

FIFTY-SOME BAGS OF GARBAGE AT THE EDGE OF THE EARTH

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When Melissa finally walked back into her New Orleans apartment, she didn't think she'd ever recover from the shock of how normal it looked. She expected to throw away waterlogged belongings, prostrate herself to FEMA, and chat gravely with neighbors about what she'd lost. But when she drove up to her apartment, everything looked fine, just as it had a month ago when she evacuated.

She went from room to room, but everything was exactly as she left it. No looter scat, no trees on the roof, not even a broken window. As she sat down on her kitchen table and looked around at the different objects that had made up her life a month ago, it felt unsettling.

From New York she'd watched the city gain and then release water like a clogged tub. As she stared at the TV alone, she corrected out loud broadcasters who didn't know the right names of neighborhoods. She scanned footage of flooded houses trying to catch a glimpse of something familiar. It was even stranger when she did recognize something, a storefront transformed by looting, or a local park littered with blankets and MRE's, a place she knew looking like nothing she'd seen before. As she watched her new-found city become a public spectacle, something changed in her. To come back and have her apartment look the same, down to the dirty napkin she'd left on the counter, seemed like a mockery, a sarcastic gesture to how things would never be the same.

The only thing she lost was her job waiting tables at a gumbo joint in the French Quarter. With no tourists, she had to find a new profession, which was just as well. She felt like a change. As she paged through the thin print of a classifieds section haloed with coffee stains, she decided she would become a property manager. She'd always been vaguely interested in real estate.

Melissa pulled up to one of her first assignments, a sprawling four-plex. It was dilapidated with outside walls that sunk into the ground so the whole building looked like it was frowning.

She locked her car and trudged toward the house, arms folded together for warmth. Gusts of wind picked up broken window screens and slammed

them against the siding, creating a depressingly syncopated soundtrack of groaning hinges and hollow-sounding slaps.

She knocked on a warped door that looked like it would dissolve in a hard rain. On the top was spray painted “Katrina you bitch” in red letters. Melissa could hear a TV, but no one answered. She knocked again. Across the street somebody laughed. Two ancient men were sitting on lawn chairs sipping beers wrapped in brown paper bags. They were surrounded by what looked like a graveyard for cars – molded, partially gutted corpses of various makes and models.

“They home,” one of the men shouted. “You just need to knock, babe. But they home.”

Melissa waved. “Thank you.” She knocked until her knuckles hurt and the whole door trembled.

A woman with frizzy red hair and arms wide as sewer lines appeared.

“Are you,” Melissa looked down at her file, “Mrs. Boudreaux?”

The lady nodded. “You the FEMA lady?”

“No. I’m Melissa Rutledge from Spirit of New Orleans Property Management, and I just wanted to introduce myself so you can call me if you ever have any questions or concerns.” Melissa handed her a newly printed card.

“I got some questions or concerns right now,” Mrs. Boudreaux said. “My toilet don’t flush right.”

“Hmm,” said Melissa.

“Yeah, it do alright if I just take a piss or something, but when I like really,” she paused, “you know, it don’t go down.”

Melissa’s forehead tightened. “I’ll call a plumber.”

“Yeah, you better. ‘I don’t need my toilet backing up on me and fill my house. I missed that during Katrina, and I ain’t trying to have it now.”

“Okay,” Melissa backed away from the door. “I’ll get that taken care of. Nice to meet you.”

As Melissa drove to her next appointment, she thought it might be time to unpack her winter wardrobe. She tried to picture what it looked like. She hadn’t seen it since the day after graduation last May, when she packed up all her cold, New York clothes, even though she was certain she wouldn’t need them in New Orleans. The first thing she’d have to find was her coat, a quilted, beige thing she’d found in a thrift store.

