

Upstairs

Fuck no; Claire screams through the glass door when he is too far away to hear her, escaping into his black Lexus. She pounds on the glass as he drives away. *It's a stupid fucking car!* Claire brushes her too-long bangs out of her eyes. She's gotten the asymmetrical cut for him, done everything for him, including the vomit-diet and the clothes she ordered from the second-hand website that sells only high-end, name-brand, gently-worn merchandise. "Someone exotic," he had posted on the website, and she had googled 'exotic women with short hair' because there wasn't time to grow it out. After reading his profile, she lied about being into techno-jazz. This was a mistake. Later that music set her on edge every time he came home from work, immediately swapping out her carefully selected mood music—mellow jazz without the tin.

Hell no! What does he think? *That I can afford just to move out? Nope, not gonna happen. I'm not leaving, and you can't make me.* Now she sounds like a child, and it disturbs her. She is 36 years old, and Emmet is supposed to be "the one." *Where the HELL do you expect me to go, you asshole?* This is her final admonition to the front door. She sighs.

Claire met Emmet on an Internet dating site, one of three she was using. He checked off every box. Stable job. Check. Emmet founded a company that managed high-end Airbnb rentals. He interviewed the tenants; conducted background checks; lined up the landscape, pool and cleaning services; handled insurance claims—the whole gamut. Business was booming in Austin. He owned his home, a property in the very posh Westlake Hills neighborhood. Check. He also fit into her age criteria, between 32 and 48 years of age. Emmet barely squeaked by on that one, saying he was forty. When she eventually checked his license, he was 46. No biggie. He was unmarried. Thank God. She wasn't going to play the, "I'm going to divorce my wife as soon as..." game EVER again!

Emmet had five-year-old twin girls, but Claire was okay with kids. She never met these children as they lived in California, and he flew to see them every other weekend. Animal lover. Check. Emmet had a rescued greyhound. The dog was old and arthritic and slept all day on one of the six dog beds in the house. A squirrel was the only thing that could light his fire these days. Claire herself wasn't a big animal lover, but she theorized men who cared for animals tended to be more thoughtful.

She did appreciate Geno, the dog. After all, he was the reason she ended up staying in Emmet's apartment ahead of her schedule. After a month of dating, Emmet's dog-sitter had contracted the flu on a kid-weekend. Claire generously volunteered. The arrangement continued, and after three months, he invited her to move in. She had meticulously worked towards this invitation—her hair and clothes, manicures and pedicures, eleven dollar-a-unit Botox, and perfume samples scrounged from department stores.

One evening when Emmet left for the bathroom, Claire snatched up his phone just before it went dark. She furtively uploaded a tracking device onto his cell—the same one he used to track his ex-wife's phone, HoverOver. Emmet had explained that he feared his ex might disappear with the kids one day. Claire's rationale for her surreptitious download was to be prepared whenever he came home. Not just looking her best self, but having his favorite meals hot and paired with expensive cabs and merlots chilled to 55 degrees. Precisely to his taste. Unfortunately, this also meant she had to feign liking wine—dry wine at that.

Claire was a beer girl, Dos Equis, Corona, and sometimes spiced rum—Captain Morgan mixed with orange juice. But she was done with beer guys, lazy and broke guys, guys who gambled and guys who came home every night to grab a drink and watch whatever sports event was being televised. Her father had told her after one of *those* break-ups, "You can love a rich man just as easily as a poor man." Her father was a poor man. But hardworking. And he loved his kids. He came home and drank beer and

watched sports after work. He wouldn't have checked off many, or any, of her boxes. After that, she set her sights higher, expanded the search range on her dating apps, and quickly moved to Austin.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Claire begins sobbing and makes her way to the white living room couch. She plops onto the overstuffed cushions, wipes the mascara tears with her fingers, and smears the black goo into a seat cushion, making a sad-face emoji. She can hear his break-up words reverberating in her head. Words that came right after she had kissed him hello and led him to the dining room, the lighted candles flickering across his body in a delicate strobe. He had taken her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. *I like you so much, Claire. But you're just not the same girl I fell in love with.*

Claire didn't understand; they had only been living together four months. Her first line of defense was sarcasm. *Really? I did some kind of mutation overnight that I don't know about?* Tears teetered in the corners of her eyes.

Emmet shifted his weight from left to right, initiating a soft rocking motion, his hands half in his pockets, thumbs out. *It's just that you used to be so spontaneous and free-spirited.* He was talking over her head. He could do that, being six-foot-three. Tall. Another checked box.

