

AERIE ■

Trish Annese

Beneath the antiseptic blue of a new mountain sky, we wander among rows of silk-laden stalls, sliding our palms across piles of tapestries embroidered with the likenesses of gods. Astrid lifts a string of brown mala beads to her nose, inhaling their rich, woody scent before returning them to their place at the table where she fingers them gently, loathe to let them go.

We had come as pilgrims to this rocky, pine-scented place, seeking prayer and alms for our crash-and-burn souls; like pilgrims disoriented from the voyage, however, we are confounded by the back-breaking difficulty of sanctifying new ground.

That morning, I'd awakened to Astrid standing before the window, her feet bare against the slate tile.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” she conceded, and I thought that was probably right.

On the road, a chill breeze rifles the colored flags strung among the barren brown branches of trees, and I find myself delighted, in spite of myself, by their confetti blink and flutter amid the tall cedar green.

“You fill me when I want to be empty.” Astrid’s voice is too loud behind me, but I check my impulse to scan the space for eavesdroppers; that particular brand of vigilance doesn’t

set well with her. “Who cares if they can hear?” she asks, but it is rhetorical. She doesn’t. Nor, does she think, should I. When I turn to face her, she retreats from me. “I want to be empty,” she repeats, her voice a thin hiss, her flair for the dramatic intact. She stares into the middle distance, rolling the ring that matches mine between her bony fingers. A bell sounds in the distance, its pristine clarity piercing the bright morning air.

I wonder if she remembers eating dinner in the Thai restaurant up the street from the apartment she used to share with that husband of hers. We’d laughed as I set up the joke about women who love other women: What does a lesbian bring to a third date? She’d issued an unlikely giggle, shaking her head, her silver curls bouncing against the edges of a self-conscious smile, and I’d winked, lifting rough chunks of tofu dripping with green curry and coconut to my hungry mouth with the slim wooden chopsticks before delivering the punchline: A U-Haul. I’d thought she would laugh, chuckle at least. Instead, she’d placed one hand across my forehead and the other to the side of my face, the pad of her thumb pressed against my lips, and I’d leaned into the consecration I’d sought.

But now here we are.

The low thrum of the monks’ meditation hums from the halls of the gilded temple nestled at the foot of the steep mountain road. I close my eyes, picturing the lush collage of saffron and gold within, the red cushions steeped in incense and the smoke from lonely travelers’ gifts of prayer and light.

Thunder roars beyond us and the leaden gray clouds
descend, filling the pale bowl of sky.