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Gerald Irving
Northampton Community College

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Lainey

by Gerald Irving

As Hank was leaving the CVS pharmacy one evening after his shift, he noticed a pretty woman with short black hair putting a \$4.99 can of hairspray into her large, black pocketbook. She didn't seem dull or stupid, and she didn't have that distracted look he had seen on other shoplifters. When he told her everything was on the security cameras, she looked at him a moment, seemed to realize he worked there, and handed him the hairspray, saying, "Here, you got it back. Let's just forget it." As soon as she spoke, he knew from her accent she wasn't local, and the idea that she came from outside the Lehigh Valley made her more attractive to him, made him imagine she had new ways of looking at things, new attitudes. He said, "I'll buy it for you," and he did. Outside, in the parking lot, though, she fished a \$5 bill from her pocketbook and insisted he take it so they were "even." "If you had the money all along, why didn't you just buy the thing?" Hank asked. "What fun is that?" she said.

A few days later, Hank sat on the couch in his apartment on 12th Street in Easton, PA with the woman, whose name was Lainey. She was in the apartment for the first time. She pointed to the front room, which was in shadows from the street lamp and the light from the living room, and asked, "Who sleeps in there?"

In that front room, as Hank was well aware, the bed was covered with a pink and white bedspread, the windows were shaded by white curtains, and perfume bottles and little boxes stood on a vanity table that had a matching stool and an attached mirror.

"That's my mother's room," Hank said.

"You still live with her?"

"She's dead. I just haven't put all her things away."

It's weird to leave the room like that, the last woman who had come to his apartment told him. He expected Lainey to say

something similar, but she didn't seem to have any bad reaction.

"When my mother died," Lainey said, "my sister and I asked our cousin to box up everything. That way we didn't have to go through it item by item."

"I don't have any cousins who could help," Hank said. He looked at Lainey. "Would you do something like that?"

"Pack up all your mother's things? I hardly know you." "It's better that way."

She seemed to consider the idea. "Maybe sometime," she said. "How come you didn't leave after she died?"

"Who knows? Rent here's cheap. Besides, moving takes too much energy."

"I wouldn't have stayed, not with all those memories," Lainey said. She looked around the room. "You need something here to make the place more your own."

The place isn't mine, he thought but kept quiet. He didn't want to explain everything to Lainey. Hank had lived there alone with his mother ever since he was 4, and his father had walked out. Hank's duty, as he saw it, was to his mother because she had not abandoned him. Just up and leaving the apartment, which was filled with her, would be like breaking faith with her. But he did not imagine that he would always be there. He just had to find an acceptable way to go.

He had tried gambling, thinking he could win big enough to carry him away, like some giant, unstoppable wave, but, after a while, gambling seemed like a roller coaster ride—ups and downs but always arriving back at the place he started. He had told Lainey he used to gamble but had never told her why.

"You could use some paintings here. They'd put your stamp on this place," Lainey said. "In Queens, I had paintings all over my apartment. The other day, I saw a painting that would be good here. A black flower—there's no such thing as a black flower, really. I Googled all this after I saw it. I want to buy it, but I'm sure they won't let me hang it at my sister's, and I don't want it sitting in their



garage. It would go great here, though.”

Hank knew that Lainey lived in her married sister’s house in Palmer Township, having left Queens, as she had told him, after she lost her job but also after she called off at the last minute her wedding to a guy she had gone out with for seven years, since they were both seventeen.

“Is the painting modern art?” Hank asked. “Maybe I won’t even understand it.”

“You don’t have to understand it, just enjoy it.”

And he knew he would enjoy having something of Lainey’s in the apartment.

The art gallery was one of two businesses on 2nd Street off Northampton. The other business, a dusty-looking store that repaired vacuum cleaners and TVs, fit the city better, Hank thought.

