

## SONYA

Tamara Pace Thomson

Sonya has been sober almost a year—six months in treatment and six months on her own—and goes to AA meetings at noon or at 7:00 p.m. (sometimes both times) every day. She smokes Camel 100s in hard packs. She and her boyfriend save up the yellow Camel bucks tucked in the cellophane of every pack with Joe Camel's goofy mafia-inspired face and send away for chrome Zippos and mini pocketknives, all with the Camel logo. At nineteen she is the youngest person in AA by almost ten years. Her sponsor, her friends, and her boyfriend are all much older.

Frances is Sonya's sponsor. Frances lives in welfare housing beside the train tracks. When Sonya and her boyfriend visit, Frances brings out her two-pound ashtray shaped like a fly. The fly's wings attach on a hinge to be moved off the body that is shaped like an oblong bowl then moved back to cover up the spent ashes and butts. Frances rocks slightly back and forth in a creaky rocking chair smoking, and she laughs between puffs on her Kool, *I can't ever read the Bible without masturbating—with all the incest and concubines and all*. Sonya laughs, looks at her boyfriend, and raises her eyes. Frances seems old to the girl with her silver hair, folds of fat, and big, outdated glasses, but Frances talks constantly of sex with her lesbian friend and sex with her big, mean retired cop boyfriend who says that lesbians ought to be shot but watches lesbian porn videos that he buys from a kid who works at the gas station who sells them on the sly from under the counter. The kid is saving up money to go to college. The word gets out that he has videos, and men in trucker hats and men in suits and junior high kids all come

in and say, *Are you the kid with the videos?* And he stashes the money in an old *Star Wars* lunch box in his closet.

Sonya taps a Camel on her thumb before lighting it. She read a series of books as a kid—*A Bargain for Frances*, *Bread and Jam for Frances*, and *Best Friends for Frances*—about a badger who likes tea sets and bread and jam and exclusive friends. Sonya never knew if Frances was a girl or a boy. Suddenly she realizes that she must be a girl, since Frances, her masturbating, smoking sponsor from AA, is a girl. In fact, the badger Frances and the AA Frances look a bit alike—small eyes and gray streaks in their hair. Sonya rubs a bulging, wormlike scar on her arm where she sliced through a muscle not very long ago. The muscle still tweaks with pain when she moves it wrong.

*Brandon is getting married*, Sonya says, *to a blond cheerleader who wears a pound of makeup and rides around on a scooter with fake-tan legs and white Keds without socks.*

*That son-of-a-bitch*, Frances blows the smoke out through her teeth. *I wonder if that cheerleader knows he's a pedophile.*

Sonya would never talk in an AA meeting about being raped, but she told Frances. It happened when she was a girl—not yet ten years old—by a high school boy in her neighborhood where all the families were friends and her rapist's little sister was her best friend. Frances supports her in not talking about it. *You don't want to throw your pearls before swine, Sonya.*

Frances herself was molested for years by her stepdad. It seems to Sonya that every woman and half the men she knows in the program have been molested or raped at one time or another. From Frances, she hears stories about bishops and babysitters and house guests and men in prison who had molested her fellow recovering alcoholics. It is practically commonplace. Sonya knows she shouldn't care so much about something that happened so long ago and that seems so unexceptional. She thought maybe it mattered to her because her neighborhood had doctors and lawyers and professors and virtually everyone went to church and professed certain Christian beliefs. All of the kids she

grew up with were now in college. All the talk of the spirit, of following Christ, and of serving the widows and orphans in her neighborhood made the rape more ironic somehow. A stupid thought, she knew.

Sonya chuckles and says, *Maybe I should tell his fiancé that he raped me.* She taps her ash into the open belly of the fly. Her boyfriend walks into the ten-by-eight-foot kitchen. His 501s are fraying at the corner of the pockets. His arms are dark and sinewy and his shoulders from behind look like a brick wall. Sonya feels a surge of recklessness in her blood—like the ice water her friends once shot up when they ran out of cocaine. She doesn't know if it is rage or lunacy that she feels, but she wants her boyfriend to see this, to know this about her. *I should call her,* Sonya says.

