

BEYOND THE GATE



Cristy Fossum



Create in Me

1



Aunt Barb had said, “We’re calling you a specialist in infestations because you are, Jessie, and we’re saying fifteen bucks an hour. When rich people get infested they’re desperate; they’ll pay.” And it had worked, at least maybe.

This was it. Twenty-six thirteen South Harvard Drive. Jessie panted up to the large two-story house five minutes late. A black wrought iron fence surrounded it. She stood at the gate breathing, trying to make her hand reach for the latch. Her head turned to watch a car pull into the wide expanse of concrete driveway and a woman emerge who contrasted to her in every way: large-framed and tall, dark-skinned, professionally dressed and made-up, comfortable-looking in stiletto boots. She hurried to Jessie and offered her hand. Jessie’s aim was off returning the gesture—this

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was her second or third handshake ever—and she wanted to sink into the ground, but the woman easily adjusted and shook firmly.

“Hi, Ms Stewart. Jessica, right? I’m Lauren McCoy. Thanks for coming. This is my uncle’s house. He’s really let things go since my aunt died a few years ago,” she said, opening the gate. “And now we’ve got problems.”

They walked a stone sidewalk through neglected flower beds on each side of the ornate wooden front doors. Lauren McCoy turned her key in the lock, and they entered a foyer at the foot of a wide staircase. Jessie could smell the roaches, like rotten brown sugar.

“Let me tell him we’re here,” the niece said, and turned right to the end of the hallway and right again down some steps. While she waited, Jessie took in a fancy side table under a fancy mirror. It held a nice lamp but was covered with disheveled mounds of mail. An expensive looking rug littered with yellow cat hair and assorted bits of debris led to light blue-gray carpet on the steps, a dark and dirty path up the middle. Thick cobwebs hung from the brass chandelier. Jessie’s nose twitched at the smell of cat pee, a smell she detested.

“He’s really let it go,” the niece repeated upon her

return. “I had no idea,” she said, shaking her head and leading Jessie left through the hallway, a string of shipping boxes, opened and unopened, making it tricky to navigate. They passed a small sitting room on the left and a living room and formal dining room on the right, both dusty and cluttered, into a large, sunny kitchen with a bay window breakfast area. *This place is way worse than Aunt Barb’s*, Jessie thought, her eyes flashing around. She moved toward the stove where small brown bugs skittered in and out of the burner wells, pausing over crumbs and spills. *That’s where I’ll start.*

“The exterminator should be here soon. I only discovered a couple days ago that it was this bad.”

Jessie nodded and turned slowly around to see dead plants, boxes and bags of trash, an island counter and sink piled high with food cartons, and a sticky, dirty floor. *At least two weeks, maybe more, for the kitchen.*

“What do you think, Jessica, if I may call you that.”

“I can do it. I charge fifteen dollars an hour.”

“Yes, that’s agreeable,” Lauren said, but with hesitation. “Now, Jessica, are you sure you can handle this? You seem so—young. How old are you, if I may ask?”

“Nineteen,” she said, tucking her gum into her cheek. “I

can do it.”

“Are you bonded?”

She didn’t know what that meant but was pretty sure she wasn’t and shook her head.

“Well, I’m having my doubts here. This is a major project. It’s a terrible mess, I have to say. I don’t want you to be in over your head, and my uncle...” She paused. “He’s a good man, but...” She paused again, looked away. “He’s had some upsets. His wife and dog died on the same day, for mercy’s sake, and, well, he can be very particular—although he’s been resigned lately to—or depressed, I don’t know—it’s like he’s lost himself—and I stopped coming over a while back and—oh, gosh,” she said, shaking her head like a wet dog and looking back at Jessie, “Anyway, you’re very young and...”

“I can do it. Those are German roaches. My aunt had them and I got rid of hers. And I’ve done three other houses too,” she lied for emphasis.

Lauren gazed down on her. “Alright then,” letting out a big breath. “Let’s try it.”



I feel like I’m in a car half off and half on a cliff. It’s great it didn’t go over, but what now? My next move could tip it. I don’t

know if I can do this job. It will probably be a disaster. Walking home in the middle of Friday afternoon traffic with its congestion and blasting horns, Jessie's stomach filled with knots of anxiety that tightened and tumbled when she passed by her alma mater, Fremd High School.