Claire blew out the candles and turned on the lights. *I'm sorry; I've been stressed with work.* It was all she could think to say. Claire worked as an adjunct instructor for New Jersey South University, a place she had never seen. She was teaching online classes in business basics. Four courses were a living wage. She taught five, and it was all she could do to keep up with discussion boards and rubrics grading. Online teaching was the perfect gig to facilitate her primary occupation of constructing a picture-perfect and permanent relationship. She had read that people often don't put as much energy into relationships as they do their jobs. Such a lack of dedication would not be her undoing. She would give it her all.

Emmet didn't ask about her work stress. He wasn't a man to ask her questions.

I don't understand, Claire said, everything was going great, you said so.

Then Emmet dropped the bomb that exploded and impaled her with shrapnel. An old girlfriend had come into town, and Emmet wanted to reconnect. *I didn't plan it. She walked into MoonBeans for coffee. But, after we talked, I knew.* Emmet swallowed loudly; *I have always loved her. I'm so sorry, but I have to play this out. I think she's my soulmate.*

Claire didn't believe in soulmates and cringed inside. *But you said you loved ME!*

I know, and I thought I did, but I'm not feeling that way now. I'm so sorry. His phone rang, and he turned away to answer. *I can't talk now. Yes, yes. I'll call you back. You too.* When he disconnected the call, he seemed harder, the empathy gone from his eyes. *Look, I need to see my kids this weekend. Can you have your stuff moved out when I get back Sunday night?*

But, I but, where would I go on such short notice? What about Geno?

Oh, come on now, you have tons of friends, and I'm sure your parents would love to have you stay with them for a while. Do you need help with a plane ticket? Claire didn't have any friends, not here. She had moved to Austin for him. She worked alone, from his home. Emmet continued. *Let me know when you find a place and I can help you with the security deposit and first month's rent.*

And Geno? Claire didn't know why she kept bringing up his dog.

I have someone coming to watch him.

Her? Claire blasted.

No, Bailey, the woman who used to watch him, remember?

Claire's tears spilled over, and she started to cry, sobbing and gulping like she was drowning.

Come on, Claire, baby. Claire. These things happen, and people get over them and find better partners. Emmet started to reach for her but redirected his fingers to run through his curly black mane. Claire sat in resignation on the dining room chair and pushed away the vegan Chicken Alfredo and then continued to cry with her head buried into her hands. Emmet awkwardly came in for a hug. She reached for him, held tightly to his waist and didn't let go until he put his hands on her shoulders and stepped back, kissing the top of her head.

It'll be alright; you'll see. They both went quiet, the space between them filled only with Claire's sniffles. *I leave for California first thing in the morning. I'm staying with a friend tonight to give you some space.*

Claire felt the sting. *Her?*

Emmet hesitated. *I left the phone number of a moving company on the fridge if you need help moving your things. They'll bill me if you call them. And Don't worry about cleaning up; the housekeeper comes this weekend.*

Help moving what? I have my computer and my clothes.

A hell of a lot of clothes. Emmet retorted, and then checked his cell phone. *I'm just gonna grab a few things, and I'll be off.* He stood and headed towards their, no, HIS bedroom. Claire followed, but feeling queasy sat in the midnight-blue, brushed-velvet armchair in the living room. She felt like Ping-Pong balls had been lobbed at her face with each word he had spoken. She hadn't managed to dodge any of the hits, and they just kept coming.

Emmet poked his head around the corner. *Oh, and just take the things you came here with. We can sort out anything we bought together when I get back.* He knew there were no joint purchases. Within a few minutes, Emmet was walking towards the front door. He stopped to tussle Geno's head.

The dog, lying on his living room bed, wagged his whip of a tail. Emmet spoke without looking up. *Claire, I know you are upset, and I know you love Geno. I am sorry to sound harsh, but please don't be destructive. I would hate for there to be any legal issues between us.* At that, he glanced towards the video camera mounted over the door and the one on the opposite wall. Within minutes, the door was shut and locked behind "the one," who was now "another one."

Claire buries her head in the white pillows that are just for show and needn't be touched by anyone but Margaret, the housekeeper. She cries heartily and wipes what is left of her warm beige foundation and plum-rose blush into the white pillows. Too bad her lipstick is worn off.

Claire! Stop being destructive! Emmet's angry voice booms from the surveillance speaker.

Geno looks up from his corner towards the sound of Emmet's voice and howls.

Good dog, she says.

