

## FastDog Security

ALLISON WYSS

The inside of the station is brightly lit, but it makes the outside, through the window, darker. The 9:40 bus to Grand Rapids will pull through any minute and bounce shadows on the wall behind me. The bus will zip over the highway, like a bug to a zapper, to this station that floats on empty winter fields.

But first, a woman walks into the station. She's young, with all sorts of extra makeup around her eyes. She stops short at my checkpoint, her face inches from mine.

"Oh!" She hops backward.

"Do you have a ticket?" I say.

"Mmm-hmm." She pulls something from her purse and a speck of gray fluff falls to the floor.

"Oh, I don't need to see it." The wooden stick is smooth in my hand. The metal-detecting wand is quiet on the table. "I need to check your bags and your person. Could you please open those up?" She does and I rifle through six—six!—bags. Through sweaters, books, tangled cords, lacy underthings. Through tubes and plastic cases, bottles and combs, brushes, colored pencils, crumpled Kleenex.

“Now, miss,” I say. Her raccoon-ring eyes look back at me. “It’s not my business, but I just can’t see someone pretty like you needing *all* these beauty supplies. There’s room now that we’re only in Botkins, but once you reach LaGrange and then Kalamazoo, the bus will fill up and you’ll be crushed.” The idea makes me quake a little. Bile rises in my throat. “Wouldn’t it be better to have less stuff?”

She rolls those smudgy eyes and takes a step to pass me.

“Miss?” She stops and I place my body between her and the gate. “Please put your bags down and hold out your arms. I’m just going to wave this little wand around in front of you. Car keys out of your pockets?”

The wand beeps at the heels of her boots, which she bends to unlace before I ask her. She grunts, but doesn’t speak. I poke at the boots, then she shoves her feet back in.

The bus will be here any minute, but she collapses onto the bench, past the security border, the flipped tables, and she spreads her bags around her. Her purse stays on her lap, but its contents dump to the floor.

wadded tissues, Chapstick, phone and charger, pencil stubs, ticket stubs, receipts, candy wrappers, loose and chipped M&Ms, hairbrush, fluff, lint, a crushed mini package of cheese-and-peanut-butter crackers

So much trash—it’s bleeding into the checker pattern of the floor tiles.

And, finally, through the window, there are flashes, far off, sparking toward us along the flat of the highway. Headlights brush over the slush in the parking lot, then shoot into empty fields and sit still.

Before I can help, the girl has gathered her six bags, hugging them to her body like a second, bunched coat. Her two arms cable it all together as she wobbles out.

I finish the last of my work, lock wand and wooden stick in the supply closet, flip the tables to stand upright. Scoop up her trail of crumbs and metallic flakes of candy wrapper.

The bus rumbles away, dragging its lights into then out of the window. The old station is empty, echoing, comforting—there’s room to breathe again.

I drive home, watching for a low constellation that glows at the horizon. It’s a cluster of five houses, huddled together on the empty fields. Porch lights. Front windows. A mile past where the gas station and the fire station sit catty-corner to each other.

My house is the last one and Rosie is inside. She left the kitchen light on, but there's also a low glow from the bedroom window.

In Rosie's car, in the garage, I find some trash. Under the seat is a crumpled coffee cup, a receipt for gas. In the ashtray is a single cigarette butt, because she still smokes just the one, on the way home from work, and every evening I remove it for her. Driving gloves on the passenger seat are crumpled until I fold them. A stray pillowcase has fallen into the backseat, so I bring it inside.

The station floor is tile and my boots echo when I click over it. When I tap my wooden stick on the table leg, the sound booms through the station. Besides me working here, there's just Gressley, spiky hair and plastic glasses, at his ticket window, clacking away at his computer. And right now there are four people past the barrier, too, luggage stacked around them, waiting for the 2:56 to Muncie.

My four tables are flipped, their smooth, long surfaces facing the entrance, and the legs pointing to the boarding area. One card table is upright, but no bags are dumped right now. All that clutter is scooped into purses and duffels and backpacks. The ones clutched by the passengers who are waiting.

It's only eight months this station has even had a security guard. I'm the first at Botkins, Indiana, FastDog Terminal. Before I got here, anybody could board the bus. So long as Gressley sold them a ticket, that is.

In the eighteen months before I started here, retired from the plant, that's when I had time to get organized.

First, the pantry in the kitchen. It wasn't my business, since Rose does the shopping and the cooking. But that doesn't mean the clutter never got to me. The extras. The duplicates. Dusty back there, with labels facing all directions, and too much of everything. So I cleaned it out. Donated the second and third cans of lima beans, tomato sauce, artichokes, pears in heavy syrup. Wiped down the shelves and put some order to the just-one-of-each rest of it.

