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APPLE, KEY, CROSS

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by Patricia Schultheis

Weeks later, Elaine Reismann's mind kept replaying the shooting, expanding and contracting it in elasticized time. Some things, like the glass case exploding or the old salesman's yarmulke flying off, accelerated at such velocity that they flashed then vanished before Elaine could grasp them, while others, like the guard collapsing into the wooden door or the crimson starburst blossoming across a young mother's anorak, unfolded in the slow-motion rise and fall of fireworks.

Elaine laid on the floor with her arm over the shuddering shoulders of another woman and watched as that woman's hand reach for an enameled apple pendant rolling across the floor toward the wounded mother's little boy. The memory of the woman's shoulders trembling beneath her arm would send shivers through Elaine's bones for months.

Crownstone Jewelers in suburban Baltimore had been crowded that rainy Friday afternoon, and the police took hours to interview everyone. Elaine was among the last. In the cramped rear office, her responses sounded unnatural and recitative, like her second-grade catechism lessons back in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Her name was Elaine Reismann she told Detective Moyer. She lived at 4800 North Charles Street. She'd been at Crownstone's to pick up her stepdaughter's graduation present. Her husband Stuart was at a medical conference in Houston. There were four shooters. One was a woman.

And then Elaine froze. Through a window that was camouflaged as a Matisse print on the sales floor, she saw a policewoman holding the young mother's little boy. He was pointing to the floor, and the knees of his blue overalls were red. "Jesus," Elaine breathed.

"You can go now, Mrs. Reismann." Detective Moyer handed her his card.

Through a side entrance she exited onto a dark narrow alley and steady rain. She tried calling Stuart: no answer. She left a text and walked along the building toward the floodlit parking lot where raindrops blitzed through klieg lights. A schizoid scene. Customers massed like huddled prisoners, everyone hunched over a phone, frantic for a ride – their cars behind police tape. Except Elaine didn't have anyone to call.

And then she spotted the large black woman who had lain beside her on the floor. At the lot's far end, the woman stood with her eyes closed; she was sending a prayerful hum over the rainy nightmare. Elaine hated interrupting her, but she was desperate. "I wonder if you can help me. I need a ride home. I haven't lived in Baltimore long. And my husband's away. I'm from Wisconsin. I don't know what to do. My husband's in Houston."

The woman, Nina, Elaine would learn, opened her eyes and looked at Elaine without registering her. Rather she gazed over the lot and spoke as though she were invoking a truth stronger than the horror before her. "My daughter . . . my daughter . . . she's coming for me. My daughter is coming."

"Oh . . . I understand. It's just that I don't know anyone to call. I'm from Wisconsin."

Nina turned. "It's just that we've got to get my grandson from the daycare. They charge you extra if you're late. Every ten minutes, it's extra."

"I'm sorry . . . I shouldn't have . . ." And then she saw Nina's eyes perform a split-second evaluation and judge her worthy.

"I guess we can do it . . . give you a ride. Maybe because of all this. . ." – Nina's arm swept the lot – "the daycare will make an exception. At least they should."

Elaine thought of offering to compensate her, but only managed to say, "Thank you...thank you. I don't know what to do."

Nina was gazing at the lot again. "Looks like nobody does."

Together they waited for Nina's daughter. A policeman held Crownstone's heavy wooden door open. Six men wheeled out a gurney carrying a slight, sheeted form. And a policewoman held an umbrella over the white-wrapped shape. But the rain managed to hit it slantwise. "Sweet Jesus," Nina said. "Sweet Jesus."

When her daughter, came Elaine rode in the rear beside an empty child's seat. Mother and daughter, she noticed, discussed only the barest facts about the shooting: the

number of robbers, the guard's murder, the mother's, the police. Five blocks from Crownstone, they tucked even these scant items away, as though they resented the toll they exacted. Rather, the two settled into an easy, mother-daughter intimacy. Elaine caught snippets about a pastor, a watch, an anniversary. Nothing rushed. Everything understood.

Elaine realized that not once had she shared such relaxed acceptance and tacit understanding with her own mother. Her own schizophrenic mother.