After visiting three more houses, all in similar condition to the first, Melissa headed back to her office Uptown. She parked on the street. She

didn't have a space in the parking lot yet. The office was in one of the most elegant parts of town, on Maple Street just north of St. Charles Avenue, and it had suffered only minor wind damage from the storm. It was a block ruled by real estate, boasting three title companies, two insurance agencies, the property management company where Melissa worked, and directly across the street, Spirit of New Orleans Realtors, Inc, where Melissa wished she worked, where agents who dealt in listings and sales made more in a month than Melissa could make in rentals in a year. Balancing her files, her purse, and a bottle of water, she kicked open the door to her office.

"Good morning," said the secretary. "Did you find everything all right?"

"I'm getting better every day," Melissa smiled. "Thanks for your directions."

The secretary was a middle-aged woman with a fake tan who liked to wear low-cut tops accentuating a bosom that may or may not have been enhanced. She had on fuchsia lipstick, and she pursed her lips out as she typed.

"It takes awhile to find some of these neighborhoods," she said, which was a nice way of saying it takes awhile to figure out where the ghettos are.

Melissa's desk was near the back where the heat took the longest to reach. It was a depressing gray cubicle covered in papers. While Melissa was studying a disclosure, a deep female voice behind her said, "Excuse me."

Melissa turned around. It was her boss, Donna.

Donna twisted her lips into a puckered smile. "How's it going, sweetie?" She was a tall woman, always elegantly dressed, but there was a certain shrillness about her that put Melissa on edge, afraid she'd start shrieking insults. Donna never raised her voice, but something about her nose and the intense way she scrutinized made Melissa uneasy.

"How's my newest agent doing?" Donna asked. "Have you put that Dorgenois double on the rental list yet?"

"It went on today."

Donna grunted. "And that place with the tacky wallpaper on Mari-gny?"

"I've shown it five times already, so I'm crossing my fingers."

"Wonderful." Donna paused, running her intense eyes over Melissa's person. It seemed there was something she wanted to say. She shook her head and smiled. "There's a freeze coming through, so make sure you cover your plants."

Melissa didn't have any plants.

That night at home she turned on the space heater in her kitchen and sat down with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She surveyed her kitchen as she chewed. Except for a bowl and spoon soaking in the sink it was perfectly tidy. She wondered if she'd ever be able to live with anyone again, spar with them about cleaning or noise or food.

When she finished the sandwich she was still hungry. She opened the refrigerator, but everything seemed to require too much preparation. She sat at the counter sipping a beer. When it was empty she checked her messages. There were two from her mom, the first one short, "just seeing how you are." The second one was more elaborate. "I hope you're not wearing sandals, no one knows what's in the soil, and did you get those gloves I sent you? Is the air purifier running? Do you need a new filter? Oh, that's another thing. I've been reading about the real estate business, and I think now is a terrible time to get into it what with all the law suits and the confusion, and I heard most people's titles flooded, so how is anyone going to know who owns anything? Did you go online and buy a taser like I told you? I hear there are no cops at all and looters are still roaming around the city, and a young girl like you really needs. . ."

She erased the messages, and stared at the phone for a while. Then she found her father's number in her address book and dialed. The phone rang eight times before the answering machine picked up. She listened to his message and then hung up. He never returned calls. He was a busy man. She thought about calling her sister, but couldn't remember her new number, so instead she took out another beer and sipped on it until it was time to go to bed.

The next morning Melissa was the coldest she'd been in New Orleans. It took awhile, but she finally found her beige, thrift store coat and walked into work late. She wound her way to the back and settled in at her desk. She kept her coat on as she picked up the phone.

"Melissa," said Donna's deep voice. She was wearing a matching mauve jacket and skirt with a string of pearls choking her neck. "What is that you're wearing?"

Melissa looked down. "An overcoat."

Donna wrinkled out a smile. "I can see that, sweetie. It just looks very. . ." she paused, trying to find the right word, "it's very different." She looked at Melissa and sighed. "I have a new rental for you, a six-plex near

Gentilly. The downstairs hasn't been gutted, so you'll need to wear a mask and gloves," she said. She placed the file on Melissa's desk and shook her shoulder encouragingly. "Let me know how it looks."

