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Michael stood in front of the wall of windows in the terminal. He gazed out across the bustling tarmac of the small regional airfield. In the nearby foothills, thick plumes of black and bilious yellow smoke billowed up into the August sky, choking out the sunlight. The wildfires were close, and advancing quickly.

"Could have been avoided," he muttered to himself. "All of this."

But the twinge of resignation in his voice said maybe he wasn't so sure about that. He glanced at his watch. He looked back out the window, and shook his head. He let out a long sigh.

"Nature," he said, softly.

He walked back over to the blue sun-faded Naugahyde chairs. He braced his weight against the worn armrest, and sat down next to Cindy. She was typing something in her phone. She quickly set it down in her lap.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well what?" replied Michael. He stretched his arms and neck backwards over his head, yawning.

"What else could I be referring to?" said Cindy, gesturing indiscriminately with her right arm in the direction of the window. "The plane, dude."

"Uh, yeah. That. The connection to SF is still delayed," he said. "I swear it's every damn time with that airport. I really don't know why I keep trying."

"Unbelievable," she said. "That kind of makes it worse, actually. You knew. You knew, and still you put us through there."

"But—," Michael began, only to be cut off by Cindy.

"If you make me miss this trip," she said, glaring at him. "I don't know what I might do." Her blue-green eyes were burning. Around them, crow's feet cracked. Her slender face was dainty and feminine, yet chiseled. Her fair skin wore the wear of a woman ten years older than her thirty-six.

"Oh, give me a break," Michael shot back, staring at her sternly. His intense brown eyes gave off the impression he was angry, even when he was not. "If it weren't for me we wouldn't even be sitting here right now."

"Yeah, you can say that again," said Cindy, rolling her eyes. She looked off in the opposite direction at nothing in particular.

"Hey look," Michael said, collecting himself. His voice had a tendency to go up an octave when he was upset. As though he were holding something in. "I did this for you. You know that. I wanted to do something nice. And now we're headed south to Texas to see your friends," he continued. Cindy turned and looked at him. "I thought I was doing a good thing here."

"Well, it was," Cindy said. With the emphasis on the word *was*.

"What, now it's not?" asked Michael.

"What I mean, Michael. What I mean is that—," she paused for a moment. "I think that you think you spending money on me makes you a man. Or something."

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"Excuse me? Where is that coming from?" Michael said. "I've never once said that. Or even thought that."

"Well, it doesn't," Cindy said, unzipping the storage pockets in her back pack. She rummaged around in them.

The public address system droned on in the background: *Would a Mr. Carl Falconer please report to gate A-37. Your flight is about to depart.* This was the third time in the past five minutes. Michael wondered who this Carl Falconer was. What he looked like. Wondered where he could be going. And then he imagined that he was him. That it was he who was standing there, well-dressed, at gate A-37. Holding a black leather attaché, waiting in line to board. Alone.

"Hey! Hellllooo?" Cindy said to Michael, waving a hand in front of his face. "Have you seen my phone charger? I can't find it anywhere. My phone's about to die."

"Why are you asking me? How should I know where it is?" Michael said.

"You were in such a hot rush to get us out the door this morning", she said. "You know that I don't like feeling rushed. It makes me panicky. And when I get panicky, I forget things. So now I can't remember if I packed my charger or not. Jesus Christ. It was still dark outside." She gestured towards the window again. "And, oh, look, the plane is still not here."

"So...do you want me to help you look?" he said, flatly.

"Wow, don't get too enthusiastic, buddy. You might hurt yourself." Cindy said.

"Just give me the bag," Michael said, motioning to her carry-on luggage.

"It's not in that one," she said.

"You sure about that?" he asked.

"Yes. God. I always put my personal things for the plane in my back pack," replied Cindy. "I do it every time."

"Well, I'm gonna look anyways. It can't hurt anything," Michael said. He was about to start unzipping the storage compartment when she stopped him.

"I told you, it's not in there," Cindy said. "You never listen to me."

"So you're positive it's not in there?" he asked her, again.

