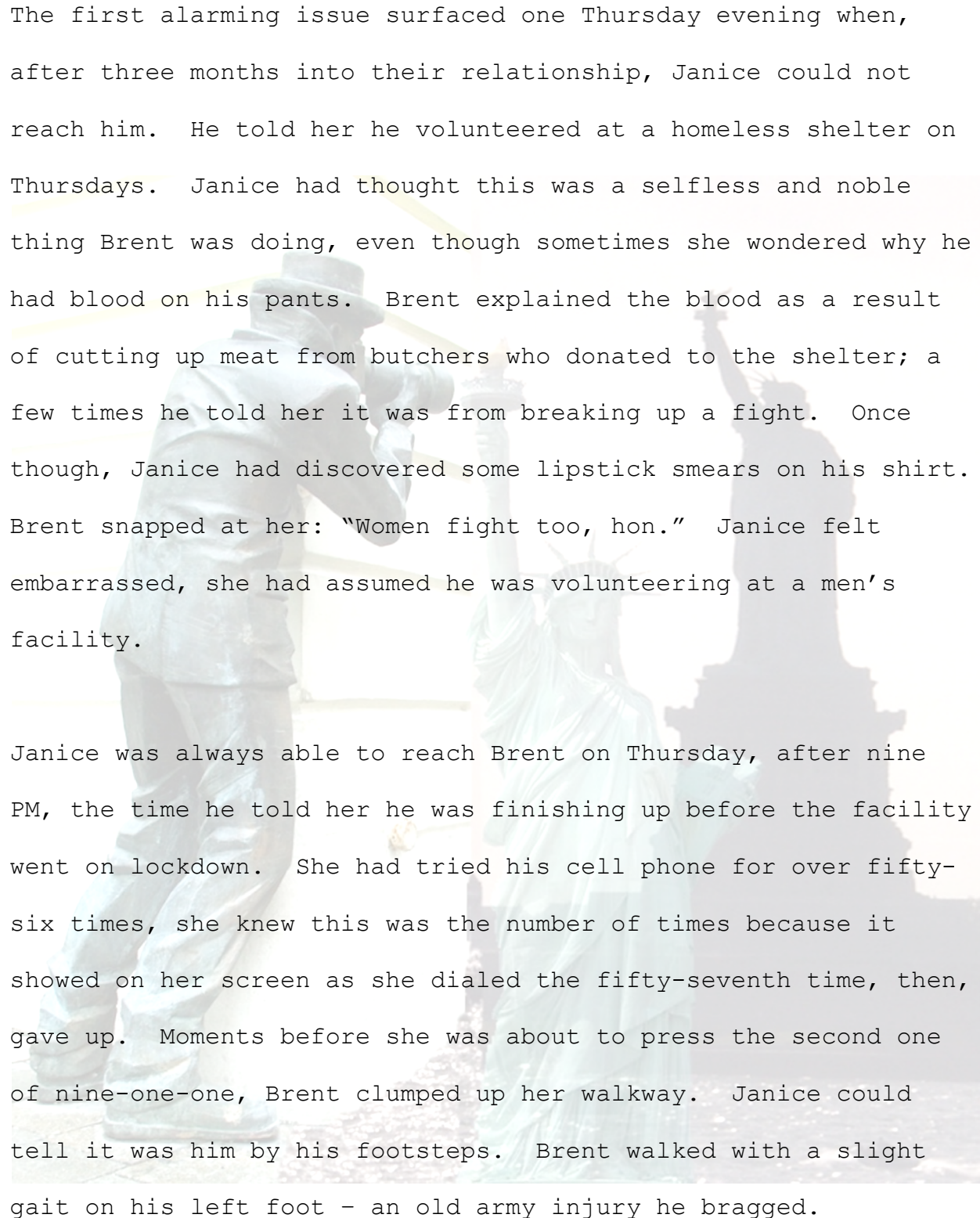


On the Fence

Janice thought she had found the love of her life. After three divorces, she desperately sought love and, what she called, happiness. Brent was an attentive listener who remembered every detail of their conversations. He too claimed to have had multiple divorces, how many, he never quite revealed. Both discussed their college aged, and, for him, adult children, with the same sense of humor and love.