The block was empty, so it was easy to find a parking space. Melissa gazed down the street and sighed. It looked like the backdrop to a Western shoot-out scene at high noon, bits of fiberglass insulation blowing like tumbleweeds across empty, brown lawns, windows boarded up, people having long since gotten the hell out of Dodge. Only here it had been high noon for months. The only evidence anyone had been back since the storm was piles of debris outside some homes – molded, broken drywall, diaries and collections of letters swollen stuck in their boxes, waterlogged pieces of furniture, pathetic-looking objects that had once been the backdrop to someone's life. The houses all had a dark brown stripe across them where the water had settled and stayed for weeks. Shrubs were covered in what looked like black tar, and flooded cars were fogged white at the windows, like they'd been dipped in salt. There was not another human in view, and Melissa felt like she'd reached the edge of the world, the mythical place where sailors thought you'd fall off the earth, the place where our reality ended and something unknown began. Or perhaps, Melissa thought, looking at the desolate block, there was just nothingness. Perhaps there was water, deconstruction, sorrow, and then nothing at all. An empty block with fiberglass tumbleweeds blowing past salt-dipped cars.

She fitted a gray painting mask over face and slipped on a pair of latex gloves. She grabbed her file and walked toward the house. It was ugly, a two-story brick slab with cramped, aluminum windows. As Melissa ascended the steps, she could smell something rank, like sauerkraut, from the open apartments downstairs.

There were three units up, and according to Donna, all of them were vacant. Melissa knocked on the leftmost door as a formality.

"Hello?" she called letting herself in.

This neighborhood didn't have electricity yet, and the windows were covered with sheets, so Melissa unzipped her purse and removed a small flashlight. The tiny beam danced around the room revealing a bright green carpet and a few forgettable pieces of furniture. She walked into the next room and it was bare except for a blanket and pillows on the floor. There were some empty tin cans nearby.

Suddenly Melissa thought she heard something further down the apartment. She pointed her flashlight into the next room, but the beam was lost in the endless darkness. There was another sound, something like a thud.

“Hello? Is anybody here?” she called out.

There was the sound of something falling down, then a toilet flushing. A door opened somewhere in the darkness and Melissa heard the steady tread of footsteps, softened by the carpet, coming toward her.

Not knowing what else to do, she ran to the front door and opened it wide, throwing sunlight into the darkness and revealing a large woman coming into the front room. She wagged her finger at Melissa.

“Who the hell you think you are?”

Melissa stammered, “I’m a real estate agent. I’m here to rent out this house.”

“This house already is rented.”

“Does the owner know you’re here?”

“He should. I been here fifteen years,” the woman answered. “He wanna’ try to raise my rent, he can go to hell. I stay right here. I don’t care about no mold. I don’t care I got no electricity or hot water. This my home.

Melissa was getting a headache, and the closer the woman came the more she was overcome by the smell of body odor and cigarettes. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Miss Ruby Jackson, and what may I ask is yours?”

Melissa told her, reaching out to give her a business card. Miss Ruby tore it out of her hand. “You can’t just walk into people’s homes,” she said. “You’re lucky I didn’t have my gun. I’d be well within my rights to shoot to defend.” She mumbled something and put the card in her pocket. “I shot out someone’s tires the other day who parked in my spot.”

Melissa thought of the empty street and wondered why a parking spot was necessary. “I’ll talk to the owner and find out what’s going on. Are there people in any of the other units?”

“Well no,” Miss Ruby said quietly. “But depending on my mood, sometimes I stay there, so I’d appreciate a little notice if you’re going to show them.”

Melissa wondered how she was supposed to give this woman notice if she didn’t have a phone. She was outside now, and Miss Ruby suddenly stopped and looked at Melissa’s coat. She touched it gingerly.

“Girl, what you wearing? What is this, some kind a joke? You telling me you a real estate agent and you’re dressed like some street bum in some tattered hand me down?”

Melissa looked at her coat. It wasn't tattered. Some orange lining was coming out near the waist, but it certainly wasn't tattered.

Miss Ruby started laughing. "Oh Lord! I guess everyone hurting lately, huh baby?"