When they pulled under the port cochere of Elaine's condo, Nina suddenly grabbed her arm. "You take care ... take good care of yourself, hear me? And God bless you."

"You too ... and thank you for the ride." And then Elaine got out. And watched Nina and her daughter drive away. She stood alone. In a city she scarcely knew. In front of a building whose elegance felt foreign—the condo had been Stuart's before they were married.

She checked her phone: still nothing from him. Their condo was on the fourteenth floor. She got off the elevator, feeling nauseated and chilled with sour sweat, feeling as filthy as she had when she'd come home the shade of pulverized bone from the dust rising from Eau Claire's grain elevators. Her mother would come at her, then, screaming "Demon child! Demon child! Damned demon child," and heat water scalding hot to scrub her.

And Elaine would go running to her Aunt Martha, whose reaction was to fume, "What now? What now? Jesus Christ, what now?" and call Father O'Malley and tell the priest "I don't know what to do with her, Father." And Elaine would sit in Martha's kitchen, never on her parlor's damask loveseat, and wonder which "her" her aunt meant.

She wanted a drink, something to drop her lids like metal security doors and seal her in sleep. But Romulus, Stuart's old retriever, needed to go out, so she was dragged back into the drizzle. Homeward bound headlights hurtled past her like fleeing spirits ... *impossible*. Impossible how, only a foot or two from disaster, everyone stayed in his own lane. That no one went crazy knowing that at any second he could wrap himself around a light pole. Impossible how one last email read or sent, or an elevator missed or caught could make all the difference. She felt she no longer was the person she recognized as Elaine Sullivan Reismann, the person who became an expert medical coder, who, when she was forty-one, and her aunt dead, had moved to Baltimore with her dog Molly. And who, the night she had to have Molly put down, had met Stuart Reismann in the veterinarian's parking lot.

Her phone rang — finally, him. Yes, she was fine. The police had taken her statement, but she didn't know if she'd been any help. She'd gotten a ride home with a woman named Nina.

"Want me to give Mel Bronstein a call? Maybe I should call Mel Bronstein." Stuart's way of helping, she knew. He couldn't help himself from throwing around his doctor buddies.

"I'm fine. Just come home."

Later, showered and wrapped in a white terry robe and wearing oversized yellow hospital socks, she'd just refilled her wine glass when Romulus's tail signaled the elevator had stopped at their floor — Stuart was home. She did a silly little duck waddle into his arms. A tall woman, he was taller yet, and her head found the sweet cavity below his shoulder.

"Elaine," he murmured, "my God, Elaine," his hand holding her head to him, stroking her straight, blonde hair, finding her face, letting her nip his fingers, taste the cold off them, while smelling the rain rising off his trench coat. And beneath that, another scent, one uniquely his, always the last memory her waked mind relinquished before she fell asleep.

He didn't make love to her until the next morning, his strong surgeon's hands slowly tracing her long limbs until they found in each other a truth best told by touch. Their love-making always had an aspect of worshipfulness. Under his hands, the unguardedness she allowed herself that morning felt like sinking to the other side of surrender. His hand over her mouth, the scent of herself on his fingers. Her tongue flicking the taste of herself off him. And then sudden release into benign blinding light and sudden wonder.

But then Saturday ticked on, forcing them to pick up life's stuff: the groceries; the dry cleaning; the issue of what to get Gabby, his daughter, for graduation now that her pin was out of the question. And they began skirting each other, their tones artificially cheerful to avoid everything they feared their three-year marriage couldn't withstand: How Stuart hadn't picked up Gabby's pin because he missed his flight back from Houston, and so he had called Elaine at her office where she headed the medical coding department.

And how she, worried her staff would think she was taking advantage of being Dr. Reismann's wife, had delayed going to the jeweler's until the last minute, and then had missed the unfamiliar highway's exit, so she had gotten to Crownstone's just before the robbers. And how the pin's diamonds, priceless because Stuart's grandmother had

smuggled them out of Holland under the noses of the Nazis, now could be anywhere. Still in Crownstone's vault. Or divvied up on the streets of Baltimore.

