

Penumbra

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Penumbra is the official, refereed, scholarly journal of Union Institute & University's Ph.D. Program in Interdisciplinary Studies. The journal is published at regular intervals and dedicated to challenging traditional academic and creative disciplinary boundaries in the context of social change.

Penumbra's purpose is to promote theoretically informed engagements with concrete issues and problems. The journal publishes socially engaged, innovative, creative and critical scholarship with a focus on ethical and political issues in the humanities, public policy, and leadership. *Penumbra* is a peer-edited and peer-reviewed journal committed to spanning the divide between scholarly and creative production, and to fostering work from graduate students, junior scholars and emerging artists, in addition to more established critical and creative voices.

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Steak and Wine

Kate moved as quickly as she could, lifting food from the cart, placing items onto the belt. Several boxes of macaroni and cheese, because she could fill the bellies of the whole family for less than a dollar and fifty cents. Margarine: poison to a healthy body and she knew it, but butter cost ten times as much. Chips because the kids begged for snacks, and chips were cheaper than fruit. Four frozen pizzas, \$2 each on sale. Two loaves of white bread, a quarter the price of whole grain. Expensive soy formula—the stuff made Matty constipated, but breast milk or dairy milk would kill him. Two gorgeous steaks. A bag of russet potatoes. Asparagus. Sour cream. Cheddar cheese. A bottle of wine.

The baby was in his carrier, screaming, as usual. His tummy hurt. His tummy always hurt. Three year old David had yellow crust under his nose. Kate would never have taken him out like this, but there was no food in the house and monthly benefits had been loaded to their EBT card that morning. Their older sister stood at the end of the checkout lane, arms crossed, staring straight ahead.

Kate's stomach seized as she placed the food where the cashier could scan it. Her husband's birthday was the next day, and she'd wanted to surprise him with a special dinner. She'd eaten nothing but pasta and margarine for days, saving up. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face. He hadn't had a high-end steak in longer than she could remember. She prayed the \$12.62 in her wallet would be enough to pay for the wine after tax. If not, she'd have to put it back. The checking account had been overdrawn so long

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the bank closed the account and every credit card they had was over the limit and behind in the payments.

The cashier gave her the total and she handed him the bright orange benefits card and cash for the wine, giving thanks that it was only \$12.44. Hopefully the gas in the tank would be enough to last until payday.

Behind her, a woman snorted loud enough for her to hear: "Oh, nice. She's buying steak and alcohol with her food stamps, and I'm scraping together enough to pay for ground beef."

"Maybe she should have another baby so she can get more money from the state," the woman continued. "Then she'd have enough to buy some tissues to wipe her kid's nose."

§§

Freddie's hand slid up her thigh so slowly she'd barely noticed until his fingertips slipped under the hem of her short denim skirt.

"Stop," Kate said.

His kisses trailed down her neck and back up to her ear. "I want you so bad."

Her heart fluttered against the cage of her ribs. Her belly was fire. She wanted him, too, but she'd never been one to let her feelings run away with her. She pushed his hand away and scooted away from him so that her back was pressed against the passenger door of his Ford truck. "We agreed," she said. "Not yet. Babies and college don't go together so well."

He sighed, leaned back, and pulled her leg up into his lap.

"Did you tell your parents?"

"That you got accepted too? Yeah. I think they're worried you'll distract me."

He grinned, all white teeth and dimples. "That's my plan."

"Beast."

"You won't even need your degree," he said. "Why would anyone want to be a teacher when they're married to a successful architect? I'll be making a quarter of a million dollars a year. You'll be ordering the nanny around and getting pedicures."

She laughed. "A nanny, eh? How many heirs do you think I'm going to produce for you, great one?"

"Three," he said.

"You've given this some thought," she said.

"Two boys who will work with me in the family firm, and a little girl who I'm going to spoil into a rotten brat."

"Hey! Girls can work in the family firm."

"Not my girl. She's going to be a horrible little princess who loves her daddy more than anyone else in the world forever and ever."

She rolled her eyes. “Sounds great.”

“It will be. You’ll see. I’m going to give you the world.”

She believed him.

§§

The suit had just about maxed out their credit card, but they agreed it was crucial he make a great first impression. Suit or not, whatever he’d said in that interview worked. He was the youngest architect on staff at the city’s largest firm. He’d told her how nervous he’d been at the interview. None of those nerves were present just then as he moved from the bedroom to what they described as “the other room” – the kitchen/living area/dining nook – in their 600-square-foot apartment.

Kate set a plate of bacon and eggs with toast on the table. “Breakfast for the conquering hero,” she said.

He kissed her and sat down. “This looks amazing,” he said.

She looked up at him. “I’m so proud of you,” she said.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet. I have a surprise for you,” he said.

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“I’m evil that way,” he said handing her a piece of paper. “Meet me here at 5:30.”

There was an address written on the piece of paper that she did not recognize. “What is this?”

He talked around the bite of eggs he’d stuffed into his mouth. “If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?”

She thought about that address all day, as she took attendance, explained cell respiration to her students, marked assignments.

After school, she attended a mandatory meeting about watching kids for signs of substance abuse. Time seemed to move slowly. The speaker droned on eternally.

Finally, at 5:05 p.m., she drove her rattling red convertible (ignoring the smell of burning oil coming from the engine) to the address he’d given her. She used directions she’d looked up in an atlas in the school library during the lunch hour.