Since this security job at FastDog, since Rose's nephew set me up here, there's been less time for keeping back the clutter. Rose's nephew is a big-shot muckety-muck for FastDog. Or maybe it's the public transport authority of Beaner County that he works for.

playing cards, crossword puzzles, pharmaceuticals, laptop computers, water bottles, padlocks, airplane pillows, chewed gum, fresh gum, gum stuck in wads of pocket lint, whole packs of gum, loose Chicklets, checkbooks, textbooks,

hairy wads of gunk stuck to the bottoms of purses and the insides of pockets

Rose makes beds all day, replaces towels, and bosses the other housekeepers at the Holiday Haven, who are making beds and replacing towels. Head of housekeeping. She's seen some horrors. Bloody sheets, broken bottles of mini-bar drinks, cracker crumbs like dandruff through the linens. She's far away, next to the airport in Clifton, forty miles from home even.

chocolate bars, potato chips, beef jerky, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Chinese takeout, chewy fruit candy, hard sugar candy, bananas, hard-boiled eggs, crumbs, those little cups of pudding—punctured and oozing out through the underwear, paperback romance novels, and beauty products

I zap my wand at the aluminum legs sometimes, just to see the light and hear the beep. Keeps me busy between the buses. Twice a day, I sweep the floor.

Rosie's clothes. She had them sorted by color, but that doesn't make sense. I pulled all the sweaters together and all the T-shirts. Then I purged her of duplicates. Except for socks. Of course, I left two of each color of socks.

Between the 2:56 to Muncie and the 6:04 to Dayton, there's time for a quick drive to the subdivision going in on the west side of Orrindale, past Huntoon, where Rosie and I live. Bill Freiburger's dad—I grew up with Bill—used to farm that land when he was alive.

Now there are lots laid out and a few finished houses, blighting the ground that was once flat and open, only wind sweeping over soybeans or corn. Last week's snow has blown away, except in cruddy spots against the lee wall of each house. No one's building now, in the cold.

The space between towns is shrinking. We're losing the buffer and I like to keep an eye on the houses springing up. I can't stop them, but I can give them a hurtful stare.

Neither Huntoon or Orrindale or even Berlinda is as big as Botkins, which is big enough to have this bus terminal with a clerk, but not big enough to have an airport like Clifton does, even though it is a tiny airport.

I like small towns, but I like the spaces between them better.

It's good to drive around, feel space around my car. Between the three buses that leave our station, I check up to a dozen passengers a day, almost always strangers.

They let me flip a couple big folding tables for my work. The long kind for banquets and whatnot. They make a wall that way. Cut off the crawlers and the sneakers.

There were never strangers at the plant, just the old crew, or maybe someone new, but one-at-a-time new, never overwhelming.

Between the later buses—Dayton and Grand Rapids—I might drive around again, or I might talk to Gressley at the ticket window.

After a year and a half of retirement, the house was almost, *almost*, finished. But I don't complain. My new job is important. And Rosie's glad for me to help her nephew.

Often at night, if I've had a bad day, I'll do a bit of consolidation at home, cleaning and reorganization.

Rose's nephew Phil is having dinner with us, yet again.

"Aunt Rose, this pork roast is delicious," says Phil.

"Would you like some more?"

"Oh, probably."

I hold up my plate, too, and Rose picks out a bit for each of us. Eating makes me quiet, but Rose and her nephew chatter about his girlfriends and his softball team and they each talk about their jobs. They tell each other about my work at the station.

Phil's always been good enough to Rosie and me, although we didn't used to see him so much as we do now.

wingtips stuffed with wooden feet, tennis shoes with balled up sweat socks, cracked flip-flops, crumpled loafers, dirty work boots wrapped in plastic grocery bags

A fellow could use a cane for a weapon. Also, he could use a cane to walk and be pretty out of sorts without one. So I give a cane the once-over and let the carrier know not to strike anyone. I say it firmly but friendly at the same time.

Rosie and I don't have kids. We waited, and then it was too late. Rosie minds some, but I don't. Maybe there's too many people in the world already.

At the bus depot, it's just all this stuff.

"You could fit all this stuff into one bag, you know," I tell a woman. My wooden stick is tangling in the shredded tissues at the bottom of her purse, then fluffing with lint in an empty suitcase.

"Oh, but I'm going *shopping*," she says. "I'll use the space for the things I buy."

Things. They all want things. And I scabble through them.

But the people with the most stuff aren't carrying it around on buses,

anyway. The people with the most stuff use banks and safes and security guards.

Gressley is OK to talk to, between rushes, when no one is at my checkpoint, or buying tickets at his window. "Catch the end of the game last night?" I call out.

"I don't watch basketball." Except at other times of the year, it's football or baseball he doesn't watch.

I might tell him about the game anyway, or whatever odd thing Rosie found in a room. He'll perk up from his typing at that, especially when neither of us can figure out what a thing was for. His guess is usually sex, but I like to think of other possibilities.

shark teeth, megaphone, bathtub full of unpopped popcorn, parking meter, half-melted snowman, strings of sticky hot caramel, wrapping out of the bathroom and down the hallway, clinging to the walls and floor and toilet seat

A kid like Gressley should get out of this station, instead of typing on his computer all day, which I suppose is what he really gets paid for, because it's only about a dozen people ever come through and half of them already have their ticket from the first leg, when they bought round trip. But I'm not sure Gressley is even working when he types, that spiky head bobbing. It might be video games.

