Armored

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Dot Stram a travaillé pour Armored « depuis plus de huit ans sans qu'un emploi à temps plein lui soit octroyé ». Suivant un régime strict de westerns spaghetti, flics, Urgence 911 et patrouille des autoroutes, les détails de la vie de Dot sont distillés dans le langage de l'argent et enregistrés minutieusement dans son « journal de revenu », « chaque inscription l'air de : 7h 29min x 10,53 $ = approx. 78,97 $. Suceurs armés de pied en cap. Je déteste l'argent ». Pour Dot, l'argent évoque la plénitude de l'amour et la douleur de la perte. Si Armored est avare comme son père radin, l'argent est aussi associé à la générosité de sa mère, ses fêtes outrageusement coûteuses avec sa fille, où « la langue de Dot ne se sentait pas si épaisse » et où « elle ne sentait que de l'amour ». C'est alors en un acte ultime d'amour que Dot planifie son vol à main armée chez Armored.

Dot Stram pulls the makeshift handicapped van off the road into a thicket of trees near the old house. The passenger seat is gone, replaced by a worn but functional wheelchair strapped to the metal stays she welded in herself. Her mother is back at the home now, chatting lightly with a room full of strangers, waiting for the staff to bring her a tray. Today, for the first time, she'd said "It's nice of you to sit here and talk to me so long. Are you married?" Dot, her mother's only child, politely said "no." Now Dot glances up at the house they sold when her father left. "I'd like you to meet my husband, he should be here soon," she can still hear her mother saying. That's it, she thinks, as she locks up the van, parked here because it always has been. Nobody seems to mind.

She gets into her own car parked in the driveway and takes a five dollar bill out of her wallet and tears it into little pieces. As she drives the long ride home, she releases bits of money confetti through the barely cracked window, out onto the highway. It's an old game she played with her mother, when her father was stingy with cash or love. She does it every Tuesday; the middle-of-the-week day she doesn't work; the day that stands between her and full time; the day she visits a mother who now doesn't

recognize her. Yes, she thinks, not long now, as the last bit of money flies into space. For Dot has been planning for the day she will retire.

At home, she settles into the only chair in the room, three yards back from the television set, next to the radio she hasn't played in years. The chair is comfortable, overstuffed, taken from the curb as a neighbor was moving and thought it too ugly to lug. She had brought it up here alone, placed it on the spot where it currently rests. She'd surveyed the single room from her newly staked post and decided it looked cluttered. She'd stacked up the four flimsy chairs which came with the scratched formica table by the kitchenette. Even trade, she'd thought, as she dropped the chairs down by the road where the easy chair had sat. By morning they were gone, and she'd felt pleased: efficient recycling, nothing gone to waste.

She sits in the bartered chair, skewers Spaghettios with her only fork and watches. *Cops. Rescue 911. Highway Patrol.* At 9:45 she writes a few sentences in a spiral notebook. "Income log" it says on the inside cover, written unevenly in Magic Marker. Over the years, each entry goes something like this: "7hrs 29min x $10.53 = approx. $78.97. Armored sucks. I hate money." On Tuesdays and weekends the entries are shorter: "Mom seemed well," "Repaired rear left tire," or "Rained." Today she writes "Mom is gone. Soon." In the back of the notebook is another log. "CASH" it says, in capital letters. But she doesn't write in this today. She brushes her teeth, changes into threadbare pajamas. By 10 she lies in a twin bed facing the wall. By 10:05 she is asleep.

In the morning, Dot buttons the top-most button on her shirt, tucks its tails into her same colored pants, and fastens their hook and zipper with some difficulty. "She's a big girl isn't she," people used to say when she was young, not even posing it as a question. She's not the kind of big that people take much note of now. In fact, she's just the kind of big people don't. She lifts the belt from its designated hook, threads it through its loops and slips on her average-sized shoes. She runs a comb through her timeless haircut. Short, but not too short, parted in the middle. "Just a trim," she says every two months or so as she sits herself down in the hairdresser's chair. She places the comb back in the near empty drawer it shares with a box of band-aids, her toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and a box of tampons she needs less and less. She leaves the house at 6:45, as always, a tattered backpack slung over her shoulder. It is Wednesday.

Midweek. Neither here nor there.