She tried not to think at all. That used to be easier, but not now, with everything that had happened. Jessie had lost her father, mother, husband, child and aunt one right after the other. She didn't miss any of them particularly. Maybe Aunt Barb, and not just because she had owed Jessie money when she died. That was causing a problem though, with rent due. *So much*, she sighed, half-stumbling along, her mind ablaze with unbidden, unwanted questions and memories whirling around like sparks from a campfire rising into darkness.

What did my father die of? Where did he live? Why does it even matter? I mean, who cares? Her face in a deep grimace, she walked right into the path of a car turning right from a side street and jumped at the honk. *What happened between my mother and Aunt Barb? What was wrong with my mother? It seemed normal how she came home from work every day and went upstairs and shut herself in her room, but Doug showed me it wasn't. But why did she?*

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Focusing on the ground, she barely smelled the pizza restaurant or the pungent aroma of the mum beds at the park entrance or even the frightful stink of a duck carcass rotting on the bank of the Salt Creek. Paying no mind to the mechanical growl of the municipal digger filling potholes or the dad pushing his kid in a plastic car stroller who had to swerve out of her way, she walked on, her small body an engine of determination.

She turned into the narrow driveway of her apartment building, worn out by her busy brain, and stepped on a stone, lurching forward three awful times before catching herself. *Okay, okay, I'm okay. In a minute, I'll be safe in my apartment.* She took a left around the building, feeling the sharp gravel through her worn sneakers at the same time a home-sweet-home feeling began to glow inside. But there was Doug's car, and there was Doug, sitting on the rickety picnic table in the small patch of weedy grass.

"How's it going, Jessica?"

"With Aunt Barb dying, I can't pay my rent this month. Can you help me one more time? I'll pay you back."

"Hey, remember? As long as you're my wife, I won't let you be homeless. And you know you don't have to pay me back. How much?"

“Three hundred.”

He pulled some bills out of his wallet and handed them to her. “But I can’t keep paying two rents, and pretty soon you won’t be my wife anymore. You need to get a job.”

“I have a job,” she told him. “This should be the last time I need anything from you.”

“You have a job? What is it?”

“Housecleaning again. Fifteen dollars an hour.”

“That’s great. I’m proud of you.”

She winced. She didn’t want him to be proud of her. She only wanted him to go away. But he stood there, looking at her with that look she hated, love or whatever it was.

“We could have made it, Jessica, if you hadn’t...” His voice broke, and she started by him, desperate to get inside and lock her door.

“Don’t you want to see Fiona?”

She froze, then went to the car, trying to swallow the panic in her throat, and peered in at her sleeping baby.

2



Today was Halloween, the end of Jessie's second week at her new job. She loved the work so much she wanted to smile at times. Roderick McCoy was like a ghost in the basement, so this kitchen was her world to fix. But after writing, "Please cover food with paper towel while heating," and taping it to the freshly cleaned microwave, and finding it the next morning with "No notes!" scrawled across it, she remembered it wasn't hers at all.

From eight to five each day, she stomped roaches on the floor, slapped them off the walls and counter tops, and ground them in the garbage disposal. The pesky bugs didn't bother her as much as the cat. "You are an obnoxious, long-haired bag of bones," she muttered at it, prancing all over the table and furniture as it pleased, haughty and cat-like,

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throwing up on the carpet leaving faint reddish stains. Worst of all, when she'd be down on all fours scrubbing the floor or wiping the grime off woodwork, it would rub up against her, nudging her arm with its slimy nose. "You are so gross!" she growled, jerking away.

Pulling the refrigerator out for the daily cleaning behind and underneath, Jessie watched the bugs scurry, some of them racing back up into the appliance before she could suck them into the vacuum. Patience and gradual progress kept her satisfied with the job, but her heart hit bottom when she told Lauren she needed another Bag o' Rags.

"Jessica, I don't have time for this," she'd said. "I'll tell you what. I'll open an account at Zimmer Hardware by the town park, and you can go in there and get whatever you need. And here's a key. Have a duplicate made for yourself and leave this one on the counter."



Thinking about it is worse than doing it, she told herself after a couple false starts—walking down the block and back, jittering on a park bench. People shop every day—it can't be that hard—and it's not my fault my mother and Doug never took me shopping. Okay, maybe it is because I never wanted to go. She finally entered the old store. There were no other

customers, and the man duplicated the key and checked out her purchases with hardly a word. She'd found a fresh supply of Doublemint in a rack by the checkout and added it to the rags, scouring pads, rubber gloves and the new key. *Wow, gum and my own key.* She slipped it into her pocket and walked back to Harvard Drive, lighter and brighter.

