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Weight

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The bracelet fit snugly in her jacket pocket, but the matching necklace snagged the lining, its pendant leaving an accusing eye dangling over the edge. The other pocket held a tangle of chains and beads. But it wasn't enough. She needed something with bigger pockets, something that held more. Scooping out handfuls of jewelry, she dumped everything on the table and rifled through outfits on the rack.

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As she watched darkness call the last gilt-tipped minaret along the Turkish shore, Marty knew night's embrace would not be gentle. The wake of a passing ship churned memories of the night Lana had yelled, *You killed him.*

The maitre d' gave her grief for reserving a table for one. "Why don't you join that party of Americans?" But she held her ground, so tonight she sat alone in a dining room that echoed the clink of silver on china. Sipping wine, Marty turned to the window and caught the reflection of a man and boy at the next table. The man's thick gray hair reminded her of Cole's.

Tonight the ship would sail through the Dardanelles, the same route she'd taken with Cole the first year they were married. They'd stood on deck as the ship cruised the narrow channel, watching the lights peek-a-boo along the shore. As the channel widened, the lights grew fainter and seemed to disappear; but then she'd catch a flicker in the distance—a star that could only be seen out the corner of an eye while staring at something else.

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Cole was an English professor. "With a name like Coleridge, I couldn't sell used cars." He loved teaching. Once she sat in on a class as he read a poem by Yeats in an impossibly sensual voice. The girls worshipped him, and Marty wondered what it felt like to be a god.

Back then, Cole was proud of his wife. Called her "soldering-gun Picasso" and even persuaded her to quit her day job. Marty protested there wouldn't be enough money to support a family. "I can take care of it," he said, running his hands over her growing belly.

"Look at the necklace she made," he said to his colleague, Larry Kenner one night after dinner. Larry studied Marty's chest with the eyes of a master jeweler before inching up to necklace level. Rumor confirmed, she thought.

“Excuse me.” The man from the next table was standing next to her chair. “My son is fascinated by your necklace. He bet me you made it yourself.”

Marty looked up at him, her face barrier hard.

“He wants to make jewelry. Already has an internship with a jeweler and he’s only fourteen. Join us for dessert?”

“Not tonight, thanks.” Stay on your side; don’t cross here.

“As a favor to my son. Please.” He put one hand on the table and folded his body down until they were almost eye level, his *please* gripping. She followed him to his table.

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She jammed the heaviest pieces into the pockets of her hiking pants, hoping the loose fit would provide cover. She was running out of outfits, out of time.

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Cole put his book down and looked at the clock. “Can’t get any work done tonight.”

Marty reached over and turned down the speakers.

“It’s not the music. I just can’t sit still.” He got up and turned the speakers up slightly. “C’mere.”

When she stood up, he pulled her close. “Tomorrow, tenure, everything.”

“Lana’s watching from the top of the steps,” she whispered.

They stood in the middle of the room, barely moving, his fingers kneading her back.

“Biggest day of my life.”

When the music ended, Marty looked back at the staircase. Lana was gone.

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She sat across the table from the boy, who looked younger than fourteen with his cowlicky hair and vulnerable face. When the man told her he was divorced and had joint custody, the boy’s lips etched a tight line under his nose. Lucky you. Divorced is still-could-be. Dead is engraved in stone. She half-listened as he told her they’d been visiting his aunt and uncle in Turkey. When they got back to New York, the boy was scheduled to fly to the West Coast to live with his mother. The boy turned his face to the window.

Anxious to leave, Marty turned the conversation back to the topic that had brought her to the table. “Your father tells me you’re interested in jewelry.”

The boy turned, his face all color, all child. “I bet he didn’t tell you I’m studying geology, too. You take rocks and make, like, a necklace. Some

lady buys it, passes it on to her daughter, who passes it on to her daughter. Or the person dies and wears it when she's buried. Either way, it's recycled. So I'm an artist and an ecologist all in one." He smiled. "That's an awesome piece you're wearing. You make it? Can I see?" Marty half stood and leaned over the table, holding the necklace out toward him. The boy reached out, and she watched his fingers trace the contours of the stones.

He described his first piece, illustrating on the back of a cocktail napkin. It was a miniature puzzle pin, interlocking copper slices on a silver backing. There was a completeness to the work, as if it were his grand finale. She complimented him on his ingenuity.

A gentle movement of the ship reminded Marty how her belly had rippled during her pregnancy whenever her daughter had changed positions. Her baby's heartbeats sent a message only Marty could hear: "You are a part of me and I will always love you." She and Cole laughed at the undulating geography of her body, and decided to name the baby Lana because it sounded like velvet and meant *calm as still water* in Hawaiian.

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"Someone in the department did this. I'll find out who, swear to God, and kill the fucker." Marty jumped as Cole threw a book against the wall. When he turned to her, the rage was gone, and he looked like the Cole she'd married. But this Cole had a hard, clench-toothed edge. He looked past Marty, erasing her, eyes focused on the only prize worth winning.

