

WHY WE CAPITALIZE THE “D” IN DEVIL

by Kerri Pierce

People tend to blame it on Jenny Lanaford. Remember all that fuss? How Jenny became an overnight sensation when she was filmed outside her house at 2 a.m. shouting at the devil that, “he should’ve taken the deal when he could”? This video, you might recall, was recorded by Dewey McLarson, Jenny’s fourteen-year-old neighbor, who at the time in question was chatting via his online internet persona Beth Bigguns. Hearing the commotion outside, Dewey left his chat partner hanging on the question of when they could meet, wriggling really like a hooked fish, and rushed to the window in time to see a woman holding forth beneath a street lamp, insects flashing in and out of the light above her, for all the world like a diva beneath a glittering halo. *Yes!* Grabbing his cell phone, Dewey started recording, capturing

the last half of the rant, the part where Jenny Lanaford was shouting: “You Lucifer! You Satan! You’re not going to get a better deal than this. I’m the best chance you got!”—at which point the police showed up. By the time the action had subsided, and Dewey returned to his computer, his disappointed chat partner had logged off. No big deal. After uploading the video to Facebook under “WTF crazy lady on my street,” he sent it to his friend Lucas Grant, alias Jane Blowuhard, with the comment that these events had interrupted what was sure to have been a prime catch, seeing as his guy had been begging Beth to name a place and a time and, if things had gone according to plan, would’ve shown up at Elmwood Park for sure. Not like their last four candidates, who *BAAWWWK* had chickened out, but definitely like their first one, a man whom he and Lucas, from their concealed vantage point, had recognized with instant shock as their high school principal, Mr. Dawletson. Even from a distance, his iron gray hair and stern demeanor were terrifying. That man could ruin them, like *riptearSLASH!* For a blip-moment both boys longed for their parents, feeling like kids indeed and not like mature teens facing the ills of the world square on. But: Harry Potter! Percy Jackson! So. Over the days and weeks that followed, as they drifted in and out of detention, and cave-dark circles grew beneath their eyes, the boys weighed their options. *What what what*

to do? Felt like they were holding a live bomb. Sure, they could anonymously send it to the local news station, that explosive video of Mr. Dawletson in a dress suit standing by the kiddie swings, looking expectantly around and holding a paper bag containing, they knew, Berry Berry wine coolers, accompanied by a transcript of his conversation with sixteen-year-old Beth Bigguns, that busty hottie from Spank Me High. But that would hardly get *them* anything. So—blackmail? Anxious and hopeful, they dared to imagine it: A *Dear Perv* note stuck to the windshield of Mr. Dawletson’s blue Ford Explorer; their demand list, which included, among other things, unlimited soda machine access, total reprieve from all tests and homework, one Alienware Area-51 Threadripper apiece, two million bucks... The question was urgent. Impossible. On the night Dewey captured Jenny Lanaford shouting at Satan, the boys were leaning toward blackmail. They’d agreed, however, that they had to catch another perv first. Two in the bag somehow cinched it. Amazing, that all this history could be conveyed by a brief, six-word text: “Had BGEE prv butt chk it!” [Video link.] Typing that message did require a few extra strokes. Dewey’s spell check, which had ignored BGEE and prv, kept primly trying to change “butt” to “but.”

Within hours, Jenny Lanaford shouting at the devil had become a virtual plague. Not that Jenny was herself aware of it.

You'd think that when someone steals your likeness and launches it into virtual orbit, you'd be conscious of the fact. But no. All that stuff about cameras stealing your soul—a myth, so far as we know it. No, Jenny was completely ignorant that her shouting likeness was pixel-footing its way from device to device across the globe. Instead, after convincing the cops she was tipsy with enough self-control to “take it inside,” Jenny had gone to bed and slept it off.

It had been, after all, one hell of a night.

Pause! In order to tell this tale properly, more than one person's story must come into it. Yet, trying to include every actor would require the unfolded stitch-history of everyone who's ever clicked on a Jenny Lanaford headline, or watched a commercial she was in, or just speculated, for a hands-still moment, what it would be like, living with the Devil, thereby opening the door for Jenny's story to creep in, take root. A few select representatives will have to suffice. Karen Mae Wilson, for example, though most people still know her as Mandie Starr, the woman who performed the hit single "At Least I Ain't the Devil's Bitch" with Jenny Lanaford on SNL.

A little prehistory here is in order.

The week before Jenny's video went viral, Karen/Mandie took a bus trip home to visit her parents. Time to discuss her career—to end it! Yes, that had been her intention, as she told her sympathetic seatmate on the way back from this visit, when the skies outside were dark, and the bus lights dim, an ideal time for confession, bumping along a road with someone else driving—she'd meant to tell Jeanine and Malcolm Wilson that she'd had enough. Mandie Starr was done. No more gigs, no more record deals. Finally, Karen would get to feel like herself in her own skin, and could settle for doing, if not what she loved, at least what she was good at; namely, teaching music to children. And who knows,

they might have a sun-bright career ahead of them. A teacher can take some joy in that.

Her seatmate, headed home from college to visit her family, nodded. Jonah Strong was a bit in awe of this random woman sitting beside her, who'd apparently released a country album (not Jonah's preferred music style, but still), and whose single "Break My Heart, I'm Coming for You" was downloadable on iTunes. There was, apparently, also a video on YouTube. Jonah resolved to check these items out when she got home, curious to see how the camera transformed the woman, who had a slight overbite and whose brown roots were showing, into a make-believe celebrity. Filmmaking was Jonah's college major. She'd seen firsthand how the camera could do anything; as a result, she never believed anything she saw, not online and not in the real world either. Take this lady, spilling her guts on a bus ride, wearing sweats, no make-up—a far cry from how she'd look on a first date, say, all her secrets packaged inside her, not to mention on her first day in the world, a squalling newborn, with no secrets at all. People: always changing. Jonah's senior project was called *A Life in Reproduction*.

Jonah's seatmate, whose name she'd by now forgotten, was certainly a character. Jonah couldn't wait to tell her girlfriend all about her: an elementary school music teacher by day and a

country singer by night—”or more like during the summer,” the woman confided. Jonah, in another scenario, would’ve been profoundly annoyed by a stranger talking her ear off, but she was a night owl and her seatmate suffered from motion sickness. So they talked—or the woman talked and Jonah listened. Something to pass the time. The weirdness of the people you meet.

“You know, my parents were separated three years ago, but neither really have the guts to call it quits,” the woman laughed, and Jonah laughed with her, earning a glare from the elderly couple across the aisle. Jonah shrugged at them, *Sorry, not my fault, she won’t shut up*. Whatever. “They won’t divorce since they’re both Catholic,” the woman continued. “But they see other people! Anyway, whenever I perform, they’re always there, front row, sitting together. Maybe it’s why I keep doing it. I don’t know. Nobody at my school knows that I’m a country singer. I never book shows in town. No clue why, it’s not like my songs are offensive or anything—” The woman trailed off. “Anyway, I was all prepared to tell my parents Mandie Starr was done, but then they took me to dinner and floated this absurd plan. They were both so excited. You know what they want me to do? They want me to film a video! Not a music video, but a *real-life scenario*.” Jonah smiled, for her own reasons, when the woman sarcastically emphasized those words. “They want me to pretend I’m shouting

at my boyfriend, who will be played by my cousin Nate. As my mom put it, 'Nate will do anything for fifty bucks.'" Jonah laughed again, not looking at the couple across the aisle. The lady was hilarious. She could tell a story like nobody's business, even if Jonah only half believed it. "My mom, who's also my agent, says it'll give the song an extra kick if people think there's some reality behind it. I don't know. I hate to think what'll happen if my principal gets wind of it and sees me shouting at Nate on YouTube. Of course, I've always secretly wanted to be a comedian, so maybe getting fired would help. Plenty here to laugh at anyway," the woman grinned. Then she sighed and glanced out the window, where her face was a dim reflection.

"Well, you can film it so people don't really see your face," Jonah remarked, feeling like she finally had something to say. "I mean, if nobody knows about your country career at work, there's a good chance it won't blow up for you. And I think your mom's right. People like it when they can attach reality to things. Even if what they're seeing is totally staged."

The woman hesitated. "So you think I should do it?"

"Look, I'm not here to give you advice or anything," Jonah said quickly. "All I'm saying is, I can see your mom's point. That's all."

The woman fell silent, mulling this over. The people one seat over closed their eyes again. After a while, Jonah dozed off. She wondered if the woman would ever do it—make a video to help her song. She wondered if she'd ever see the video. The next day, Jonah searched the Internet for—*What was the song called?* But all Jonah could remember was that it had something to do with heartbreak, which only narrowed it down to every country song ever written. Oh well. After that, the semester rolled on, and Jonah became so immersed in her senior project that she completely missed the rest of these events.

For her part, Karen/Mandie agonized for a few days over whether to make the sham break-up video. If her principal saw it, she'd probably be stuck nursing Mandie Starr's flagging career, at least until she found someone who'd hire Karen Wilson to teach again. Not that teaching was any great gig lately. She'd heard the district was cutting teacher benefits, again. Just that day a third grader had puked all over the floor beside her. *Gross.* Feeling like she was bungee jumping off an abyss labelled Rock Bottom, she texted her agent/mother: "Okay, I'll do it."

<Heart, Heart, Heart>, her mother texted back.

The morning after the shouting incident, Jenny's head was pounding. First thing she noticed upon waking was that Satan, that damned dog, wasn't in his usual place at the foot of her bed. Probably spent the night wandering the streets in the same miserable condition in which she'd found him six months ago. Fleabitten and footsore. Stupid mongrel. He wouldn't get a better deal than this. No way. She did miss him though, the rugpisser.

Grabbing her cell phone off the nightstand, Jenny switched it on and saw a seemingly endless stream of texts: words interspersed with emojis, sometimes just emojis, as if words weren't quite enough—Jenny smiled. Growing up, she'd occasionally attended a Pentecostal church with her grandmother. There, she'd seen how people could be seized during the service: swaying in the aisles, throwing up their hands, unable to contain themselves. Granny, for her part, would close her eyes and jerk spasmodically. After Jenny realized that her grandmother was not, in fact, having a stroke, she began to watch with interest, half fearful she'd be seized, too, half hoping to discover what that was like. Although she never did twitch, jerk, or prophesy, she accepted that other people did. In much the same way she accepted that people felt compelled to text each other all in caps, rather like upthrown hands, and to intersperse their words with emojis, or sometimes to just abandon the written word. Not so

spontaneous, perhaps, as Granny's Pentecostal spasms. It took time, for example, to find the correct emoji for *yuck* or *funny*. Which to choose: Barf or grimace? Teary-eyed laughter or a tongue-lolling grin? To Jenny, however, the principle seemed the same. She herself rarely used emojis, though occasionally she'd throw out a thumb's-up or a smiley face. Why not?

