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BINGO!

She hooked her earrings to her lobes and fastened them so; she tossed her thick black, shoulder-length hair, then followed with an adjustment to her breasts. She applied more make-up to her eyes, then dusted her cheeks once more with a brush. She took a look in the mirror with all the confidence she could muster to reveal to herself; the lines on her face were becoming more noticeable the longer she stared with her accusing eyes. She was almost thirty and, though most would consider that a prime age in a human's life, this woman felt that everything was simply falling apart, and thirty wasn't beginning to look so hopeful as it does for others.

The name-tag pinned just to the right of her lapel read Audrey Riley, and beneath that: *Teller*. Monday through Friday she was a slave to a schedule at the same job doing the same thing over and over again. It hadn't been long after she was hired that these feelings began to consume her, eat away at her. The sort of life she was living wasn't the life she had, and certainly not the life she wanted. Upon noticing the name-tag she quickly ripped it off, relieved that there were two whole days ahead of her that didn't involve the godforsaken bank at which she worked. Not that the bank itself was a poor establishment, it was Audrey's attitude towards *work* in general that made everything there seemingly miserable.

Audrey was a woman never accustomed to doing things for herself, and it was apparent that she'd been pampered since she fell out the cradle. Her parents were kind and loving Floridians who put their daughter's happiness before any financial obligations; they once took out a second mortgage on the house they could barely afford so Audrey would be able to attend the best private schools; she always maintained a steady "B" average her entire scholarly career.; she was pretty, cheerful, dainty and delightful, always well liked amongst her peers. But most importantly, above all else, with her parent's shining approval, she married a wealthy man right out of college -- and during an economic depression nonetheless. He was significantly older than Audrey, but she felt a certain comfort with him, much like the safety blanket she clutched in her sleep as a child. A few days after their honeymoon in Cancun, Audrey happily moved into her husband's Boca Ratone residence.

His name was William Riley, and he was -- as Audrey would explain it to everyone -- "in real-estate," never quite grasping the full extent of his position. Whatever he was he worked tirelessly at it,

pulling all-nighters at the office; “Drawing up contracts,” is what he’d tell her. Though his absences were frequent he kept his wife happy and taken care of, never asking her to have children, or pick up the dry cleaning, or vacuum the house, or any other conventional wifely duty that too many often inherit, allowing Audrey a life of comfort and style. She quickly became acquainted with names such as Coach, Cartier, and her absolute favorite, *Versace!* There were spa days and lunch dates, brunch dates and mall days, and sunsets that melted behind palmtrees – an actual view from her kitchen window.

Audrey loved the kitchen she had inherited, a lovely large kitchen with lots of natural lighting, laced with stainless steel and all black appliances, with a nice hardwood floor beneath their feet that was easy to clean. Audrey never considered herself much of a chef, having heard of “slice-and-bake” cookies but never actually making them; she used to only eat store bought cookies before she finally utilized all the amenities available at her fingertips. There were Cookbooks, the internet, and *Food Network*, and before long she'd learned to prepare meals for her and William – when he could make it home in time for dinner that is. She loved learning new recipes on her own time, learning all the tips and tricks that her mother never taught her, like how to roast a duck, or make a simple quiche.

In the center of the kitchen was an island bar with a nice marble countertop, surrounded with stools. This is where Audrey and William would eat their meals when it was just the two of them, which was quite often. After collecting a few years worth of beautiful sunsets from their kitchen windows, enjoying dinner with one another on that countertop, William received a most grave phone call; it was a doctor from a hospital in Pittsburgh. William's mother, Ruth Riley, was dying. She was old, and William expected such for years, but that night – ironically – it was very *unexpected*, just like everything else that'd been happening to him in his life. William was extremely close to his mother, loyal to her every need, and wanted to be there for her as much as possible while she was alive. He broke the news to Audrey that they would have to relocate to William’s hometown of Pittsburgh; it would be in their favor “financially,” as William put it, and would allow him the appropriate amount of time to settle his dying mother's estate.