Brent told Janice that he was estranged from his children due to their mother's animosity towards him having divorced her. The ex-wives, he would implore, took his wanting out of their union, hard; it seems Brent considered himself one of the best mates a woman could reel in on a matrimony hook. Brent also fancied himself a talented fisherman. He sometimes referred to the women as "being caught on his inescapable love line." He would always adopt a warm, slightly tilted smirk after he made that statement. Though Janice found it a bit disturbing, she just accepted it as one of his little tics. Compared to most bad behaviors of her previous mates, this was, for her, but a mere annoyance.



The first alarming issue surfaced one Thursday evening when, after three months into their relationship, Janice could not reach him. He told her he volunteered at a homeless shelter on Thursdays. Janice had thought this was a selfless and noble thing Brent was doing, even though sometimes she wondered why he had blood on his pants. Brent explained the blood as a result of cutting up meat from butchers who donated to the shelter; a few times he told her it was from breaking up a fight. Once though, Janice had discovered some lipstick smears on his shirt. Brent snapped at her: "Women fight too, hon." Janice felt embarrassed, she had assumed he was volunteering at a men's facility.

Janice was always able to reach Brent on Thursday, after nine PM, the time he told her he was finishing up before the facility went on lockdown. She had tried his cell phone for over fifty-six times, she knew this was the number of times because it showed on her screen as she dialed the fifty-seventh time, then, gave up. Moments before she was about to press the second one of nine-one-one, Brent clumped up her walkway. Janice could tell it was him by his footsteps. Brent walked with a slight gait on his left foot - an old army injury he bragged.

The doorbell rang with a hard "ding" before the "dong". To Janice, it sounded as if Brent was troubled. He rarely used the bell, he preferred to knock. Flinging open the door, Janice exclaimed:

"What happened, I was so worried?"

"I think I lost my phone, I tried to backtrack my steps, but couldn't find it anywhere." He declared, eyes wide, then darting to the left and right - not exactly the kind people get when their phones, which contained their entire lives, were lost or stolen.

"You must have insurance; can you get another one?"

"I forgot to send in the form, I never lose phones." He announced, pinching his chin as he spoke.

"Hope you backed everything up to your Cloud account, least you have your numbers."

"Mine was an android, remember?"

"They must have some kind of backup for your information, no?"