Claire, she hears the speaker again, his voice softer. *I'm sorry you are sad. I'm sad too. But try hard not to be destructive. I know this is a shock to you, but I also know you are a good and decent person.*

She holds up her middle finger under the pillow. Emmet is letting her know he is watching.

There are wired cameras on the lower floor. The ones upstairs are wireless and disconnected. The AC vents are shut off, and the doors are closed. The upstairs isn't a place Emmet visits. No need. He doesn't use the two extra bedrooms and baths, the galley kitchen, or private back entrance. When Emmet first bought the place, he had remodeled to rent via Airbnb. However, once his management company took off, he wanted home to be his refuge. He hated strangers in his space, stomping overhead and complaining about the Internet being down and not enough hot water. And he hated

plunging other people's crap. Now, only Margaret ever meanders up that way, about once a month to clean what hasn't gotten dirty.

Claire sits on the floor next to the dog. It is then the brilliant idea blasts into her brain. It makes her chuckle. Claire whispers to Geno while she pets him for the camera, *I'm not going anywhere*. Regardless, she packs her things which amount to one carry-on suitcase and six sizeable black plastic bags of clothes, shoes, and hair and face products. Energized, she walks in and out the front door carrying her things. She doesn't wipe her feet. On the last trip, Claire stuffs the chicken dinner, minus the bones, into the dog's bowl. Reluctantly, Claire hangs her house key on the holder and slips off another marked, 'tenant key.'

Once in her car, she drives around the block, into the alleyway, and parks behind Emmet's house. Slipping a stick into the gate crack and pushing back on the slide lock, Claire lets herself into the backyard. She opens the home security app on her phone to observe the camera's view. The yard isn't monitored, but the back entrance is. She removes the shed key from under the fake rock and drags a ladder to the house. To avoid detection, she climbs on top of the gable and reaches down to angle the camera away from the back door, but enough to view the hinges and mounding. Something the wind might have done, or a squirrel. At last, she opens the door and walks her things up the stairs and into the bedroom with a lovely view of the street below. As she unpacks into the Ikea dresser, she thinks, *This is simply a detour, Emmet will realize his mistake, and things will be good again*.

Although drinking and drugging have never been a concern for her, Claire spends that first upstairs-weekend making a fearless inventory, something she borrowed from her recovering friends back home. However, her inventory details the issues of concern for her continued relationship with Emmet. She plans to win him back and aims to find out what he needs that she hasn't provided. Claire

has trouble identifying the problems. *He said I'm not spontaneous enough. What else? Maybe I'm not coming off exotic enough? Too many clothes? He did say, "a hell of a lot of clothes."*

Before Emmet returns, Claire sells her car, opting for public transportation. Using a Command attachment strip, she also attaches a tiny wireless spycam under the upstairs rail. She wants to observe Emmet, and especially wants to see what's so great about 'her.' Geno lumbers up the stairs, and Claire gives him a quick pat on the head, and then sends him downstairs. *Good dog. But stay downstairs. Please.*

She is very, very quiet whenever Emmet is home. After two weeks, only Bailey-the dog sitter, and Margaret show up, not "her." Bailey comes mornings and evenings on kid-weekends. She stays about an hour each time, letting Geno out, filling his bowls and petting the dog while watching Netflix on her phone. Margaret comes on Saturdays but hasn't cleaned upstairs. In preparation, Claire tapes a note to her bedroom door on Saturday mornings. It says not to clean in this room—Por favor no limpie este cuarto. Since Margaret doesn't speak English, and Emmet doesn't speak Spanish, Claire isn't worried they will communicate about the note. Claire learns that Margaret sings quite well.

Friday night of her third week living on the downlow, Emmet comes home with 'her.' *Welcome, Loretta, to my humble abode.*

Claire hasn't put a camera in his bedroom and doesn't, therefore, see much of them. She puts on headphones to avoid eavesdropping. Claire isn't a voyeur, anyway, not a sexual one. For the first time in her life, she thinks about homicide. Her only options are strangulation or a kitchen knife. She imagines sliding her feet across the floor, down the steps, and into the kitchen. Unable to resist, Claire removes the headphones and finds herself at the top of the stairs. She sits and begins to scoot down, one step, then another, and another. Her heart is pounding in her chest. When she is halfway down,

Claire hears a shuffling noise at the bottom of the stairs. She freezes. Geno stands on the landing, looking at her.

Don't bark. Claire mouths. He doesn't. But it's hard to stay connected to her homicidal rage while staring into the old dog's face.