Audrey thought the move would be temporary, a waiting game; but her husband’s mother refused to pass like the months gone by. Slowly Ruth's health began to progress, and soon after she was out of the hospital and back into her home. It was “a miracle,” the doctors said, and had no other explanation for her sudden step back to life. William was ecstatic, but hesitated to show any signs of returning to Florida, and perhaps because he knew they weren't going to.

The cold, dreary weather that constantly hung over the “steel city” began to take its toll on Audrey, and the frequent absence of her husband and lack of friends did not help either. She hated

Pittsburgh; she hated the townhouse they lived in, as well as its small, nearly windowless kitchen; she hated the cold snow that blew harshly against her skin; she hated the dirty gutters of the streets, the black slush of snow and salt pushed against the curb; she hated the narrow winding roads that dipped up and down, curving left – then right; Audrey couldn't stand the constant running of her nose, and the dry cracks in her skin, especially on her hands; and she absolutely (secretly) loathed the Steelers, a sports team whose name and logo are unavoidable and can be found around every corner of the city; but above all, going past her contempt for her surroundings, she *loved* her husband and tried to accommodate him as he did her, though William's mother was beginning to come between them. Because of his elderly mother he was constantly stretched in separate directions between the two women of his life while maintaining a demanding job.

“Do you want to come with me tonight?” William would ask, kicking his feet up after a “long day”; he would ask her that question every Friday night.

“Why, Will? It’s Friday night. We should go out and grab a drink or something,” Audrey would say. “Can’t you find somebody else to take your mother to bingo? You deserve a break.”

“Who’s gonna take her? We’re all she’s got. Besides, she loves spending time with us.”

“No, not *us*. You, Will. She can’t stand me. She thinks I'm just some bimbo you married off the streets.”

William would argue that his mother cared deeply for both of them, whereas Audrey would admit otherwise:

“Your mother hasn’t liked me since the day we met, and you know it. Remember, it was at our wedding. Your mother couldn't even muster the dignity to congratulate us.” Then dramatically, almost choking on her words, said, “Most of all she didn't even compliment me on how good I looked in my dress. She doesn’t think I’m good enough for her ‘*Billy boy*.’” – clenching her teeth – “I hate it when she calls you that.”

Then one day it all abruptly ended; Audrey’s life had been pulled from under her. She came home from Christmas shopping one afternoon and, upon walking through the front door, dropped her bags at what she saw: her husband swinging from the ceiling fan, a chair kicked out from under him and a cord noosed around his neck; a note was resting on the hardwood floors beneath his feet. It explained the debt they were in due to the foreclosures on his properties. He wrote that the money from his life insurance policy would be enough to sustain Audrey and his mother and that it was “the only way out,” wishing a happy life for the two women that meant the most to him.

What William did not know (or didn't think of) was his life insurance policy didn’t cover suicide, which was most unfortunate for Audrey Riley, a widowed woman left to shoulder her late husband’s

burdens – with no one to call for help. Her parents were broke and she hadn't held a job since college. She never counted on such things happening to her. These were things that happened to other people in other places – not her. She also never counted on the many tears that were to be shed since that day . . .

Audrey continued to ready herself, moving about the bedroom, then into the bathroom. The bathroom, along with the rest of the house, fell short of appearances since Audrey had to let go of the house cleaner: the mirror above the sink was splattered with water spots and specs of dried toothpaste; her curling iron was lying out next to many little bobby-pins; clothes were strewn everywhere; the shower was beginning to develop a ring, and the toilet -- as well as its seat -- was in a most horrifying state.

Audrey didn't know why she bothered going into such preparation for such a boring dismal affair. It was Friday night and she felt, as before, she deserved to be doing better. She wanted her life back, the life before Pittsburgh, back when the sun shined.

On the way out she swung into her tiny, dark little kitchen and removed a chocolate chip cookie from a store bought package, the plastic cookie filer twisting with noises as she struggled to release her hand from the bag as though it were a bear trap. She buttoned her black wool peacoat and exited. The weather outside was appropriately reflective upon her attitude . . . and she figured it would be. It was late February, and the cold wind blew piercing droplets of rain smack against Audrey's cheek as she jogged to her car parked along the sloped road. Inside she fixed her hair in the review mirror, then noticed how beautiful her earrings looked on her face; they were a pair her husband bought her when they were engaged. She missed him dearly, that was certain, and therefor felt compelled to keep with his weekly tradition as best she could . . .

