

# **The Cubicle Giant**

A novel

Length: 2,500 words

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About: A magical realist literary novel about two actual giants who, in 1994, finally discover that the other exists.

**Veronica**

Norfolk

1

She dared go for her walks only very late at night. On this early morning at the front end of that hot summer, Veronica watched the clock, willing it toward two and at the same time wondering exactly when it was—when exactly was the moment—that her little sister had fallen in love. She'd read the letter, and it had moved her insides over in her chest by an inch, and she couldn't yet believe that while she, Veronica, had been watching TV or eating crumbs from a bag of tortilla chips, her younger sister had been out in the world, with a boy, and had been falling in love.

From a slim collection open on her lap, over and over Veronica tried to read the same long poem and then finally, when she figured most of the drunks would be off the streets, she closed the book. She went downstairs, crouching, as always. Her mother woke from the big corner chair, hair covering half of her face, and asked where she was going at this hour. Stockholm, Veronica said. No, Paris, she said. Texas. No, Harvard. And her mother laughed before flopping back down, saying, be careful, Pickle, I love you, don't ever change.

Though Veronica sometimes turned left, toward the water and toward nobody, toward empty safety, on this night she went the other way, toward Ghent, where the boys would be, and

where danger might be. Because, though she never could admit it to herself, she at the same time wanted to see no one and wanted, in her stomach, to see someone. There were things that Veronica, who everyone thought of as smart, was purposefully dumb about.

For a while, there had been the tape measure. The last time she had pinched the end of the tape with her toes and run it all the way up to the top of her head had been a year ago, maybe more. She had been seven feet, nine inches and then, terrifyingly, seven feet, ten and then seven feet, eleven, and so after that she pretended she'd lost the tape measure even though she knew well that she'd tucked it behind a jar of dry pasta on top of the kitchen cabinet. The not-knowing where she'd hidden the tape measure was a lie she kept as alive as the blood in her veins because without the lie she would die. She lived her life like that. It was exhausting. She hoped, all the time, against all evidence, for reversal, for shrinkage, maybe even for a jump back in time, to when she was merely freakish and not awfully freakish. She longed to be what she was so obviously not, which was normal.

The people she would not admit she wanted to see were teenaged boys. She thought of them as the Hey Guys. To anyone watching, it would appear as if she had long avoided them. As if by some understanding, they waited for her most days at set spots around town: Borjo's Bagels, the smoker's patio outside the Arts and Letters building on campus, Cogan's Pizza, where they thought she liked to go. But no one knew for sure, no one but Veronica, of course. There was a lot of hearsay. But though they kept trying, and though she knew they kept trying, she never met them at those places. She would control that, at least.

And so she sometimes went looking for them without looking for them. She could do both, in her head. She walked and yet didn't think about them. She headed south on Colonial Avenue: two blocks, three blocks. Head bowed, she swept her eyes back and forth, ever-

watching for movement, the flash of a belt buckle, the click of a tongue. Five, six blocks. She was sweating from the small of her back, under her big sweatshirt. She wore it because it was big enough to cover her body, not because it fit her well. It had been made for a Serbian man who played basketball at the college for half of a semester before he got homesick.

Maybe it was because she was looking down at the ground while at the same time trying to look out, to the side, scanning everything around her, and maybe everything was just enough confused and just enough clear all at once, but she noticed something that must have been there all along. Its greenness and aliveness stood, proud: grass, sprung up, all which ways, from the cracks in the sidewalk. Look at that, she thought, the life that happens when you're not looking, whether you're around or not. The air was cleaner this late, and cooler, washed. She lost herself for a moment. She was capable of that. Sometimes, her gentle warm insides took over, without her other parts, the tense, sad parts, knowing about it. It was as if her crazy-haired 12-year-old self came back for a moment, the girl who used to sprint along the beach until she'd see spots and then laugh until she'd fall asleep or cry, her younger, smoother self sitting down light on her 21-year-old chest, breathing hot and hard, whispering, hey, you smart weirdo, I love you.

