

SCOTT ARMSTRONG  
**CREEPER**

I DIDN'T HEAR HER come into the room. She could be quiet like that when she wanted. How long she stood there before speaking, I couldn't say, but long enough that she was ready to shout when I turned around. Ginny's moods were like that. Hot and cold. And because of all the faults she supposed I was guilty of, there were a lot of moments that did not slide in my favour. Like now. My previous predicaments damning me before I could open my mouth.

"What the hell is this?" she asked loudly. Loud enough that anyone in the next unit or sitting out on their front stoop below us might hear. Not that it had ever bothered her before.

"Well?" she demanded, folding her arms across her chest.

We were up in the boys' bedroom, which faced another long row of grey housing units like our own across a narrow parking lot. There were units behind us as well. Behind them, too, then mirrored three times over across several access roads. Like double-wide domino tiles sitting on edge in the middle of a flat field. I had a small field telescope in my hand. I had been standing at the window with it cocked against my eye. She watched me slip it into my back pocket.

"Barn swallows," I said without hesitation. "There's a nest just under the eaves at the corner unit. I counted three babies and the parents are swooping around them like mad. They're rare these days, you know. Dwindling populations due to the erosion of their natural habitats by ongoing suburbanisation. I was thinking of doing another painting."

She stared at me, unsure. Anger grooved into the scowl she wore only for me. Two things I had learned quickly about marriage was to never tell your wife she was wrong, and to always have an excuse ready when you were doing something she might not like.

Flicking the window pane with my fingernails, I suggested where she look, distracting her from the teenage girl sitting in the living room almost directly across from us. I offered her my telescope to show my sincerity.

Ginny didn't take it. And she didn't bother looking, either. She didn't care about birds or art.

"I have clients coming in half an hour," she said, reaching up to knot her long blond hair in a make-shift bun, highlighting the broad, boneless features of her round face. "I don't want you stomping around up here while I'm taking pictures. Think you can stare out the window another time?"

The boys had already been shipped out. A neighbour was watching them while Ginny did her thing. Ginny liked to keep me around in case she needed something, using me as a kind of gopher if I wasn't working. And sure, why not? The money was going to make grocery day a hell of a lot more exciting. Maybe I could even score some new canvases, I thought, nodding and smiling, hiding the telescope as quickly as possible. I wasn't here to make any trouble.

"Smoke first?" she asked, softening her tone. She peeked out the window casually, but without really looking. "I don't want to stink too much."

"Let's do it," I said. "I'm all yours, honey."

We smoked out back on the raised deck in the shade of a giant oak tree. After dumping all the kids' toys under the stairs, there was just enough room for two folding camp chairs and a small pop-up table on which Ginny liked to sit a vase of plastic flowers. Tidying things up was small consolation when you considered that the row of units behind us across the shallow grass gully was just as filthy as we were pretending not to be. The same rotting stilt beams and splintered cross-boards jammed up with plastic crap and broken things. Some residents had tried to hide it with strips of mis-matched lattice or potted plants, but it didn't do much. Otherwise, it was a pretty good neighbourhood and the people were decent.

Ginny had her notebook out and was going over possible scenarios for the photo shoot. She said they were a young couple with a small child and that they wanted a few family shots and maybe some individuals. A lot depended on how wide she could open their wallets. Ginny sucked hard on her cigarette. She took her photography very seriously. I was still thinking about the girl in the window.

"I might do something backdropped by the swings," she was saying to herself, blowing the smoke away from our faces with a funny curl in her bottom lip. "Maybe with the kid by himself in the sand. Black-and-white, probably. Depending on how the sun holds."

I had been watching the girl for a while now and imagined her about fifteen. Well, not watching her so much as her room. What I was really meaning to start painting was a series of still lifes. The theme something like privacy versus voyeurism. That was the real rage. The images I had in mind needed to be precise, realistic, and the girl proved a perfect muse. Bookshelves, wall posters, the jewelry she hung next to her mirror, everything was memorised and detailed down to the gentle nuances of where she dumped her dirty clothes. The room was settled in my head and in some rough sketches I'd been making, but I was still waiting for the girl to hit the right pose, the right juxtaposition of body and environment that I knew would come if I was patient enough. The shot, as Ginny liked to say, would find me.