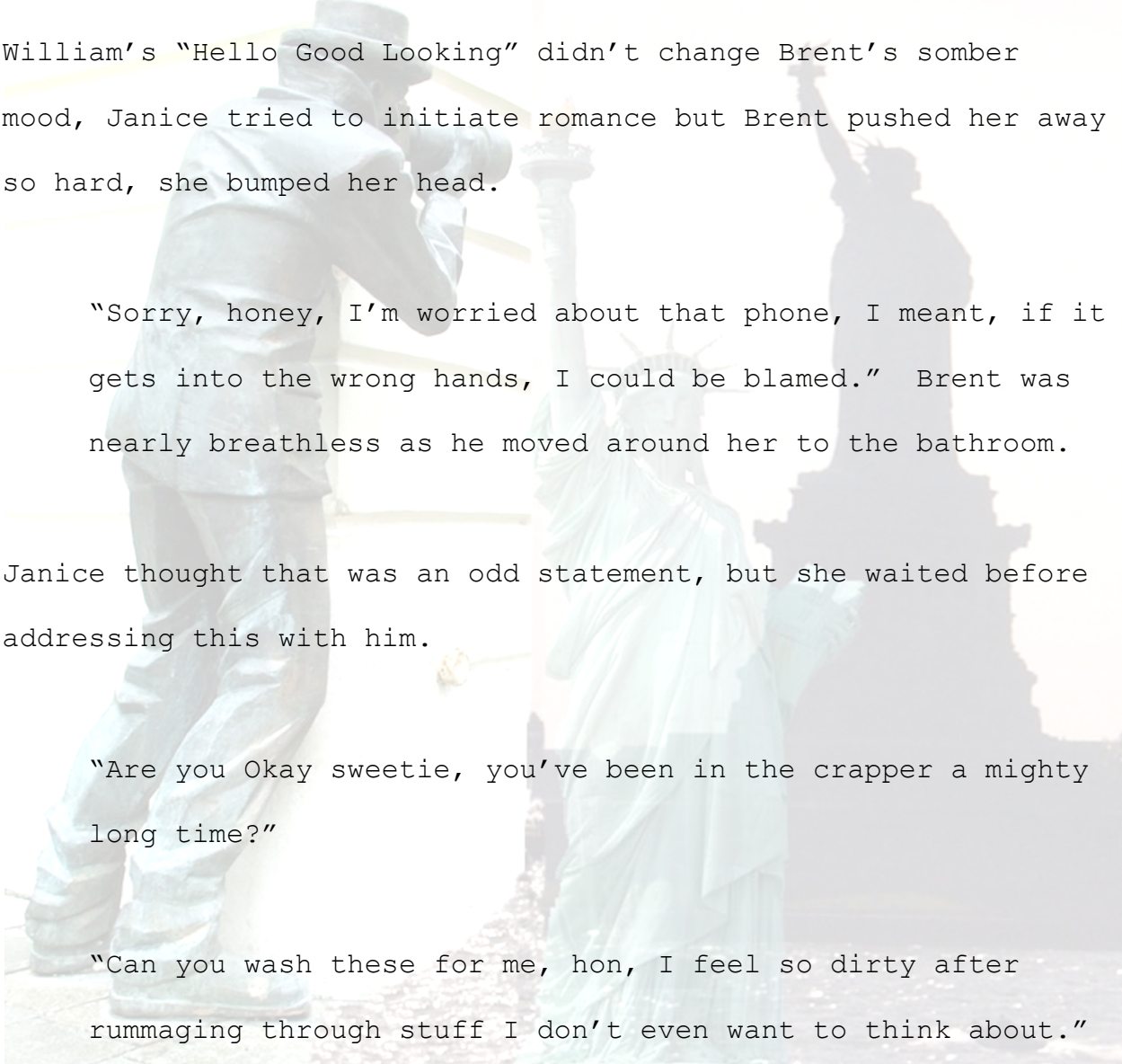
"It was more a burner phone I used for that dating site, I didn't want to use my real number, I had had a lot of issues with women in the past." He announced, stroking her hair, trying to keep a distance - he stunk worse than he usually did on Thursday nights.

"Well, you want me to drive you to your place and get your "real" phone, now that you've confirmed that I am not a crazy stalker?" It had occurred to Janice that she had never visited Brent's place - did he ever give her a physical address?

"I'm exhausted from looking for my phone, you got anything to eat?"

"Sure, I'll make you something, then, we can go back out and look, if you want?"

Brent was extra quiet at dinner, skimming over her steak, peas and potatoes, his favorite dish. Janice put on some of his favorite music - country and western, the old-fashioned kind by



Hank Williams and Merle Haggard. She once tried to play some Patsy Kline and Loretta Lynn numbers but Brent asked her to put on Hank Williams, Jr. instead. He wasn't fond of female musicians singing country music. Come to think of it, he really didn't have any female artists he liked to listen to. When Hank William's "Hello Good Looking" didn't change Brent's somber mood, Janice tried to initiate romance but Brent pushed her away so hard, she bumped her head.

"Sorry, honey, I'm worried about that phone, I meant, if it gets into the wrong hands, I could be blamed." Brent was nearly breathless as he moved around her to the bathroom.

Janice thought that was an odd statement, but she waited before addressing this with him.

"Are you Okay sweetie, you've been in the crapper a mighty long time?"

"Can you wash these for me, hon, I feel so dirty after rummaging through stuff I don't even want to think about."

Brent confessed, almost as if an afterthought.

'Of course," Janice complied, taking the bundle and hurrying to the laundry room in the corner of her kitchen.

