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SUNY Purchase

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The Biggest Drill

During high school, Missy worked part-time at Gino's Pizzeria. The summer after she graduated, the manager promoted her to a full-time position. She got a new red T-shirt with *GINOS* stamped across the chest in white letters, and most days she wore a red bandana over her dark hair to match.

The guys from Connolly Carpentry showed up in July. That first time, Missy watched them emerge from the Catholic church across the street and point to Gino's. One man shoved open the door with his shoulder and the shop filled instantly with their laughter and complaints.

"Christ, it's hot in here."

"You're telling me," said Missy. "What can I get you?"

"A cold beer, for the love of God." The voice that answered was husky but high-pitched, with a thick Jersey accent. Missy looked for its owner and was surprised to see a woman on the crew. Or something like a woman, anyhow. Her hair was dark and curly, like Missy's, but she kept it tucked under a Yankees cap instead of a bandana. She was short and broad, and the outline of a sports bra showed through her company T-shirt. She spoke like she was throwing something.

"Drill Bit, you better hope the foreman doesn't catch you with a beer," said one of the carpenters, bumping her with his elbow. He was a doughy blond guy with translucent eyelashes.

Drill Bit's face split with a conspiratorial smile. "He won't know if you don't tell him."

"He's tired of your shit," mumbled another carpenter. He looked the oldest, perhaps due to his bald pink head.

The crew sat on stools at the plastic counter and called for five beers and two pepperoni pies, then ripped into one another until their pizzas arrived.

The guys were so big and the stools were so small that they looked like top-heavy beige flamingos suspended on one leg.

As Missy set their pizzas on the counter, redolent of hot oil and oregano, she said, "I haven't seen you all before. Are you new in town?"

"We're here on a job, refinishing the pews in that church," said the blond carpenter.

"That one across the street?" Missy pointed.

He nodded.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing's wrong," the blond carpenter replied. "They just need a new coat of stain."

"I'm glad we're refinishing, not replacing them," Drill Bit added. "Under all that wear, they're beautiful old pews. Solid maple."

"You won't be so glad after a full day of scrubbing seats," said the bald carpenter. He looked at Missy and winked. "She's an apprentice, so she gets the shit jobs."

"Thanks for that," said Drill Bit, looking straight ahead into the kitchen.

To change the subject, Missy asked, "Is Drill Bit a nickname?"

Drill Bit lifted a slice off the pan, stretching ropes of mozzarella until they snapped. "Of course it is." Having separated her slice from the pie, Drill Bit squinted at Missy's name tag. "Is Missy a nickname?"

"No, that's actually my name. Why do they call you Drill Bit?"

The bald carpenter threw an arm around Drill Bit's shoulders and grinned. "It's 'cause she's little, but she's got the biggest drill on the crew!"

Drill Bit ducked out of his grasp and rested her elbow on the counter. Missy caught her eye, and Drill Bit shrugged.

The crew teased Missy, describing the potency of the enormous drill. With a tool like that, they assured her, Drill Bit could screw anything. Missy played innocent, asking them if it was difficult to refinish furniture and how long it took. They said they didn't expect this job to take longer than a week.

For a while Drill Bit said nothing, she just smiled as Missy danced around their innuendos with practiced expertise. Under her eyes, Missy felt elegant and in the know. If there was any danger here, it came from her and not the five large men she worked with.

They finished eating within twenty minutes and left a big tip. Drill Bit was the last one out the door, and as she left, she said, "My real name is Casey. In case you wanted to know."

Casey's crew returned on Tuesday and then again on Wednesday. On Thursday, during a story about a beehive in the wall of a client's house, Casey caught Missy staring from behind the register. "*She* knows what I mean," said Casey. "I bet bees follow her everywhere thinking she's a flower. Right, sweetheart?"

There was a beat of silence as Casey, her crew, and Missy's coworkers waited for Missy to deflect. But she didn't. She stood with a stupid smile on her face and color in her cheeks. Behind her, a cook chuckled. "I don't think so," she said at last.