All this she and he couldn't speak because such thoughts didn't fit the linearity of their minds. And because their new marriage, by tacit agreement a sanctuary of calm, had at this point no language for sudden rupture.

By mid-June, she'd settled into herself again: early to work, although not as early as Stuart, but always together with him in the evening, the two of them slicing, chopping at their kitchen's sleek island. And, then in the dining area: Like it?" "Terrific." "More wine?" "Not tonight, thanks" And she'd know he'd spend the evening at his computer. But other nights: "More wine?" "Why not?" and he'd come around the table, laughing softly — "Not now, Romulus. Not now." — and take her hand and lead her past his bonsai collection, his camel colored couch, to the bedroom ... "Oh!"

But then, in July, she awoke one Sunday with an urge to go to Mass. Some fundamental calibration within herself demanded resetting in accordance with those old ceremonial patterns from childhood, the rhythm of genuflection, and of wafers and wine offered and received.

She couldn't explain it to Stuart — she scarcely understood it herself, but, still, she went, not every week, but most, always calling when Mass was ended so he could start the brunch.

In August she came home and he told her he'd called his lawyer, Bernie Greene. She reached for her bloody Mary on the island. "You think I'll need a lawyer??"

Stuart poured eggs into the omelet pan. "Bernie says there's a possibility you'll be called as a witness. The police have caught three of them. They're still looking for the fourth."

She dropped their English muffins into the toaster. "Me? ... no. I was down on the floor. I was with that woman I told you about, Nina. I didn't see any actual shooting. I only saw a woman who was getting an engagement ring kick the salesman. The police have better witnesses, I'm sure."

"I also told Bernie to handle the insurance end. I don't want to be the one calling Crownstone about Gabby's pin."

He'd been so pleased with himself when he thought of having the diamonds from his grandmother's brooch reset for his daughter. And now those faceted expressions of his

family's story and of his people's multi-millennial history were reduced to negotiations with insurance companies.

She felt it was her fault. And felt Stuart thought so, too.

"What kind of jelly do you want?" she asked.

They got his daughter "interim graduation presents," a new phone and a trip to Montreal, which Gabby declared boring and a week in Ocean City, which she liked better.

Early in September, the girl lounged in the chaise that usually was Elaine's, while they watched a Ravens game on their balcony. The girl kept pulling her elasticized purple tights away from her chubby thigh and letting them snap back ... pull, snap ... pull, snap ... "I had the hardest time getting these, even online, you know," she said. "My friend Taylor? She's the one who found the site. They would have been cheaper if we had got two pairs the same size, but Taylor, she thinks she's so tiny, only she's not *that* petite. I kept telling her 'Taylor, get a medium,' but she wouldn't. We could have got a discount . . . pissed me off."

A yellow news tape began scrolling along the screen's bottom. Elaine didn't catch the whole thing until its third loop: "Last Crownstone killer caught in Tucson." And then there was a cut-away to a local newscaster. "In a surprising twist on the Crownstone murders, the fourth suspect turns out to be a man, not a woman as the police had believed. Details at eleven."

Gabby snapped her tights again. "Now, maybe I can get my pin ... finally."

To Elaine the balcony suddenly felt overcrowded and fragile. Nothing could bear the weight of so many crushing experiences. The terrible provenance of the pin's diamonds. The robbery's horror. No, nothing could support such incongruent mass. She could sense the balcony's concrete pulling away from the wall's brick.

"Anyone want more chips?" she asked and headed toward the kitchen. Warm, she needed warm and had a sudden urge for tea.

But after the balcony's sunlight, the condo's cool interior blinded her. And she almost had to grope her way past Stuart's bonsai sitting like snipped hopes on his custom-built wall unit.

On a stool at their kitchen island, she stretched out her long legs, wrapped her arms around her chest, and waited for the water to heat.

Before the shooting began, she had stood opposite Nina, who had set her squishy golden handbag on a small display case containing the apple. She remembered Nina catching her eye and sing-singing “Ain’t love grand?” and nodding toward the young couple at the counter, who were picking out an engagement ring, the woman in silver sandals, holding out her hand with a ring on her finger. And then Elaine had felt a blast of cold air and turned toward the door, where the affable guard, who’d been playing the role of a genial host, was already falling.

