

Broken Blinds

The yellowed floral sheets were bloody. Jammed between her legs, wrapped tight to her thighs, twisted up during the night from a hot spell. A sheen of sweat had dried sticky on her body. Pulling the top sheet away—an uncomfortable tepid damp—Tabitha wadded it loosely into a ball, sightlessly tossed it toward the laundry basket. Vacantly, she hoped for the worst—or the best—depending on how you looked at it. She wasn't a mom. Maybe her baby agreed. Born into a life of stress, obstacles, hardships. Why start a life like that? Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away. Imagining her heart like a solid stone weight.

Sunlight split through broken blind slats, jagged, and bent. Maybe from when he'd thrown her into the window. Maybe from the cat chasing a fly.

Even the cat had left. Choosing the wild over despondency.

Glancing at her phone, she clocked the time—5 a.m. July 6, 2023. Full sun in the sky. Nature's wake up call.

Cautiously she lifted herself to sit, but felt no pain, only the usual stiffness after a double shift at the pub. Remnants of the night before littered the coffee table, overflowing ash trays, empty bottles, and spent pipes. Her stomach churned at the odor. Stale tobacco, pot, and soured beer. Fumbling open her purse—hidden between the mattress and wall—she crumbled a saltine out of the plastic sleeve, scooping crumbs into her mouth. They stuck in a dry salty mound on her tongue. She reached for her water bottle but spotted an extinguished cigarette oozing its toxicity like an oil tanker leaking poison into the sea. Coughing as crumbs lodged in her throat, she staggered a couple feet to the kitchen sink. Running the tap, it sputtered rusty orange fluid. Moments later it ran lighter, a semblance of drinkable. Plugging her nose, she leaned in and

gulped. The taste of sulfur filled her mouth, but she forced the dirty water down, hoping it did more good than harm.

The shack was empty. Addiction, a real self-motivator. Dale rarely missed a tide. His digging, her freedom. Clams wouldn't make you rich, but they'd bankroll an oxy habit if you could get double tides. The last of the crowd had staggered out when Dale started snoring in the recliner a few hours before, lit cigarette burning a new hole into stained upholstery.

Even the single-wide trailer she'd grown up in was spacious compared to this. His inheritance. The family pride passed on. A barely livable one-room twelve-by-twelve camp with exposed insulation, poorly wired electricity, and indoor plumbing on a tiny parcel of wooded land in the seaside town of Phippsburg, Maine. The sea wasn't visible from the family lot. But you could catch the fresh scent of eau de town dump when the wind shifted westerly.

Still, they loved to talk about what they could sell it for. Around the firepit—rusty oil barrel leaking filth into the earth—the brothers dreamed and schemed of what they'd do with all that money. Boats, trucks, parties, girls. Land was scooped up like hotcakes fresh off the grill by out-of-staters looking to claim the zip code.

They'd never sell. An exploded can of worms—in the form of unpaid taxes and deed disputes—wouldn't get them a paycheck. It was possible they didn't own it anymore, but the town hadn't waged that war yet. Messing with the Carters was like submitting a request to have your house burned down in the middle of the night—while you slept inside.

Scraping stringy dark hair into a ponytail she was glad there was no mirror in the curtained-off bathroom. She used to be pretty, back when fruits and veggies were a staple not a luxury. She missed the days of free school lunches, even meatloaf Mondays. She didn't need to

see a reflection to know dark puffy circles bordered dull brown eyes or that the thin, dry skin of her face was covered in peach fuzz and an unhealthy yellow tint. Splashing stinky water over her face, she shivered at the icy coolness. Wiping a damp washcloth between her thighs it came away with dried blood only. The spotting had stopped.

She used Dale's deodorant and then struggled her bony limbs into clean wrinkled jeans and a t-shirt. Cinching a belt tight around her waist, she forced her feet into beat-up Vans, some kid's rejects she'd picked up at Goodwill for two bucks. Her big toe poked out of a worn hole in the right sneaker.

Her trucker dad had left in '05 to help clean up Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, never to return. Not a saint or a martyr. Chasing fast cash and easy women. Wife number two was a stripper barely old enough to drink where she danced.

Numbing the struggle with cheap wine, her mom worked hard for years. When Tab was old enough to fend for herself, she'd reacted like any teen mom turned late-thirties divorcee might, hanging out at the local oceanside dive until she landed a retiree with a pair of doublewides, one in Florida and one in Maine.

Living up to expectations, her 1991 red Ford escort whined petulantly when she turned the key. Pumping the gas with no luck, she let off the ignition for a minute. Jamming the clutch back to the floor, she tried again, this time the engine reluctantly grumbled to life. Like her, ugly and dependable. A reflection she wouldn't ruminant on.

