

Reinforcements

The dressing room was small, four by four at the most, but Tony asked Eileen to come in with him. They had been married long enough to know how to get around one another in tight, airless spaces—they shared a bathroom, a double bed, the memory of his early-on affair, the death of a child. Though they were both oversized and middle-aged, in there they moved with the grace of dancers, each anticipating, then compensating for, the actions of the other.

Eileen heard a faint tapping sound coming from above. The room was lit by plexiglass panels embedded in the dropped ceiling. The noise was coming from the panel closest to their heads.

“What the hell is that?” she asked.

He looked up, shrugged, then looked back in the mirror. He held out his arms like an emcee introducing himself: “What the hell is *this*?”

Half-opened packages of man girdles and “compression briefs,” as they were called, lay strewn about his ankles. Lycra tank shirts and tees hung halfway on hangers, embarrassed to be there. She pinched the flesh-toned fabric under his armpit. Her thoughts went to a time, thirty years before, when she had watched him take off his skin-tight football jersey. The surprise she’d felt seeing that the bumps and ridges beneath weren’t his muscles, but a system of rubbery pads. She opened her hand, and the sound of the shirt snapping back startled them both.

“I wish it were bigger,” he said.

“It’s plenty big, see?”

“When I suck it in. But what about pictures?”

She patted the flat space under his ribs, just above his belly. She could feel a headache coming on, a side effect from weeks on a no-carb, no sweets diet. “It’s supposed to take two

inches off your middle. You've got room."

Their daughter was getting married. A destination wedding, an island four hours away by plane. It bothered Eileen to fly. She hated the stale, flat Cokes and the false hopes that came with the fresh air controls. She resented the anonymity that came with being lumped in with the other passengers. All of them shuffling aboard like doomed members of a cult, clutching their carry-ons and a collective faith in the voice coming from the other side of the cockpit.

The tapping sound above their heads grew louder and merged with the throbbing between Eileen's temples. Something was making a break for it, from the inside out. She looked up and saw something moving – skidding? – along the opaque plastic. She imagined a cockroach, or maybe a small bird, tap dancing across a sheet of ice.

"Jesus, look at this." He reached across his stomach and poked at a roll of rebellious flesh above his belt. "You think I should go through with it?"

Eileen remembered standing at the back of the church at her own wedding. She had stared straight ahead, digging her nails into her father's arm, wishing for him to yank her in the opposite direction—not so much away from the man waiting at the end of the aisle, but away from the still-unnamed but inevitable calamities that she knew waited for them in adulthood. Now, with their remaining daughter grown and going off, Eileen thought maybe they should try to cheat whatever it was that was coming for them in old age. If she could leave now, let him have a real mid-life crisis without the guilt, give them both space to unfurl the grief that had been coiled inside of them for so long, maybe they could postpone the descent.

"I need to dance. I need to be able to dance," Tony said, curving his left hand around the air, and holding up his right palm to meet an invisible partner. He closed his eyes to some imaginary music, bit his lip and swayed, his hips knocking into Eileen's. Then he stopped and

grabbed his gut. “The father-daughter dance, I can’t screw it up.”

Eileen looked at her husband, felt how desperate he was to get this right, imagined the heat of his trembling hands as he reached to hold their daughter tight one last time. She did not know how she would feel then, after any of it, but for now, in this tiny room, in this small moment, with God knows what moving around above them and inside them, she felt certain that there was nothing they could not do.

She kissed him on the mouth, harder than she had in a long time, then raised his arms over his head and began the slow process of pulling off the shirt.