

Spes

The customer was an older man, as they usually are. He was a little over six foot, and had coarse brown hair that seemed to cover most of his body. I met him at his front door. He seemed nervous and I wondered if this was his first time paying for sex.

He had cooked for us. He had fried ribeye steaks in Italian dressing and mushrooms. He had mashed up baked potatoes that were covered with thick slabs of butter. No salt, though, he explained. His family had a history of heart conditions. The oven timer went off about the time I walked in and he pulled a hot loaf of honey and lavender bread from it. "I thought you might be hungry," he said, setting the table. I was, but my nerves were like broken glass in my gut, and I wasn't sure how I could possibly eat.

We sat down across from each other. He was huge, a bear of a man. I tried to imagine him on top of me, his large hands bearing down on my flesh, the gristle of his beard poking into my skin.

He started eating, tearing into his steak with a knife. I took small bites at first, but I had been living off SpaghettiOs for weeks, and the food was good. I ate quickly, then, tearing chunks of the sweet bread off with my fingers. The sounds of forks clinking against glass filled the kitchen. He got up after a moment and poured us both a cup of red wine. I took large gulps of it, the alcohol making me feel heavy and warm.

I waited on him to start talking. Most of the men - customers - wanted to have long conversations about their ex-wives, jobs, kids. By the end of the night, they had paid more for company than they had for the actual sex. He was quiet, though, his eyes lingering on me as I ate. He refilled my cup for me several times without asking and when all the bread was gone he cut another thick slice from the loaf and brought it to the table. I ate until I couldn't eat anymore and then I pushed the plate away and stood up.

"Do you care if I use your bathroom?" I asked him.

He stuck a thumb out in the direction of a hallway. "Second door on the left," he said, his voice gruff.

I found it and closed the door behind me, making sure it was locked. I took out my cell phone and texted my sixteen-year-old daughter Emily. "Is everything ok?" I typed.

Before I'd left, I had told her I was going to try to get us some dinner, and I might be gone awhile. She had sighed and rolled her eyes, in the way that all teenage girls do.

Even though I knew she was getting old enough to take care of herself, I constantly worried about her. Was she getting enough sleep? Her eyes were always ringed with dark shadows and a lot of mornings she was up before me, sitting out on the fire escape with her legs dangling over the edge. Was she eating enough? I tried to bring home whatever food I could, but sometimes we could be sitting in the quiet and I would hear the unmistakable growl her stomach would make and I would physically hurt.

The man's bathroom was small, but it was clean and smelled of vanilla. I relieved myself and washed my hands, my eyes on my phone, hoping that Emily would text me back. The older she got, the more reserved and distant she became. I found it harder to talk to her. She seemed to find it harder to listen to me. I thought she was embarrassed of me, although I was pretty sure she didn't know the lengths I had went to trying to keep the bills paid.

I looked in the mirror. My lips were stained red from the wine and my eyeliner was smudged, bleeding into the creases that circled my eyes. Wrinkles. I smoothed my skin out with my fingers, sighing when they wrinkled back up. My dark hair had become mussed from the wind outside and I combed through it with my fingers. I thought of when my daughter and I had still been close, and how she could weave my hair into dreadlocks, braids, almost anything, her fingers moving expertly. The memory of it caused my heart to thrum against my chest. I looked at my phone one more time, no new texts, and knew I couldn't stall any longer.

The man was scraping the food from his dishes when I walked back in. He stopped when he seen me. He looked even larger standing up, towering over me. "We should go to the bedroom, I guess?" He said it as a question, looking at me uncertainly. I was sure then that he had never done this before.

"Yes. We should," I confirmed. He led the way down another long hallway, to the door in the back. His room was small, the walls covered with tall, wooden bookshelves that were full of books. Books that were tattered and worn, with pages hanging out. Piles of books, crammed in so tightly that the wood seemed to bow with the weight of them.

"You like to read?" I asked, walking around the room, studying the spines of them.