Marty spent the next few months getting used to the new Cole who spent days at the office and nights in his study. She enjoyed the extra time with Lana, but resented the competition from Cole's new family: the colleagues he charmed and the seminar students who spearheaded a campaign to protest his tenure denial.

At home, Cole had two modes: 1) working, and 2) ranting. Some nights he and Marty made love violently as if she were on an opposing team. Other nights, alone in bed, she wondered whether he was secretly measuring his success against hers, resenting her growth as an artist while he struggled to keep his job. "It doesn't matter who earns more money," he insisted. But did he believe that? Did any man?

Marty was attending a jewelry convention in Paris when Cole called. His final application for tenure was denied. "Don't cut your trip short," he said, sounding unnaturally calm. "You won an award. Celebrate. I've scheduled vacation time and canceled the babysitter, so I'll be here when Lana gets home from school."

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Crack of onyx on tile. Her hands shook as she bent down to grab the stone. Before stuffing it into her oversized bra, she rubbed the smooth surface, remembering how she'd been drawn to the textures of her craft, the way

they echoed the human condition—the softness of skin on skin, the hardness of human heart. When she dropped the onyx into the cup of her bra, it clinked against the other stones.

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Laughter and scraps of conversation drifted up from the living room. From the top of the stairs, she could see Cole and Lana playing Monopoly on the floor. An ice cream truck outside endlessly looped its melody.

“Dance with me, Daddy.”

“Sure, baby.” He picked up two plastic houses and danced them around the board.

Lana nudged him with her elbow. “You’re silly.” Then she grabbed a hotel off Boardwalk and they danced round Atlantic City. Neither noticed Marty at the top of the stairs.

It was a gradual process—the shifting of affections, the undermining of authority.

“It’s only a tattoo, Marty. A butterfly.”

“Did you see what she wants to get? The size of it? It’ll start on her butt and run half up her back. A neon sign: ‘Come see my ass.’”

“Which her clothes will cover.”

“Low-rise jeans don’t cover crap.”

Lana came to the bedroom door and stood watching them go at it.

“You’re making too big a deal.”

“She’s only fourteen.”

“Like fourteen isn’t old enough,” Lana broke in. “You had your ears pierced when you were fourteen. Your parents were freaked.”

“She has a point, Marty.”

“Dammit, Cole. This isn’t about me. It’s about your daughter. And what’s appropriate at her age.”

Always the same two-against-one choreography. “Who’s the parent here, Cole?” Marty turned her head and slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand.

Marty didn’t think she could get her daughter back until she got her husband back. She considered divorce, but felt she had a better chance of getting through to her husband and daughter if she stayed, nourishing herself with the hope that things could change. It’s what gets me through the day, she thought. But on sleepless three o’clock mornings, Marty suspected that nothing was going to change.

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As they left the dining room, the ship rolled and Marty felt the steadying touch of the man’s hand on her shoulder. Standing outside the dining room, Marty silently rehearsed her getaway lines. Relieved when the

boy said he was going to the game room, she extended her hand to him, but he stood looking at her, face unreadable. Then, moving a step closer, the boy put his arms around her, burying his face in her neck. His hair smelled like citrus, and she could feel the not-quite-man chest under his silk shirt. Tentatively she put an arm around him, and they stood locked as if she were the last missing puzzle piece in his life. Then the boy slipped out of her arms and walked off. The man watched his son go. She could picture him saying goodbye to the boy for good.

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I need more weight. She slipped a glass paperweight into the pocket of her raincoat. The photograph on her nightstand—a sepia-toned picture of her family in Victorian costumes—had a heavy gilt frame. That should do it.

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The man turned to her. “I’m heading over to the ballroom later. Would you come with me? For an hour?”

An hour of companionship, she thought. Why not? Tomorrow he’ll be somewhere in Greece, and I’ll be gone. I’ve written the note so they won’t have to search the ship. I won’t leave Lana a legacy of uncertainty or guilt like Cole left me. The note explained that it wasn’t Lana’s fault—she’d just been a victim of her parents’ demons—and she begged her daughter’s forgiveness. A quiet passing, Marty thought. A dance, a splash, then nothing but the lights on shore.

“Yes,” she answered.

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When Lana was fifteen, Marty had taken her to a mall. She’d stopped to look at something in a window while Lana walked ahead. When Marty looked up, she saw a butt-swinging spiky-haired stranger in the distance and realized she was looking at her daughter. How had this happened? She remembered a line from a song: *You were so much mine, now I reach for you and I cannot find you.*

Marty had tried to break through to her original daughter, the sweet-girl memory, the five-year-old who handed Marty a Valentine’s card one April morning because her mommy looked so sad. But nothing in her maternal toolkit penetrated the anger that had hardened around her daughter.

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The man held her at the waist—a prelude to nothing. There was space between them, no eye contact, as her feet moved by muscle memory. The man pulled her close as if to embrace. Marty pulled back, but his grip was insistent. He lowered his mouth to her ear: “My wife left me, said she hated me, hated my family. Was glad they’re dead.” He held her tight so pain wouldn’t flatten him.

Some things are worse than death, thought Marty. Things that reach into your parents' graves, grab them by the throats, kill them over again.