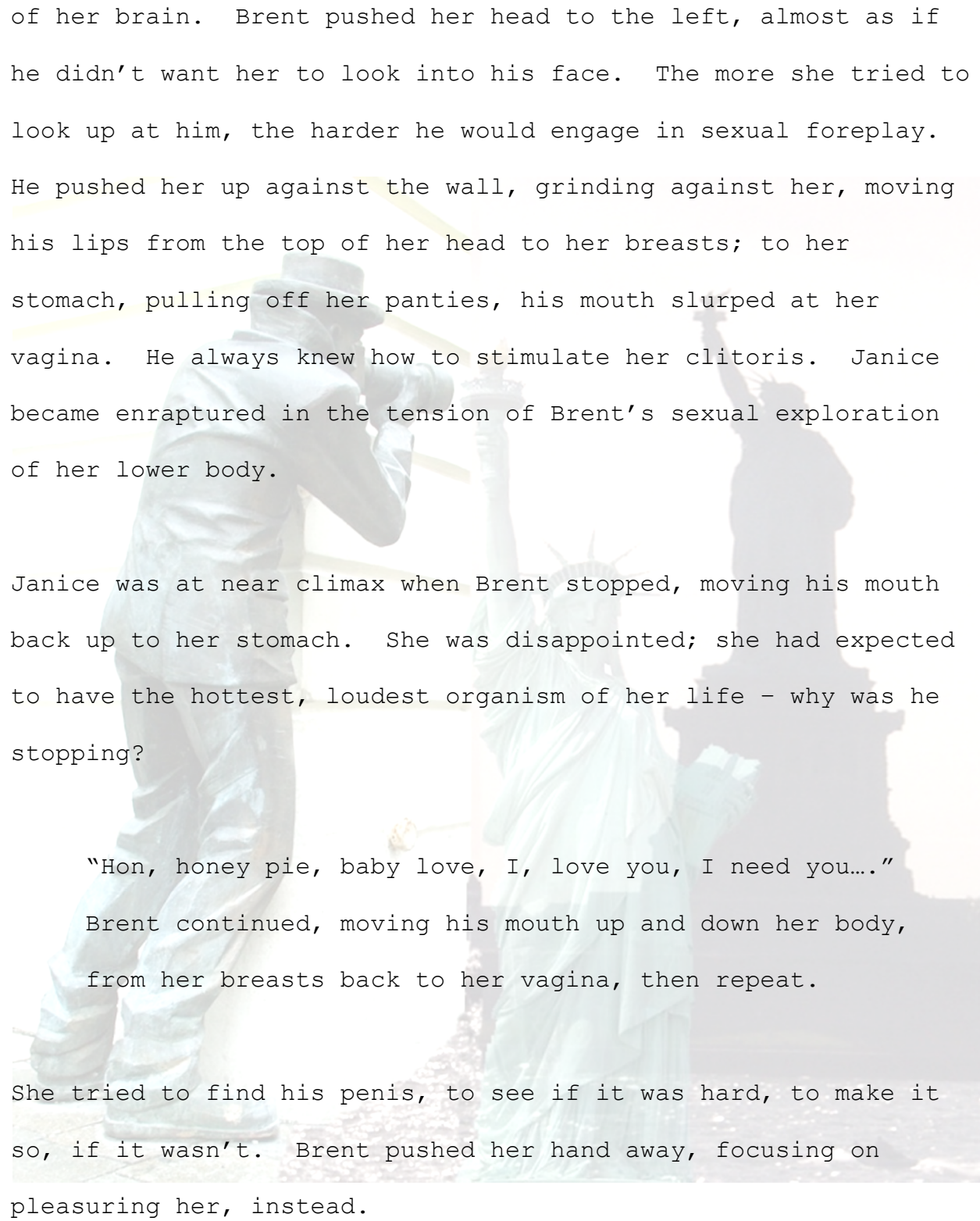
"Why don't you lie down, I'll give you a back rub."

Brent's clothes had an odd smell, one that wasn't the usual combination of disinfectant and men's cologne. This scent was of fresh pine soil; Janice chalked it up to Brent having been foraging around the outdoors, maybe he had looked through some bushes. She pushed it out of her mind. Brent was a good man who lost his phone; she was only going to be supportive.

"Oh my gosh, you startled me," Janice yelped when Brent grabbed her around the waist with a sudden desire for affection.

"I realized I was being a jerk to the best woman I have ever loved and cared for," Brent declared, kissing the top of her head, while caressing her breasts with both hands.

Turning around to face him, Janice was nearly speechless, he had never uttered those words before. In fact, those were words she had not heard in a long time. It was so refreshing to know she was loved by such a good, caring man as Brent. He was good to look at too, she smiled as the thought came into the forefront



of her brain. Brent pushed her head to the left, almost as if he didn't want her to look into his face. The more she tried to look up at him, the harder he would engage in sexual foreplay. He pushed her up against the wall, grinding against her, moving his lips from the top of her head to her breasts; to her stomach, pulling off her panties, his mouth slurped at her vagina. He always knew how to stimulate her clitoris. Janice became enraptured in the tension of Brent's sexual exploration of her lower body.