And then everyone was ordered down, and from under the small display case Elaine would see the woman in the silver sandals jump onto the counter and kick the old salesman in his throat, sending his yarmulke flying. And watch Nina’s hand reach toward the enamel apple.

“Elaine?” Gabby stood in the doorway. “Dad sent me to ask if you need any help with the chips.”

*

Memories merged with her dreams — *Her mother, tiny feet in white ice skates, trim little body encased in a scarlet bathing suit, grabbing Elaine’s hand. “Time to play crack the whip! Come on, Lainy, let’s skate!”* — and dropped Elaine into wakefulness as brutal as ice water.

Not the faint hum of their condo’s efficient systems, their comforter’s satiny softness, not even Stuart beside her, felt as real as the dream of her mother in a red bathing suit on the Wisconsin ice.

She’d get up, settle into the suede couch, and as soon as she pointed the TV’s remote, let Romulus hoist his arthritic body onto her lap — their secret pact — the one indulgence Stuart forbade the dog was his suede couch.

One Saturday morning, he caught them together. “How long has this been going on?” His sardonic smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, but not enough to camouflage his judgment. His wife’s haggard face, her distracted manner — she wasn’t the efficient, steady woman he’d married.

She managed a weak volley: “Romulus and me? We never meant for it to go this far. It just happened.” They leavened their marriage with a teasing jocular, but now the

prospect of braiding incongruities together for ironic effect seemed exhausting. Her retort registered as predictable, and the skin around her husband's eyes dropped like a final curtain as soon as his smile faded. "I have to go into work for a few hours. You have anything you need to do there?" he asked.

"No." She started toward the bedroom. "But can you walk Romulus before you leave?"

Bernie Greene called the first week in November. Gabby's pin was ready. That Saturday Stuart's eyes appraised Elaine's haphazard slacks and sweater and told her she didn't have to go with him to get it. "I'm taking Gabby to lunch afterwards."

"Where?"

"Linwoods."

"Fancy."

He adjusted the angle of his prized juniper bonsai. "The pin was for her graduation, Elaine. Six months late."

"I'd like to go. Really."

She rode beside him hoping for some solicitous remark, something to let her know he understood how troubling returning to Crownstone's had to be; how much he appreciated her setting aside her own discomfort to participate in Gabby's getting her pin. But some fierce avidness had taken hold of him and excluded everything but the recovery of his family's stones.

She didn't bother telling him that the parking lot had been repaved, or that a beveled glass door had replaced the heavy wooden one, or that a sky-blue awning had been added.

Inside, pristine new fixtures had erased all reminders of the murders. And she didn't tell him that either.

A young woman in a pencil skirt came over. "Dr. Reismann? Your sales associate is ready for you, now."

A woman with scarlet nails and a small star of David at her throat squeezed open the mouth of a little envelope, and onto a maroon velvet cushion slid a key-shaped pin. "A key," the woman cooed, "... so perfect ... absolutely perfect."

"It's for my daughter. It was supposed to have been for her graduation," Stuart said.

"Oh, I'm sorry... so sorry that you had to wait so long."

"Well, at least she'll have it now."

"Thank you so much for your patience. You've been wonderful. All our customers have just been wonderful."

Elaine wanted to ask about the old salesman she'd seen kicked in the throat, but the woman and Stuart were encased in common memory. "My grandmother's diamonds," he was saying "... just a teenager ... she just made it out ... she suffered for that ... all her life she suffered. You know ... for the ones she left behind. She could never enjoy her life."

The woman murmured. "I know. I know. So many lost ... so many."

Elaine could do nothing but watch because her terror during the shooting had been personal and individual, while the terror embodied in the diamonds was biblical. And what was one compared to the many?

At the restaurant, Stuart slid a silver-wrapped box across the table to Gabby, who despite her tattoos and chopped hair, summoned a sense of appropriate ceremony. She sliced the silver paper with a fingernail and held the box on her palm to slowly lift its lid, synchronizing each motion to the tick of Mosaic time. She held up the pin. "Oh, Daddy . . . Oh."