Melissa opened her mouth to defend her coat, but nothing came out. She started walking toward the other apartments, trying to think of something to say, but all she could come up with was, "It's from New York."

As Melissa walked toward her car, a large, beige Humvee motored down the street. There were three National Guardsmen in it, all wearing sunglasses and with heavy, semi-automatics slung over their shoulders. On the front of their jeep, tied like some kind of mascot, was a flooded teddy bear. Melissa stared at it, trying to determine the significance. The guardsmen nodded at her.

When she got back to the office, she checked her messages. One of the younger agents across the street, Angelina, sold something to an out of town investor, and she wondered if Melissa would like to manage the rentals. Melissa stuffed a little stack of business cards in her pocket. She was trying to get the hang of networking, so every time she went to the sales office, she tried to introduce herself to as many agents as possible. This call itself was the result of a previous visit passing out business cards.

It was cold outside, but Melissa decided to leave her coat behind. Angelina was waiting at the front. She offered her hand in a kind of flaccid handshake and led Melissa to her desk.

There were a few tidy piles in one corner and a mug that said "Hawaii Open 2003." As Angelina began explaining the ins and outs of her client's property and personality, Melissa's mind began to wander. She pictured Angelina in khaki peddle pushers and a Limited tank top playing a few rounds in Hawaii with all the wealthy families of New Orleans. Melissa had always resented rich kids, but Angelina didn't act spoiled. She seemed bright, capable. Melissa wondered if she'd gone to finishing school, been taught the proper way to walk and to eat a banana. And suddenly Melissa wished she had been born in the South to privileged, Uptown parents, that she'd had a coming out ball.

When they were finished, Angelina slipped on a fitted, gray coat and a silk scarf. It was the kind of boring outfit Melissa would never think to buy, but it looked so good on Angelina.

Angelina gave her another flaccid handshake. "Let me know if you need anything. This is a very important client to me."

Over the weekend Melissa went online to price coats. She was disgusted. A good pea coat started at \$125 and the styles went up from there. If she were smart, she would have bought a coat in March or April when everyone was trying to get rid of their stock, but then she was still in school, and had no intentions of wearing anything other than her quilted coat. All her friends thought it was a great find.

Of course she was in a different culture, and what was important to her friends in college wasn't necessarily important to the people in her office. If she wanted to be recognized as a professional, there were certain sacrifices she would have to make. She just couldn't stomach it yet.

The whole weekend the weather stayed wet, and on Monday the paper said it was going to reach a record low—30 degrees.

When she got in the office, the dry heat of the furnace felt wonderful. She sat there for a moment taking off her hat and rubbing her hands.

"Did you hear about the neighborhood group in Onzaga?" The secretary looked pleased, her coral lips pursed excitedly.

"No," Melissa said. "Where's Onzaga?"

"Out to the east. Anyway, they've started painting their own street signs and stop signs, because the city won't do it, or can't do it, or whatever. It just shows you what it's going to come down to. If the city can't get their act together, people will take things into their own hands."

"Hmm," Melissa said.

"I have a present for you," the secretary said, lips still pressed together with self satisfaction. "Somebody left this here last week, and I decided if they didn't come for it after the weekend, then I'd give it away." She pulled out a fitted, gray wool coat. It had matching satin lining and black buttons that gleamed down the center.

Melissa took it gently and looked it over. It was London Fog, one of the more expensive coats she'd seen online.

"Try it on," the secretary said. "I think you're one of the only people it will fit. Maybe you and Trish, but she's already got a coat."

Melissa slid into it, feeling the heavy weight of the wool and the smoothness of the lining on her arms. She fastened the shining buttons. It fit perfectly.

"Take it," she said simply.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not going to deal with it anymore. Take it. It's yours."

Melissa walked back to her desk feeling like the universe had blessed her. It was still a little cold in her part of the office, so she kept the coat on, looking down at it periodically to admire how smooth it looked. One of the older agents, Millie, passed by on her way to the bathroom, and she stopped by Melissa's desk.

"Hello," she said. "I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Millie and. . ."

