

THE NEW STORE

She wasn't sure why she'd looked into the store window. She knew that the old building was undergoing yet another transformation and that some sort of new store was going into it but she'd not paid much attention before today. But after David had turned her entire world on its head she'd found herself doing all kinds of strange things. Staring into the window of this old building to which she'd previously been oblivious was just one of them.

It was as if David had struck an actual physical blow that had made her head spin, but that would have actually been better. She'd seen him lose his temper and a thoughtless flailing about that had struck her a glancing blow would have been easier to take than what he'd told her. She should have known about Allyson. She was so naïve, so insulated from life it seemed sometimes. He hadn't said why this matter freighted with so much emotion—the fact that he loved Allyson and was going to move in with her—had to be disclosed to her while they were stopped at a traffic light in the midst of a series of joint errands, but the effect of his oafish timing had been her explosion from the car and racing off before the light changed.

As she ran down the street she wondered if she had been blind or if he'd changed. Had Allyson been the reason he'd largely stopped reading her manuscripts lately? And, when he did read them, had been perfunctory and disengaged in his comments, unlike in

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the past when he'd emoted about the things he'd liked and gently let her down on the ones he hadn't? Had it been Allyson who'd done that, that vile and predatory woman? No, no, that was wrong. Allyson wasn't vile or predatory. She'd been to the house when they'd entertained. She was soft-spoken, decent, attractive. Why hadn't she noticed how he'd looked at her? Not like, she now thought, a man would look at a co-worker and friend but as man would look at a lover. The worst thing about it was that Allyson and David were so normal. It wasn't just free-thinking libertines who had affairs and tricked their spouses, not just the people in books and on the screen. No, it was normal middle-class people. And normal people doing such things them made them normal. This realization, long sublimated beneath careful layers of imagined domestic tranquility, had suddenly reared up to frighten her.

Now, standing before the window and staring in unseeing, she wondered what people had thought as she'd run past the familiar Starbucks and Staples and Walgreens and that last bastion of mom-and-pop shops amidst the welter of franchises, Jonas Fischer's bakery, run as if she were being chased by some fearful specter. Did they think she was in the throes of some drug-induced hallucination? Or that she was some crazed homeless person? No, not that. The homeless didn't tend to run about manically; they meandered mumbling at the affronts the world had heaped upon them. A jogger, perhaps? No, not that either. Joggers were purposeful and serene, inwardly focused, inhabiting some beatific world of health emanating from them like sound waves from a tuning fork. Not distracted and aimless like her. Clearly, the jogger who'd seen her running at him hadn't taken her for a kindred spirit. Rather, he'd given her wide berth, leaving the whole sidewalk to her as he'd moved into the street. Nor had the delivery boy

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on the bicycle she'd thoughtlessly aimed herself toward like some sort of human projectile causing him to swerve and nearly fall over. But it was the young couple holding hands and wandering up the walk, oblivious until she was nearly upon them, that finally got her full attention and slowed her down. Poor fool, she thought, of the wide-eyed girl. Years from now he'll make clear to you that all the time you've spent together has been over a chasm and that only the thin fabric of lies and illusion kept you from falling in.

What she saw in the window at first appeared to be nothing special. It appeared that the building was being renovated to be a department store because the space behind the window was full of mannequins, each dressed in the colors and styles the arbiters of fashion had decreed would prevail for the next season. But as she looked at them, it suddenly occurred to her that these mannequins were unlike any she'd ever seen. They almost seemed to breathe, each to have his or her own story. To the far left a man was bent over a woman stretched out on a chaise lounge, his ear close to her lips. One of his hands was placed delicately on her shoulder, the other on his hip with each finger slightly spread over the khaki fabric of his slacks. His look was one of extreme happiness and her smile was delicious. At the other end of the window, a man was seated in a folding chair reading a book. The book was not spread in his lap, but held up before his eyes. He scarcely seemed to notice the woman approaching with a tray holding two cups and a teapot. But while he feigned inattention, it was clear that he was really watching her even though he didn't want her to notice. But she did notice. You could tell. Her stride was confident and lithe, filled with assurance that his reading was a ruse and that she was in fact the center of his attention.

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But in the middle of the window stood the mannequin that held her attention. Here was a woman whose presence so dominated the window that, as impressive as the other figures were, it was difficult to look at anything else once you focused on her. She wasn't beautiful, nor was she dressed in eye-catching clothes, nor was she in the midst of any engaging activity. She was, in fact, doing nothing. That was the wonder of it. She dominated despite being part of no provocative tableau. She was merely standing there, gazing out from behind the window with an intensity and concentration that was riveting. The other mannequins' eyes were incredibly lifelike, but hers burned into your soul. You felt, even as you knew the complete and irrevocable foolishness of it, that this woman—this mannequin for goodness sake!—knew you and what you had experienced. Everything that had befallen you she had endured. And she understood.