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy cringed through the rest of her shift. She worried that Casey's crew would stop coming in, but the next day they were back and more boisterous than ever. At first, she was relieved, but then she noticed a sharpness to the crews' jokes, an edge directed at Casey. They shoved her and grinned at Missy and returned to the subject of Casey's drill. They grew more insistent as their lunch hour waned. Before they left, Casey wrote her number on the back of the receipt and returned it to Missy.

"Let me take you out," she said.

The crew snickered, ready for Missy to lay their doubts to rest.

Missy heard herself say, "Okay."

As soon as the door slammed behind Casey, the cook whooped. "All right, Missy!"

"That's enough," said her manager. Missy didn't dare turn her head. She didn't want to catch his eye or see his tight, knowing smile. It was unprofessional to accept the phone numbers of cocky dykes on company time.

The other waitress, Kendall, sidled up and nudged her. "Look at you," she said. She smiled but not at Missy. She grinned with her eyes on the door.

"I don't know why I did that."

"I think *I* do."

"That's enough, Kendall," said the manager.

Kendall lowered her voice. "All this time I've been dishing about my boyfriend, and you never had anything to say. Now I know why."

"It's not like that," said Missy, slapping her palm on the counter over Casey's receipt. She dragged her palm to the edge of the counter and let the receipt drop into the trash can below.

Behind them, the cook laughed. "So, what? You said yes to not hurt her feelings?"

"You're too sweet, Missy," said Kendall. "You better learn to say no or people will take advantage."

Missy pocketed the receipt when she took it out of the trash. After work, as she walked home along the highway, she pinched and worried the paper, wondering what to do. Kendall had offered to drive her, but Missy refused because she didn't want to be interrogated.

It took her forty-five minutes to reach the narrow clapboard house where she'd grown up. She sat on the steps out front, peeled off her sweaty jacket,

and fished out the receipt to take a closer look. To her horror, she saw that the ink had smeared, obscuring Casey's phone number. The fives resembled sixes and the ones could have been sevens or vice versa.

Once she realized some smudged ink might prevent her from calling Casey, she stopped wondering what to do with Casey's number. Missy knew she wanted to call her, she just needed to figure out how. On the same receipt, below the smudged number, she wrote out as many possible combinations as she could think of. She swapped fives for sixes and ones for sevens, keeping the legible numbers constant. Then she dialed each possibility on her smartphone, one by one, until she heard Casey's voice on a voicemail recording. Missy hadn't expected Casey to pick up anyway—she didn't know anyone her age who picked up calls from random numbers, and Casey didn't look more than a few years older.

Casey here. You know what to do.

"Hey," Missy said after the beep. "It's Missy. From the pizza shop. I just thought I would call." She hung up because she didn't know what else to say, and fretted until she felt her phone vibrate in her back pocket during dinner.

She bolted up from the table.

"You okay?" asked her dad, pausing with a can of beer halfway to his lips.

"Sit down," her mom demanded. "We're saying grace."

"It's my friend," said Missy, improvising. "She needs homework help."

"Didn't you graduate?" quipped her older sister Bree.

"Yeah, but she didn't," Missy snapped.

"Sit down," her mom said again. "We'll say grace and then you can go."

Missy bowed her head, heart pounding, and listened to her dad recite a prayer in Polish.

Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty.

The prayer was short, so Missy had time to get to her bedroom before she answered the phone.

"Hey, Missy. Sorry I missed you before."

"It's okay! No problem at all."

"Is this a good time to talk? You seem out of breath."

Missy made an effort to slow her breathing. "No, no. Now's a good time. What's up?"

Casey laughed. "I guess—I want to know if you want to see me. When we're both off the clock."

"Yes."

When Missy didn't elaborate, Casey asked, "So...are you free tomorrow night?"

"You mean Saturday? Saturday I'm free." She paused, then forced herself to continue. "Let's drive somewhere new. I'm sick of Bayonne."

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll think of someplace,” said Casey. “Is that where you live, Bayonne? Can I pick you up?”

Missy struggled to think of a suitably anonymous meeting place. Her house was out of the question, as was Gino’s Pizzeria. In the end, she gave the name of a local Korean grocery because none of her parents’ friends shopped there.

