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How Long Have You Been Lost?

At her best friend Beth's cast party, Emily had her palm read by a man dressed as a sailor who cheerily told her she'd have two miscarriages and die young. She pushed through the crowded, laughter-filled kitchen, and from the balcony outside her she watched the steamy rain pounding the cars below.

Beth came out and put her hand on Emily's back. "That's sorcery, you know," she said, as if this were comforting news. "I think we should pray." Emily watched Beth's tightly-closed eyes as she prayed, "Father, protect Emily from these words. Your love is stronger than anything of this world."

"Thanks," Emily told her. "I feel a little better." Beth went back inside the apartment and Emily went downstairs to sit in her van and wait for the actors to go home.

A month later a girl with long dark hair and hoop earrings approached Emily on the waterfront. "You have a very familiar spirit," she said, studying Emily intently. "I can tell you been searching for a long time." She held up one hand to block the sun's glare. "You come a long way to find something, yes?"

Emily said yes, she had only been in Georgia a short time. She did not say that she'd just left her husband or driven nearly three thousand miles to a city she'd never seen and sworn off men.

"I'm Sister Kathy. I know you keep getting into relationships that make you unhappy," she said, and though it was true, Emily opened her mouth to say she didn't

have any money for this kind of nonsense when Sister Kathy shook her head. “No charge. You need my help.” She touched Emily’s palm, then looked up, coyly. “I see your soulmate is about to enter your life.”

“Could he have entered my life two weeks ago?” Emily asked, then blushed, ashamed of her ridiculous hopes about Zane.

“The present means two weeks surrounding a certain time, so it’s possible,” Sister Kathy said. She wrote her address on the back of a grocery receipt and underlined the time twice. “Tomorrow,” she said, and coughed, “things change for you.”

Emily stood on the slanted porch of Sister Kathy’s house beneath a peeling hand-painted sign announcing: *Tarot, Palm Reading, Spiritual Guidance. Trusted in Savannah since 1953.* Emily planned to listen, but not to believe. In her pocket were two one dollar bills. She’d brought her checkbook as well, promising herself that fifteen dollars was all she would spend. Her silly job barely paid the bills; her three credit cards were over their limits, the van’s timing belt was going out and she owed Beth one month’s rent and forty-three dollars for the fancy pet carrier she bought Tractor, even though there was really no reason to take a rabbit anywhere in this city.

The door swung open before she knocked, and Sister Kathy pointed to a wicker chair by an enormous glass-topped table and told Emily to sit down. There were red plastic hearts hanging from the girl’s hoop earrings and she wore a pink angora sweater with faux pearls sewn around the neck. She took Emily’s palms and squinted at them.

Two white porcelain dogs sat on either side of the fireplace. Emily smelled incense, or curry—something spicy, warm. In the kitchen, an older woman in a robe poured herself a cup of coffee from a home espresso machine. Sister Kathy coughed, a

horrible hack rising from deep within her lungs, then cleared her throat. The woman muttered something.

“Who is that?” Emily whispered, watching Kathy’s heart-shaped face and wondering if the girl had some terrible disease.

“My mother.”

“How old *are* you?”

“Thirteen. I have an old soul.” She put her hand on Emily’s forearm. “The colors in your aura are very dim, and I can hardly see your inner light.” She coughed again. “It’s almost out.”

“Out? What happens when it goes out?”

“Wait,” Sister Kathy said. “Let me finish. I see that men are very drawntracted to you, but they can’t make the connection.”

“Drawntracted?”

“Attracted,” Sister Kathy said, blushing. “Attracted, but they can’t get past a certain point. They want to, but can’t because you’re missing something. Something you’re supposed to have.”

Her whole life Emily had felt this lack, had known there was a level of love she simply could not reach. It was as if all her emotions lived in a shallow pool, and though they often got churned up, they never were pulled, fresh, from some place deep inside her—only recycled. “I’m missing it? I plain don’t have it?”

“It was taken from you,” Sister Kathy said, turning to cough into her hand, then motioning to her mother for a tissue, “when you were very young. Someone you trusted.”

“Who?” Emily said. “Where?”

Sister Kathy squinted. “I’m only seeing people’s knees because you were very small. A holiday, maybe? I think it was a two-story house.”

The houses of her childhood were all split-level ranch, but the idea of this kind of violation had haunted Emily for years. Like most of her college friends she had spent too much money in counseling and felt now that her problems and fears were like a ball of yarn unraveling. The harder she pulled, the faster her thoughts and memories got tangled and knotted, and Emily was afraid, finally, that there was nothing at the center of her despair. She’d always wanted something to point to and say, “There, because of that,” but she was not so foolish to think anything in this life was so simple, so easy.