Many people, seeing a wall of texts upon waking, would assume something was wrong. But Jenny worked part-time at River Red, an upscale bar-and-bistro across town. Its name was in homage to the day the Barda River flowed red. Remember that? It made national news, you might recall, back in the 1980s when a delivery truck carrying, among other things, Allura Red food dye lost traction on an icy road and tumbled down a slope and into the river. The driver emerged unscathed, staggering up the steep bank to collapse onto the roadside, sopping wet, to offer ecstatic thanks for his survival, a minor miracle eclipsed by the fact that the seeping-out food dye turned the water blood red. Caused people to fear the world's end. Didn't matter that the water upstream remained normal and that the food dye rather quickly dispersed. People from all over town gathered to take pictures. They got those pictures developed, showed them to friends and family, mailed them to the local news stations. Liquor sales and religious gatherings spiked. As Nick Moreney, owner of Nick's

(the bar that became River Red), liked to joke: “The day the river turned red was the day I learned to shout Glory Hallelujah.”

Nick’s was located conveniently down the street from the First Baptist Church and around the corner from Blake Street Episcopal, so people from the two rival congregations could fortify themselves during these trying times. A moment of true Christian siblinghood, when the Baptists overlooked that the Episcopalians had a female pastor, and the Episcopalians overlooked that their Southern Baptist fellows insisted on a literal interpretation of the Word of God.

Thirty years later, by the time Jenny was bartending at River Red, the First Baptist Church, where her father had once preached, had moved, the neighborhood was up-and-coming, and River Red was now owned by Nick Moreney’s grandson—Nick. And that bar crowd! They were always texting each other, chains that could go on for hours, days even. Everything was either a soap opera or a crisis. So when Jenny Lanaford half glanced at her cell phone that morning and saw that most of the texts came from the bar, she wasn’t too worried. What she saw went something like this:

Cali W.

SHIT GRL WHAT WR U THINKING??!!!! JUST SAW
U ONLINE!!!

<EMOTEEMOTE> CHK IT OUT <LINK>

Emily B.

What?!!! U kik som bstrd outta ur pad? <EMOTE>

John L.

U FAMUS!!! CHK IT <LINK>

Lindsey K.

<EMOTEEMOTEEMOTEEMOTEEMOTE>

<LINK>

Mom

Call me

...

Yawning, Jenny reflexively clicked the link that Cali, a River Red waitress and endless source of absurd videos, had sent. In the video a woman with long blonde hair stood ranting beneath a streetlight. Jenny felt her lips twitch, especially when the cops showed up. Hah! She sure knew how that felt. Not that she was going to let the bar crowd know. She'd never hear the end of it. That woman, though, was clearly drunk or high, whereas Jenny herself had only been the slightest bit tipsy. No way the cops were going to let that crazy bitch off. With a rush of sympathetic

schadenfreude, Jenny turned up the volume to hear the arrest. And then—a collision of reflections! A what-the-fuck-WHACK-to-the-gut! A needle-sharp WAKE-UP! She read Cali's text again. JUST SAW U ONLINE!!! Heart pounding, Jenny scrolled through the other texts. Oh no, oh no, oh no. Her stomach dropped. That couldn't be her. No! The texts weren't just from the bar. Lindsey K. was a fellow nursing student. Jenny felt nauseous. She'd been watching *herself* on YouTube. She felt exposed. Disemboweled. That. Was. Her. That ranting, drunk woman in pink pajamas and an old Care Bear robe—her. Who'd taken that video? She glanced around. Her blinds were drawn. She felt watched. The video had been shot from above. Could it have been one of her neighbors? Jenny looked closer at her iPhone's text wall and groaned. There was even one from her mother. Could things get any worse?

Bit of advice: Don't *ever* ask that question.

In those first revelatory moments, Jenny's thoughts floated. For some reason, she caught herself remembering her high school community drama club. Her dad, the First Baptist Church minister, hadn't wanted her to participate in a secular drama club but Granny had intervened. Be careful what you wish for: Her

experience on stage had been . . . complex. Sometimes, after the curtain went up, Jenny would feel totally exposed, herself in her own skin, a liar in a space where truth is costume and lines. On those nights she'd fumble her lines and the other actors would have to cover for her. Backstage, the cast members would complain and say they'd entered JFUM, Jenny Fuck Up Mode. Other nights acting on stage was effortless. She'd be hungry for the curtain to lift and would manage her part perfectly. Not that it made any difference to her fellow actors: by then mocking her was like a team-building exercise. "Hey, we got lucky tonight. Five bucks she screws it up tomorrow." Jenny let them talk, never bothering to explain that her bipolar performance had to do with whether or not she'd spotted her father in the audience.

At the same time, like one image overlaid on another, Jenny recalled the day she'd been caught tongue-kissing Kenneth Newcome (people pronounced his last name NEWKem) at church camp in sixth grade. Kenny was a pimply-faced seventh grader and it was her first kiss, a warmup for the *real* kiss she hoped to have one day. They'd just begun slurpy negotiations when the tool shed door opened. Jenny had blinked at the sudden bright light. Outlined in the doorway was Mol, the girls' counselor, with a crowd of giggling campers behind her. "Well, well," Mol said, "what do we have here?" Kenneth stumbled back, face bright

red, and pointed at Jenny: “She made me do it. She tricked me! Just like Eve!” That old line. He pushed through the crowd and was gone.

After that Jenny had to meet with Mol in her hot, cramped office every day “to rap about what had happened.” Thank God it was the last week of camp. Every single meeting with Mol was a rehearsal of the first, only with more feeling. Like Mol overnight had been pondering her delivery. First Mol, sucking a peppermint with a slurpy sound that conjured an awkward, gropey darkness, would offer Jenny a can of orange Slush from her minifridge. Then she’d launch into a spiel about why the devil had tempted Eve rather than Adam. Women, Mol recited, were weaker than men. Just look at the clothes girls wore these days. Skirts above the knees, tank tops. Jenny had entered puberty, which meant her body was a battlefield for her soul. “Yes, a battlefield, Jenny. Winner take all.” The devil *wanted* Jenny to give into her physical urges. He wanted her to tempt boys, to trip them up, to wear short skirts, to paint on make-up, *and* to forget to tape down her nipples.

Turned out Mol, also known as Donkey Face—narrow cheeks, prominent teeth—was big on the art of nipple-taping. “Hey, girls, let me tell you a secret!” she said at one of their Straight Talk camp sessions. And then she used a naked,

anatomically correct plastic torso to illustrate the concept. “A little tape here, a little tape there—and presto! And *that*, little missies, is why Scotch tape is your new best friend.” Oh oh oh! *That* little bit of wisdom promptly vanished—*schlurpsuck!*—into the hormonally festering preteen swamp that church camp was. Shortly thereafter, Mol’s instructive torso disappeared from her office. A few weeks after camp let out, it was discovered in the woods behind the chapel, wearing a bra and with the name WANDA stenciled in permanent marker across the back. Once a teacher, always a teacher. In subsequent years, more than one boy fondly thought of Wanda whenever attempting to work a bra clasp blind.

But fighting those urges, Mol assured Jenny, was to fight the devil himself. *Schlurpsuck*. “The devil himself was with you in that shed, Jenny,” Mol proclaimed. “I could feel his presence. He was laughing. He wanted you to do it. He wanted you to kiss that boy. But God’s stronger than the devil. Next time you’re tempted, just remember: Jesus Christ died for you. He died so you wouldn’t go kissing boys in tool sheds. Amen!”

Holding hands, they’d pray on it.

During these rap sessions, Jenny didn’t once bother telling Donkey Face that the tool shed had been Kenneth’s idea. Nor that it was one of the most popular places at camp. A handful of white rocks on the path let fellow campers know when the shed

was booked. In fact, it was only because Jenny was a “shed virgin”—apparently, the only one left in her cabin—that she’d accepted Kenneth’s offer at all. It could have been anyone. Indeed, judging by the way he’d asked her to go You-Know-Where, mumbling the invite to his shoes, Kenneth was feeling the exact same pressure. He’d smiled gratefully when she’d said yes. Despite the pimples, Kenneth had nice eyes. A light hazel brown.

The jerk.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Violet counseled Jenny later. “Everyone knows Donkey Face and Jack are fucking.”

Jenny digested this information, that the two camp counselors were *fucking*, in silence. Violet and Jenny had known each other since before they could walk, but this year at church camp Violet had changed. Among the campers, Violet cussed and had the biggest boobs, so she was considered worldly. Plus, she’d been felt up by gorgeous Dwight McBride, an actual eighth grader, in the tool shed the camp’s first week. She’d also made several visits to the shed since then with a variety of other boys. Jenny, on the other hand, had remained a shed virgin until the very last week. In fact, Jenny was surprised Violet was being so friendly, considering she’d spent the entire camp teasing Jenny for being a prude and calling her Preacher’s Daughter.

“I thought you were supposed to be on lookout, Vi,” Jenny said angrily. “Why didn’t you warn us?”

Violet smirked. “Hey, it’s not my fault you were so into Pimples you didn’t hear me shout. But who cares? Tell me, before Donkey Face caught you, did Newcome feel you up or what?”

“You’re such a bitch, Violet,” Jenny said. It was the first time she’d ever cussed aloud. Ignoring her not-so-best friend’s obvious shock, she took a step closer. “And Violet, if you say anything back home about what happened, I’m going to tell your dad about Dwight and all his friends. There are words for girls who get *used* by boys and none of them are nice.” That last line was straight from the Donkey’s mouth.

Violet’s face turned bright red; she burst into tears and ran off. Jenny didn’t care. It felt good to make Violet cry. It did. No doubt she’d just run to her brand-new camp friends, whom she’d known only three weeks, not a lifetime, and say all sorts of nasty things. Didn’t matter. Camp was nearly over. Jenny just prayed Violet didn’t rat her out for spite.

