

REFUSE PILE

by

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Harriet sat across the desk from the plump man in the ill-fitted suit jacket and cleared her throat.

“Do you mean to tell me, sir, that my daughter is not stupid enough to get help?”

The man sighed and straightened a stack of papers. A drop of sweat ran onto his nose from his receding hairline. “It’s just that we have certain criteria, Mrs. Albertson. We’ve been through this. Several times. I’m sure you understand.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” Harriet stiffened in the frayed office chair feeling like it might spill her out on the cheap office carpeting.

“But she scored a seventy-*three* this time. Two full IQ points higher than six months ago.” He tried to sound excited about the small change, but Harriet Albertson knew better. Her voice took on a tremor.

“If my daughter can’t get an SSI check with a score higher than seventy, how in the hell is a seventy-*three* a good thing?”

“Kelly Ann is more capable of living on her own now.” The man looked at the door of his small office, rapped his knuckles on the desk, and checked his watch. “She’ll always need help, of course, but there’s a reasonable chance she’ll be capable of getting a job. Somewhere. Most parents would be happy with an improved score.”

Harriet swallowed hard as a sudden lump came up in her throat.

“Most parents,” she said, emphasizing the plural *s* with a hiss, “have a spouse to help fight for their kids.”

The man sighed and took off his glasses.

“I’m sorry about your husband, Mrs. Albertson. I can’t imagine how hard it must—”

“Oh shut up.” Harriet stood and sent the chair into the wall behind her. “All you know are your rules and your numbers. How to tell folks no. Tell me, what happens to Kelly Ann after I—when I’m gone, too?”

The man stared back and seemed to search for the right words.

“I’m sorry.”

He placed his hands on the desk and straightened in his chair.

“Yes,” said Harriet. “Yes, you are.” She held her head high, stepped out of the small office, and shouldered out the door into the cool air. “Somebody with some brains should be helping these people,” she shouted just before the door closed behind her.

In the safety of her small, dented sedan, Harriet gripped the steering with white knuckles and let out a deep sigh. She reached into her purse, took out a prescription bottle of small green-and-white pills, and poured them all out into the palm of her hand. They felt weightless to her, like they were filled with air. One deep breath, she thought. That’s all I need. One full, deep breath of air. She looked hard at herself in the rearview mirror and slid all but one pill back into the bottle and dropped it into her purse. She swallowed the single pill without water, a trick she’d gotten quite good at in the months since the funeral.

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Kelly Ann wiped the peanut butter from the side of her hands onto her sweat pants. She held the shiny soda can close to her eyes. She loved the shiny things her mother threw away like they were garbage. She had to dig deep for this one. Down past the banana peels and gross napkins. She grabbed the tab and twisted it forward and back, forward and back, until it popped off. A tingle ran down her neck, through her arms, and into her fingers and made her giggle. She dropped the can on the floor and, holding the tab in the air like a jewel, plodded back to her bedroom.

A box of buttons. A Wal-Mart bag full of scraps of tinfoil. A clear jar with a mix of paper clips, twine, and twist-ties. The old Campbell's Soup can for the tabs, almost full. She fished out a piece of twine and strung a few can tabs onto it. It didn't look right. She bit one of the tabs and bent it. Better. She bit the rest of them too. She grabbed a handful of buttons and strung them between the tabs. She smiled. Now for some color.

The heavy front door opened and Kelly Ann heard her mother's slow steps come into the apartment. She gritted her teeth and froze, waiting for what she knew would come next. She heard her mother make a grunting noise like she always did when she bent over, and then heard a soda can drop into the garbage.

"Why do I even try!" her mother yelled.

Kelly Ann closed her eyes, held the necklace-in-progress to her chest, and waited.

"Kelly Ann Albertson! Do you want to live in a refuse pile?"

Kelly Ann rose slowly to her feet, tiptoed to her door, and gently closed it and clicked the lock.

Her mother's footsteps came closer in the hall and stopped outside her room. She could hear her mother breathing hard on the other side of the door.