Kathy’s mother had moved to the couch and was sitting with her knees drawn up beneath her. She muttered something and the girl nodded. “You have no inner light to guide you,” Sister Kathy said. “That’s why you feel so lost.”

“No inner light?”

She patted Emily’s hand. “I can help you. I found you just in time. We can start the work today.”

Emily got back into her van, lit a cigarette and started the engine. A loud whine began from somewhere near her feet, and the engine revved high, without any pressure on the gas. “Come on,” she pleaded. If the van died she would have to ride the Savannah city buses, and she was not brave enough for that. The two dollars in her pocket were gone (Sister Kathy had told her to place one dollar bill on each of her open palms and make a wish for each) and she’d written a check for fifteen dollars. The herbs required for the “work” would cost Emily sixty dollars. “I don’t have the money,” she’d said. “I really don’t.”

“Okay, just pay fifteen right now,” Sister Kathy said. “You can do that, yes?”

The work consisted of complete secrecy, letting Sister Kathy burn herbs and go into a trance to bring Emily’s inner spirit back in union with her true self, and various tasks. The first task was to draw seven colored circles in crayon on a piece of paper—her full name in the middle of each—and sleep with it folded under her pillow. Emily didn’t mind keeping the secret—she had so few these days—though she knew it would be hard in a one-bedroom apartment. If Beth found this piece of paper she would think Emily was communing with the devil or practicing witchcraft.

Before meeting Beth twelve years ago, Emily thought believing in God was a simple process. But while they sat on Beth’s mother’s clean kitchen floor eating bowls of corn flakes, Beth said that in order to be saved, to really be a Christian, you had to ask Jesus into your heart. “It’s the only way,” she said, and Emily still remembered the dizzy rush of fear and longing she’d felt. But then she had always been drawn to people who seemed to balance on the precarious line that separated belief from fanaticism. In second grade, her friend Amy Pate, who was a Jehovah’s Witness and thus was not allowed to vote for class monitor or say the pledge of allegiance, set her crustless peanut butter sandwich on one bony knee and explained calmly that there would soon be a huge and terrible flood. Only those who believed would survive to live in the New Jerusalem. Emily stumbled away from Amy, but everywhere she went encountered something that seemed supernatural: On the lower playground the wind was whipping dry leaves in wild circles like witches dancing, and by the swings on the upper turf Sandy Mullhouser was walking around with Frankenstein arms and his eyelids folded inside out.

Emily’s mother was furious her daughter had been fed such nonsense at a public school and called Amy Pate’s house that night. But for years Emily did not stop thinking

about the flood that might take her just because she hadn't chosen the narrow path of righteousness that stretched like a silver wire toward heaven.

When Emily reached the second flight of rusted stairs zigzagging up the back of the apartment she heard Beth shrieking and laughing, and Beth's boyfriend Ralph's heavy feet on the wooden floors. Emily listened for a moment, then sneaked behind the kitchen door.

Ralph ran by with a red whiffle ball bat, and Beth, not far behind, cackled, "I'll get you, my pretty!"

Tractor's nails skidded on the dining room floor and Emily stuck her head through the doorway and yelled, "What are you doing?"

Beth screamed and Ralph stood frozen, holding the bat above his head. Tractor had flattened himself against the wall and his little chest heaved in and out. "Ralph's allergic," Beth said. "He just found out."

"Are you insane?" Emily asked, scooping the bunny up. A puddle of cloudy yellow urine was spreading along the baseboard. "You're okay, baby," she whispered.

"Zane called three times," Ralph said, slowly lowering the plastic bat. "Must be important." Beth wrinkled her nose at the mention of Zane's name.

"What's wrong with Zane?" Emily asked, holding the rabbit tightly. He was trembling and she blew lightly on his thin ears.

"Why is he different than Sam, or any of the others?" Beth asked. "Why can't you just be alone?"

Emily stared at her. Beth had never been alone in her life. Since she was fifteen years old she'd had one boyfriend after another.

“So, where have you been?” Beth asked. “I made you breakfast, but Ralph ate it because we didn’t know where you were.”

Beth was the one Emily always came clean to, but now she only shrugged. She could not let this possibility be taken from her. “At work. Emergency at the espresso cart.”

Beth chewed on her painted thumbnail, watching her. She’d once declared that she could hear Emily’s thoughts as loudly as if they were being spoken, and believing this, Emily was a little nervous. “What’s wrong with you?” Beth asked, finally.