Gressley gets bored hearing about the ordinary things Rosie finds every day.

toenail clippings, orange-tipped cotton swabs, tissues, cellophane ghosts, lipsticked plastic cups, socks, snaked-out condoms, hangers, cellphone chargers

It's not a paid position I hold. Just volunteer security.

The wand they gave me is electric. It beeps when it gets close to metal, and it buzzes and lights up. It's an older model but works fine.

I'm checking for weapons mostly, with the electric wand and my own wooden stick. And other dangerous things, like firecrackers and flammable liquids. They can take liquor and cigarettes, but I warn them not to drink or smoke while riding.

Rosie comes into the bedroom out of the shower, wrapped in a bright-white hotel towel, but her hair and legs still dripping. Her skin is pink from the heat of the shower. Her cheeks glow like she is still young. Her hair is in coily snakes, bunching at her shoulders. She takes hold of me at the waist.

"Don't get me wet," I say.

Rosie giggles and flops onto the bed.

“Now the bed will be soggy.”

“I’m changing it today anyway. The sheets, I mean.”

“Oh.” I bounce on the bed beside her, but far enough to stay dry.

She rolls over and giggles some more. Rosie’s body is round in the middle. Full and smooth. She looks juicy with the shower still misty all over her. Her arms and legs, though, are thin and hard-muscled.

“What’s got into you?”

“It was just a good shower. I’m in a good mood.” She reaches out to pinch me. “You?”

I snake an arm into her towel. She smells delicious, but I’m not sure yet what either of us wants. “Do you have time?” I could be convinced.

She squeezes my hand. “Oh, not really.” Rosie kisses my forehead and splatters me with water from her hair.

Rosie dresses then and I watch, disappointed and maybe relieved. She puts herself back to middle aged, respectable. Her hair is dried and pinned. Her skin is toweled and lotioned and covered in polyester uniform slacks and button-down shirt. She powders the glow out of her face, then colors a different pink to it.

What if I grabbed her?

Now that she’s done up, she’d be annoyed.

“Why are you watching me like that?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Do you have time for coffee if I make some?”

“Sure.”

I saved four coffee cups, for when we have company. All of different pretty colors.

And then one day, my wand isn’t working. The handheld metal detector.

It occurs mid-shift, between the 2:56 and the 6:14 daily departures. It won’t beep. It won’t light up. Maybe the batteries are dead?

I unhitch the back side of it and take the little guys out for a shake. They aren’t ordinary batteries like for a remote control or a flashlight. They look expensive.

The equipment closet has lots of toilet paper, but no backup batteries.

I’ve been spending some of my downtime scanning the walls for bomb implants. In retrospect, now, that was not a bright idea.

I leave Phil a voice message: “This is your Uncle Hank. Hank Friederman, volunteer security at the Botkins bus depot. Listen, Phil, I’ve got a problem with my wand. The handheld metal detector. I think it needs batteries, but I can’t find a spare set. T9Y7674B is the model number and it wants 87A5WX batteries. That’s T-9-Y-7-6-7-4-B on the wand and 8-7-A-5-W-X on the batteries.”

There’s two hours before the next bus departure and I don’t know what Phil will be able to do for me.

“Gressley. I’m going to run to the store.” I wait for him to look up. “I need batteries.”

He reaches for the 87A5WX battery that I’ve got in my hand. “You won’t find this at the hardware store.”

“Maybe the Super Walmart?”

“Man, I doubt it.” He turns it over. “Hank, these are specialty batteries. They might not even make them anymore. And, shit, I bet they’re expensive.”

Gressley probably doesn’t know what he’s talking about, but the Super Walmart is a better bet than Umber’s Hardware, so I drive twenty miles to Orrindale, just inside where Bill’s farm/subdivision is.

The Super Walmart has nine brands each of 4.5-volt, D, C, AA, AAA, AAAA, A23, 9-volt, CR2032, and LR44. Most of the hooks have at least five packages hanging, with no fewer than two batteries per pack. There are batteries that look like a damn nickel and batteries that look like cans of gasoline. But no 87A5WX.

I used to eat supper sometimes with Bill’s family, fascinated to watch how much mashed potatoes his dad could swallow. He was so tired you could feel it in the stillness around him. He shut down every muscle but in the one arm for lifting his fork and his jaw for chewing. Even his eyelids would droop.

Bill was afraid of his dad, but I saw pride radiating from him. It seemed to be about the sweat he had put into his day. That’s how the old farmers were.

And it was the same with my dad, home from the plant. Of course I couldn’t see it then, because *I* was so afraid of *him*. But I knew it for myself later.

Back at the station, Gressley is watching for me. “Your nephew called.”

“Why didn’t he call my cellphone?”

Gressley shrugs. “He says to hold tight on the battery.”

“Hold tight?”

“That’s what he said.”



