

A stylized logo consisting of two concentric heart shapes. The outer heart is pink with a white outline, and the inner heart is white with a pink outline. The text "PINK LITTER" is written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the white heart.

**PiNK  
LiTTER**

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a blue and red sequined choker and white high-heeled sandals, stands against a red background. She is holding a large white rectangular sign in front of her chest with both hands. The sign has the text "ROUND 19" written on it in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters.

**ROUND  
19**



WELCOME





# Table of Contents

**Ryan Quinn Flanagan**

*Ladybug Lanterns*..... 1

*The Bootlicker* .....2

*You*.....3

**Charlotte King-Irving**

*Mia* .....4

**Salvador Bullock**

*How is Your Heart?* .....7

**Jared F. Conrad**

*Next Time, Just Don’t Leave*..... 17

**Ben Newell**

*Buy Local*..... 22

*Me Too* .....23

*Fuck Iran* .....24

*Dirt*.....25

**Peter Mladinic**

*A Flower*.....28

*Red Wing* .....29

**Chase**

*Don’t You Ever Forget About Me* ..... 30

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# THE MEG

LOL





# POETRY BY RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

## *Ladybug Lanterns*

There's a girl with beanstalk hair,  
doesn't want nothing but  
good old love

and how it comes  
doesn't much matter,

not over crippling surf tide,  
not under ladybug  
lanterns;

just hot mouth kisses  
and bedroom banshees:

a bricklayer's back  
put into everything.



# POETRY BY RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN



## *The Bootlicker*

She had this bootlicker  
working his way halfway up  
her leg.

It was very distracting  
to talk to her.

*"Does Fido have a name?"*  
I asked.

*"Don't worry about him,  
he's busy licking."*  
she said.

I watched his good form.  
Tongue through a tight zipper slit  
in the leather.

*"You know,  
I have a few pairs of old snow boots  
kicking around,"*  
I threw it out there.  
*"You think I could bring them over  
for a cleaning?"*

*"Don't worry about him,"*  
she repeated her command  
with obvious annoyance.

*"Ok," I said.*  
But I kind of was.





POETRY BY  
RYAN QUINN  
FLANAGAN

*You*

I think about you each  
devilish night.

Those dreams that howl  
and scratch with fever.

Wouldn't you like to know  
about those dreams!

Those buggers I hold close  
as a losing hand  
of cards.



# Mira

A portrait of a woman with long, dark brown hair and bangs. She is wearing large hoop earrings and a multi-strand pearl necklace. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is plain white.

# 4

CHARLOTTE KING-IRVING



"You're not serious. That's *not* what they asked for."

Mira tossed the glossy magazine onto the coffee table hard enough that it slid off and hit the floor. The woman on the cover—some nineteen-year-old with collarbones sharp enough to cut glass—smiled up at her, frozen in perfect, airbrushed serenity. Across from her, Jamie just shrugged, stirring his coffee like this conversation bored him.

"It's the gig," he said. "They want 'aspirational.' You know how this works."

Mira did know. That was the problem. She knew the way her agent's voice got tight when she suggested pitching her for mainstream campaigns, the way clients would nod politely at her portfolio before sliding it aside. The industry wanted curves, but only the kind that looked like they'd been sculpted by a god, not the kind that came from her grandmother's cooking and a lifelong grudge against gyms.

Which was why she'd said yes when Jamie called about the indie magazine shoot. "Raw, authentic, *real*," he'd pitched it, like those words weren't just another kind of marketing. Now, standing in the cramped studio with its exposed brick and too-bright lights, Mira already regretted it. The photographer—a wiry guy with a beard that looked like it took more maintenance than her entire beauty routine—kept adjusting her strap with fingers that lingered just a second too long.

"Gorgeous," he murmured, not to her, but to his assistant, like she was a prop. "Just gotta get that *edge*."

Mira forced a smile. She could already tell where this was going.

The first shot was innocent enough—Mira perched on a stool, the strap of her dress still annoyingly askew where his fingers had been. Then came the director's notes: "Arch your back more. No, like you're waiting for someone. Think hungry." She shifted, the stool creaking under her, and caught her reflection in a nearby monitor. The lighting carved shadows under her cheekbones she didn't recognize.

"Better," the photographer said, but he wasn't looking at her face. His gaze tracked lower, lingering where the fabric pulled tight across her hips. "Now, let's try something... looser." The assistant, a sharp-eyed woman with a clipboard, handed Mira a silk robe without meeting her eyes. The photographer grinned. "Trust me, it'll read *artistic* in black and white."

Mira's fingers tightened on the robe. She'd done implied nude before—hell, she'd done *actual* nude for a body positivity spread last year—but this felt different. There was no pretense of empowerment here, just the quiet, greasy anticipation in the room. Jamie was texting in the







corner, oblivious or willfully blind.

The robe slithered off her shoulders in the next series, pooling at her elbows while the photographer murmured about *softness* and *contrast*. His assistant adjusted a light, her mouth a flat line. When Mira caught her eye, the woman looked away fast, but not before Mira saw something flicker there—discomfort, or maybe recognition.

They broke for lunch, and Mira fled to the bathroom, locking the door behind her. Her phone buzzed—Jamie, asking if she wanted sushi. She ignored it, pressing her forehead to the cool mirror. The studio's playlist bled through the walls, some moody electronica that had sounded cool three hours ago and now just felt like a headache.

Back on set, the vibe had shifted. The photographer was laughing with a new arrival—a woman in a sleek blazer, her hair a perfect platinum bob. "Mira, this is Elaine," he said, too cheerfully. "Publisher of *Edge*. She stopped by to see our little project." Elaine's smile was razor-thin. "We're *loving* the direction," she said, and her eyes raked over Mira like she was tallying up flaws. "But let's push further. Think... *uninhibited*."

The photographer's grin widened. "Exactly what I was thinking." He gestured to the assistant, who produced a bottle of wine with the weary air of someone who'd done this before. "Helps loosen everyone up," Elaine purred, pouring a glass too full. Mira took it, the stem slippery between her fingers. Across the room, Jamie finally looked up from his phone—just in time to give her a thumbs up.

The wine tasted like vinegar. The next pose was on her knees, the robe open just enough to tease. The camera clicked, relentless. Elaine's heel tapped an impatient rhythm on the floor. Mira's chest ached with something that wasn't shame, wasn't anger—just a dull, heavy certainty. This wasn't art. It wasn't even exploitation. It was just *\*business,*" and she was the product.