Ooh, I love this recycling center! Jessie sorted each item into its proper place simultaneously picturing the orderly spaces left in the garage. Putting her little corner of the world right, along with her painting, had always been her way of handling life.

Struggling to push the last flattened box through the slot at the top of the dumpster, she startled when someone took it out of her hands from behind and pushed it through. She swung around into a young man who stepped awkwardly back. They stared at each other, and then he spoke.

“Um, thank you for recycling. People like you may yet save our planet.”

She looked at the ground, wanting only to be back in the truck, driving away.

“Am I freaking you out?” he asked, ducking to look

into her face.

She nodded.

“Oh, no,” he groaned. “Okay, I’ll go away,” but he kept talking. “I thought you were a child, I thought you needed help, but now I see you’re a full-grown woman.”

Jessie glanced up, eyes magnified through her thick lenses, then stepped around him.

“Thank you again,” he said to her back as she walked away. “I admire you,” he called as she climbed into the truck.

Stiff as a rod, Jessie leaned slightly to her right to look at him out of the corner of her eye in the side mirror as Kelly eased the truck away. Medium height and blond with an expression on his face both eager and worried. She didn’t calm down until they were back in Palatine, driving through darkening streets alive with football players, Dementors, super heroes, and Dorothy in ruby slippers.

“Cousin, how long had you been cleaning for Ma before she died?”

“Four months. She asked me at my mother’s funeral. I remember exactly what she said: ‘Jessie, I got roaches, baby. How about gettin’ your butt over to my house and helpin’ me out? Ten bucks an hour.’ Except she didn’t say butt.”

“Yup, that’s her,” Kelly nodded and blew a trail of cigarette smoke out her window. “You know, you’re practically a businesswoman, Jessie, hiring me like this. Make sure my pay covers fifty cents a mile on top of my time, okay? And maybe a happy meal, now you can write it off on your taxes,” she teased.

I don’t mind paying, but I’d never have gotten in touch with you if I knew anybody else with a truck, Jessie thought, looking out her window. Gosh, I didn’t even see her for ten or twelve years until her mother died. I hardly remembered her. I think she wants to be friends, and she cast a sideways glance at Kelly. I don’t think she was very nice to me when I was little. Besides all that, who needs green hair? What was it Aunt Barb would call her? Jessie pondered. Oh yeah. Ungrateful, disrespectful spitfire.

“So who’s this guy you’re cleaning for?” Kelly asked as they drove along.

”Roderick McCoy.”

“Well, is he okay?”

“I guess.”

“Look out. He could be anybody. He could attack you or accuse you of stealing. He could go paranoid on you at any time. I knew this guy once, he painted the whole inside of this lady’s house, bought the paint and everything.

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When he got done, she charged sloppiness and said she didn't like the colors. He never got a cent. I'm tellin' ya, look out, girl. You could wind up on CSI."

Whatever CSI is. Probably a TV show. Just drive me home.

After a while, Kelly said, "Hey, Jessie, wanna go see Get Out, that new horror flick? It'd be perfect for Halloween night."

"No." *I want to go home and count my money.*

"Wow, I see you still don't know how to have fun. You were dull as a kid, and it looks like you haven't..."

"But could you stop at Jewel-Osco?" Jessie said, a sudden craving for something yummy overcoming her dread of going into the busy store.

"Oh, yeah, for some Friday night treats? Great idea."

They did their shopping and got back in the truck.

"What'd you get? I got Cheetos, French Onion Dip, a bottle of Merlot, and Almond Joys."

"Coleslaw and gum," Jessie said.

"Wow again. Way to live it up."

I am living it up, with enough money to pay my bills and some left over. All alone in my very own place. A whole quart of coleslaw. That's all I need.

Kelly drove through her driveway and turned left into

the small parking lot. “Hey, when’s your divorce hearing?” she asked as Jessie slipped down and out.

“Tuesday.”

“Good luck with that. I hope you come out better than my friend Heather. She’ll have a hard time getting back to point zero,” she said, shaking her head. “Devante, that’s her ex, emptied their bank account, and then he...”

“I don’t want to hear,” Jessie said.

“Oh. Sorry,” Kelly said, surprised. “But listen, I’m all ears if you need to vent. Want me to come in?”