Janice was at near climax when Brent stopped, moving his mouth back up to her stomach. She was disappointed; she had expected to have the hottest, loudest organism of her life - why was he stopping?

"Hon, honey pie, baby love, I, love you, I need you..."

Brent continued, moving his mouth up and down her body, from her breasts back to her vagina, then repeat.

She tried to find his penis, to see if it was hard, to make it so, if it wasn't. Brent pushed her hand away, focusing on pleasuring her, instead.

"Listen, baby, baby?" Brent crooned.

"Yes, honey, what is it, tell me, tell mama?"

I borrowed some money from your stash, I found it in the closet, to pay my daughter's college tuition, I felt so guilty, but, if I didn't get it to her, she was going to be kicked out - I was going to put it back before you noticed, but honesty is the best policy in a relationship when you love someone as much as I love you, honey best." Brent whispered licking in, out and around her right ear.

'Anything, anything for you babe, oh babe, please.'" She moaned, wanting him to finish that organism she had so badly longed for.

Slowly working his way back down to her throbbing vulva, Brent delivered a thundering finish to his sexual conquest of her body.

Janice was in too much of a sexual euphoria to notice that Brent didn't appear interested in engaging in intercourse with her at all. In fact, he went to the refrigerator, got himself a beer and plopped down on the sofa to watch television. Janice went into the bedroom, brushed her teeth, sprayed on some of her most

expensive cologne and shimmied into her sexiest nighties. When she bent over the back of the sofa to give Brent a warm hug, Brent appeared to have dozed off. Janice nibbled his left ear, the right one, nothing. She heaved her body up, intending to flip over the back of the sofa and position her head in Brent's lap when the doorbell rang. Brent did not move an inch. Janice hurried back to the bedroom to retrieve a robe.

"Sorry madam, but there has been a murder in the area."

"Oh, sweet Jesus, what happened, officers?"

"A woman, in her mid-forties, from what we can tell, she met some guy on a dating site, and things went very wrong - turns out, he was a homeless drifter."

"How, how did you know this, officer?"

"Cell phone records."

"Oh, so you are going door-to-door warning everyone in the neighborhood?"

"No, the cell phone in the guy's possession showed a ping from this location."

"Oh shit, you think he was outside my house, before...?"

"Is anyone else in the home with you madam?"

"Yes, my boyfriend, his name is Brent, but, he's asleep."

"No need to trouble him, madam, the phone was a burner, tracked to a homeless drifter down at the shelter, he's in custody, confessed to the killing, we recovered a large sum of money on him, likely the victim's, we think it was a robbery gone bad."

Janice had hoped that Brent would wake up, but he seemed dead asleep. How he could remain in blissful slumber with all the commotion only a few feet away was becoming a mystery to her. Again, though, she attributed it to his being tired and stressed about his phone. Janice peeked back at Brent, he wasn't stirring. She closed the door, moved out onto the entry porch to her condominium, and, in a low voice:

"Officer, do you think people should not keep money in their homes?"

"Why do you ask, madam?"

"I keep some money around in case I get robbed, that way, maybe the burglar won't take my life, just my money?"

"I can't answer that madam, the dead woman had \$6,300 dollars on her but it didn't save her life."

"Thank you, officers, thank you for your service." Janice gulped, moving back inside her home and locking the door, watching the lawmen walk to their patrol car.

She wanted Brent to wake up, to tell him about the events of the night. Brent, however, had gone to bed. Janice couldn't sleep. Something was nudging at her. The phone, the money, and, the dead woman. Most unusual, was Brent's actions, he didn't go into her bedroom to sleep unless she invited him. She decided that she was just being paranoid. After all, he had just declared his love for her, he probably was beginning to feel at home, she convinced herself.