She backed away from the window, feeling simultaneously foolish and deeply affected. This was madness. She looked down and shook her head, then took a tissue from her purse and dried her eyes and blew her nose. When she looked up again a slight man had inserted himself between the mannequin and the glass and was peering at her intently. He wore gold corduroy pants and a blue-and-gold tattersall shirt with a fat-knotted wool challis tie. She thought he looked like a gnome. But then, given her vocation as a writer of children's books, many diminutive men tended to look like gnomes to her. His merriness increased the illusion, for he was laughing, no doubt at her startled reaction to him as she'd looked up. Gnomes were always merry, you see, at least in her books. Unlike trolls who were invariably cross. He gestured toward the door to the right of the window, inviting her to enter.

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“Are you all right?” he asked as he met her at the door. She supposed she looked frazzled. How far had she run anyway? She nodded. “You were looking at my people.” His tone was that of a proud parent. When she didn’t respond, he said, quietly and without enthusiasm, almost with distaste, “My mannequins.”

“Oh, yes. Wherever did you get them?”

“Get them? Why I make them myself of course.”

“They’re remarkable. So lifelike.”

“I won’t let H & W buy the mass-produced figures that you see in other establishments.” He extended his hand. “Linus Fischer.”

She put her hand in his and he pressed it gently.

“Alice Sawyer. What is H & W?”

“What is—? Well, my goodness. H & W is Halberd & Wimple. Merely the most distinguished, the most exclusive, the most selective store in the world. Surely you’ve heard of it. You’re a born H & W customer. I can tell by the way you reacted to my people in the window.”

“I’d not noticed your window before.”

“Probably because it hasn’t been here. Halberd & Wimple just selected this location for one of its new stores very recently. Renovation of this old building has only been underway for a relatively short time. I just started work on the window six days ago. You may be the first to have seen it complete. It’s a great compliment to your community that H & W decided to open a store here.”

She looked out over the interior of the store to see what sort of place this H & W would be. The space was relatively small, and what there was of it consisted of covered

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display cases, empty clothing racks, bare shelving, and uninhabited checkout carrels. No workmen were putting the finishing touches to anything. No foremen or supervisors were hovering over work yet to be completed prior to a grand opening. No one was stocking shelves with merchandise or filling racks with clothes. The place was empty and anonymous, as bereft of clues to its ultimate purpose or specialty as an empty warehouse.

“When will the store be opening?” she asked.

“I have no idea. Management can be very fickle about that. We could be very near opening, or it could be weeks or months.”

“But, surely, if you’ve finished creating the window, the store must be near opening?”

“Yes, that would be logical. But H & W is not logical. Sometimes I think its operations surpass all understanding. Management often dispatches me to equip display windows long before they have any intention of opening. Why, in Lakeland I had windows fully furnished with some of my very most captivating people for nearly seven months before the store opened. In East Kensington it was over a year. Sometimes I simply lose track of how long it takes. And, you know, sometimes H & W never opens.”

“Never opens! Why on earth not? After all the work?”

He shrugged.

“Management doesn’t always explain. Their ways can be very mysterious. I think it’s because of insufficient emotional engagement with the clientele.”

“But how would they know, if they haven’t opened?”

“They know.”

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Surely, she thought, this Linus Fischer was an extreme eccentric if not slightly mad. But he was neither so eccentric nor so mad that, when he asked if she'd like to have a cup of tea, she was inclined to refuse. To the contrary, she thought, how droll would it be for Alice to have a cup of tea with the mad hatter?

She followed him into a small room at the rear of the store. "Employee kitchen," he said, as he placed a copper tea pot on the burner of a stove. "H & W are very thoughtful employers."

"Have you been with them long?"

"Forever. I can't remember when I wasn't with them or what I was doing then."

She took a seat at a small table as he poured the hot water into her cup. She watched the spirals of brown float out from the tea bag into the water to form arabesques. She almost didn't hear him say, "So you've had a great shock recently."

"How on earth . . . ? I mean, well . . . how did you know?"

"By the way you looked at the one I call Anna. She embodies the sorrows of the world."

"You mean the mannequin?"

"I mean Anna, my sorrowful one."

"But she isn't real."

He looked at her as if she'd said something inexplicably strange if not outright insulting.

"Is it the real that comforts us, that gives us solace? I submit to you that it is precisely the opposite."

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Well, he had a point there. But nonetheless, as soon as she finished her tea she resolved to leave this strange place and this small, mad man. His world was not a healthy one, she feared.