Veronica smelled wet concrete, then recent dog shit, and then, at the next house, a stinky flowering tree, and then, finally, she saw what she had been looking for and also not looking for: a soft, expanding plume of cigarette smoke.

It was always something that snapped her out of it, that took her from 12 years old to right there where she stood: greasy-haired and empty and 1994 and Norfolk, Virginia, and so tall that she didn't know how tall she really was. This time, off to the right, it was a regular human cough, aimed only at her, out of all the other hundred trillion things on the planet, the cough not a cough but instead a soft little arrow, screaming, "You."

She stopped, looked around. She'd walked farther than she'd meant to. She was in the heart of Ghent. Across the street, beneath the Naro's marquee, lit up bright as ever, was the orange single-breath-long glowing dot of a cigarette and then that slow cloud of smoke. Her eardrums came alive. They went *ca-shoosh*. She would not give in, not yet. She still was not thinking of them, the Hey Guys, not yet.

She took a step. Immediately, there was another cough, louder, and from the same place. She stopped, mimed checking a watch she knew she was not wearing. She kept walking. Hey, said a voice, a boy's. Veronica, it said. Her name, and no one else's. It was what she'd been wanting to hear, from the kind of voice she'd been wanting to hear. She knew what she'd do now, not the details, but still, the general outline, the shape, the shadow. Her guts clicked a notch.

Of course she knew that she should have gone home, to her mother, father, sister, all sleeping, warm, alive, who, it could not be denied, loved her. It must have been three in the morning. She should go home. Anything could happen out here, even to her, tall as she was. It hadn't happened yet, but it could. There could be another waiting around the corner, or two of them, or there could be a knife. She wasn't dumb about regular things, only the deep dark soft-around-the-edges things she'd long chosen to avoid.

But then he said: "I've been waiting for you," and after that the boys who were maybe lurking around the corner, the knife, it all went away.

Someone has been waiting for me, she thought. Someone needs me. Someone wants to see me. Fuck all those other ones. Fuck those people who stare on campus. Fuck all the cashiers of the world, all the nurses, the doctors. Fuck my professors, and all the men on streets and in

buildings and in offices and in cars who say what they say. My mother, nice as she is, fuck her. And fuck my sister, too. Because this one, right here, he wants me.

And so appealing was that thought that she knew, right then, that she would go to a room with him and they would get naked there and she hoped that at the end of it she could take with her a second or two of something that was not rotten. That, meager as it might have seemed, was enough for her, was enough for that scooped-out, hopeful, not-hopeful young willow of a woman.

Can you believe it? As smart as she was, as competent in writing long papers, as earnest as she was in her appreciation of hip-hop, as good and free and true as she was in mending her own clothes, in laughing with her sister until snot came out of her nose, in crying and in all those many more numerous instances of not-crying. None of that mattered, nor did the ocean of sour thick darkness inside of her, because this boy, this one, wanted her. Veronica, for the first time in a long time, stood tall, fully tall, walking and then ducking only so that she would not strike her head on the movie theater's marquee.

She looked up. There, in those big letters, was the name of a movie. Maybe they could even see it, whatever this movie was. She'd sit in an aisle seat because that was the only kind of seat she could sit in, but, still, she'd eat Snowcaps and they'd share a large Cherry Coke. She could even try to do things with their hands, hers and his. She'd always wanted that, the lacing of the fingers, the beautiful touching of skin on skin, the trust, the gentleness, the little smiles that meant more than smiles and that were worth a hundred tiny beautiful books of poetry. She'd only seen these kinds of smiles in movies and wondered if they were real, if real people smiled like that. And if it was a funny movie, she'd snort, and so would he, for he, too, would be a snorter. Even in that moment she knew it was a fantasy, not possible. But a flicker of it remained, of

whatever rare flammable mineral of which it was composed, that hope, that hope for hope. She was 21 years old, but also 12, and also 8, and also 75, and also dead, and also not yet born, and she was a hang glider and also a speeding train on fire. She was a terrible tenuous flicker.