Bumping over roots and potholes, the driveway—a path beaten into the ground by vehicles passing on top for decades—ended in a five-inch-high lip of Route 209 pavement, Phippsburg's main thoroughfare. Visibility limited through overgrown trees on either side, she prayed for the best, catapulting her wheels over the hump and onto the road. Beach traffic

wouldn't pick up for another hour or two. Working the clutch until she hit cruising speed, she cranked down her window, still nauseous.

Sun baked the pavement already, throwing heat toward her bare arm dangling off the side of the car. No hint of a breeze. Set to be a scorcher.

Tipping up the blinker wand at the center store, she wedged her car between two oversized trucks, their long beds providing the familiar fishing village aroma of rotting fish juice, curdling her stomach further. Waving to Jess at the register—they'd gone to high school then nowhere together—she beelined for the bread aisle. Unappetizing as food may be, she needed calories, no matter how empty. Settling for a \$2.99 loaf of white Wonder Bread, she gripped the thin plastic in one hand and opened the cooler for a gallon of cold spring water with the other.

Nodding at the men gathered around the coffee bar like it was their personal office water cooler, she dropped her items on the checkout counter. Shiny apples gleamed in bowl. She was tempted to add one to her purchase, probably only an extra dollar or two, and she'd get paid cash at her cleaning job. Debating still, she pulled out her thin cloth wallet, and her heart dropped.

“Asshole,” she mumbled, not needing to open it to know it was empty. He'd cleaned her out.

Color burned her cheeks, meeting Jess' eyes. Her friend nodded in understanding, “Dale the dickhead strikes again. I'll put in on your account.” Jess grabbed the spiral bound notebook and flipped to Tab's name, adding a fresh number to the crossed-out payments. Another balance to add to the list—car insurance, phone minutes, electricity, gas, oil, food—that kept growing because her boyfriend stole money for drugs while she slept.

She tallied her debts while driving east, blue sky so bright she needed to squint. Dale had tossed her five-dollar gas station sunglasses—black frames dotted with rhinestones—out the

window last week, saying she looked like a whore. She'd bought them for function, not fashion, to stave off daily migraines.

Once at speed, she cradled the bread between her legs, untwisting the wire and freeing an interior slice. Settling it on her leg, she retrieved her French's yellow mustard from the glove box, oozing a warm stream across the white surface. She folded the bread over and took a bite, slowly chewing the soft concoction. Somehow it was the only thing her stomach wouldn't rebel against.

Winding her Ford up a long, paved driveway, Tab stuttered the car to a stop when she reached the garage. Mrs. Croft was an eighty-seven-year-old earlier riser and liked Tab to come "help" her clean at six in the morning every Thursday. The log cabin was perched on a bluff atop the ocean. Mr. Croft had purchased the land for a thousand dollars back in the sixties, right before he'd proposed. Now he was buried beneath a blue spruce out back that they'd planted together on their fifth anniversary.

"I made you a coffee dear," Mrs. Croft greeted her in a flowered housecoat, shuffling toward the kitchen, stooped shoulders leading the way. Her body had settled into the shape of a plump question mark over time.

Taking the warm mug of dissolved instant granules, Tab sipped it black, hoping she could tolerate enough to get a jolt of caffeine.

"Read first today?"

Mrs. Croft's eyesight had deteriorated. No longer able to decipher words on a page, but somehow still allowed a driver's license.

Matching American flag placemats were set at all four seats of the pine kitchen table. Mrs. Croft shakily set her cup of tea down on one. No one ate at the table. No one visited. Just Tab. Mrs. Croft had a TV stand where she ate her microwaved meals.

Flipping to their bookmarked page, Tab recited Delia Owens' fluidly written words, experiencing the bestseller along with her aging friend. *Client*.

Living in a blurred world of daytime soaps on her big box TV and NPR over the radio, Mrs. Croft rejected advancements in technology with disgust. Refusing to even listen to a book on tape. *Cassette tape*. The local library still has these, but Mrs. Croft refused to slide one into her husband's ancient stereo system.

Once their mugs were empty and the final words of the chapter had been read, they pushed away from the table, Tab retrieving the cleaning supply caddy and Mrs. Croft rinsing the cups clean.

"You can start with the living room, dear. I'll join you after I shower."

Mrs. Croft didn't believe in having a maid, but a helper was okay. She'd pick up a rag to buff the furniture for the last five minutes of Tab's three-hour shift. Each week was the same routine: dust, vacuum, bathrooms, mop. Dusting included taking a wet rag to the rounded logs—shiny with polyurethane coating—making up the interior walls. Mr. Croft had made a commitment to wood for his home and stuck with it. A monotone homage to natural resources. Floors, walls, ceilings, railings, cabinets, and doors. All shiny, poly-ed wood.

As much as she enjoyed her time with Mrs. Croft, this wasn't the future she'd hoped for as a little girl, nose deep in worn library books, living the lives of her characters. Maybe she'd be a veterinarian or a nurse or a flight attendant.