Ginny flicked her cigarette into the empty apple juice can behind my seat. The can was nearly full again and the bottom was rusting out. Usually, when the kids were around, we put a towel over it.

"Are you paying attention?" she asked, flipping her notebook closed.

"Christ. You're not, are you?" she snapped, standing up. "It's no wonder this family is such a failure. You're always staring off into some sort of fucking dream world, floating and eating dust."

I put out my half-smoked cigarette because she was no longer smoking. She was tall for a woman and thick without being fat. She was wearing a long blue skirt and a faded white blouse that was just tight enough to show off her curves. I knew exactly what she had said and repeated it verbatim.

"I need to set up," she answered, ignoring me, opening the screen door to head inside. "The backdrops need sorting before they get here. Think you can handle cleaning up the kitchen?"

"No problem," I said and meant it, following her into the house.

In truth, the kitchen was almost done. I had been pecking at it for a few days while the boys were at daycare and Ginny was sleeping. The few dishes we owned were already squared away in the cupboards and the tiny rectangle of counter space between the sink and stove was as clean as water could shine it. The sink itself was still kind of a horror show with mould under the grouting and black goo splashed along the lower window frame. Most of that was from the people before us, but we hadn't done much to rectify the problem. The stove top was splotched with grease and two of the elements were missing and stuffed with tinfoil to catch spills. As a matter of sounding busy, I knocked the tap on and thumped some drawers closed, careful not to

slide them off-track. Luckily, not many clients came into the kitchen and, if they did, they mostly looked out the window and remarked on the oak tree affording us a cool breeze in the afternoons.

Hearing Ginny banging around in the front room, I chanced a few blasts of vodka from the bottle we kept in the cupboard over the fridge. I stood around making noise, waiting for her to finish, going back to the bottle for a third time when it got boring. I heard the car doors before she did.

“They’re here,” she called out. “I want you to greet them with me, then fuck off.”

I came into the room drying my hands on a towel and stood next to her.

“Not here for Christ’s sake. Move back. This is business, not a family reunion.”

They turned out to be a nice couple with a cute little girl. We all shook hands and introduced ourselves. Listening to them talk, I tried to figure out what could have possibly driven them to choose us.

Ginny had done a good job fixing up the main room, making it seem almost professional. The big bay window was great for natural light and, with her equipment spread all around the room, you barely noticed the holes the children had put in the walls. There wasn’t much we could do about the scuff marks and gouges in the floor, but a few bed sheets draped over the couch and love seat worked wonders. Backdrops hung from a thick metal rod I had wired into the ceiling with plant hooks. Ginny’s cameras were the most expensive things we owned.

Everyone but me settled on the couch and Ginny brought out her portfolios, snapping open the big glossy binders across her knees. Most of the pictures were samples she had lifted from the grocery store photo centre where she had worked doing kid portraits and passports. For the last year or so, she had focused on weddings, bridal showers, baptisms and anything else someone wanted done on the cheap. The back pages were nature shots that she occasionally shopped around to flea markets with little success. Her ‘personal beauties’ she called them. But what most people saw was that computers could make almost anything look halfway decent.

Ginny looked up after a few minutes into her sales pitch and noticed me still standing there, leaned against the wall with my hands stuffed in my pockets. Her face broke into a quick snarl, telling me it was time to disappear. Fair enough, so I made my exit, allowing Ginny to excuse me by mention-

ing an office in the basement that I used to work from home. I laughed, but not loud enough for them to hear. At heart, that girl was pure carny. But she believed in herself. That was the ticket.

The stairwell to the basement was in the kitchen, tucked behind our ratty pull-out dishwasher. I hit the lights and started down, ducking my head to avoid the overhang. At the bottom of the stairs Ginny had hung some shelves to display a collection of old cameras. It looked good, but that was the end of the illusion. The rest of the basement wasn't for anybody else to see.

The smell hit you first. A damp, dusty stench that stuck to the back of your throat. Garbage. Every inch of the room was touched by it in some way, amazing you with its breadth and scope. The kids weren't allowed to play here anymore for want of space and health concerns. There were paths, little alleyways to the side rooms, but overall, the place was closing in on itself.