Violet, turns out, didn’t need to. Someone, presumably Mol, had already called Jenny’s parents. Father Lanaford, whose broad shoulders always looked strangely out of place in a pulpit, was waiting to pick the girls up in the First Baptist Church parking

lot. He stood next to the family car, scowling and fingering his belt, a threat previously reserved only for Jenny's older brother Andrew. Mrs. Lanaford sat in the front passenger seat, erect and pale, toying nervously with her necklace. She didn't ask how camp had been or if Jenny had remembered to brush her teeth and say her prayers. Suddenly, it didn't matter what had passed between the girls that summer. Violet and Jenny gripped hands that whole terrible car ride home.

Not that Violet admitted to anything after.

Strange, the thoughts that go through your head during times of crisis. Also strange, the thoughts that don't. Jenny could have recalled any number of life experiences during those first few revelatory seconds, but here she was, thinking of Kenny Newcome and Donkey Face Mol and the high school drama club, none of whom had crossed her mind in years. Yet now the idea that any of them, especially Mol, might have seen that video was horrifying. *Jesus Christ died for you, Jenny. He died so you wouldn't go shouting at Satan on YouTube . . .*

It was like having the tool shed door wrenched open all over again. Like trying to play crazy Ophelia, that girl unhinged by love, with her father in the front row. Her phone buzzed. Jenny looked down. It was her mother calling. She knew she shouldn't

answer, not in this state, not before she'd had a chance to process what had happened, but she did it anyway. Habit: the frenemy of self-preservation. It was the last time Jenny and her mother would speak for over a year. It's also arguable that, without this phone call, Jenny Lanaford would never have rocketed to fame in the first place.

Aaaand pause! In order to understand what exactly happened during Jenny's phone call with her mother, it's necessary to relate one of those life events that Jenny didn't explicitly think about after clicking on Cali's text but which was, so to speak, so deeply rooted as to be with her always, particularly when it came to interactions with her mother. The event was this: When Jenny Lanaford was sixteen years old, she'd taken one of her mother's treasured pearl earrings and buried it in the backyard. Right at the V-fork of the old oak's roots. It happened after Jenny overheard a conversation between her mom and Olivia Claymore. The two mothers were still friends, even if Jenny and Violent weren't. Jenny was on the way to the kitchen to grab a post-jog snack when her mom's worried voice stopped her at the door.

"I just don't think Jenny should go to that dance," Mary Lanaford was saying. "Jenny's just so—you know—"

Jenny rolled her eyes. The Fall Dance was coming up and Jenny had been pestering her parents to go. What did they think was going to happen? A chair scraped across the wood floor, the creak of a large body changing position: Olivia. "Look, Mary, school dances are a rite of passage. We may be Baptists, but we're not that bad. At least not in private." Both women laughed. "But seriously, what's wrong with letting the kids have a little fun? I remember my first high school dance. Jerry McCay!" Olivia's

giggle made Jenny wince. “All the girls had a crush on him, and when he asked me to dance, I thought my socks would drop off.”

Mary Lanaford snorted, then lowered her voice. “But that’s just it, Olivia. It’s something else dropping off that I’m afraid of—” She cleared her throat meaningfully.

Jenny blushed. That too! Would she ever live that down? Violet had been felt up at that camp. She’d bragged about it! But here Jenny was, sixteen years old, boobs flat and ungropped, still.

“Well, I understand your concern, Mary,” Olivia said. “Of course I do. What mother doesn’t worry about—that. But Violet will be there. She’ll be going with the cheerleaders. They’re such a tight-knit group. Do you know they’ve taken a vow to keep each other accountable?”

The pride in Olivia’s voice was sickening. Jenny, if she’d wanted to, could’ve told Olivia plenty of things that would probably knock her extra-large socks off, again. Just a couple of weeks ago, Jenny had gone to a party where she’d seen Violet passing a joint with a few other oh-so-straightlaced cheerleaders. Violet had lifted her eyebrows, as if daring Jenny to say something—Jenny was the first to look away.

“But if Jenny goes, I’ll have Violet keep an eye on her,” Olivia promised.

Jenny couldn't hear her mom's reply.

“Well, that's also true, dear. It's too bad Violet and Jenny don't see more of each other now but—You know, you should encourage Jenny to try out for the cheerleading squad next year,” Olivia said brightly. “I mean, they've got some real talent. I was a cheerleader myself. But the squad is always looking for alternates. Or, you know, people to run the scoreboard. Things like that. It would give Jenny some structure—”

Jenny slipped away. The thought of having Violet “keep an eye on her” made her stomach churn. Ultimately, her parents relented on the dance. But Jenny, who'd spent all the babysitting money she'd earned over the summer on a dress, and who also had a date for once, said she was sick.

And she was—sick of it. On the day after that overheard conversation, Jenny resolutely took one small pearl earring from the box in her mother's right-hand dresser drawer. Then she called Violet and asked her to come over.

Over the years, Jenny and Violet had developed a strange relationship. At school they didn't talk much. They didn't sit together at church. Not that they were enemies in the traditional sense. They'd grown up as sisters, after all. Deep roots. Only a few

months before the pearl incident, Violet had called out of the blue to ask if Jenny would accompany her to Planned Parenthood.

“Look, I know it’s weird, me calling you like this,” Violet said in a rush when Jenny picked up, hardly bothering with *hello*, “but I really want to get on birth control. And I really don’t want to go alone. Please come with me?”

Jenny hesitated. “Why don’t you ask one of your cheerleading buddies?”

“You know what,” Violet said angrily, “just forget it. I’ll go by myself.”

“No, no, fine. Whatever. You know I’ll go, Vi.”

That was that.

So when Jenny called Violet and asked her to come over, without offering any explanation, Violet griped about missing cheerleading practice, but she came. Fifteen minutes later, she was pulling up in the new Jeep her parents had bought her when she made the Squad. Jenny still drove her older brother’s clunky Chevy Impala.

“Look, I do have to get to practice soon,” Violet said, striding into the living room. “What’s up?”

Jenny held her hand out, and Violet came over to look. “I’m going to bury one of my mom’s pearl earrings in the backyard. I want you to help me.”

Violet blinked. “Aren’t those the earrings your dad gave her on their first anniversary? When they had no money and all that?” Violet had been to Jenny’s house enough to have heard that story, multiple times. The way David Lanaford, then a seminary student, had insisted on buying his new wife a pair of seed pearl earrings, even though they could barely afford the rent. He’d called her his Pearl of Great Price.

“Will you help dig the hole or not?” Jenny asked impatiently.

“Okay, okay,” Violet said, “but you know, Mary’s going to be heartbroken.”

Jenny shrugged. “I’ll put it back sometime. It’s not like it’s lost forever.”

And so the two girls dug a hole in the backyard. They had to pour water on the dirt to make it easier to dig, and the garden trowel didn’t work very well around tree roots. Afterwards, Jenny marked the place with a rock.

“I hope you feel better now,” Violet said, pushing the hair out of her eyes. “I broke a nail and my uniform’s dirty. Well, no time to change.” She hurried to the Jeep, then paused and turned to face Jenny, who had followed her out. “Look, whatever’s going on—You should just talk to your mom. She’d probably listen.”

“Yeah right,” Jenny said fiercely. “Like you talked to your mom about birth control?”

Violet rolled her eyes. “You’re such a child, Jenny.”

“Like you’d know,” Jenny muttered.

Watching the Jeep pull away, she felt wonderfully free, like burying the pearl earring had put something to rest. And though the guilt came later, wave after wave, Jenny never did confess. Sure, throughout the years, Mary Lanaford had vainly searched for it, eyes glistening with tears. And though it had been on the edge of her tongue hundreds of times, Jenny never told her mom the truth.

Eventually, the First Baptist Church moved, and her parents left the parish house. Six years later, David Lanaford died of a heart attack. When she learned of her father’s death, Jenny panicked. Suddenly, she *had* to have that earring! Hands shaking, she sped to the old house to dig it up. Like that would bring him back. Her father.

At first, the new owners didn’t quite understand what the sobbing young lady on their porch wanted. Finally, however, they gathered that she used to live there, that she’d buried something precious in the yard, and that she wanted to dig it up. After a hurried discussion, they showed her back and even offered her a shovel. She thanked them profusely. Yet, when she saw the tool

shed, the young lady let out an anguished cry, turned, and rushed off. They heard her drive away. Clearly, the girl was disturbed. They decided not to call the cops. If something *were* buried in the backyard, well, wasn't it better just to leave it at that? With an uneasy glance at their yard, they headed back inside to finish dinner.

Jenny, after that, was inconsolable. A *tool shed* stood where the oak tree had been. Her mother's earring was long gone. And the way it had happened was just—diabolical.

Lost in thought, Jenny jumped when the phone rang. It was her mother. Caller ID warned her. Jenny took a deep breath and answered. “Hi, Mom,” she said, trying to sound cheerful. Like everything was normal. No way her mother had seen that video. Not yet. All Mary Lanaford did online was shop Amazon and watch televangelists, right? But as Granny used to say, “There’s a reason luck rhymes with—”

“Jennifer Lanaford, what were you thinking?” her mother demanded. “Your brother Andrew just forwarded me that video! How shameful! I could hardly believe that was you. Were you drunk? You were almost arrested! Why were you shouting at Satan? Did you have a man sleeping over? I’m glad your father’s dead. Do you know how disappointed he’d be? I can’t show my face anywhere. What will people at church say? Some of them have known you since you were a baby!”

During her mom’s tirade, which swept Jenny like a tidal wave, she felt a fleeting stab of amusement. Visceral. Naturally, Andrew would send their mom that clip. In fact, a frustrating half hour probably stood behind the statement “Your brother Andrew just forwarded me that video!” and “How shameful!” Indeed, Jenny could just picture Andrew in his lawyer voice trying to walk their mom through opening the YouTube link: “I’m forwarding it to you now, Mom. Yes, *forwarding*. It should be in your email. Why

don't you go check? Okay, boot up your computer first." A glance at the clock. *Sigh*. "The link is at the bottom of the message. Have you found it? Now, push the play button. That's the one that looks like an arrow. Yes, Mom, press the triangle. No, *not* the little quotation mark." Fingers drumming the desk. "That's the pause button. You want the triangle. You only have to push it once. There's no sound? Well, do you have it on mute? I don't know what the mute button looks like! Yes, that's probably it. The bullhorn. Press the little bullhorn—"

Jenny almost texted Andrew to ask if it had been worth it.