“This has got to stop,” her mother said, her voice now a whisper. She sounded more tired than usual which scared the girl who now twirled her fingers in the tab-covered twine.

“You... you getting sick?”

“I’m alright,” said her mother. “Just tired. Of all of this.”

The two stood on either side of the closed door without saying a word. The door pushed in a little and Kelly Ann could picture her mother leaning hard against it.

“I just wish I knew what to do,” her mother said. “Nobody tells you what to do.”

Kelly Ann loosened her grip on the necklace and ran her fingers over the shiny tabs.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered through the door and listened to her mother’s breath on the other side.

“We’re not getting the money, Kel.”

Without even being able to see her, Kelly Ann knew what her mother’s face looked like now—a scrunched forehead and big watery eyes. It’s how she always looked when she used a soft voice right after a loud one.

“I’m sorry,” Kelly Ann said again.

“You still have your nice dress clean and hung for tomorrow?”

Kelly Ann looked around her room, took in her collections, and bit hard at her lip. The yellow dress with the pale butterfly pattern hung in her open closet.

“Do I have to?” she asked.

“Yes,” said her mother in a voice now firm. “I’m not going to be around forever, and...”

Kelly Ann wondered why her mother stopped talking, and felt that scary feeling creep back into her guts.

“Mom?”

“We’re going out tomorrow to look, Kelly Ann. You can wash dishes or stock shelves or clean hotel rooms. Something. We’ll find something.”

Kelly Ann listened as her mother’s footsteps grew quiet and the click of her bedroom door echoed from the end of the hall. The can tabs didn’t look as shiny as they did a minute before as she went back to biting and stringing them onto the twine. She carefully tied the ends together and put it over her head. Her bedroom light reflected in the bent metal as she looked at herself in the mirror. The thought of getting a job made her feel cold and small. It made her sweat to think about it. It made her armpits itch and her throat get tight. It made her forget her name and hate her mother who had been talking about it ever since Kelly Ann turned eighteen. She used words like “independent” and “self sufficient.” And, since her father died, she used words like “necessary” and “important.” It confused Kelly Ann. This had always been her bedroom. She wanted it to always be her bedroom. She went to the yellow dress, took it from the hanger, and threw it on the floor.

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“Rick’s in a quite a mood today,” said Julie as Harriet took her place at the reception desk. “He lost the Bingham Ranch sale last night.”

“The one he’s been working on since June?”

Julie nodded her head and made her eyes big. “Would have been over two hundred grand in commission.” She mouthed the words *two hundred grand* again as one of the new, young real estate agents walked past the desk.

“Wow,” said Harriet as she settled herself in her chair and noticed a large run in her stocking.

“What I could do with two hundred *thousand* dollars,” said Julie.

“What I could do with two *hundred* dollars,” Harriet replied. Julie laughed and Harriet ran her finger over the run in her stockings and noticed how worn her old pair of “good” pumps were getting. She imagined being able to afford the kind of shoes the women agents wore, but knew they’d be wasted behind the thick wooden reception desk.

The glass front doors flew open as Rick Avery charged into the large real estate company foyer. His face flushed red and his shoulders tensed. He lurched toward the desk like his knees and elbows needed to be oiled.

“Good morning, Mr. Avery,” said Harriet in her usual polite, office tone. Mr. Avery froze in place.

“Good morning?” he asked with a voice dripping in sarcasm. “Did you just say ‘good morning,’ Harriet?”

“Yes, sir. I just meant—”

“There is nothing good about this goddam morning, Harriet.” Rick dropped his briefcase in front of her like a boat anchor. “It’s a good morning for that greenhorn prick over at Century 21, but now I have to go back to selling crappy little ranch homes for three grand a pop.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harriet and looked down at the briefcase.

“You’re sorry,” said Rick. “Everybody’s sorry. Let’s see how sorry you all are when I put a freaking bullet in my brain from having to deal with all these assholes.” He snapped open his briefcase and rifled through it. He pulled a business card out and slapped it on the countertop.

