

Terry Dubow

Soon

Mindy says Gary killed a woman — strangled her with a bungee cord. But I like to think it wasn't like that — that maybe he broke into his neighbors' garages so he could pawn their power tools and lawn mowers to pay for an engagement ring or for a young helpless girl's liver transplant. Gary doesn't say much about his time in prison. He doesn't say much, period. I'm not in love with him. I love Simmons. He's buying a house in Columbus and I'm moving in with him. Soon, I tell Mindy. Soon.

Gary has a tattoo of the Virgin Mary on the inside of his wrist. He's the pizza cook. Our boss Robert calls him a pizza chef. Gary just scratches his moustache when Robert says that. We work at the sort of restaurant that sells \$11 personal pizzas and \$25 salmon fillets with Portobello mushrooms and Gorgonzola cheese. Everything has Gorgonzola. And basil.

So Gary cooks the pizzas, and Mindy is a hostess. I'm the general manager. I keep the place stocked and try to keep the staff in line. They love me because I'm a pussy. That's what Simmons says. I hit him when he says that because I hate that word. He just sends me his smile and raises his eyebrows. Simmons used to pour the drinks, but he moved last month and told me to come with him.

The day the dead man walked in we were the only ones in the place — me, Mindy and Gary. We weren't open yet, but I left the front door

unlocked so the rest of the staff could get in. The dead man walked in fast like he was late for work.

Gary was getting the wood stove ready at the time, tossing toaster-sized logs on top of the snapping fire. He had his sleeves rolled up and he kept staring into the flames like he was suspicious. Mindy and I were sitting on bar stools. She kicked my shin to get me to stop staring at Gary's arms and pay attention to the man who was standing in front of me. Psst, she said. Dead man front and center.

He wore jeans and a parka and had a pinched face like he'd spent the day smelling and was done. He had a pony tail and oily hair too. I could tell why Mindy would think he looked dead. The skin on his face was tight and sunken like a corpse. And he smelled like shit. He stood still in front of us, a little like a frightened child, with his head down.

Can I help you, I said. I tried to say it nice and not annoyed because I could tell that Mindy was staring at him. She was rude that way.

Gary work here?

Umm, what do you need, sir? I stood up and tried to smile. It's my job to make sure the drunks, whores and degenerates who hang out on our street stay out of the place. The owner Robert wants to hire a bald bouncer with muscles like shotputs to do the job, but I tell him I can take care of it. They're just people, I tell Robert.

I was told Gary works here, the dead man said. I need to see Gary.

I was about to tell him no. I was about to say, There's no one named Gary here, but just then the dead man's eyes changed. They spread wide.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Gary wave the dead man back to the kitchen. Gary nodded at me that it was okay.

When the dead man disappeared behind the swinging doors, Mindy said, You've got to be kidding, Alice. You can't let that man back there. He was probably Gary's cellmate for Christ's sake! You're the boss. Do something.

Simmons would have said the same thing. I could hear him.

No, I said. I trust Gary. Why don't you trust anyone?

Trust is for pussies, she said. Do you want to be raped? Cut up? Is that what you want? She stood up and walked to the bar. She downed a shot of the well vodka, waved at me with a twisted smirk and walked out the front door.

Simmons is looking for a double in German Village. He wants to live in one part of the house and rent the other. He got the idea from one of the regular perverts who hangs out at the bar. The guy is a real

estate guy. Simmons says he got rich this way.

Simmons is tall and lanky. Some days he has a beard. Other days he looks clean like a banker. I never can predict. His real name is Nate. Nate Simmons. He has said things to me that no other man has ever said. Like that after seeing his parents fall apart he never wanted to be with anyone until he met me. And then, on the other side, once when he was drunk he started saying that he wanted to do all sorts of things to me. I want to tie you up, he said. I want to bite your thigh, he said. I want to rape you, he said.

So it's complicated.

I stayed on the barstool for a minute or two. I thought about calling Simmons and asking him what I should do, but I knew what he would say and I knew I wouldn't be convinced.

The thing is I'm not weak, and I'm not gullible. That's what people like Simmons and Mindy think. The truth is I'm principled. I believe that people are worth something, and I try to act that way. The human race has given up on itself. That's what I think. I want to be an alien in this world.

I walked around the restaurant for a minute, straightening tablecloths. I saw that Mindy hadn't really left — she was smoking a cigarette right outside the glass door. I waved at her. She sneered back.

Just then the metal doors swung open and out walked the dead man holding the straps of a canvass bag in his hand. He nodded and thanked me as he walked past. I took a peek into the bag and saw a wedge of Gorgonzola. I watched him pass Mindy who stepped away when he got close.

Gary came out and went back to throwing logs into the fire. I walked over to him. He didn't notice me for a minute, so I just watched the Virgin Mary on his wrist glow as she hovered over the fire. When he did look at me, he stood up straight and scratched his sideburn nervously. I think he was waiting to get fired. I stepped close to him, reached around the back of his neck, and pulled him to my lips.