"You like it? Those diamonds, they were... "

" I know...I know...they were your bubbe's. The ones she managed to get out with."

"She was only eighteen."

"Know what scares me?"

"What?"

"She was the age I am now. I think about that, you know...what I would have done?"

"You would have done fine, Gabs. You would have done fine." He smiled. He'd conferred on his daughter all the diamonds' history. And she'd reciprocated, her solemnity telling him she understood her debts to the future and to the past, her gift to him.

And Elaine had sat mute. If she had intruded in any way, she'd have trespassed into their covenantal time. Behind her, a man said something, and everyone laughed.

*

Work became a disaster. She'd been attracted to medical coding because its precision made her feel like she'd mastered a secret, reductive language. But now behind the numbers she sensed malignant caprice: pernicious blood pressure in a twenty-eight-year-old; leukemia in a seven-year-old; liver cancer in a forty-year-old. Who adjudicated the stricken from the spared?

Her staff began to fall apart. Cathy started transposing numbers the way she did whenever her son had another parole hearing. The Director of H.R. called, saying that Elaine's latest hire had lied about her immigration status and had to be fired.

At home, in a desperate hunt for her keys one morning she knocked over Stuart's juniper bonsai. She started having migraines and watched marathon sessions of "Downton Abbey." Dinners became trials by silence, Stuart at his computer in the den until she called him, and then returning as soon as he'd eaten.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, another rainy night and dinner almost done when the front desk rang: someone named Nina Thomas wanted to see Elaine.

The events at Crownstone were so distant to Stuart by then, she had to remind him who Nina was.

"What's she want?" he asked.

"I have no idea."

When she opened the door, Nina seemed like a diminished version of the woman who had lain under Elaine's arm in May. She kept apologizing for "barging in," for "ruining" their dinner, for "not calling first."

When Stuart thanked her for giving Elaine a ride home, Nina dismissed it — “It was nothing” — then shot Elaine a rueful smile as if to say, “After what we went through, what was a ride?”

Stuart offered her wine and dessert, but his voice was constricted with impatience — he wanted to get back to his den and watch a video of the procedure he’d learned down in Houston, and performed for the first time just that morning.

“No, no. I just...I shouldn’t have...,” Nina said.

“Would you like some tea?” Elaine asked

“Only if it’s not too much trouble.”

Nina followed her into the kitchen and sat on a low counter opposite the island, her squishy golden handbag clutched on her lap.

“It will have to be decaf,” Elaine said. “Decaf’s all I drink these days.”

“You can’t sleep, either?”

“It’s awful. I wake up like I’m shot from a canon,”

“Know what I dream whenever I *do* manage to get to sleep? About not sleeping, that’s what. I dream I’m awake and trying to get to sleep. How crazy is that?”

Elaine made their tea. “At work, I’m not catching mistakes my staff makes. I have to be careful. I head the decoding department at a hospital where Stuart’s a surgeon. If I screw up, they’ll say I only have my job because of him.”

Nina sipped her tea. “The other day I slapped my little grandson. He’s only four. He messed up the TV somehow.”

At the island Elaine slid onto a stool. “Did you ever suspect she might have been a man?”

“Who? That one gettin’ the ring? The way she jumped up on that counter in those sandals ... must have had four-inch heels ... man or woman, I didn’t have time to think. It all happened so fast. I was wondering, did Crownstone ever call you?”

"A few weeks back. My stepdaughter's pin was ready."

"So, you went? You've got a lot of guts. I don't know if I could have done that."

"It's all changed, now. They've even resurfaced the parking lot."

"Something in me just snapped with my little grandson. It's like I'm deliberately making myself bad. But I don't know why."

"Maybe because we lived." Raindrops hard as pebbles hurled themselves against the window.

"I hadn't thought of that," Nina said.

"Neither did I, until just now. I'm glad you came. Milk? . . . sugar?"

"Thanks, I'm fine."

"It could have been any of us that day. But it wasn't. Maybe that's why we're falling apart."