At last her mother drew a breath. "Jennifer Lanaford, are you listening to me? I asked you who you were shouting at?"

"You saw the video," Jenny said, suppressing a bout of half-hysterical giggles. Bubbles rising underwater. "I was shouting at Satan."

"What?"

"I said I was shouting at Satan. He broke the deal!" Jenny was nearly shouting now, howling with laughter. *We've entered JFUM! Rhymes with NEWKem.*

"Are you *laughing*? Get a hold of yourself, Jennifer. This isn't funny. Drunk and shouting at a man on the street. Probably someone you met at that bar. I can't believe you took him back to

your grandmother's house. What do you think Granny would say? She'd regret giving you that house, I bet."

That old line. Jenny's laughter ebbed. Her mother had never forgiven Jenny for not only inheriting Granny's house, but for refusing to sell it and split the proceeds between herself and Andrew. No matter that Andrew was a lawyer and made enough money for his family to own two houses, one in town and one lakeside. Her stomach clenched. A reckless daring seized her.

"Did you know, Mom," she began conversationally, "Granny took me out for my first whisky when I turned twenty-one? To River Red, actually. I couldn't stand to drink it, though. You know why? Because it smelled like Dad's breath when he was whipping me with his belt. You remember that? When I got caught kissing that boy at church camp? *Why can't you be more like Violet?* That's what Dad said as he was whipping me. He hit me and hit me, and you just stood there, wringing your hands. Of course you did. You never lifted a finger to protect us from him. But you know what? Violet got felt up or worse by about six different boys that summer. And she was the first girl I knew to lose her virginity. Hey, I even made a little trip to Planned Parenthood with her in high school. Not that I'm a virgin either. But at least I didn't lose it at a high school dance. And you want to talk about Satan? How about a preacher ranting about drink and

then falling into the bottle when he thinks no one's looking? Granny knew more about life than you ever did. I bet if she knew I'd brought a man to the house, even Satan himself, she'd probably say she hoped he had a nice ass." Jenny was breathing hard, like she'd just run five miles.

"You little bitch!" her mother hissed, the word like a slap. It was the first time Jenny had ever heard her mother cuss. Jenny's feeling of floating increased. A whole new vista seemed to spread before her, where things were *not* as they seemed, where the fixed things of her past and the vague outlines of her future were suddenly fluid, open to negotiation. *What if?* The idea hit her in a blind flash. Inspiration! Jenny almost felt like she *had* spoken up when she wanted, in the past as well as now, like an explosion had ricocheted down her timeline, empowering her past self and propelling her into the future. What if she *had* told Mol all about the tool shed, ratting out her fellow campers in the bargain? What if she *had* gone ahead and played river-bound Ophelia, whether or not her father was watching, like she'd done in rehearsal those first few weeks in drama club when everyone thought she was some kind of amazing actor? What if she told her mother right now that Andrew and Melissa were separated, something they didn't want Mom to know until they'd figured things out? She

opened her mouth to disclose Andrew's big secret, and a lot of other things, but realized her mother had hung up.

Whatever.

For a moment she sat there, looking at her phone. Disconnected. Then she tossed aside the device, ran into the bathroom, and vomited. Afterwards, she called in sick and crawled back into bed. That was the last anyone heard from her until she appeared, smiling and composed, on a talk show's pop news feature a week or so later.

(Worth mentioning here that this phone call was arguably what deposited the sand grain in the oyster's belly. So to speak. For it was around such powerful memories and emotions that Jenny Lanaford's public persona began to coalesce. She felt the grittiness of it in her stomach as she was vomiting, something she continued to do after every interview, commercial shoot, or the time she hosted SNL, where she co-sung the hit song "At Least I Ain't the Devil's Bitch" with Mandie Starr. (That was also the day she met Jeanine Wilson, who acted as her agent and became, for a time, her surrogate mother.) This routine continued for about half a year: Go on stage, pretend she'd been shouting at the Devil rather than at her dog, leave the stage, barf. Strange. The community

drama club had been a dreadful experience, but she'd never thrown up before a performance or after. Each time she hurled now, however, it was like that first emetic shock: the sense of being caught in something intimate and shameful. Yet playacting, as she thought of it, was ridiculously easy. Empowering even. It allowed her to reimagine who she was, to reshape past events, at least her perception of them, before an audience that was disposed play the game with her, to both believe her and not, in the manner of all good reality TV—which gave her an immense freedom. Or so she thought. Eventually, she did stop throwing up. But that grit-in-the-gut feeling remained with her throughout the whole I-Dumped-Satan affair, lodged tight, smoothing out, a ruminant opalescence that grew with time, lasting until Jenny Lanaford committed the act of vandalism that sent her to prison.

But I digress.)

Lucas was the first to bail.

“Look, dude, just destroy it,” he told Dewey, giving his friend a dirty look for bringing that damn video up. Again. Guy was obsessed. “The video doesn’t prove anything. It’ll just get you into more trouble.” Ever since the Jenny Lanaford video had been traced lightning-quick to Dewey’s Facebook account and their phones had started ringing, Dewey’s parents had confiscated his cell, changed his computer password, hidden all the tablets in the house, and made their son delete his social media accounts. Not that it did any good. Dewey had grown up with the Internet.

“You mean get *us* into trouble,” Dewey said pointedly.

Lucas avoided his friend’s eyes and concentrated on the window instead. It was raining. “That video was shot on your cell phone. It was your idea in the first place, Dewey. All of it.”

Dewey tried a new approach. “Look, don’t you want to bring that fucker down?” A month ago, this would’ve earned a fist bump. Now, Lucas just glanced at him warily. He knew Dewey was thinking about Beth Rigby. One day, the boys had been sitting in the office waiting for Dawletson to hand them another detention (late for P. E.) when they’d seen Beth head into the principal’s office. He’d shut the door behind her. Beth! With her long brown hair and sweet smile. The way she chewed her pen lid. Her cute pink backpack. She could’ve been a snob but wasn’t.

She'd talk to anyone. Dewey sat next to her in geometry. Only class he'd never skipped. Personally, Lucas preferred Jane Howitzer, but whatever. Seeing Beth go inside, Lucas and Dewey had exchanged a glance. Knowing. Since then, Dewey had been unbearable.

Lucas tried again. "We can't touch him, Dewey. So we have a video of him. So what? He'll just say he was in the park for a walk or something. We were the ones filming *him* without permission." Lucas shifted in his chair. "I don't want any trouble, Dewey. My mom's already said I won't be going to New York this summer if I get one more detention. I'm not even supposed to be here!" They were in Dewey's bedroom upstairs. Another fallout from Dewey's video: Lucas's parents had decided his best friend was a bad influence.

"Yeah, but we've got the transcript!" Dewey argued. Lucas rolled his eyes. So predictable. "It says he'll be there. It names the place and the time. 6:30, Elmwood Park. He says he'll be wearing a red tie and carrying wine coolers. He'll be standing by the kiddie swings. And we've got it all on tape. It's timestamped! They can trace the chat back to his computer. Do you think he's smart enough to have covered his steps? Hell no!" Dewey's voice was eager.

Lucas shot from his chair and rounded on his friend. “So what?” he shouted. “How many men wear red ties and go to the park? Elmwood Park is even by his house! I’m not convinced we caught anyone. It’s probably all coincidence. Dewey, this is crazy. It’s all in your head. Just let it go.”

“We saw Beth go into his office,” Dewey said stubbornly.

Lucas grabbed his school bag. “Kids go into his office all the time! He’s the principal! Anyway, no one’s going to care. Why would they? *You* were the one in the chatroom pretending to be a sixteen-year-old girl, flirting with dirty old men. You really want anyone to find *that* out?”

Dewey scowled. “You were right there with me, Jane Blowuhard.”

“No I wasn’t,” Lucas told him. “I lied.”

BOOM! In the space of a few weeks, Jenny Lanaford ricocheted to fame. But she certainly didn’t do it on her own. In many ways, she had very little to do with it. As people, with more sarcasm or less, have pointed out, there *was* something almost diabolical in the way that everyone saw that video in near record time, like the very next day. Some individuals, however, were particularly instrumental in getting the clip *seen*. Pop culture bloggers, for

example, not to mention the unsung individuals who tirelessly mine the Internet for the sake of the weird and entertaining. Yet, important as they are, such sources have constantly been overlooked by those who have written about Jenny Lanaford. Indicative of this trend, for example, is an article published in *TIME Magazine* entitled “Take on Me: Bringing the Devil Home to Dinner.” While this article makes the compelling argument that society itself, already glutted on a host of supernatural monsters-turned-romantic-figures (vampires, merpeople, zombies . . .), was well-primed for Satan to step onstage as a romantic object, something of a prodigal son, the article begins at the end, after people world-over were thoroughly obsessed with Jenny and her failed Satanic romance.

Not that this obsession isn’t worthy of focus! To the contrary. As you might remember, people were so compelled by the romance of it all—a woman rejecting the Devil—that when Jenny finally proclaimed to anyone who would listen that it had all been a lie—a hoax!—a mistake!—she was resolutely ignored by almost everyone. (Of course, by then she was also a convicted felon.) Indeed, as the *TIME* article further points out, there was a *yeah right* aspect to people’s belief that, paradoxically, allowed the romance of the situation to take fantastical root in people’s minds. So much so that when Jenny began calling her own bluff, insisting

that Satan was a black mongrel dog around two years old, weighing fifteen pounds, everyone played the skeptic. “Call my vet!” she exclaims in that last dramatic video, the one where she gets hauled into prison after committing arson. “Call my vet! Here’s his number! They’ve got the records to prove it!” *Yeab right.* Nobody bought this because nobody had quite believed her in the first place.

Not that people ignored the invitation to call the vet. That man. He got swamped with calls, texts, emails, and death threats, though it wasn’t clear exactly what he’d done to deserve the latter, other than to get unfortunately doxxed, until it surfaced that, five years earlier, he’d accidentally put a woman’s cat to sleep. MURDERER! Before disconnecting his phone, changing his email, closing up shop, and moving his family elsewhere, the vet did confirm that, yes, Jenny Lanaford had owned a black dog named Satan, that she’d updated his shots, and that she’d had him neutered...