The photographer crouched to adjust the hem of the robe, his breath warm on her thigh. "You're 'killing' it," he whispered, like it was a secret. Mira smiled, automatic. Behind him, the assistant stared at the floor, her jaw tight. Mira wondered if she'd still be here in five years, or if she'd be the one handing out robes to some new girl while the music played on.

"One more," Elaine said, swirling her wine. "And this time—*give us something to remember*."

Mira took a slow breath. The studio lights buzzed overhead. Somewhere, Jamie's phone chimed again.

The robe slipped another inch as Mira shifted on her knees, the silk whispering against her

skin like it was in on the joke. The photographer's lens loomed too close, his breath shallow with excitement. "Tilt your chin—no, higher—perfect. Now look at me like you want to devour the camera." She forced her gaze to meet his, imagining the shot: her pupils dilated from the cheap wine, lips parted just enough to suggest hunger. Not for food. Never for food.

Elaine's heel stopped tapping. "Christ, yes," she breathed. The assistant flinched at the sound of her voice.

Mira's thighs burned from holding the pose. The studio's air conditioning had given up hours ago, and sweat pricked at the small of her back. The photographer leaned in, his thumb brushing her collarbone as he adjusted the robe's neckline. "Gotta see more of this," he muttered, tugging the fabric down. The assistant coughed—a sharp, deliberate sound—but no one glanced her way.

Jamie's phone buzzed again, the vibration skittering across the table where he'd abandoned his coffee. He scooped it up, frowning at the screen. "Uh, Mira? They're asking if we can get some close-ups. The, uh—" He waved a hand vaguely toward her chest. "The 'texture' shots. For the print version."

Elaine's smile widened. "Oh, yes. The paper stock really drinks in the details." She set her wineglass down with a click and stepped closer, her blazer sleeve brushing Mira's bare shoulder. "Let's see those freckles, darling."

Mira's fingers twitched against the robe's belt. The assistant was staring at her now—not with pity, but something worse: solidarity. Like she'd seen this script play out a hundred times and knew exactly how it ended. Mira swallowed. The wine had left a metallic aftertaste.

The photographer was already changing lenses, his movements brisk. "We'll do a tight crop," he said, more to Elaine than to Mira. "Maybe collarbone to waist. Keep it abstract." He winked, as if that made it better.

Mira exhaled through her nose. "Abstract," she repeated flatly.





Jamie shot her a look—half warning, half plea. *Play along.* She could practically hear his unspoken pitch: *This could lead to the swimwear campaign. The one with the tropical location. The one that pays.*

The assistant handed her another glass of wine, their fingers brushing for a second too long. This time, Mira held her gaze. The woman's eyes were a pale, washed-out blue, like denim faded from too many washes. She didn't smile, but her fingers tightened imperceptibly around the glass before letting go.

Elaine sighed. "God, the tension here is delicious. Keep that." She gestured to the photographer. "Get the shot while she's like this—like she's about to *snap*."

The camera whirred. Mira's face ached from holding the expression—something between defiance and surrender. The robe gaped where the photographer had arranged it, the cool air raising goosebumps along her ribs. She wondered how much retouching they'd do. How much of her they'd erase to fit whatever "edge" meant this month.

Behind the photographer, the assistant mouthed something. Mira squinted, trying to parse it in the strobe-lit haze. *Leave*, maybe. Or *later*. The woman's knuckles were white around her clipboard.

"Gorgeous," the photographer murmured, but he wasn't talking to Mira anymore. He was scrolling through the shots, nodding at Elaine's murmured suggestions. Jamie was typing rapidly, his thumbs flying over his phone. The assistant had retreated to the shadows by the equipment cases, her arms crossed tight.

Mira stood abruptly, the robe slithering to the floor in a heap. The studio went silent. "I need air," she said, and her voice didn't shake.

Elaine arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "We're just getting started, sweetheart."

Mira stepped over the robe, her bare feet soundless on the concrete. "Five minutes," she said, and walked out before anyone could argue.

The hallway outside was dim, the walls plastered with old promo shots from past shoots—all of them young, all of them grinning like they'd won something. Mira leaned against the fire exit door, the metal bar digging into her back. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Jamie, probably. Or her rent reminder. Or another "opportunity" lined up by her agent.

Down the hall, a door creaked open. The assistant—what was her name? Rachel? Rebecca?—emerged clutching a vape pen, her shoulders hunched like she expected to be yelled at. She froze when she saw Mira, then exhaled a thin plume of mint-scented smoke. "Fire exit's

alarmed,” she said flatly. “Tried it last week.”

Mira huffed a laugh despite herself. “Figures.” She eyed the vape. “Got another one of those?”

The woman hesitated, then tossed her the pen. It was still warm from her grip. They stood there in silence for a beat, the distant thump of the studio’s music vibrating through the walls. “They’re gonna ask for topless next,” the assistant said finally. “Probably with the pearls. That’s Elaine’s thing.”

Mira took a drag, the nicotine hitting her bloodstream like a dull punch. “Pearls. Classy.”

“They’ll call it ‘deconstructing luxury.’” The assistant made air quotes, her chipped black nail polish catching the fluorescent light. “Then they’ll sell it to some finance bros as ‘exclusive content.’”

Mira studied her—the frayed cuffs of her flannel, the dark circles under her eyes. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough.” She took the vape back, her fingers brushing Mira’s. “You should leave. Like, now.”

The fire exit’s alarm suddenly seemed worth it. But Mira hesitated. “What about you?”

The woman barked a laugh. “I’m already three paychecks behind. Can’t afford the symbolism.” She glanced toward the studio door, where Elaine’s shrill laugh echoed down the hall. “But you—you’ve got the look they’ll keep chewing up until there’s nothing left.”

Mira’s phone buzzed again. Jamie, this time with a string of emojis—palm trees, dollar signs, a bikini. The assistant grimaced. “Let me guess. ‘Big opportunity’?”

“Something like that.” Mira thumbed the screen off. The hallway smelled like stale coffee and the assistant’s cheap conditioner. “What’s your name?”

“Claire.” She said it like it was a secret.

A crash came from the studio—glass breaking, someone cursing. Claire’s shoulders tensed. “That’s my cue.” She pocketed the vape. “You coming back in?”

Mira thought of Elaine’s hungry gaze, the photographer’s sticky fingers, Jamie’s eager silence. The robe pooling at her feet like a surrender flag. “No,” she said, and it felt like pulling a splinter out. “I don’t think I am.”

Claire nodded, quick and sharp. “Good.” She reached into her back pocket and slid Mira a



crumpled business card—a feminist art collective downtown. “Tell them I sent you. They pay in exposure too, but at least they mean it.”