Soon, she's at one of 23 convenience stores within a fifteen minute drive. Today she has chosen a 7-11, on Cramden, near Vine. The groggy morning regulars are pouring their coffees and choosing their sweet pastries. She looks at the floor as she walks, knowing her way by the bottom-most items and baseboards. She hasn't been to this store in a month, but it doesn't affect her ability to navigate. The aisles are narrow, and her arms nearly brush bags of chips and brightly colored popcorn. She withdraws $100, the usual workday morning sum for the last six months or so, from the mini-ATM. She arrives at the coffee station and stands to the side, waiting her turn. Just as the coffee pot cuddles its nest, a man in workman's overalls pushes past her.

By 7:20 she has her regular coffee and a brown bag housing a Boston creme donut and a single napkin. From any of the stores she variably frequents, the drive to work takes 10 to 20 minutes. This means she is always early, pulling into the yard, past the security kiosk and chain link fences. She gathers up her brown bag and coffee, the backpack holding a second brown bag saved from the day before and enclosing her lunch. She shows her ID to the guard who barely glances from his paper, knowing full well it is her, first, as always, to arrive for the 8:30 shift. She signs for her gun and schedule, stows her bag in a locker and sits at one of four cheap tables with chairs, drinking her coffee and eating her donut, looking at one of yesterday's papers.

Dot has worked for Armored for over eight years and she's never been promoted to full time. She has to have Tuesday's off for her mother, whose thin hold on who she is would get even thinner if Dot broke the routine. Until now, that is, when there is no hold at all. The company has been happy to accommodate – but they won't give her an alternate shift, an evening perhaps, or a weekend – though she now knows that no one works here at all after 8 on a Friday night. An alarm system handles the guarding, though on weeknights the counting room staff is here a bit later, and she knows she could do that. After all, her evaluations at Armored have always been "satisfactory." There are check marks next to "punctual" and "reliable," though "takes initiative," and "gets along well with co-workers" are always left unchecked. The "comments" column too is blank. The thinness of her file does not bother her, however. It is the thinness of the paycheck and the benefits package that does.

Dot sips her coffee and sucks on an empty space where a tooth once was.

It had to be pulled by a dental school student when Quikmart pain killers couldn't quell the throb. She sucks on the space when she's thinking. A heist. So obvious a fantasy for a disgruntled armored car employee. It's always the quiet ones, Dot thinks, almost smiling. "Quiet one." "Can you believe this is my child?" her mother used to jokingly ask her friends. "Of course – she can't get a word in edgewise," the friends had said. But that wasn't it. She liked the category "Quiet." Liked to listen. Liked to be left alone.

By 8:10, co-workers arrive. Some car-pool, come in pairs, sit at other tables together. In the winter especially, they come in stomping snow from their feet and chattering, filling the room with the smell of cold air and sweaty wool. They are mostly men, though lately more of them are women. Most of the new ones are also part time. Sometimes one might try to catch Dot's eye and ask "anybody using this?" before taking a chair. But usually the extra chairs around Dot's table just vanish as the room becomes busy, leaving her, eventually, to a table island by herself. She likes to eavesdrop on the clunky hum of this leaking ship. Seems like everyone does nothing but complain.

At 8:30 they mobilize, like an out of shape squadron of traffic cops. Navy blue sleeves and yellow insignia wave through the air as jackets are thrown over navy blue shirts, and bodies shuffle out the door. Shoulders are patted as assigned teams of two or sometimes three part from their other friends. Dot's partner, Zach, a small wiry Black man with three kids and a nice smile, jokes with his buddies longer than most as they walk to the depot. At the last possible moment he jogs, keys jangling, and hoists himself into the driver's seat beside her, smiling the winning smile. "Dot!" he says, like it's an old joke between them, and starts up the engine, throwing the truck into gear. Dot says nothing.

Dot. Her mother would cringe. She had wanted a life of dignity, where people were called by their full names. "Dorothy," she'd always said, pronouncing every syllable. They used to take trips to the town's most expensive department store. She watched her mother talk, at length, to salespeople. Clothing, jewelry, furnishings – all things they simply could not afford. Or maybe not so simply. Her father made plenty of money. He just didn't give it to his wife. The salespeople humored her – there was, after all, a chance. But Dot was embarrassed, her tongue thick with love for her mother and shame.