Audrey waited patiently outside of *Willow Towers; Assisted Living for the Elderly*, leaning against her sedan and puffing a cigarette (a habit revisited after the funeral). The identical buildings stood next to one another, tall and luminous and rusting with age. William was always opposed to the idea of placing his mother in a retirement home, and wouldn't have it . . . at least while he was alive. After his death Audrey swept her dear mother-in-law beneath someone else's rug, selling the woman's house along with most of her unneeded possessions – which were great in numbers; it had taken days to remove the decades of collected material items from the basement alone. The money raised had payed for Ruth's residency at the home, and any extra was used by Audrey in effort to keep the townhouse which she could barely afford.

She peered around the lot and took notice at the elderly slowly moving about, pushing their walkers on an evening stroll. It saddened Audrey to look at them, and felt that it was one of the most morbidly depressing scene's she had ever seen. For her to even imagine living a life as such made her

sick to the core. Audrey felt bad for what she'd done to her husband's mother, but also felt there was no other choice.

The automatic doors to the entrance opened. Audrey quickly flicked her cigarette in the bushes and let out a long exhale.

Out of the doors rolled Ruth Riley, pushed in a wheelchair by a handsome male nurse. Ruth surely wasn't the "spring-chicken" she once considered herself to be; she'd had two minor heart-attacks and suffered one major stroke – the stroke had consequently paralyzed her right arm; there were liver spots all over her loose skin; she wore shoes strapped with Velcro and her perfume was down right cheap. Audrey refused to comprehend why a sense of fashion had to die with the person.

Though Ruth was aware of her son's suicide she was never told of the financial ruin he was in, and so assumed that her "Billy-boy" died a successful man. However much Audrey hated Ruth she simply couldn't ruin a mother's memory of her late son.

"Look, Henry," said Ruth, looking up at the nurse pushing her. "You'd think my daughter-in-law was a streetwalker from the way she paints herself up."

"Charming, Ruth," Audrey said, having heard the comment. "I'm really glad to see you too."

"Lighten up, would-ja?" said Ruth. "You see, I can't even joke with her, Henry. She throws me in a home surrounded by death and *I'm* the one with a sense of humor."

"Sorry. I suppose we share a different kind of humor," said Audrey, rolling her eyes at Henry. He smiled back at her. "Hope you're hungry, Ruth." Audrey bent at the waist and stared down at the near crippled woman as though she were a child waiting to open gifts.

"You're not gonna try to kill me this time, are you?" Ruth asked, miserably.

"I did not try to kill you!"

"Henry, she knows damn well of my peanut allergy, and do you know where she took me two weeks ago? I'll tell you where she took me – to some Godforsaken steakhouse that had a floor *littered* with peanuts! Can you believe it! My life flashed before my very eyes!"

"Ruth, I told you I'm sorry. I didn't know –"

"I'm sure you didn't." Ruth looked away. "Just help me in the car before I catch a death of a cold out here." She tightened her jacket around her neck.

Both Henry and Audrey assisted Ruth into the passenger seat of the car and shut the door.

"Has she been giving you any trouble?" Audrey asked Henry in a whisper.

"It's okay," he said, his Texas accent beginning to prevail, "she can't hear a thing we're saying. She's been shouting all day. I think she has her hearing aid turned down."

Audrey smiled at the nurse's humor.

“Well, let’s think . . . Other than threatening to throw a jug of urine on me if I didn’t reveal where I hid her tin of chocolates, she’s her usual self I suppose.” He broke into laughter. “Always a handful.”

Audrey's brow raised and her mouth turned downward in dissatisfied way. “Her health isn’t failing? At all? I mean, she's almost a hundred. Sooner or later she's gonna slip back into a decline, right?”

“She's eighty one, Miss, and not necessarily; she has her ups and downs, but bounces back like the trooper she is.” There was a pause. “And how have you been holding up, Miss Audrey?”

“Good,” she replied, over exaggerating and looking at the ground.

“Is that all, Miss Audrey? Just *good*?”

Nearing closer to Henry, she said, “Honestly? . . . Things could be better.”