She could see the boy's face now, the traces of fiery acne above the bridge of the nose, the beginnings of a mustache he should shave. He was younger than she'd thought, in his T-shirt she was sure was his favorite, his khakis, the skateboard shoes, his face tough, cool, more confident than he was on the inside. She knew enough about boys to know that most of them spent a lot of time pretending. They weren't so different from girls. This one, there was nothing particular about him, nothing that reached out and tapped her on the shoulder. He was a boy who happened to be a Hey Guy, a boy who may or may not like to hold hands in a movie theater. She hoped for hope.

But then he tossed his stringy hair back out of his face in a certain way. His name would not come but for sure he was a classmate of her sister's, one of a hundred. He was a boy, a face, like a bird she'd seen many times but had never cared about until now. Of course he'd know Natalie and her tall sister Veronica, know of her, would have talked about her, dirty things, boy things, sex things. But, still, they would be talking about Veronica, and not about her sister. Or maybe he talked about them both, about how Natalie was the real prize of the two, the normal one, and prettier, and how Veronica was a world apart, not in the same category, a giraffe to Natalie's cat. Then Veronica pictured her sister, young, pretty now all of a sudden, and regular, and in love with a boy who worked at a pizza shop, whose arm was covered in tattoos and who had slicked-back hair. And what if the boy loved her back? Yes, of course he did, and Veronica's guts clicked again. She took a deep breath.

This Hey Guy came up to the middle of her chest. He walked and she followed. Then he was looking up at her, smiling.

“What?” she said.

“Why’d you stop for me?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I’m glad you did,” he said. “You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

And just like that, her insides clicked back, but the other way. She knew that what he’d said was a lie, and that this night, like all the others, was made of hollow plastic, like a front-yard Santa Claus. Still, because it was all already happening and because of her sister and because she still held out for that warm flicker she’d hoped for since as long as she could remember, she followed him, turning left and then right, until they came to a house that was like all the others except that this one had an expensive fieldstone walkway leading to the front door.

“Try to be quiet,” he said.

And so she tried.

And then, just before they climbed the steps to the porch, before the Hey Guy slowly slid his key into the front door, before everything that happened after that, Veronica looked down and there, like something she couldn’t shake, was the bright, new grass again, shooting out from between the enormous stones. And she knew already that, afterwards, when she’d be carrying her ugly shoes, carrying them so as to be quiet, that she’d again notice the grass. She saw it as if it were already happening. And though it made her feel as if she were about to betray that beautiful 12-year-old girl she still loved, Veronica knew that, when it came time to grind her foot into that grass, grind it to pulp, it’s not that it would feel good exactly but that it would feel like something, all right, like the exact thing that she deserved.

While Hawk, 250 miles to the north, suffered and lived mostly quietly, Veronica suffered and lived loudly, loudly as she dared.

There were qualities about herself that Veronica Benson liked, and some that she disliked but tried to ignore. Examples of the first were that she was clever, funny in a way that she meant as playful but which often came out as cutting, and able to read and make sense of large amounts of densely worded information. But her sister, Natalie—younger by only a year and a half—brought out the other kind of trait, the kind that made Veronica feel selfish, disagreeable, and, above all, young. She was young, it was true, and in some ways she was younger than her younger sister. Veronica was a shoe with a pebble in it, a hangnail, a joint gritty with sand.

Veronica, that early summer of 1994, was 21 years old and so fragile and proud and pent-up she felt as if she might fall apart. She feared things she could not talk about. She feared that she would never stop growing, that one day she would not be able to fit inside her house, would not be able to wash herself, feed herself, would not be able to hear her mother when she spoke unless she hunched herself over into a human question mark. She feared she would never be able to wear clothes that she liked. The fear that lived below all of that was that it was getting harder, lately, to imagine a world in which anyone would love her.