With five minutes to spare, she pulled up to a two-story house with a two-car garage. There was a red ribbon on the front door, and Freddie sat on the front steps, grinning.

She stepped out of the car and stood on the smooth blacktop of the quiet residential street with her mouth hanging open.

“Come and see,” he beckoned.

He held the oak door with the two beveled glass windows open. She stepped inside. A great room melded into the kitchen. It was light and open, spacious and breathtaking. She ran a finger over the smooth, round river rock that outlined the fireplace and chimney. Her heels clicked softly on the hardwood floors.

Standing behind her, Freddie put his hands on her shoulders. “There are four bed-

rooms upstairs. You know, one for us, and one for each of the kids-to-be.” He kissed the top of her head. “Do you like it?”

She turned and sobbed against his chest.

“What’s wrong? We can probably still back out.”

“No!” She managed. “It’s all just so perfect.”

He squeezed her tightly against him. “Well, there is one thing I should tell you.”

He led her through the kitchen to the garage door, and pushed it open. Inside the wide space was a brand new navy blue SUV. “You can’t drive your old beater in a nice neighborhood like this. People will think you’re casing the joint.”

She squealed and raced to sit behind the wheel. “I can’t believe you did this,” she said. “Are you sure we can afford all this?”

“Not only can we afford this,” he said, “but by the time Freddie Jr. arrives, you’ll be able to quit your job and stay home with him.”

§§

The nursery was awash in soft blue light. The baby snored softly in the round white crib.

“God, she’s so beautiful,” Freddie whispered.

“Our perfect little Brooke,” Kate agreed. She smiled at her husband. “I really love you.”

“Good thing, ‘cause you’re stuck with me.”

“I can’t believe I get to spend my days rocking this little angel.”

“Yeah, and wiping her poopy butt, and washing my dirty underwear. It’s a sweet life,” he teased.

“It really is. Thank you for giving me this life.”

He kissed her then, and led her out of the baby’s room.

§§

Kate sat on the edge of the bathtub, grinning like a fool. She could hear Brooke jumping on the bed and singing the ABC song on the other side of the door. After more than a year of trying, she’d almost given up hope that a second baby would come, but the three little sticks on the counter all showed the same pink plus sign. She couldn’t wait to think of an extra special way to tell Freddie. He’d be over-the-moon.

She counted in her head. The baby should come before Christmas. Two little ones with gifts under the tree that year.

§§

Their third child, Matthew, was born with Phenylketonuria, a metabolic issue. “We’ll have to be very careful about his diet,” the doctor said.

Freddie stroked his infant son's head. It seemed the poor baby hadn't had a moment's peace in his two and a half weeks on this earth. The tests and procedures were endless. The baby never seemed to stop crying. "Our other children never had any issues," he said.

"How old are they?" the doctor asked.

"Two and Five," Kate said.

"Genetic issues can skip all over a family. I suspect they'll be fine. Little Matthew, here, is going to be fine, too. We're just going to have to tread carefully with him."

Kate cradled her newborn son against her chest and prayed for him to be well.

§§

"How could they cut your hours? I thought you were supposed to be a partner by now," Kate said.

Freddie set the pan down hard on the counter. "What do you want me to do, Kate? The market crashed. No one can get a loan, so no one can buy a house. If no one is buying, no one is building. If no one is building, architects have no work. I'm the low man on the totem pole over there."

She stood, bouncing Matty on her hip, trying to keep him calm. Trying to keep herself calm. "Are you going to lose your job?"

"I don't know," he said.

"We could sell the house," she said. "We don't need such a big place, really."

He looked at her with frustration clear in his features. "No one is buying. This house isn't worth half of what we owe. We're upside down on both cars. We make the payments on all of it, or we go bankrupt."

"If anything happens I could go back to teaching."

"And who would take care of him?" he gestured to the baby. "You can't put him in daycare. He wouldn't last a week."

Kate sank down into her chair. "What are we going to do?"

He turned away and said nothing.

§§

"I got a job," Freddie announced, closing the door behind him and kicking his shoes off before he stepped off the mat.

"Really?" Maybe everything would be OK.

"Yeah. I can stay at the firm four days a week, and bartend at Finnegan's at night."

He brushed past her on the way up the steps. "It's a job, Kate. If I can make enough in a month of pouring drinks to cover the mortgage, maybe my check from the firm will pay for everything else."

"Mama!" Brooke called down. "David's got booger face again!"

At the sound of his sister's shout, baby Matt began to cry. Kate cried, too.

§§

Kate stood with her back ram-rod straight. The cashmere sweater she'd received for Christmas two years ago suddenly felt much too warm. Her feet, on the other hand, turned to ice inside the leather loafers she'd purchased to celebrate her feet returning to their normal size after David was born.

As she walked away from the register, the woman behind her said, "I bet that coat cost more than my whole wardrobe. Nice to know our tax dollars are going to the needy."

How had it come to this? she thought. They'd done everything right. This was the land of opportunity, right?

On her way out she noticed the "now hiring" sign.

The store was open twenty-four hours. Maybe she could get a job working third shift. It would only be minimum wage, and she'd never see her husband, but that's what Americans did, right? They worked.

She climbed into the car she could no longer afford, and drove home, wishing she had never bought any of the nice things they owned. Wishing she'd never quit teaching. Wishing the economy hadn't crashed and cost them everything. Wishing she'd never have to use that horrible bright orange card again.