The studio door banged open. Jamie’s voice, slurry with wine: “Mira? Elaine wants to discuss the—” He spotted them and frowned. “What’re you doing?”

Claire melted back against the wall, suddenly invisible. Mira straightened, the card digging into her palm. “Tell Elaine I quit.”

Jamie blinked. “You can’t quit. We signed—”

“I’ll pay the penalty.” She stepped past him, heading for the elevators. Behind her, Jamie sputtered something about contracts, about reputation, about how this wasn’t how the game was played. The elevator doors slid open with a ding.

Claire’s voice floated after her: “Keep the robe. Dry clean only.”

Mira laughed, sudden and bright, as the doors closed on Jamie’s stunned face. The elevator smelled like lemon disinfectant and someone’s old lunch. She smoothed the crumpled card against her thigh—ink smudged, edges soft from being carried too long. Outside, the city pulsed with golden-hour light. Somewhere, a photographer was waiting. Somewhere, Elaine was fuming. Somewhere, Claire was probably getting fired.

Mira took a deep breath and stepped into the sun.



**HOW IS YOUR HEART?**

**Salvador Bullock**



The toaster popped, startling him badly enough that he dropped the butter knife. It clattered against the tile, loud enough to make his ears burn.

"You okay in there?" called Adrian from the living room.

"No," Martin said automatically, then winced. He wasn't supposed to say that. He wasn't supposed to admit things like that. But Adrian had this way of asking questions that made the truth slip out before Martin could stop it.

The toast was cold by the time he picked the knife back up. He scraped butter over it anyway, his hands trembling slightly—not enough for Adrian to notice if he walked in, but enough for Martin to feel it in his wrists.

Adrian had been staying over more often lately. Not every night, but enough that Martin had started buying extra groceries, leaving a toothbrush out for him, pretending it wasn't a big deal. Last night, Adrian had kissed him goodnight on the couch, then paused halfway to the guest room and said, "You know you don't have to sleep alone if you don't want to."

Martin had wanted to. Desperately. And that was the problem.

Martin stood frozen in the kitchen, staring at the unevenly buttered toast like it might give him answers. The memory of Adrian's offer echoed in his skull—casual, unweighted, as if he'd suggested splitting a dessert instead of sharing a bed. His throat went dry. He'd never slept beside someone before, not like that. The few drunken hookups in college had been fumbling affairs in dark rooms, over before he could register the warmth of another body. This was different. Adrian was different.

"You're thinking too loud," Adrian said from the doorway. Martin hadn't heard him approach. He leaned against the frame, arms crossed, wearing one of Martin's old band t-shirts that stretched tight across his shoulders. "It's just sleeping. No expectations." His voice was softer now, the way it got when he knew Martin was spiraling.

Martin opened his mouth, then closed it. The toast was a lost cause. He set it down carefully on the counter, fingers leaving greasy smudges on the laminate. "I know," he lied. He didn't know. He didn't know how to explain that the idea of waking up tangled in someone else's limbs made his chest ache in a way that wasn't entirely unpleasant, but terrified him all the same.

Adrian pushed off the doorframe and crossed the kitchen in three strides. He stopped just close enough that Martin could smell his shampoo—something faintly citrusy—but not close enough to touch. "Tell me," he said. Not a demand. An invitation.

Martin's pulse rabbited under his skin. He stared at the hollow of Adrian's throat instead of his face. "What if I'm bad at it?" The question slipped out before he could censor it, absurd and small.

Adrian blinked, then laughed, warm and surprised. "Bad at sleeping?"

"At—at the rest of it," Martin muttered. His face burned. He didn't mean sex, exactly. He meant the intimacy of morning breath and sleep-mussed hair, of being seen in the unguarded moments between dreams and waking.

Adrian's expression softened. He reached out, slow, giving Martin time to pull away, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear. "There's no 'rest of it,'" he said. "Just us. However that looks."

His thumb brushed Martin's cheekbone, fleeting. "And for the record, you couldn't be bad at it if you tried."

Martin exhaled shakily. Adrian's certainty was a lifeline, something to grip when his own thoughts threatened to pull him under. He nodded, once, and Adrian's answering smile was bright enough to eclipse the fear, at least for now.

Martin's fingers trembled against the edge of the counter as Adrian took a step back, his hand lingering near Martin's elbow—not guiding, just present. "You don't have to decide right now," he said, and Martin hated how obvious his relief must have been when his shoulders sagged.

The apartment settled into silence. Adrian busied himself with scraping Martin's abandoned toast onto a plate—because of course he noticed, he always noticed—while Martin stood uselessly in the middle of the kitchen, his thoughts tangling like unspooled thread. He should say something. Do something. But his body felt anchored in place, his pulse still erratic, his skin too tight.

"Hey." Adrian nudged the plate toward him. "Eat something before it gets even sadder."

Martin took the toast without thinking, biting into it mechanically. It was cold and too buttery, the texture all wrong, but Adrian was watching him with this quiet, expectant look, so he kept chewing.

"You're doing that thing again," Adrian murmured.

"What thing?"

"Where you're so inside your own head you forget how to blink." Adrian reached out, thumb brushing a crumb from the corner of Martin's mouth. The touch was casual, effortless, like they'd done this a thousand times. It made Martin's breath catch.

"Sorry," Martin said automatically.

Adrian sighed, leaning back against the counter. "Stop apologizing for existing."

"I didn't—"

"You did." Adrian's voice was gentle, but firm. "You're allowed to take up space, Martin."

The words lodged somewhere behind Martin's ribs. He stared down at the half-eaten toast, his appetite long gone. Outside, a car alarm wailed briefly before cutting off. The mundane sound grounded him, just enough.

Adrian pushed away from the counter. "Come on," he said, holding out a hand.

Martin hesitated. "Where?"

"Living room. We're going to watch something terrible until you stop looking like I'm about to stab you."

Martin's laugh surprised both of them, a startled, breathy sound. Adrian grinned, triumphant, and curled his fingers in a *come here* motion.



The couch was still warm from where Adrian had been sitting earlier. Martin perched on the edge, stiff as a board, while Adrian flopped down beside him, close enough that their thighs almost touched. He grabbed the remote, flipping through channels with exaggerated concentration until he landed on some low-budget horror movie.

"This is awful," Martin said after a minute, unable to help himself.

"That's the point." Adrian tossed an arm over the back of the couch, his fingers brushing the nape of Martin's neck. The touch was light, barely there, but Martin shivered.

"You cold?" Adrian asked, already reaching for the blanket draped over the armrest.

"No," Martin said, too quickly.

Adrian paused, then smirked. "Liar."