Veronica lived in Norfolk, Virginia, a humid, coastal city that she thought of as half-southern, half-nowhere. Her parents, both professors, taught at Old Dominion University, her father in the oceanography department, her mother in history. They were soft-in-the-middle people who regularly donated small amounts of money to WHRO. Her parents liked Billy Crystal and Mel Brooks comedies, which Veronica also liked, and the TV show *Dr. Who*, which



she hated. Veronica knew that she had always confused her parents but that they loved her anyway. Her mother called her Pickle. Her father, when he'd had two glasses of wine, sometimes called her Hot Dog, which Veronica pretended she hated but which secretly she liked. Veronica tried to forget about these kinds of tender things when she'd do the things she did with the Hey Guys but, in the end, she always remembered.

Veronica had been accepted at Princeton but instead stayed at home and went to college where her parents taught. With her small scholarship, after books, she bought Sour Patch Kids, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Cheetos, hip-hop CDs, and fabric, with which she planned to make clothes. She spent as little time on campus as possible. She had gotten her parents to convince all but one of her professors to allow her to do independent study, on her own. On the rare occasions when she set foot on campus, she went in very late or else very early, hood pulled down over her forehead, crouched and walking close to the sides of the buildings. Even with taking 20 or 21 credits per semester, she still had plenty of time left over to read a book per week, to listen to hip hop, to masturbate. She was on course to finish school in three years. And so, rather than move into a dormitory, rather than having to make friends, she kept her peaked-roof attic bedroom in the creaking, worn house on Colonial Avenue. She could be close to her family, to her sister, who was now changed, who was in love.

There were things that Veronica cared about deeply, and then there were whole swaths of the world made of gray mush. She didn't care about the food she ate, but she ate a lot of it, whatever her parents put in front of her: pasta, any kind of fruit, nuts, sleeves of crackers, wedges of cheese, slapped-together sandwiches of turkey and mayonnaise and yellow mustard, huge bowls of cereal, pizza of any kind, whole batches of macaroni and cheese that she ate from the pot. She loved a bright green, highly caffeinated soda called Surge. She'd discovered beer

while at Old Dominion, and one night early in her first semester, at a party a few houses from campus, she'd drunk 14 cups of Natural Light before she got bored and walked home feeling fuzzy and bloated.

She was constantly fiddling with her gray hooded sweatshirt, an article of clothing that was her chief concern on some days, and for which she'd learned to sew. She wore it nearly every day. She often slept in it. She hesitated to wash it more than once every two weeks and only relented when it began to smell. It draped over her. When she saw girls her age wearing store-bought jeans that fit their bodies, Veronica knew, no matter how her day had gone, that she would never be like them. They could tear them, wear them out, stain them, and it would not matter. They could buy more. She wondered what it must be like to walk past a mirror and like what she saw.

Veronica had a hard time being a girl. Her teeth weren't straight enough and she never knew whether or not to paint her nails. She never knew what to do with her curly hair, and so she covered it, with store-bought canvas hats that fit if she stretched them out nearly to breaking, or with knit hats she wore even when it was hot. She could go four days without showering, and double that without washing her hair. It didn't matter, was the thing, whether she bathed or not. Her hair threatened to clump, to dread. Her hair had an odor. Some nights, lying on her back, she would drape it over her face, over her nose, and inhale, imagining that deep human oily rich smell to belong to someone else.

She craved touch, to be touched, and so, without telling anyone she was doing it, slowly she made it so that the family's three-legged cat was her cat and no one else's. Veronica fed Arlo, and washed her, and one day moved the litter box into her bedroom. When Veronica wore her hoodie, she would often carry Arlo in the hand-pouch, feeding her bits of whatever food she

came across. Arlo often fell asleep in that pouch, her purr a set of gentle fingertips on Veronica's belly, and especially on nights after she'd visited with one of the Hey Guys.

