

SURVIVING DARWIN

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I met Curtis Greene in AA. He told me he'd gotten too fond of his Pouilly Fuisse despite his dry Southern Baptist upbringing. He said he'd started to drink socially after moving to California, and then he'd started to look forward to getting home at night for a glass or two every day. He never wanted to go to restaurants that didn't have a good wine list. He figured he had a problem, he said, and started to come to meetings.

We got friendly and I could tell he liked me by the way he'd look for me and save me a seat. He'd get red and tongue-tied, talking to me. He told me he was a pharmacist and owned three drug stores in the Los Angeles area, Greene's Pharmacies. He drove a new BMW the color of midnight and he smelled good, like money. He was married, he said, and had a little boy named Alex.

I got caught stealing large amounts of Vicodin from the hospital floor I worked on as a nurse. I'd pop a few and get to work, tending to my patients' needs while loaded on their pain meds. I loved my job when I was high. I felt connected. Actualized.

Things were great as long as a couple of pills would get me loaded, but then I needed six, and then ten at a time, to get the kind of buzz I needed. I started to wake up feeling like shit until I could get a few Vicodin in me.

Nurses are in such short supply they can't get rid of all us druggies or the patients would be wiping their own asses; or worse yet, the supervisors and administrators would have to do it, so they send us for our shot at redemption to a program called Diversion, a rehab for licensed health professionals operated by the state of California. They assign you a color and make you call a phone number every day, and if it's your color you have to go piss in a jar for random drug testing. You have to go to Diversion meetings once a week and AA or NA meetings the other six nights, and every six months a committee of tight asses evaluates you to see how you're progressing with your little problem.

NA was full of street drug addicts—meth freaks with open sores and

junkies with the jitters. I found the AA crowd more to my liking but I was desperate for a way out of this mess. I hated Diversion and, without Vicodin, I hated nursing.

One night I walked to the meeting about a mile from my apartment and then I asked Curtis for a ride home. I leaned my head back against the leather headrest and laid my hand on his thigh. Fifteen minutes later his cock was in my mouth and he was telling me that he thought about me night and day. I saw possibilities.

We started an affair. He told me about his wife, how he and she were high school sweethearts back in Benton, Arkansas, where they grew up. His wife, the only woman he'd been with before me, was prudish and frigid, he said. I was forbidden fruit, a wild California girl, free-spirited and comfortable with my body. After sex the first time, he asked me if I'd felt "warm."

"Do you mean: did I come?" I asked.

He winced. "Yes," he whispered. I taught him the marvel of the clitoris and buried his face in it. He'd bawl after sex with me, blubbing how much he loved me, how lucky he was to have found me. He said he loved his wife too, and his son, and that he was just so torn up inside.

"If you love your wife so much, why are you here?" I asked him. He blinked bewildered blue eyes. "Have you ever thought about divorce?"

He startled. "I couldn't divorce Susan," he said. "I could never leave my boy."

I laughed at him. "You don't divorce your *kids*, silly."

I lied and told him that a doctor at work had asked me out. I said he was cute and single and crazy about me, and that I hoped everything would work out between us. Curtis didn't hide his emotions well.

I said, "Honey, you're married. I can't put my life on hold for a married man."

He sat there with his head in his hands. "I can't stand the thought of you with someone else," he said looking like a dazed, sick cow.

"I'm not going to *sleep* with him," I said. "Not on our first date."

"I can't get a divorce, I just can't." I had to keep boxes of Kleenex everywhere because Curtis was always bursting into tears.

Later I got together with my ex-boyfriend Artie. We were still good friends and still had an intense sexual relationship even though he was living with an older, wealthy woman who supported him.

He lit up a joint.

"Get that stuff away from me," I told him. "You'll contaminate my urine." It smelled so good. I love drugs, to tell you the truth. I miss Vicodin, the stony bliss of it. If I could get away with it I'd be using—not out of control like last time. Now and then. A sensible habit. But I had five years of Big Brother in the form of Diversion in my future.

"So what do you get out of torturing this guy?" Artie asked.

"I like him," I said. "Plus, you never know."

"Right," Artie said. "A hayseed from Podunk is right up your alley."

I waved my hand like a game show hostess toward my new wide-screen TV and Bang & Olfson sound system. "He also paid for my transmission."

"Any good in bed?" Artie asked, stoned now, yanking at my sweatshirt.

"He's sweet. And a good learner," I said, mimicking Curtis's Arkansas lilt. "And extremely grateful." I had to stop talking then, Artie had his fat tongue in my mouth and was digging into my pants with his fingers. Artie kissed a lot of puckered, old-lady ass to live like he liked, and when we got together, he took control and I submitted. I found humiliation cleansing somehow, absolution for something blistered in me.

I got the box out from under the bed and he trussed me up with leather straps. He put alligator clamps on my nipples and gagged and blindfolded me. Artie was fun that way.