The blanket settled over both of them, heavy and warm. Adrian shifted, his knee pressing against Martin's under the fabric, and Martin swallowed hard. It was stupid, how such a small point of contact could feel so monumental.

On screen, a poorly CGI-ed monster lurched toward the screaming protagonist. Adrian snorted. "This is worse than I remember."

Martin hummed in agreement, but his attention was elsewhere—on the way Adrian's thumb absently traced circles against his shoulder, on the quiet rhythm of their breathing syncing up.

He should say something. He should—

Adrian yawned, leaning imperceptibly closer. "You tired?"

Martin wasn't, but he nodded anyway.

Adrian smiled, soft and knowing. "Bed?"

Martin's pulse kicked. He opened his mouth, closed it, then nodded again.

Adrian stood, tugging Martin up with him, their hands slotting together like they'd been made to fit. "Just sleeping," he murmured, pressing a kiss to Martin's knuckles. "Promise."

**IT'S NEVER  
TOO EARLY  
TO START  
THINKING  
AHEAD.**



**FUCKING NUMBER 20!**



A romantic couple in a bedroom. A shirtless man is leaning over a woman who is wearing a white lace bra. They are both looking at each other with soft expressions. The lighting is warm and intimate, with a reddish-pink tint. The background is dark and out of focus.

# "NEXT TIME, JUST DON'T LEAVE"

JARED F. CONRAD

"You forgot your lunch again," Leah sighed into the phone, balancing the receiver between her shoulder and ear while her fingers trailed lazily down her own stomach. The kitchen smelled like burnt toast and cheap perfume, the kind she sprayed too much of when she knew she'd be alone all day.

She didn't wait for her husband's reply before hanging up, already pressing her thighs together as she imagined him—broad shoulders straining against his uniform, grease smeared across his knuckles from the garage. The thought made her wet instantly, her cotton panties clinging uncomfortably as she dragged a single fingertip lower, teasing the damp fabric.

Upstairs, the bedroom door clicked shut behind her. She didn't bother with the lights, just peeled off her sundress in one slow motion, watching herself in the dresser mirror—nipples already hard, skin flushed pink from collarbone to belly. The AC hummed, raising goosebumps as she finally slipped her fingers under the waistband, exhaling sharply at the first real contact.

She could smell him still—motor oil and cheap aftershave clinging to the pillowcase where he'd slept last night. Leah buried her face in it, hips rocking against her own hand as she pictured him bent over some car hood, sweat drip-

ping down his temple, those thick forearms flexing as he worked. Her other hand twisted a nipple, imagining his calloused grip instead.

The panties were soaked through now, sticking to her folds when she peeled them down her thighs. She kicked them off and spread her legs wider, two fingers sliding easily through her slickness. A whimper escaped her lips—she could almost taste the salt of his skin, almost feel the weight of him pressing her into the mattress. The bedsprings creaked under her frantic movements. She imagined his voice, rough and impatient, telling her to keep going while he watched. That alone made her hips jerk. Her fingers moved faster, circling her clit in tight, desperate spirals. The pillowcase wrinkled under her grip as she arched her back, toes curling against the sheets. She was close, so close—her breath coming in shallow gasps that fogged the mirror across the room.

A car door slammed outside. The sound shouldn't have mattered—he wouldn't be home for hours—but it spiked through her like lightning. Her thighs trembled,



muscles locking as she came with a choked moan, her body bowing off the bed. For a second, she just lay there, dazed, heart pounding against her ribs while slickness pooled between her legs.

Then she heard footsteps. Too heavy for the neighbor's kid, too familiar to ignore. The bedroom door creaked open before she could move. His shadow filled the frame, grease still streaked down his forearms, eyes dark as they raked over her—legs splayed, fingers glistening, the pillow clutched to her chest. "Forgot my wallet," he said, voice rough.

She didn't cover up. Just let him look while her pulse kicked again, lower this time. The air smelled like sex and sweat now, and she watched his Adam's apple bob as he inhaled. He stepped inside, kicking the door shut behind him. "You gonna finish?" he asked, nodding at her hand still pressed between her thighs. The challenge in his tone made her wetter.

Leah dragged her fingers through her slickness slowly, never breaking eye contact. "Depends," she breathed. "You gonna watch?" His jeans were already straining, and she licked her lips at the sight. He didn't answer—just leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, like he had all the time in the world. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing to her.

Her fingers dipped lower, spreading herself open so he could see how wet he'd made her. A low growl escaped him when she circled her clit again, slower now, teasing. "Fuck," he muttered, shoving off the wall. His boots hit the floorboards hard as he strode toward her, ripping his shirt over his head. Oil streaks smeared across his stomach, and she wanted to lick every inch.

The mattress dipped under his weight as he climbed over her, caging her in with his arms. His calloused hand wrapped around her wrist, dragging her fingers from her pussy to his mouth. He sucked them clean with a filthy groan, eyes locked on hers. "Taste yourself," he ordered, pushing her fingers back between her legs. "Show me how bad you want it."

She whimpered, circling her clit faster now, hips lifting off the bed. His belt buckle clinked as he undid his jeans, freeing his cock-thick and already dripping. He stroked himself lazily, watching her fall apart. "Come for me," he growled, thumb brushing her nipple. "Then I'll give you what you really need."

Her back arched as she obeyed, her orgasm crashing over her in waves. Before she could catch her breath, he flipped her onto her stomach, dragging her hips up. His palm cracked against her ass, the sting making her gasp. "Been thinking about this all day," he muttered, lining himself up. He didn't wait—just shoved inside with one brutal thrust, filling her completely.

The stretch burned, but she moaned into the pillow, fingers twisting in the sheets as he set a punishing pace. His grip on her hips was bruising, every snap of his hips driving her face deeper into the mattress. She could hear the wet slap of skin, smell the musk of their bodies mingling with the motor oil still clinging to his skin. "Look at you," he grunted, pulling her hair to arch her back. "Taking me like you fucking missed it."

She did—god, she did—and the way his cock dragged against her walls with each stroke had her clenching around him already. He cursed when she tightened, his rhythm faltering for a second before he gripped her waist tighter, fucking into her harder. "Greedy," he rasped, biting her shoulder. "Always so greedy for it."

Her moans were muffled against the pillow, but she arched her back further, pressing her ass against him, taking him deeper. The slap of skin grew louder, the bedframe creaking under their combined weight. His breath was hot against her neck, his teeth scraping her skin as he pounded into her, chasing his own release now.

She could feel him swelling inside her, his rhythm turning erratic—the way it





always did when he was close. A rough hand slid between her legs, fingers finding her clit with unerring precision. "Come again," he demanded, rubbing tight circles that made her vision blur. She didn't have a choice—her body clenched around him, squeezing hard as another orgasm ripped through her.