Her sister, Natalie, who knew about the Hey Guys, Veronica was sure, was always snooping, trying to be helpful, though it felt like a soft smothering. Veronica was often irritated. Moreover, she was irritated by the fact that she was irritated. To keep out the constant scratching inside of her, she devoured hip hop, drinking tea with milk and too much sugar and staying up late sprawled out on her bedroom's hardwood floor, the music turned up to a level she thought of as "enveloping," not dancing or even bobbing her head but instead only letting the rhymes surround her. That was how she traveled. Sometimes she'd imagine the rappers' words being written directly into her head, as if her mind were a soft clay tablet. A Tribe Called Quest or Pharcyde or Nas thumping into her ears, she could begin to give up control, to relax, to unclench. Some nights, she pictured paragraphs of a long paper she might write, something about machismo and mothers and New York hip hop and kung fu movies and how poverty was not some noble thing through which one was forged but instead a scourge better avoided. She aimed for these ideas, and when she got them, she soared.

But, mostly, she did not soar. Mostly, she was clenched. Hunched, is what almost anyone would say about her. She hunched when she walked. She hunched while inside the house, in her bedroom, in the shower. She hunched in the service of her ridiculous dark always-there thing, her attempt to fool, to deceive. Her back always hurt, but, still, she hunched. She hunched even more when meeting someone new, when shaking someone's hand, and bent so much on the rare occasions when she hugged another person that her body formed nearly a right angle. She was clenched, inside and out, and sometimes she shouted into her pillow at night and in the morning pretended that her family had not heard. It came out of her, sometimes. The truth, which most

anyone could see except for Veronica herself, was that she stood atop a great roiling sand dune.

First Veronica had stopped going to regular doctors and then, lastly, it was the child psychologist. After the last visit, after she'd walked out, on the way home she realized she would never be normal. Gradually, her life took on the tight, closed-in form she demanded it take. Her family went to the same three restaurants, the same bookstore, the same art galleries, the same two street festivals in Ghent, their neighborhood of coffee shops and professors and graduate students and artists. She wanted, deeply, to use the brand of tampons she saw in other girls' purses and backpacks. She wanted to fit in the desks at school, but couldn't, and so she sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by stacks of books on Marxist American history, Latin, French, mathematics, musical theory, biology, basic chemistry, British literature, drawing, even literary theory. There, sitting on her normal-sized stool, barefoot, constantly eating, Veronica fed her head with everything she could, swimming in rivers of ideas while ignoring the one overriding idea living inside her bones, which was: you are tall, and you are ugly, and no one will ever love you.

And so she lied to herself. She listened to her hip hop. She devised elaborate syllabi. If her tallness was discussed, by anyone other than a child, Veronica had developed a severe and automatic response: That person was cut out. Calls were not returned. Hellos at restaurants died in the air like dud fireworks. Her family had learned not to talk about it. Natalie, her sister, had learned, though she sometimes chose to forget. Veronica would've liked to talk with her sister, who was so smart and funny, but she had constructed these rules so rigid that talking about it was not possible. She was locked in, and she was the one who'd done the locking.

She got back home from the Hey Guy's house. She slept. When she woke, she felt scraped-out. She rolled over and, facing the wall, pulled the covers up to her chin and then over her eyes. It was still too bright in her room. She wanted it to go black. She was still tired. It grew warm under her covers, her hot breath catching in the folds of the pillowcase. She could smell her own mouth, her hair. She needed to shower, to get rid of the grease, to knock off the dust she imagined covered her skin like a film. She was having trouble breathing. She lay on her belly. She switched to her side. She tried her belly again but her mind would not shut off. Again, as she had many times the day before, she reached inside her pillowcase and found the letter. She did not want to read it again, but instead it was a compulsion, a touching of a bruise.

It had been sitting there, underneath a hairbrush in her sister's room. Veronica had picked it up. "Natalie," it said on the envelope, in the kind of rushed, sloppy handwriting that could come only from a boy. The paper was unlined and clearly had been folded and unfolded many times. She read:

*Dear N—,*

*I'm supposed to be working but instead I'm doing a lot of not-working. I burned a pizza today and instead of throwing it out or eating it, I tried to serve it to a customer. Hector saw this, though, and fixed it for me. I'm a terrible boss. Under no circumstances should you work for me. Wait, would you come work for me?*

*I was thinking about you last night. Not like that. (Not totally.) I'm going to try to do this chronologically. This is how it went:*