Melissa laughed. "Millie, I know who you are."

Her face went red. "Melissa! I'm sorry, dear. I didn't recognize you in that coat. You look wonderful!"

Melissa wasn't sure if that was a compliment.

Aside from the coat, though, it was a hard day. The electricity went off in one section of town, and the tenants called saying they wanted to deduct that day from the rent. Then an elderly-sounding man called up saying he had no gas pressure and no hot water. Melissa called the energy company, and they said there was no gas service in that area.

"But he's had it all along," Melissa argued.

"I don't know how," the customer service rep said. "He shouldn't have."

By the end of the day, Melissa had a headache. She said goodbye to everyone in the office, basking in the light of their admiration for her coat one more time, and then she went to her friend Gina's house.

Before the storm, Melissa and Gina had worked together at the Gumbo Shack. Now it was just Gina and a skeleton crew serving pleased-looking volunteers and testy locals.

"How's the real estate world?" Gina asked.

"It's a living."

"Nice coat. What happened to that beige one you were telling me about?"

"It's a long story. No one at work liked it." She leaned over the edge of Gina's couch and pulled out a double-decker liquor cart on wheels. Gina kept it stocked for company. Melissa chose Southern Comfort and poured herself a few fingerfuls. She emptied the glass and slammed it on the cart.

Gina laughed. "I have ice, you know."

"I'm not going to linger."

Gina grabbed a pack of cigarettes. "You want one?"

"I quit."

"During the evacuation? Hell of a time."

Melissa shrugged. "It actually wasn't that bad because I was out of the habit. I mean, I was out of every habit. Everything was all out of whack, so it worked out."

"Well, I applaud you," Gina said. She flicked a lighter over the end of her cigarette until it glowed, then she leaned back into the couch. "I was surprised you came back, actually."

"Why? I had a good apartment, and my landlady wasn't going to raise the rent."

"Yeah, but you move down here by yourself, no friends or family, and a couple months later the biggest hurricane ever hits. I'd stay the hell away!"

Melissa shrugged. "If you knew my family, you'd understand why it's so easy for me to move away. They're much more endearing from a distance. Besides, there's always something going on here. It keeps me from thinking about things too much."

"What things?"

"What I'm going to do with my life, why I can never meet any interesting guys, why everything is always so boring. You know, all the big questions of life."

"I have a hard time believing things are more boring in New York than here."

"I'm not talking about how many clubs there are or what you can do over the weekend. I'm talking about life in general. At least here things are being challenged, in a way. Life, and order, and. . . civilization is being reinvented here. It's like we're starting from scratch."

"No, some things never change."

"Like what?"

Gina laughed. "Like your coat. No part of our city is civilized right now, but yet we're still supposed to act like it is, look professional."

"But that's culture, not civilization."

"I thought they were the same thing?"

Melissa shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows."

The smoke from Gina's cigarette filled the room. It smelled rich, almost sweet. Melissa leaned over the liquor cart and picked out another drink. Rain vodka this time.

Gina was quiet for a moment, then she tapped her cigarette on the ashtray. "I saw a bunch of college kids in the Lower Nine the other day. They'd just gutted a house, and they were posing in front of a camera. I could

picture them showing it to their friends back home, bragging about how they made a difference.” Gina tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “I think it’s great they’re helping out, we need every single person we can get, but . . . I guess now I know how third world countries feel when the Peace Corps comes to town. It’s needed, but that doesn’t mean it’s not annoying.”

Gina smoked and Melissa sipped while they listened to the traffic outside, then Gina crushed her cigarette and said, “You hear about that guy who solved the garbage problem in Onzaga?”

“I heard something about Onzaga.”

“He was so sick of fruit flies and rats that he single handedly – he’s 82, mind you—he single handedly moves fifty-some bags of garbage away from the front of his house, and he puts it in the middle of the street. Right in the middle so it’s blocking traffic. Of course everyone calls the city, and low and behold, the Army Corps of Engineers sweeps down and picks it up. In like an hour and a half. Probably the fastest recorded Corps response on anything. So now everyone in Onzaga’s throwing bags of trash in the middle of the street because it’s the only way to get it picked up. You can hardly drive down the streets without running into it. I almost spun out.”