Janice picked up the remote and began flipping around the channels, a news story caused her to stop:

"We've just uncovered a breaking story, information that the public needs to be aware regarding cell phones: "Traditionally, police identify a suspect, then issue a warrant to search the person's home or belongings. Geofence warrants work in reverse: Police start with a time and location, and request data from Google or another tech company about the devices in the area at the time. The companies then typically supply anonymous data on the devices in the area. Police use their own investigative tools to narrow down this list. Then they may ask for more specific information—often an email address or a name of the account holder—for a phone on the narrower list.

Critics say the process is an invasion of privacy, often subjecting many people to an unconstitutional search. More from our reporter, Norm Mather":

"Mary, this investigation stemmed from an innocent man being charged with murder. Twenty-three-year-old Jorge Molina was arrested and jailed for six days on suspicion of killing another man. Police in Avondale, Arizona, about 20 miles from Phoenix, held Molina for questioning. According to a police report,

officers told him they knew "one hundred percent, without a doubt" his phone was at the scene of the crime, based on data from Google. In fact, Molina wasn't there. He'd simply lent an old phone to the man police later arrested. The phone was still signed into Molina's Google account."

The hairs on Janice's arm stood up. She told herself this was all coincidental. But, her gut told her to find out one last piece of information. Her girlfriend had warned her about trusting Brent - she snapped that the friend was just jealous that she had found a decent man. Tiptoeing to her room, she feigned changing into a different nightgown, one that she kept hanging deep into her closet. She peered over at Brent, he was sound asleep, she could see the covers rising and falling over his chest.

Locating the strong box with the money she had saved, Janice clumsily opened it, discovering that the amount missing was six-thousand-three-hundred dollars of the nine thousand, three-hundred that had been wrapped in four bundles. There was only one bundle of Three-thousand dollars remaining. This shit just got scary, she heard herself say.

Putting her hand over her mouth to contain her nervous breathing, she put the container back in its place, ripped off her sexy garments and closed the closet doors. Brent cleared his throat, then turned over on his left side, to his right one, facing her. She told herself not to panic, not to jump to conclusions - it all might just be a coincidence; besides, she was jittery from the news that the police had brought her. Still, the facts kept popping into her head: Brent working at the shelter; his cell phone being lost; the money he took, the exact amount that was found on the homeless drifter, the news report and, Brent's confession earlier. Why would he confess to her if he had something to do with the events of the night, she finally persuaded herself, climbing into bed next to a loudly snoring Brent?

At seven AM, the following morning, Brent was in the kitchen. The smell of eggs, toast, bacon and steaming hot coffee whiffed into Janice's nostrils.

"Hello Mrs. Brent Brownward," He beamed, wearing her fluffy white bathrobe that she had gotten at a high-end spa.

"What?" Janice responded, trying to form a smile, to cover her nerves.

"Will you marry me, Janice Stewart, I never want to be apart from you, hon?"

Janice looked past Brent to the small patio of her unit, smoke was coming from the grill that she purchased from Walmart but never had a chance to use.

"You barbequing our breakfast, babe?"

"I was gonna, but I spilled grease all over my clothes, the ones from yesterday, so I just tossed them into the fire, can you pick me up some clothes later, hon?"

For the first time, Janice ACTUALLY turned and looked into Brent's face - anytime she had tried before, Brent would distract her with oral sex. It was funny how she rarely, really looked closely at him. His eyes were shifty, his nose flared when he made statements that she thought were, likely, untrue; his mouth was crusty around the corners; his lips were unattractively thinner than the picture from his profile; he only had one set of clothes that she laundered each time they were together; his hair was dirty, receding and, now that she

had time to think, she doesn't remember him having a real, hard erection - ever.

Giving Brent the best attempt at a passionate kiss, she could muster, Janice feigned agreement about that shopping, immediately, rather than later:

"Let me grab my bag, I can't wait to dress my handsome knight in shining armor - soon to be husband," She inveigled, dashing up the stairs to the closet to retrieve the rest of her cash and get as far away from Brent as she could.

With an ear to the bedroom door, Janice could hear Brent setting the table, then, walking out to the deck. Taking her personal belongings, plus her jewelry, she opened the window, tossed them down first, then stealthily shimmied down the side of an oak tree outside her bedroom window.

Janice decided that she'd put the condo up for sale after she had gotten to another state - let the real estate broker and the cops find him waiting for those clothes. She, in her soul, had always been partially on the fence about Brent, which is why she had refused to let him move in the first week they met.