*Natalie has the coolest handwriting. I wonder if she always writes like that or just when*

*she's writing to me? How'd she pick me? Is it because I'm older? Natalie's pretty without even trying. She's funny and she thinks I'm funny. But she's going to college next year and she's going to meet a thousand people in the first three days and I'll be here and what should I do? I don't want to be foolish. I know how much older than her I am. But then I thought about how I've never met anyone like her and how it feels when I'm with her, how it feels like I've been living this other life that it turns out was black and white even though I didn't know it. And she's color.*

*So, fuck it, I thought. I like color.*

*Regards,*

*P—*

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on her door. Veronica stuffed the letter beneath her pillow.

"Who is it?" she asked.

The door creaked open. It was Natalie. "Yo, homie," she said.

"Yo," Veronica said.

Natalie stood beside the bed, waiting. Veronica made room. Natalie sat.

Veronica liked her sister, or had, though she sometimes felt as if she didn't know her. Only a year younger, Natalie had recently become someone else. Where Veronica had been a sloping line, Natalie was a sloping line with a late, sharp uptick. Veronica remembered growing up together, having sticky faces together, ripping open Christmas presents together, but all of that seemed like a long time ago. They were grown now, something that had happened just the other day, it seemed, and it had turned out that they were different. Veronica was irritated, itchy, while her sister was funny, relaxed. Natalie, sitting on the edge of the bed, in the space created by the

hollow between Veronica's belly and thighs, wore fitted jeans, simple blue flip-flops, and a thin, green shirt that showed the tops of her breasts. Veronica was jealous of her sister's jeans, and always had been. Natalie's eyes were bluer than Veronica's, her smile warmer, easier. She had clear skin, the beginnings of a tan, freckles. She smelled good. Veronica's little sister, a week away from graduating from high school, three months from taking her first pre-med classes in New York, newly in love, was hot.

"So when's the wedding?" Veronica said into her pillow, her breath coming back at her hot and stale.

"Glad to find you in a good mood," Natalie said.

"I was in a good mood until you came in here."

"You're never in a good mood."

Natalie was right about that. Veronica lifted her face from her pillow. She again studied her sister. She was even prettier than she'd thought. No, not prettier, but happier, more confident. Veronica thought of a cantaloupe, plump, orange, and then she was hungry and thirsty.

"But he is your boyfriend."

Natalie softened and sighed. "You know he isn't. Not yet, anyway. You read the letter. And can I have it back, please?"

"What is he, then?" Veronica asked, finding the letter beneath the pillow and handing it to her sister.

"Just a friend."

"You're a shit liar."

"You're a shit sister."

"True, but the only one you've got. Let's be friends."

Natalie thought for a moment. "Can sisters be friends?"

"It's pretty early for you to be so stoned. You're so stoned. You're so wasted."

"Jerk," Natalie said.

"Tramp."

They stared out of separate windows in Veronica's bedroom. They were annoyed, and impatient with each other, and they loved each other in the bothered, short way of two people who were so similar they sometimes hated the other, but casually, with no real enthusiasm or endurance.

Veronica lay there, still staring at her sister's face. She might not get another chance. "So what's it like?" she asked.

"For real?"

"Sure."

"You're not going to make fun of me?"

"Not to your face. Maybe in my journal. Maybe in a chatroom. On the world wide web."

Natalie laughed. Veronica could still make her laugh. "You're in a chatroom?"

"No."

"What is a chatroom, anyway?"

"I don't know."

Veronica thought her sister might laugh again. She wanted her to. But she didn't. "I can't stop thinking about him," Natalie said.

Veronica's stomach shrunk. So it was real. "The guy who makes pizzas all day?"

"He hasn't made pizzas for a month. He's the manager now," Natalie said, staring at the ceiling. "Anyway, it's the stupidest thing."



“What’s stupid about it?”

“To be so helpless.”

She might not be perfect, Natalie, but she was better than Veronica had ever been.

“You really feel that way?”

“It’s all I feel.”