“Super Walmart didn’t have them.”

“Yeah.”

“Neither did Umber’s.”

“I looked them up while you were out. You have to special-order.”

“Did Phil say—”

“—He just said ‘hold tight,’ man. I told you.”

“How long will it take, do you think? If I order them?”

“They’re \$80 apiece.”

“Holy shit.”

“Probably take a week to get here.” Gressley is tapping at his keyboard. “Or you could pay for overnight, but even that wouldn’t ship until tomorrow. That’s like \$200 total.” Gressley shakes his head. “You want to use my computer to order it? Maybe they’d pay you back?”

I stand still and think.

Gressley is back to his typing, and it must be a game today, because it’s furious. “I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t trust those guys to pay up.”

Rosie and I talk about the bags I check. I tell her how women cringe and turn red, how I can’t help noticing personal items, then feel funny for looking at them.

“You don’t even know what the embarrassing ones are!” She sinks into couch cushions, too many cushions, for one tiny couch.

“Well, sometimes their bags are stinky.”

“That might be embarrassing.” She slithers a little and wrinkles her nose at the cushions. They are all over her. But they seem more like luxury than clutter. It’s only because of Rosie. She is claiming them as herself as she nestles. “Like dirty underwear?”

“More like egg salad or bologna.” I poke a finger into the softness of Rosie’s middle. “People have food in their bags.” I stroke her shoulder. “Not sex.”

“They don’t have sex in their bags?” She flips up her toes and sends the pillows into avalanche. Rosie slips away, into the couch, the pile of pillows. I want to squeeze her, but there are too many pillows between us.

No knives are allowed inside the bus, but it’s OK to pack them in the bags that go underneath. I ask which is which when I search them.

With my back to Gressley, I try to call Phil again but get his voice mail. “About those batteries. I can order them, but I need reimbursement. Can’t afford

to be buying my own batteries for a volunteer position, you know? Call me back, please.”

That bus will be here in forty minutes. Passengers will start arriving in twenty. There’s no use rooting through the toilet paper again.

I slip the old batteries back in and shake it good.

lipsticks are the ones in the tubes and then those plastic cases falling open, leaking powders, perfume, brushes, combs, nail polish with a tiny brush inside each vial, razors, foam spurting out of aerosol cans and making creamy soup with the rouges powdering down the sides of the bag, fingernail clippers, nail files, cotton balls, cracked slivers of silver mirror glass

Squinting my eyes, willing the wand to buzz. I feel a throbbing in my throat.

black bananas, fruit flies, lice, bedbugs, fleas

We don’t ban the infested.

Gressley is typing when I tap his counter with the dead wand. “You’re not getting your batteries today,” he says. “Probably not this week, right?”

He’s talking like I’m stupid. “Do you mean the 87A5WX batteries?” I say.

“It’s not like Botkins station here is a priority. Unless you want to buy them yourself, and even then . . .”

“Security is the priority. Safety. That’s my—”

“So we could shut down the station and strand all these people . . .” He looks across the station. There’s no one here yet. “Or you could strip-search them all.”

“Shut up.” I’m getting fed up with this kid. “Just shut up.”

He smirks. “I’m only trying to help.”

“I’m not strip-searching anyone, you little pervert.” I try to flip the batteries, but they only fit the one way. “You’d like that.”

“Well, you can’t shut down the station.”

“Damn.” I shake the wand again.

“Why don’t you fake it?”

I’ve thought of this. It’s pulsing in my throat.

“Pretend the damn thing is working and shut up about it.”

“And you are the goddamn cynical lying future of the goddamn country!”

“Goddamn right!” He’s back to his video game. “Break a leg, Hank!”

“Asshole.”

I keep puttering, see if I can't squeeze out a flash or a buzz or I don't know what.

There's gray area. Like sports equipment. A baseball bat—does it count as a weapon?

We never buy any hygiene items ourselves, Rosie and me. That's because Rosie brings home all those mini bottles from her hotel. The individually wrapped shaving razors, the shampoo, the single-thread sewing kits.

I'll fake it. It's just—

The passengers line up outside my table-fence. A middle-aged woman, lipstick running up the cracks into her cheeks, and two young guys.

I poke through the woman's purse with my wooden stick—a reliable piece of equipment. Nothing unusual in the purse, but she's faintly embarrassed by it.

Her other bag is a soft quilted thing. Instead of dumping it, I fondle the underside, find a hairbrush, perhaps a curling iron. Ah yes, there is the cord.

"That's fine," I say. "Now you want to stand up straight with your arms out." I lift the wand, then lower it. "All the change out of your pockets?"

I wave the wand slowly over her. Women are easy because they keep their keys in their purses. It's only jewelry sometimes, or a watch. When I reach the watch, I emit a sharp sound, electronic, from my throat. The volume surprises me, but I keep my mouth closed, my face calm.

"All right, ma'am. You have a nice trip." I motion her past the barrier.

That wasn't so bad.