“Things could be worse,” said Henry, looking around. “You know, it’s good you come and do this for her. Not many here have family that visits the way you do.”

“I suppose so . . .” Audrey looked at the car with Ruth inside. “I’ve never been like this before, and I just don’t know how much longer I can take everything – my husband sure left me in a bind. I took a job as a teller at a bank and I’ve been working forty hour weeks.” She exhaled exhaustingly. “There’s just not enough hours in the day it seems.”

“I hear that,” said Henry, folding up the wheelchair and placing it in the trunk. “Well, I hope things get better for you, Miss Audrey. I know they will. I can feel it.”

“Me too,” Audrey said, enjoying the first hint of encouragement she’d received in a long time.

Ruth rolled down the window, shouting, “Can we go sometime soon? *Time* isn’t exactly on my side. And I don’t want to miss bingo.”

Audrey imagined herself dragging the old woman out of the window and strangling her there in the street for all to see. She felt that by doing so she would be doing the city a service, a worthy feat that could possibly deserve an award of some sort.

Instead she smiled kindly, saying to the nurse, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Audrey started the car and pulled away.

“You smell like smoke. Have you been smoking, Audrey?” Ruth interrogated as they drove off. “I’ll tell you, I wish I’d never smoked a single cigarette in my life. I just don’t understand why a young girl like you should . . .”

Ruth’s, blunt and thorough examination of Audrey’s life lasted the duration of the car ride. Audrey took it, bottling up her contempt for the woman’s verbal bashings.

Like every Friday during Lent, Ruth attended the fish fry at the Catholic school gymnasium. The basketball hoops were drawn up and foldable tables and chairs were placed in long rows down the

court, creating what appeared to be a mass eating trough for senior citizens and those accompanying them.

After waiting in the long line of people that extended the length of the gym, Audrey returned with the food, placing Ruth's plate in front of her with a set of plastic silverware.

"I asked for the shrimp basket, not cod," snapped Ruth.

"You told me to surprise you."

"With anything but cod. You know I don't care much for cod. I see you helped yourself to the shrimp basket."

Audrey swapped the plates, saying, "There. Problem solved."

"You don't have to do that," said Ruth.

"Yes, I do."

The cod was awful -- way too salty for Audrey's taste, so she picked lightly at the side of green beans and carrots, occasionally looking up at Ruth swiftly devour the shrimp basket.

"You didn't come last week," Ruth said, wiping her mouth and picking her teeth with her tongue.

"I told you I wasn't feeling well, Ruth. I apologize."

"*What?*" Ruth asked loudly, turning her head.

Speaking louder and slower, Audrey reiterated, "I wasn't feeling well and I'm sorry."

Ruth nodded her head. Then said, "There was another jumper at *Willow Towers* last week."

"Oh my," Audrey was taken back. "Did you know the person?"

"Yes, but she was a simpleton who's relatives were either dead or nonexistent. She didn't get out much, not like this."

Audrey knew that was as close as she was getting to a "thank you" out of Ruth.

"Would you look at that?" Ruth said with a scowl, staring at a the interracial couple that sat a few seats down; a black man spoon-feeding a white woman some bites of his shrimp; the two were clearly in love, though the ring on the woman's finger was small and could have said otherwise.

Audrey watched alongside, also staring at the happy couple. She was terribly jealous of them.

Ruth leaned in to Audrey, but instead of whispering, unknowingly shouted, "That ain't right! In my day that'd *never* fly!"

"Ruth!" Audrey said, appalled and embarrassed.

"Well, it wouldn't. I see stuff like that on the television and I turn the station."

"Ruth, you-are-*shouting*. Could you please just keep your thoughts to yourself." Ruth pursed her lips, looking her daughter-in-law up and down, noticing her fancy outfit and expensive jewelry.

"I really don't know why you bother at all. You don't have to do this. A pretty girl like you

should be out on the town looking for another husband, shouldn't you?"

"Don't speak like that, Ruth, please. How could you . . .?" Audrey looked away, down the rows of people eating and talking, flicking sugar packets and ripping them into their coffees. Audrey was so angry she could've thrown a cup of scolding coffee in Ruth's face; and thinking of doing so somewhat comforted her.