“Nothing,” Emily said. “I’m fine.” She waited to be told she was lying but Ralph came up from behind and started tickling Beth.

“Leave me alone! Don’t!” she screeched, laughing, backing away. Ralph grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her, hard, and she whacked him on the backside with the plastic bat.

“Fiend!” he shouted, pulling her hair.

Emily carried Tractor into the bathroom and sat on the closed lid of the toilet. She looked up at the water damaged ceiling, at the places the wallpaper was peeling from the wall, at two dead cockroaches in the corner near the sink. She opened the frosted window and took a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. She had her ritual down—fan the smoke away, brush her teeth, mist her hair with flowery Aqua-Net. Beth never noticed; if she did she would have said something. To her, smoking was more than a dirty habit—it was an incomprehensible act, a sign that Emily had no respect for the temple of her body, which hinted at darker, deeper problems.

Emily knew she did not want Beth's life, but she did want to believe something so completely that she would be able to give up everything for it. God truly spoke to Beth, and Beth spoke back. They had conversations, even arguments, Beth said.

Emily pounded the rotten window frame with the flat of her hand and it gave slightly, then opened all the way. She climbed onto the sink, and stuck her head out the window. The air smelled of the nearby salt flats, and overhead swallows circled, twittering. The escape ladder was rusted, bolted to the brick, and she pulled herself carefully over the sill, and out on the ledge. She held her breath until her foot hit the top bar and then eased down the side of the building.

Safely on the ground, Emily looked up, pleased with herself, and rubbed her hands on her jeans, trying to rid the smell of rusty metal from her fingers. She cleared the fallen blossoms from the windshield of her car, then realized her keys were inside the apartment.

Emily had only twenty cents and a safety pin in her pocket, not even her lipstick, without which she felt exposed and ugly. Zane was probably at his studio, which was only eleven blocks away, though Emily knew it wasn't smart to be alone between 30th and 40th Streets. She tried to stay off Habersham, avoiding the groups of men hanging out in doorways, leaning against grafittied walls and barred windows.

She made it safely to Zane's studio, though for the last few blocks terrified that two men in red turtlenecks were following her. The security woman seated on the first floor of Witham Hall looked up from her paperback and asked for her ID. "I'm locked out of my house," Emily said. "Zane's got my keys. Zane Hurley in 312."

"You still have to sign in," the woman said, handing her a chewed ballpoint.

Zane was shirtless, crouched on all fours on a large canvas. His red velour pants had slipped down his hips, exposing his boxer shorts. “Hey,” Emily said.

“I’m working,” he said, without turning around. “I’m thinking, here.”

“It’s me,” Emily said. “I’m locked out of my house.”

“I know.” Zane sat back on his heels. “I mean, I knew it was you.”

Emily flushed and turned to leave, but Zane pulled himself to his feet and brought her back into the room. “I’m sorry,” he said, lifting her chin and kissing her. “I’m just frustrated with this thing.” They stood looking down at the canvas, stripes of deep blue arching from one corner, thick strokes of yellow and orange like an exploding fireball. “I’m trying to recreate this thing that happened with my mother,” he said. “I was eight, there was an eclipse, and I knew I wasn’t supposed to look. I thought I’d been blinded. She said maybe I had, and I knew, then, that I could never trust her. That she loved me, but would always hurt me.” He closed his eyes and shook his head so his shaggy dark hair covered most of his face.

Emily was pleased by his disclosure, but also knew Zane could continue being melancholy for hours if not distracted. “We could go to Skidaway,” she said. “Take some wine and walk out to that treehouse thing to watch the sunset.”

“And fuck,” Zane said, still gazing at the canvas.

“And fuck to beat the band,” Emily said. When he looked up and smiled she felt that he was with her in a way that people rarely were.

On the drive east they listened to Zane’s African drumming tape and Emily looked out the window at the glimmer of gold that came through the trees and between the houses built on the edge of the marsh. The small, winding waterways were lit like

fire, and when they hit the bridge over miniscule Moon River, they both sang, *Moon River, wider than a mile*, and laughed.

They walked climbed the steps of the three-tiered deck that rose out of the shimmering grasses and looked to the western horizon. Sitting cross-legged, facing each other, they chain-smoked and drank red wine out of the bottle. Zane was so unlike her ex-husband—smart and brutish and cultured, but sad and lost, underneath. Emily put her hands to his face, nearly dizzyed by the bright blue of his eyes, and told herself *he could be my soulmate*. Perhaps the reason she'd behaved so badly in love was simply that she had not met her match. The cicadas buzzed in metallic waves as they walked back to the car, hand in hand, naked except for their sneakers, and fireflies flickered in the swampy blackness.