One of the men has only a duffel bag that I can poke at effectively enough, and no metal on his person, except a wad of keys that he drops on the table. But the other rolls a hard suitcase that I have to rifle through. The two men are together and they are both nervous, so I am too. After he's past, the first waits for the second, uneasily, shifting heel to heel, looking around.

I don't want to find drugs. I'm not authorized to deal with them and it's embarrassing to let people see that. Fortunately—with some luck and some clever technique—I don't find any drugs.

A dense, high-pitched beep emerges from my throat when the wand nears the young man's waist. "Pockets?" I say.

He turns them out. Empty.

"Oh, probably your belt buckle."

He lifts his shirt and there is no belt. He's standing stiffly now, facing me.

Maybe he wants to bully. After all, he's gotten the one thing by me.

terrorists, bombs, heart attacks, car wrecks, public speaking, beautiful women who aren't my wife, people quacking at me in other languages

"Hmm." I make a show of studying the wand. This kid can't get me. I won't let him. I flip the wand and hit the switch again. Then I hold it to my ear. Shake it lightly.

"Let's try again." I wave the wand near his crotch and up. I guide it closer. Flinch just to see if he will. My throat constricts—it wants to beep, oh it wants to. But I hold it in. "Just a malfunction, I guess. You have a nice trip now." I wave the wand like a beacon, directing him to the benches beyond my checkpoint.

FastDog bus service doesn't have an official policy against wrapped presents, but how can I search them without ruining the paper? So I ask, "What's in the box?" and then warn them they should wait, next time, to do the wrapping.

Rosie and me, we use hotel towels and don't even wash them. She hauls them back in and brings fresh ones. Same with the sheets and the pillowcases.

Rosie makes a tight bed—but she grumbles at it now, like she never used to.

It's a perk. The fresh laundry and the mini bottles. Rosie says so, and I don't believe she'd steal. Anyway, it's been 35 years of it.

bombs, knives, running out of space, suffocation, strangers

Rosie is sympathetic about the batteries, but not too much. "Order them, Hank. I'm sure Phil will pay you back." She's changing out of her work clothes.

"It shouldn't come out of his pocket, either."

"Hank, it won't." Now she's in the bathroom, but the door's open. She's got just her underwear on and she's about to peel the makeup off her face. It will come off in bright-colored swaths. Or maybe in layers. How much color can wash down a drain?

"And in the meantime?" I ask.

"We can afford—"

"—I mean the job. The security. The people on the bus!"

"Go up and down!" She's grinning in the mirror, half pale, half bright red. But I'm not in the mood for songs. Thank goodness it washes down the drain.

"Rosie!" I snap.

"It'll be fine, Hank!" Her tone is sharper now. "You faked it today, you can fake it tomorrow!"

"Bombs! Guns! Box cutters!" The bed is quaking underneath me.

“Hank, this is Botkins, Indiana, we’re talking about. Butt- *fucking* -Egypt. The goddamn middle of nowhere.”

“It’s lying.”

“Come on, Hank. Everybody fakes a little bit.”

“Not me.”

She rolls her eyes up to look at me in the mirror. “It’s only for a little while.” Her face sputters into her hands, filling with water from the gushing faucet.

“I’d like to know if it doesn’t matter, why I even go.” I don’t think she hears me because I’ve said it softly.

But Rosie’s shoulders tighten and her hands freeze in front of her face. “Do you want to quit?”

“I guess not.”

steak knives, bread knives, hunting knives, pocketknives, X-Actos, scissors

This woman, is there violence in her? I focus, try to feel. But maybe I can’t tell. I rifle through the bag, careful not to cut my fingers, but when I find the knives, they are cooking knives. They are safe in little plastic shields. “You have to keep this bag underneath, OK?”

She eyes me, but nods, pulls the strap over her shoulder and sits by the gate.

“Don’t bother Phil about those batteries, Hank.” It’s morning and the sun slants in stripes through the blinds into the bedroom. Rosie is drawing the edges onto the rims of her eyes. “We can just buy them.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“It’s for a good cause. And he’s so overworked lately. Did you notice his eyes? Last week at dinner?”

“It’s expensive, Rosie. \$200.”

“\$200? Well, I’ll talk to him then. You make the order and I’ll get us paid back.”

I miss the plant sometimes. The even spread of the line, the space between.

I didn’t plan the retirement, but the time came and it felt right, what with the circumstances. Better me than some young guy with a family.

It’s not that money is tight, but how long does it have to last? You never know.

Rose had a dozen bottles of pink fingernail polish and then another dozen or so of red. All of them less than a quarter left. You could hardly reach the paint in there with the tiny brush. It took a whole afternoon to combine the pinks and

then the reds. I knew enough not to mix the two!

Midwest, small towns, bus routes? Worth a bomb?

Rosie appreciated my efforts. I thought so, mostly.

“Were you digging around in here?” Rosie was poking through her jewelry box, which gaped open on her dresser. One hand reached far back into a drawer and the other cupped something tiny, palm up and fingers closed.

“I cleaned it last week.”