"Where to?" Zach asks, filing out the lot behind the other trucks. Dot

clears her throat, since she hasn't spoken aloud yet today. "Route G: 7-11, Park and Lincoln." Her tone is flat as a bored bureaucrat's. As Zach drives, he tells her animated stories of the exploits of his children and his wily brother-in-law. Zach is a master monologist. It is what saves him, the other drivers confide, happy they are not the ones stuck with boring old Dot.

When they get to the 7-11, she eases herself out of the passenger side as the truck rolls to a stop. She carries the empty metal replacement canister and the electronic log with her left hand and armpit, her right one free to reach for her gun if she has to. The cashier expects her, nods and stands aside as the manager exchanges the canister for a full one, tagged with the date, time and number of the store, and hands it back to Dot. They swap electronic signatures and he types in a code. She exits, circles around the back of the truck and opens the metal door, sliding the canister in through the chute for which it was designed. She never actually touches the money, nor does she know how much is supposed to be inside. The manager's numbers are checked in the counting room, and tomorrow, the bank confirms them. She grabs another empty canister, shuts the door and climbs back in to her seat. Zach says "off we go," and backs out. Dot says, "Dairy Mart: 4th and Lincoln."

Inspired, Zach talks about his newly vegan daughter. "Most foods'd stay the same if she wasn't also not eating milk. Now what good is that? Depriving yourself of cheese and ice cream and dip. I say, just make what we always make and let her find her way in it. She'll change back to normal sooner or later..." He follows with a list of the foods they make for parties, with variations for specific holidays and seasons. Most of this Dot has heard before, except for the new part about the daughter that won't eat dairy. Dot never adds accounts of her own diet, not even the part about the Boston creme donut that starts her every day. She wonders for a moment if there really is cream in Boston creme. She shrugs. She doesn't really care.

"Why you shrug all the time, Dot?" Zach asks, not expecting an answer. "You talking to someone in your head?" Dot shakes her head vaguely, looks out the windshield as if she's the one who's driving. Zach carries on, unfazed. "You ever try those vinegar and salt flavored chips?" he asks, segueing neatly into an account of the snack foods he likes and dislikes. "I like 'em though I think nobody else does. My wife buys me a bag now and then – nobody else'll touch it. Guess that's part of what I like." This makes him laugh, his good-hearted, self-amused laugh. Dot has some opinions about chips, though she doesn't say so. She likes them plain, but with ridges.

They pull into the Dairy Mart, and Dot repeats her routine. The chipper cashier here is a thirty-something woman with an overbite, who chats with every customer. She yells out "how ya doin today?" to Dot who wordlessly hands her the empty canister and electronic log. She stands, legs firmly planted, hand on her gun facing the row of mid-morning customers. "Alice," as her nametag announces, "New Manager," fumbles a bit with the safe and the canister device. Dot doesn't budge. Once freed, Alice smiles her top-half-smile and looks apologetic, "can't seem to get that darn thing right the first time." Her eyes fish from Dot's unresponsive glaze to the customer first in line – a man in a business suit with a newspaper, who nods and averts his eyes.

Back in the truck, Zach says "I was about to come in and check on you," though Dot knows it would take more than that to alarm him. She was menaced once by a couple of teenage boys with time on their hands, while Zach stayed outside listening to his favorite radio station. Zach has told her, more than once, about his philosophy of crime. "You don't challenge a robber, Dot," he'd say. "Just give 'em what they want and let the police take care of it." He said "po-lease" like it was two words. Dot suspected it was more that Zach hated conflict, avoided confrontation. He had a brother who had been shot under unclear circumstances. It was the one thing he never talked about. She'd overheard it one morning as she sat alone near people who didn't. Besides, drivers are never to leave the truck, even if their partners have guns to their heads. "This is for your own safety, as well as the safety of our customers' assets," the employee handbook explains. "If criminals knew that was all it would take, our runners would be held up at gunpoint on a regular basis." Zach agrees with this policy, and has said so. Dot thinks it warrants higher wages, whether you do it part time or not. She once wrote this down as a "Suggestion" in the box displayed for this purpose in the lunch room, but nothing came of it. She's not even sure if her slip of paper's not still in there, feeding some dust mites.