Curtis didn't look too good. He'd lost fifteen pounds in the three months since our affair started, and bags hung under his eyes. He said he couldn't stop thinking about me and that his wife kept asking him what's wrong. She wanted to go to couples' counseling. He told me if it wasn't for his son he might consider getting a divorce. They were so young when they got married, he said, and he'd become a different man. His wife was still the same Arkansas piano teacher who went to church every Sunday and Wednesday nights. Her throat had never experienced a warming swallow of alcohol or the blunt thrust of a penis.

Alex was six. Curtis showed me pictures of him, a towhead with Curtis's water-blue eyes and pouty red mouth. He showed me pictures of his wife Susan, too, your basic Midwest Baptist, dressed in crisp, buttoned-up pastel shirts and tailored slacks and loafers. I scanned through the photos, a tic jerking my upper eyelid like a pulse.

He wanted me to meet Alex, so one Saturday he took him to the mall and we staged a coincidental meeting. Alex was bored and fidgety while Curtis and I drank coffee. At one point he looked at me with his crusty little eyes and said, "My mom is prettier than you."

Curtis said, "Mommy's very pretty but that's not a nice thing to say. Ms. Nolan is very pretty too."

I smiled at the little prick. "All good little boys think their mommy is the prettiest in the whole world." Curtis beamed at me, and when Alex

wasn't looking, he blew me a kiss. My eye was twitching again. I craved a Vicodin.

Afterwards, he phoned me. "See why I couldn't break up my family even though I love you so much I can't function?"

"He's precious," I said, trying not to vomit. "Maybe it's best if we stop seeing each other." I hung up. I ignored his calls and didn't answer the door when he came pounding on it. He left me notes in my mailbox, desperate missives that Artie and I giggled over.

"So it's over with the hayseed?" Artie asked, flopping on my sofa.

"Hardly," I said.

"You're not going to break up his family are you?"

"I'm not. He might though. He's not as happy as he thought he was."

"What about the brat? You're not exactly the mommy type."

"He's a bit of a problem."

"It'd be awful if something happened to him," Artie said, undoing his belt and wrapping it around my neck.

"Awful," I said. Artie cinched the belt and I saw stars.

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Now, Curtis is at my house. He's weepy and tiresome with his professions of love and angst over what to do about it.

"Life is short," I tell him. "I'm turning thirty-five next month. I can't be wasting my time on dead ends."

"If it wasn't for Alex—"

"Look, we've each got to do what's right. I love you but you're taken." I let my voice break a little. I'm fond of Curtis, or maybe it's his desperate adoration that appeals to me. I offered to let him tie me up but he was shocked, wouldn't do it. He said he couldn't enjoy degrading me that way. Artie would pistol-whip me unconscious if I let him.

"I can't live without you," Curtis says. "I'm going to ask Susan for a divorce. We can share custody of Alex. You'd be such a good influence on him, I just know it."

"Baby—are you sure?"

"I love you Nina. I want to marry you, take care of you. You could quit your job and we could have babies together, little brothers and sisters for Alex." I feel a dark, thrilling victory. I hide my face in his shoulder and cry real tears, not from happiness but for something I can't name. My skin burns and itches like I'd rolled in dried grass.

He tells Susan he's in love with another woman and that he wants a divorce. She goes berserk in a quiet, Midwest way, developing a taste for vodka and taking to her bed. He says that Alex has started to wet his pants.

Susan begs Curtis to reconsider. She calls his mother in Arkansas who calls him and implores him to come to his senses.

"I'm in love, Mother. Life is short. I'm divorcing Susan, not Alex. I'll always be his daddy and he'll spend half his time with me." He's talking to her on his cell phone in my apartment and I listen to the conversation with my head lying on his bare genitals. I lick the head of his penis while he consoles his mother. "Susan will be fine. Everyone in California gets divorced. She'll be financially secure and Alex will still have both of his parents plus a wonderful new stepmother. Wait until you meet her," he says, closing his eyes, his cock rigid against his belly.

After Curtis's lawyer serves Susan divorce papers she takes Alex to a neighbor's house. She fills her car with gasoline and then drives into their snug, weather-stripped garage. She closes the door and drinks a pint of vodka with the motor running, a photo of Curtis, Alex and her laughing in front of a Christmas tree on the dash. When Curtis phones to tell me of her suicide I'm shocked, but then it occurs to me that he won't have to pay her alimony or divide their assets—we'll have it all. And then it hits me that Alex will be with Curtis twenty-four/seven now. Artie is right—I'm *not* the maternal type. I can't help wishing she'd taken Alex with her.

Curtis flies to Little Rock with Alex and Susan's body to bury her there. He phones to tell me how awful and sad the scene is there, how much he misses me, and how he wants to get married as soon as decently possible, to create a stable family environment for Alex.

