camera, and although she had removed her sweater voluntarily, she was now about to take off her pants and drop her bare leg into a hole in the ice to pick up an open pocketknife and this was no longer the Candlelight date she had envisioned. This was something else. Something for which no box could be checked or unchecked. It was a test of some kind. A test which either of them could fail at any moment, miserably. She took a deep breath, slipped her thumbs under the waistband of her pants, and began to pull them down.

"Stop," Leonard said. "Maybe I should turn around."

Jamie watched him intently. This was make or break stuff. This was rhetorical "Find Your Match on Candlelight or It's on Us" type of stuff. Would she ask him to turn around, or would she ask him not to? Would she give him the option? Was the ball in her court, or his? She wasn't sure. She felt time moving at the speed of a photograph. $1/125^{\text{th}}$ of a second passed. Then $1/60^{\text{th}}$ Then $1/30^{\text{th}}$. A different thought passed through her mind with every lengthening fraction of a second.

Finally, Leonard spoke: "I think I should go."

Again with the humor? Or maybe this was something else. "You mean go home? Why?"

"I don't understand why you would walk around barefoot in the middle of winter, that's why."

Jamie instantly ran out of tranquilizer. But with sobriety came

clarity, for she herself had been judging Leonard from the moment she had clicked on his bicep online, and for the most part she had been, and continued to be, wrong about him. He wasn't entirely perfect. He wasn't entirely fit. He smelled, probably. His nose was a little crooked. Perhaps he cheated at golf, or tipped poorly, or sang in the shower. She took a few extra seconds to think of what to say. Would she retaliate? Ask him to leave? Run inside for more tranquilizer? But then she thought ahead. She thought about how she had wanted the evening to end.

“No, Leonard. Let's not judge each other. Not right now. Let's just try to get your pocketknife back.”

Leonard was unsure about the idea, but the pocketknife was important to him. When Leonard was just nine-and-a-half, his father, who had been an auto collision repair specialist, died in a car wreck at the age of 40. (Leonard was certain that this was irony.) In all those nine-and-a-half years, his father had never judged him. His mother, on the other hand, had. For his birthday that year, his father had presented him with the pocketknife sealed inside a manila envelope on which the words “BE PREPARED” were carefully typed.

Leonard nodded once and said, “Yes, let's just try to get the knife back.”

“And you don't have to turn around if you don't want to.”

With quiet determination, Jamie resumed removing her pants, revealing a racy black thong with a small, gold letter J hovering dead center just below the lace trim. Jamie ran the tip of her middle finger over the J,

tracing it from bottom to top. This struck Leonard as curious. Did she iron that on? Was it embroidery? Silkscreen? She stood facing him, wearing only her underwear, bra, and the bunny ears. Her thin white legs appeared to dance in the flickering candlelight. Instinctively (perhaps too instinctively) Leonard reached for his camera. Jamie's eyes widened.

"I said no, fucking, pictures."

Leonard held his hand up in apology. He coiled his index finger and pinned it under his thumb like a trapped rattlesnake. He had recently photographed a woman's bare legs in his studio, at a photoshoot replete with bunny-fetish paraphernalia, and Jamie's legs had compelled him to repeat himself.

Jamie, having seen that same photo shoot in person from behind a pine tree outside the studio's north-facing window, had felt jealousy then. Now, in some sense, she felt vindication. She sat down next to the fishing hole with her left leg extended across the carpeting. She dipped her right foot into the water and immediately flinched.

"Freezing, I know," Leonard said. "Don't try to get used to it. Just go in all at once."

Jamie nodded and looked down, gathering herself. She thrust her leg in until her upper thigh swelled tight around the perimeter of the hole. The cold was so shocking she barely realized her foot was firmly planted on the lake bottom. "I'm there."

"Can you feel the knife?"

Supporting herself with her hands, Jamie bobbed her foot in an

ever-widening circle until she felt the sharp steel knife on the ball of her foot. “That’s it.”

Leonard scrunched his toes inside his boots. He could almost feel the blade himself as Jamie grasped at it.

“I need to concentrate.” Jamie closed her eyes. She felt the blade turn toward the webbing between her toes. Unable to free it, she winced in pain as it cut her skin.

Leonard panicked. He did not want any more blood. “Forget the knife.”

“No, Leonard. I can get it.”

Leonard considered pulling Jamie up physically. It was true he was no longer fit, but he was no milquetoast. He had once pulled a man over a bus seat by the necktie. But that kind of physical contact with Jamie was out of the question. He considered verbally demanding that she leave the knife where it was, but decided that it ultimately may have been his father’s verbal demands that had left his mother so world-worn and needy. Besides, his father would have wanted him to get the knife back. Leonard calmed himself and let Jamie work her foot around until she found the knife once more.