After three more stops it is time for lunch. On this route, they can loop back to the depot, and eat there. The tables and chairs are all filled with other workers, drivers and their runners, counters from the money room, guards. On these occasions, Dot treats herself to something from the vending machine, consolation for having to eat standing up. Looking through the glass, she notices for the first time the small bags of vinegar and salt chips, the spiral rack nearly full when others are nearly empty. She contemplates the choice, then hits A6: Ruffles, as she always does. Comfort

is scarce at $11 an hour. The machine jams.

On her way home from work, she stops at the 7-11 on First and Grand. She withdraws $50, the afternoon sum she's taken out since January, from the mini-ATM. She buys a can of beer, since it is Wednesday, and a loaf of white bread, a jar of peanut butter, two cans of tuna, Kraft dinner, a large can of Beefaroni and a pint of milk. Whole milk. Her dad had always made her mother mix their milk from powder. It was thin and watery. Milk in a carton is Dot's main luxury. That, and the fact that she never shops at supermarkets, though she knows it's less expensive. Dot hates buying more things at once than she can carry in her arms, hates having to sift through rows and rows of other items just to end up with the same few things she could just as well get here.

Dad. Cheapskate. As her mother's memory reversed, she'd come to talk more fondly of her ex-husband, the disease eating back the years of bitterness and well-deserved contempt. Hard to adjust to. For years Dot saved her paltry earnings, brought home her paycheck and socked away half. She'd wanted to spend it on her mother in one lump sum, a spree the likes of which she'd only dreamed. She'd set a target: $25,000. Dot did not care much for things, and so, she'd saved. If she'd earned what she deserved, her pay going up like it's supposed to, up when you go to full time, up when you're on time every day and never call in sick, she'd have had that much already three years ago. Before her mother'd stopped knowing her name or whether or not she was married. But Armored was stingy, and now she'd lost the need to save. She'd use her savings alright, now that she'd watched it slowly grow into a giant pile of cash, like the piles of cash she saw but did not touch at the end of each workday, bundling in the counting room, deep in the vaults of the Armored building. Like their money and not like their money. Hers was the money of open palms. Theirs, the money of tight fists.

At the cashier, she lines up her items in an orderly fashion and buys a Lotto Scratcher. She slips it into her wallet with the change, leaves without a word. Back at home, she is at ease. She unpacks her bag and puts the cans and boxes in the cupboard. There is always just enough for the next few days. Nothing left over. Nothing left to chance. She pulls the Scratcher from her wallet and files it in a kitchen drawer, unscratched. "RETIREMENT" she's written in slanted block letters on the drawer face. She plans to do her scratching all at once on her last day of work.

People always think that a plain person alone must be sad and lonely.

But this does not do justice to Dot. Dot simply does not want. Sees too clearly what wanting does to other people. She comfortably settles into the only chair and scoops Beefaroni with a white-bread shovel. She sips her beer and watches. *Cops. Rescue 911. Highway Patrol.* At 9:45 she writes a few sentences, "Armored sucks" and "I hate money" among them, and enters $150 minus the total of the day's purchases into the part that says "CASH." She empties her wallet of all bills over $10, puts the money, sorted, on the proper piles in the closet. She brushes her teeth, runs a comb through her hair, and hangs up her uniform. By 10pm she lies down facing the wall and soon is asleep, as usual.

At 6:15, the alarm goes off, and Dot, like yesterday, rises immediately. She shuffles to the bathroom, pees with the door open, stands in the shower long enough to soap her underarms and finally brushes her teeth. She buttons the top-most button on her shirt, and glances at the large round wall clock, reminiscent of the kind that is standard in schools. It is Thursday, and the work week gasps toward Friday.

She leaves the house, her lunch in her backpack, and by 7 is at Hav-a-Snak. Small and cramped and dusty, it smells of ammonia and old ice. The coffee is weak, the donut poor. She withdraws $100. A man in worn out shoes in front of her buys $10 worth of lottery tickets.

Her mother had started buying lottery tickets the day her father left, once a week, telling her daughter about the things they would buy when they won their millions. Her mother who then shopped at thrift stores, looking through racks of stretched sweaters and stained blouses and checking labels, appraising items here with the same air of grace as their trips to department stores before. Dot's tongue had not felt so thick there. There she had felt only love.

She pulls into the yard, earlier than usual, past the security kiosk and chain link fences. She gathers up her brown bag and weak coffee, her backpack, and her jacket. She formally shows her ID to the guard who is not looking at it, and is instead taking a passing interest in a car which has just pulled up. Dot turns to watch as Mike, the man to whom she turns in her gun most afternoons, gets out of the passenger side, saying "5 sharp, Melissa. I mean it," before slamming the door and sauntering up. She signs for her gun and schedule, listening as the man carries on with the morning guard.