The painting, on an easel surrounded by a white cloth, and alone in one of the gallery’s two display windows, showed a dark black flower in a vase on a table near a window. The flower was the only thing on the table. The wall behind the flower was bare. Through the window near the flower, there were only clouds. Everything except the shiny, dark black flower was one shade or another of

grey.

“Isn’t it something?” Lainey said, staring at the painting. “It’s gloomy,” Hank said.

“Not at all,” Lainey said. “That black flower shines above all that grey.”

Inside the gallery, Hank stood next to Lainey as she asked the salesman how much the powerful picture in the window cost. “We don’t have any pictures in the window,” the salesman, dressed in a tailored dark brown suit, pink shirt, and pink silk tie, said, flashing a smile.

“Do you mean the painting?” When he told her it cost \$2,000, she asked if there were any lay-away terms available. “You do realize this is an art gallery, not a department store,” the salesman said.

“Stuck-up bastard,” Lainey said as they walked outside where she stared into the display window again.

“Come on, Lainey. Find another painting.” “I want this one.”

“You have credit cards?”

“They’re all maxed out.”

“Then wait till you save up.”

“I have no patience to wait.”

She stepped away from the window and began walking with Hank toward Northampton Street.

“Too bad you don’t gamble anymore,” she said. “I could stake you, and you could win the money for the painting.”

She paused. Hank sensed she was waiting to see what he would say about that idea of gambling for the \$2,000. He said nothing. He didn’t want to stir up all the good memories of gambling, especially memories of the times it was so easy to win. He thought instead of all the discipline he had to use to stop gambling, all the substitute activities that took off the edge but never equaled the thrill of a blackjack hand.

"How did you get money when you were gambling?" Lainey asked.

"There was somebody I borrowed from."

"Can I do that, too?"

"I wouldn't do it unless you can't live without that painting. It'll cost you double, and you'll have to give him something every week."

"How much?"

"He'll tell you. But how could you afford any payment, no matter what it is?"

"Let me worry about that. You don't even like the painting."

They crossed at Centre Square and walked down 3rd Street to the parking lot.

"Thing is," Hank said, "if I take you to meet Wilfredo, I'm involved. Two thou is not such a big deal, but I wouldn't like those guys coming to the cash machine with me again every week."

"I'll keep you out of it. I promise. I transferred unemployment from New York. I can make payments."

"You'd be better off with a bank loan."

"My credit's zip."

"Can't you borrow from your sister?"

"She wouldn't lend me a dime for a painting. As it is, she doesn't think I make good decisions. Will you at least let me talk to this guy?"

He looked at her face. It was serious and intense.

"You really should find some other way," he said.

"Just let me meet him."

"Alright, next time I see him..."

"Can't you find him and tell him I'll come speak to him."

"It's less of a big deal if I run into him and mention it. Don't

worry. He's always around."

As Hank drove uptown on Northampton Street toward his apartment, Lainey said, "Let's go to Home Depot. We'll get boxes, and I'll start on what you asked me to do."

"You mean with my mother's stuff?"

"Yup. I'll do it while you're at work."

And she did. When Hank returned to his apartment that evening, Lainey was sitting in the living room, watching TV. The boxes they had bought that afternoon were standing in his mother's bedroom, filled.

"What's next?" Lainey asked. "You move into the front bedroom?"

"Oh no," he said quickly.

He realized he sounded strange. The logical thing would be to use that large, front bedroom. But that was his mother's room, even though her things were now packed up.

He felt Lainey looking at him. He was aware she was waiting for some explanation.

"I mean, I couldn't just start sleeping in her bed," he said.

"You could take down her bed and put your own in there."

"That's an idea," he said.

To his relief, Lainey dropped the subject.

While Hank restocked the baby powder, Wilfredo, short and muscular with curly black hair, came into CVS and asked Hank for allergy tablets. After Hank told him where to find them, Hank mentioned Lainey and said she wanted to talk business with Wilfredo. "Send her around," Wilfredo said, "but I don't change the way I do business for a woman, and I don't do charity." Then, Hank watched him look around with a sneer at the wide aisles, the well-kempt shelves of toiletries, and cold medicines under the high ceilings and bright fluorescent lights. The store was clean and orderly, and part of Hank's job was to keep it that way. "Working here..." Wilfredo said. "Can't tell me you don't miss the action."