“Jesus,” Melissa said. “Desperate times call for desperate measures, but it freaks me out.”

Gina was looking out the window. “I told you I was here after the storm?”

Gina had told her a couple times.

“Everyone had guns. I was carrying one my neighbor lent me. It doesn’t seem real now. He was this ex-marine, and I always thought he was crazy, but once all hell broke loose, I went right to his house and asked to borrow a gun. I felt like I was in the Wild West. You’d hear gun shots at night, and during the day young guys would walk down the street, four or five abreast with handguns, shotguns, bats, whatever. I was trying to use a pay phone at the grocery store, and of course everyone’s in there looting. Some people are just quietly stealing canned food to get through it, and other people are trashing the place just because they can. Anyway, this guy came up to me with this crazy look in his eyes, so I pulled out my gun and pointed it at him, and he didn’t say a word; he just turned around and left. It was weird. I don’t think I actually could have pulled the trigger if I had to. I had no idea how to use the thing. After that was when I saw the body on the street, and I decided to leave whether my parents were going or not.”

“You told me about that. The blue body Uptown, right?”

Gina nodded. "Krishna."

"That's a crazy story," Melissa said.

"Everyone was just going about their business, walking by this guy or woman or whatever. This human being had died and turned blue and was propped up against a stop sign at an intersection, and everyone's just walking by like it's a dead squirrel. It was so freaky. I had to leave after that. I found the National Guard and told them we were ready."

"And they airlifted you to Kentucky," Melissa finished. She poured herself another glass of vodka but couldn't think of anything else to say.

As Melissa walked back to her car, she felt something in the pocket of her coat. It was a business card with the words "Tania Tetlow Jackson Square Artist" written in raised ink. There was a phone number. Melissa wondered. Could this be Tania's coat? But why would she have just one card in it? Probably the coat's previous owner had visited Jackson Square, talked to one of the artists, and put Tania's card in her pocket. Chances were incredibly slim, Melissa decided, that the owner of the coat and the name on the card were the same person.

The cold front continued with temperatures never rising above the low forties. Melissa wore her coat and was amazed at the level of respect it commanded. One day she knocked on the door of a particularly temperamental tenant to ask about the rent. She was expecting the usual string of curses, but the woman was reserved. She looked at Melissa and said, "You must be that real estate lady. Hold on." And she brought a check just like that.

Melissa remembered how professional the agent across the street, Angelina, had looked, so she went to a mall and bought a silk scarf. She tied it around her neck the way Angelina had done, and she put on eye shadow and lipstick. When she came into work, she was showered with compliments.

"You're really looking nice lately," the secretary said, her dappled breasts poking out cheerfully from a low-cut pink sweater.

Later that day Donna pulled up a chair at Melissa's desk. She was wearing a gray pencil skirt. Her feet were stuffed into a pair of narrow stiletto heels, toes crunched together so the tip of the shoe could form the narrow point that was so fashionable.

"Melissa," she said in her deep voice, "I just wanted you to know, I really think you're fitting in well here. You're learning more every day, and your clients seem happy. Someone's coming in tomorrow who owns a couple

amazing complexes in the French Quarter. Why don't you come with me? I want you to meet her."

Melissa leaned forward. "Of course," she said.

Donna set the time and walked away, her stilettos clack, clacking on the hardwood floor as she left.

That night, Melissa celebrated by taking herself out to a nice dinner. She'd invited Gina, but she couldn't get off work, so Melissa put on a black dress and went by herself. She parked just outside the Quarter and walked to a Creole place that had been highly recommended by the secretary. The service was so good it was almost overbearing. The manager checked on her table three times, each time giving her a concerned look as he asked, "Everything okay over here? You're doing alright then?"