The next morning Ralph and Emily sat side by side in the square of sun bathing the kitchen table while Beth talked mostly to herself about the part she wanted in the upcoming musical at City Theatre. She was making an omelet with four of Emily's eggs. Ralph moved his lips as he read Beth's Bible and Emily focused on one of the refrigerator magnets, trying to feel the merging of her spirit and self. The phone rang, and both Beth and Emily said, "You get it," but Beth didn't move.

Sister Kathy wanted Emily to come see her. "I been in the work and I've got something important to talk to you about." When Emily hesitated, thinking that she had gone too far into this whole thing, Sister Kathy said, tiredly, "This is your *life* we're talking about."

"Who was that?" Beth asked.

"Girl from work," Emily said, sighing. "She's having a crisis."

“Why do they always call you?” Ralph asked.

“Because she’s a sucker, and they know it,” Beth said, with her mouth full.

Even as she started the engine something felt very wrong. Emily looked in the rearview. Her eyes seemed too large, and she felt they were not hers, or that there was something living inside her, looking out of them. Squirrels skipped and chattered across the yard and she held onto the steering wheel with both hands to steady herself. The engine whined; it sounded like rocks were knocking around in the undercarriage.

Mercer Boulevard seemed unfamiliar. The synagogue with the smooth brown dome appeared like a large battered hat among the strip malls and steakhouses and drive-through carwashes. The telephone lines zinged and quivered, caught by the strange red light blooming all around, and the traffic snarled and multiplied. At the intersection of Waters and De Renne a signal shorted out and blinked green, an ambulance wailed, and a man in a crocheted beret got out of his car and started flipping everybody off. Emily’s faulty air conditioner blew hot, moist air all over her face and when she rolled down her window the guy in the car beside her said, “Hey, wanna fuck?” His teeth looked as if they’d been smeared with coffee grounds. Emily rolled up her window so fast some of her hair got stuck in it. He sped up and pulled in front of her, waving.

“This is crazy,” Emily said aloud. “I’m not supposed to see her. I won’t go.”

She stopped at a Hardee’s to use a payphone that took her quarter without giving her a dial tone. Sweat had soaked her back and was dripping down her legs onto her sandals. An old man with a car full of cats leered at her as he drove slowly past, and she climbed into the van and pulled off the road.

The pay phone outside Baskin Robbins worked, but suddenly Emily could not read the phone number that had bled unintelligibly over the damp paper. She started to cry, nauseated; even the smell of her perfume gagged her. If she told Beth what was going on, she'd have to stop the work, and though Beth would comfort her, pray for her, she would probably decide Emily was in grave spiritual and emotional danger and whisk her off to an exorcist.

Emily didn't want to go home. She stopped by Zane's studio and found him wearing a felt fedora pulled low over his eyes and kneeling on the floor, spreading gesso over a huge board. "You look like shit," he said, squinting. "Where have you been?"

Emily told him about the work and he took off his filthy shirt and held her. "I wish you would've shared this," he said with his mouth in her hair.

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone," she said. "It could screw everything up. I just want to leave this town."

"You're just scared, Emily. You don't let people in, you know? I don't want you to be one of those women who end up living alone with seventeen cats."

While he undressed her she tried to think of a way to explain that even though she wanted to be with him, a nagging thought had already begun: she knew was going to change her mind and grow disgusted with his kindness and good intentions. "Zane, I'm incapable of love," she whispered.

"I think you'd feel better if you made a body print," he said, squinting at the board on the floor. "What do you say? I'm tired of using these palm fronds."

Emily spent the rest of the afternoon naked, covered with Vaseline, rolling and being pushed slowly over the large board, which Zane was planning to paint and patina

when it dried. He wanted to document movement, capture one moment, mark time with the body.

When they came home at two-thirty in the morning Emily found a message scrawled on newspaper with permanent marker and taped to her pillow: *The crazy girl is looking for you!* Across the room Beth and Ralph were asleep, fully clothed, on top of the covers, part of their continual effort to be an example to Emily, to prove loving someone did not have to include sex before marriage. Zane and Emily got into her twin bed. She turned so her back was against his bare stomach but every place he put his hands was wrong. He tried to nuzzle her, but poked the base of her skull with his sharp chin. “Knock it off,” she hissed.

“Jesus, Emily. I’m going home, then,” he whispered, getting out of bed.

She felt guilty, ashamed of herself. “No, stay. Please.”