We could go on and on. And all these points, piled to infinity, to infamy, are important components of the Jenny Lanaford story. But what this article and others like it do is to ignore elements central to Jenny Lanaford’s rise to fame. As if virality just happens. Yet, as we all know, there must be carriers.

One of these was the aforementioned Mandie Starr, whose drunken shouting match with her cheating boyfriend went viral the same week that Jenny Lanaford was recorded shouting at the devil. “You’re right I’m pissed!” Mandie Starr explodes. “You cheating bastard. Take this!” *Crack*. A beer bottle shatters dramatically but harmlessly to the street.

Though the video, it was publicly acknowledged later, had been staged to garner free publicity for Starr’s new single “You Break My Heart, I’m Coming for You,” Mandie was arrested for drunken and disorderly conduct. The boyfriend in question was played by her first cousin Nate; the alcohol in her bloodstream was genuine. In the video, the last shot we get is of Mandie Starr’s round thigh in artfully ripped shorty jorts disappearing into a squad car while the singer, now off-script, sobshouts incoherently. Not quite as intended, but this video, along with Mandie’s mugshot, did go viral.

Instant celebrity! All thanks to Mandie Starr’s mother, not that anyone was thanking her. Jeanine Wilson, Mandie’s mother, had been a slave to her daughter’s career since she (Karen/Mandie) was six years old and on the pageant circuit. No mother could have involved herself more in her daughter’s growing up. Jeanine had heard all the crap. She’d had it rammed down her throat. Helicopter mother, the bleeding-heart travesty of

children's beauty pageants, how immoral it was, sexualizing underaged girls . . . She'd endured it, sobbed in corners, given it the finger, let it roll off her—depending on the day. More to the point, she'd kept at it. Her task was to help Mandie Starr make her way in life. And how! Expensive beauty parlor trips, deportment lessons, how she'd dragged her daughter, kicking and screaming, to singing, Irish dance, karate (good to have a varied resume), playing the No Troll, as her own mother, who'd died from breast cancer when Jeanine was twelve, had termed it. Saying *no* when no one else would.

Along the way, Jeanine Wilson had been a one-woman show. Malcolm, Karen's father, had a rubber spine (invisible to the eye but floopy as *allll* shit). That man! When he was around, he said *yes* to everything (sweets, junk food, dropping lessons to catch the newest Marvel comics movie, whatever it was, since both of them were so addicted fantasy), whereas Jeanine, who'd lost her own mother as a girl, had her feet planted firmly in reality. Re-al-it-y. Not that Karen or Malcolm ever appreciated her for it. Nope, she was always the Grinch. Didn't matter that Jeanine had been on Zoloft and Xanax for as long as she could remember. Yasmin too—the birth control pill: the XYZ's of show biz, as she told her fellow mothers on the Circuit, the only ones who truly understood why she just couldn't handle another kid. She already had two:

Karen and Mandie. “Don’t forget the W!” was the typical reply. Jeanine laughed as they toasted, though she rarely drank. You’ve got to stay focused. Cigarettes helped. She was Mandie Starr’s agent, and had scripted and filmed the entire video. You had to be hard in this industry. Stone cold.

As a result, Jeanine knew, though no one else watching did, whom her daughter was shouting at as they shoved her into the cop car. “Don’t do it! Don’t do it! Please, don’t do it!” She wasn’t yelling at the cops, like everyone thought—no, she was yelling at her mom, who’d filmed the arrest, zooming in on Karen’s thigh, one of Mandie’s best assets, at the very end of the take. Jeanine had released the video that very night, posting it in all the right places. Malcolm and Karen weren’t speaking to her because of it, but she’d done it for the sake of Mandie Starr. She’d done it for Mandie. Any exposure was good exposure, right?

Privately, though, Jeanine had begun to doubt herself, wondering if she’d done the right thing, if she’d perhaps gone a *little* too far, when the unexpected happened: Jenny Lanaford’s clip began its dizzying circulation. A crazy blonde in a bathrobe, standing out on the street and shouting at Satan, had made it onto the major talk shows? How was that possible?

Jeanine wondered about this. In fact, she wondered so much that she watched Jenny Lanaford’s first interview repeatedly.

Amazing! In the interview, Jenny—or J. L., as the woman henceforth appeared in Jeanine’s copious notes on the subject—came across as utterly sane. Likeable even. She joked about her Southern Baptist upbringing: how she was caught at church camp kissing a boy in a shed (sympathetic laughter); how this interview would probably go badly because she’d been known to mess up high school plays (more laughter); how she, a teetotaling preacher’s kid, had ended up tending bar down the street from the old Second Baptist Church (laughter again). From the beginning, J. L. had the audience eating out of her hand!

“Seriously,” J. L. tells the host at one point, “I think I have issues.” The smile she turns on the audience: captivating.

Freeze frame! Jeanine studied J. L.’s image, blowing it up on her computer screen until it was pixilated. Something in J. L.’s smile made you *want* to believe her. How was that possible? The woman was claiming she’d dumped Satan! Jeanine crossed herself, something she hadn’t done in years.

“So, were you and Satan, like, in a relationship then?” the host asks, like it’s nothing. Like they’re discussing any old boyfriend. “And hey, any juicy details you want to provide, keeping in mind this *is* a family channel, are welcome. Give us the scoop!” The host gestures wide, encompassing everyone, the audience, the viewer. *We’re all in this together.* Cheering!

J. L. takes a deep breath. “Okay, here goes. Well, I found him—”

“Satan?”

“—yes, about six months ago, as I was driving around one night. I’d had a bad first date, you see, and I—I kind of told the guy I was going to the bathroom. Then I slipped out the back.” J. L. contrives to look sheepish.

Freeze frame! Jeanine shook her head, busy with her notes. *Dangerous gambit. Introduces humor. Could seem flippant. Audience seems to like it. J. L. as independent. Works.*

“Ooh, that was cold!” the host says. More laughter. “We’ll hear about that bad first date later. But now I want you to tell us about Satan! No changing the subject.”

And here it was, the seed of the story. Jeanine leaned forward.

“Like I said, I saw him on the side of the road, and he seemed kind of sad and down, so I stopped and talked to him a bit and we ended up going back to my place. I didn’t know his name at the time, only that he needed a place to stay. I’m kind of a sucker for lost pups.” She grins. *Nice move.* “And I mean, that was really weird for me, because I’m not the kind of person to pick up a guy on the side of the road and take him back to my house. But—I liked him instantly. We got along. I guess we became, I

don't know, roommates? And then things just—" J. L. trails off. There's discomfort in her face, like she truly believes she's been rooming, or worse, with Satan.

Girl must be pathological! That or—no, it was impossible. But what if—the thought gave Jeanine chills. A plot unfolded in her mind. *Twilight! Buffy!* With each subsequent viewing, Jeanine caught herself imagining scenarios.

"Then you became romantic? What was that like?" the host asks.

"Complicated," J. L. admits. "It wasn't exactly a traditional romance, because we never, you know—there was never any of *that*. But, of course, things were always tense. And—and then it was over."

J. L. crosses, uncrosses her legs. Leans forward. Crosses her arms. Like she doesn't want to talk about it. Clever not to provide details. Gives people a chance to fill in the blanks. Jeanine wished she could talk to Karen about J. L., or about anything, really. But each time she tried her texts went unanswered. That wall of blue blurbs, the occasional green one—depressing.

"And then you had a fight with the whole world watching?"

Yes, Jeanine thought sadly. Karen and I had a fight. Was I really so wrong? I did it for Mandie!

“If I’d known the whole world was watching, I would’ve just stayed inside,” J. L. grins. “But yes, I suppose that’s accurate. If you could call it a fight when you’re dealing with—a beast, the Beast, whatever.”

“And then Satan left?”

J. L. nods.

“And have you seen him since?”

“No,” J. L. says firmly. “And I don’t think he’s ever coming back.”

“Okay then! Before we close, I have to ask the question on everyone’s minds. What was the deal you made Satan? Because you swore, he wouldn’t get a better deal than whatever you offered him. I have proof of that on tape.”

J. L. leans forward, as if confiding a secret. “Basically, I told him that, in exchange for room and board, he had to be a good boy and mind his manners.”

The audience hoots and claps.

That was that. In a little over six minutes, J. L. had hooked the public’s imagination. How many emotions had she demonstrated during that one short segment? She’d joked and been dazzling and coy and vulnerable and guilty and proud and *real*. Was the woman a superb actor or just batshit crazy? Didn’t really matter, because the attention she was getting—

Then and there, Jeanine determined that Mandie Starr was going to get hitched, at least temporarily, to J. L.'s ride.

Dewey slid into his desk, shoulders hunched. These days, all anyone wanted was to talk about was Jenny Lanaford. Sure, the conversations took place in secret, when the teachers weren't looking. Whispered questions. Popular kids, who wouldn't have looked his way six months ago, stopped him in the halls. Even some of the teachers approached him. But his parents and the school had banned anyone from openly discussing it. Adults were so stupid. That just meant that Jenny Lanaford was the foremost topic on everybody's minds. At least Jenny Lanaford had sold the house next door. Meant the media trolls had left their street. Meanwhile, Lucas was ignoring him. Bummer. But Dewey had the real story. He was dancing with the true Devil. "You tell anyone, I'll say it was all fake," Lucas had warned him. His ex-pal was scared. Dewey got that. He was scared too. That knowing look in Mr. Dawletson's eyes every time Dewey saw him in the hall was enough to make anyone shudder. These days, Dewey made a real effort not to get into trouble. Beth, though. She'd stopped talking to everyone. She stared at her desk, didn't raise her hand in class. Her hair, everything about her, had lost its sheen. Beth. Dewey couldn't think what to do. No one would believe him. Lucas was right. What did a transcript and a video prove? Too many holes that snake Mr. Dawletson could wriggle through. Beth was the one who would have to go public.

And so, stars in her eyes, Jeanine jumped into action! From behind-the-scenes, she stirred up Hell on the Internet. Here she was, a conservative evangelical Christian. *Look!* she posted on forum after religious forum. *Look! Must be the End Times, if a girl can get so popular for claiming she SLEPT with the Devil! Whore of Babylon anyone? Same week another woman gets arrested for shouting at her boyfriend.* [LINK]

There she was, a left-leaning activist. Change of approach, same religious fervor. *Look!* she posted. *Look! A drunk blonde in a RICH neighborhood disturbs the peace at 2 in the morning by shouting at SATAN and the cops let her go. Same week, a woman shouting at her cheating boyfriend outside a bar gets arrested for disturbing the peace.* [LINK] *Double standard?*

And so on.