Hadn't he ever seen a girl eat by herself? No matter. Melissa lingered for almost three hours over a carafe of wine, turtle soup, oysters, red fish with a shrimp and crawfish cream sauce, and bananas foster for dessert. She felt warm and uncomfortably full as she walked back through the Quarter. In Jackson Square she ignored the tarot card readers and gave only passing glances to the artists, until she saw something.

A young woman, about Melissa's size, was huddled near a wall of mediocre paintings wearing nothing but a sweater and a fleece blanket wrapped around her like a shawl. She had large, gray eyes that stared ahead without blinking.

Melissa walked closer to see if she had her name displayed somewhere, but she didn't. She walked back to her car.

She took out the card and stared at it, the light beige background, the name written in brown font with the number in a decorative cursive. The paper felt heavy against Melissa's fingers. She wondered how much it cost to print. Where was Tania? Was she making any money? Was she freezing? Somewhere the coat's owner was in the cold without her coat. However much Melissa was enjoying the coat, someone out there was missing it just as much, an equal and opposite reaction. Melissa thought she'd gotten away with something, but now she reminded herself that you always get what you pay for.

The next day at work she dialed Tania's number. A woman with a strained voice answered.

"This may sound strange, but I was wondering if you lost a jacket recently." Melissa specifically said "jacket" instead of "coat."

“Yes, I did,” Tania said right away. “It was actually stolen out of my car a couple years ago. Why, did you find it?”

Melissa tried to process this. “Do you remember what size it was?”

“Eighteen. It was one of those bright yellow raincoats.”

Melissa relaxed. “This is not it. What I found was a size six wool coat. Your card was in it, so that’s why I thought to call. Sorry to bother you.”

Melissa was ecstatic. She could wear the coat without guilt. She put it on after lunch when she and Donna drove down to the French Quarter to meet her first luxury client.

They rode in Donna’s Saab, and the heated, leather seats amazed Melissa.

“I didn’t know there was such a thing,” she said.

“Don’t say that,” Donna said. “It sounds so pathetic.”

Melissa looked out the window without saying a word, until they passed the Superdome, and Donna broke the silence.

“I hope we don’t bore you today. This client and I have a lot in common.”

“How so?”

“Well, we’re both old. No, you don’t need to say anything. We’re both old, we both have very discriminating taste, and we’re both addicted to botox. We’ll probably be talking about it the whole time.”

“You guys don’t need that. You look fine.”

“I look fine because of the botox. No, you can’t argue with me on this,” Donna smiled. “You’re still young and beautiful, so you won’t understand. But it’s religion itself to women my age. So, please, don’t say a thing about botox!”

Melissa laughed and glanced over at Donna. She looked different outside the office. Her face was almost relaxed and her lips much less puckered.

“I wish I could tell you the way you look isn’t important in this world, but unfortunately it is, especially if you’re a woman.”

Melissa tried to think of a response.

Donna continued. “That’s why I had to put my foot down right away with that whole Katrina couture thing.”

Melissa tilted her head.

“Right after the storm everyone was walking into the office with greasy hair and jeans saying they couldn’t dress up because their clothes were ruined or their showers didn’t work. I put up with it for about two weeks and

then I told them, 'Buy some new clothes and go take a shower at a hotel.'" Donna adjusted the heat level on the seats. "I'm not going to have a bunch of riff raff representing me. People said I was being too hard, but it was for everyone's good. We have to do what works. When everyone else is breaking down, that's when you've got to follow the rules by the book. That's when you can shine." She turned to Melissa. "Do you think I got this position by trying to get away with things?"

Melissa thought the question was rhetorical.

"I'm serious." Donna's head was still turned away from the road. "Do you think I could afford to not follow the rules working in a company where the whole corporate office is men?"

Melissa looked nervously at the road. "Of course not."

"Exactly." Donna stared back ahead and sighed. "I know what it takes for a girl to get ahead. People complain, but I've got three top producers, all women, who started out looking like deer in the headlights. You don't pay a personal trainer to take it easy on you." She thought about that for a moment, then, "I just hope we don't bore you to death."

They parked in one of the buildings off street parking spaces, a luxury in the Quarter, and Donna buzzed the client.

