

Lyn Stevens

Shopping

Putting up with her ex-husband's *I told you so's* was worth it. Anthony had agreed to take Dylan off Marie's hands as soon as school let out. Dylan would walk the dog and baby-sit his stepbrother for a few hours each morning so Anthony's pregnant gleaming second wife could get some rest. After he mowed the lawn or cleaned out the garage or did whatever Anthony had laid out for him to do, Dylan would have a few hours to himself to bike around the neighborhood or swim in the town pool. With structure he'd become steady and responsible. If it went smoothly and Dylan didn't screw up over the summer, Anthony would consider keeping him for good.

A few days after these arrangements were made, Marie took Dylan to the Carpet Gallery. The steps up to the warehouse were steep and as thin as pot handles, the mornings heat already deep in the metal. Each time Marie reached for the railing, her shirt rose exposing shelves of flesh. By the time she got to the heavy glass door she was slightly out of breath. Her face was flushed pink and her stretch pants stuck to her bottom. Behind her, Dylan gripped both sides of the railing and shimmied himself up the steps, four at a time, with the ease of a monkey. Marie slid her sunglasses up her forehead to wipe the sweat off the side of her nose and waited for him.

"How about being a gentleman and opening the door?"

"Do I have to?"

"Come on, it's hot."

"No. I mean do I have to go in?" he asked pulling on the door handle.

"You'll fry out here."

"That's okay, I don't mind."

"Get in the store, pinhead."

Bringing him was a mistake but what choice did she have? He'd been grounded before she read about the sale and even if she did trust him to stay put, what fourteen year old kid would sit in an empty apartment on a Saturday morning with his friends kick-flipping their skateboards on the street below and leaning on the buzzer, yelling up to him to get his sorry ass down there.

I'd like to stick my cock in your warm fuzzy cunt, D. It'd been nearly a week since Mrs. Stewart called to tell her Dylan had written that in her daughter's eighth grade yearbook. She ransacked his room, upturned his mattress, threw his clothes out of his drawers, tore apart his closet and desk. All she found were two Hustler magazines under his mattress and a couple of cherry bombs in a shoe box on the bottom of his closet. He put his hockey stick and rollerblades back in the closet, refilled his backpack, refolded his clothes, and set his bed. "You make such a big deal of out of everything Mom. It was just a joke. You can even ask

her. We're friends." For two nights Marie needed Valium just to stop tossing and turning. They were just words but they made her sick to her stomach.

Do you have any questions? she had asked him on the third day. No questions ma. Do you know what a condom is? Yes ma. You're not using one yet are you? No ma. Leave me alone. Do you have a girlfriend? I wouldn't tell you if I did. Leave me alone already. On the fourth day while developing an x-ray of a fractured radius at the hospital, the words carved a picture in her head of her son with a hard-on. She'd glimpsed the long sausage outline beneath the fabric of his boxers recently. She was shocked by it, ashamed of herself for noticing and for feeling secretly proud of her son. Next time the phone call would be from Mr. Stein to report that Jennifer or Tiffany or Rachel, one of those Riverdale girls who politely murmured on the phone was pregnant. Because he was handsome enough and stupid enough and his penis was certainly big enough.

It had been so different with Nelson - Dylan's much older half brother who was now married and expecting his first child. (It seemed as if everyone was pregnant lately, like an infectious disease). Nelson had been a shy, meticulous child bent on following rules. Perhaps it was because Nelson's father, Frank, was such a menacing jackass. Even as a teenager, Nelson was polite. He'd grown into a quiet, marine tough man, who never wavered in his convictions or went back on his word. He reminded Marie of a beautiful rifle nailed to a wall.

Nelson certainly wouldn't let Dylan visit again this summer. Dylan was too old for day camp. There'd be nothing to do in Kingsbridge during the summer but hang out on in the gutter with those friends of his. The ones who'd probably graffitied the park across the street, and God forbid, might get him started on drugs. She needed to protect him from boredom, from his lack of good judgment, as in, *I'd like to stick my cock in your warm fuzzy cunt*. Most of all she needed a rest. So she had called her ex-husband, Anthony.

"Mom, uh, hello. You have to go into the store to buy the rug. It doesn't come flying up to you like in Aladdin."

A shiver blew up her spine. She couldn't tell whether it was from the blast of AC or the sight of so many rugs. The warehouse was enormous, so big, that if it hadn't been for the walls and the artificial light she might have been looking down from the top of a mountain, across an acre of land, with stacks of rugs forming neat little hills as far as the eye could see. Golden hand woven tapestries. Dyed cyan and sienna Egyptian wool. Braided dhurries. Rugs hung on rods bordering the concrete walls like pages in giant books. They were tacked up like murals and suspended like flags from the 30-foot ceilings. Hundreds and hundreds to choose from. She forgot her overdue car payments and the record-breaking heat. She forgot Dylan. She was so overwhelmed and amazed she forgot that she was soon to be a grandmother. Marie puffed up her honey blonde perm and strode over to the nearest stack. She hadn't expected there'd be so many people. How had they ever found such a fabulous place in one of the dirtiest parts of the Bronx?