“That’s my detailer,” he said. “Have my Mercedes done by Friday.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harriet as Rick stomped back to his large, book-lined office. “A bullet in the brain,” she whispered under her breath. The thought made her shudder. She would never use a gun. Kelly Ann might find her. Or maybe she’d point the gun in the wrong place and be fed

through a tube for forty years. And where would she get a gun anyway. No, she decided on pills. Responsible people did it with pills. She'd have enough of them saved by the time she knew what to do with Kelly Ann.

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“You’re taking all that garbage off before we get to the restaurant,” Kelly Ann’s mother said to her as they walked the crowded Bayfront sidewalk. The seagulls cried overhead and a cool breeze smelling of fish blew in off the bay. Kelly Ann fingered her necklace, now dazzled with colorful paperclips and small blue stones wrapped with wire and fastened to the twine. She reached low to pull at her wrinkled dress and noticed how pretty the bracelet looked against its yellow fabric.

“What are you going to say when they ask why you want to wash dishes?” Her mother pulled her along so fast that they stepped into the street to pass the tourists clogging the sidewalks.

“I don’t want to wash dishes,” answered Kelly Ann without thinking. A table of jewelry stood in front of a store and captured her attention. Some of it looked a little bit like hers. Her mother yanked at her arm and spun her around to look her in the face.

“Yes you do, Kelly Ann. Yes. You. Do. What did we practice?”

Kelly Ann searched her mind, but saw on the table a huge broach made of bits of broken glass that looked like a whale. Kelly Ann remembered her mother’s champagne bottles in the fridge at home. One pink, the other a deep blue like the ocean.

“Those are beautiful,” said a voice from somewhere behind the table. Kelly Ann and her mother turned to see a young woman dressed in flowing purple robes step out onto the sidewalk. The breeze caught her long hair and pushed it into her face. “Did you make this?” She stepped toward Kelly Ann and touched one of the bent and bitten soda can tabs jingling on her necklace.

“We’re not here to buy anything,” said Kelly Ann’s mother.

“And this bracelet! How creative! You made this, too?”

Kelly Ann blushed at the woman and nodded her head.

“Oh, my,” the woman said. “I could sell something like that.”

Kelly Ann’s mother stepped between the woman and her daughter.

“We’re *not* here to buy anything,” she said in a hard voice.

“I’m not talking about selling anything,” said the woman who looked at Kelly Ann’s mother for the first time. “I’m talking to this young lady about her art.” Kelly Ann’s heart started beating hard in her ears so she could barely hear what her mother, who now looked like she held back a laugh, said next.

“Art? That’s just stuff she pulls out of our garbage!”

“Well, that’s what a lot of this is,” the woman said and waved her hand over the jewelry on the table. “Hand-crafted.”

Kelly Ann’s mother looked hard into the woman’s eyes. “You go on ahead to the restaurant,” she said to her daughter. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Kelly Ann nodded and skulked away from her mother. As her head began to clear, she thought she heard a piece of their conversation.

“Do you *really* think...” she heard her mother say. And did that woman just say, “Yes”?

* * * * *

A woman pastor! Harriet knew some were women, of course, but she thought they were in the big towns in the valley, not here on the coast. It worried her for a moment, but she got it together.

“Oh, yes,” Harriet explained, “I’ve always loved Jesus. I guess I just... well... lost touch for a while.” She smiled at the pastor who nodded her head and made her straight blonde bangs dip over her eyes.

“We’d love to have you as part of our church family,” the pastor replied. “It’s never too late to reconnect!”

“I did have one more question, though,” said Harriet as the pastor reached to shake her hand. An awkward silence fell over the little office while Harriet got her nerve. Next to her, an ancient-looking Bible lay cradled in a tall, wooden stand shaped like a cross.

“You see, I had a brother,” Harriet started, and then stopped.

“Yes?”