Hank smiled and wished him good luck with the allergies.

Driving Lainey along Washington Street, Hank saw Wilfredo in front of the bar that was his usual hang-out. Wilfredo stood in the middle of a half circle of guys who could have come out of a muscle magazine. Wilfredo owned a moving company that had an office above the bar, and Hank knew that when these guys weren't collecting debts for Wilfredo, they were lifting furniture and refrigerators in and out of the moving trucks.

Hank's car was at a stop sign, a block from the bar. He pointed Wilfredo out to Lainey, who immediately unclipped her seat belt and opened the door, insisting she go by herself because she wanted to keep Hank out of it. She was on the street before Hank could say another word.

Hank pulled the car along the curb and sat, waiting. In the shadowy light of the street lamps, he regretted he had ever mentioned Wilfredo to her. When Lainey returned, she sat heavily and forcefully pulled the seatbelt around her.

"Come on, let's go," she said. "Little creep starts asking me my life story," she continued, as Hank pulled the car away from the curb. "'Don't worry,' I tell him. 'I'll pay you back.' 'I'm a banker,' he tells me. 'I don't want to make a bad investment.' 'Double what you're lending sounds like a good investment to me,' I say. 'You know, you got a shitty attitude,' he says, and he tells me if it wasn't for you, he wouldn't even talk to me. I said I didn't want you mixed up in this. That's when he says I need collateral."

"OK, so that's done," Hank said, relieved she wouldn't be borrowing money from Wilfredo.

"I have collateral," Lainey said. "My mother's diamond ring. She left it to my sister with the provision that she couldn't sell it. I'll borrow it for a while. My sister won't know it's gone."

"Why not just pawn the ring?"

"Too much like selling."

"You know, with Wilfredo there's no late payments, no partial payments. He'll send people after you. They'll make you give them anything they want."

"It's sweet that you're so concerned."

"You think this painting is worth all that?"

"Definitely."

"Why? What's the big deal about it?"

"It makes me feel strong."

"You seem pretty strong to me."

"I cover up good."

Hank propped himself on his elbow to study Lainey's pretty face and short black hair while her chest rose and fell as she took her sleep breaths. She had never slept overnight in his apartment before, saying her sister would go nuts if she didn't come home. Last night, though, when she came back to the apartment, anxious and upset, she called her sister, and Hank overheard her say, "I'm staying with that guy I told you about."

In disjointed bits, Lainey had described to Hank what happened after she left his apartment, heading to the bar to pay Wilfredo—having refused Hank's offer to drive her there. Two of Wilfredo's muscle boys had stopped her on the street in front of Hank's apartment building, yanked her pocketbook from her, searched inside it for Wilfredo's money, and handed it back to her, telling her they were just doing her a favor, saving her a trip.

"I feel like such a low-life," Lainey kept saying to Hank, "like I'm at their level. Must be some way I can get those muscle-heads off my back."

Hank assured her she was way above all of them.

Now, through the open bedroom door, Hank glanced into the living room, where the painting of the black flower hung. He still didn't like the painting, but he did like the changes it had brought. The apartment had a different feel, less sad, less of a why-bother atmosphere. And every time Hank looked at the painting, he thought of Lainey, and his spirits rose.

He was most afraid that he would lose Lainey to some art lover, someone who would understand those painting ideas—perspective and light and color—she talked about. He tried to follow what she

said, but he felt like a bystander listening to a fan. He wanted some connection with her that couldn't be easily broken. Lainey opened her eyes and looked at him. For the first time, he told her he loved her.

She touched his cheek with her finger tips. "My fiancé Steve and I used to say we loved each other all the time. Then near the end, it hit me: We didn't mean the same thing. I don't want any of that misunderstanding ever again."