These and similar posts, not just from the No Troll, popped up everywhere. They got people talking. Mandie Starr's video got caught in the whirlpool. Charybdis anyone? *WHAM!* The No Troll doubled down. Mandie Starr was hounded for quotes, interviews. Begrudgingly, she wrote a new hit song, which became an instant YouTube sensation, with plenty of repetitive

affirmation, that was soon heard in workout studios the world over:

I got arrested.

I confess it.

At least I ain't the Devil's bitch.

Woo-woo.

At least I ain't the Devil's bitch.

Oh yeah.

I AIN'T THE DEVIL'S BITCH!

Ya hear me? ...

When Mandie Starr, who'd been forced to quit her day job, went on SNL and sang this song with Jenny Lanaford, Jeanine felt she could finally rest. She'd done it. Malcolm was there, but he sat on the opposite side of the auditorium. Good riddance. Afterwards, Jeanine and Jenny started talking. They hit it off. Jeanine's head was full of ideas. She could spot potential a mile off.

Karen was still ignoring her.

And so a year almost blink-fast whirled by. By this point, Jenny Lanaford had fame. There was a movie deal. But what made Jenny infamous were her "victims."

The term was coined during a radio talk show recorded before a live studio audience where people could call in and ask

the Real Jenny Lanaford questions—*certain* questions. By now, a dense forest packed with unbelievable flora and fauna had sprung up around the whole Jenny Lanaford affair. A *selva obscura*, anyone? Not so obvious there, what was fake and what was real. To cite just one example: A string of churches, it was rumored, had begun to stockpile arms, convinced Armageddon was coming. Just look at that Whore of Babylon, whose coy smile was everywhere, a plague, an ICON used to sell everything, from Benson's household cleaners, *tough on the most Devilish of stains*, to whole-grained breakfast cereal, *wholesome on the outside, sinfully decadent within* . . . Mammon! Walking abroad for sure. This. Was. War. Church basements that once had housed prayer circles, Sunday luncheons, spare animal costumes for the Noah play were now home to weapons' caches. The FBI began to raid them—until it all turned out to be a hoax. *Or...?* The story, apparently, kicked some scattered fringe congregations into gearing up, prompting the FBI to raid them. *Or...?* Who knew what was true, what was not? *What if?* Anything was plausible. So it went! Everywhere you looked, Jenny Lanaford popped up. Here she was, partying with the stars. There she was, at a fundraiser for a prominent politician, who ensured the audience he could've made her a better deal than the Devil, plus he had bigger hands.

At the same time, there emerged a copious undergrowth of what might be termed colorfully adventurous fan fiction . . .

Suffice it to say, callers into the radio program were prescreened. “Ask me about *me!*” Jenny’s on-the-air smile was audible. “I’ll answer anything. I’m an open book.”

(Deceptive, that! What *is* an open book, really? Many things, among them: a product of edits and re-edits, rejections, contracts, negotiations, marketing decisions . . . Not to mention the *real* question: which genre? Just saying.)

But the radio program was starting!

Radio host: “Okay, let’s launch right in. We’ve got Seth from Hartford, Connecticut on the line. You’re on the air, Seth.”

Seth: “Jenny, I can’t believe I’m talking to you! I’m just—
Wow, I just can’t believe it.”

Takes a moment for Seth to calm down.

Jenny, laughing: “Hello, Seth. I’m happy to be talking to you, too.”

Seth: “Okay, Jenny, here’s my question. You’ve said in a couple of interviews that you left a first date by escaping out the back. Someone did that to me the other day and—” Whistles from the audience, some outright chortling. *Callooh, callay, what happens to other people.* “Okay, I guess that’s kind of funny—”

Jenny: “Hey, be nice to Seth, y’all! I’m the one in the hotseat!”

Seth: “Thanks, Jenny!” Obvious adoration. Probably why he’d been let through. The caller queue—undoubtedly endless. All those questions, to the infinite horizon, for the Real Jenny Lanaford...

Seth, continuing: “So, I was just wondering, what did the guy do wrong?” And just like that, with his wide-eyed voice, Seth became a stand-in for all rejected dates. A character in every John Hughes movie. *Breakfast Club! Sixteen Candles!* And Jenny—it was like *she* had left him hanging. The audience listened, breathless.

Jenny: “Honestly, Seth, it’s not like the guy did one specific thing wrong. I mean, he didn’t pick his nose in public and wipe it on the tablecloth or something.”

Groans from in-studio. *Gross!*

Radio host: “I *cannot* unsee that.”

Everybody laughing, laughing. Tongues all working together. An intimate setting.

Jenny, riding the wave: “Sorry! What I’m trying to say is, it was just a really awkward date and I wanted out.”

Seth: “Awkward how?”

A pause.

Jenny: “Well, I suppose the real problem, Seth, was that the guy knew some people I used to know, people in my community drama club who were bullying and not at all supportive, and he kept bringing up things that I didn’t want to talk about. I tried to change the subject and he’d change it back. Cowardly, maybe, but I was glad to ditch him.” Truth was, after they’d sat down at the restaurant and started talking, her date had exclaimed, *Wait a minute, you’re that Jenny? The JFUM girl? No way! I’ve heard of you. You’re way hotter than I thought you’d be.* Not that Jenny said that on air. Felt like she was floating; now she had a harness. How many intimate interviews had she done? She was an old pro. Wordly.

Seth: “Why didn’t you just tell your date what was up? I bet for someone like you, he would’ve dumped his friends on the spot.”

Aaaaahhhh.

Jenny: “C’mon, Seth, I’d never ask that of someone.”

Seth: “But what *right* did you have to just leave him there, Jenny? The girl who left me, she bragged about it on Facebook. She said she pulled a Jenny Lanaford! I didn’t even know that was a thing. I got stuck with the check!”

Boos from the audience, not just for the nameless girl—Jenny felt it.

Jenny: “Okay, wow, I really hope that isn’t a thing.”

Awkward chuckling. “Girls, be nice to Seth! And Seth, thanks for calling.”

Seth: “Wait wait! Jenny, will you go on a date with me? Please? I don’t know anyone from your past, I swear it—”

Like a tide breaking, all that cheering. *Calloob, callay!*

Radio Host: “Wow! What do you say to that, Jenny?”

Jenny: “Well, I—you know, why not? Just don’t pick your nose, Seth!”

Groans, a few titters.

Seth: “Yeah, I don’t do that.”

Radio host: “What a call! What a twist! Just give them your details backstage, Seth. I’m sure Jenny will be in touch.”

Seth: “Jenny, you’re not going to regret this! I’ll take you on the best date ever—”

Radio host: “Okay, our next caller is Melody from Boulder, Colorado. Melody, you’re on the air.”

Melody: “Hello, Jenny. Nice to talk to you.”

Jenny: “Hello, Melody.”

Melody: “Okay, here’s my question. I’m just curious if you know how all the stories you tell about your past affect people in the real world—people you actually used to know, that is?”

Jenny: “Hmm. I’m not sure, uh, exactly what you mean by that, Melody.”

Melody: “Sure, let me explain. It’s just, you keep telling these stories about things that happened to you. I’m wondering if you’re aware that people are probably out there scouring the Internet right now, looking for the members of your old drama club. And when they find these individuals, and they *will* find them, their lives will be ripped apart. Their privacy will be nonexistent. Even their coworkers will turn on them. I know this for a fact because it happened to me. I’m your old camp counselor Mol—Donkey Face, I believe you used to call me.”

An indrawn breath. Communal.

Jenny, recovering: “Wow, Mol—or I guess I should call you Melody. That’s a great question. It’s something I’ve thought a lot about actually, ever since that video of me surfaced. When that happened, I also felt like the doors on my private life had been blown open. Now it’s like I can’t talk to anyone without that video hanging over me. Anyway, I guess this is when you tell me that you *did* have it right all those years ago? I really did shack up with the Devil?”

Laughter! Cheering! What a show! Everyone knew the story of Mol and the Tool Shed. How that camp shed was a *happening* place. Ignorant counselors. Camp pranks! To the

audience, it was like meeting another celebrity. Donkey Face Moll! And for Jenny, to finally say aloud the line she'd thought of numerous times, how powerful. What a rush. Felt surreal. Jenny wanted to laugh. Hide her face. Barf. Scream.

Melody: "I know that joke seems funny, Jenny. But I want you to know, my kids have been harassed at school. Multiple packages labeled as—well, we'll just say donkey excrement—have been shoved into my mailbox. I've been hounded and harassed on social media. I was asked to leave one board because 'my views did not align with the organization's', even though I'm obviously a different person in my thirties than I was in my teens. I'm still a counselor, by the way. For the last decade I've worked for women's rights, specifically with young girls who have been abused. And yes, Jenny, we—you and I both—grew up in a repressive culture. And I'd be the last person to tell someone to *just get over it*, because we each process the past, particularly our past traumas, in different ways. And of course, knowing what I do now, with all my schooling behind me, not to mention my different life views, I would've handled the tool shed much differently. But you've got to remember, I was just a teenager at the time. And young kids exploring their bodies in a tool shed—that was something we counselors were unequipped to deal with. I'm very sorry for all the pain that incident has caused you. But I

also will say that my past has informed my career choices. And I've been able to move beyond it, and even to see the good in it. I just hope and pray the same thing happens for you."

Well, shit. What a speech. Seemed to Jenny that Donkey Face had been practicing her lines for years. Course she had. All she lacked was the clacking candy. *Schlurpsuck*. Jenny's face burned. Abruptly, they were right back in Mol's hot camp office, rapping about what had happened, Mol trying to get Jenny to see the light. Hallelujah! Her father, waiting with the belt. Peering at her from the front row. *No!* She'd moved past all that. She'd spoken out. She was no longer cowed to silence by some imposed—*script*.

Jenny: "And I'm sorry, Mol, if my being open about something that happened in *my* past has caused you or the people you love harm. But I hardly think it's fair to make me responsible for the actions of people I don't even know. What should I do? Pretend I didn't exist before that video went viral? I mean, like it or not, we're all out there on the Internet anyway. Privacy is an illusion. But I want to be more than what people see online. It's why I came on the air today, to let people ask *me* questions. So that everybody is not just getting soundbites from people who used to know me, former colleagues, fellow students, even my own family!"