“I had a brother killed in a car wreck a while back.” Harriet looked at a picture of Jesus on the wall—his arms spread open and his eyes looking into hers—and suddenly felt ashamed. Lying in a church, she thought. Right to a pastor’s face. With Jesus watching. If hell existed, Harriet knew she was punching her ticket.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said the pastor. Harriet wondered if the softness in her voice was real or something she’d practiced at pastor school.

“Thank you,” said Harriet. She cleared her throat—too loudly for the small office—and continued. “He didn’t have any other family. No wife, no parents, no brothers or sisters.”

The pastor tilted her head and scrunched her eyebrows. Another technique she’d been taught to use in difficult situations, thought Harriet.

“But he had this... this son. This son who was, how do they say, mentally challenged? And the church. His church. They stepped in and made sure that boy was taken care of, you know? Is that a thing that—just for curiosity’s sake—is that the kind of church this is?”

The pastor stared straight into her eyes now. The smile vanished. Harriet's pulse pounded in her ears.

"I just want to make sure that, before I jump back into a church, it's the good kind of *giving* church I'd want to be a part of." Harriet squeezed the fingers of her left hand with her right hand and looked again at the picture of Jesus on the wall. She sensed a judgmental look in his eyes now.

"This was your brother?" asked the pastor after a long moment.

"Umm. Yes."

"And he had no family?" The smile crept back onto her face. "And no brothers or sisters to help?"

Harriet's heart stopped in her chest and the room went cold. She thought for a second about running for the door. Before she could, the pastor stood and walked around the desk. She sat next to Harriet and placed her hands on Harriet's hands. They felt small and cold.

"We would help however we could, Mrs. Albertson. In any situation."

Harriet looked at the floor and nodded her head.

"But we're a small church, you understand. We're limited, financially. But we *are* here for everything that God blesses us to do. He just doesn't always work how we expect."

Harriet nodded again. A tear started to form in her right eye and surprised her. "That's nice," she whispered.

The pastor reached out and touched Harriet's cheek, turning her head to look into her eyes.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Albertson? Can I do anything for you? Can we pray together?"

Harriet stood abruptly and shook the pastor's hand too hard. She mumbled *no thank you*—or something like that—and burst out the door. As the cool air hit her, she felt like she couldn't breathe.

She drove her dented sedan to the McDonalds parking lot where she parked it way back by the dumpster and sobbed harder than she had in years. She fished around in her purse and pulled out the bottle of green-and-white pills. She shook them in her hand and listened to them rattle inside. She wondered if there were enough.

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“You want *more?*” asked Harriet into the phone. She never expected to hear from the jewelry store lady again. She had left that day trying to figure out her scam—telling young girls they were artists—but quickly forgot all about it when Kelly Ann's interview went so terribly. The girl completely froze. Didn't say a single word. The white-shirt-and-tie manager asked questions and she just stared at the floor.

Harriet had almost forgotten Kelly Ann left some of her jewelry with the lady as they passed the table again that day. Kelly Ann chatted like crazy, then, talking about rocks and paper clips and buttons and wire. But the interview? Nothing. And now the lady called to say she wanted more of Harriet's garbage? Unbelievable.

“It all sold?” asked Harriet.

“Well, not all of it, but most. She's got a great eye for repurposing the ordinary.”

Harriet said nothing for a moment. “I don't know what that means.”

“It just means people like it.”

Harriet pulled at a strand of her hair and tried to form the question she wanted to ask.

“*Why--why* do they like it?”

“Well, why do people like anything?”

“I mean...” Harriet cleared her throat and straightened her back. “I mean, are you telling people it’s made by... made by... somebody *slow*? Is it a charity kind of thing?”

Another long silence.

“I didn’t even know,” said the woman.

Suddenly there were tears in Harriet’s eyes and she couldn’t see to punch the button to end the call. She heard the woman say *hello?* a few times before the line went dead.