"No, they're just here for decoration." I looked back at him to see if he was joking and he smiled wryly.

He sat down on his bed, the weight making it creak. I sat down beside of him, careful not to let our arms touch. I wrung my hands together, feeling nervous again.

"I've never done this before," he said then, looking at me finally. Up close, I could see that his eyes were gray, the color of the sky right before a thunderstorm. He had thin lips that were chapped and cheeks that were tinged pink from the cold.

I nodded. "I kinda figured as much," I told him. "Do you want to tell me your name?"

Some customers did and some didn't. I had always imagined that the ones who kept their names a secret had wives back home. Their meetings had always left me with a bitter feeling in the pit of my stomach, even though it was none of my business. Either way, their money spent the same way.

He was new to this, however, and the thought to keep it a secret - or at least make up a name - didn't seem to cross his mind. "Eric," he said, without any hesitation.

I thought about lying. I always had before. I gave away so much of myself, my time, my dignity, my body. I sold it all for a price, but they couldn't have my name. They couldn't take that one thing from me. However, this time I told my real name, and felt it fall away from my lips heavy, like a secret I had chosen to share. "Audrey."

"You are... really fucking pretty, Audrey," he said, his voice full of raw emotion. I waited on him to touch me, grab me, but he did neither. He sat with his hands pressed against his knees. I was used to men who grabbed too rough. Men who were drunk and their eyes were hazy and they weren't thinking about tomorrow. He was... different.

It had been a long time since I had been romantically involved with a man and all I could remember about my relationships was the pain afterwards. I shook the thought away and pressed my hand against his cheek, gently nudging him so that he faced me. "Do you want me to start?" I asked him. He exhaled, his breath warming my skin.

"Um, I... I guess," he stuttered. I moved in close. I brushed my top lip against his bottom lip gently, before kissing him. Like him, his kiss was different than any I had ever had before. It was like fire, warm and thick lava running through my veins. It was like stepping outside on the first warm day of the year. I leaned into him, wanting more. I had never enjoyed my job before. But I felt a need blossom deep inside of me that I hadn't felt in years. I climbed up on him, straddling him. And then... he pushed me away.

"Wait. I'm sorry. I need a second," he said, sounding out of breath. His lips were swollen and his cheeks flushed. His eyes landed on me. "I have to admit, this has been a huge moral dilemma for me."

I sat there, willing my heart to slow, unsure of what to say. He pressed his fingers in the spot behind my ear, and I knew he'd seen the tattoo there. He traced it. "What does it say?" he asked, curiously.

"Spes."

"Spes?"

"It means 'hope'. It's a latin word," I told him.

He nodded. "Hope. I like it."

My cheeks flushed red. "Thanks. I've had it forever."

He smiled hugely. "You've had the tattoo forever, or hope?"

"The tattoo."

He wore a red flannel shirt, and from it he pulled a tin peppermint can with rolled cigarettes in it. "Want one?"

I didn't smoke, but I took one anyway, hoping it would calm my nerves. He cupped his hands around the cigarette and lit it for me. We sat there for a moment. The winter winds whistled around the brick building loudly, rattling the bedroom window.

"Do you work?" I asked him, trying to fill the silence.

He took a long draw from his cigarette. "I worked building houses for years. I could point out houses to you, all around town that I helped build. I loved doing it. My favorite thing to do was build the fireplaces, sitting for hours, placing the stones so that they fit together, like doing a huge puzzle. One of these days I'm going to get around to building my own."

"What made you quit?" I could imagine him, his large hands pressing stones together with concrete, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. I felt warm all over. I told myself to stop acting like I was on a date. This was far from a date. I tried to look as uninterested as I could.

"I broke my shoulder. An older lady wanted a skylight in her bedroom, so she could see the sky while she was laying in bed. Romantic, right? Well, I was standing on a ladder, at the top of this two-story house, trying to get

measurements for this skylight, when clumsy, old me fell right off of it. It's never been right since." He lifted his arm over his head awkwardly and let it drop to his side.