But her high school guidance counselor had joined a long list of people in her life who didn't care enough to provide the simple help she needed. Back then she didn't know there were ways to go to college without money. Her grades would've landed her something, devouring textbooks like food. It wasn't too late, she knew, but now was drowning in bills with no fathomable escape route. He'd never let her leave anyway.

She'd tried before. Would not recommend a repeat effort.

The bathroom door cracked open. Mrs. Croft letting the steam out so she could dry her hair into a curly gray bob.

Once her mom had Florida Jim's ring on her finger, she'd sold her trailer, pocketing the meager earnings, no longer responsible for Tab's welfare, and moved to his spot on a pond two hours north. Tab made the occasional check-in call, empty promises to visit fell flat on both ends.

Mid swipe, the cloth fell from her hand as a cramp ravaged her abdomen. Doubling over, gripping the rough stained log, splinters pricked her palm as the pain tensed her face, neck straining, a groan ripping from her chest.

"Is everything okay?" Mrs. Croft's worried voice called down the hallway.

Two months along, she had no bump. No one knew. *It wasn't too late.*

She tried to yell a reassurance, but it came out as a gasp, dropping hard to her knees on the floor.

Mrs. Croft's shuffled toward her, slippers quickly sliding across the wood. "Oh my. Dear, you don't look so good."

Tab moaned in acknowledgement, gripping her flat stomach, as if to hold the pain in.

"Let me get dressed. We'll go to the hospital."

Tab nodded, but fearfully prayed the pain would stop. It's not like the pub provided health insurance. She cursed Dale, refusing to wear a condom. Too restrictive.

A refill on her pill had been denied. She was due for an annual appointment with Planned Parenthood first, which couldn't happen until she had an extra twenty bucks to cover the income-based sliding scale fee she qualified for.

First, she'd stayed because he was the only one who hadn't left her. They'd met at the pub. She was nineteen.

One of her usuals—a mean drunk—had twisted her wrist when she set down his Canadian Club tumbler with too much ice. Holding her there, while scooping the ice out, he pelted it in her face. Dale had shoved the guy off his stool mid stride, landing a rib kick before dragging him through the crowd and out the front door. He'd returned, propping himself on the empty stool, accepting the bottle of Budweiser she offered in gratitude. Wearing a faded navy button down tight across broad shoulders, split open at the top, with worn low-slung Wrangler jeans, she'd shivered at his manliness. She was only used to boys. The deep bronze of his weathered skin illuminated hunter green eyes. Tousled light brown hair glistened with strands of sunbaked blond framing dimples that could charm an old lady out of her last ten dollars.

Fresh off the boat—an early winter offshore trip—he was riding a coke bender with the last of his work stash. She mistook the shine in his eyes for excitement and felt safe with his veiny forearms wrapped across her waist on the sticky barroom dance floor. The band played “Free Bird” so loud the clean pint glasses shook in their holding racks. She'd thought the song was poignant, chronicling the moment they met. *The irony.*

Now, she stayed because she didn't have a choice. His violent temper scarier than staying.

“Okay, come on up,” Mrs. Croft hunched over her, wearing a matching pink sweatsuit, chest embroidered with chickadees sitting on pinecones. White orthopedic shoes braced her stance while she reached for Tab’s arm with a surprising firm grip around her bicep. Grinding her teeth against the pain Tab hobbled toward the door, trying not to put too much weight on the older woman.

Sagging with relief into the passenger seat of the RAV4, Tab slumped over. They were twenty-five minutes from help. Minimum. The pleasures of rural life.

Normally maintaining a steady twenty miles below the speed limit, Mrs. Croft surprised her by accelerating quickly, zooming toward town. She closed her eyes, afraid to watch as they hurtled down the two-lane road with nothing to guide them but a failing set of eyes. The cramping had slowed, still a sharp pain, but not breathtaking.

Dale was proud that he’d never used needles, a frequent party line he boasted before snorting a crushed line of powder. In the hierarchy of drug abusers, he wasn’t on the bottom with meth-heads and heroin shooters. She didn’t know he used drugs of any kind when they first met. *Naïve*. There were moments of kindness, at first. They’d even gone to the movies. He paid for everything. That was before he tried oxy. After that, the only time he was kind was when he passed out before exploding into a fit of rage.

Feeling the car swerve quickly she cracked an eyelid, the pain settling to a dull ache. She felt wet between her legs. Mrs. Croft was straining forward to peer over the steering wheel as she navigated onto the highway in Bath.

“I think the worst has passed,” Tab told her once they were safely merged, “we can skip Midcoast Hospital and go to Planned Parenthood. Will save me some money.”

Mrs. Croft nodded, keeping her attention on the road. If she was surprised that it was baby related pain instead of appendicitis or an ulcer, she didn't show it. Tab carefully pushed herself upright, leaning heavily on the door.