Ruth sipped her coffee then began coughing, choking on the hot liquid. She heaved for air, and her mouth made the same shape William's did when he would cough. Audrey, for a brief moment, saw her husband sitting in front of her; she could almost reach out and touch him . . .

"What are you gonna do, Audrey? My Billy boy's not around to take care of you, and those bags under your eyes say you're not adjusting too well as a working girl. It seems you can't accept growing up, growing older." Ruth's eyes were slit and devious.

Audrey trembled with anger, but remained silent as Ruth ran her mouth.

"Look at you, dear," continued the elder, "there's nothing modest about you: that leather purse and expensive jewelry -- and those clothes ain't exactly Sears-Roebuck. Let's be fair, my boy was much older than you and it's okay that you used him for what he was worth --"

"These are all items your son bought for me. And they remind me of him. He liked it when I wore things he bought me."

"How would you know what he would like? He was always slaving away at his work so you could wear his earnings off your ears." Ruth huffed and rolled her eyes.

"I knew William better than you could ever imagine." Audrey's eyes filled with tears that she fought to hold back, not there, not in front of Ruth of all people. "He and I shared some magical moments together and I knew him inside and out. Did you know that his favorite movie was *Cheech and Chong's Up in Smoke*? Did you know that his favorite band was the Rolling Stones? Did you know that he liked eating rocky-road ice cream before bed to help him sleep? Did you know how he liked his steak cooked? Black and blue," she answered her own question, adding, "served with an ice cold vodka martini -- no vermouth."

Ruth gave her daughter-in-law a disapproving look. "Silly child," she said. "Of course I know how he liked his steak cooked, where do you think he developed the taste for it? I brought it home from the market once a week when he was growing up. I raised that boy from diapers to diplomas -- *alone* too. Where you there when his father ran out on me? Up and left, he did. Did you know Billy almost died of pneumonia when he was a boy? Were you there for that? I was there. Or, did you know that he would come home from school, crying his eyes out from being bullied all day? Well, you can bet your sorry ass I was always there to tell him everything was going to be okay." The crippled

woman seemingly towered above Audrey, beating her down with more personal knowledge of her son than Audrey could ever even pretend to know. “Did you know that he was married before you?”

Audrey was frozen in place and trembling.

“He was?” she asked.

Ruth nodded her head. “He had a lot of love to share. He was my boy -- hell, he came out of me! So don’t even try to trump me, dear. Now lets get a move on it, bingo starts shortly.”

Audrey dumped the plates in the trash and wheeled Ruth out of the gymnasium. They headed down the school’s hallway towards the room designated for senior citizens bingo. Audrey was still in shock, her mind swimming with emotion, slowly pushing Ruth along.

“I want you to know that I loved William,” said Audrey.

“Well, maybe if you weren’t so high maintenance my son would still be alive. God knows someone drove him to suicide and it certainly wasn’t me.”

Audrey stopped dead in the hallway, in front of the football trophy display.

“What did you say?” Audrey asked, squaring up with the old woman, now looking down upon her. Ruth gripped her wheelchair and starred straight ahead. “You think *I* drove him to suicide? You’re sadly mistaken. Now you listen here, you old shrew, I didn’t kill your son!”

Others around them heading to bingo stopped and turned their heads at the comment.

Boiled with anger, it had been a long time coming that Audrey wanted to say what she did: “Your *Billy boy* killed himself because money was tight. His properties were all foreclosed on! He wasn’t worth shit. He left me to clean up a mess I didn’t know I had. I refrained from telling you this for your own good, but it’s clear there is no good in you.”

Ruth was devastated, and cowered like a turtle in its shell.

Audrey then added, “You ruined my life the second he thought you were going to die.” She paused and turned, sobbing in the palms of her hands.

Ruth said nothing.

Audrey spun around, hysterical.

“I wish you would have just died so I could have my life back. But that wouldn’t solve anything right now, would it?” Audrey sniffled and desperately searched through her purse for a tissue.

Then an old wrinkly hand holding a pack of Kleenex reached up to the young woman. Audrey accepted the tissue and the two looked at one another.