“You didn’t throw anything away, did you?”

“Just duplicates.”

“Duplicates of what?”

Necklaces hung from little hooks, sparkling and untangled. Rows of earrings lay gently across miniature satin pillows. “I made it neat for you.”

“What did you throw out?”

“Mostly I untangled and cleaned—”

“—What did you throw out?”

“A plain necklace—like that one. And some earrings.”

“The pearls?” Rosie picked up each earring, held it close to her eyes, and then dropped it into her cupped left hand. She must not have had her contacts in.

“Yeah, I kept one pair.”

“Which pair?”

“Those. I threw away the old ones.”

Rosie thumped her fist on the dresser, and a flash of jewelry bounced from it, scattered over the surface and into her open underwear drawer.

“What’s the matter?”

“God, Hank. I’ve put up with—”

“—were those expensive?”

“They were my mother’s.”

A ring was still rolling in looser and looser coils on the dresser top.

“I’m really sorry.”

She breathed in deeply. “In the trash?”

“It was last week. That trash is gone.”

She sat heavily on the unmade bed.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are.” She swatted at the bed covers, smoothed them uselessly.

"I am."

"I know."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know. I know. Just drop it. It's done."

"I'm sorry, OK?"

"Jesus Christ, I don't care!" She tugged at the sheet beneath her, hopped her butt up from the bed, then back down. "I'm not mad." She stood then, pulled the sheet in a sweeping arc. "Can you leave me alone for a minute?"

I checked the trash, then took a walk to watch the open sky. When I came back, I stayed in the living room, alone.

So I don't touch Rosie's dresser anymore, even though it's a mess again, of dust and crumpled paper, price tags cut from clothing, earring backs, powder brushes, Rosie's long, stray, curling, waving hairs.

The bombs, the killing, the terror. It's where you least expect it, most likely.

The kid has bottle rockets. I feel it.

"I'll be keeping these," I say, when I finally find the package, clear at the bottom, tucked inside a pair of socks. "Any more in here?"

"No." He claps a hand to his pocket.

I figure there's another package, but when I wand him, my throat beeps, and it's a pocketknife. This kid is no boy scout. I take the knife and issue a pickup ticket.

"But I'm not coming back!"

"Should I give it to charity then?" I don't really have the authority to take things.

"Unh." This kid doesn't know that.

And he shouldn't be running around with knives! On a bus full of people! shampoo, sewing kit, towels, sheets, pillowcases, bathrobes, toilet cleaner, Windex, toothbrushes, vacuum cleaner with extension for drapes and upholstery

It's stealing, after all. Rosie pocketing the soaps and the lotions, the laundry service.

She'll do it no matter what, so I might as well pretend it's OK. Right?

Like we need more stuff!

These county line roads—empty, only exist to put the line on the map. I drive far from any houses, any people. I pull off, get out of the car.

The fields are brown, striped with windblown snow in the furrows. A distant

row of trees breaks the plane, marking an old fence line between fields. The trees are stark black sticks, rooting upward. The sky is the palest, coldest blue.

I squint to the horizon, where the sky films up from the field. There's no rise in the ground, no swell. Flatness expands to every edge, past where my eyes can see.

It's this open space. Some days I need it.

I breathe in and my lungs expand. Something snaps out through my chest—pops, cracks—like a silk parachute. A cold wind is filling me with air, but it's not wind or air—it's just space. There's room to breathe and breathe and breathe. I'm heady with it. I swell outward, to the clouds, to the edges of the sky, and then past those edges.

I stand until I can't stand it, until it scares me too much, the wild, free beauty of it.

By degrees, I pull myself back. I cram myself inside the car. Jingle my fat set of keys in the ignition and rumble away over the gravel that spits, scatters from the tires.

Rosie told me the Queen of England has nothing in her purse. She read it somewhere. But a homeless woman needs a whole shopping cart, at least on TV.

I don't mind. Kids would clutter up the house.

I don't buy batteries the next day either. That money. Phil won't pay it. And electricity is just more junk.

Phil has left and Rosie is rinsing dishes, then handing them to me, one after another, to cram in the dishwasher.

Rosie won't let us have pie on top of where our meatloaf sat. She brings out a whole new plate. We used to have nine big plates and eleven small ones, but I brought us down to four of each.

"Phil brought that money for the batteries."

"You mean the damn thing that hasn't even come yet?"

"Hank, that's not his fault."

"I know."

When we finish the dishes, Rosie gets her purse and pulls out an envelope with a bunch of bills in it. "Do you want me to put it in the bank?"

"Yes."

Rose puts the envelope back in her purse. "I'm sure those batteries will get here any time."



Newspaper says the plant is running more parts again. That's good for the guys. But more parts! I can't believe I was a part of that.

Slow times cycle, of course. If it weren't for the bus station, maybe I'd go back. Maybe to parts . . . parts . . . parts . . . parts . . .

The favor to Phil is really to Rosie. Trying to make up for those earrings.

