

Junebug

The lump had already started to form long before the meeting. In the wee hours that morning, she'd woken suddenly, her thin nightshirt damp with perspiration and her heart and her ears thump thumping. There it was, already, that familiar lump, distinctive and unwanted in her throat, teasing of strangulation. She'd managed to go back to sleep after that, just an hour or so of fitful in and out of wakefulness sleep that did nothing to refresh her for the day ahead. She awoke groggy and full of dread.

An hour later, she pulled her car, modest and nondescript, into the church parking lot. She circled the lot a few times and settled on a spot under a big maple tree facing away from the church doors. She was twenty minutes early and needed this time to think, collect herself, before going in. There was a squirrel in the tree above, and she watched it scurry through the branches, its fluffy chestnut tail an exclamation point for its tiny body. She imagined the squirrel descending upon her as she left her car, its tiny claws tangled in her long dark hair, its little teeth gnawing at her face. She shuddered the image from her head and tried to focus on her breathing exercises. Inhale two-three-four, exhale two-three-four. Inhale two-three-four, exhale two-three-four. The lump was still there.

The church basement was damp and musty, and she sneezed twice upon entering.

"My goodness, bless you! Oh, good morning, June! It's so nice to see you, dear! We missed you last week." Sandra was a jolly woman

with sad eyes. She hummed softly as she laid out snacks on a folding table.

"Here, come have a muffin, June. Blueberry. I picked them up from Kroger this morning. There's coffee, too. It's not that Starbucks you kids like, but it'll do."

"Thanks, Sandra." June made her way to the folding table and selected a muffin from the clamshell packaging. She took a bite, the texture was strangely spongy, the blueberries chemical. The bolus turned to ash in June's mouth. She took another bite in silence and studied a dusty decorative plastic plant, its leaves beginning to curl and warp with age. June checked her phone. Five missed calls and three messages from the same number. The lump got bigger.

"You're early, dear. Why don't you sit and enjoy your food? Have a nice little breakfast? You're looking very thin, a little pale, too." Sandra's pencilled-in eyebrows furrowed with concern as she fanned out the pink paper napkins.

"I'm fine. I just haven't had much of an appetite lately. I think it might be an ulcer or something."

"An ulcer! You should see a doctor, they can clear that right up. George, you know George, my ex-husband? Well, he had an ulcer once. It was terrible, couldn't eat, made him a crabby prick." She chuckled at her own brashness. "Well, I finally had it and made him go in and the doctor gave him some antibiotics. He was feeling much better in just a few days."

June nodded in agreement, though going to a doctor was not something she could really afford at the moment.

"Yes, I will."

June made her way to her usual spot, an avocado green plastic chair in the corner nearest the exit. She watched as the rest of the group slowly trickled in, eight bodies filling the semi-circle of cast away chairs.

A man she'd spoken to one or twice, Phil, she believed his name was, sat down next to her. She nodded at him, tried to make the flat line of her mouth curl upwards but found she could not. Phil looked tired - more tired - than usual. He was balding on top, and today the hair at his temples shot out in all directions like a mad scientist's.

"Morning," Phil said. His eyes did not meet hers.

Avery, a petite woman in a plaid flannel and muddy boots, led this week. She spoke with a hint of a Texas drawl. "Good morning, everyone! Welcome back to our little Al-Anon family; I hope everyone had a nice week. I don't see any new faces today, so we'll go ahead and get started."

They chanted the serenity prayer and said their introductions. The fluorescent lighting cast ghoulish shadows on the faces of those congregated below and June wondered just how terrible she looked. She hadn't checked a mirror yet that morning.

"Alrighty! Who'd like to begin?"

A plump woman with a sandy blonde ponytail looked up. She wore fuchsia lipstick and a tiny bit was smudged across her cheek.

"Hi, I'm Diane."

"Hi, Diane!" The group chorused.

"Um, well. It's been an okay week. It's nice with the kids back in school." She took a deep breath. "As most of you know, John -- John is my husband -- well, it has been six months now

since...since I asked him to leave. And he's been...on the street all this time. And the kids, they still ask me." Diane paused and did a little half cough. June knew this trick, it was to stall the coming tears. Diane looked up at the ceiling. "They ask me where their daddy is. And I have to tell them, I tell them that Daddy is on a trip right now and he'll be back. I don't say when. And I just..." Tears were freely streaming down her face, but Sandra was quick with the tissues. "And I just...I need him to hit rock bottom. So he can get better. So he can come home. I need him home." She looked up, made an apologetic half smile. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Diane!"

For just a moment, June hated Diane. Hated that she was here, in this sad room at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning with this sad woman. Hated that she was just like her. June sniffled loudly and studied her plastic flip-flops. Her peach nail polish was chipped, badly, but June did not care.

Next, it was Sandra's turn.