He cursed through gritted teeth, hips stuttering as her contractions milked him. One final thrust buried him to the hilt, his groan hot against her ear as he spilled inside her, pulse after pulse filling her up. For a moment, they stayed locked together, both panting, sweat-slick skin sticking where they touched. Then he pulled out with a wet sound, collapsing beside her on the ruined sheets.

Leah turned her head to watch him—chest heaving, cock still glistening with her wetness, the grease smears now streaked across his torso from their frantic movements. The sight made her clench around nothing, still throbbing. His calloused fingers trailed up her thigh, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "Still not done with me?" he rasped, thumb brushing her swollen lips.

She caught his wrist, guiding his hand higher until his fingers slid into her, still dripping with his come. His groan was raw when she tightened around them. "Told you I missed it," she breathed, rocking against his hand. His other arm hooked under her knee, spreading her wider as he leaned down to lick a stripe up her inner thigh, tasting them both.

The mattress creaked as he shifted lower, his mouth replacing his fingers without warning. Leah's back arched off the bed at the first swipe of his tongue—rough and demanding, just like he knew she liked it. His stubble scraped her thighs when he buried his face deeper, sucking her clit between his lips hard enough to make her fists twist in the sheets. "Fuck, right there—" Her voice broke as he added two fingers, curling them just so.

She could smell herself on him now, mixed with sweat and the faint gasoline scent still clinging to his skin. His free hand pinned her hip to the mattress when she tried to grind against his mouth, forcing her to take what he gave her at his own brutal pace. The wet sounds were obscene, her slickness smeared across his chin as he worked her over with single-minded focus. He didn't let up even when her thighs started trembling—just sucked harder, fingers pumping faster.

Leah came with a choked scream, her body bowing off the bed as the orgasm crashed through her in waves. He kept licking through it, drawing out every last spasm until she was shoving weakly at his shoulders, oversensitive and shaking. Only then did he pull back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before crawling up her body. The weight of him pressing her into the mattress made her whimper—she could feel his cock already hardening against her thigh again.



**POETRY BY BEN NEWELL**

## **BUY LOCAL**

**HE SPEAKS CRITICALLY  
OF THE SUBURBS  
AND THOSE WHO LIVE THERE.**

**HE REFUSES  
TO SHOP AT STORES BEYOND  
THE CITY LIMITS,  
REFUSES TO EAT AT RESTAURANTS  
OUTSIDE HIS BELOVED METROPOLIS.**

**HIS CONSUMERIST LIFE  
IS DEVOTED TO EXPANDING  
THE TAX BASE.**

**HIS ONE EXCEPTION  
TO THE RULE:  
THE OCCASIONAL HOOKER  
ACROSS THE RIVER.**

**THERE'S NOTHING  
LIKE A SLOPPY BLOWJOB  
TO MAKE A MAN COMPROMISE  
HIS PRINCIPLES.**

**Touch**





POETRY BY BEN NEWELL

CREATE

digg



### Me Too

I exit my apt.  
to find the glossy flyer trapped  
beneath a wiper blade;  
standing there beside my old Honda,  
I read the thing  
then notice a neighbor doing the same—  
“Me too,” he says,  
chuckling and waving the ad  
for a fifty-dollar Brazilian wax job—  
I don’t have a pussy  
but keep the flyer all the same,  
keep it for a rainy day  
when things get really hairy  
and having a dick  
is no longer an option.



POETRY BY BEN NEWELL

# TENSIONS



## Fuck Iran

Set in 1979  
when tensions were high,  
my story is about a hot young wife  
cheating on her workaholic husband  
with an Iranian grad student.  
Unfortunately,  
I failed to take advantage  
of relevant historical detail—  
Namely the gasoline shortage  
and those long lines at the filling station,  
those interminably long lines  
which would have made a brilliant metaphor  
for the Iranian's cock.





POETRY BY BEN NEWELL

PEACE

before

### Dirt

I open the mailbox  
to find my mother's AARP magazine  
stuffed inside  
with my contributor copy of *Finally Legal*.  
My mother has no idea  
that her son/live-in caregiver  
writes for such a sleazy publication—  
Dirt I intend to carry to my grave  
years after the last shovelful  
has been dumped on hers.







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# PETER MLADINIC

## *A Flower*

You're married, and you're so dirty.  
That's not bad, it's good.  
You're the dirtiest woman I know.

That you're married makes it extra dirty.  
Nothing to be ashamed of,  
or feel guilty about. I can't believe

how dirty you are!  
You're such a bitch  
all sweet on the outside, inside

a bitch. Be mean. A flower,  
how aroused you get  
just being who you are,

in the erotic realm,  
what you do, think, and say.  
How you feel.

Of course in the day- to- day  
you are completely different.  
Nothing wrong with living in two worlds.

A flower,  
you're married and you're so  
dirty. It makes you hot.







**PETER  
MLADINIC**

**POETRY**

### **Red Wing**

I was between the ex-husband  
and the women Pat started dating.  
I remember her name,  
and that she came from Red Wing  
Minnesota. She had the most beautiful  
pubic hair of any woman I've ever  
been with: thick and blonde,  
soft. I remember how lovely it looked  
at the top of her long thighs,  
I'd love to feel it in the palm of my hand.  
That won't happen.  
She was tall and had almost no breasts,  
with small buds for nipples.



# Don't You Ever Forget About Me!

by Chase



"You're still using that old cast-iron skillet? I told you, the stainless steel is better for the sear," Elias said, leaning against the doorframe of the small kitchen.

Marcus didn't look up from the pan, where three eggs were sizzling in a pool of butter. He just shrugged, his focus on the timing of the flip. The apartment smelled of burnt toast and expensive coffee, a domestic stillness that felt earned after a decade of chasing deadlines in the city. He liked the weight of the iron; it felt permanent, like the way the floorboards in this neighborhood groaned under the weight of a century of tenants. It was a quiet kind of life, the sort of existence where the biggest drama of the week was whether the local bakery ran out of sourdough by ten in the morning.



"Some things are worth the extra weight," Marcus replied, sliding the eggs onto a plate with a practiced flick of the wrist. He didn't mention that the skillet had belonged to his grandmother, a woman who had treated her kitchen like a sanctuary and her recipes like state secrets. He set the plate down on the reclaimed oak table, the steam rising in a lazy curl. Elias watched him, a small, knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. They had been friends since the days when their only responsibility was making sure their sneakers didn't wear out before the first day of school, and that shared history allowed for a silence that didn't need filling.