"Yes. What the hell. So now not only do you not listen, but you also don't trust me," she said. "Really racking up the points here."

"What, are you afraid of me opening that thing up?" he joked. "What's gonna happen? Is your shit going to spill out all over the place?" he smirked.

"No, jerk. I think I know how to pack a suitcase, thank you very much. I'm very orderly," Cindy said. She pushed her tousled unshowered reddish-brown hair out of her eyes again. It had been flopping in them all day long. She grabbed a scrunchie from out of her backpack, and quickly tied her hair up off of her face. "And it's not shit," she said.

"So, we're just going to sit here forever not knowing whether you have your charger or not, because you're too proud to let me open your suitcase?" Michael asked. "Nice one. Real nice."

"No. Because you're gonna go buy one for me," Cindy said.

"Come again?" Michael said.

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“Yes,” she said. “Because it’s my friends who are letting us stay with them. For free. So I’d say you can more than afford to go buy me a stupid little phone charger so I can text them that we’re running late.”

“Wow. Just wow,” he said. “I thought a minute ago you said—,” but he stopped himself. “Ok. Ok, fine. Whatever,” he said. He stood up from his seat. “Yeah, that really makes a lot of sense,” he muttered as he turned and began to walk away.

The last time it happened, Michael swore to himself he’d never let it happen again. He walked towards the opposite end of the terminal to where the bookshop and convenience store was, and he felt that familiar pain in his abdomen return. A burning knot. Like a clenched fist. It was never not there these days. And it reminded him of something his therapist used to tell him. June was her name. June Bowen. It was during the year before he and Cindy met. She was tall and lithe, in her fifties, with high cheekbones and dark brown eyes. And a bob haircut dyed jet black. He’d go for a session here and there.

He usually didn’t remember what they had talked about. One time he did. *Where do you feel it in your body?* he recalled June asking him. He said when it would come it would make him nauseous. The tension. How when it did he would swallow it down to try to make it go away. He remembered her telling him about boundaries. And how in that thing he would swallow there was a voice.

Michael leafed blankly through the magazines. He had brought a book. O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. A marked-up paperback edition with an old library stamp on the inside page. Elkhart, Indiana. Now, though, he needed something easy. His eyes stopped at the cover of the latest show-biz glossy. Linda Hamilton’s face.

“Another Terminator?” he said, under his breath. “Enough is enough already. What is that, four?”

He looked upward to the left and furrowed his brow for a moment. As though he were considering something. He stepped away from the periodicals and found the electronics shelves.

“This looks like hers. Wait. Or is it this one?” he said, audibly, and put the charger on the counter. “Fuck it. I’m sure it’ll be fine, right?” he said to the cashier. Her shrugged shoulders said *I don’t know your life, buddy. And I don’t care to*. Michael added a Baby Ruth to the tally, and paid. He ripped open the candy bar, chewing it quickly as he walked back.

Cindy’s fingers typed furiously on her phone.

“can’t wait either babe. gonna be realll. woot!!”

“Ugh not so good”

“ugh too much for here fill u in when I see u”

“welllll yeahh it was. I was”

“I thought he was. I mean he said he was. he said a lot of of things tho”

“so disappointed in myself”

“no actually it really is that bad”

“worst thing poss”

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“guess”
“worse”
“nope”
“yup. again. fuck. fuck my life”
“it makes me feel like running thats what”

She chewed the inside of her cheek.

“idk idk idk”
“oh you bet your ass I’m gonna make him”
“he said he would but whatever I can do it myself”
“he better not leave like the last ones did”
“exactly fuck them their all little boys anyway”
“no he’s at the store”
“he fukn better”
“I mean it’s like wtf youre a man youre supposed to be on that shit but no your just a boy”
“yeah he should have but he didn’t”
“damn right it’s his fault”
“hell yeah I’m pissed”
“oh god idk what to do I’m freakin out hard. I wanna barf”
“idk. I do. at least I think I still do”
“I think so. I mean I want there to be anyway”
“Oh god I need him”
“fuck fuck dammit!”
“oh god do I need one right now. were gonna get so drunk babe haha”
“shit K he’s coming back ttyl xo”