"I can't take care of someone else's brat," I tell Artie.

"You are some piece of work, girl," he says. "Do you have any guilt at all?"

There's something in me that cringes to think of Susan alone in her car, breathing in carbon monoxide and gulping down vodka. And there's another part of me that revels in it; finds a black satisfying thrill in her despair.

"The way I see it," I tell Artie, "it's dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest. Susan wasn't a survivor."

"Brrrr," Artie shivers. "I never want to get on your bad side," he says, getting undressed.

"Too late," I say, reaching for the box under my bed.

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Curtis wants Alex and me to get to know one another slowly. We go to the zoo. We go to the beach. We rent Disney videos and watch them at Curtis's five thousand square foot home in La Cañada-Flintridge, an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. It's done in a kitschy country decor that makes me want to gag. I see black granite and silk-covered walls. Chrome and nickel and sumptuous wool carpeting to hide the cliché of peg and groove oak.

"Why don't you take him out by yourself this Saturday," Curtis says. "I have to attend a seminar."

"Sure honey," I say. "Good idea."

I've been having bad dreams and sleeping poorly. I have a blotchy rash on my chin and my joints ache. I'm getting migraines. I don't feel like hanging out with Alex, who snivels all the time, but Curtis doesn't want me to move in or get married until he feels Alex is comfortable with me. I ask Alex what he'd like to do and he shrugs. I get him into the car, the Range Rover that Susan killed herself in, and buckle him into his seatbelt.

We head to a coffee shop to get some breakfast. As we're driving I look at Alex and see tears streaking his face.

"What now?" I ask.

"I miss my mother," he says. All Alex knows is that his mother is dead.

A dazzling scotoma appears in my field of vision, harbinger to a migraine. And me without a pain pill.

"I'm sorry about your mommy, honey," I say to him. The first throbs descend on my brain. "But she's in heaven. With God. She must be happy there." My mouth has a metallic taste, like I've been sucking a lead pipe.

"She's not happy, not without me and Daddy," he says. "I hate you. I wish *you* were dead." His small body convulses with sobs. My head hurts so bad I have to pull the car over. I'm nauseated and break into a sweat. I've just enough time to open the car door and vomit the coffee I had earlier, then bile. I'm drenched, my shirt sticks to my body and sweat streams from my armpits. I feel a tapping. I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and turn to see Alex who's undone his seatbelt and is kneeling on the seat, rubbing my back and shoulder with his hand, his face anxious and tear-stained.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't mean it." He covers his face with his hands. I put my arms around his sturdy little body and my nose fills with his boy smell. He hugs me, trembling. Each beat of my heart is a wrenching explosion in my brain. I left some Excedrin Migraine back at Curtis's house.

"I have to go back to the house and get my headache medicine," I tell him. I can't see; the scotoma is like a sizzling white starburst that takes more than half my field of vision from each eye, leaving me with blind spots. I hang a U-turn, careening the car crazily. Despite the headache it occurs to me that Alex has left his seatbelt unfastened. I imagine hurtling into one of the thick, old elms that line the street—a horrible accident while crazed with a migraine, and poor little Alex, his seatbelt undone, becomes a Scud missile. I envision him shooting through the windshield, impacting the tree. A lightning storm of pain blazes in my brain.

I pull the car over.

"Put your seatbelt on Alex," I say, panting, leaning my head on the steering wheel. Snot streams from my nose to my lap. "Safety first," I say. He nods and fastens it, and I manage to get us back to Curtis's house.

"I'm going to take my medicine and rest," I tell Alex. I lie down on the living-room sofa and he goes to watch television in the den. I fall asleep and wake to find him standing over me, pale and worried looking.

"I'm okay," I say.

"Do you want a drink of water?"

"That'd be nice." He brings me water in a plastic Pokemon cup, arranges his blanket on my legs and puts his hand on my forehead. I tell him again that I'm fine and he goes back to watch TV. I think of how his body felt in my arms, how it pulled at something in me. I wonder if I could ever love him, if I could ever love anything. I vomit the water I've just swallowed and Alex brings paper towels and mops it up. I tell him again that I'm fine.

By the time Curtis gets home in the afternoon my headache is gone and Alex and I have eaten pizza and watched cartoons. I tell Curtis about the morning, how sick I was and how Alex took such good care of me. Alex listens, pink with pleasure, his eyes downcast and shy. Curtis, of course, is crying.

Later I'll go home and write Curtis a letter to tell him that it's over. He won't recognize it as the only decent thing I've done for as long as I can remember. I'll call Artie and tell him I've gotten off the gravy train and he'll come over. "So," he'll say, "I guess we're back in business."

I'll get the metal box from the bottom of my closet, the one I keep locked up. I'll find the key in my jewelry box and open it.

"Make it hurt," I'll tell him.