

DENISE

DON'T

She's at the register and Joshua walks up to her and presses her against the counter with his hips, brings his mouth close to her ear.

—Hey, he whispers.

—Don't, she says. She puts her hand against his chest and pushes limply. She worries that customers are watching, turns her head to look over her shoulder, to check. Nobody seems to be paying any attention. While she has her head turned he leans in and bites her gently on the neck.

—Hey! She turns back to him and pushes a little harder. —I said *don't*, she says.

—What if I'm not listening? he says, although he lets go of her and take a step back.

—You *have* to listen to me, she says. —I'm the assistant manager.

—Maybe I don't care.

—Then maybe I'll fire you.

—You can't.

—Yes I can.

—You need to get Freya's permission.

—No I don't.

—Yes you do.

—No I don't.

—I think you do.

—You think she wouldn't let me fire you?

—Nah, says Joshua. —She's hot for me.

—Shut up, Denise says.

—You shut up, says Joshua.

—Make me.

—Maybe I will.

—Maybe you should.

He steps up to her again, starts to slide his arm around her waist, and she knocks it away. —Get off, she says, and he adopts a look of such stupid consternation that she starts to laugh right in his face.

He opens his mouth to say something and she says —Go do your work. And, miraculously, he goes.

She's beginning to find a certain delight in bossing him around like this. The discovery that she could get away with it surprised her. She began to figure it out the night the war began, the night she stayed with him.

They'd gone back to his place, and they sat with his roommate around a table in the kitchen, knocking back cans of Budweiser while listening to the radio recite the same few pieces of information over and over. It reminded her of living with Toy and Mark, and she thought *I am not going to end up back there again.*

After the roommate crept off she stood in the hallway and let Joshua kiss her against the wall but when he began to lift up her shirt she took hold of him by the wrists and said *no*. She was fully ready for him to say *you fucking tease* or something like that but instead he said *ok* in a surprisingly meek voice and the two of them went off to bed, fully clothed (she did take off her sunglasses, set them on his bedside table, on top of his copy of Genet's *Thief's Journal*). They kissed a little bit more and then she set her head on his chest and fell asleep.

The next morning she was getting ready to leave and he asked *can I call you?* She said *sure*, and he found an ATM envelope and she wrote her number on it, but when she handed it back to him she said *I don't always answer my phone*. Since then he's called her twice; she's noticed him on the caller ID and not answered. She's been painting in the mornings. She has a huge canvases set up in her kitchen right now, entirely blocking her back door; she's been adding strokes to it ever since the war began, building up an impasto of red and black. She imagines it as a forest fire. It grows thicker and thicker.