"That's some shit luck," I told him, hoping I sounded indifferent. I stubbed my cigarette out in an ashtray.

He laughed. He had a loud, booming laugh that filled up the whole room. "Honey, my life has been nothing but *shit luck*," he said, and I thought about my daughter at home, her belly empty, wearing old clothes that were too big for her. I gave him a look.

"At least you had a good job," I said, unable to keep the edge out of my voice.

He was quiet then, studying me. I turned away from him and looked at all the books, reading the titles of each, feeling irritated.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. He grabbed my hand roughly and started to rub his thumb across my palm. "Why do you do it then? Your job? Why don't you work at like, Starbucks or something? I don't know?"

I laughed, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "Wow, I'm so glad you said that. I would have never thought of that. Good thing there are smart people like you out here to look out for the dumbasses like myself."

I pulled my hand away from him. I felt sick, like I was going to throw up all the food I had just ate.

"Please, don't leave yet. I'm sorry. I'm not good with words," he said. He caught my wrist, his skin hot against mine. "I know it can't be easy. I know you wouldn't do it if you knew of another way."

"Why do you care? You wanted me here. You are willing to pay for me, like I'm a piece of damn merchandise."

He grimaced. I shook my head. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't get the image of Emily at home hungry out of my head.

Eric cleared his throat before speaking. "Audrey. You're not a piece of merchandise. Nobody is, honey."

"Well, I feel like I am, sometimes. I know there are people out there with problems big enough to swallow mine, but I feel like if I could just catch a break... things would be okay." The words pour out of me and I snap my mouth shut. I think about melting into Eric's bed and just fading away. I remind myself, this is not a date.

He nodded. "Do you have any kids?"

I hesitated. "Yeah, I have a sixteen-year-old."

"Where is she?" he asked.

I thought carefully about how to answer him. I had never told my customers about my daughter before. "She's with a friend," I lied.

He looked like he was in pain, the way he squinted his eyes and swallowed hard. "Look, you wanna go for a ride? Get some air?"

"I don't know. Maybe. You're not a serial killer or anything, are you?" I half-joked. He chuckled softly, the way a lover would.

"I'm not. Promise," he said, holding a palm against his heart.

We stepped out into the cold February night. I pulled my coat close around me. It was already past dark, and the city looked unforgiving and hard in the glow of the streetlamps. The wind was harsh. It had snowed the day

before, but the sun had melted it to slush, and the cold air had froze it, making the ground slick and wet. It crunched under my boots. I walked down the sidewalk, my stomach full of fluttering.

Eric owned a small, puke-green Buick. It smelled like cigarettes and aftershave. He drove through the city with his windows part-way down, despite the cold. My hair whipped against my lips and eyes.

"I'm not from here," he began, chewing on his lip as he drove, "I grew up in a small town. A lot of my family called me crazy for moving to a big city. I love it, though. It's perfect."

"It's okay."

"It's beautiful, Audrey. Sometimes, you can get caught up in it, but if you slow down for just a second and look around you..."

I peered out the window and tried to focus on everything around me. Eric was right about the beauty. It was small and hard to find, but then I caught glimpses of lit windows with people sitting at tables, eating and holding hands, people walking down the sidewalks, all moving alongside each other, the rest of the world background noise.

"Where are we going, anyway?" I asked him.

"I just want to show you something. I don't usually show this to people. Some would probably think it's weird."

"Your penis?"

"Ha, ha" he said, a smile in his eyes. "No, not that. Just wait and you'll see."



He drove out of the city, where the land was flat and green everywhere, and where houses passed by in a mess of colors. The roads were wet from melted snow and glittered in the moonlight. I focused on studying Eric, noting the way the creases in his knuckles were rough, and the scattering of freckles he had on his arms.

