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PLAINCHANT

The man slid into the booth at the northernmost corner of Johnnie's Restaurant. It was a good thing they didn't bolt down the tables as he could still push the whole thing back, make more room for more of his middle. There you go, he said to the young gal placing a glass of ice water on the table and offering him a menu. You keep that, he told her, just send Sally.

The youngster smiled and walked away. New girl. Nice little figure, though she'd blow right up as soon as someone popped a bun in that pretty oven. He'd known enough puffy knees and padded elbows to sort the naturally trim from the bread and butter gals: the first are always stalks and the others just pockets of yeast pitted perfect for seed. Of course, it's the puffies who take you in quicker. Curse man's fate, he used to tell his boy, the easier the lay, the wider she'll lie down the road.

Sally came over with a hot cup of coffee and a fresh bowl of creamers. How are you, this morning, she always asked, and also, will it be your usual? Yes, and how about a date on the side, he'd smile and wag his eyebrows, and she always said we don't have dates in these parts, but would he care for a little cup of raisins. He'd laugh and tell her to just go get his breakfast and hurry up, and she'd give him a wink and leave. She had nice gray eyes and long lashes; that was enough. He'd pretty much learned his lesson with the last one. Annette. He'd found out where she'd lived by hanging around late one day and sort of acciden-

tally on purpose following her home from work. She had a duplex, prefab from the seventies, rented it from some company in Lansing, he figured, with a young couple and their dirty baby living next door. After that, he couldn't help it. He drove by her house every time he was out, sometimes parking down the street, just to watch and rest, listen to a little radio, until he knew her whole schedule. Work at 6:30. Home by 3:00. From the looks of it, she'd take a nap, shower, then chat on the phone in her baby blue robe, fiddling with that stuffed bear she kept on her couch. Come happy hour, she'd lower the blinds and walk down to the bar like she was on her way to an important business meeting, chin up, brown eyes scanning the sides of the street for familiar faces, though she wouldn't do more than nod if she saw one she knew. She always wore a skirt and those slender black ankle boots that laced up the front, and usually ended up in some guy's car by 10 pm. He must have watched her do just about everything that can be done in just about every position, before she paired up with this particular fellow who only liked it one way and only liked Annette. And that was that. She moved out of the duplex and settled down with the young fellow in that new trailer development with the carports. A short while later, they moved away, somewhere south, she'd said on her last day at work, and suddenly, his life was over. He quit going in for breakfast for a good long while, had a hard enough time keeping food down. When he finally made it back, here was Sally.

I AM THEIR MUSICK

A man called Pete pulled into the driveway, around the rear of the house, where he stopped, turned off his van and sat. Pete, an odd job man, always liked this drive, the way it circled Ma's house and back onto the road, a good design for not having to worry about the direction you're headed: you'll come out either end, like spoilt meat or one drink too many. Of course, Ma wasn't Pete's mother, who'd been dead so long he barely remembered her Christian name. Ma was his wife's Ma, batty old gal who gave most of her money to the church by tithing ten percent whenever she touched the pot. Pete could see her house from his own, or his house from hers, except he'd pulled in facing the wrong direction, so unless he turned all around or messed with the rearview mirror, the only thing he could actually see was Ma's sagging porch littered with empty corrugated cardboard boxes and the foil pie-tins she used to feed the cats. The porch light was on, a dull miserable glow, and Pete knew Ma was sitting in her wheelchair at the dining room table, playing solitaire, reading Catholic Digest, waiting for Pete to show with her arthritis medicine. He'd gone into Lansing to get it that very afternoon. Pete restarted the van instead; the stones crunched and broke beneath the wheels as he pulled out and turned on the radio. *You know me better than that*, he turned the volume up and hummed along, *you've seen me lose all my charm*.

Ten minutes later he was at the Wagon: Wheel & Bowl, just for a minute, as was his usual intention. He didn't see

any of the other guys' cars, not even his brother-in-law's, the stinking drunk. Probably at home, easier to keep that girlfriend of his if she's kept in the house. She's a piece of work, alright, putting her sticky hands and sloppy mouth all over you, saying she ain't married into the family, so what's the problem. Jesus Christ who'll judge the quick and the dead, still, glad she's not blood is all, her and that other tired cow, the nephew's wife. Woman'll sit there at Easter supper and foul-mouth her boy's wife for calling the cops when she caught him fiddling with their baby girl. What kind of sick pup would do that? Sure, boy's mother is singing for sympathy 'cause the baby-toucher's the only baby she's got left, and he's all locked up. Then she goes dragging her dead son into the dinner, what a joy, according to she, forgetting the fact that the boy hung himself, a slow hang, knelt on the floor, belt about the neck, lean forward, let gravity take care of the rest. The sheep will go astray, is all Ma ever says about it. Well, sheep stray without a good strong shepherd, and that poor mother has had a rough go, losing two boys like that and a no-good husband to lean on.

Pete had lost one himself, but he had more sense then to bring the subject up, aside from funny before-stories everyone likes to hear. He slid out of his van and closed the door without locking it. Pete'd lived in Plainfield his whole life, minus a three-year stint in the army, and it was a good place. Safe. There'd been no violence except domestic, and the only serious stealing in town was about ten years ago, a series of horses, right out of the barns. He could still remember when the Wagon: Wheel & Bowl was simply a western-style building of painted gray cinder blocks with a giant wagon wheel planted out front circled by white stones. They added the alley twenty years ago, with its own set of now-faded shiny new doors and pin-shaped bottles of beer, the result being a lopsided place popular with old and young in this and the other small towns around. Pete liked the alley, though not for bowling as much as a place to go through on the way to the bar, see who might be passing the hours tossing balls, having a few, watching their pins fall, or like them, wobble and stay up. There was no one much there that night, only the barber, down on lane twelve with his boy and some of his barber buddies. The barber, that's one who can't hold his tongue,