Marcus settled into his chair, the morning light filtering through the blinds in sharp, golden slats. As he took the first bite, his mind drifted—not to the food, but to a specific kind of electricity he hadn't felt in three years. He thought of the way some women were like a slow simmer, comfortable and predictable, while others were a sudden flash of heat that burned out as quickly as it started. He had navigated a long line of the former, women who fit into the gaps of his life like missing puzzle pieces, providing a steady, if unremarkable, companionship.

Then there was Sarah. The memory hit him with the force of a physical blow, a sudden shiver that seemed to travel from the base of his skull straight down his spine. He remembered the specific, breathless intensity of her, the way she moved with a precision that felt almost choreographed, like a martial artist who knew exactly where the pressure points were. Most of all, he remembered the sheer, unfiltered power of her touch, the way she could reduce him to a shaking mess with a single, focused act of devotion. It wasn't just the act; it was the way she looked at him while she did it, as if she were claiming every single inch of him for herself.

"You're staring at the wall again," Elias noted, his voice pulling Marcus back to the present. Elias leaned in, his expression shifting from amusement to curiosity. "You've got that look. The one where you're calculating something that's probably going to backfire."

Marcus didn't answer immediately. He traced the rim of his coffee mug, the warmth of the ceramic seeping into his palm. He had spent months convincing himself that he was content with the stillness of his current life, but the ghost of that sensation, that singular, spine-tingling electricity, had become a noise he couldn't shut out. He realized then that he wasn't just reminiscing; he was starving. He didn't want another companion or another comfortable partner. He wanted the only woman who had ever made him feel truly vulnerable and utterly consumed.

"She's in Chicago," Elias said, though Marcus hadn't even asked. Elias had a way of knowing which ghosts were haunting Marcus before Marcus even admitted he was haunted. He reached for the plate of eggs, the conversation shifting into a comfortable cadence, but Marcus remained frozen, his mind looping back to the specific geometry of Sarah's presence. He remembered the way she used to arch her back, the way her breath would catch just before she hit that perfect rhythm, and the way the world outside the bedroom door simply ceased to exist. It wasn't just a physical memory; it was a visceral craving for the feeling of being completely dismantled.

He spent the next three days in a state of frantic restlessness. He didn't go to the gym; he didn't finish the freelance project that was paying for his reclaimed oak table. Instead, he spent hours scrolling through an old contact list, staring at her name as if it were a dormant fuse. He tried to imagine the conversation—the smooth, confident version of himself that would convince her he had changed, or perhaps the vulnerable version that would beg for one more hour of that electricity. He convinced himself that the intensity they had shared was a rare chemical reaction, something that couldn't be replicated with the "simmers" he had dated since she left.



The text message was short, sent at 2:14 AM on a Tuesday: *I saw a cast-iron skillet today and thought of you. You always said I used too much butter. Hope you're doing well.* It was a calculated play, a soft entry designed to trigger a specific, domestic memory. He stared at the screen for six hours, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird, watching the read receipt appear and then linger. When the reply finally came, it wasn't the warm invitation he had hallucinated. *Marcus. Please don't do this.*

He didn't stop. The rejection didn't feel like a wall; it felt like a challenge, a signal that the fire was still





there, even if she was trying to smother it. He called her, then emailed her, then sent a physical letter to the address he remembered from her last move, filling the pages with a detailed inventory of everything he missed about her—the way she hummed when she was thinking, the precision of her touch, the way she made him feel like the only man in the world. He wasn't acting out of malice or desperation, but out of a sudden, terrifying realization that the stillness of his life was actually a void.

Sarah finally answered the phone on a rainy Thursday afternoon, her voice sounding thin and exhausted. "I'm not a memory, Marcus," she said, her tone devoid of the heat he craved. "I'm a person who moved on three years ago. You aren't missing me; you're missing a feeling that you can't find anywhere else. But that feeling doesn't belong to you anymore." As he listened to her, Marcus felt that familiar shiver start at the base of his skull, but this time, it wasn't pleasure. It was the cold realization that while he had spent years refining his life into a sanctuary, she had built a fortress to keep him out.

"I can fly out this weekend," Marcus said, his voice sounding too loud in the quiet of his kitchen. "Just for dinner. One night to actually talk, not through a screen or a letter. I just want to see you, Sarah."

There was a long silence on the line, the kind of silence that felt like a physical distance between them, stretching across a thousand miles of highway and three years of silence. He could hear the distant hum of traffic in her background, the city of Chicago breathing in a rhythm he no longer knew. He waited for the crack in her resolve, the moment where the memory of their shared intensity would override her current resolve. Instead, she let out a short, dry laugh that didn't reach her eyes. "You're not coming to Chicago, Marcus. Please. Just stay in your sanctuary with your cast-iron skillet."

The click of the hang-up was surgical. Marcus stared at the phone, the screen reflecting the golden slats of light from the blinds, but the warmth had vanished from the room. He felt a strange, pulsing energy in his fingertips, a restlessness that made the reclaimed oak table feel like a cage. He didn't go back to his freelance work or the gym. Instead, he spent the afternoon pacing the perimeter of his living room, calculating the cost of a last-minute flight and the probability of her opening the door if he just showed up. The rejection hadn't dampened the fire; it had merely narrowed his focus.

He remembered a weekend in Maine, years ago, when they had spent forty-eight straight hours inside a cabin while a nor'easter raged outside. They hadn't spoken a word for hours, consumed by a physical hunger that felt more like a battle than a romance. He recalled the way she had looked at him then: the absolute certainty in her eyes, the way she had claimed his body with a precision that left him breathless and shaking. He had spent the last three years trying to find that specific frequency in other women, but it was like trying to hear a symphony while listening to a recording of a single note. The memory of her mouth, the specific pressure and the rhythmic, devastating focus of her, was a ghost that now haunted every single room of his apartment.

"You're doing it again," Elias said, appearing in the doorway with two glasses of scotch. He didn't need to ask who had been on the phone. He saw the tension in Marcus's jaw, the way his eyes were fixed on something far beyond the walls of the kitchen. Elias set the glasses down and leaned against the counter, his expression softer now, more concerned. "You can't chase a feeling, Marc. Especially not one that someone else decided to take with them when they left."



"It's not a feeling, Elias. It's her," Marcus replied, though the words felt thin even to him. He picked up the scotch, the amber liquid catching the fading light, but he didn't drink. He was thinking about the way Sarah used to dismantle him, not just physically, but mentally. She had a way of seeing the gaps in his armor and sliding right through them, leaving him exposed and shivering. He had spent years pretending he liked the stability of women who didn't challenge him, women who were like the stainless steel Elias praised: efficient, clean, and incapable of leaving a mark. Sarah was the cast iron; she was heavy, she required effort, and she left a permanent seasoning on everything she touched.