"Mike – what the hell you doing here this hour, man? You're not on til 10!"

"Fucking accident last night – three blocks from here!"

"Bad?"

"Naw. Just can't drive it til it's bent back into shape."

"That's a shame."

"No kidding. Can you cover me tomorrow night, my wife works a late shift way the hell across town."

"Not me – I got a reunion to get to in Detroit. We always get the family together for Memorial Day."

"Shit, that's right. Long weekend, nobody's gonna want to work..."

Dot shuffles out of earshot. She stows her lunch in her locker, sits at a cheap table with chairs, and drinks her coffee. She pokes at her missing tooth, dislodging some donut. More co-workers arrive and Mike holds court. "Jump's on too, he can close out the last trucks alone," someone says helpfully. "Don't let the boss hear that... but wouldn't be the first time he covered my ass, you hear what I'm saying?" Squeezing time out of the company is a favorite pastime of her co-workers. Serves them right, she thinks, talking about the management, and sucks the empty space. Tomorrow.

"Route K: Stop-n-Go, 45th and State." Zach's topics today start out with music. "I love a good tune, Dot – I sure do!" he says. "Don't mind, do ya?" he reaches for the radio. Yes, she thinks, I do mind, but shrugs instead. I'd just rather hear you talk, she thinks, but it comes out as words. Zach looks at her for longer than a driving person should, then bursts out laughing a deep, robust laugh. "Dot, man, you kill me. Four years, no nothing from you. And now... words! Conversation! And what you say is 'you talk'..." This makes him laugh some more. He spends the day, in between stops, telling her everything he knows about music. She gives him the addresses on the route.

On her way home from work, she stops at the 7-11 on Fifth and Noble. She goes in to buy a single stick of butter and a Scratcher. She withdraws $50. Ahead of her in the checkout line are teenage girls, three of them, buying chips, soda, and a box of microwave popcorn. They are alternately loud and confidential. The girl at the head of the line wants cigarettes. "ID?" asks the cashier. "I lost my wallet today. Give me a break." "No ID, no cigarettes." The three band together, testifying to the lost wallet and an age well beyond the required 18. The cashier doesn't budge. As if rehearsed, the first two girls turn away from the counter now loaded with their items. The third sweeps her arm like a broom across it, propelling

chips, 2 litre bottles, assorted lighters and collectible cards to the floor. They push through the double doors with the bravado of outlaws leaving a saloon. The cashier turns to Dot, an apology in her eyes. "Teenagers," she says, her head shaking. It's a statement meant to hold the adult world's collected wisdom.

Dot stands by as the cashier calls to a second worker holed up in the back, and other customers bend to pick things up or step across the mess, leaving their own intended purchases behind. Dot bends to pick up a bag of rumpled, ruffled chips. She keeps this bag, holding it ably along with her butter, while she uses the other to help correct the upset. She replaces a bag of Fritos to its rack and wonders if the girls will still have their party. Dot has not been to a party since she was a child, in the days when whole classrooms of children were invited to birthdays as a matter of courtesy. A waste of money, her father had said, so she'd never thrown one of her own. But her mother would organize secret celebrations, day-old cupcakes and punch sipped through fancy straws, relished in a clearing they'd sought in the woods.

Dot retrieves their Fritos and adds it to her items. She eyes a large bottle of Coke that's rolled to rest along a baseboard, contemplating. She thinks better of it, and walks to the cooler in the back to get three 16oz bottles instead. With the three bottles, bags of chips, and butter, she is reaching armload capacity. As she walks back down the aisle, however, she stops again. Vinegar and salt. One more bag joins the collection.

At home, she stores her things in the cabinet, files her Scratcher, and settles in to a meal of Kraft dinner. The transistor radio catches her eye, and she slips it into her already-crowded backpack for tomorrow. She logs the day's hours in her notebook, ending with "Armored: the time has come." Then, *Cops* and *Rescue 911*. She gets up to change the channel. A re-run of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. She takes the extra cash from her wallet and stacks it in the closet, then goes to the kitchen for plastic bags. In neat squares of stacks, she divides her money into manageable bundles. Once a month, she's transferred bundles just like these to a storage space near the old house. What's in here now fits nicely in a canvas bag. She'll need to move quickly tomorrow.