“Forget it, I’m leaving.” He looked around for his shirt.

“No, wait. Come with me,” Emily said, pulling him into the bathroom. “Please.” She locked the door behind him, pushed him against the wall and got on her knees.

“Emily, you can’t just do whatever you want with me.”

“Quiet,” she said. She pulled his boxer shorts to his ankles and kissed the warm skin of his stomach.

Listening to his murmurings, the drip of the shower head, the loud whoosh of the air conditioner, Emily thought about Sister Kathy, sitting in her church, wherever it was, surrounded by burning herbs and wailing sitars, and remembered the summer when she was that age; she and Beth spent the endless days riding their ten-speeds around town, sneaking along the weedy, private canal road and wading in the slow water. They

believed themselves to be of one mind, kindred spirits, and had no secrets. Emily never thought they would pull back against this closeness, grow jealous, cruel, careless. Beth knew every heartless thing Emily had ever done, knew that each time she tried to be faithful she failed, each time she tried to stay away from men and regain perspective she failed as well. But maybe now, with Sister Kathy helping, Emily could stay with Zane, really love him, and prove once and for all she was not a monster.

She woke in the middle of the night. Zane was snoring in her ear, his hot breath making her itch. She crept to the kitchen and placed the packet of herbs Kathy had given her in a cereal bowl and touched a burning match to one corner of the thin paper wrapping. The sweet, cloying smoke rose and she leaned over it, whispered her full name, and spoke the words Kathy had dictated: *I wish to find my true self, to heal my inner spirit and rekindle my inner light.* She waited, anticipating a little trembling in her soul, a tingling in her fingertips. She sat in the warm spot in front of the refrigerator for half an hour, trying to discern any action within, then gave up and went back into the bedroom.

Zane and Ralph were snoring, the neighbor's cats were fighting outside the window, and Tractor thumped one foot repeatedly against the side of the pet carrier. Emily climbed into bed beside Zane and closed her eyes. She took three deep, slow breaths, and concentrated, almost able to feel Sister Kathy opening and fingering her soul.

The bedroom was hot and smelled slightly sour when Emily woke. Ralph groaned in his sleep and said, "Never, no." Beth's hand was outstretched, reaching.

The phone on the nightstand rang and Emily grabbed it, quickly. “Emily? Where were you yesterday?” Sister Kathy asked.

“I don’t want to do this,” Emily whispered.

Kathy coughed into the phone. “You have to,” she said. “This is *very* important. It’s all for nothing if you stop now. I was up all night in the work, and I must see you. Emily, please?”

Kathy had repeated her directions and this time, within ten minutes, Emily found the small brown house in a neighborhood where sand dappled the edges of the lawns and covered the sidewalks. The city was itself again, stately and calm, moss draped over the leaning live oaks, a slight breeze coming from the ocean. Emily had lost her mind, and paid for the loss. She looked down and realized she was still wearing her pajamas, but a denim shirt on the backseat saved her from going home again.

Sister Kathy’s mother answered the door holding a cordless curling iron. “Kathy will be right with you,” she said. “Sit.”

Emily sat. A poodle with its tail shaved like a broccoli floweret padded in from one of the bedrooms followed by a dirty-faced child in overalls. She stood watching Emily until her mother sputtered something, then sat on the white leather couch with her finger in her nose.

Sister Kathy came down the hall in her fuzzy pink sweater and a jean mini skirt. Her long hair was uncombed, frizzy, and the skin under her eyes looked bruised and puffy. “I was in the work all night,” she said. “Your colors look better, but something’s wrong. You been telling somebody about the work,” Sister Kathy said. She twisted one of her purple hoops. Her mother paced the kitchen, muttering into her coffee.

“I just think I need to help myself,” Emily said. “It’s not right that you stay up all night, doing work with my soul, while I have nothing to do with it.”

“You don’t understand,” Kathy began, but her mother walked toward Emily, jabbing her finger fiercely.

“Kathy’s trying to help you but you don’t let her,” she said. “You been unhappy for a long time, yes? You think more doctors and therapists can help you? Wrong. You can’t fix yourself.” She sat down and leaned forward over her elbows. “You don’t even know who you are. How can you show yourself to others if you don’t know who you are?”

“Quit yelling at me,” Emily said.

Kathy’s mother blinked, and paled a little. “Okay, sorry,” she said. She took a sip of coffee. “You been damaged, so you can’t reach God. Understand? He led you to Kathy. When she saw you she told me, ‘That girl’s spirit is crying out to me.’ She don’t usually just bother people that don’t ask. But you need her.” She leaned closer. “She was sent, by *God*, to help you.”