Jessie shook her head and pushed the door shut. As soon as she’d locked herself inside, right there by the washing machine, she stripped and put all her clothes in a hot, sudsy wash, a daily routine to kill any roach eggs that might have attached. She put the slaw in the refrigerator, took a hot shower, got into her pajamas and lay down on her bed. Maybe tonight she would start hanging her pictures. They were all safe in her utility room now, all seven boxes of them, the biggest gift her mother had ever given her—not throwing them out. When they first got married, Doug had said they didn’t have room for them, but when they’d cleaned out her mother’s apartment after the accident, the paintings had come back to her.

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Two minutes later, someone rapped on the door. She crept through the utility/entry room and peeped out through the blinds. Doug, with Fiona in an elephant costume. She opened the door, and he thrust the furry ball into her arms. The trunk hung over the baby's head and bopped Jessie in the face. Through the circle in the gray plush, Fiona peered up at her

“I'm going to get a haircut. You two have fun,” Doug said, and she was alone with her daughter, who watched intently as her daddy got in his car and left. Then, she looked Jessie straight in the eyes and, after a moment's consideration, let out raucous cries. If she knew how, Jessie would have joined in.

3



On her eleventh day of cleaning Roderick McCoy's house, Jessie unlocked the front door and went straight down the stairs to his den for the first time. He and Lauren were at a doctor appointment. For once, the TV was not blaring, but she stopped on the bottom step anyway and peered around the corner through the shadows before entering.

She marveled at the mess, moving slowly from one area to the next. The smell of old beer mingled with urine odor from the half bath made her cough. Wide-eyed, mouth hanging open, she stole around this wonderland of grimy disorder, pausing at his recliner where bits of food made a greasy layer on the chair and the shag carpet around it.

If I ever get down here to clean, the first thing will be to collect

the beer cans. That alone will make a big difference. I'll tidy up those bottles of spilled pills and get a basket or something for that pile of snacks.

A velvety coat of dust covered the whirling blades of the overhead fan, mimicking the purr of the cat asleep in the recliner. The fan had flung years of dust up and around, forming a dark circle on the textured ceiling, like a storm cloud brewing. The window and door frames and bookshelves hung with cobwebs of the same gray filth. The laziness of the cat contrasted sharply to the exhilaration for cleaning this place up that quickened Jessie's pulse. But she also felt wrong being there, afraid she might get caught, and soon hurried up to her own territory.

She was cleaning the inside of the refrigerator when they came in the front door several hours later. "Come into the kitchen and meet Jessica," she heard Lauren urge and then his grunt as he went in the opposite direction. Lauren came in the kitchen but hadn't yet spoken when they heard him fall down the steps. Jessie ran down the hall behind Lauren, and in a flash, Lauren was climbing over her fallen uncle, the two of them cursing, a chaotic jumble of her trying to sit him up and him pushing her away, Jessie watching from above.

“I’m okay, leave me alone!” he yelled.

“You might be okay, you might not, you stubborn old codger. Now let me...”

He struck her hard, and she flew backward. He jumped up in defensive stance, looking down at her, fists in the air.

“Uncle Roderick! It’s me, it’s Lauren,” she screamed.

A long silence followed except for his heavy, horrified breaths. When Lauren spoke again and rose to lead her uncle gently down the last steps, Jessie retreated to the kitchen and resumed her task. *Maybe I should get my coat and get out of here right now. But so much money—and I love this work—and how would I find another job?*

“Sorry,” Lauren said when she returned to the kitchen. “He’s been having some strange bouts lately. The V.A. doctors think it’s PTSD starting up, after forty-five years. I didn’t know that could happen. And his arthritic knees are killing him and...”

And he’s drinking too much beer and taking too many pills.

Leaning her forehead on her hand, Lauren spoke from a faraway place. “I’m not sure how much longer I can put up with this.”

Jessie had her head in the refrigerator and kept it there.

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Roderick's doorbell rang. *Whoever that is has nothing to do with me, thank heaven,* and Jessie kept mopping the kitchen floor. It rang again, and then, after a minute, somebody banged on the side window of the kitchen yelling, "It's you!"

Her head jerked up in shock and she choked on her gum and dumped the mop bucket. *What in the world? Oh, my gosh. It's that guy from the recycling center! Why would he be here?*

The grin on his face quickly disappeared, and his expression copied hers. He took off. She ran to the window and closed the blinds and then all the blinds in the kitchen and cleaned up the mop water. *Is he still out there? Probably not. He looked more scared than me.* Her heartbeat slowed as she worked, and by the time she started home hours later she'd forgotten the guy at the window. She had more important things on her mind.