She lies down facing the wall, feeling content. Got to remember to pack up the Scratchers, she thinks, as she drifts off to sleep. In minutes, however, there is a crash what feels like inches from her nose. Alf must be home. Her neighbor Jan is six months pregnant. Big already, she throws his meager

gifts back at him as fast as they are offered. He's been gone for days, gambling, drinking, drugs from what she can make out. Bickering clouds her earliest memories, drifting to wordlessness and her father's eventual departure. He had left a note: "I deserve a better life than this," it read. Dot listens sadly, then gets up to add a line to her notebook. "I hate money," she writes.

At 6:20 the next morning, Dot prepares her things. Satisfied, she slips her feet into her shoes, and grabs her canvas bag and backpack. As she leaves the house, the air buzzes with the special Fridayness of a long weekend. The repo people seem to spring in their steps as they haul the neighbors' furniture out to the waiting truck. They always come so early, Dot thinks, adding insult to injury. Jan and her belly stand bleary on the stoop. It is their fourth couch this year. No money down. There will likely be another.

Dot emerges from the 7-11 on Baldwin with a regular coffee, a brown bagged donut, and a roll of white packaging twine. She puts these in the backpack, along with her lunch, the chips and sodas, transistor radio and a spare t-shirt. Five new 20s line her wallet. By 7:40, she pulls into the yard, gathers up her backpack, canvas bag and coffee, and shows the guard – who barely glances – her ID. They do not exchange hellos. She signs for her gun and schedule: Route B. Yes! she thinks, turning before the inattentive guard could see the missing tooth. She does not stow her backpack or the bag in her locker. She sits at a table alone.

"You going on a trip there Dot?" Zach asks, jogging up behind her as they approach the trucks. He doesn't expect an answer. Dot clears her throat. "Route B: Quikmart, Lincoln and Main." Zach groans. "B? Damn. I thought we'd get out of here early for once. I'm a man with plans." Dot says nothing. "Let me go grab my lunch," he says, resigning himself. Dot stows her heavy backpack and bag behind the seat. When Zach returns, he expounds on his coming long weekend. "I hate just sitting around doing nothing – I have to keep busy, you know?" This soon blends into plans for retirement. Zach is going to build a boat, he says, build it from scratch. Dot thinks: drive. I'm going to drive.

She carries the metal canister with her left hand, her right one free to reach for her gun. The cashier expects her, nods and stands aside as the manager exchanges the empty metal canister for a full one and hands it back. They exchange signatures and Dot pauses, scanning the rack of magazines beside her. A woman with bed-head is flipping through *People*. Dot picks one up and pays, awkwardly sticking the magazine under her

canister-arm along with the electronic log so that her gun-arm is still free to grab it if she has to, and exits the store. She circles around the back of the truck and slides the canister in through the chute. Empty canister, magazine and log in hand, she clambers back into the front. Zach says "what you got there?" Dot stuffs the magazine behind the seat. "I like *Sports Illustrated* myself, or the newspaper," he says. Dot says, "Dairy Mart: 4th and Lincoln."

At the next Dairy Mart, the cashier calls out "how ya doin today?" to Dot who wanders down the magazine rack first, carrying the empty canister. She returns with a copy of *Sports Illustrated* and some AA batteries. She stands, legs firmly planted, hand on her gun and facing the row of mid-morning customers as the cashier fumbles with the safe. Back at the truck, she slides the magazine behind the seat as she hops up. Zach says "She sure is slow, that one. We're already running late."

On this route, they can't loop back to the depot for lunch, so Zach pulls through the Hardee's drive-thru and orders himself a Pepsi. The metallic voice corrects him, "Coke okay?" And he says "sure." Dot is glad.

The afternoon goes slowly. Traffic is heavy already at 3 – people are leaving work early. Dot takes a little longer with everything, from opening doors to walking. By their last stop, one of the 7-11s on Old Mill Highway, they are 45 minutes late. By the time they pull into the yard past the chain-link fences, the security kiosk is vacant. This is not the first time this has happened, though it is against the rules. "Everyone's gone home already but us, dammit," says Zach. That's what happens when you underpay people, Dot thinks. And it is Memorial Day.

