

DENISE

**DON'T [II]**

Denise gets home from work and finds Rick and Gerhard in her living room, sitting on the couch with Johnny. A tiny ceramic pipe sits on the table, next to a grimy baggie. Rick has his eyes closed as though he may be asleep, but Gerhard and Johnny look up at her through the haze of the room's smoky air. Gerhard holds his hand up in greeting, and then goes back to slowly turning the pages of the magazine in his lap. Denise recognizes it as one of her fashion magazines. Johnny holds her gaze for a second, long enough to realize that he's in trouble, then he gathers himself up out of the couch and comes towards her.

—Hey, Johnny says. He embraces her awkwardly. —I invited Rick and Gerhard over. I didn't think you would mind.

She's been letting Johnny stay with her. Sleeping on the sofa. She'd done it to help him out. He'd called her up one night, saying *listen*, saying *I need to ask you a favor*. Apparently, Rick and Gerhard had been getting a hard time from their landlord, who had caught on somehow to the fact that they'd taken on an extra roommate. They, in turn, had started putting pressure on Johnny, suggesting that he find someplace new to stay. That's when he called her. *It should only be for a couple days*, he'd said. *Just until I get this trip in order*. She knew it would probably be more than a couple days—she's not stupid—but it's been two weeks now and he doesn't show any signs of getting any closer to leaving.

He follows her into the kitchen. —I don't mind you staying here, she says, keeping her voice low so that only Johnny can hear her. —But Rick? Gerhard? I don't want those people in my place.

—What's wrong with—

—They're not good for you, Denise says. —Sitting there smoking up? You really think that's wise? After what you've gone through over the past couple of years?

—Pot! Johnny says. —It's just pot. That's not dangerous. That's not even in the same *world* as—

Gerhard calls from the other room. —Listen, he says. —I think we're gonna get going. He sticks his head through the doorway. —Rick's got to get up early for work, and, uh, you know.

Johnny clenches his eyes shut and frowns. —Yeah, fine, whatever, he says.

—Nice to, uh, see you again, says Gerhard to Denise.

Denise stands there with her arms crossed, looking down at the floor. —Yeah, she says. She looks up for just a moment. —Yeah, nice to see you, too.

They leave. Johnny and Denise go back to the living room, sit on the couch, and argue. For maybe twenty minutes. But after that the tension between them begins to go away. She can feel it while it is happening; she can feel lines of force dissolving into air. She can feel them come into tune with one another. This is something she's never really been able to do with anyone else. She thinks the same is true for him. Eventually he is resting his head in her lap and she knows that the argument is over.

—I just don't want to see you blow this Amsterdam thing, she says. She runs her fingers through his hair. —It sounds like a really great opportunity to do something cool.

—I don't know, Johnny says. —I'm already blowing it. Even if I *got* the passport and stuff I wouldn't be able to afford a ticket. Maybe I just need a couple of months. I could get a job, wait tables or something, work a couple of months, save up some money—

—I'm making good money at the record store, Denise says. — I could pay for the ticket.

—You would do that? Johnny says.

—I would.

—Why?

—I have the money, she says. —I have a lot saved up; I hate spending money on myself. And I care about you. I want to see you do something that's going to make you happy. This Amsterdam thing sounds like it might *be that* for you. If that's the case I'd want to see you do it. I'd want to help.

Johnny is quiet for a long time while he thinks this over. —That's really cool, he says finally. —But it's not your money that I want.

—Oh no? she says. —Then what *do* you want?

—Let me show you, he says.

He grasps her shoulder and pulls himself up to a sitting position. His face is close to hers. He curls his hand around the back of her neck. She realizes what's about to happen and she stiffens.

—Don't, she says, in a voice that is barely audible.

—Ssh, he says. He takes off her sunglasses. She closes her eyes.

—It's OK, he says. —Just relax.

She can. She does.