She liked the morning and evening walk to Roderick's house except for having to walk by the high school. Afternoons around five-thirty were quiet, and every single time she passed, relief settled over her that she didn't have to go there anymore. Mornings were different, with throngs of students and their incoherent shouts conjuring up

memories. One day she had heard what sounded like “pretty” rise shrilly above the chatter and remembered when she and Pam, the only friend she’d ever had, were walking along and a girl in a group of girls approaching said, “Those are pretty glasses, Jessica.” She was surprised the girl knew her name, and when Pam said, “She’s making fun of you,” the laughter behind them made her realize Pam was right.

Pam looked more normal than Jessie, but bullies got on her because she was so thin. “Walking Stick” and “Skeleton Girl” were some of the nicer names Jessie heard. She and Pam ate together in the cafeteria a few times, but they were both absent so much they didn’t spend much time together. And then Pam died from anorexia. Jessie wouldn’t have known but for whispers in the library.

But today, she didn’t even notice the school. *I’m going to organize my life like never before. And I’ve never had so much to organize!*

She stepped down her three steps and unlocked her back door. She was seeing only a few bugs once in a while at Roderick’s house now, so didn’t bother to shower immediately. She glanced at the seven boxes of her paintings, stacked against the wall to the right, and passed

into the kitchen, grabbing the magnetized list and pen set she'd found at Jewel-Osco and liked so much. Over an egg and cheese sandwich and carrots and celery, she started her list.

#1. Go to bank – She was eager to have a checking account now that she had money. *I'm going to balance my statement like Doug does. That will be fun. But—oh, gosh—I have no idea how to open a bank account. But I'll worry about that when I get there,* she told herself, legs jiggling.

#2. Get file box – For the bank statements that would be coming as well as her divorce papers and time sheets. *What sort of store has file boxes?*

Doug had done all the shopping and public jobs while she took care of the apartment. She'd hardly ever gone out except to church functions with him. Before Doug, her mother had done everything, including buying her clothes, basically a uniform of khakis, T-shirts and sneakers. After these months on her own, buying groceries was getting to be pretty okay, walking across the street and down the block to the store first thing Saturday morning, the place practically empty and the cashiers not awake enough to be talkative. *And I'm not as nervous in Zimmer's, so I guess I can step out a little more.*

#3. Get step stool –*I love the one at Roderick's, and I'm going to need one to hang my pictures.*

#4. Fiona. *I didn't mean to write that down. I just can't stop thinking about her.*

“You're her mother, Jessica, even after what you did,” Doug had said the day he'd helped her move. “I'm looking for another wife, but at least until God guides me to the right woman, she needs you.”

No, Fiona definitely does not need me. I'm still afraid I could accidentally hurt or kill her. When the baby was only a couple weeks old, Jessie had caught her tiny thigh in the zipper of her sleeper. Oh, and there were more terrible incidents. She had dropped her twice, dear God. And knocked her tiny head on the door frame, the poor thing crying out in her baby goat voice. She was more substantial now, but Jessie still hated holding her. On Halloween night, she had left her in that ridiculous elephant outfit because the cushioning felt safer. Plus, she might have broken her arm taking the suit off.

Me as a mother is all wrong. Me as a wife too. Too bad I happened to be outside that day Doug came into our yard—and wound up with me ruining his life.

“Marry this guy, Jessie,” her mother had told her a

month later. “You will never have another chance. Never.”

If not for all that, I'd still be there on Brookside in my quiet house, cleaning and painting. Except the house is gone to make way for fancier buildings. And so is my mother, gone. C'mon, get a grip, she sighed, getting up to wash her plate and glass.



“How much did it cost?” Kelly asked Jessie, returning to the topic of her divorce when she stopped by Roderick McCoy’s house.

“Two hundred ninety-nine dollars with forms Doug got off the computer,” and she answered the rest of Kelly’s questions. Ten minutes in the Cook County Courthouse on Euclid with a lady judge. Full custody of Fiona for him, unlimited visitation for her. She took her name back, Jessica George again. Afterward, Doug had taken her straight to the photo I.D. window, so she was all set with that. *I know he’s a good man. Too good for me, with all his religion and doing everything the right way and wanting lots of kids.*

Kelly broke into her thoughts. “Did you cry?”

“No, but he did, and he wanted us to go out and eat.”

“Did you?”