At the depot, they are met by the one remaining money room guard, a timid man named Jimmy, called "Jump" because he is easily startled. He's a soft-natured man, and accepts his status as brunt of a good many jokes.

"You all alone Jump?" Zach calls out as he passes through the secured enclosure encasing the back of the truck, ready to be unloaded. Dot follows closely behind, backpack slung over her shoulder.

"Yup, Mike had to leave. But you're last anyhow. Once we're done I can set the alarm and go home myself."

"Traffic's a killer out there. Don't count on getting home too soon," Zach says.

Jump and Zach load up the full cache on its dolly and wheel it towards the vault while Dot stands guard. The thick metal door swings open, revealing a room with sections of sorted and counted bags of money bound

for banks on Tuesday, sealed packages of precounted change bound back to the shops, and uncounted canisters waiting still to be sorted and logged. As the two men slide the day's rows of canisters into place, Dot's hand encircles her gun. She is calm and waiting, but feels an unfamiliar surge of words well up when they turn around to face her. Instead of words, she draws her gun.

Zach doesn't register the drawn barrel pointed towards him. Jump, however, lives up to his name.

"I'm sorry guys, but your work's not over yet," Dot says, in the same flat tone she uses for her other spare words. Jump has recovered enough to look generally confused. Zach's usual smile has slowly drooped to a scowl. "Dot? What? Hey..." Words trip out but don't connect. Dot's however, begin to flow.

"I won't hurt you. I just need you to help me load up the truck. After that you'll be done," she says to Jump, and then "You'll need to drive me for a little while longer," toward Zach.

"This is mighty stupid," Zach says, "you can stop this nonsense right here and we won't tell nobody – right Jump?"

Jump nods. Dot shakes her head.

"I've been working here for eight years, guys, for not enough pay. I am done. Today, we're cashing in my unofficial pension."

Zach hesitates, looks at her like his eyes could make this all a joke. But Dot stands firm. "Load up the cart," she says, and coaxes him with her pointed gun.

Jump begins to load and Zach follows suit. They load up bags of counted money, until the truck is full. As the metal doors latch they turn to face Dot and her trained gun, unsure what to do. She herds them into the guard room where Jump and his co-workers keep a desk and a lot of discarded candy wrappers, and tells Jump to sit down in the chair. She tosses Zach the ball of twine from her backpack. "Tie him up," she says seriously, "but leave his hands in the front."

Zach objects. "C'mon now Dot! This is fucked up." He starts to walk towards her. But Dot has thought about this, that Zach might not take her seriously. She points the gun up and squeezes, showering bits of shoddy ceiling tile down on the desk. Zach flinches, deep down, and stops in his tracks. He drops his eyes, nods, and retraces his step. Dot doesn't like this part, and is glad when Zach starts tying, like she asked, Jump's shaking legs. He wraps the twine around one leg, then the other, each time binding

it to its counterpart on the chair.

"Leave the hands in front?" he asks, his voice sounding tight. Dot replies, "Yeah. Tie each elbow to the chair arms and tie the hands together at the wrist." Zach complies, his lips pressed straight like a sidewalk crack. Dot checks his work, gun still pointed, and makes him tie the chair to the desk. "That'll do," she says, and reaches for her backpack. "You like Fritos?" she asks Jump, shifting to a lighter tone. "Yeah, I guess I do," he quavers, once again confused. "Good," she says, showing her missing tooth, and gets out the slightly crumpled bag the girls had left behind and a bottle of Coke. "Open them for him," she instructs Zach. "Please. Put them where he can get them. And move the phone away."

When this is done, Jump is allowed to demonstrate his ability to use his tethered hands to eat and drink. "You know they'll find you Tuesday," Dot says, as she carefully places the copy of People in front of him, "Sorry about this. But here's so you don't get bored."

As they leave the room, Dot glances back and meets Jump's gaze for a fraction of a second before he awkwardly starts the two-handed turning of pages she expects. She slows her walk and listens for the munch of chips. She doesn't hear anything. He'll get hungry sooner or later, she assures herself, and carries on.

Under the gun, Zach drives. She feeds him directions, but nothing more. Memorial Day traffic slows them often. Zach does not say anything. She wishes he would chatter in his usual way, but knows this is a lot to ask. She thinks of her Tuesday visits with her mother, who still likes to talk. But not to her. Not to her specifically, that is. She accepts Dot's visits like those of a friendly stranger, and prattles on politely about the past.