“H & W,” he was saying, “specialize in those things that comfort us, in those things that people actually need, not just want.”

“However would they know? What we want, I mean.”

“Emotional engagement with the clientele. H & W insist on that. If we don’t have it, we close! We’re gone as if we never were. You know, there are communities like that. H & W was there, briefly, but has been gone so long it’s barely remembered, if at all. Or, as I’ve said, we simply never open. Do you know the difference between closing after having opened and just never opening?”

She shook her head.

“Ah,” he said sadly, “it’s important to know that. Very important.”

“Look,” she said, “I must be going.”

“I’m sorry. Before you go, what would you most want to be stocked in the new store? Management will want to know.”

This was getting so silly that she gave a silly response.

“A new man, I guess. My old one has grown tired of me.”

“Ah, so that’s it, that is the sorrow you share with Anna. Come to the store when it opens. You will find what you need, what you really need. I have seen it over and over. Emotional engagement with the clientele. That’s the ticket! We will not come to a community where we cannot make a difference. But,” he said pausing, suddenly looking at her with a new seriousness, “you must believe in us. You do, don’t you?”

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“I don’t quite know what I believe these days,” she said.

“Ah,” he said, “ah . . .”

She caught a cab home. “Ever hear of Halberd & Wimple?” she asked the driver.

“No, lady, but it sounds like that damned law firm that my ex-wife hired that screwed me out of a lot of money.”

Stepping out of the cab in front of the house, she was suddenly worried that David would be there. The last thing she wanted was to see him now. But she had no reason to be concerned. He’d been there but had gone and left a note on the kitchen table.

Dear Alice,

I’m sorry things have worked out like this, but it is for the best. There is simply no emotional engagement between us anymore. I do still feel real fondness for you, but I adore Allyson and find myself thinking about her every moment. Obviously, I couldn’t go on like this. I know it wasn’t fair or considerate to bring this up in the car this morning, but this has been endlessly on my mind that I just blurted everything out without thinking. Frankly, I can’t imagine that my feelings could have been any surprise to you. I haven’t been able to conceal my love for Allyson. Anyway, I’m sorry to have been so obtuse.

I’ve taken a few personal things and will be back in touch about coming back to get the rest. There are a few other things in the house I may want, and we can talk about that, but I’m happy for you to keep most everything and the house.

-- David

Why had he referred to her as “dear Alice”? Obviously, she was very far from “dear” to him. She knew it was just an accepted protocol in a letter or note, but it still seemed horribly wrong now, as glaring as “your most humble and obedient servant” or some other startling anachronism. And why had she only just thought about the fact that

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he was leaving her for *Allyson*? Their names were so similar, yet hers suddenly seemed inordinately drab to her, uninteresting, a plain brown dress of a name, while Allyson was a skin-tight red chemise. It was a name of a princess, a magical woman who floated above the mundane like a Chagall figure and whose every glance and touch inspired adoration and awe. An Allyson could be above things; an Alice was just mired in them.

She went upstairs to their bedroom. The copy of *Anna Karenina* that she'd been reading was there on her bedside table. She thought she should probably look for something more cheerful now. On David's side he'd apparently forgotten the medieval history he'd been reading, the one that so intrigued him that he would interrupt her reading at night with tidbits about medieval armaments or apparel that she barely heard. The comics section of the newspaper was still there too in the middle of the bed where David had left it after reading to her the *Peanuts* comic strip for the day and laughing. Everything had seemed so normal that morning, so dense with reassuring routine that it was impossible to think it as fragile as it had turned out to be. It was good that we felt this way, she thought, believed and took comfort in this illusion of the durability of things, of the substantiality of everyday life.

She cleared away the newspaper and stretched out on the bed. It was early afternoon, with the sun shining brightly through the window. As she lay there, Anna came to her, Anna with her wide imploring eyes and her nimbus of quiet pain, and Linus Fischer, moving about in the display window of Halberd & Wimple, a store waiting to open to clientele who would crowd its aisles to acquire only the things they really needed.

When she awoke it was early evening. She decided that she would treat herself to dinner at a nice restaurant. On the way she walked by the window of the old building

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that was being renovated for a new department store. She paused to look through the glass of the display window into the interior, mildly curious about how close the store was to opening. It would be dark soon and she would be able to see nothing. Now, however, she could still make out pieces of mannequins where they were piled, torsos here, arms and legs there, dismembered bodies strewn about in chaotic disarray as if after a random explosion. And in the dim background there was something, wasn't there, dimly visible, barely stirring, a small but vital figure who could create order from chaos? He was there, wasn't he?