

RITUALS ■

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Traffic stalls on Bannon Road in Woodinville going west toward Seattle—twenty miles away. More summertime construction must be causing the delay. Monica’s happy about this. It gives Lyle a paycheck. Or maybe the tiny house being hauled on a semi several vehicles ahead is contributing to the hang-up. Bright yellow, the house stands tall. Monica likes the idea of these tiny houses. So much better than the mini-mansions on multiple-acre lots nearby. She and her current husband, Lyle, a road worker, rent an apartment half a mile from here. Her nine-year-old daughter, Haley, whom Lyle recently adopted, lives with them.

It’s an August Friday and Monica’s driving home from the canine shelter where she works. Walking dogs and playing with puppies eases her stress—even working with the difficult ones like a growling German shepherd that was mistreated. Monica knows she can do something to help these animals, if only give them attention. The new-car smell of her dark-blue Honda Civic makes her smile. This is the first new car she has ever owned. On the right is St. Bridget’s. Straining to see the top of its red-brick steeple, she crosses herself. Since her divorce seven years ago, she hasn’t attended Mass. Every day she passes this Catholic church, and a momentary twinge sets in. Monica misses the music, the incense, and most of all Communion. Through caring for her now-deceased, alcoholic parents, as well as enduring the violent behavior of her first husband, Darrell, St. Bridget’s offered consolation. Despite yearnings, Monica always tells herself, *Too many broken rules: dead-*

end relationships, an abortion, a remarriage. She's found other ways to cope.

"I'm okay just the way I am," she repeats.

A sedan follows the semi carrying the tiny house. It has a sign she can barely read: *Wide Load*.

Monica glances at her dashboard clock: 3:20 p.m. She told two women friends from the shelter—Susan and Pam—that she would meet them at The Coffee Bean by 3:30. It's at the mall across from the apartment. She rubs her aching left arm. The muscles have tightened because her rotator cuff never healed properly.

This stretch of Bannon Road accommodates two lanes of traffic, one going in each direction, with shoulders about the width of bike lanes on either side. *Time to fix it.*

Her car radio plays Monica's usual music on The Wolf—an FM country station. Trying to relax, she listens to Miranda Lambert's "Gunpowder & Lead." Her friends will wait if she's a bit late.

On the left side of the road is a tattoo parlor, a gun shop that Darrell probably still goes to, and a mini-mart. It's a sweltering day with a hot wind. A cool drink would hit the spot, but she doesn't have any idea how long she'll sit in this jam-up.

All of a sudden the Honda lurches with a bump from behind...then another bump. She grips the steering wheel.

Oh shit! A domino collision? Monica braces for another jolt, all the while telling herself, *Tension will only make injuries worse.*

No more hits. She says a quick “Hail Mary,” then wonders, *What do I do?* Moments later vehicles ahead start to move, and Monica searches for a place to pull over, hoping the driver who ran into her will follow and that nothing will fall off her car. With paper and pen on the console, she readies herself to write down the license plate number if this driver zooms away. She can’t see any intersections, so Monica pulls into the parking lot of an auto repair shop. *Maybe someone can check out my car.* A gray Dodge Ram rolls in behind her. She jumps out of her Honda and from the Ram lumbers a balding, fair-skinned man.

Strands of blond hair blow into her eyes. She brushes them away, catching a snarl. “Ouch,” she says.

“Are you okay?” The harmless-looking man is over six feet tall.

“I’m fine. My watchband got tangled in my hair.” She goes through a quick assessment and does feel fine except for old aches.

The man wears a Polynesian-design flowered shirt, rumped khaki cargo shorts, and backless rubber sandals. *Did his foot slip off the brake, making him hit me twice?*

“I’m sorry. My fault...the accident.” He looks like a huge, chastised yellow Lab. The man offers this apology and his

responsibility two more times.

Are his words slurred?

“Traffic seemed to move so I ran into you twice.” He pauses before mumbling, “I live down the road. We’re leaving for our condo on Maui tonight.”

Monica’s never been to Hawaii. She studies the front of his Dodge Ram but can’t see any damage. Turning to her Honda, she takes in that both taillights hang low, and the bumper looks as if a good shove could send it crashing to the ground.

“Show me your papers,” she says to the man.

He ambles back to his truck, losing a sandal on the way, and fumbles to put it back on before fetching his information.

She goes to her glove compartment to get her own proof of insurance. Moving a rosary off the papers, Monica questions why she has to show him anything. Flustered, she leaves her passenger door open but quickly notices and turns to close it as a big, orange pickup drives away from the auto repair shop, missing her door by inches. *He could have gone around!* The pickup sounds as loud as a jet, and its fumes make her sneeze.

A man in the shop’s window glares at Monica with an all-too-familiar expression. An expression that, thank God, she never sees anymore.

The other driver, Gary Medkin according to his registration, says, “We can take photos.”

“Good idea.”

He can’t get his iPhone camera to work. “Mary bought this for me.”

Monica doesn’t ask who Mary is. She shows him how to operate it.

About this time the man in the window, small and sandy-haired and in a denim shirt, swaggers out. He walks like Darrell but isn’t anywhere near as big. A tag on his shirt says *Mack*. He reminds her of a nippy cocker spaniel.

“I own this place of business,” he barks at her. “You can’t park here.”

Why’s he picking on me and ignoring this bimblefuck?

“Let’s hurry,” Monica tells Gary Medkin.

The shop owner goes back inside, and they carefully place their information on the Ram’s hood in order to stabilize it from the wind. Monica can barely reach the hood. One of Gary Medkin’s papers blows under the truck.