Veronica’s mouth went dry. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters,” Veronica said, again burying her face into her pillow. She was telling the truth.

“What matters?”

“Nothing.”

“No, I really want to know. What matters?”

“Forget it.”

Veronica could not be the kind of sister she knew Natalie wanted. Veronica raised her face from the pillow, strands of her curly, greasy hair sticking to her eyelashes. She needed to shower. She stared at Natalie. It bubbled up inside of her, this other need she had, which she was about to do to her sister. She didn’t know what it was exactly that she was going to do, but she was going to do something. “You’re still here,” she said.

Natalie stood. “Good talk.”

The air was cool on Veronica’s face. “Go away,” she said.

“Dick,” her sister said.

“Bitch.”

“You’re 21 years old.”

“And you’re not even 20.”

“Well done.”

“Thank you.”

“Hermit,” Natalie said.

“Slut.”

And then Natalie, about to speak, closed her mouth and gave her that look which said: it’s not me who is the slut, and we both know it.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Veronica rolled over. Miraculously, for such a deeply dirty, deeply wrong person, deeply harmed and hurt and hurtful person, it happened, that small mercy. She slept.

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The hot yellow-orange light in her room said: summer afternoon, though she didn’t yet know where she was. She sprang from bed and saw that she was still wearing her ugly khaki shorts from the night before. Her mother, stacking folded bath towels in the hallway linen closet, said, “Good afternoon, Pickle.”

She was hugely hungry. Sitting at the kitchen’s raised island, she filled a metal mixing bowl with an enormous heap of Cocoa Pebbles and a long pour of milk. She boiled water for a cup of instant coffee. She ate quickly. She made the coffee in a Pyrex glass measuring cup with a handle. She cooled it with milk and stirred in five big spoonfuls of sugar. She ate, and breathed huge ragged breaths, and slurped.

Her mother, humming a tune, glided into the kitchen. “Late lunch?” she said.

“Don’t,” Veronica said, her mouth full.

“My,” her mother said.

Veronica dropped the bowl in the sink from a foot higher than she should have, the booming metal on metal clanging her ears even though she knew it was coming. It sounded to her like a scream.

Carrying her coffee, she went upstairs, started the water in the shower, and closed the bathroom door. She set up her special toilet seat, her knees nearly up to her chin, and let her mind go blank while she peed. This small break would be like a prayer before the game, the half-second between the last sentence from the magazine in the waiting room and the receptionist saying the doctor will see you now.

Veronica undressed. She parted the shower curtain and ducked under the rod. Sitting on her plastic shower stool, she wet her hair but did not wash it. They would get her, if that’s what was going to happen, but they would get her, this time, as she chose. She washed her face, the back of her neck, her armpits, her arms, her belly, between her legs. She shaved, for the first time in a week, maybe longer, and nicked her shin. The water washed away the blood.

In her room, she dressed quickly, in her ugly khaki shorts and, though it was hot outside, in her gray hoodie. She wanted to look as tough, as mean, as she could.

“Where to?” her mother asked as Veronica opened the front door.

“I’m going to go get a job,” Veronica said.

“Wonderful! Where?”

“I don’t know. Don’t follow me. I’m ghosting.”

“Pickle!” she said. “I hate it when you talk like that. What’s ‘ghosting?’”

“Stop,” Veronica said.

“You stop,” her mother said.

These hot blasts of conversations, that deep held-in well of potential energy let out only in percussive bursts, that was how her life felt, had always felt, strapped-down, eyes scanning, scanning.

By the time she'd shut the door, she knew where she was going.

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In five minutes she was standing outside Cogan's, the pizza place, staring at the front door, sweating, mumbling, "Shit, shit, shit, shit." There were moments, and they seemed to be coming more often lately, when Veronica knew as certain as sunrise that she wasn't supposed to do something. Beyond that, she was nearly certain that she would harm another human, a human who meant something to her in a deeper way than she even knew in any place other than the guts of her guts. But, still, she was powerless to stop what she was about to do. She was compelled. She was a vessel. She was scared, and also as thrilled as she'd been in her life.