There will be no double-murder tonight.

As Claire begins to move back up the stairs, a light switches on. She flattens herself against the steps. Emmet's voice. *Don't stay away too long, Loretta. The bed is already getting cold.* And Loretta's response. *This girl has gotta pee. I'm sure you can keep it hot til I get back.* Geno heads for naked Loretta as Claire watches through the rails. Loretta waits for him, bends down and gives him a hug. Her long red hair spirals over his face, and she murmurs softly to the dog. As she stands, exposed, her toned body is backlit in a halo of golden light. Claire gets it now. *Exotic and spontaneous.* When the lights go off, Claire crawls back to bed and very quietly, into the pillow, sobs herself to sleep.

I need a plan. This is her first waking utterance. Her sad side wishes an exit, a slithering out the door with no one the wiser. Her mad side wants retribution, retaliation, or at the very least, a dramatic exodus.

In the multitude of days to follow, Claire learns Emmet is habitual when alone; he gets up to an alarm, runs for 45 minutes, showers for ten, has breakfast, and leaves for work. According to HoverOver, he exits work between six and six-fifteen. Once home, Emmet eats fast food carryout while watching the news with the sound off—captions on. Flipping through the channels, he talks to his parents and Loretta, always closing with *I love you.* Then bed. Claire learns he isn't very spontaneous or exotic.

Then, by the grace of God or some other sympathetic being, the big fight commences. It is held in the living room. Claire is watching on her phone. At first, Loretta and Emmet are seated on the cloud couch, holding hands. Claire can see that Margaret has removed her sad-emoji mascara stains.

What do you mean you are moving away? Emmet sounds disheartened.

I got a better job offer, the same reason I came back here. My old company wants me back, and for tons more money. You should be happy for me.

Emmet lets go of Loretta's hands. *I thought we were going to, you know, try to make us work. For the long haul.*

I know, and I really love you, but I have to go where the wind blows me. Remember, you like my free spirit?

A free spirit, not disappearing spirit! He pauses, reaching for her. *So maybe we can take turns visiting on the weekends when I don't see my kids.*

Loretta doesn't take his hands. *No Emmet, it won't work. It didn't work the last time we tried. This was fun; let's just enjoy the remaining time together.*

How long have you known about this?

A couple of weeks.

Emmet stands and looks down on her. *A couple of weeks?* His voice has grown loud, and Loretta looks nervous. Claire feels anxious too. *And you are telling me now?*

Loretta stands and faces Emmet. *Yes, because I knew this is how you would react, and I didn't want to ruin things.*

Well, you ruined things! He screams at her, throwing his arms overhead and punching the air.

Loretta backs up, and then turns towards the door. *Look, I'm gonna go.*

Fine, go. No point in you staying if this isn't enough for you. If I'm not enough.

Loretta half-turns back to him. *There's a week before I go. We could...*

No, I'm done. Go!

Well, I want my dog back. I miss him.

Fine. Take him! Go, the both of you!

Her dog? Claire is confused. Still, she wants to twirl and cheer. It's hard to self-contain, to stay noiseless and still, so she rocks on the bed with her arms tightly crossed over her chest, watching her phone, and listening.

A dog shuffles. A door slams. A car pulls away. A man cries. And Claire's cell phone lights up with a text from Emmet.

How are you?

Claire can see he is pacing while texting. *Okay, you?*

Great, just great.

Happy to hear you are great. Claire hesitates, but goes for it. *I am still missing you.*

Claire waits for his reply, then wishes she had texted something else like—*I'm great too, learning to skydive*—or anything spontaneous. Maybe—*I'm fine; I've been living over your head for a couple of months, quiet as a mouse.* Now that would have sounded spontaneous.

There is no reply from Emmet.

Loretta's Dog? It sinks in. Claire learns Geno was not a rescue dog from the shelter about to be euthanized—as Emmet had written on his dating profile. She wonders if he kept Geno only to get Loretta back. Not an animal lover. Uncheck.

Claire knows what comes next. He will go on the dating websites because he is a creature of habit. Claire will go catfishing to figure out, at last, what she doesn't have that he needs. She finds him on Tinder, Match, and Bumble and creates three fictitious profiles. Each of her fantasy women has an exotic name. She knows this because she searched Google with 'exotic names for women.' Their faces are also courtesy of Google, online images of model's faces—the ones at the end of the image search. Claire makes them 25, 27, and 30-years-old. A law student, a woman with a cupcake business, and a street artist who paints murals and works part-time for a museum. Nice detail. Hometowns: Hackensack, Middletown, and Orange Grove. All now live in Austin.

