

The Switch

Through the window at the elementary school, Jackie watched the two girls make tracks in the snow. The girls had snuck out to play in the zero degree weather in t-shirts. Jackie locked the door. She was as good at crossing the line as they were.

That morning, someone knocked on Jackie's own door at home. It was dark and the wind packed snow into walls, and when she turned on the porch light she saw the gangly teenager who bagged groceries at the Mountain Mart on her porch, holding a bottle of vodka. The card wrapped around the bottle's neck said Happy Valentine's Day from the Liminal and the bottle beeped like a bomb until she woke up to the snowplow backing up in her driveway. Through her bedroom window, the sun was finding its way through the trees and the air was still. The neighbor's dog climbed up a pile of snow built by the plow, and dug.

The Liminal was the bar in the city two hours away where Jackie used to work and date the owner, Mingus. She ended it with Mingus just before Christmas, moved to Clayton just before New Year's, lied in the interview that she had experience with kids, and started a job as assistant counselor for the Clayton Elementary After-School Program a week later. Unlike most jobs, she still liked this gig six weeks later, even with the little brats like Karly and Elizabeth, the two fourth graders who now chased each other over mounds of snow in a chaotic game of tag. They left blue and purple streaks in the snow from their nails, which they'd colored with markers. Jackie would unlock the door after they tried to get in, but couldn't. It would be good for them to know what that feels like.

Jackie returned to the cafeteria, where half a dozen younger kids sat obediently at the fold-down table waiting to make Valentine's Day cards.

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"I'm hungry," said Cam, a first-grader. Half of Jackie's job was pouring goldfish into plastic bowls.

"Allen's making a special snack." Jackie lifted a box of supplies from off the floor behind the check-in desk, and put it on the table in front of Cam. "But we only get to eat it if we make Valentine's Day cards." Half a dozen kids grabbed at pink, red, and white papers, glue sticks, and scissors. They shared the same fervor as college students at The Liminal grabbing at nachos on busy nights when the wait for food was long. Jackie bent herself into the table built for children, and folded pieces of construction paper.

"I want to sit by Jackie." Cam crawled out from his spot and pushed his way between her and another kid.

"Hi Cam." He balanced his knees on the bench and touched the stud in her nose.

"Hey, remember what we talked about?" Cam had a touching problem. The stud in her nose, the makeup around her eyes. He'd probably never seen makeup before, judging by the mountain moms who picked up their kids.

"You're pretty." This was true love for Cam. The new man in Jackie's life, a first grader who needed help blowing his nose.

The space from men was what she came to the mountains for, and she'd never spent so much time by herself. Her cabin had a piano that she was getting better on but no landline, so a few times a week she huddled into the payphone at the Mountain Mart where her words to her sister about the weather and the kids at work smoked into the cold air. Her sister would visit this weekend, bringing an extra ski jacket. Jackie was sealing herself into a dark green wool sweater left in the cabin's front closet. The sweater worked okay if she wore two other sweaters under it, and if there wasn't a blizzard.

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Sometimes at the Mountain Mart payphone, she called Mingus and hung up.

Or, she'd wander over to Annie's Café and listen to the regulars. They talked about ten years ago when the Mountain Mart was Mountain Foods, about squirrels and how to get them off the bird feeders, and about the hardest winters. Her days were repetitive and steady, the way that plows uncover the roads, again and again.

Laughter from the kitchen. Allen, her boss, was making a special snack with the older kids, something they were keeping a secret from everyone else until snack time. Allen must have done something silly. She pictured him striking a pose with carrots for horns or apple slices for ears. Allen chopped his own wood, hadn't owned a car in ten years, and wrote her name like "Jak" on the schedule.

"Look, a heart!" a girl in the second grade said. She held up the shape of a mummy.

"It's gorgeous!" Jackie drew hook after hook on folded pages, and kids followed her lines with thick, safe scissors.

It was Jackie's sister who found the place in Clayton, buried two hours into the mountains from the city, from Mingus, from The Liminal, and from the part-time on-again off-again waitressing she'd done at The Liminal for the last year. Her sister called the six months of rent for the Clayton cabin a New Year's gift, but it was a prescription. Her sister was not a therapist but knew how to act like one, and stayed with Jackie the first two days to make sure she ate three meals a day, touched no liquor, and didn't hibernate. Her sister had an Ivy League husband and three little kids who tried their hardest to stay up until the ball dropped on New Year's Eve. This was the year they made it, it would be a lucky 1995, and their mother missed it because Aunt Jackie was a mess.

"Do you like it?" a kid said, holding up a pink page full of scribbles.

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"I'm making one for my dog," a girl said.

"And maybe one for your dad, too." Jackie bet the girl's father, in his daily green sweatpants and duct-taped gloves, knew how to appreciate a Valentine's Day card.

Most of the kids' parents said little to Jackie. They clomped into the cafeteria in worn Sorrels with clumps of snow clinging to the lining like small animals. Their jackets were from the eighties, puffy, synthetic, and patched over in spots where someone sat too close to a fire. After so many brief exchanges at the sign-out table, Jackie knew the parents as jackets: Cam's dad was forest green with a black patch in the lower back, and Elizabeth's mom was bright red with white linings.

