

## SNAPPING A LINE BY SARAH CARUSO (WOMEN'S FICTION)

*June, a mother, wife, and artist, is on the verge of forty. She develops a relationship with a man that points out the distance that has grown in her own marriage. The story of her emotional collapse and the eventual rediscovery and renovation of self is framed within the context of renovating her home.*

Where there should have been a curved wall, there was just emptiness, wind roaring in my ears. I let go, thumbs up and a gentle push, rushing from the safety of the plane. My body pressed back into his, intimately close, emptiness for miles below, connection and adrenaline. My eyes snapped open. I just needed another minute in that dream, I thought, closing my eyes, trying to pull that moment back to my present. Sex without sex. No climax. Never knowing if the parachute would yank my body to slowing grace.

I was unrested and sore, two hundred feet from my house. We were renting our neighbor's summer home. I lay on a mattress that was too soft, between sheets I would never have picked. Each limb, as I stretched it, remembered how many feet of baseboard I had patched and filled and begun to paint. Each limb asking if the plan was the same for today. Yep. Until it's done.

I missed my own mattress, firm, though with two slight depressions where Ben and I had slept side by side for years.

The house was so close to being home again, I could taste it. Smell it, too. The scent of polyurethane and latex paint had seeped into all of my clothes. My phone chattered along the table by the side of the bed. Moka startled, her head popping up from the pillow of my calf, brown curls hiding her eyes. God, she needed a grooming. She looked like Chewbacca. There was so much to do.

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I picked up my glasses and phone together and slid my fingertip along the screen, wondering who wanted my attention so early in the morning. Bruce. A text from Bruce, my electrician. Well, an electrician, but I felt possessive.

“You got your C/O?”

“No, plumbing inspection hasn't happened yet. Damn.” My belly did a little flip. I'd just jumped out of a plane strapped to his solid body, his bearded face pressed to the side of my head, and I woke to him tucked in my phone, by my bed.

This guy was tricky to figure out, but the best thing to high-wire zoom into my life in a while. He'd finished work on the house last week. There was no reason for him to see me anytime soon, but I wanted to see him again.

My phone vibrated again, and Moka jumped off the bed and out the door. That dog was impossibly weird. Thunder and fireworks didn't phase her a bit, but she'd cower and shake at the sound of food sauteing in a pan, the noise of lips blowing across a beer bottle, and now, a vibrating phone.

“Pony Play was WAY WAY too tame.”

Well, cut to the chase, man.

My amygdala lit up like a brush fire, sparky and sudden. I realized I was wiggling my wedding ring at the same moment I was reorganizing my mind. Last week, at the end of his tenure, Bruce made a crack about spending his off hours perusing kinky sex on the internet. I suggested he look up Pony Play, a fetish where women wore hoof mitts and face masks, and pull men around in sulkies, neighing, and getting wound up. Whatever turns your crank in this big, wide world, I figured, and Bruce had sparked a straight-faced competitive side I hadn't exercised in a while.

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What the hell, Bruce? What were you starting? How should I respond? It was one thing to make an off-the-cuff flirty joke, another to text your customer at seven am to let her know you had spent the evening boning up on her fetish suggestion. So. I wasn't alone in my illicit daydreaming.

I dropped my legs over the edge of the bed, sore legs protesting at being asked to move. I walked across the room, split the cheap slat blinds with the tips of my fingers, and peeked at my own house next door. It was complete, empty, waiting for the final coat of polyurethane to dry on the floor, and a new toilet tank to be delivered, replacing the brand new, leaky one the plumber had put in last week. These were the final two things between my house and the Certificate of Occupancy, the town's permission slip to move back home. I was desperate to move back home, yes, but desperate also to hold onto the adrenaline-fueled vibe surrounding the renovation.

The wood floor was freezing on my bare feet as I walked to the bathroom. Hiking up my cotton nightgown to my hips, I sat to pee and pondered how to reply, looking forward to a game that had barely begun. I've never been adept at strategy.

I stood and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. My morning curls always looked like roving families of field mice had been searching for nesting materials in the night, frizzy straw poking in all directions, waiting to be tamed by the shower. I flipped the light on, took my glasses off, folded them, and lay them carefully along the left side of the sink. Leaning in, I took the daily assessment of life versus skin. The examination entailed an inventory of what time, sun, and more joy than sorrow had done to a face that had been around for just over forty years.

Could be worse. There were plenty of tiny creases around my eyes. A little less plumpness above the lids, a little more below, but no deep pair of worry lines pleating my forehead.

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No harm in replying, I told myself as I went back to the bedroom, leaned back against the pillows, and typed in, "U like it dirty? Naughty boy." and hit 'send' without the pause that would let me second guess.

My heart thumped. I couldn't take that back. What now?

I had just dropped an unframed moment into a pocket belonging to someone I liked very much but didn't know very well.

My real life was tugging. After closing my eyes for one last moment, postponing the world I had built with Ben just a bit longer, I pulled myself into the kitchen. My favorite blue and green bowl was placed neatly next to the Cheerio box, silver repousse teaspoon tipped in the hollow. I knew how the tiny flowers dressing the handle purred against my thumb without touching it. A sweet, daily piece of ritual Ben had done for me every day since we were newlyweds, sixteen years ago. It felt good to have this happen in this rented space, our neighbor's house, same as at home. It reminded me of what home really meant. As I hoped for a reply from Bruce. My horny electrician.

Ben sat at the narrow end of the oval table, swiping through news and email on his tablet, absently eating scrambled eggs before he showered and left for work. Another daily ritual. Two eggs and the news, although the format had changed over the years. Sunlight dipped under the green-sprigged curtains, catching his blonde curls. I leaned over to kiss the top of his head. He seemed not to register the greeting until I turned. He shot his hand out, spanking my bottom. I flinched in irritation, not pain. I wasn't feeling playful towards him this morning.

"I might be late tonight. Don't wait for dinner, Juney" Ben said, not looking up.

"When will you know?"

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“I might go out for a drink after work. Just make enough for me and leave it in the fridge.”

“Kay.” Why was it so irritating, not knowing the plan? Had I always been like that?

Rose came in lugging her backpack, retrieved a thick novel from the kitchen counter, and worked on pulling the zipper around the additional thickness in a bag filled to burst.

“Mom, can you make my lunch?”

I glanced at the clock. 7:28. Ten minutes til her bus. Plenty of time to pour coffee and have a sip before hitting lunch. This quarter, Rose's standard fare was peanut butter and Fluff on whole wheat bread, an apple, a Greek yoghurt, and Goldfish crackers. This would be the only acceptable spread until some mysterious day in the next month or two when all items would become simultaneously and instantly repulsive to a twelve year old, and the lunch bag would come home untouched. It always took three or four days for me to clue in and help Rose figure out the composition of the next perfect meal.

I pulled a loaf of bread and peanut butter out of the cabinet and opened the fridge, pushing aside four bottles of expired salad dressing left by my neighbors that I hadn't gotten to trashing, and located a yoghurt.

Rose grabbed the black and white zebra-striped insulated bag and hefted the overstuffed backpack over her shoulders. I stationed myself by the doorway so Rose couldn't slide past for the day without a quick kiss to the top of her head. When had she gotten so tall? I had to stand on my tip toes to reach the top of her head with my lips. Rose loped out the door to the bus, the weight of the pack bouncing against her hips.

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I listened, tilting my chin slightly to the right, to gauge whether Andrew was awake, and heard the soft swishing noise Lego makes when you sweep your hand through a deep bin. I returned to the bedroom and saw the green blinking light notifying me of a new text.

“Yes, please.”