Emmet responds first to M's profile—*Hi I'm Murni. (It means pure). Most people say I have a great body but doesn't everyone in Austin? LOL. I just love this town. I'm aceing my class in litigation. Honestly, corporate law is perfect for me. Sorry if that turns off all the hippies out there. I'd love to share my wild side with someone likeminded.*

Emmet writes, *I like your profile. I'm definitely not a hippie. I'd love to talk with you about litigation. I run a company and could use some legal advice. Also interested in that wild side! LOL.*

From their conversations, Claire learns Emmet is 40 again, isn't in a relationship, and recently broke up with a very self-centered woman. *How so?* He did all kinds of stuff for her, and she never gave him a thought. And what did he want in a relationship? *Stability, someone who has their own career but won't put it ahead of the relationship.* He wants children. He forgets to mention he has children. Really? Emmet wants to settle down, have children, another family? What about spontaneous and exotic? Claire is going to let her hair even out.

After a week of conversations, Emmet wants to meet Murni. *I'm wondering if you are free to meet sometime soon.*

Yes. I'm free. How about this weekend? Murni responds.

No, sorry, away on business.

What a lie! Claire says out loud. But not loud enough to breach the closed bedroom door. Then she whispers. *Business my ass. This a kid-weekend!*

What about next weekend? Types Emmet.

Perfect.

At Whatta-bar?

Works for me. Murni is most agreeable.

In the outdoor arena?

Fabulous. It's a good thing Emmet can't read sarcasm.

Murni doesn't show. She ghosts him. Poof. Claire thinks about emailing Emmet to offer an excuse, but she doesn't. She imagines him alone at the bar, checking his watch every few minutes and wonders how long he will wait. One hour, twenty minutes. Thanks, HoverOver.

The next Emmet-free weekend, Claire sleeps in. She is jolted awake by a woman's scream. Margaret is hollering while clutching the handle of a vacuum. Her eyes are popped open like a marionette puppet. The note about not cleaning is on the nightstand next to Claire's bed. In another few seconds, Margaret is laughing and apologizing for her lack of recognition. Claire explains that Emmet is letting her stay with him until she gets back on her feet.

¿Dónde está Geno? ¿Muerto? Margaret asks.

No, Loretta lo tomó. Responds Claire.

Margaret is relieved that Geno is alive and asks if Loretta and Geno are coming back, to which Claire responds that she doesn't believe so. She tells Margaret it is not necessary to clean her room. Dread, spurred by thoughts of getting caught by Emmet, nauseates Claire. The universe is telling her it is time to move out, but she decides to stay. Emmet has swiped right on the profile of Paige, the street artist.

Just a little longer, Claire tells the ceiling.

Emmet is looking for someone who *likes to cook and wants a monogamous, long-term relationship*. He doesn't want children at this time because he already has two, but he might consider it in the future. Emmet does want to get married when he finds the right woman. Out of life, he wants to be successful, and he wants someone honest and a natural beauty, inside and out.

Claire thinks about donating her high heels.

Oh, yes, I'm as natural as they come. I wear minimal make-up and am in a smock most days.

Later Paige tells Emmet that sometimes she is wearing only a smock. She likes to cook. Music? *The blues, soft rock. Not a fan of jazz.*

Emmet doesn't mind much; he has *eclectic taste in music*. Now.

A week later, Claire is dressed in a hoodie, watching Emmet from behind a tree at Zilker Park. She is distracted by the abundance of dogs. Claire misses Geno. Emmet is sitting on a bench, dressed in his button-down red shirt, waiting for Paige. He is holding two coffee cups until he puts one down and sips on the other. After half an hour, Claire sends an email from Paige. *Sorry, I'm not ready to be in a relationship with you. I'm sure you'll find someone special.*

Claire sees Emmet examine his phone. She thinks about coincidentally walking past him and saying hello. But before she decides, Emmet stands and walks away, leaving one cup behind. When she can no longer see his red shirt, she confiscates the coffee. It's exactly how she likes it—soy latte with an extra shot—although a bit tepid for her taste.

That night, after packing her bags, Claire's phone lights up with a text. It's Emmet.

How are you?

Claire tries to think of something spontaneous, but nothing comes to mind. *Okay, how are you?*

Not so great. Sadface.

I'm sorry. Want to talk about it? Claire adjusts the bed pillows behind her head.

Emmet texts. *Can you come over? I've missed you.*