Crossing the Frank J. Wood Bridge into Topsham, she saw crudely designed posters in a multitude of colors. Less than a dozen picketers were gathered along the sidewalks.

STOP THE MURDER OF BABIES.

A CHILD NOT A CHOICE.

HONK FOR LIFE.

From the side of her eye, she thought she saw Mrs. Croft flip the bird, but couldn't be sure, starting to feel dizzy. Turning into the clinic, she was relieved to see that protestors weren't blocking the entrance. Typical Mainers. Maintaining a respectful distance while communicating judgement.

Swiping the car diagonally across two parking spaces, Mrs. Croft slammed the car into Park, hopping out with the spryness of a fifty-year-old. She had the passenger door whipped open before Tab could extricate herself from the seatbelt, feeling woozy and confused. Mrs. Croft did it for her, trying to pull her to her feet.

"I can do it," were the last words she uttered before dropping to the pavement.

She woke to bright white lights and the antiseptic smell of the clinic. Laid back on the hospital bed, she wanted to close her eyes and never open them again.

She was so tired.

Mrs. Croft held her hand lightly, thin papery skin blueish white against her olive-yellow tone. "You can stay with me while you get your strength back. I'd love company. Plenty of space

for the two of us. Think of all the books we'd go through!" She'd seen the bruises over the past two years but had grown up in a time when you didn't ask.

A slight knock on the door and they were joined by a physician in purple scrubs, a white coat, and bushy red hair pulled back in a wide clip. Dr. Ross had a pleasant smile and freckles spattered across her nose. She reassured Tab, "The baby's fine. Spotting is normal. You've got low blood pressure, which is likely why you fainted. Thankfully, your head bounced off this one's sturdy shoe, not the blacktop, so no concern for concussion." She pointed at Mrs. Croft, who listened with rapt attention. "Bloodwork shows anemia, so we'll send you home with vitamins, as well as some nutrition info. The first trimester can make it tough to get enough to eat. With someone as tiny as you, you're going to have to try your best."

She didn't feel relief, or disappointment. Just nothing.

Registering her indifferent response, Dr. Ross softened her tone, "would you like to discuss your options?" Not waiting for a nod, she continued, listing the possibilities: raising the baby, adoption, abortion. Pamphlets for all three were slid into a discharge bag along with bottles of supplements.

On the drive back, Mrs. Croft continued her campaign to be roommates. "Baby or no baby. You're welcome alone or with the little one. Your body. Your choice."

Tab forced a smile, leaning her forehead against the window, air conditioning fluttering hair from her face.

Crossing the bridge, back to their rural peninsula, she didn't trust herself to drive but needed to anyway. Leaving required an exit plan, where she could collect her things, the few items that brought her joy: a dog-eared copy of *Great Expectations* from her high school librarian; a picture of her as a toddler with her parents, a reminder she'd had a family once; and a

tiny box of chocolates Mrs. Croft had given her last Christmas that she'd been saving for the perfect time to enjoy.

Wringing her hands together in worry, Mrs. Croft tried to talk her out of leaving once they'd made it back to her house.

"I'll be fine. I promise," Tab reassured from her driver's seat, ignoring the lightheaded sensation. "I'll give you a call in the morning."

In a daze, she covered the distance home. If you could call it that. *Prison with a day pass.* The pain in her stomach had subsided to a dull throb but the exhaustion was overwhelming, sliding into unconsciousness as soon as she fell on the mattress with no top sheet.

It was dark when she startled awake. Dim moonlight was distorted through the damaged blinds. She blinked until she recognized the rough plywood boards of the ceiling. Dale was home. Angry. Banging, cursing, yelling.

Curling to a fetal position, she closed her eyes against the onslaught, but cracked one back open when a whistling sounded through the air. An empty Wheat Thin box whipped across her cheek, slicing a tiny break in the skin. They had no food. *Her fault.*

She pictured Mrs. Croft's spare bedroom, untouched for decades except when they dusted and turned the mattress over each year. It was decorated with a loon theme. Floating birds on pillowcases, curtains, and the comforter. Shades of forest green, brown, and white, oddly offset by a neon multicolored throw Mrs. Croft had crocheted herself and folded at the end of the bed.

Dale continued to rage, shaking the refrigerator on its base. Oversized pickle jar clanking hollowly within.

He didn't know where Mrs. Croft lived—or where any of the houses she cleaned were—he'd never cared enough to ask. She could probably hide there. Maybe take online classes while saving up cash to get a place. Maybe for two. Maybe not.

A crash boomed through the house as the toaster sailed through the air, smashing against the front door, denting the metal casement. She saw Dale stomping toward her—red faced and fists clenched—as if in slow motion. Still, she felt nothing. *Apathy*. Then everything faded to black.