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Kelly Ann’s eyes goggled at the aisles of the Michael’s store. There were round beads, diamond-shaped beads, little bronze charms, big silver charms, crazy-looking paperclips, wire of every size, containers of shiny stones, pieces of dark leather, little strips of light leather, thousands of ribbons, and a million other things she didn’t even know the names for. And there were more colors than she ever knew existed in the world. She stood frozen at first, like a deer in headlights. Then, slowly, she began running her fingers over the dazzling trinkets and making soft cooing sounds. She looked at her mother and worried again because she found tears in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” she said to her mother as she pulled her hands back from the shimmering display of polished stones. “I don’t need any of this stuff. I like can tabs.”

Her mother bit at her lip and shook her head. “Go ahead,” she said.

Kelly Ann reached for a bright purple stone. She held it in her hands, looked once more at her mother, and dropped it in the shopping bag. Her heart thumped hard in her chest.

“More?” she asked.

Her mother nodded and wiped at her eyes. “I’ll tell you when to stop.”

An hour or so later, Kelly Ann and her mother walked out of the store carrying several large bags and wearing smiles across their faces.

“I’m going to make the most beautiful things anyone has ever made,” said Kelly Ann as the two buckled themselves into the dented sedan. “I know I can do it.”

Her mother reached over and touched Kelly Ann’s hair.

“I know you can, too,” she said. “I didn’t realize it for a while, but I know you can, too.” Kelly Ann didn’t hear her because she’d buried her face inside the bags, rooting through the treasures.

“And you can help me,” said Kelly Ann from deep inside one of the bags.

“Oh, you don’t need my help.” Harriet’s voice caught in her throat.

Kelly Ann popped her face out of the bag. “Not with the jewelry,” she said laughing. “You’re the best at helping me with... just whatever! You’re the best helper there is.”

Harriet put the car in drive and the traffic blurred in her wet eyes. “I try,” she said softly to her daughter. “I really do try.”

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Harriet stared at the blank paper and felt a tremor come into her hand. She had never been good with change. It sent her into a panic that spiraled out of control and made her think terrible thoughts. Life always forced change on her: the unexpected pregnancy, the birth of a disabled daughter, the death of her husband. These all happened *to* her, not *because* of her. But after watching Kelly Ann at the jewelry store—chatting with customers and selling jewelry like a natural—the desire to write this letter became a scream inside her head.

Dear Mr. Avery, she wrote on the first line, suddenly unsure of what to say. She reached to her neck and touched at the necklace. She felt the soft pink stones Kelly Ann picked out for her. It filled her with confidence—like a kind of magic—and she tightened her grip on the pen.

It has been a pleasure working for you all these years, but I am writing to give you my two-weeks' notice. I know this must come as a surprise since I've never talked about doing anything else. but I have decided—

Harriet felt a strange power come into her body when she wrote those three little words. She went back over them again with her pen, tracing them into an unintentional bold.

*—**I have decided** to take a job at the vocational rehabilitation office where I can help disabled adults like my daughter. I'll be teaching them to take care of themselves, helping them find work, and to become independent. Perhaps I'll figure out just exactly what I can be as well. I've recently come to realize we are often capable of much more than we give ourselves credit for.*

Sincerely,

Harriet Armstrong

Harriet read back over the letter and imagined Rick's reaction. She's lost her mind, he'd think. He'd try to talk her out of it and tell her how she was born to be a secretary, but Harriet knew better now.

Harriet made two stops as she drove to her new office that first Monday morning. First, she stopped at the jewelry store and bought a piece of her daughter's jewelry—an elaborate broach with bits of colorful plastic and small, smooth stones washed up from the local beach. And second, she dropped off an almost full bottle of green-and-white pills at the pharmacy.

“I won't be needing these anymore,” she told the woman with the huge hair at the reception desk. The woman nodded her head and Harriet signed a document she didn't read. As she turned to leave, a thought occurred to Harriet and she turned back to the woman.

“What happens to those pills now?”

The woman wrinkled her brow at the question. “I'm not sure I know. You'd think I would after all these years. I think maybe they get incinerated?”

The thought brought a smile to Harriet's face as she stepped out into the cool air into the next chapter of her life.

END