

The Company We Keep

She takes her coffee black, and takes it all day. Pot after pot and nothing else. She skips breakfast and lunch and supper—just has her coffee, black and bitter. Her stomach is so full of coffee alone that if her skin broke, she might bleed the stuff—ooze the dark liquid from her veins. Her skin is a thin yellow film stretched taut over bone. Her hair is thin, too—greying and long, draping down to her thighs. She never cuts it and never wears color, just sweaters in white, grey, and beige. And faded jeans and loafers.

Her days are crossword puzzles and walking Harvey, her dog and sole friend. Letters used to be thrown in there too--hours of just writing, crumpling, starting over. But the few good enough to send came back unread. A sorry has no weight when there is nothing to be sorry for. And what if it hadn't been this way? Would it make a difference? She pretends it wouldn't because the difference it truly would make is too great for her 90 pound frame to handle.

A dog is good company, but a grandchild is the best. A son, too--if he wants you. But she has neither now, so instead the space is filled with a newfoundland and lots of coffee--black. A bitter taste to overpower a bitter memory. It is one thing to have a treasure taken, and another entirely to have it leave of its own accord. She sets down her pen, the crossword finished, and leads Harvey to the front door. The cold creeps up beneath her shirt, and her jacket lined with faux fur cannot keep her body warm, even in this spring weather.

Susan is the wife; the wife of her son now gone willingly from her. And Trever is the grandson; the grandson she doesn't know. They live an hour away, in a perfectly groomed neighborhood. With perfect housewives who clean the house all day and perfect husbands who come home at five, leaving mistresses for the weekend 'work' trips. Their house is white with light blue shutters and widow-boxes full of pansies. She'd been there once, on Trever's first birthday, and was never let inside.

By Sarah Doughty