Nina rooted in her handbag and took out a crumpled tissue. She laid it on the island. "I had to come here . . . I didn't have anywhere else. I'm hoping you'll help me. All the way here, I prayed for that." She folded back the tissue. And lifted out the apple. "I need to get this back to them. I can't set things right until I do. I saw you see me take it. You never said anything, but I know you did. I thought you might tell the police, but, then when you asked me for a ride, I figured you hadn't. You didn't seem like the type to ask for a ride from someone you just snatched on."

"You want me to go with you?"

"Not *with* me, *for* me. I can't do it. I've got a record . . . years ago, a stupid thing . . . but if I take this back, they'll start harassing me like they do." Nina picked up the apple and held it at her throat. "It's really sort of ugly."

"Your daughter can't return it for you?"

"She's moving to Richmond. Here I was, thinking I had prayed all those bad ways out of myself. Just goes to show, the devil's never done. Please, I gotta get rid of this thing."

The woman's guilt, her discomfort, her desperate hope that she'd find help, struck Elaine as raw and pure.

"Can I see it?" She reached out her hand and Nina laid the apple on the lines of her palm portending life and fate. "All right. Yes, I'll take it for you."

Nina started to cry. "All the way here, I was praying so hard. Know why I was at Crownstone's that day? To pick up my pastor's new watch. He's been with us ten years. Sometimes I wonder if the Lord set me on a path ages ago, so I'd be at that place at that particular time. But then, what was he trying to tell me?"

"Maybe that you should come here."

Nina wiped her eyes. "Think so?"

"All I know is that I miss the way things were with me."

"And with your husband?"

"It's that obvious?"

"I've been there."

When Nina left, Elaine went into the bedroom and from her top dresser drawer took out a little, square white box. Inside lay a gold cross with slightly beveled edges. Small, it had been perfect for her tiny mother, and even for herself, at first. She'd been nine when she had stood on her aunt Martha's porch and watched two men lead her mother down the steps, into a van, then drive down the street, around the corner. Gone. That night, still on her knees after her bedtime prayers, her aunt Martha had fastened the cross around her neck — *"This probably is the only thing of your mother's you'll ever get that's worth anything."*

But by high school, she'd grown too tall for it. She'd never even shown it to Stuart, but now she wanted him to sense the cross's significance. By some mystical union spouses were supposed to have, he was supposed to know that she needed him to come to her. She didn't care about the wall separating the den from the bedroom, she needed him to understand how her mother's schizophrenia and the Crownstone murders kinked the links in her life's chain.

But he didn't come. So, she put the apple into the box and took it to him.

On his computer's screen two blue hands were reaching toward an exposed, pulsing heart.

She set the apple by his mouse. "Nina asked me to return this to Crownstone."

He looked up. "Doesn't she want it?"

"She can't keep it ... she took it that night."

"What do you mean she *took* it?"

"It was just an impulse, Stuart."

"You mean she stole it?"

"A sudden impulse, that's all. They were smashing everything."

"So, she just grabbed a little something for herself?"

"Everything was so crazy. You have no idea what it was like. She just did it without thinking."

"I can't believe you've gotten yourself involved in this, Elaine."

"Why?"

"Because that woman's a thief, that's why. And if you take it back, Crownstone will think you're a thief, too. Congratulations, that woman just got you to do her dirty work." On his screen, the heart had stopped beating.

"You have no idea what it was like ... none! You just think they came in, took some stuff and left, all la de dah. But they were shooting, people were screaming. I saw a child crawling in blood . . . in his own mother's blood!" She felt every ugly thought — his air of superiority, his obsessive fastidiousness, his blind love for his feckless daughter — surging up, and she wanted to spew them out in a wad of fury.

"I need to take Romulus for his walk," she said.

From the sidewalk, she looked up to the fourteenth floor. His anger was rooted in his need to control, she knew. And his need to control was rooted in fear. And his fear was

rooted in the marrow of his being . . . his alcoholic father, his fawning, clinging mother. Just as hers was rooted in growing up on the hard shores of Lake Superior. Maybe she'd been too afraid of losing him to speak her mind before, too afraid he'd think he'd married another woman with vague, troubled needs like Gabby's mother. She needed to resurrect the part of herself he'd fallen in love with the night he found her crying in the veterinarian's parking lot.