His bleary blue eyes make her question, *Can he kneel down?*

Monica says, "I'll get it."

He ignores her and hunkers under the truck, looking like he'll keel over as he rises.

Monica stands ready to grab his arm.

Is he drunk? She can't smell alcohol. Has he been using marijuana? Is he on opioids? He acts passive and almost frightened, as if he expects her to start yelling and kicking him.

After retrieving the paper he stammers, "I'll give you my telephone numbers too."

She puts these in her iPhone notes.

As they wrap up the exchange and head back to their vehicles, Mack, the auto repair shop man, comes out again and snarls at Monica, "You're trespassing!"

"I got rear-ended! There's no place else to pull over. You never even asked if I was hurt."

"Sassy bitch." Mack pulls out his iPhone and takes a picture of her license plate.

She slowly drives away, wondering, *What is he planning to do with that?* In her rearview mirror she sees him talking to a silent Gary Medkin...and sneering.

How's he treat other women? Monica's mind goes back to

the way Darrell behaved right before he exploded. After a third trip to the hospital for broken bones, with the help of A New Path For Women, she summoned her courage to leave.

Ten minutes later she arrives at The Coffee Bean and checks out the rear of her Honda. Nothing has fallen off. She should be able to make it home. Inside the cafe she flops into a booth where Susan and Pam are sitting. She tells them what caused her to be late and how mean the auto shop owner was where she pulled over.

They commiserate about the damage to her almost-new car.

“What about the other driver?” Pam asks.

“Really disoriented. He had some sort of problem.”

“Maybe that guy shouldn’t be driving.” Susan shakes her head.

“Maybe...what’s the shop owner going to do with a photo of my license plate?”

“He can’t do anything at all,” Susan assures her.

“There’s no other way to go. I have to drive by there every day!”

Pam pats Monica’s arm. A loving gesture that sends a pain up to her shoulder. “He can’t do anything to you. He just wanted to intimidate you,” Pam says.

When she returns to the apartment, Monica immediately calls her insurance company and reports the accident to an adjuster, Stella, a young-sounding woman.

The woman says, “This should be an easy one. You’re obviously not to blame.” She takes the claim information and gives Monica the name of a local auto repair shop. Even though it’s close to the apartment, the woman never mentions that shop where Monica and Gary Medkin parked.

Next morning she takes her Honda in to be fixed.

A week later she picks the car up. It looks good as new. She writes a check for the \$1,000 deductible, hoping she and Lyle will have enough money for rent and her car payment this month. The total bill for the Honda’s damages comes in at more than \$6,000.

Stella calls a few days later. “I’m glad your car is fixed to your satisfaction.” She pauses. “There is a problem with the claim.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Mr. Medkin’s wife, Mary, called and told us they were in Maui when this accident occurred.”

“He said they were going that night, but he certainly was on Bannon Road earlier and hit my car—twice!”

“I could hear him in the background, saying a few words to his wife as we talked, but I’m not sure what he said.”

Then Monica tells Stella about the nasty shop owner. “Do you think he has something to do with this lie?”

“I’ve seen people falsify details before.”

Two weeks later Stella calls again and tells Monica that Mary Medkin has changed her comments about the accident. “She said on further discussion with Gary, the conclusion was reached that he did hit your car at the time you reported. Apparently Gary has been sick and that caused the confusion.”

“I guess it explains the way he acted. He must be on drugs.”

“I assume so.”

“What’s going to happen? Will he continue driving? He could have caused injuries, even deaths.”

“Our company will determine his abilities in the future.”

“That’s a relief.”

“A check for your deductible will be in the mail within the next few months.”

“Thanks for your help and understanding.”

With a payday loan, Monica and Lyle have enough for their bills. The Honda's working fine with no sign of an accident. However, her anger hangs on, like a slow-burning flame. Rightfully or wrongfully, she doesn't resent Gary Medkin. Maybe he and his wife lied, trying to avoid a boost to their insurance cost. Maybe a communication problem caused the discrepancy. Monica chooses to believe the second explanation, even though a Google search has revealed that they live in one of the Woodinville mini-mansions worth over \$2 million. It's the auto repair shop owner's attitude that still infuriates her.

Each day when she drives by Mack's shop, Monica glares in that direction and says things like: "Hex on you." Or "I hope this place burns down." Or "You asshole, Mack!"

She thinks about sending a rant to the *Seattle Times* describing the shop owner's rotten, territorial attitude. She considers writing a horrible review on Yelp, detailing his unhelpfulness and saying that no one should trust him with a car. She pictures herself going to his lot at night and spreading nails around.

One day, when she doesn't have enough money to buy Haley a birthday present, she thinks, *I could go in Darrell's gun shop and get one to blast that guy to kingdom come.* Or maybe she should blast that brutal Darrell, who's never paid a dime of support. Or maybe she should go get another tattoo.

Instead, as each day passes, the clench in her stomach and pounding to the back of her head worsens. Monica

remembers something she read in one of her many self-help books: “A strong woman never seeks revenge. She moves on and lets Karma do her dirty work.” With this thought her antagonism temporarily floats away. It returns the next day when she drives by the shop. Monica considers going to a doctor but knows that her symptoms are caused by bad feelings. She remembers an act that is part of the Mass and tries it, and finds that with repeating the words, over many weeks, she begins to feel better.

She looks at Mack’s shop and says, “Peace be with you.” Then she adds, “And peace be with me too.”