Truth was, Jenny had ample cause for complaint. Felt like her life was a sieve; that her pre-video self, who she'd been, was leaking through all the holes punched in what, once upon a time, seemed like a coherent picture. Everyone seemed to have a story about her. Just recently, for example, one bartender had talked about how she'd jilted him out of a shift, which had never happened. Never! He'd broken his toe skiing, missed three weeks of work, and returned to find his favorite shift taken. Just one of the countless stories circulating. Photos from her childhood, published by other people. One that was especially painful: Jenny and her grandmother, taken when Jenny had gone to live with Granny right after the incident with her father. The photo had popped up, anonymously posted on that website "Catch a Celebrity." Only someone in her family could've done it. For a few sleepless nights, Jenny had driven herself—on a mental road to nowhere—*crazy* trying to figure out who. She could remember the picture being taken; how hard it had been to smile for the camera with her back still burning. Who's snapped it? Andrew?

The absolute worst, though, was her mother. Recently, Mary Lanaford had up and married a TV evangelist. Hard as it was to believe, Jenny thought, with all the other twists the last year had taken, but this *had* actually happened. Now Mary could be seen primetime on a certain channel pleading with the world

alongside her new husband—What a warrior for God he was!—to reject Satan, to reject *his* influence in the world, because *his* power was growing, oh yes it was, you could feel *his* presence, even in her own family, especially there. Mary’s face took on a look of ecstasy: Reject *him!* Cast *him* out! God, she loved her new role. Loved it! Her old husband, that fuddy-duddy. That closet drunk. Sure, they’d had some good times. But this man—*this* man. He was a lion, roaring for what was right. At least that was how Jenny imagined the thoughts going through her mother’s mind. Not that they were speaking. But the spectacle of Mary Lanaford on TV, pearl drops in her ears, a huge diamond ring on her finger, begging people to reject Satan, to read her blog, to donate to the Cause—Jenny didn’t watch her mom every night, but she did, often. Every time, Jenny felt the infinite, nothing weight of a pearl in her hand, dropping.

Melody: “Of course not! That’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m just arguing that privacy in our digital age should be viewed as sacred. As you said, Jenny, so much of us is already out there— Heck, we let it all hang out every time we make a credit card transaction.”

Audience laughter.

Melody: “But seriously, I guess what I’m saying, Jenny, is just be careful what stories you tell. Yes, it is your past. Your

experiences belong to *you*. But they inevitably involve other people. And like it or not, these people have become victims. *Your* victims. And no—to all the curious out there, I no longer advocate nipple-taping!” Laughter, riotous clapping. “And yes, I did get my teeth fixed during college, when I had student insurance. Before that my family could never afford it.”

Cheering! The Real Mol! Right here! Onstage!

Radio Host: “Thank you, Melody. This has been quite a show. Any last thoughts, Jenny?”

Jenny: “None from me. Thank you for your perspective, Mol.”

At least Donkey Face hadn’t mentioned the Devil, hadn’t addressed that story or tried to call Jenny out. Almost like the last year didn’t exist. Buttututut! Mol *had* to be aware of the fiery trail Jenny had blazed across the heavens. Satan, dog that he was, was right there in the room with them. Of course, one of the show’s ground rules was: callers couldn’t ask about that video. They had to ask about Jenny’s real life, and they did, for another half hour, though none of it was as riveting as the first two callers. So!

After that interview, Jenny did what she hadn’t done in almost half a year. She went into the bathroom and threw up. Didn’t help. The knot in her gut remained. Lodged tight. Core. That was Jenny’s last public appearance for a while. After the

radio show, she called her surrogate mother, Jeanine, who'd been advising her, acting as her agent even. By this point, they called and texted multiple times a day. Emojis! You could say so much with them. Not that Jenny and Jeanine had planned on developing such a close relationship. But hey, Mandy Starr had gone completely MIA. Karen Wilson, on the other hand, was enjoying quite the comedic career, at least according to her mother.

Whatever.

You've got to be kidding me. When Jeanine saw that J. L. was calling after that disastrous interview, she let the call go to voicemail. Deliberately. Then she re-clicked on a YouTube clip of Karen's In-the-Flesh routine, where her daughter had blown the lid off that video: the fact her mom had staged it; her cousin's reluctance to play the cheating boyfriend. Karen was great with voices. She imitated their entire pre-shoot conversation.

Nate: "Okay, Karen. I mean Mandie—Karen—whatever! Just don't hit me in the face with that beer bottle, okay? Promise? *Promise?*"

Jeanine: "Stop whining, Nate, or you won't get your fifty bucks! And you, Mandie—stop laughing and get down to business. Wait, are you drunk?"

Karen: “*Nooope*, no drunks here. And the name’s Karen, Mom.”

Jeanine: “Your name’ll be Has-Been if you don’t get your ass out there. Now, I want to see some anger. Remember when Nate set fire to your dolly’s hair in kindergarten? How her head melted, and she had to wear that tiny elf hat? You hated that, didn’t you?”

Karen: “Mom wants me to hit you in the face with a beer bottle, Nate.”

Nate: “Shit! No, no, shit! I’m sorry about your doll! NOOOOOO!”

Crack!

Oh, people loved that routine! Karen had also put on weight, every pound like a slap in the face. Obviously, she was getting back at her mom, letting herself go. Meanwhile, Karen had signed on with someone else. Her *father* was now acting as her agent.

Jeanine’s mouth tightened. She’d lost one daughter, and was still mourning it, but had gained another, at least temporarily. Was Jenny Lanaford a rebound relationship? The writing, in any case, certainly seemed to be on the wall. REDRUM! *How* grotesque had that radio performance been? J. L. had completely lost control of the situation! Oh, maybe she could redeem it,

Bachelorette-style, say—not just Seth, but dates with a whole line of desperados. All types. Bad boys, gym jocks, nerds. Finally, she picks one! Jeanine could see it. Not that J. L. would go for it. She didn't listen, any more than Mandy Starr had. "They'll eat you alive, honey," Jeanine told her when J. L. first floated the radio idea. "What do you mean, you want them to know the *real* you? The real you doesn't exist—not out there. Honey, you've been on dates with movie stars! You've partied with the starlets! Look at what you've accomplished! People would *kill* to be in your position. No, no, I know. It was a black dog *named* Satan, not Satan himself," Jeanine reassured her, something she had to do more and more frequently. What a headache! Shortly after they'd come together, J. L. had confessed *that* little nugget. Even now, Jeanine wasn't sure what to believe about it. Not that it really mattered. Did it? "But if you go on the radio, honey, and let people ask you questions about your past, then *you* become real, and nobody wants that. They want the illusion! They want to believe you're sweet outside, but decadent within, not human and flawed all through— Fine, fine, I understand." Jeanine sighed, wanting the conversation to be over. "Yes! Go out there, be real! Sure, the kicked-out-the-Devil stuff is running its course. You need something new to fuel your motor. Go on the air, be out there, be real, be Jenny!" What an idiot. What had the Real Jenny

Lanaford been? A bartender with issues? Well, Devil take the hindmost!

So, when J. L. called her after that disastrous crash-and-burn affair, and Jeanine's instincts were telling her it was finally over, she ignored the call. Good riddance. She did text, though. One last time. She had a heart, after all. The poor lost, broken little girl. But she'd also had enough. J. L. wasn't her problem. Not anymore.

"Honey, call your mother." That text seemed incomplete. For a few moments, Jeanine debated. She scrolled through her emojis. Thumbs up? Too casual. A rose? No. Finally, she settled on a simple heart. Then she added two more. Three hearts. Yes, that set the right tone. Most importantly, it didn't say, *Call me back*.

Dewey's life was over. He'd done it. He'd approached Beth, *his Beth*, as he'd thought of her, ever since he'd see her emerge from Mr. Dawletson's office that day. He knew, if the world didn't, why her cheeks had lost their color and big circles were growing beneath her eyes. Ripples in a pond. The heaviness that had dropped into her life. There was no shame in it. He'd rescue her. He would. So one day—he did it. He called her. When she came

to the phone, he almost couldn't believe his luck. He asked if she wanted to go to Elmwood Park. And Beth, his goddess, said yes.

They met where the video had been shot, not that Beth knew it. She was waiting for him on a park bench, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, hunched over slightly, arms crossed. She looked so lost. He wanted to hug her, kiss her. She was taller than he was. Sitting, they were even. "Hey," he said when he saw her.

"Hi Dewey," she said, brightening. "I'm so glad you called. It's nice to go to the park with a friend. I haven't been here in years."

A friend? "Yeah," Dewey agreed, sitting by her. Then, because he couldn't contain himself: "I'm so sorry you're having to go through this. No one should ever—not *ever*—" He trailed off.

Beth dropped her eyes to her lap. "I guess you know then."

"Ever since that day I saw you coming out of Mr. Dawletson's office," Dewey admitted, not daring to take her hand, which was just inches away. Inches. Would've been so easy.

"Oh."

"But it's not like it's going around school or anything," Dewey assured her. "I swear, I haven't said a word to anyone. But

somebody's got to stop it!" Beth's anguished look made Dewey furious. He'd make him pay, that man.

"They've tried but—there's nothing anyone can do." And then Beth was sobbing, and he was holding her. Holding *her!* His arms were around Beth Rigby. He was breathing in her scent. She smelled like vanilla. It hit him: Beth was just a kid, really.

"I'm so sorry, Dewey," Beth said, pulling away and wiping her eyes. "I swear I didn't come here to sob on your shoulder." She gave him a tentative smile.

"It's okay," Dewey said. Felt like he was floating. "I'm the one who brought it up. Blame it on me. Besides, I think I can stop it. I mean, we can. We can stop it together." He'd thought it all through. Lucas was right. The evidence was all circumstantial, without a witness. But if Beth was willing to talk—that'd cinch it. It would! They could do it! He knew it would be hard, but he'd support her. He'd defend her! They'd lock away the Devil.

"What are you talking about, Dewey?" Frowning, Beth drew away from him.

"Just take a look at this!" he said, triumphantly handing her the transcript of his conversation with Mr. Dawletson.

Beth started reading. After a moment, her face flushed.