Jessie shook her head. She had just walked away from Doug. It was all she could do.



The formal portrait hanging over the mantle in the living room fascinated Jessie, helped her get to know Roderick McCoy and his wife, as far as appearance. Handsome couple, the wife seated, wearing big jewelry with a formal gown of an unusual shade of red. *That's Red Violet, I remember the paint tube.* Roderick was in uniform standing behind her gold-painted chair.

That morning, Lauren had mentioned that he was in a good mood because a buddy from Vietnam had been in touch about visiting. So Jessie decided to ask him if she could get rid of some cartons stacked in the breakfast area: a dusty and collapsing box of Campbell Soup labels, another of long-expired canned corn, and a third filled with yarn. She made her way down the stairs to his den like she was stealing through the woods, hand on her palpitating heart, and peeked around the doorway. He was in his recliner facing the TV on the back wall, his big arm in a brown plaid flannel shirt resting on the arm of the chair, his square, salt-and-pepper haircut jutting above it. She planned to say, "Mr. McCoy, is it okay to get rid of the boxes in the breakfast area?" hoping he would grunt okay. But when she began to speak, the cat jumped out of his lap with a loud

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meow and hiss and spooked her. She heard him snort with laughter as she vanished up the stairs. *Who cares? All I want is doing the job and getting the money. I'm just moving the boxes to the garage.*



“American Chartered on Euclid,” Lauren said the next day when Jessie asked about a bank within walking distance. “Go whenever you like, Jessica, and good for you, getting your infrastructure in place. You can go right now, if you want to.”

She put on her coat and set out, her money tucked in an envelope and her photo I.D. in the small, flat wallet that fit in the back pocket of her khakis. She had not been in a bank before and quivered with both anxiety and excitement, walking up the brick sidewalk past the neatly trimmed shrubs and struggling through the heavy door.

“Hello. Welcome to American Chartered,” voices called from different directions, confusing her as she took in the place with its crystal chandeliers and rich furniture.

“How can we help you today?” asked one of the voices, a woman at a nearby desk.

“I want to open a bank account,” Jessie said, moving toward the desk.

“I’ll be glad to help you with that. Have a seat,” the woman said, and Jessie sat down in the pretty chair in front of the desk. “Checking or savings?”

“I just need a place to put my money.”

“Will you be writing checks?”

“Maybe. Yes.”

The woman unfolded a brochure in front of her and started throwing around banking words—interest and low minimum and high yield. When she stopped talking Jessie said, “I’ll take the Free Checking Account that is actually free.”

The woman filled out the forms as she supplied the information, then asked, “And how much will you deposit today, Ms George?”

“A thousand,” she said, handing over the envelope with fifty twenty-dollar bills. *Gosh, I hate letting go of all that.* But while the woman went to the counter to deposit her money, she reasoned with herself again. *Yes, you’d rather have it at home with you— but stop acting silly—this is a bank—most people put their money in banks—it’s normal, it’s safer,* and she beamed inside at the feeling of adulthood that came over her. She picked out checks—pretty ones, nature scenes—happy to think she could now pay her rent by check. She

wanted no part of the free credit card or the services available over the telephone and on the computer. *I don't know how to do any of that—though it would be nice doing business without people.*

After shaking hands with the woman—smoothly, this time—and them thanking each other, she exited into the crisp, sunny day and saw a whole shopping center she hadn't noticed on the way in. Exhausted from the ordeal—and hungry—she rewarded herself with a hot dog and coleslaw lunch at the grocery store restaurant, even sitting down in a booth, then bought a plastic file box at the drugstore. She also went by Zimmer's and found a small hammer and little gold nails perfect to hang her pictures, linoleum tacks they were called.

"You must be laying a whole house of linoleum," the clerk commented.

Uh oh, am I in trouble? I took every box on the shelf, a dozen of them. Maybe you're only allowed to buy them if you're using them for linoleum.

"Um, I'm using them for something else."

"Sure," he said as he scanned one twelve times, twelve beeps chirping out. "Looks like quite a project."

Relieved, she nodded.

And then she took a deep breath and asked if they had step stools. He showed her on a computer the different kinds they could order, and she picked one, and they ordered it and said she could get it next week. It cost over fifty dollars and wasn't the same as the one at Roderick McCoy's. She had picked a taller one.

How accomplished she felt as she walked back to Harvard Drive, making a major detour to stick a note on Doug's mailbox that she wanted to see Fiona.