The next morning, Marcus didn't check his email or look at the sourdough availability at the bakery. He woke up at four, the apartment silent and oppressive, and began packing a small leather duffel. He didn't think about the "please don't" in her voice or the surgical nature of the hang-up. Instead, he focused on the memory of that Maine cabin, the way the wind had screamed against the cedar shingles while she had worked him into a state of total surrender. He remembered the exact moment his resolve had broken, the way she had looked up at him with a triumphant, predatory smile, knowing she had won every single part of him. That power—the ability to be completely undone—was the only thing that felt real anymore.

By noon, he was standing in the terminal of O'Hare, the humid Chicago air clinging to his skin like a



damp sheet. He felt a strange mixture of adrenaline and dread, a humming vibration in his chest that felt like a warning. He didn't have an invite, and he didn't have an address, but he had a memory of a specific neighborhood, a cluster of brick brownstones with ivy creeping up the walls where she had mentioned living during a brief, tentative conversation two years ago. He spent the afternoon wandering the streets, his eyes scanning every window and every passing silhouette, searching for the specific gait, the precise shoulder-set that belonged only to her.



He found her around six o'clock, stepping out of a boutique grocery store with a brown paper bag tucked under one arm. She looked exactly the same, yet entirely different; the intensity was still there in the line of her jaw, but it was no longer directed at him. It was focused on her own life, a self-contained ecosystem that had no room for a man who only remembered her for

the way she could make his spine shiver. As he stepped out from the shadow of a brick alcove and called her name, he saw her freeze. The recognition was instant, a sharp flicker of something that looked like annoyance, followed by a cold, hard wall of indifference.

"You actually came," she said, her voice flat, the bag of groceries crinkling as she tightened her grip. She didn't move toward him, and she didn't smile. She just stood there in the fading light of the city, looking at him as if he were a ghost she had already exorcised. Marcus took a step forward, his heart hammering, the hope of that physical electricity surging through him. "I couldn't stay away, Sarah. I tried. But everything else just feels... quiet."

Sarah didn't blink. She didn't even shift her weight. She stood there like a statue carved from ice, her eyes scanning him not for the man he was, but for the flaws she remembered. The silence stretched, filled only by the distant honk of a taxi and the rhythmic clicking of a pedestrian's crossing signal. Marcus felt the air between them thicken, a tension that felt familiar yet devoid of the heat he had spent a thousand sleepless nights craving.

"Quiet is good, Marcus," she said, her voice as precise as a scalpel. "Quiet is what I've spent three years cultivating. It's a luxury you've never known how to appreciate."

She began to walk, not toward him, but toward the ivy-covered brownstone twenty yards away. It wasn't an invitation; it was a demonstration of her autonomy. He followed, his footsteps echoing against the pavement, feeling the desperate gravity of her presence pulling him along. He wanted to reach out, to touch the small of her back or the curve of her shoulder, but he knew the risk. Sarah was a woman of strict boundaries, and crossing one without permission was like stepping into a tripwire.

Inside, the apartment was a mirror image of his own sanctuary: minimalist, curated, and smelling faintly of cedar and expensive soap. But it lacked the warmth he had spent years building. It felt like a

gallery where the art was meant to be admired from a distance, not touched. Sarah set the groceries on a marble counter with a deliberate, slow motion, finally turning to face him. The light from the hallway cast her face in shadow, making her eyes seem like two dark voids that saw right through his carefully constructed facade.

"You think this is about a conversation," she said, her voice dropping an octave. "You think if you just stand in the same room as me long enough, the air will start to hum again. You're chasing a ghost of a sensation, Marcus. You're addicted to the way I used to dismantle you, but you forgot that for me to do that, I had to actually care about the pieces."

Marcus stepped closer, the proximity finally triggering a flicker of that old electricity. He could see the pulse jumping in her throat, a small, betraying sign that she wasn't as indifferent as her voice suggested. The air between them shifted, the coldness of the room clashing with the sudden, radiating heat of their shared history. He remembered the way she used to breathe against his skin right before she took him, a soft, rhythmic warning that preceded total surrender.

"I do care about the pieces," he whispered, his voice sounding raw. "That's why I'm here. I'm not looking for a simmer, Sarah. I'm looking for the fire."



Sarah let out a breath that was halfway between a sigh and a scoff, her eyes narrowing as she looked at him. The flicker of heat he'd sensed didn't bloom into an invitation; instead, it hardened into a sort of clinical curiosity. She stepped back, putting a deliberate few inches of marble counter between them, her posture remaining as rigid as a soldier on guard.

"The fire," she repeated, the words tasting like something bitter. "You always loved the drama of the burn, Marcus. You loved the way I could strip you down to nothing because it meant you didn't have to actually be anything. It was easier to be a shivering mess in my hands than it was to be a partner in my life."

She turned away from him to begin unpacking the groceries—a bunch of kale, a wedge of sharp Manchego, a single bottle of expensive red wine. Her movements were efficient, devoid of the choreography he remembered. The precision was still there, but the devotion was gone. She was no longer a woman claiming every inch of him, she was a woman reclaiming her space from an intruder.

Marcus watched her, the silence of the apartment feeling heavier than the silence of his own. He real-



ized that the electricity he felt wasn't a bridge connecting them, but a current running only through him. He was vibrating with a need that had nothing to do with her current self and everything to do with the version of her he had curated in his mind during those three years of loneliness. He reached out, his hand hovering just inches from her waist.

"Just one night," he murmured, his voice dropping. "Let me remind you. Let me show you that the fire hasn't gone out."

Sarah paused, her hand hovering over the bottle of wine. For a heartbeat, the apartment went utterly silent, the kind of stillness that precedes a crash. She turned her head slowly, her gaze sliding from his hand to his eyes. There was a flicker there—a ghost of the old hunger, a memory of the power she once held over him—and for a second, Marcus thought he saw the wall crack. He felt the air thicken, the atmospheric pressure in the room dropping as if a storm were rolling in from the Lake.

"You think you're the one doing the reminding," she said, her voice a low, dangerous vibration.

She didn't move away when he finally closed the gap, his palm landing on the cool marble of the counter, pinning her into the small space between herself and the groceries. He could smell her now—not the scent of a memory, but the sharp, clean reality of her: citrus and something metallic, like rain on hot pavement. He leaned in, his breath brushing against the shell of her ear. "I remember the way you used to look at me," he whispered. "Like I was something you were carving out of stone. I want that look again."