"That's Mr. Dawletson!" Dewey exclaimed. "I mean, it's me as Beth Bigguns. Lucas and I used to go into these chat rooms

and try to catch pervs. I know it sounds fucked up. We got the idea from *To Catch a Predator*. But look, that's where the perv agrees to meet Beth in the park. *This park*. Kenneth and I hid up there"—he pointed to the tower at the top of the big slide—"to film him. And it was Mr. Dawletson! He was standing over by the kiddie swings and holding a bag. It's hard to see in the video, but his tie is red. I mean, he's the perv. Really! So all we've got to do is—"

Beth stood abruptly and threw the transcript to the ground. Her voice was shaking. "God, Dewey! How could you? When people said you were some kind of creepy voyeur, spying on that lady and posting stuff online, I defended you. I thought—" She took a deep breath. "I thought you were different." She began to cry again. Dewey was horrified. He tried to say something, but Beth interrupted him. "I guess you think this is funny. Some big joke. Is Lucas filming me now? You bastard!" she shouted. "My dad has cancer. There! Post that online, why don't you?"

After she ran off, Dewey slowly picked up the transcript. He read through it in a daze, trying to figure out what had set her off. Okay, maybe he'd been wrong about her and Mr. Dawletson, but — Then he understood. Oh God. Beth Bigguns, who carried a shiny pink backpack. *Sometimes I chew my pencil when I get horny*. Oh

God, oh God, oh God. *His* Beth had read that. Up until now he'd never realized— Dewey buried his face in his hands. His life was over. He hated himself. He wished he were dead. Pure and simple.

And so it goes, the ride, whatever you want to call it.

BOOM

pause

barfgrimace**heartheartheart**— life goes on. What a ride! Sometimes all you can say about it. The way a person's face contorts in freefall. Weird from what gravity does to it. The terror, the joy. The everything-mixed-up of it. How Malcolm finally texted Jeanine two words: "Karen's pregnant." With a *whoop*, she sprang into action. Heart hammering, she took out her cell phone. Surely, the rest of it didn't matter. They *had* to forgive her! Or Dewey, who had to get up the next morning, and the next. Lucas wasn't speaking to him. Beth glared at him, balefully. He'd skip geometry, but there was the principal—watching. Finally, Dewey broke down. He confronted his parents, told them the Jenny Lanaford thing just wouldn't die. Felt like the Devil was *always* eyeing him. They whisked him out of school. Plopped him into counseling.

For Jenny, she'd thought her life was over when that video surfaced. But then—she stepped onstage and felt reborn. A new person. Playacting! Her past blown open. Soaring high up in a

place where truth was *also* costume and lines. Finally, she could live! That radio interview, though. It marked the plummet. Not like she hadn't experienced negative press before. But this was relentless. A whole new level. The public seized on it. Jenny Lanaford's victims. She never did call Seth. Poor guy, jilted again. BOOM! He was up to his neck in hook-up offers. No clue if he accepted.

Funny thing, though, about Jenny Lanaford: You could juxtapose all the moments of her rise and fall, like the time she told a riveted world how the Devil had cooked her dinner ("He burned the rice!"), or that famous phrase: "He's really just a guy whose Dad kicked him out." Like the montage people get when their life flashes before their eyes—in crisis, when dying. Btt butt but! Once on the Internet, there always. A kind of afterlife. A half-life. For a while it was a frenzy. Eventually, people moved on. Jenny Lanaford was yesterday's news. Except for everyone who had contracts with her. Then it was JFUM all over again. The cereal people cut ties. The Benson people replaced her face with a cartoon. "Tough on the most Devilish stains." The Devil gets booted. The humor was still there, obviously. The movie *The Devil and I* continued its production. That old line: The show must go on. It did. Too much money already invested. Books had been published, middle grade on up. Satan had become a cultural icon.

A prodigal son. Oh, the many ways *he* fell in love. In high school, on HBO. A tortured hero—a king.

And so, in the darkness of her room one night (not the old safe space at Granny's; she'd finally sold the house and split the proceeds with Andrew), Jenny made a phone call. First call she'd made to anyone from her old life in over a year. It was 9 p.m., night-owl early, late for someone with a family. "Is Violet there?" Jenny asked when a woman's voice answered. She felt like a beggar on a doorstep. Good thing the room was dark. Gave her courage. She could pretend it was her old bedroom. Back when the walls were firm.

"This is Violet."

Jenny took a deep breath. "Violet, this is Jenny—Jennifer Lanaford. I wanted to call you and—I wanted to call you and say I'm sorry."

A long pause. "Jenny! Wow, I haven't heard from you in—I guess it's been about ten years. But what are you sorry for?" A child's voice on the other end. Violet, whispering, "Give Mommy a minute, honey."

Jenny felt awkward again, an intruder. This new room, so unfamiliar. She could imagine Violet in a comfortable house, surrounded by light, life, a family. They were the same age, but

Violet seemed beyond her. Grownup. Worldly. Part of the world in a way she wasn't, anyway. Jenny blinked back tears. "I'm sorry if I ruined your life somehow, Violet. You know, how everyone's saying I ruined theirs by telling all those stories?"

Violet laughed. "Like you have that power! But yeah, you've had quite a year, haven't you? Look, I don't know about other people, but Mol's book is getting a lot of press right now. I'd say you did her plenty of favors. And you never mentioned my name, so I can't complain. I was always just your ex-best friend who lost her virginity at the Fall Dance."

"Mol wrote a book?" Jenny asked, surprised. "What's it about?"

"I don't know. How to keep your nipples pointy? She's like some feminist crusader now. With straight teeth."

Jenny laughed. She *laughed*.

"Anyway," Violet said, "you don't owe me an apology. It's not like I've been a great friend to you over the years. I mean, you must know I told your mom about the pearl earring. And I spread a bunch of rumors about you in school, too, about stuff you'd done with guys. It was all stuff *I'd* done, of course. Go figure."

Jenny sat frozen, phone in hand. Her mother had *known*. All these years, her mother had known about the pearl earring. "Violet—"

“No wait, let me finish.” Violet sounded almost angry. “I also told Mol about you in the tool shed.”

“Why?” Jenny wasn’t shocked exactly, because it explained an awful lot. But still.

“Because you were always so perfect!” Violet exclaimed. “Boys didn’t want you for just *that*. But I had big boobs, it’s what I had to offer. And I felt like I couldn’t say no, especially not after all that with my cousin.”

Jenny had completely forgotten. But now she remembered: Violet’s older cousin Graham, how Violet and Graham used to “practice” in the closet. Jealous and loyal, Jenny had stood guard for them. How she and Violet used to smile about it, conspiratorial. It had happened the same summer they went to church camp.

“And there you were,” Violet continued, “with this perfect family, and perfect body, and you were good at *everything*. And you must know, by the end of high school I was a total mess. I tried college, but I dropped out. Eventually, I went through the twelve-step program. I tried calling you years ago, to confess, to apologize, but I never got up the nerve. Also, I wasn’t all that sorry. But Jenny, you were always there for me—you never once ratted me out. Not once. I think I hated you even for that.”

Jenny was silent as these accusing words, like a soothing wave, washed over her. The knot in her gut loosened. “But—why would you hate me for not spilling your secrets?”

Violet sighed. “For a long time, I blamed you for what happened with Graham, I guess. I mean, he was my cousin. I trusted him. And he *used* me. And you could have stopped it at any point. But you didn’t.”

“How could *I* have stopped it?”

“You could’ve told someone,” Violet said briskly. “But anyway, that was a long time ago. And I know it wasn’t your fault. Like I said, you don’t have the power to ruin my life.”

But Jenny was still stuck on the first point, steeped in the *how-it-was* of those years. “*Why* would I have stopped it? I mean, Violet, I was totally in awe of you. You told me to keep my mouth shut. Don’t you remember? Back then it felt like—us against our parents. Like we were so smart and grownup. I wasn’t going to spill! I mean, as an adult, sure, I would’ve said something immediately. But back then I didn’t understand what was happening—” Jenny paused, hearing her own words. “Anyway, if it makes you feel any better, I haven’t been a great friend to you either. When I decided not to go to the Fall Dance our junior year, I told Gabe Wilson that he should ask you out. I told him if he

played his cards right, you'd probably have sex with him. I said you were on birth control, so it'd be alright."

Violet laughed. She *laughed*. "That's not why I got on birth control, you know, at least not at first. I had painful periods and my doctor recommended it. But my mother refused. Wait, hold on." There was a long pause. In the background, Jenny heard voices. Violet's, a man's, a child's. Violet picked up the phone again. "I'm back. But Jenny, why are you really calling?"

Jenny grinned in the darkness. As she'd talked to Violet, a plan had been forming. "There's something I've got to do. And I was hoping you could help me."

BOOM! That fiery night when Jenny Lanaford, for no obvious-to-the-world reason, set fire to the shed behind her family's old home. WTF?! Luckily, no one was injured. The current occupants were on vacation. Someone called 911; the fire was doused before it really got going. No more than a campfire blaze, really. In multiple videos—the neighbors all grabbed their cell phones—you can hear ecstatic whooping. Like there was more than one person. By the time the fire trucks and police cars showed up, there was only Jenny with a gas can, facing a row of held-out cell phones like a wall of stakes, sharpened. "It was all a hoax!" she shouts as she's led away. "Nothing there all along! Call my vet! Here's his

number! He'll tell you all about my black dog Satan! I brought home a dog! A dog, you hear me! It was all a hoax!"

That old line.

The next day, her mother, in an absurd fur coat, with glistening eyes and a huge smile, bailed her out, on the condition that Jenny appear on the Network, or at the very least call in, to renounce the Devil and *his* works. Just in time for their annual campaign drive.



Kerri Pierce is a writer and translator living in Honeoye Falls, NY. She thoroughly enjoys the challenge of language as an artistic medium that is at once fluid and tangible. Her translations, from a variety of languages and genres, have appeared, among other places, in *The New Yorker*, *World Literature Today*, and *Words Without Borders*, and have been short-listed for the International Dublin Literary Award and the Pen Translation Prize. In snatches and pockets, she has also composed her own poems and stories. Her poetry has appeared in *Literary Mama* and her short fiction in the

SFWP Anthology. However, she is still an emerging writer (can't help but picture with that word a weird head-shaped balloon floating up). Pierce also holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Penn State.