Kathy coughed raggedly and Emily saw her standing with her hand on the porcelain dog’s head as if bracing herself against the strength of her mother, watching Emily as if everything depended on her answer. Emily wished suddenly that she could cradle her, protect her from the world. But this was a game, a trick, and though she wanted help, she didn’t want to be told, again, the many things that were wrong with her. Still, she was impressed by their accents, their confidence, and wanted to know exactly what it was they saw in her heart.

“Emily. You don’t have to do this,” Kathy’s mother said, more softly. “If you don’t want to, then don’t waste your time. Don’t waste Kathy’s time. But I don’t want

you to look back in five, ten, fifteen years, and see that nothing has changed. If you don't let her help you, you always going to be unhappy."

"I should just go ahead and kill myself now."

"No. I didn't say that. Will you trust her?"

"Yes," Emily whispered, unable to let go of the small possibility that there was magic here, that she was being daring and brave by agreeing to this ridiculous scheme.

"Okay, then," she said. "Kathy? Come on." She sat heavily on the couch and let her daughter work.

Sixty days after her first encounter with Sister Kathy, Emily went to the shabby house on DeRenne, vowing it the last time. She had tried, repeatedly, to stop the work, but each time she mentioned it, Kathy had a new message for her that was too urgent to relate over the phone. Emily spent more and more time at the waterfront, staying after work until all the ships had passed through the channel.

Her life had become a dizzy blur. It was very hot; white and pink blossoms wilted and fell and bees bumbled into the open windows and buzzed around the back stairs. She worked five days a week at her horrible job, ate cheap white bread and potatoes and sometimes Beth's Little Debbie snack cakes. Besides the original sixty-two dollars she had paid Sister Kathy a hundred and fifty more, in twenty-five dollar installments. Emily sold plasma, some books to the used bookstore on Broughton, and tried to pawn two necklaces she'd had for years and was told they weren't real gold. Beth was barely speaking to Emily because of the snack cakes, or because Tractor chewed the tassels off one of her new penny loafers, or because of some combination of reasons Emily was

afraid to question. Beth stayed at the theater until midnight every evening except Sunday.

Zane had taken Emily on a two-day hike around Cumberland Island, where he turned to her on the dunes and announced he had never felt about anyone the way he felt about her. "I'm saying I love you," he said, grabbing both her hands, as if she had misunderstood. But she did not want his love; she wanted to start over, fresh, far from here. She noticed every sentence he uttered contained slang, and his feet turned slightly inward when he walked. At night, in the crowded bedroom, she shrank from his moist skin. "I'm hot," she'd whimper. "Please, don't touch me."

"I feel just the same," she told Sister Kathy. "And I hate that you have to do all this work and I'm not even helping."

"Emily, you *are* helping with the work," Kathy said. "You been burning the herbs, right?"

Emily nodded.

"You repeated the words I told you? And you didn't tell nobody, right?"

"But why can't I tell anyone? Why does it all have to be secret?"

Sister Kathy leaned toward her. "I told you before," she said, "this is a delicate thing. It is very easy for negative energy to mess everything up. You got to believe in me."

"I still feel strange about it."

"But you're so close. You're making such progress. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. It's about Zane. Some problems could come up unless I truly bring your spirits together."

Emily folded her arms over her chest and sighed.

“You don’t believe it? Hasn’t everything I told you been right?”

“But how do you know what Zane will do?”

“I been looking into him, too,” Sister Kathy said. “Now, listen to me. I need to dress up your spirits, to join your hearts. You got credit, right? You need to go to the mall and buy two outfits for him, two long pants and two shirts.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing cheap, Emily. No jeans. Linen, cotton, or corduroy. Okay?”

“Kathy, I don’t have any money. I already gave you more than I have.”

“You *said* you had credit. If you don’t want to use your card then just open a line of credit at a store. Now listen, for you, you need to buy two outfits also. Silk and linen. The fabric is important.”

“You’re talking about five hundred dollars!” Emily said. “I don’t have five hundred dollars!”

“I’m *talking* about your *future*! Money is nothing compared to your life. Don’t you see it’s the only way to hold onto Zane?”

“Are you threatening me?”

Kathy didn’t answer.

“You’re telling me if I don’t do this, he’ll leave me?”

“I don’t know,” Kathy said, quietly. The little girl sitting on the foot of the bed holding the poodle watched Emily intently. She, too, seemed to be waiting for a decision.

Emily was exhausted; she was no match for these people. “Okay, so what do I do with the clothes?”