"This week has been a good week, I suppose. I'm working on step six now. Jessica, my daughter, she's doing okay. I talk to her once a week now, which isn't easy for me. We used to talk daily, you know, I used to try to keep tabs on her..." She sighed, smoothed her hair, adjusted her cat eyed glasses that had started to slide down her nose. "But I know that wasn't helping anyone, especially not me. She promised me she would cut down a little, now that she got that new job. So, I'm hopeful." Sandra's last sentence came out more like a question than a matter of fact.

"Thank you, Sandra!"

June knew Sandra's daughter. They'd been classmates in high school. June also knew Jessica had recently started hanging out with some of the local junkies and was rumoured to be pregnant. She felt guilty she had this information and wasn't sure what to do with it. June heard her phone buzz in her purse at her feet and her heart plummeted.

Next, Avery shared and then a shy young man named Sheldon who June had never seen before. He had stuttered badly and talked about Jesus a lot.

June shifted in the plastic chair. She knew she should share. It would make her feel better.

She took a deep breath.

"Hi, I'm June."

"Hi, June."

"So, yea. I'm still on step two. The whole higher power thing is really hard for me. I mean, I want to believe but I just don't. Or can't. I dunno. I mean, I don't know how to just start believing if I never have before." She stopped herself. She felt inarticulate and awkward and could feel all fourteen eyes on her. "Anyway. Anyway, that's not really what I wanted to talk about right now."

June had a sudden urge to get up and run. Leave the church basement and never return. The fourteen eyes implored her to continue.

"My brother, Sebastian. It started with alcohol a long time ago and that was...bad." She chuckled at the absurdity of that statement. "But it was still just alcohol, you know? But recently he's gotten into other stuff. I'm not sure what. Bad stuff, meth probably, I really don't know. And... I'm scared. Scared, that like,

he could actually die. But then I feel so fucking guilty 'cause a part of me would actually be relieved if he died. Then I -- we -- my family -- we would grieve and it would be awful for a long, long time but then eventually...eventually we would start to feel better. And then maybe, one day, we could be a normal fucking family again."

June held her breath and slowly looked up, expecting to see judgement in the fourteen eyes for the terrible thing she'd said. The eyes just looked sad. Some of the heads were nodding.

"Sorry for swearing," she whispered.

"Thank you, June."

She wasn't crying for once. She always cried at these meetings, after she spoke. Instead, June felt angry. Violent even. But the lump was a little bit smaller.

The meeting ended and June found her way back to her car. She pulled a cigarette out of her purse, pausing before lighting it, and leaned against the trunk. She imagined the church parking lot a mere twenty-four hours from now, families getting out of their sedans and minivans, donned in their best polyester outfits. They would sit through the hour-long service and the kids would fidget and the parents would scold. They would pile back into their cars, head out to Denny's or The Waffle House for Sunday brunch. "That's nice," she thought. She inhaled deeply and waited for her heart to slow.

Back at home, June's cell phone rang for the eleventh time that day. She looked at it. Without thinking, she answered. Sebastian.

"Hey Junebug, where ya been? I've been calling all morning."

"Nowhere. Here. I've been here."

"Look, sis, I'm in a little bit of a situation here. This guy really screwed me over and I was wondering if I could borrow--."

"No."

"Well, would you let me fucking finish? If you knew what I've been going through..."

"No! I said no. Look I really don't want to hear it. I'm done. Deal with it like a fucking adult."

Silence.

"You don't have to be such a bitch, June." There was crying in the background. A woman.

"Look, I'm sorry," Sebastian continued. "I know things have gotten a little...crazy, but we're *family*. And I'm trying, I really am. I swear it. You know I would help you out if you needed anything. I just need a little extra cash right now and then I won't ask you for anything again."

June snorted. "That's a lie."

"Come on, Junebug, just Venmo me \$200 and I won't bother you again."

June ended the call. She turned off her phone and got back into her car.

At the Waffle House, June ordered buttermilk blueberry waffles with a side of sausage and two poached eggs. As she waited for her food to arrive, she took out her phone, turned it on. Thirty-two missed calls. Eighteen messages. She selected and deleted them all. She opened her Venmo app, where a \$200 request was waiting and approved it.

In a text message, she typed: "This is the last time. Don't contact me again until you're getting help. I love you, but I won't do this anymore." She hit send, then blocked Sebastian's number.

June looked up from her phone. There was a little girl in the next booth standing on the seat cushion singing "Baby Shark," her face smeared in ketchup and bits of egg. The adults, the girl's grandparents, perhaps, were laughing and recording her on their phones.

This was not the end, June knew that. Sebastian would find a way to contact her -- through a friend or family member, from a different number. But next time, she would not respond.

June's food arrived. She took a bite of the waffle. The blueberries were fresh and plump and she relished as the juices burst in her mouth. A tiny drop of maple syrup dribbled from her mouth, and she licked her lips and savoured the sticky sweetness. "This is nice," she thought.

The lump, for that moment, was gone.