As soon as she hung up, Missy felt overwhelmed by the task of dressing for their date. In high school, she’d dressed in whatever clothes her peers wore, noting the most popular styles of blue jeans and ballet flats. She saved her paychecks and bought the right brand of backpack. She gravitated toward shirts with brand names splashed across the front. Now that she worked full time she wore her Gino’s T-shirt almost every day.

But with Casey, she couldn’t rely on context to dress. She didn’t know Casey from high school, and she certainly couldn’t wear her employee uniform on their date. The thought of dressing like Casey, in Carharts and flannel, crossed her mind. But she couldn’t imagine wearing Casey’s clothes any more than she could imagine Casey in a dress. The image embarrassed her and brought to mind how appalled she had been by Casey’s appearance that first day in the pizza shop. Or maybe she wasn’t appalled—maybe that was just the name she gave to feelings of another kind.

After dinner, Missy decided to wear sandals, shorts, and her church cardigan, buttoned up to hide the little gold cross she wore around her neck.

The following evening, Casey picked her up and drove north along the Hudson River, stopping at Liberty State Park. From there they could see the backside of the Statue of Liberty, as well as some of lower Manhattan across the water. Casey parked the car and bought two ice cream cones from a truck. Then they crawled under a railing and found a place to sit on the rocks, with the river just a foot away. The sun set behind them, leaving the cityscape to glitter against a dim eastern sky.

“Have you always lived in Bayonne?” asked Casey, licking a drop off the side of her ice cream cone. Tonight she wore a clean shirt and jeans in addition to her usual Yankees cap.

“Pretty much.” Missy smiled. “You know the church you’re working on? I grew up going to that church.”

Casey grinned and said, “No way!”

Missy remembered her first communion, standing at the altar in a frothy gown. She remembered her first bittersweet sip from the communal goblet, and the ham hocks her mom brought to the potluck after the service. That night, her parents gave her the little gold cross she wore every day, more out of habit than devotion.

“The windows are beautiful,” Casey continued. “And so are the pews, with the new stain and all. Do you like going there?”

“I go because I’ve always gone. My mom likes it.”

“And you like going to church with her? Living with her?”

This question struck Missy as condescending. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I just meant, how is that like for you? Tell me about your family.”

“My family,” said Missy, running a curl between her fingers. “Well, my parents are Polish immigrants. My dad is an electrician and my mom is very Catholic.”

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy braced herself for more questions about her beliefs, about her mother, but none came. Relieved, she added, “My mom and my sister always butt heads.”

“Why?”

Missy rolled her eyes. “A million reasons. Stupid reasons. I think Bree will be happy once she has kids of her own to boss around.”

“Oh, she wants to be the boss. I get it, I’m like that too.”

Missy felt a little thrill. Then she felt embarrassed and exposed. What was she doing on a dark riverbank with a woman who dressed like a man? Her mother thought she was at Kendall’s house. She should be at Kendall’s house. If Casey had picked Missy up from her house rather than the Korean grocery, would her mom have shaken Casey’s hand?

To distract herself from hypotheticals, Missy said, “Let me tell you about my sister. When I was little, we would play house and she would make me be the dog.”

“That’s mean.”

“It was! Bree would be the mom, our friend would be the dad, and she’d get a doll to be the baby.”

“She couldn’t let you be the baby?”

“No! I had to be the dog. She made me drink from a cup on the floor—”

Casey laughed so hard Missy had to stop the story.

“You shouldn’t laugh so hard at my sad story,” she teased, once Casey had recovered.

“It’s not the story that’s so funny. It’s your delivery.”

“My delivery?”

“Yeah,” said Casey, looking from her to Manhattan. “Like at the pizza shop, when my crew was making dick jokes. You went along with it, all sweet and simple until you looked at me. Then the joke was on them. You know what I’m saying?”

“Not really.”

“It’s not a bad thing. When I first saw you, I thought you were pretty and mysterious. But I didn’t know you were funny until later.”

Missy looked down at the Hudson River. She was flattered and flustered, but at the same time she felt criticized. Like she’d been caught in a lie. Missy changed the subject. “Where did you grow up?”

“I live in Newark,” said Casey, pulling down the brim of her Yankees cap. “I have an apartment and a couple roommates.”

Missy waited for elaboration, then asked, “But where are you from?”