Sarah didn't pull back. Instead, she leaned into him, her chest grazing his, her movements devoid of the softness he had hallucinated on the flight. She reached up and gripped his wrist, her fingers digging into his skin with a strength that bordered on bruising. She didn't pull his hand away; she held it there, a captive thing.

"You want to be dismantled," she whispered back, her eyes locking onto his with a predatory intensity that made his pulse jump. "You want to feel that shiver because it's the only time you feel like you're actually awake. You don't want me, Marcus. You want the version of yourself that exists when I'm taking everything from you."

The silence that followed was a live wire, humming with a tension that made the fine hairs on Marcus's arms stand up. He felt the grip on his wrist tighten—not a caress, but a claim. He had expected a softening, a slow melt back into the intimacy they had once shared, but Sarah didn't do softness. She did precision. She did the kind of intensity that didn't just touch the skin but bypassed it entirely to rattle the bone.

"Then let me have it," Marcus whispered, his voice cracking. "Take it all."

Sarah's gaze dropped to his mouth, then traveled down to the pulse hammering in his neck. A slow, calculated smile touched her lips—the kind of smile a cat gives a mouse it has decided not to eat just yet. Without breaking eye contact, she released his wrist and slid her hand upward, her palm flat against his chest. She didn't lean in for a kiss; she simply pushed him back, just enough to create a sliver of space that felt like a canyon.

"You're still so predictable," she murmured. "You think the hunger is the same. You think because you can feel the electricity, it means the circuit is still open."

She stepped around him, her hip brushing his thigh as she moved toward the bedroom. The movement was fluid, a predatory glide that triggered every sensory alarm in Marcus's body. He followed her, his footsteps heavy and uneven compared to her rhythmic grace. The bedroom was a sanctuary of grey linen and stark white walls, the air cooler than the rest of the apartment. Sarah stopped in the center of the room and turned, her eyes scanning him with a clinical detachment that made him feel stripped bare.

"Strip," she commanded.

The word wasn't a request or a flirtation; it was an order, delivered with the same flat precision she used to organize her groceries. Marcus felt a jolt of that familiar, terrifying power surge through him. For three years, he had imagined this reunion as a negotiation—a slow dance of apologies and longing where he would eventually win her over. But Sarah didn't negotiate. She operated.

He obeyed, his fingers fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. He felt clumsy, his movements frantic and uncoordinated in the face of her stillness. As the clothes hit the hardwood floor, he felt the temperature of the room drop, yet his skin was burning. He stood before her, exposed and shaking, the silence of the room amplifying the thud of his heart. He was waiting for the look—the predatory, claiming gaze that had once made him feel like the only object in the universe.

Sarah didn't move. She stood with her arms crossed, her eyes traveling slowly from his shoulders down to his feet and back up again. She wasn't looking at him with love, or even particular desire. She was inspecting a piece of equipment, checking for wear and tear.

"You've gotten softer," she noted, her voice devoid of warmth. "The stillness of that sanctuary of yours has made you slow. You're leaning into me already, Marcus. You're practically begging for the spark before I've even touched you."

"I'm not begging," Marcus lied, though the tremor in his thighs betrayed him. He felt the air in the room thickening, a heavy, static pressure that seemed to pull the oxygen from his lungs. He wanted to reach for her, to close the gap and force a reaction, but Sarah's gaze held him in place, an invisible tether that kept him rooted to the spot. She moved toward him then, not with the rush of a lover, but with the



slow, deliberate pace of someone walking toward a project. She didn't touch him at first. She circled him, her footsteps silent on the floor, her presence a cold current that made the skin on his arms prickle. When she finally stopped, she was behind him. He felt the warmth of her breath against the nape of his neck, a sudden, sharp contrast to the chill of the room. Then, her hand slid up his spine, her nails tracing a line from his lower back to the base of his skull with a precision that made his breath hitch. It was a light touch, almost tentative, but it carried the full weight of their history. The shiver he had been chasing for three years finally arrived, a violent, electric surge that rattled his bones.



"You remember this," she whispered, her voice a low vibration against his skin. "The way it feels when you stop fighting and just let go."

She moved around to face him, her eyes locked onto his. There was no softness in her expression, only a focused, predatory intent. She sank to her knees in one fluid motion, her gaze never leaving his. The shift in perspective was immediate; he was suddenly towering over her, yet he felt smaller than he ever had in his life. The silence of the room returned, absolute and oppressive, broken only by the sound of his own jagged breathing.

As she leaned forward, Marcus felt the world outside the room vanish. The city of Chicago, the memory of his quiet apartment, the voice of Elias—it all dissolved into a singular point of focus. When she finally made contact, it wasn't a gentle homecoming; it was a claim. The specific, devastating rhythm she employed was a language he had forgotten he spoke, a precise application of pressure and suction that bypassed his mind and went straight to the nerve endings. It was a surgical strike on his resolve.

He felt his head tilt back, his eyes fluttering shut as the world narrowed to a single, blinding point of sensation. It was the same terrifying efficiency that had haunted him—the way she didn't just perform an act, but orchestrated a collapse. Every muscle in his legs turned to water, and he had to reach out, his fingers digging into the fabric of the duvet to keep from falling. The shiver didn't just travel his spine; it lived there, a vibrating current that threatened to snap something inside him. He had spent years trying to convince himself that this was a physical need, a biological craving for a specific technique, but in the same moment he felt the peak approaching, he realized it was actually a form of surrender. He wasn't just being touched; he was being erased.

Sarah didn't let him linger in the haze. Just as he reached the precipice, just as the tension in his chest became an unbearable scream, she stopped.

The sudden absence of her touch was as violent as the presence of it. Marcus gasped, his body twitching in the vacuum, his heart hammering against his ribs in a panicked, unfinished rhythm. He looked down, blinking through a blur of heat, to find her looking up at him. She wasn't breathless. She wasn't flushed. She looked as composed as she had when she was unpacking her groceries, though there was a glint of something—triumph, perhaps—in the dark circles of her eyes.

"You're still so desperate for the end," she said, her voice cool and steady. "You've spent three years imagining this moment as a resolution, but I'm not a solution, Marcus. I'm a reminder."

She stood up slowly, smoothing her skirt with a clinical precision that felt like a slap. She didn't look back at him as she walked toward the door. The predatory heat that had filled the room moments ago had vanished, replaced by a sterile, echoing emptiness. Marcus remained where he was, shivering and exposed, the unfinished energy of the act pulsing in his veins like a fever. He felt more dismantled now than if she had actually finished.









Thanks!