I hassle a college kid pretty good, flip his stuff like confetti. He's hiding something, defensive-like, and squirmy. But I can't find it.

"I'm sorry, sir." The kid speaks in a quiet voice, but sarcastic. I'm washing my hands in his clothes, elbow deep now. "Is there something you're looking for?"

"Hands out," I say. He slumps his shoulders but holds up his hands. I wand him slowly, then shake my head. "You can go now."

"Is that wand even real?" He steps toward me. "It's ancient."

"You can go now."

"Beep," he squeaks as he rezips his suitcase, catches a bit of cloth. "Beep," then pulls it back, tries again. "Beeeeeeeeeep."

Rosie didn't get that money from Phil. I don't know why, but she's lying to me. And I'm not going to spend my own money on batteries. Not when I can feel the metal.

Rosie and I were young and lying tangled together, after sex, in one of the rooms she cleaned. She kicked at the sheets, which were wadded at the bottom of the bed, her legs still wrapped around mine, then snaked her legs free. The bed rose and fell with our breathing.

Rosie sprung from the bed and took hold of my ankle. She pulled.

"Hey!"

"Get off the bed. I want to show you something." She pulled harder and my butt thumped to the floor.

"Rosie!"

"See what I do?" She pulled off the bed clothes, grabbed new from her cart and made the bed, tucked the sheets, crisp, clean and tight.

Rosie glowed and I didn't know if it was pride in her bed-making, or the love we'd just made. "See how quick I am? You should have timed me." She flopped, naked, onto the bed, bounced like a coin. "It makes my arms so strong."

"Come here." I pulled her off the bed, down to where I sat on the floor, and rubbed those muscled arms. "This is what I do at the plant." I was working on

rotators then, so I guided her hands in that familiar clamp-tightening motion. The part I set every day, tightened just so, over and over.

“Oh.” She wriggled into me, less interested in the clamp, than in restarting the love, but I was done for the day. When she saw that, she rolled out of my arms, before I could finish the secret movements.

“Don’t you want to see what I do?”

“I can’t see it.”

“Here.” I took her arms again, worked the motions into her muscles, and she tried to pay attention. Of course, I didn’t have the rotator or the stopple or the bit with me there in the hotel room. Rosie stopped wriggling and tried so hard, I could tell, to be impressed and proud of me. It was wavering in the air like a sheen between us. Maybe it was easy to let her fool me.

I’m not controlling the throat beeps anymore, if I ever was. They glow from my voice box. I can’t prove it, but I think they’re dead right.

But when I switched to activators afterward, and then to clamps and on to neutralizers, I didn’t tell Rosie. Couldn’t stand to update the demonstration.

It was after I’d already switched, that Rosie made a joke of the motion, at the dinner table. It was funny, too. “Oh, all day long you’re playing.” And she did it low, like it was dirty. It became a quiet joke, a signal for sex and sexiness, a signal for hard work, and then eventually, it grew into a hand motion that meant, “Whatever you say.”

getting old, never having kids, overpopulation, losing your job, debt, hate, greed, lust, drugs, divorce, war, sadness

shampoo, soap, lotion, razors, laundry service, sewing kits, hair dryer, ketchup and mustard, coffee, curtains

I don’t know if I’d go back to the plant, if ever I could.

Rosie and I don’t have all that much sex anymore. But the potential is there. If I believe it might happen, well then it really might.

Three overlapping yearbooks, from Rosie and me being only a year apart in high school—it’s a waste. I’m clipping out signatures, tucking the ones from my yearbooks into Rosie’s and then we won’t have to keep all these duplicate pages.

Gressley is hammering the keyboard. “You finally got those batteries, huh?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Must be a relief.”

“Uh, yeah.”

He leans up into the window. “I mean, I’m glad you fooled all those guys, but you couldn’t have kept it up, right?”

“I suppose not.”

“I mean, I could tell.” His eyes flick from one of mine to the other. “No offense. You’re not much of an actor.”

“That’s a relief all right.”

If I find a radio, they have to show me the headphones, or stow it below. We at FastDog ensure a quiet ride to our patrons—Phil said that to Rosie once. Nobody told me to enforce the rule, but I might as well.

How much of life is faking it? Is anything real? Does it even matter?

I can push that mood away. Thank goodness.

napkins, coffee cups, extra mittens, pens, blankets, kitty litter, spare tire, floor mats of the same damn material as the floor anyway

Not in my car!

With a whole afternoon to myself, I take a drive. Nobody on these roads and something satisfying about driving down the middle. The highway curls from my tires. I don’t want to see the old Freiburger land. I can’t stomach it. I drive to the airport, near where Rosie works, but not to her hotel. I leave the car in the drop-off line, where the sign says not to, but I don’t see why not.

Through the automatic doors, the room opens up over my head. The walls are white and the carpet is worn, but patterned with toy airplanes. Behind a roped-off section, there are twenty seats and doors labeled “Gate 1” and “Gate 2.” I don’t try to get through—I respect security barriers—but find a place against the wall.