"Why would I misunderstand?"

"Both of us could." She looked into his eyes. "I do have feelings for you, but I don't want to label them. Right now, we're helping each other. Why not leave it that way for the time being?"

"How am I helping you?" Hank asked.

"I feel worthwhile again with you," Lainey said.

"Without me, you don't? That doesn't sound like you."

"When I first came here, I was as low as I've ever been. Then, I met you. You kept crashing into the same rocks over and over. I thought if I could help you, it would make me feel better. And it did," she smiled.

A few days later, sitting in Shorty's, a bar/restaurant across from CVS, Hank told Lainey he went to the office of Zuniga Movers above the bar to ask Wilfredo not to send the muscle boys after Lainey. Wilfredo sat at a metal desk behind a computer terminal, in an office that surprised Hank because it was so attractive—no clutter or dust anywhere and filled with sunlight from the front and side windows. "Let her pay my guys like everybody else," Wilfredo said. Hank did not tell Lainey that Wilfredo also said, "Princess got her money. Now, she wants to forget how she got it? Cut loose from her, man. She's a user. Suck you dry and spit you out."

"He's a punk," Lainey said. "I'd like to shove the money down his throat."

"Maybe there's a way you can—if you win enough to cover it."

"Gamble?" Lainey said. "I thought you didn't do that anymore."

"I don't. I'll just get you ready. I got a thousand dollars we can

use.”

“From where?”

“My boss, Bernie. I never hit him up for anything before. I had to hear his usual pitch for me to enroll in the pharm tech program at NAC, but I’ve heard all that before from him. He’s really a good guy.”

He didn’t mention that he had told Bernie the money was for a friend who had gotten herself into a jam, and Bernie had said, “We live in patterns, you know. Make sure your friend’s pattern isn’t that you have to bail her out all the time.”

No matter what anyone said, Hank thought Lainey was one of



the best things that ever happened to him. She was like a new dealer who changed the chemistry at the table in his favor.

"We're going to be financial managers, though, not gamblers," Hank smiled. "I'll give you a very conservative strategy. You game?"

"I've got nothing to lose," she smiled.

Hank noticed Lainey peering into his mother's bedroom. He had just put away everything he and Lainey used for gambling practice—cards, craps-table cloth, dice and chips. He stood next to Lainey and looked into the room himself. The furniture and curtains were all that remained from his mother. The boxes he had dropped off at Goodwill.

"You didn't put your bed in there yet," Lainey said.

"Nah, I think I want to move out completely."

"Good for you."

Wanting to move out and actually moving out, he knew, were very different. Still, he didn't feel his mother's presence so strongly in the apartment lately, and what's more, he was seeing things differently now.

One morning recently, sitting in his favorite armchair, waiting for Lainey to come to the apartment, a hairbrush of Lainey's on the end table next to him, he drank coffee and looked at the bright black flower in the gray painting, and the thought came clearly to him that his mother was gone forever. There was no reason to worry about abandoning her now.

She had died in the month of November, and soon after, the bad weather started. That winter, the apartment was especially cold, dark, and quiet as he stayed there alone. Never comfortable with people, he had no energy for them after his mother's death. He didn't think he could stand such loneliness again, a loneliness relieved only by the sense of his mother's presence in the apartment. What would it be like in a new place with no presence but his own?

"Would you come with me if I got a new apartment?" he asked now, stepping into the living room with Lainey.

"Live with you?" Lainey said, as they sat on the couch. "You

know this Lehigh Valley has never been for me.”

“You’re not planning to leave soon, though, right?” “I don’t like making plans.”

“But it’s good to know what you want to do.”

“You have plans?”

“General things.”

He felt her eyes studying his face.

“I’m probably not the best one to fill that big void in you,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You want somebody to be your whole world. It would be flattering at first, but I couldn’t do it long-term. It’s too limiting.”