In one corner was the mountain of black garbage bags, bursting with old clothes and bed sheets and a thousand other items squeezed and sealed in plastic in anticipation of some kind of resurrection. Ginny tossed a new one to the bottom of the steps every few weeks. Another section was devoted to our mail. Anything that had our names on Ginny demanded be shredded. Stacks of re-stuffed envelopes, bills, notices and coupons flyers leaned against one another in low, nonsensical rows, turning yellow and splotchy with mould. Funny thing was, we didn't even own a shredder and, if we did, who was going to bother spending the time it would take to destroy it all? Other than that, it was mostly crates of junk and magazines, broken toys and ragged lawn chairs. The potential she saw for re-use was nearly endless. "Saved!" she liked to shout at me. It was almost a magical incantation she used to make herself feel as if she were bettering our lives.

I was fully aware that others in my position might have raised issues or pushed at the fact that something wasn't quite right. But, in truth, it didn't bother me so much. Satisfying her urges was fairly easy to accomplish. Our basement wasn't huge. There was no food lying around. We weren't animals. When the children got a bit older and needed the space, we were going to come up with a plan. Things, as far as I was concerned, were under control.

Moving through the room towards the open toilet that the previous owner had crammed between the hot-water tank and furnace, I started talking to the girl in the window as if she were there with me.

“Do you think you’ll be home tonight, Ashley? Do you think our stars will cross? I hope so. I really do.”

The toilet was set on a low wooden pedestal pushed against the cement foundation. The bowl was scummy with a brownish crud that streaked like viens into the small pool of water while I pissed. I pulled out a bottle of coffee liqueur from behind a low-hanging air duct and splashed some around in my mouth, savouring the tangy sweetness. Bits of Ginny’s pitch floated down through the floorboards and I could tell by their muffled reactions that she had them in love with themselves already. People were suckers for vanity.

“You weren’t very kind to me the last time, Ashley,” I said, continuing the joke as I scissor-stepped my way to the space beneath the only window. “I waited and waited and you never showed. Even your parents were worried about you. I saw them. Your dad came down for a glass of water and stared at it for a long time.”

My bags were undisturbed where I had left them. I had purposely divided their contents into three separate lunch bags so that none of the pieces would seem to fit together if discovered. There were better ways and places to hide them, I supposed, but this was easy enough. I emptied each paper sac onto the back of a chessboard, fingering each item as I took inventory.

Sketch pad. Sharpened graphite pencils. Pocket flashlight. Box cutter. Dark blue gardening gloves. Yellow twine. Balaclava.

“Look, Ash,” I said, pointing theatrically to a silver bracelet and an orange travel mug dropped seemingly at random into a box of Christmas lights. “Pieces of you. Lost trinkets. The very heart of our painting.”

The ski mask made it extremely difficult to sketch or take notes, as did the gloves, especially sitting there in the dark with summer bugs bouncing off your face. They were necessary, however. A little precaution I’d worked out a few years ago while attempting a series of colourful autumn pieces based on the theme of backyard gardens. A comparison study of beauty versus neglect. The first few paintings had come out nicely and were down here in a box somewhere. One of the things I’d learned back then was that people weren’t keen on sharing their hidden retreats and, after a few close calls scaling fences and digging through hedges, the gloves and mask had become a staple. Camouflage. It was similar to photographing wildlife. You had to be there, but couldn’t really be there. The girl, so far, had been much easier.

The conversation above me faded into silence and footsteps loomed. Not really hurrying, I rebagged the supplies, noticing that my sketch pad

was nearly full. Ginny cracked the first step coming down and I met her at the bottom.

“What the hell are you doing?” she whispered hoarsely, re-shouldering the camera slung under her arm. “I’ve called you three times.”

I shrugged.

“What is there to do?” I asked.

Ginny started laughing and suddenly straightened up, gripping the handrail so tightly that I could see her knuckles bulging white. She had a terrible spine. Things were always popping and shifting and making it difficult for her to work a steady job. Her medical cheques were going to run out soon, and then she’d have to think of something fast.

“Son of a bitch,” she said blowing out a stream of air through her pinched lips. “Wouldn’t want to clean anything, would you? Not like work is holding you back.”

