

DENISE

I DON'T WANT TO BE ALONE

Wednesday, March 19, 9:15 pm. They've shut down Tympanum for the night; Joshua's in the back counting out the drawer with Owen, the new clerk; Denise is vacuuming. She has to anchor the floor mat in place by keeping one foot planted on it, otherwise it'll adhere to the bottom of the vacuum and she'll just drag it around. Something outside flashes and she jumps. She has to look out at the rain-slick Chicago streets to confirm that she's only seeing lightning. All week long, her imagination has been filled with explosions.

That's when Joshua comes out of the back and says something that gets lost in the roar. She shuts off the vacuum. —What? she says.

—It's beginning, he says. —The war. They're talking about it on the radio.

—Shit, says Denise, and she presses her fingers into her forehead.

She sends Owen home and then goes into the back with Joshua; the two of them stand around the radio listening. There's not much information available, really. US forces have begun striking at selected targets. The President has addressed the nation; he's said *the disarmament of Iraq has begun*. Joshua shakes his head in disgust at this phrase.

—Fuckers, he says.

—Oh, God, Denise says. She finds her way down onto the chair and stares at the items on the desk in front of her with a kind of numbed horror. The radio covered with stickers, a clipboard, a stack of empty jewel cases, a coffee mug full of leaky ballpoint pens. All these objects seem suddenly meaningless. She wants to sweep them all to the floor. She wants to douse the entire store in gasoline and set it ablaze. Just to have the feeling of release.

She tries to imagine riding home. In a subway car surrounded by strangers. She imagines that they will all be acting normal. Reading books. Maybe joking around, laughing. The idea makes her feel hollowed out, weary.

And when she makes it home? Then what? She sees herself sitting in her apartment, listening to thunder shake the house. She knows the way that massed abstract dead of the future will roost in her mind. Their weight will keep her from sleeping.

Very quietly, she says —I don't want to go home. I don't want to be alone. Not tonight.

For a minute they listen to the reporters on the radio repeating the few lines of information that are known. And then Joshua says —My place is only a couple of blocks away. You could come over for a bit, if you wanted.

Her initial response is irritation. She's tempted to swat the air around her head and just say *no*. It's like he doesn't get what she means. She feels *alone*—alone so deeply that she suspects that being with someone else will only make her feel *more alone*. She wants him to *understand that*—but no one ever *understands* anything about her—

—I could make you a drink, he says. When she doesn't answer he says —I think we could both use one.

OK, she thinks. OK, OK, OK. Why the fuck not.

—All right, she says. She reaches out and snaps the radio off. —Let's go.