Michael loped up to Cindy across the blue-flecked carpet. He walked just like her father used to. Shoulders and head slightly forward. A little fey, half-present at times. But so smart. Maybe that’s what it was. When she was ten, Dad taught her how to change the oil on the car. He was always working on cars in the yard. He was also always drinking. Maybe it was because Mom used to walk all over him. She’d meet guys out at the bar while he was passed out on the couch. She’d berate him, cuss him out all the time. Told him she did it because he wasn’t a man. Told him if he couldn’t, she’d find someone who could. Maybe that’s what made him do it.

“Took long enough,” Cindy said. She put her hand out. Michael lay the charger in her hand. She tried a few times, from differing angles, to open the plastic packaging, and then exhaled in disgust.

“Here, you do it,” she told Michael. “Show me what you got.”

After a brief fumbling, he was able to pry two fingers in between the layers of plastic. Using them like forceps, he pulled the plastic apart. Out popped the charger onto his lap. Cindy held it up, examining it briefly.

“Hmmm, you sure this is the right one?” she asked him.

“Yep,” came the reply.

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Cindy plugged the charger into the outlet on her chair's armrest. She tried to fit the tip of the charger into her phone's port. It wouldn't fit. She tried again. She then turned to Michael, shaking her head in disbelief.

"It's not compatible. It took you an hour to decide to buy the wrong one?" He had only been gone twenty minutes. "I swear, it's things like this..." she trailed off.

"It said it was a universal charger," Michael said.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean it fits every phone," said Cindy.

"What? Seriously? That's the definition of the word," he said, incredulously.

"Ok, Mr. I-went-to-college-but-I-still-can't-read-packaging," she quipped.

"Well, maybe if you didn't buy your off-brand phone at Dollar Tree we wouldn't be having this problem," said Michael.

"Hold that over my head more, you asshole," Cindy said. "I can't afford to be all fancy pants over there like you are with your iPhone 27 or whatever. Besides, that shit's a scam, anyways. You know they're tracking you, right?"

Michael didn't bother to answer. Or even react. This was a lit cigarette flicked into a dry forest.

"Wherrre's the plane?" Cindy shrieked. Some people nearby looked over at them. "Where's the plane, Michael?"

As if I were the Carl Falconer of the FAA, Michael thought. Bestowed with the magical ability to make 737's alight on my forearm. He closed his eyes for a split second, and then exhaled. He rose, and without saying anything, strode over to the nearest attended gate counter. A few minutes later, he returned.

"Two more hours," he said. "Let's go get a coffee."

"Fine," said Cindy, reluctantly, still simmering.

They stood next to their bags in front of the elevator. The café was one floor up. The button for 2 was illuminated with its orange ring, but nothing was happening. There was no activity from the elevator. Michael pressed 2 again. Silence. They waited, staring ahead at the closed elevator doors. He pressed the button a third time. Nothing. Cindy exhaled heavily. Michael could feel it. The sudden urge to swallow again.

"Let's take the stairs," Michael said.

"No shit," said Cindy, under her breath.

Michael started up the first few steps. "Ahem," said Cindy, standing at the bottom of the stairs.

Michael stopped and turned. "Oh right," he said. "I was going to."

"Bullshit. No you weren't. You were already halfway up the stairs," she said. Michael walked back down the three steps to where she was.

"When we first met, you went on and on about how old-fashioned you were. You said you were a 'real man'," she said, making air quotes with her fingers. "You said you were different. And yet here I am, reminding you to carry my bag up a flight of stairs," Cindy went on, rolling her eyes again.

It's not that he didn't intend to. It just happened. Some things just do. He slung his backpack over his left shoulder, and picked up his luggage with his left hand. He knelt slightly and picked up Cindy's suitcase with his right. He started back up a couple of steps, but quickly set her bag down with a thud.

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"Jesus, what do you have in this thing, anyways, bowling balls?" Michael said. "It weighs a freaking ton."

"It's just my clothes and stuff. Rolled up super tight. Is that a problem for you, Mr. Man?" Cindy cracked.