Kathy nodded. “I take them to the church and pray over them with special herbs. I go into a deep trance and lift your spirits together.”

“And then I get the clothes back?”

“No, Emily. They cannot be worn. They are not to wear, but to heal.”

“Kathy, I don’t have five hundred dollars.”

“You go to the mall and ask them about credit. I don’t want you calling me, saying you can’t unless they say no at the stores. Okay?” She touched Emily’s hand.

“Okay?”

Emily nodded, weary. The wide-eyed little sister closed the door behind her. In the van she put her head against the steering wheel and burst into tears. What if she truly had given Sister Kathy access to her soul, given her permission to reach into the darkest corners of her spirit and do whatever she wanted? Even if it was all a lie, if she believed it, even the smallest part, the work could continue without her money, her will. Emily drove slowly, terrified, disgusted with herself, as buildings and buses and white flowering trees blurred before her.

Inside Banana Republic a Calypso song was playing, and though Emily was a little faint, she’d put on fresh lipstick and powder and knew she looked no different than any of the other women shopping for the men in their lives. “Can I help you with anything?” asked a young man in perfectly ironed khakis.

“I need some clothes for my husband,” Emily said, then shook her head. “My boyfriend. For job interviews.”

The salesman led her to the men’s side of the store and handed her a pair of brushed cotton slacks. “These are great pants.”

“You like the fabric?” Emily asked. “That’s important, right?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

Emily chose two pairs, olive and khaki, and two long-sleeved shirts. She tried to hurry—Zane would never see these anyway, never get to wear them—but she sensed that Sister Kathy wouldn't approve of her doing this half-heartedly.

For herself she chose a black dress, long and flared with a deep v-neck, and a oatmeal linen skirt and white blouse. The lights gave her a headache; the Calypso had changed into angry rap.

In the dressing room she sat on a chair with the dress bunched around her neck, looking at herself in the bluish mirror. This was it. She was finally insane.

“Can I get you any other sizes?” the salesperson asked, his shoes shiny boats buoyed beneath her dressing room door.

“No, everything's fine,” Emily said, struggling with the dress. “Just having a little breakdown. Don't mind me.”

He didn't move, and she saw the shadow of his hand on the slatted door. “Ma'am, excuse me?”

“I was kidding. But thanks.” Emily pulled her own shirt back over her head and fluffed her hair. She found the lipstick at the bottom of her crowded bag and dabbed a little more on her bottom lip, then took a deep breath and opened the door. The salesman stood waiting, concerned, a few feet away.

“Please. If you need to talk about anything, I'm not busy.” He took the armload of clothes from her. “I'm a sensitive person.”

Emily laughed. “Good line,” she said. “I bet it works wonders.”

He blushed and pressed his lips together.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude,” Emily said. “It's just that I've been seeing this fortune teller and she told me I had to do all these things or my boyfriend would

leave me. But I want him to. I do.” She stopped, trying to gauge his reaction. “This probably sounds really stupid.”

“John,” he said, taking the armload of clothes from her. “It’s John. And no, it doesn’t sound stupid. I mean, you look like someone who knows what she wants, right? And you want to see a fortune teller.” She saw him glance at her chest, then at her lips. “I think it’s great.”

“Well, thanks, John,” Emily said, smiling, looking away.

“Do you want to go out sometime?” he asked, nearly hidden behind the pile of clothes. “I could cook for you! I’m a great cook.”

“A great cook, huh?” Emily said. John wrote his number on the back of a crumpled ATM receipt and handed it to her, grinning.

She walked out of the mall into the hot glare of cars on asphalt. A man who could cook. Maybe he had his own place. “Christ,” she said. She stuck his number in the dirty ashtray, rolled down the van windows and sat waiting for the air conditioner to make up its mind.

When she got home she smoked three cigarettes, found a calligraphy pen in Beth’s desk and wrote a letter to Kathy, telling her she appreciated her help very much, and was grateful, but was going to help herself from now on. “Please do not contact me,” she added. Then she lit candles, ran a bath and stayed in it until her toes and fingers looked like bleached raisins. Tractor sat on the edge of the tub, watching her, ears flattened against his head. All the songs she’d learned in high school youth group marched through her head, and since no one was home she belted them out: *There’s a fire on the mountain tonight* (clap clap clap), *and there’s nowhere to run, no place to hide...*

She sang until the downstairs neighbor thumped his ceiling and shouted, “Please, stop! You’re killing me,” and then slunk into the bedroom and got dressed. Sitting on her bed, back pressed against the wall, she cradled the slightly damp rabbit and sang to him, softly. He fell asleep in her arms and she stopped singing, taking in the silence of the apartment. But the songs would not leave her mind, and after a few minutes she heard, distinctly, as if it were being sung inside her ear: *Have you seen Jesus my Lord?*

Emily decided to take the letter to Sister Kathy immediately; as long as the work continued she would be haunted. She put Tractor in the pet carrier, gave him a piece of Beth’s American cheese, and went downstairs.

