

Underfoot

By Allison McCarthy

“It’s too cold to play games. Do you really want to be here?” he asks.

I’m not looking at him. “Maybe,” I say.

There’s a quarter on the ground a few feet away. I’m desperate to pick it up. He watches me, grazes his shoe over to it. The coin scrapes under his big left toe, and then disappears.

“You ought to know by now,” he says.

I can’t say anything to that, so I don’t talk anymore. When he lifts his foot, the quarter has brown spots of mud caked to Washington’s head, dull where it used to shine. He looks me over once more before opening the car door.

I used to try to write him letters. We worked in the same office, four desks apart. He wrote copy for the head manager, I tracked down files for him. He dressed the way a salesman should, but he didn’t wear a wedding ring. I looked young and cheap next to him, wearing my consignment shop dresses and worn-down heels.

The first time we met and shook hands, he pressed his fingertips to my wrist, rubbed slow and soft, until my eyes started to close against their will. The overhead lights glared hot, probed my skin. He leaned in so he could brush a curl from my neck.

He smelled like the samples of department store cologne my brothers brought home. You could tell he was the sort of man who paid cash for the whole bottle.

“Married?” he asked.

“No.”

“Going to?”

“Maybe,” I said. This was flirting now, for sure.

“Ella, if I wasn’t your boss,” he said, “I’d buy you a prettier dress.”

He looked around the room, and then dropped my hand. I slowed my breathing so that I could go back to my desk.

There were so many typos in the work I did for him, it seemed like I never got anything right. He only yelled if other people were around to watch. All our glances were evidence. If we stood too close together, the sales guys would talk. Ever polite, we spoke mostly through memos: bring coffee, fetch the Fennier file, get the phone number for the restaurant downtown.

He asked, I obeyed, that's how it was. It should have been as simple as that, but it wasn't.

Writing to him was my favorite secret part of the work day, but the letters themselves weren't anything fancy. I called him names I heard from movies: grand darling and dear, sweet, wonderful man. The things I wrote were full of all the places he'd take me to: dinner plans at four-star places, tall glasses of red wine, afternoon picnics, uptown strolls. I imagined that the letters were true to our romance, that the words could make him feel giddy and light-headed, the way his being there made me.

With the firm's masthead hanging above my words, my handwriting would read too awkwardly for the paper on which it was written. I knew that whatever I gave to him had to be worth his time. I'd steel myself after every effort to just try again for better letters.

Sometimes I thought about what they'd say if the letters were ever found. I couldn't have stood a chance, the shabby girl with no credit to her name. I wouldn't have known what to do with such a man.

I was careful not to throw the letters in the office trash. I carried them in my pocket all day, waiting for a moment where we'd pass each other. It would have been so easy to slip him the folded papers. Still, any time we got near each other, I ran in the other direction.

On the walks home, I'd count the blocks until it seemed to be far enough, then tear the letters into big, careless pieces. Mixed with all the trash in the dumpster bins, the white of the crisp office paper turned to gray.

Jim's asking me about motel rooms. His eyes tell me that this is the answer, but I'm having trouble remembering the question. Did I want this? When did I ask for it?

Do I know the place on 13th Street? They rent rooms by the hour, he'll cover the cost. The open car door, its velvet interior, his hand reaching for my bony wrist – all of his gestures an invitation.

“You ought to know by now,” he says.

No courtship, no long looks, only the rain and the cold and his proposition. I can't look at him.

In a dumpster near my apartment, there are half a dozen letters addressed to the man in front of me. I could have him now, like this: a shared cigarette in a dingy room, his weight shifting on and off me, covering me, until we're both done, both spent. This could be our thing, the thing I need.

We stare at the car door, and then each other. The quarter on the ground lies between us, waits to be claimed.