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Marty had known something was wrong as soon as she walked in. It wasn't five o'clock, and Cole was home with a stack of papers on his lap.

"Why so early? What's wrong?"

Silence.

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" he mimicked her voice as he stood up. "I ran into a colleague this morning. Said he saw you at the Marriott a few weeks ago. He told me he wanted to say hello, when he saw Larry Kenner come up behind you. Saw! You and Larry-fucking-Kenner get on the elevator. Probably something innocent, he told me. Wasn't planning to say anything. Just slipped out." In a low voice—"Slipped out, my ass. Enjoyed every word, the prick."

Marty hadn't been attracted to Larry, but he must have sensed her vulnerability and worked it. A chance encounter at Starbucks led to three afternoons in a rented bed and the realization that another man's hands on her body wouldn't heal her. So she ended it.

"Was he good in bed, Marty?"

Marty's voice was locked in her throat.

"Any new tricks he can teach me? Come on, Sweetheart, I wanna hear all the freaking details."

"You haven't touched me in months."

"You're always at those goddamn craft shows."

"I'm home almost every night."

"I'm drowning in work shit, and you couldn't wait til the pressure was off. Had to screw my friend. No wonder I'm not getting anywhere. You're the freaking albatross round my neck."

Marty looked to the top of the stairs.

"Let her *hear* her mother's a whore. I can't believe you did this to me. All those girls in my classes itching to fuck me. Every day! And I never touched one." There were tears in his eyes, on his cheeks. "I shoulda fucked 'em all. Taught 'em real poetry." He grabbed his car keys and headed for the door. "You're killing me. I'm outta here."

Later that evening, Marty heard a timid knock that upped her dizziness to nausea. She looked through the blinds and thought she saw the mailman. Why was he was at her door that late? Did mailmen wear hats? And badges? She let him in and saw a silver-dollar-sized mustard stain on the sleeve of his jacket. Didn't this guy have a wife, a mother to clean him up before he left his house, she wondered. And why was he asking her name?

She stepped back from him, stepped back again, and looked him up and down. “You’re not the mailman.”

“Your husband was in a one-car accident. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not the mailman.”

“*You killed him. You killed my dad!*” The shriek from the top of the steps startled Marty and the officer. The young man shook his head and shrugged, hands inarticulate, absurd as lobster claws.

“*You killed him,*” Lana yelled again after the officer left.

Marty wandered from room to room, touching objects no longer familiar, brushing against walls so insubstantial she could walk through them. She was afraid the weight of her body would send her through the floorboards.

She went upstairs and found Lana beating her fist against the window sill.

“Baby—”

Lana’s fist gaveled judgment. “Not. Your. Baby. You treat me like a baby. Dad and I talk all the time about how you treat me.”

“You and your father talked? About me?”

“He calls your rules shit.”

He sabotaged me all along, thought Marty. I never stood a chance. If he weren’t dead, I’d kill him.

“The way he understands me. You don’t have a clue.”

Lana sucked in her lower lip, as if eating the mouth that had taken control—a kid who knew she’d gone too far, but couldn’t stop.

“This is killing me, you’re killing me.” Marty’s voice was vapor.

“*You killed him.* He loved me and you killed him.”

“Stop it!” Marty clutched her necklace, a perfect noose.

“I’ll say whatever I want. He loved me more than you, so you fucked that creep. Probably fucked a bunch of creeps.”

Beads smacked against hardwood. Oblivious, Marty stepped back, twisting her ankle on a loose stone. As Marty fell, Lana instinctively reached out to help her but quickly pulled back, watching her mother fall and swallowing the “Mommy!” that had almost slipped out.

Two days later, Marty got a call from her sister in California.

“Lana’s here. I’m sure this isn’t permanent.”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do,” said Marty as she hung up.

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Alone on deck, Marty slipped off her heels and shivered as her feet made contact with the cold planks. A strong wind ruffled the folds of her raincoat. When she took a step, the sharp contours of her jewelry-lined clothing sliced her skin. My life’s work turned psycho, she thought, bending

her arm and sliding her thumb under the strap of her evening bag to lift it away from her shoulder.

An albatross around his neck. “Water water everywhere,” he’d singsong. Marty released the strap and let it slide down her arm. The bag was nearly empty, and it hung lightly from her wrist, then slipped off. *The suicide note*. She’d intended to leave it on the nightstand of her cabin, but there it was in her handbag. A mother’s final words to her daughter. The ship tilted, and a gust of wind washed the bag overboard.

She stood there suspended between two continents, remembering the boy’s arms tightening around her, the feel of his ribs against her chest. Anchor me for just a moment, his body said. Just a moment before they send me away. She stood at the railing, stunned by the aching power of his need, by the dancing lights on the shoreline, and the siren song rising from the depths. It sounded like a lullaby.

Natalie Zellat Dyen is a freelance writer and photographer. Her recent fiction and poetry have been published in *Philadelphia Stories*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Willow Review*, and the *Jewish Writing Project*. Her essays and non-fiction articles have appeared in *Global Woman Magazine*, *Intercom Magazine*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other newspapers.