He finally came to a slow and pulled the car over to the side of the road. It was quiet, the air suddenly heavy and still all around us.

My heartbeat picked up, then. I was sure that he had took me there, into the middle of nowhere, to finish what we had started. I touched the button on my shirt, ready to undo it, when I noticed the somber expression on his face.

“This is where my wife died. She was hit by a drunk driver, about three years ago. I was home asleep when it happened. She was going to see her...” he stopped, pressed his forehead against the steering wheel. “She was going to see her boyfriend. She was having an affair. I didn’t know until after she’d died.”

He looked at me, his eyes guarded. I reached my hand out and grabbed his. “That’s awful, Eric. I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t want you to see this to feel sorry for me. I just... I wanted you to see why I had hired you. I get incredibly lonely, sometimes. I used to drive out here and sit for hours, because I felt closer to her here. But I don’t anymore. It’s like she’s really gone. I think I’ve finally come to terms with it.”

And the space between us, and all around us felt heavy with loss. I looked across the stretch of road until I finally seen the place where a wood cross sat and squeezed his hand. “It does... feel empty,” I told him, unsure of what to say.

He sat there with his eyes pressed shut for a moment, before letting go of my hand and turning the car back on. He made a U-turn in the road and started back toward the city. “I shouldn’t have hired you, Audrey.”

I instantly thought of Emily who was always on the edge of starving and my heart started to race. "No, it's -"

"I'm going to give you a gift."

"A gift?"

"Yeah. Open the glove compartment, okay?"

I pushed a hand through my hair, which was beyond messy by then, and looked at him, uncertain. He nodded. I opened it and found a brown paper bag that was crumpled and rolled up.

"There's, um, right around 20 thousand in that bag. I want you to keep it."

I unrolled the bag and reached in and found stacks of 100 dollar bills, held together with a rubber band. "20 thousand? I can't take this. Thank you, Eric, but I can't."

"I'm paying you for your time, right? The time we have spent together is worth more than what you're holding there. I want you to have it. Please. I want you and your daughter to have it."

He was only about a block away from his house. He pulled to a curb and stopped. I pushed the bag of money into a deep pocket on the inside of my coat and reached across the car to kiss him again. He kissed me back, hard. His fingers ran the length of my arms softly a few times before he pulled away. "Can I get your number, Audrey?"

He found a pen and I wrote it on the top of his hand. I stopped to look at him, my hand lingering against the warmth of his skin. He was smiling.

"Go ahead, okay? Get a cab. Get home to your daughter."

I climbed out of the car and he waved before pulling back into the traffic and disappearing into a sea of cars.

I walked fast, eager to get home and see Emily. I stopped at a bakery shop and bought some warm croissants wrapped in wax paper, styrofoam bowls full of potato soup, and cups of hot chocolate with whipped cream on top. I felt like I was glowing. The lady gave me my change back and smiled. I left her fifty extra dollars, thinking of karma. I wasn't sure if I believed in karma, but I suddenly liked the idea of it. Give and get back.

When I got home, I found Emily sitting on her bed, cross-legged, sketching in her notebook. She was wearing a gray and navy flannel shirt and had her raven black hair tied up in a messy bun. Her eyes widened at the sight of all the food. "Wow, mom, what'd you do? Rob a bank?" she asked, hesitantly, at first. She stretched her legs out and it pained me to see how skinny she was. I felt of the money in my pocket and thought about how we could go grocery shopping in the morning.

We went into the living room where I laid a blanket down on the floor for us to sit on. We ate in the dark, while she told me about her day at school and her math test she had coming up. She ate until she was full and tired and then she hugged me before going to bed. It had been the first time she'd hugged me in months.

I sat alone on the couch, wide awake, sipping on the last of the hot chocolate. Waiting. I felt this buzz in my chest, like this huge thing was about to happen in my life. When my cell phone finally rang I wasn't surprised. I answered it and smiled when I heard Eric's voice.