“Trenton. I haven’t been back in a while, though.”

A drop of sweat slid down Missy’s spine. Had Casey’s family rejected her? She decided not to press any further and instead pointed across the water. “Do you ever work there?”

“In Manhattan?” Casey laughed bitterly. “No. I’m not ready for a Manhattan job, and if my crew keeps giving me grunt work, I never will be.”

“So you’ve never been?”

“I go to Manhattan every chance I get. Mostly weekends,” said Casey, resting her hand on the rock beneath them, behind Missy’s back, barely touching her. “You should join me sometime.” The phrase was heavy with bravado, so different from the gesture, which was cautious and shy.

Tenderness welled in Missy’s chest, and longing. She leaned back, and Casey’s arm stiffened to support her weight. Casey’s fingers curled around her hip and Missy put her hand on Casey’s thigh. She felt muscles tense beneath her hand as she stared across the water, picking out blinking pearls of light, square panels of light, rhinestone strips of light, white-hot balls of light. Rows of windows glistened like scales. She felt the rough cotton of Casey’s jeans and the promise of soft skin underneath. She turned away from the lights and toward Casey, tried to kiss her but missed her mouth in the dark, getting her cheek instead and clicking teeth. Casey’s hands smelled like some kind of wood, maybe maple, and water rushed past them toward the sea.

“I can tell you more if you want,” Casey mumbled.

Missy giggled.

“I can tell you everything I know about Manhattan—the communist bookstore in the Bowery, the lesbian bar that doesn’t card, the best cannoli you ever—”

Missy’s giggles turned to snorts as she collapsed into Casey’s arms.

“Stop laughing, I’m serious. The best cannoli you ever had.”

“Shut up, shut up,” said Missy, pulling Casey’s face to hers.

But as soon as Casey shut up, Missy heard footsteps on the path above. She looked up and saw a figure hurry by, growing smaller already in the distance.

“What’s wrong?” asked Casey.

Missy sat up and adjusted her cardigan. “I heard someone.”

“Yeah?”

“I know a lot of people in this area. I’m just nervous.”

“I thought you lived in Bayonne.”

“I do, but some people from my church live here.” She paused. “And I’m not gay, you know.”

Casey adjusted her cap, ran a hand over her ponytail, and gave a short laugh. “No?”

“No.”

“So you kissed me, what? For the hell of it?”

“No,” Missy blurted. She paused, searching for the words that would manage Casey’s reaction. “I just—I wanted to try it.”

“You were nicer at the pizza shop.”

Missy felt her throat close.

“At least you smell good. You smell like pizza crust.”

“Stop it.” Her voice wobbled.

“Aw, sweetheart.” Casey squeezed her knee. “Can I drive you home?”

Missy sniffled and nodded.

They scrambled off the rocks and back onto the path, where street lamps and a few pedestrians made Missy’s palms sweat and eyes burn. Casey unlocked the car as they approached and opened the door on the passenger side.

As Casey walked around the front of the car to the driver’s seat, Missy blurted, “That wasn’t right, what I said. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Casey paused to kick the front tire of her car. With her eyes on her work boots, she said, “I did think this would make a cute story, though.”

Missy gripped the edge of the car door. “What do you mean?”

“Like, if it worked out between us, if you were the waitress that I met on my lunch break. That would be a cute story.”

On Sunday morning, Missy walked into church and gasped.

“You okay?” her dad asked.

Her mother pulled on her arm. “Missy, you can’t stop in the middle of the aisle.”

“Look at the pews,” said Missy.

“What about them?” said Bree.

“Oh! They’ve been refinished,” said her dad, nodding. “I think Father Kaminski mentioned that was gonna happen last week. Looks nice.”

Missy followed her family to the front of the church. They sat in their usual pew, three rows from the pulpit on the left-hand side. The organ music tapered off and the priest began to speak, but Missy wasn’t listening. She stared down at the pew itself, at the wood beneath her fingertips, wood she would have called yellow just last week. Now she saw tiger stripes in its glossy surface, flashes of bronze and gold, glistening scales, luminous as pearls. *Solid maple*, Casey had said. *Beautiful*.

While her mom gazed at the priest, Missy peeled off her cardigan.