She was an older woman from California, in her seventies and remarkably well-preserved. She welcomed them into her impeccably designed apartment, a little unit she kept vacant for her numerous visits. As they walked past her, Melissa smelled a subtle fragrance like jasmine. She wondered if it was perfume or if the woman just exuded pleasant smells. The woman reached out a bony, almost translucent hand to Melissa, and then she kissed Donna on the cheek.

"So good to see you, dear," she said. She offered them both a glass of mineral water. "Please, take off your coats and make yourselves comfortable."

As Melissa took off her coat, the woman stared at her.

"Is something the matter?" Donna asked.

"I had a coat just like that," the woman said. "I misplaced it the last time I was in town."

A wave of cold panic gripped Melissa. She tried to fold up the coat, but it was too late. The woman reached for it.

"Is that a London Fog?" she said, taking it in her bony, bejeweled hands. "It is. And a size six. This is exactly the same coat I lost. In fact, I think I left it behind at your office. Where did you get this?"

Donna was looking at Melissa with a horrified expression, her angular nose uplifted, on the scent of something dreadful.

"The secretary at our office," Melissa whispered. "She didn't know who's it was. She told me. . ."

"I'm *sooo* sorry," Donna interjected. "We had no idea it was yours. You can have it right back of course."

The woman raised her translucent hand. "Thank you, Donna, but that won't be necessary. I bought another one. Besides, I think this young lady needs it more than me."

Melissa's face went red. So she was a needy young lady without a name. Not exactly the impression she wanted to make. The rest of the meeting she hardly said a word, letting Donna and the old woman exchange thoughts on politics, estate planning and men. When they were finished, Melissa gave a weak smile and said, "It was so nice to meet you."

"You too, darling," the woman said. "Keep your chin up."

Melissa was mortified. She and Donna hardly spoke on the ride back. Melissa could picture the woman calling Donna and saying, "That poor young girl you brought over, she's not going to be in charge of my apartments is she? She'd be so depressing."

At the end of the day she put her coat around her shoulders and walked toward the door. The secretary stopped her, and Melissa was afraid she was going to say something about the incident.

"Have I told you about my neighbor? The woman with the trash?"

Melissa shook her head without interest.

"You heard about the people in Onzaga right?"

"They were throwing their trash in the middle of the street," Melissa said.

"Right. They were throwing it in the middle of the street, and because it was blocking traffic, it got picked up."

"Hmm." Melissa started for the door.

"Wait," the secretary said. "So my neighbor hears about this, right? And she says to me, 'I'm tired of flies too. If that's the only way to get stuff done, then that's what we've got to do.' Now this is a petite woman, sixty-some years old with little arms and an office job all her life, you know? But she takes all the trash and construction debris, including piles of asbestos roofing tiles, and she throws it in the middle of the street."

“Well, the roofing tiles are the exact same color as the street, and she no sooner finishes dragging all this stuff over there, when this woman comes speeding down the street in a minivan, and of course she doesn’t see the trash.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“So she screams at the driver who slams on the brakes and completely loses control. She swerves into one of the cars, not mine luckily, but another neighbor’s.”

“Was she okay?”

“Scared, but I guess she was fine. My neighbor was petrified. I came out when I heard the noise, and she was white as an oyster shell. The cops came and took everyone’s insurance information and blocked off the street while they all put the trash back on the sidewalk.

When they left, my neighbor went back in front of her house and cried by the garbage pile. I went over there for like a half an hour, but finally I had to go back inside. Periodically I’d look out my window, and she was still out there. Can you imagine how she would have felt if that woman had gotten hurt?”

“That’s terrible,” Melissa said. She buttoned up her coat and went outside. As she walked to her car, she thought she felt a warm wave in the breeze. Maybe the cold spell was ending. If it warmed up just a little, then Melissa could wear a jacket and not bother with an overcoat. Jackets cost much less, just forty bucks online. She’d buy it and wear it to work. She’d look up at Donna and wait for the shrillness to empty out of her face again like water receding back into the ocean.