"Ok, first of all, you know damn well I have tendonitis in my arm from work. So yeah, it hurts to lift things," he said. "And secondly, cut the crap with the 'man' comments." Sometimes when he spoke, Michael had a habit of looking off into the distance. As if the words were somewhere out there over the horizon. Waiting to be found.

"I want my man to be a man. That's all," Cindy said.

"Well that's sort of a double-standard, now isn't it?" Michael replied.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I mean...", he looked away again. Cindy glared at him. "Ok. You're feminist, right? Cool. I've got no problem with that at all. I agree with it. In fact, I like that about you," he continued. "According to that, a woman can be anything she wants to be, and is capable of anything. So it's wrong to pigeonhole a woman into any sort of set role, right?" Michael said. "Because that would be chauvinist, or whatever. And dumb, frankly."

"Where are you going with this?" Cindy said, shaking her head.

"If it holds true for women, then it should be the same for men. A man can be many things, too, Cin. The Marlboro Man version of manhood is complete bullshit. It's an idealization, not reality. I know you know that. We're all humans. I'm human. And I contain the entire spectrum of human experience inside me. Just the same as you. At least be honest with yourself, and grant the same standards you hold for women to men, too." He felt the knot in his stomach starting to untie itself.

"Fuck you," said Cindy, clenching her jaw.

"See, why does this piss you off so much? It shouldn't." said Michael. "You just wanna have your cake and eat it, too."

"No. Like I said, I want my man to be a man," she said. "There still needs to be polarity. It's not hard. You're forty-two years old, and yet I still have to tell you things that you should know how to do without me telling you," she continued. "It's shit like that."

"Oh yeah, like what, the bag?" he said. "I was in the middle of thinking about something."

"Yeah, spacing out again. Just like you always do. Ok, yeah, it's the bag. But it's not just that, Michael," Cindy said. "I need my man, YOU, to make me feel a certain way." She jabbed her finger into his sternum.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Uh, I think you know what I mean," said Cindy. "I can't tell you how to do everything. You're the man. You should just know."

"What, a man has to know everything? Everything in existence? The minute he comes out of the womb?" said Michael. "People can learn, you know. Where's your patience?"

"It died, is where it is. It died two months ago that weekend in Greenvale. You know full well it did," Cindy said. "It hasn't been the same since. How many times do I have to say it to you?"

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“Oh wow. Ok. Two can play at that. Well, I thought I was getting a sweet, considerate girlfriend,” Michael said. “And instead, I get a childish narcissist who’d rather flirt and drink with her old guy friends at the bar ten feet away while I lie in a booth with heat stroke.”

“Oh God, you were fine. Don’t be so melodramatic, you little baby,” Cindy scoffed.

“And how would you know, huh?” Michael said. “You didn’t once come to see how I was the entire time. Even Linda did. But not you.”

“See, this, this right here, proves my point. You’re way too needy and insecure. It isn’t manly at all.” Cindy said. “Everything was fine, dude. We had sex five times that day, for Christ sake!” she fumed. “And it wasn’t flirting.”

Michael swallowed. “So do you want the coffee or not?” he asked.

“Screw the coffee,” Cindy said. “Go get me some food. Do what you said you would do for once, and go take care of me. It’s the least you could do.”

“Oh yeah, great. Act like this is all my fault. Blame it all on me,” Michael said, shaking his head. “Hey, if you want be an empowered woman, you have to walk the walk and take some responsibility, too. How does blaming me for everything empower you?” He grabbed his bag, and started walking back toward the seats.

“Because it does,” she said, carrying her suitcase. “Because it *is* all your fault. You’re the man, and you should have known better. You know what the sexiest thing a man can do is? Putting on a damn condom, that’s what.”

“It takes two,” he said, looking at her. “So what do you want to eat, anyways?” he asked.

“Ugh. I don’t care. Make a decision for once in your life,” said Cindy. “Stop deferring to me for everything. Jeeeesus.” She threw her backpack and suitcase to the floor, and sat down.