Waiting for the elevator, she called Detective Moyer and told him about the apple. "I need to take it back."

"Ask for Sol Lieberman, Mrs. Reismann. He's the one we've been dealing with. If you want, I'll tell Crownstone to expect you. It might help if you get there before they open."

"Please understand I didn't take it."

"Crownstone's still missing all kinds of baubles, Mrs. Reismann. Remember, ask for Sol Lieberman."

When she got to the condo, Stuart was on the couch, watching TV. "I called Bernie Greene," he said. "Know what he told me?"

"What?"

"That you'd look great in an orange jumpsuit" — their usual jokey mode. She knew she was supposed to answer something like "Orange was always my favorite shade." And then he'd say, "So long as your jumpsuit has an easy zipper." And then they'd be off into the wit and repartee that leavened their marriage. But that also deflected hard truths.

She didn't want that now. It had taken them three years to reach their first real argument and retreating into teasing jocularity would be cowardice. She needed to say the true thing and to have him hear it. "I called the detective; I'm taking the apple to Crownstone tomorrow." Everything hung on what he'd say next.

He flicked off the TV. "Want me to go with you?" A gift.

*

At five, the hospital called saying there was a complication with the patient he had operated on the day before and could he come in?

So Elaine went alone. After the rain, the air smelled like the whole atmosphere had been replaced by one lighter and brighter. Under the blue awning, Elaine waited for the woman with the star of David to unlock the door. "Mrs. Reismann, Detective Moyer said to expect you. Please come in. I'll get my father."

The old man whose yarmulke had flown off came from the rear. He was smiling. He sat across from Elaine and put a maroon cushion on the counter.

She had prepared a speech about how she hadn't been the one who took the apple, but the old man's indulgent smile seemed to say that life makes us all guilty of something. She opened the little white box and put the apple on the cushion, where it lay like a twinkling mystery, its colors both unitary and fathomless. "Someone asked me to return this. It fell on the floor that afternoon."

"Good and evil, eh Missus?" the old man said.

"Pardon me?"

"Good and evil, that's what the apple brought us ... right?"

"I didn't take it ... I ..."

"Missus Reismann, I know. Believe me, I know. The police explained everything. All I'm saying is that without the apple, where would we be? Eve, she picked it, and what did we learn? Good and evil, that's what. What else do we need to know?" The old man took Elaine's hand and laid the apple on her palm. "Here, Missus, you have it. It's just a simple thing, you have it."

"No ... no... I can't."

One by one, he closed her fingers around it, until the apple fit in her fist like a heart in a ribcage. "Missus, Missus, please, make an old man happy. Is that too much to ask?"

"But someone asked me to bring it back."

"You did, Missus. You brought it back. Now I want you to have it." The old man's other hand also wrapped hers. His eyes swept the store. "What's all this, Missus? The gold, the stones, who made them? Not me, that's for sure. I'm just the guy in the middle. From God's earth to a beautiful neck, a wrist, a finger. Please, Missus, what's the harm?"

"I don't know what to say. You're really very kind, but I can't."

His hands shook hers. "Please."

She extricated her hand and opened her palm. "My mother loved red."

"For her then?"

"Oh, no ... she's gone."

"All the more reason, Missus. Wear it for her. Red ... wear it for her."

"She always said red made her happy."

"So, then, you'll take it?"

"It's lovely."

"So, you'll take it? A gift from me to you ... that's all."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

She laid the apple at the juncture of the horizontal and vertical lines imprinted on the box's cotton square by her mother's cross.

"There, you've made an old man happy."

Nothing about him was remarkable. His watery blue eyes, his mottled skin — he could have been any old man — all old men.

Elaine thanked him again, and then left, passing before the jewels and through the new door, and into the clean morning air.

Patricia Schultheis is the author of St. Bart's Way, Baltimore's Lexington Market, and A Balanced Life. She has received awards from The Fitzgerald Writers' Conference, Memoirs Ink, The American League of American Pen Women, Winning Writers, and Washington Writers' Publishing House. She holds degrees from Albertus Magnus College and Johns Hopkins University.

