

Water Hitting Water.

by Pia Ehrhardt

Jenny was certain nobody saw her when she took the slinky shirt from her father's store. It was blue with buttons shaped like cherries, the fabric light as air. She balled it up in her hand.

Her father owned a chain of boutiques called Body Electric. The racks were filled with clothes for teenage girls, tight shirts with tiny snaps down the front, mini skirts, acid-washed jeans, Doc Martens in every color. Dance mixes of the 70s pounded through the speakers.

The price tag cut into her palm. She waved goodbye to the sales girls, walked under the neon sign and out of the store. The sensors didn't go off because she knew how to beat them.

Jenny hurried to the food court to meet Marcus like she did every day after school. They shared their homework and ate Chick-fil-A. Her father thought she was shooting low. On Sunday while he watched football on TV, she'd had sex with Marcus in her dad's Mercedes in the garage.

She found a table by the fountain that spouted in the center of the food court. The sound reminded her of waterfalls and the family vacations they'd take in the summer. Her mother loved to hike and if she saw a waterfall on the map she'd turn Rambo, take the lead and slog them through streams, down twigs and branches with her boot, tear her legs up on brambles. She'd make them stop and listen for the sound of water hitting water, then head that way. At the falls they'd crouch on slippery rocks and watch the cascade like it was a Broadway show.

She and Marcus sat close enough to the fountain to feel the spray. They shared an order of waffle fries. He cracked open tiny packs of pepper and dumped them into a pile, then added ketchup and made his own hot sauce, offered her some. "I'll pass," Jenny said.

"You're missing out," he said. He had on his faded Saints jersey, baggy jeans, scuffed army boots.

The security guard glanced over at them and Jenny held up the paper container, offered him a fry, but he shook his head, no.

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"Can we do what we did on Sunday again?" Marcus said.

"What's that?" Jenny said, smiling. She bumped her knee against his, ate fries.

Her father appeared at their table and put his hand out. "Give it back," he said.

"What?" Jenny said.

Her father motioned for the security guard to come over and. Jenny walked between them, back to Body Electric so her purse could be checked.

"You're a jerk, Dad," she said, under her breath. She checked over her shoulder for Marcus and he was following a few yards behind "Call a lawyer," she told him, and he shrugged, palms up.

The shirt was found in her purse. Her father told the security guard he would handle this, and asked Marcus to wait for Jenny outside.

"Is this the first time?" He paced back and forth in his office. Jenny sat on a chair with a back that rocked. "Why would you steal from me?" he said.

Jenny rocked harder in the chair. "Can you sit still?" her father said. She played with the buckle on her purse.

"Are you upset with me?" he said.

She couldn't say he was the parent who got up every day and went to work, went about his business because he wasn't sick. Her mother had brain cancer and she'd lost so much weight; most of her hair was gone. She moved from bed to sofa back to bed because the chemo had screwed up her equilibrium. Jenny had been stealing shirts for her, presents she could give on her own because her father would've let her take what she wanted and not made her pay. She didn't want free shirts.

Her father sat in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "I don't know how to help her, either," he said.

He walked Jenny out. Marcus offered him his paper bag of kettle corn, and her father took some. They stood under the skylight and watched the clouds move.

"Too nice a day to be inside," her father said.

After dinner Jenny and her parents sat in the den and watched videos of The Travel Channel her father had taped for them. A crumpled Body Electric bag was beside his chair.

In the dark room with the volume cranked high, they took dream hikes through cool, dense forests, crossed deep gorges, stopped to drink from a crystal blue lake. So many faraway places, Greenland, Patagonia, the Himalayas.

Jenny's mother sipped warm tea. She wore gray sweatpants, thick socks, the blue shirt with the cherry buttons because she always put on her gifts the minute she received them. "The high altitude's giving me a chill," she said, and pulled the blanket around her.