They pull up near the old house, next to the handicapped van. Dot supervises as Zach unloads the heavy bags, from the truck to the van, truck to the van, until the one is empty and the other full. "Now what, Dot? You gonna shoot me?" he says, though he sounds annoyed and not like he believes she really will. He gives her a placating look. "There's still time to cut this out, you know."

"Give the robber what he wants, remember?" Dot asks, recalling the many times he's said so. "Let the police take care of it." She pulls her spare t-shirt out and tells him to tie it on over his eyes. Zach balks. "This is too much, Dot. I'm not gonna do it."

Dot searches for an angle, something persuasive. "How well do you really know me, Zach?" she asks, and this gives him pause. He seems to

weigh the risks with shoulder blade scales, rocking back and forth. She takes aim at his forehead. The rocking stops. "Not too well, I guess," he says, with a slow, don't-upset-the-crazy-person sort of voice. He ties the t-shirt, blinding himself.

Dot is relieved, though she knows she wouldn't shoot him, and unspools some twine. She hands it to Zach, who touches the air like a child who's lost his orientation towards the donkey. She guides him gently into the wheelchair, as if he were an old man. "Tie your legs to the support there," she tells him. And he does. "Now, put your wrists together and hold them straight out." She binds his hands, much the way she had him tie up Jump, securing the elbows to the armrests.

She gets in on the driver's side and drives, turning frequently, along country roads and small highways. There is traffic almost everywhere, but not much here. It occurs to her that she forgot to get her drawerful of Scratchers. Oh well, she thinks and shrugs. But they shouldn't go to waste. Two dollars, five, sometimes a hundred. There's got to be some winners in there. "When they find you, tell them Jan can have my Scratchers, okay?" she says to Zach, silent beside her. "She's my neighbor." Still, nothing. "She's pregnant," she adds. And that's the end of it.

After several hours of listening to stations he refuses to say that he likes, she stops the van in a thicket of trees. She rigs up the makeshift ramp she built for her mother and coaxes him, guiding in the familiar way, til he's down on soft ground. "I'll call in a couple of days, leave them directions on where to find you," she says, as she awkwardly wheels him into the woods.

Dot finds a clearing. "The best place to have a party!" her mother would have said. She feels content here, almost cheerful, as she ties the wheelchair to a tree. Zach remains stubbornly silent. She sets up the dinner tray, locking it into place across his lap. She pulls out the Coke, the *Sports Illustrated*, the chips. She plugs the new batteries into the transistor radio. "You go ahead and tune it yourself," she says, "since you won't tell me what you like any more."

"Vinegar and salt," Zach says, when she finally removes his blindfold. "You are something else." There is escaped warmth in the comment, and Dot's heart swells. She wishes she'd have brought the fancy straws. She stands there a moment, but soon feels the warmth start to fade. "I'll call. Don't you worry," she says, as she turns to leave. There really isn't anything else to say.

As she walks away her eyes well up in what she thinks must be tears. She

cannot remember the wetness of eyes, though the choke in the throat comes back like a dart. She climbs into the driver's side of the van and collects herself. She imagines how later they will find it, empty, and this thought soothes her. She's ready to let the van go. She'll get her cash from the storage space, and buy another car. She'll keep her money separate from that in the back. She'll drive in random, large, loping circles, spiraling across the continent while they send around an ugly photo, the one from her employee ID most likely. People will squint, "Maybe I've seen her. Hard to say." They'll try to ask her mother about her. But she'll say they are mistaken, she doesn't have a daughter. They'll never catch her.

Dot feels good again as she turns onto the interstate, starting a new routine. She will spend nights in motels, in rooms that are sparse the way she likes it, furnished almost identically. She will buy herself a hot plate and heat up cans of her favorites, Spaghettios and Beefaroni, bought at convenience stores along the road. Sometimes she will find a clearing in the woods, and she will have a party. She will leave some of their money behind. In barbecue pits at rest areas, or campfires she builds herself, they will keep finding remnants, drenched in lighter fluid, charred, or torn to shreds. But she won't spend a cent. For this, she has her savings. Her mother's spending spree.

As she starts to drive, Dot rips a counted hundred dollar bill to confetti and lets its pieces fly, swirling all at once, out the window.