“Day off,” I smiled. “You want me to start hauling this stuff to the curb?”

“Why do I even bother?” she asked, relaxing her stance enough to turn around. “I need the apple seat and the tractor upstairs. Think you can handle such a monumental task? We’re going to the park for a few shots. I’ll need them when we get back.”

“No problem. I’m on top of that.”

“Just fucking do it, right?”

I waited until I heard the patio door grind shut. The doors and windows were the same in all the housing units around here. Shoddy. Locking them was almost purposeless. I hefted the kiddie props up the stairs one at a time, arranging them around the base of the screens. The apple chair was usually a big success. The riding tractor was hit-and-miss. The choice, Ginny liked to explain, was what propelled them to buy the extra shots. It helped the memory take on greater meaning. Smart girl. Great tits, too.

“You see, Ash,” I called out. “Love is hard. But it does exist. As anything else, there are many forms.”

I noticed that the woman had left her purse on the kitchen table next to a pair of coffee cups dripping rings of cream. Judging from past experience, I thought I could formulate a fairly exacting inventory of what she might have in her bag. It was a game I played to test myself. Opening the purse, I found I had pretty much nailed it.

“Look. Look!” I shouted, taking the woman’s cell phone, browsing through her pictures and jumping into some of her membership sites. “We’re all so bound up in feeling connected, in feeling wanted, that we don’t even realise we’re failing. That none of us have ever felt more lonely or disengaged. The world is drowning, Ashley. And we’ve never felt better about it.”

For kicks, I used the phone to watch a few short gagging videos. I pulled my dick out out and slapped it against the screen once or twice. And all the time I’m thinking that the husband will probably get blamed for these strange internet addresses and that maybe this is good for him. That maybe he’s never even heard of gagging before.

“Welcome to the new world,” I said, tossing the phone back into the purse.

Before everyone got back from their outdoor adventure, I ran up to the master bedroom to get something for my head. Ginny’s back pills are killers: to maintain a continual cache you’ve got to ham up your routine with the specialists. Popping a couple, I crunched them down into a fine powder, slurping a few sips of water from the faucet.

I made it back to the basement just in time, lingering at the base of the stairwell to see if I was needed. For purely perverse reasons, I almost hoped to hear the woman discovering the abuse of her phone, imagining her shouts of rage and sudden fury. But nothing happened and it made me laugh.

While Ginny finished up, I stretched out on the beat-up corduroy recliner that had come with the house. Mice had gotten at the cushions before we moved in and there were clumps of white stuffing spilling out of little holes. In about a week, I trapped them all and roasted them in a sealed cookie tin over a small fire at the park. The bodies I dumped down a sewer grate.

The pills and booze were combining nicely now into a single stream of images. I needed to piss again, but instead decided to drift off into a thoughtless blur.

“Yeah, they’re gone,” Ginny repeated. “Hundred-dollar deposit plus I think they’re going to be good for a couple hundred more. I was on fire today.”

Much to my surprise, I was sitting on the couch with her in the living room. The camera equipment and the lighting was still set up, but we were alone. She had a lit joint in her mouth and her face was flushed with excitement. Either she had called me here or I wandered up on my own. She handed me the joint and I inhaled.

“Hey,” Ginny said, sinking back into the cushions. “I just called Mattie and she said the kids are fine. They’re outside playing with Ashley. She said she wouldn’t mind watching them for another hour. Want to fuck?”

“Absolutely, baby,” I answered, revving myself on. “I’ll be as gentle as a lady bug.”

“Come on, then,” she said, rising slowly from the couch, reaching out for me to help her. She paused. “What a dumb fucking thing to say.”

We had sex for a while and then took turns showering, chewing through a few cigarettes on the bed. Ginny started cycling through the pictures on her laptop, swearing to herself, but overall pleased with everything. Eventually, she got tired of me lying there and sent me over to get the boys.

It was nice outside and the sky looked like it might stay clear into the evening. I wound my way through the almost vacant parking lot. On the grass alongside her front stoop, I found a tube of apple-smoothie lip gloss that went immediately into my pocket. I was thinking about coincidences and how things worked out if you gave them enough time. The mother came to the door and let me in. Smiling, I acted as if I had never been in the house before and nailed it perfectly.