“I’m not deferring to you. I’m trying to be polite,” he said. He put his bags on a seat.

“Polite? Ha. Maybe you should have thought of that a month ago,” she said.

“I can’t win,” said Michael, throwing his hands wildly up into the air. “I’m going to get food, and whatever I come back with is what you get.”

“Sure, suit yourself,” said Cindy.

It wasn’t always this bad, Michael said to himself. He walked the entire length of the main concourse, again. He thought back to the night he and Cindy first met. The smoldering eyes that drew him to her. Her red hair braided to one side, laying over her shoulder. Her giggle. Her electric smile that he had felt all the way down to his toes. He remembered the way her butt looked in her jeans. A perfect little upside-down apple. And her petite frame, which made him feel like protecting her more than anyone he’d ever known. He recalled feeling as if a fire were lit and welling up inside of him, and feeling that night that everything he wanted to do with his life, everything he had planned, was about to change. And that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

They would talk on the phone daily, and meet up every few days to be together for a couple of days. And by together, inseparable. In bed, and otherwise. He would tell her corny jokes. He liked making her laugh. *Why did the scarecrow win*

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a medal? And others of that ilk. After about three weeks, they were talking on the phone one afternoon, and he said something offhand about love. How he didn't like to say it right away. He said it was a loaded word, and wanted to respect it by not saying it until he really felt it. Because once you say it, there's no going back. And he remembered hearing silence on her end of the line. And then sobbing.

"I thought we were on the same page," she cried. He remembered feeling bad. So he told her, "We are, babe, we are. It's ok." To make her feel better. And he remembered not realizing back then how odd it was that she did that.

Four months. *A long time to let a fire burn without any regard for control*, Michael thought. He stood in line at the Shanghai Express order counter. So many options in front of him. And he wasn't even hungry.

"Spring roll or egg roll?" the cashier asked.

Michael stared blankly at the menu board above. "What? Oh, uh...right. Spring rolls. Thank you," he said.

A plastic bag of Chinese take-out in each hand, Michael weaved his way through the maze of Formica tables and molded plastic chairs. He was about to merge back into the bustle of the main concourse when he stopped. The dream had come back to him.

He and Cindy had just pulled into Greenvale. They had driven all evening. It was too late to stop by friends' houses to spend the night, so Michael drove the two of them up a secluded mountain road. The type that at the outset is dotted with the occasional house but eventually winds deeper into the wild forest of BLM land. He had found them a quiet cove off in a turnout, under a copse of fir trees. This is where they would sleep.

They folded the seats down in the back of Michael's truck. Spread out a couple of layers of Pendleton blankets as a mattress, with a third as their cover. While Cindy snored, Michael was in and out of sleep. But it wasn't the snoring. And it wasn't the mosquitoes. It was something else. Eventually he slept. That's when he had the dream.

He was in a warm blue ocean, somewhere he recognized as the coast of southern California. He bobbed up and down with the waves as he sat on his surfboard, just offshore. He was alone. From there he could see his personal belongings on the sand. Backpack, clothes, towel, a few books. His laptop, some music equipment also. All of it huddled together in a pile. But then he began to drift further from shore. As though he had been caught in a riptide. At the mercy of its conveyance, no amount of paddling he tried brought him any closer to land. He watched as his possessions grew smaller in the distance. And then he felt a great swelling beneath him. He floated up with it, and came down as it rolled past. As the wave neared shore, he watched it raise up in a wall of water and foam and crash down on the sand. As the wave receded, it dragged all of his possessions with it. He tried paddling again, even more ferociously than before. But it didn't matter. Shore was still in the distance. And everything that was his had been swallowed by the sea.

Michael remembered waking from the dream. Lying in the back of his truck. Cindy still asleep next to him. It wasn't yet dawn. The first weak light of day would soon limn through the darkness. As he stared out the window into the stillness of

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the unborn morning, the pit in his stomach told him that that dream had meant something. Something important. You just know. After a dream like that.