*Wouldn't that be brilliant?* Frances rocks back and forth more quickly. *What is her name?*

*Kelly.*

Frances holds her chunky fingers up like a phone to her head and mimics Sonya's voice, *Hi Kelly, did you know that your fiancé raped me when I was a little girl? Good luck on your wedding night.* Frances sneers then throws her head back and guffaws.

*I am going to do it.* Sonya half-jumps off the couch—her own 501s that she dyed in a big canning pot on her mom's stove are Irish green and the fraying cuffs are the color of spring grass. Her boyfriend is leaning his back against the dirty sink. She glances at his bare feet on the linoleum. But she doesn't look at his face. She doesn't need his approval. She grabs the phone off a corner desk. The plastic fills her hand. Her fingers tremble as she dials the number she has known her whole life.

A man answers. She can't tell if it is Brandon or his dad. *Is Kelly there?* The girl tries to quiet the quaver in her voice. There is a vein near her collar bone that feels like it might burst. The blood in her head feels like a fire hose.

*Hello?* Kelly's voice sounds just like Sonya imagined it would. High. Sugary.

*Did you know your fiancé is a pedophile?* Sonya hears herself speak before she thinks the words.

*Oh, really?* Kelly's voice is sharp now—a little lower. *Who is this?*

*Yes. Really. He likes to rape little girls in the stand of scrub oaks behind his house. You should ask him about it.*

*Ha ha, I will ask him . . .* but Sonya hangs up on Kelly before she can say more.

Frances is standing now. Her pudgy hands pressed up against both her cheeks. *Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,* she says.

Sonya is still shaking. She tries to hide it. But the tremble is in her voice, in her knees, in her gut. It feels good, like the movement of the earth when she would stand next to a train roaring past when her veins were full of vodka and her head was full of shrooms. The power and the danger of it.

Her boyfriend lights another Camel for her. He holds up her hand so she can grasp it. Even her lips feel like they are shaking when she lifts the cigarette to take a deep drag. She avoids his eyes. He wraps his fingers around her quivering bicep and his thumb almost imperceptibly strokes one of the many scars still pink and still lined with marks from the stitches.

In the storybook, Frances the badger wants a real china tea set. Her best friend tricks her and buys the last china tea set herself. Frances waits and makes a plan. In the end, Frances tricks her friend into selling her the tea set. Frances jumps rope and makes up rhymes. She is sketched in black and white and the furniture in her house is simple. Frances is clever and patient.

Soon it is time for Sonya's boyfriend to go home. He has not spoken since she called Kelly. He has sat on the sand-colored couch and smoked one Camel after another, cupping the cigarette with his palm by pinching it between his thumb and first finger, listening to Sonya and Frances rant about Brandon and his cheap, fake fiancé.

Sonya walks him out to his truck. There are stars above the apartments and no street lamps. She is calmer but her stomach still churns. It is late spring. She hasn't been hospitalized for cutting on herself since Christmas. She sees a gibbous moon and what must be Mars not far

from the moon. So many nights of her childhood she spent studying the sky on her big front lawn, just down the street from Brandon's house and the scrub oaks where he and his friends had a clubhouse.

Her boyfriend is tall. He smells like coffee and cotton. He lifts his rough hands to her face and pulls it close to his. He looks into her eyes. He says, *I love you, you know. None of this matters. We have each other.* This isn't the first time he has said such things. But tonight his eyes are more blue than they have been before—the sea and its relentless movement seem tangible in the fibers of his eyes. *The sea, the sea,* she thinks, and she imagines him joking back, *The sky, the sky.* This is what she needed. His silent listening and observing. She wanted him to hear and to see. This is all.

Sonya watches him pull out of the dark lot. There is a bony locust tree with low-hanging seed pods that rattle in a thin breeze. She looks up at the red planet. Night is all around her and people watch TV in their small, dank apartments with yellowing linoleum and broken furniture. She feels safe here. There is a coffee can full of stinking cigarette butts next to the sidewalk. Two crooked lawn chairs with a few snapped rubber pieces sticking out crouch on the lawn. The chain-link fence along the back of the apartments is half covered in weeds and vines. Not far from the apartments is the railroad yard, where she and her friends used to drive in their parents' Volkswagens and Beemers to smoke pot and feel the rush of the moving trains. When she was a kid, she could only hear the trains far away when she lay on the grass watching the stars, but here the trains are so close she could walk to them. She waits for the sound of a train. But the tracks are quiet.

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