The engine wouldn’t turn over. Emily was still sitting in the van, head against the steering wheel, when Beth, suddenly at the window, said, “Hey, are you okay?”

“Perfect,” Emily said. “But if you could abuse me in some way I’d appreciate it.”

“Yeah, your life is *so* hard. At my audition I had to pretend I was having sex with a chair.” Beth rested her chin on the edge of the window.

“So, did you get the part?”

“They want me to play a stripper who’s in love with a gay man who’s in love with the man I’m sleeping with. I just don’t think I can do it. What would people think? I need to be accountable.”

“It’s *acting*, Beth. It’s not real,” Emily said. “That’s why people like it. Listen, do you need your car right now?” She tried to look nonchalant, knowing Beth would refuse, that she didn’t let anyone, even Ralph, drive her car.

Beth looked up at the sky, sighed, and said, “Well, kind of. I was going to visit Ralph. Why?”

Emily couldn’t think of a legitimate reason. “I have to deliver something.”

“You have to *deliver* something?”

“Will you drive me? You could just drop me off afterwards. It won’t take long.”

Beth got into her car and unlocked the passenger door. “So where are we going?”

“Just go up Abercorn,” Emily said. “I’ll tell you when to turn.”

“Am I taking you to break up with Zane?” Beth asked. “Am I the getaway car?”

“It’s already over with him.”

“Wow, what a surprise,” Beth said. “I’ve never understood how you always manage to get what you want. It’s like the rules that apply to most people don’t apply to you.”

“Oh, you’re right. Obviously.”

“I’m serious,” Beth said. “You want to get married at twenty years old, and you do it. You want to drive across the country and start over, and you do it. Whenever you fall for someone, they fall harder. And then you give them some lame excuse, like ‘I just need to be alone right now,’ and they buy it. They might be pissed for awhile, but then they get over it and just wait around for the next time you need someone to sleep with.”

“And you wonder why I don’t tell you things,” Emily said, lighting a cigarette.

“Christ. You know everything. Who needs God when they’ve got you?”

“I *do* know everything about you,” Beth said, quietly.

“Okay, then, where are we going? And who’s Sister Kathy? A girl from work? Wrong. She’s a fortune teller. I’ve been seeing a fortune teller. And now I’m stopping. And all I want is for you to drive me there and not ask questions.”

Beth swallowed loudly. “Emily, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“If you didn’t want me here, why did you tell me to come here? If you hate me so much then *why*?”

“I love you, stupid,” Beth said. “It’s just hard sometimes. I look at you and see how much you need me, and it’s exhausting.”

Emily looked at the smooth edges of Beth’s pale face, at her flared nostrils and watery eyes. There was a bubble of pain above her heart in a place she could almost touch if she pushed her fingers on her breastbone, and she was afraid she would cry when she opened her mouth. “I wasn’t asking you to take care of me. That wasn’t why I came. I wanted to do something on my own,” she said. “Turn at the light, then go three blocks.”

They drove without speaking. The air was moist and still, heavy with the smell of magnolias and exhaust. Emily felt that once again she’d been tricked into admitting that she had no answers, that the questions she was asking were all wrong. Though maybe Beth wasn’t so sure of herself either, maybe she needed God so fervently because of this fact. *But she loves you*, Emily thought, *she loves you*.

“Stop here,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Beth kept the car running at the curb. Emily walked to the porch, took a deep breath and rang the bell. “Give this letter to Kathy,” she said when Kathy’s little sister opened the door.

“Katheee!” the girl screamed and disappeared around the corner. Emily ran to the car. “Go, go!” she yelled, slamming the door. The tires squealed on the asphalt as Beth accelerated and rain splattered the windshield. They both laughed, surprised, and smiled at each other. Emily turned on the radio. Paul Simon sang, “These are the days of miracle and wonder, this is a long distance call,” and Beth sang harmony. Emily rolled down the window and watched Kathy and her little sister standing in the middle of their yard, growing smaller, their hands held up against the sky. “Wave goodbye to the crazy girl,”

Beth said, and as Emily looked back, squinting through the rain, she could imagine Beth there as well, standing beside the two figures on the lawn, hand up, receding.