Michael stood in the middle of the concourse. He watched people stream by and around him. All coming from somewhere, destined for somewhere else. *Interesting places. Exciting places*, he thought. A confluence of so many lives, intersecting all at once. A delicate, fragile web of irrevocable decisions and their consequences. Each being made in the only way it could have. Any single one of them made differently, and someone else would be there, in that precise moment, in front of him, instead. Instead of any of them. Including himself.

"This is your life," Michael said to himself, this time audibly. It was then that he knew. He swallowed hard.

Cindy shifted in her seat. She leafed idly through her Barbara Kingsolver novel. Her eyes flitted across the words. Like waterbugs on the surface of a pond. A paragraph started, only to be re-read. It was no use. It wouldn't go away. It kept distracting her. Her rage. She hated it. And hated it even more because she couldn't control it.

Why can't he see? she thought. Why can't he understand that I need what I have never had? She could always just tell him. *No. No chance. Pride.* And this only made her more angry. No, she needed to be strong. Or at least maintain that she was. If she told him, that would be an admission of weakness. Vulnerability. And there is no room for vulnerability in a war. The war for her very survival.

What was it, then, that made her so mad? She pretended to read, but it tumbled over and over in her head. Like a pair of boots in a clothes dryer. She squirmed in her chair. Couldn't get comfortable. It wasn't the seat. *He's a good person. Handsome, smart. Funny. Kind. What the hell is wrong with me?* But she already knew what it was. She was merely having difficulty accepting it. She had even mentioned it to him in passing. That it was just this thing that he did. It wasn't very masculine. It was something she said that she couldn't explain to him. Couldn't quite put her finger on. It wasn't as though it were one specific behavior. No, if it were only that, it could be identified. And dealt with. It was his whole way of being, she told him. Something deeper. In his essence. That painted everything he did with its color.

That thing triggered in her a fear. Reminded her of what was weak when it should have been strong. The one reliable object of constancy in any little girl's life. Instead, once that little girl reached a certain level of ripeness, that object would grab her and sit her on his lap. Though she was much too big to do so. But he did it anyway. And then the hands went where they shouldn't have. And worse. Much worse. The one night Mom was out of town. He invited his friends over. They were drunk. Of course. One of them had his way with her. And he let it happen. The bastard even watched. All those years she had stood up for him. Defended him against Mom's infidelity and brow-beating. That was the thanks she got. *How could someone do such a thing? To their own daughter?*

Cindy looked out the window at the surrounding fires. It was almost dusk. As she stood there, she thought of the many ways a fire could be extinguished. But not

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this one. It was too far along. Too many responsibilities eschewed. There was only one way now.

She knew it. Knew what the outcome was going to be. Free will had been stolen from her as a child. This was a way for her to take it back. Own it again. But everything with a price. This too she knew. It was decided.

When Michael returned, Cindy was staring blankly ahead into something that he couldn't see.

"Hey. Sorry I was gone so long," he said.

"You were?" she said.

"Yeah, I must've been away for like an hour," he said.

"Oh," she said. "It's ok. It's fine." Her voice was there, but her mind wasn't.

She turned and looked at Michael. Whatever fire there had been raging behind her eyes, it had been snuffed out. As though a torch had been dropped into a vast, tenebrous ocean. He could see it. The hard pit in his abdomen started to soften.

"I'm sorry, Cin," he said. "I'm sorry for everything."

The fluorescent overhead lighting reflected off the film of tears forming in her eyes. "Me too, Michael," she said. "I'm sorry, too."

"What's that smell?" Cindy asked. She looked toward the two white plastic bags on the floor in front of her.

"General Tso's. And Mongolian beef with broccoli," he replied.

"Woof," she said. A nervous laugh sneaked out of her. Michael started laughing too. Uneasily. As though he had been granted permission to do so. Then he let out a long sigh.

"So you're not hungry, then?" he asked.

"No. Not really," she answered.

"Yeah, me neither," he said.

Michael reached over and took Cindy's small bony hand into his, and held it in his lap. She interlaced her fingers with his, and leaned her head on his shoulder. They stared out the window into the approaching night. And waited. Waited for a plane to take them to a place they both knew didn't exist.