"I'm making one for Allen," someone said. At the far end of the table boys rubbed glue onto their fingers and poked into a bowl of glitter.

"He'll love it." Jackie considered making a card for Allen, too, but knew it would end up on her dresser for two hours and then in the trash. She wasn't the right kind of girl for Allen. He didn't play the games that she and Mingus did, pushing each other as far as they would go, then farther, and then too far to turn back. She had asked to see pictures of Mingus's daughters several times but he always refused, so when light and steam and the sound of shower water came through the bathroom door in the hotel, she reached down to the floor and pulled the wallet out of his jeans. His girls were chubby and well dressed, pretending to drink from empty beer bottles. There was not a photo of his wife.

When the bathroom door opened, Mingus stood wrapped in steam with the shower running and said "Come here," dripping on the carpet. "I miss you." He went naked to the TV table where they ritualistically placed a bottle of Bullet Bourbon and their own tumblers. He poured.

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"They're beautiful," she said.

He snatched the photo with one hand and smacked her ear with the other. "You don't touch this," he said, holding the picture photo-side down to his wet chest. The water rushed into the darkness he'd left in her ear. "You don't *touch* this."

Jackie got on her knees like she would to invite him toward her. He picked up something clear and shiny from the table and shot it at her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the water stopped, the room smelled like wood wet with whisky, and the door closed.

"Ew!"

On the table in the elementary school cafeteria, paper hearts unfolded in red, white, and pink.

The kids in the kitchen were making noise. Allen laughed and said, "Should we see what Jak thinks? Hey Jak?" He jogged out of the kitchen into the cafeteria with a bowl. He wore a flannel shirt with red and gray, which could have been for Valentine's Day.

"Remind me to keep you in charge of all snacks, even special ones," he said.

"What did you make?" The kids at the table and from the kitchen huddled around, wrapping up Allen and Jackie.

"Try." Allen smelled like coffee, natural soap, and thick winter clothes. He was clean-spirited to his bones.

"What happened?" Jackie put her hand into the bowl. It was cookie dough. She popped a tiny ball into her mouth, which disintegrated into salt.

She remembered suddenly, the way a branch will snap from the weight of snow.

"Oh my God." She stood up and walked quickly away from the table.

"That bad?"

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She was in the hallway and could see the door, and then the empty basketball court darkening to a heavy gray. A million foot prints chopped up the snow where the girls had come for relief and retreated a dozen times, a hundred. All week Karly and Elizabeth had been sneaking into the kitchen stealing handfuls of sugar. When Jackie got to work that afternoon she'd switched the sugar with the salt, forgetting about special snack and that it might be baking, then forgetting about the girls entirely.

The window exploded and Jackie jumped back, crossing her arms across her face. Snow sunk down the glass. Another thump hit at the bottom of the door, then one near the top. Through blurry streaks, Jackie saw the girls, their hair as stiff as twigs and their lips dark. Elizabeth cried, her arms hugging her chest under her t-shirt, but Karly's arms were bare, skinny and white as plastic bags. She molded another snowball and Jackie opened the door.

"Girls," she said. Frozen air dropped over her like a net and nothing moved. Her lungs tightened.

Elizabeth ran toward the door, her arms still under her t-shirt like they'd frozen to her own skin. Karly dropped the snowball and bent down for something different. She raised it above her head and it was gone, buried in the dusk and then there was a crack on the brick wall above her head and it was gone, buried in the dusk and then there was a crack on the brick wall by the ear that still couldn't hear all of it, then a stack of paper shuffling. Again. A shadow appeared through air as cold and sharp as ice, and made a sign. Its hands melted through the ice and reached Jackie's cheeks, framing them.

"Your girls," Jackie said to Mingus. The water from a shower and light from the hotel bathroom gleamed over the photograph like whiskey. She fought passed his hands on her face and wrapped her arms around her head.

"Jak."

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The shadow sharpened into a man who was not Mingus. He was Allen, in the dark, in the cold.

“Jak, can you hear me?” His hands moved to her shoulders, shaping around them. It had been weeks since she'd been touched by a man.

“Can you move?” Allen said. “Let’s get you inside.”

She sat up. The light from the hallway cut into her head. She leaned against the door, keeping it open, and there was red on the ice and on her arm, a melted Valentine’s Day card. On the ground was a rock with a fat end and a sharp end, the size of a tumbler.

“We called the clinic, the doc’s on his way.”

She scooted on her butt toward the light and Allen stayed with her.

“The girls.”

“They’re inside,” Allen said. “They saw you slip. I think you scared them.”

Cam and the other kids gathered in the hallway against the wall, their paper hearts abandoned. Karly and Elizabeth stood behind the younger kids, squeezed together under the sweater from Jackie’s front closet. The green wool was lumped with snags, but it was big enough to hold together two halves of a shape cut without lines.