A family is passing through the checkpoint. The mother places her shoes, her purse, her daughter’s shoes, into a plastic tub. The dad empties his pockets—keys, change, red and white peppermints crumbling out of clear film. Slides his belt off like drawing a sword.

Instead of rifling through the bags, these guards—three of them!—send them through an X-ray machine on a conveyor belt. Slinking sideways along the wall, I get a better angle on the screen. Personal items appear in comic-strip colors. Rattling bottles, a hair dryer with a tangled cord.

The mom, the daughter, then the dad steps and stands, waits between partitions. The guard beckons and they are through.

Another guard holds a wand but doesn’t use it. It is small and sleek. Shinier

than mine, with more parts that glow.

A different guard checks suitcases. He swipes them with these slips of paper with powder on them.

“Hey, there.” I step up behind the guard, who is leaning into an open suitcase. “So what’s that powder stuff do?”

“Huh?” The guard looks up.

“Clean the shine from your nose?”

“It checks for explosives.”

There’s a little boy watching too. He asks, “How does it work?”

“Oh, I can’t give away my secrets.” The guard chuckles. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“Oh, c’mon!” the boy says. But his parents are calling him and he springs away.

I give a chuckle. “Yeah. C’mon,” I say. “But, really, how *does* it work?”

The guard is back into his suitcase, but his head turns at the neck. “Sir, do you have a bag to check?”

“I was just watching.”

“Do you have a *reason* to be here?”

“I was waiting—”

The man is staring and his uniform is dark and crisp. I go.

I tell Rosie about the guard and what he said to me, but I say it tough, like it’s not a big deal. “Asshole,” I say. “Don’t you think?”

“You should hear what a woman said to *me* today. She wasn’t from around here.”

“Come to think of it, this fellow had a funny accent, too.”

“My woman called me *Sweetheart*—she said it very sarcastic.” Rosie is sitting at the kitchen table, so I only see her arms and shoulders and head, and digging through her purse. “And she didn’t like the light switches! C’mon, the light switches? I was pleasant to her later all the same, but she had nothing to say to me.” Rosie dumps her bag on the table. It’s pens and coins and lint and gum and lipstick.

“Doesn’t take much to be friendly,” I say.

“Couldn’t they at least pretend?” A small comb, a button, a nail file, a broken-off pencil eraser. She must be looking for aspirin, because when she finds the bottle, she takes one. Then she leaves the mess, grabs a basket, and

charges out of the room.

I follow her to the bedroom. “Seems like maybe friendliness is dying out, Rosie.”

“Not around here, Hank. Anyway, it only dies if we let it.” Her basket has sheets from the hotel and she begins to make up the bed.

“You think so? You don’t think what’s left is fake anyway?”

“I don’t see what’s the difference.” She’s dressing a pillow, like I’ve seen her shimmy into pantyhose.

canes, baseball bats, pearl earrings, batteries, Rose’s stealing, bottles and bottles and bottles

How will we find the terrorists?

It’s just with so many and so much. No order and all clutter.

Here’s a skeptic. I can read it on his face. Poke through everything he distrusts: the bus schedule, the wand, the government, the security guard right in front of him.

I rattle his suitcase. Then I swipe over him with my wooden stick. Oh! Well, he makes me nervous. I switch the stick for the wand, while his jaw loosens and the slack of his mouth quivers.

The wand and my throat find the keys in his pocket. Beep. He throws them on the table. “Aw, you got me.” He’s 45 minutes early for the Dayton 6:14 and now he’ll sit with his paranoia. His mind all cluttered with conspiracy. He can’t live like this, pretending it’s all OK.

change, clutter, death

I don’t lock the wand away because I have to show Rosie. Have to let her know that I’m not a fake, because it’s real, it’s real. I promise it is real.

There she is, half-dressed in the bedroom, stripped of her makeup, the pins in her hair. Her polyester uniform pants are still on, frayed hem draping over pink toenails. She’s unclasping her bra, twisting arms behind her, elbows pointed into wings.

I step behind her, release the clasp. She lets me lower her to the bed.

“Do you want to see what I do at work?” I ask.

“Are you going to strip-search me?”

“Oh, it’s worse than that.”

She giggles, bucks up, reaches for the wand. “What are you doing?”

I kneel on the bed beside her, then straddle her, and run my metal detecting

wand, powerless, in a straight line over her. Her arms and their freckles. Down the softness of her torso, between both our legs, all the way to her pink-polished toenails.

And because I'm not a fake, I can feel the metal in my throat, feel the metal in Rosie. I can find it. It's a beep that swells, then bubbles out.

It's too much. It's too much.

Sometimes, at night, I throw my covers off and strip to naked. I walk behind my house, put the small cluster of a town behind me, and look outward, into the open night. Stars sprinkle the top layer, crowded, but too far away to touch me. And underneath is sweeping darkness, flat and smooth. Empty fields stretching to the horizon. Wide open. I feel me some space.

Then I feel a little better, but I still can't sleep, so I go back inside, find a project to keep me busy.