Of course he wanted someone to care for, someone who would care back. Who didn’t? He remembered his mother often saying that all they had was each other. Growing up, he believed that strongly. When he was a teenager, he started thinking there must be more in the world for both of them. Did Lainey think he wanted to recreate that whole mess with his mother again? Is that how he came across?

“I’m only asking you to share an apartment with me. You’re the one making it into something else.”

She looked into his eyes and then nodded. “We’ll see,” she said. “We won’t force things one way or another. OK?”

Hank agreed.

Lainey entered the apartment, smiling and waving a piece of paper that she handed to Hank, who was sitting in the armchair.

“I’m done with that son-of-a-bitch,” she said.

Hank read the handwritten paper, a receipt, signed by Wilfredo, for \$4,000 from Lainey.

“He gave me such a hard time about that,” Lainey said, pointing to the paper, “but I insisted. I wanted something to show I was out

of his hands. He wanted to get rid of me too. That's why he finally did it. But it's over now."

Lainey took the paper from Hank, carefully folded it, and put it in her pocketbook.

The evening before, Hank had gone to the Sands with Lainey. After leaving her in the casino, he walked around the Bethlehem Steel yards, past the abandoned buildings and the rusted stacks of the furnace, through areas that for decades had been the center of people's working lives but now were part of a ghost town. But because he was superstitious about gambling and didn't want the depression he felt in the steel yards to influence Lainey at the tables, he hurried back to the Sands and sat in the Food Court, drinking coffee while he waited for her.

Later, Lainey told him that at the blackjack table she followed his advice and was up \$1,500, but then she got tired and switched to craps. Her energy level was so low she knew she couldn't stay much longer, and the thought of having to come back another time depressed her, so she bet a thousand dollars at 5-1 that the next throw would be a 7. It was. "Don't be angry," she had said to Hank. "I know I could have lost, but I still would have been up 500." "How angry can I be?" Hank smiled. "You won over six grand."

"He give you the ring?" Hank asked now about Wilfredo.

"I don't walk around with that ring in my pocket all day," Lainey said, trying to imitate Wilfredo's voice. "Tomorrow at 7, in front of the bar."

Next afternoon, during his shift at CVS, Hank, stocking shelves in the bandages aisle, saw Wilfredo—thick black hair, tight shirt bulging with muscles, a stone block—walking toward him.

"Can you believe it?" Wilfredo said. "I lost that damn ring."

"You're not the kind of guy who loses things."

"I know. That's why it's so weird. But that ring ain't worth what she says it is. She's talking 15 grand. More like 500 dollars. She's a sly bitch."

"Maybe, but you have to give it back. She paid you everything

she owed you.”

“I don’t have to do shit.”

“It’s not good business to hold it. Word gets around.”

“You going to spread the word?”

“I talk to people. Give her the four grand back then.”

“That’s my money.”

“It’s her ring.”

“Yeah, well, if I find it, I’ll let you know.”

“I have to get that ring back,” Lainey said to Hank in his apartment after he told her about his meeting with Wilfredo. She stared at the floor a few minutes. “You know where he lives?” she asked.

“Going to his house won’t do any good.”

“It won’t be for a visit.”

Hank looked at her, and, to be sure he read her expression right, he asked, “You want to steal it?”

“It’s not stealing if I take back what’s mine.”

“How do you know it’s in his house? Maybe it’s in a safe in the office.”

“He’s too damn organized to mix his moving business with his other business. It’ll be in a jewelry box in his bedroom.”

“So you go in, take the ring, and leave? That won’t be the end of it for him. He’ll get you back somehow.”

“Let him. At least I’ll have the ring. Will you help me?”

After Hank found Wilfredo’s address on the CVS computer, he and Lainey drove by the house several times to determine when it was empty and what they would need to enter. The house was next to an empty lot at the end of a street in West Easton. Hank decided a screwdriver would open the side screen door, and his plastic Sands VIP card would open the simple lock on the wooden side door.