“I’ve got the handle this time.” Jamie adjusted the angle of her leg and began to pull her foot up. She lifted first her knee and then her calf out of the water. Finally, there between her toes, was the knife. She dropped it on the carpeting and shook her leg for several seconds, either to dry it off or to warm it up, Leonard couldn’t tell. But it was the sexiest thing he had seen

in years. He nearly said this out loud, but caught himself. He leaned down to pick up the knife.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Leonard.” Jamie examined the cut on her toe, which was long and, although not very deep, was bleeding slightly.

“You need direct pressure on that.” Leonard reached out with a lens cloth. “But maybe you should disinfect first. Let me carry you back to your house.”

Jamie imagined Leonard’s biceps flexing beneath her body as he carried her inside. She imagined guiding him to the upstairs bathroom, even though there was a downstairs bathroom, as an excuse to get him upstairs. (She kept her tranquilizer in the upstairs bathroom as well.) They would pass her baby grand piano on the way up, and she would drag her toes across the keys, leaving a faint trace of blood on the ivories, perhaps even striking a recognizable chord. Indeed, she was possibly about to experience being carried up the stairs of her house by someone other than her father for the first time in her life.

“No, Leonard, that’s not necessary. I think that’s nice, though. I would’ve liked being carried.”

Leonard stood impotently, envisioning his every move if only she had said yes. “You could change your mind. I could still carry you.”

“I’m fine. I can walk on my own.”

“I’m strong enough.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I saw you carrying your mother.”

Leonard dropped the knife again, on the floor this time. Here, Leonard might have become angry, or terrified. But instead he felt relief. Finally, someone knew.

In fact, Jamie had seen him carrying his mother from room to room and up and down the stairs by watching him through binoculars from behind an oak outside the living room windows of his mother’s house.

Leonard moved to pick up the knife, then stopped. “She has trouble, my mother. Her circulation. It’s bad.”

Jamie nodded.

“Her feet get so cold, especially in winter.” Leonard looked again at Jamie’s toe, which was dripping a bit of blood now. “And she’s a hemophiliac. She would bleed out from a cut like that.”

Jamie removed her rabbit ears. “Don’t you want to know how I saw you?”

Leonard didn’t answer. Instead, he imagined Jamie moving quickly through his mother’s wooded front yard, peering through the windows between the open curtains, watching him carry his mother from room to room whenever she asked. It was enough for Leonard to imagine this voyeurism. He didn’t want to hear about it directly from Jamie.

Leonard bent down and picked up the knife. He held it up to examine the blade, then wiped it dry on his shirt, drawing it several times across his left bicep. Finally, he folded it closed and once again slid it into

his shirt pocket.

“I don’t mind so much,” he said. “It’s just that I wouldn’t want my mother to know.”

Jamie bowed her head in agreement. “It’s good that you take care of her.”

“It’s not easy.”

“I know it’s not. And I know you sleep in that little bed in the basement.” She glanced back at her own house. “Your mother was my piano teacher when I was a kid. Did you know that?”

Leonard drew a quick breath. “Oh my God, I remember you! You were the homeschooling victim. Right?”

“It didn’t start out that way, but after my father died, my mother kept me at home. Except for the piano lessons and church, she was afraid to let me leave the house.”

“I know the feeling,” Leonard said. “I’ve actually never lived alone myself. I mean, sure, I moved to Duluth when I was in college, but even then I had roommates. I graduated early, then moved right back in with my mother.”

“Dead,” Jamie said. “I mean, my mother’s dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Leonard said. And he believed he was.

“It’s okay,” Jamie said. And she believed it was. Solemnly she placed the rabbit ears back on her head and looked down at her bare feet. “Did you at least enjoy the candlelight?”

“Yes. I meant to say something. I should have.” Leonard took a

half step toward Jamie, then retreated by the same amount. “It was a nice touch.”

“Thank you.” Jamie adjusted her bra strap. “If you want, you can take my picture now.”

Leonard reached for his camera and didn’t hesitate this time. In one fluid movement, he took the knife from his pocket, opened it, and set it next to Jamie’s bare foot. He knelt down and focused on the drop of blood collecting between her frigid toes. Relieved to see the blood coagulating, he held his breath and took a picture.

Jamie worked her toes over the knife and grasped it by the handle once more. She looked at the hole in the ice and then back at Leonard. He nodded as if agreeing to a long-term secret. Jamie raised her hands to her armpits, bent her wrists forward, and pulled her lower lip under her front teeth. With the knife held tight in one foot, she hopped toward the hole on the other. As she held the knife above the water, a drop of blood fell. Leonard stepped back, raised his camera, and framed another picture. Jamie scrunched her nose, closed her eyes, and let the knife go.