Once inside the neat, clean house, Hank followed Lainey upstairs to the bedroom, where, as she had guessed, she found the ring in a

jewelry box on the dresser. In less than twenty minutes, they were back in Hank's car, driving away, the ring in Lainey's pocketbook.

Hank expected the muscle boys to come for him at any time

Leaving Shorty's after dinner a few days later, Lainey told Hank she had spoken to a girlfriend from Queens who called to see how she was doing. Lainey said they talked about the people they knew and about their reactions, now that some time had passed, to Lainey's calling off the wedding.

"The conversation got me thinking," Lainey said. "I wonder if I'm strong enough to go back without falling apart."

"I thought you wanted to say goodbye to Queens," Hank said. "Not so much Queens. My old self that was there."

"Would you just up and leave here like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, after everything we've been through..."

"Hey," she said tenderly, "it's only because of you I could even consider Queens again. And I wouldn't be leaving you. No matter where I am, you and I will still be close."



"Wouldn't be the same if you're in Queens. You know it."

"You said you weren't going to force anything, remember? Here I'm talking in general, and you already want to make things come out a certain way."

Of course I do, Hank thought. What a time this would be for her to leave me! Like she put me in the lifeboat and went away. How do I steer the thing? Where do I go in it?

As they neared 12th Street, Hank smelled smoke, noticed the reflections of flashing lights, and saw yellow and black striped cones blocking the street. Stunned by the sight of the fire truck with its ladder extended into his apartment, he ran to the building entrance, but the cop stationed there wouldn't let him go in.

He saw Lainey waiting for him across the street.

"I'm so sorry," Lainey said, clutching his arm when he was next to her.

He said nothing. He looked up at the window of his mother's bedroom. There was no glass in the window anymore.

"Hey, man," he heard Wilfredo's voice and turned to see him standing calmly, looking up at the apartment. "That's your place, right? Bad luck, but maybe it's like karma. You know, you do something bad, something bad comes back to you." Wilfredo looked at Lainey. "Good thing you weren't in there, huh?" he said. "Fire's a killer." Then he walked away.

"He did it," Lainey said. "I hope the cops nail him for it."

"They won't," Hank said. "He protects himself."

Hank couldn't take his eyes off the smoke streaming through his apartment window. He no longer felt Lainey on his arm, or heard the crackling voices on the fire-engine radio, or saw the flashing lights on the police cars.

Everything's gone. He watched the smoke rise and curl. All the stuff in my room—pennants and buttons from school, yearbooks, photos—all destroyed. But maybe that's not so bad. Those things didn't hold happy memories anyway. And maybe all the melancholy from that place is gone now, spread across the sky like the smoke.

Hank's muscles relaxed, his breath came more slowly, and he felt refreshed, as if he had slept and his energy and strength had been restored.

Then, he remembered the painting in the living room. "Your black flower's gone, too," he said to Lainey.

"I know," she said, still clutching his arm.

"I'm sorry it's gone," Hank said. "It made a difference."

For a moment, the sun shone through the smoke, and Hank had the sense everything was off. The tone he had used with Lainey sounded to him like the tone you would use with an ex-girlfriend if you talked about what happened between the two of you. He didn't think things were finished with Lainey, but the current had shifted. There was less danger of crashing if he steered on his own now.

"Where will you stay tonight?" Lainey asked.

"Some hotel, I guess."

She looked at him with soft brown eyes, and he had the sense she was waiting for him to say more, to give some reaction to staying in the hotel, to complain maybe, or ask for help.

He didn't feel he needed any help, so he didn't say anything.

"Want me to stay with you?" Lainey asked.

"It's OK," Hank said.

"Don't worry about my sister. I'll just tell her what happened. She won't give me a hard time."

"No, I'll be fine on my own."

A pleasant-looking woman, wearing a Red Cross badge, approached Hank and asked, "Do you live in that front apartment?"

"I did," he said, "but not anymore."