Two small sullen men approached and without saying anything started turning back the rugs. The first was a latticework of roses and vines on a background of green, the color of bread mold. Next, dull blue and dusty rose colored bouquets of tiny flowers meant for old ladies sipping tea and good little boys with suit jackets and shoes. Flowered patterns in every shape and color, wild and tame. Underneath, more versions of the same rugs in colors ranging from watermelon pink to brown. Marie stood with her manicured index finger on her mouth shaking her head. The men flipped, one after the other in a well-practiced rhythm until every rug in the pile had been turned back. She'd been thinking of something classy and bold. Something startling. Maybe even pure white. The right rug would transform her living room.

"Dylan, come over here and help me," said Marie, already leaning over a new stack.

"This is boring."

"For Christ sake. We just got here."

"Couldn't I just go get something to eat. I'm starving. I'm dying in here."

She took a deep breath. When she told him, Dylan had said screw that before she'd even finished explaining. He threatened to run away. No way in hell was he going to go to White Plains to stay with his father. His bedroom door slapped closed. Discussion over. Screw that. She didn't have the strength in her left to tell him it might be permanent, not just then. Maybe he'd come to accept the decision, to understand how much she loved him but how exhausted she was and how much she longed to be free of aggravation and disappointment. Or maybe he would never forgive her. Because she had failed him and he had failed her and now the truth of that had grown rotten like food left out in the heat.

"Look, if you're patient and you stop complaining long enough to let me find my rug, I'll buy you a new CD after we're done."

"Two CD's. Just kidding. Sure thing, ma," he said and lumbered over to where she was standing.

"Are these the right size honey?"

"How would I know?"

"I need 9 x 12. Look at the tag."

"What tag?"

"This tag, pinhead," she said with a wry smile. She dug down into her pocketbook and pulled out a pair of baby blue framed drugstore reading glasses. Dylan hiked himself up on top of the thigh high pile of area rugs.

"Hey, I see some good ones over there."

"Get down off there, Dylan. Does this look like a playground?"

"You see the blue ones with those squiggly things. Those are them," he said and leapt off the pile.

When Dylan reached the stack, he started folding back the rugs, mimicking the pair of men. He wore his father's cocky smile which hid the silver ball pierced in his tongue. (God how she detested that ball). The lower half of his head was buzzed. Flipping rugs was hard work for one person but his arms were reliable.

Newly sprung biceps, knotty forearms that looked as if they'd been carved from granite and sanded to a shine. Beautiful new arms. Already there were long wisps of hair on his cheeks.

Two swarthy looking men cornered Dylan and snatched the rug from his hands. "We do that, missus," said one as if he were invisible. Dylan shrank back. Behind their backs he jutted out his jaw and bared his bottom teeth like an ape, a gesture he'd inherited from his father along with the smile and Sicilian olive skin. She doubted he would have ever remembered seeing the ape face.

Marie swatted the air each time she was ready to see the next one. She kept hoping a rug would catch her eye, make her say, hey wait, let me look at that one some more. A bright cheerful rug. But they were all more or less the same as the ones she'd already looked at, dull tapestries with feathery designs on the outer rim of a solid field. On the bottom were more synthetic Orientals, faded antique rugs with dark furious designs, exactly like the one she and Dylan had rolled up that morning, exactly the kind she couldn't wait to get rid of.

Three months after they married, when Nelson was a child and Dylan, still a shimmer in her eyes, Marie and Anthony purchased the rug at a Discount Store on Dykman Street. She assumed her brand new rug would last forever, vacuuming and shampooing weekly, banning outdoor shoes and all drinks except water. Birthday cake crumbs and sippy cups led to Terminator videos, bathroom jokes and the spray of chewed up popcorn (what choice was there for a couple of 9 or 10 or 12 years old boys when it was rainy or too cold to go out). And no amount of stain remover and elbow grease could hide the discolored splotch next to the coffee table, the result of Dylan throwing up his spaghetti and meatball dinner in the middle of a tantrum over having to stay with his Aunt Rose. The white fringe turned the color of old snow. Marie became less fastidious. Once that pink stain had set, it was as if she never got over the disappointment. It was only today when the armchair and couch had been pushed into the hall that she could see the original pattern of spear-like shapes, the color still as rich as a fresh cup of coffee. The removal of the chair also revealed a section of the edge that was bald of fringe. Like an exposed wound that might never heal right. Ironically it was Marie who'd caused the final ruinous act, knocking over an entire pitcher of coke with her foot, snuggled up in an afghan watching the *Bridges of Madison County*. Now that Dylan was older, she preferred he stay in his own room. This was not unreasonable especially when his friends were over. He had his own TV. And Sega Dreamcast. And beeper. The men flipped back every one of the thirty or forty rugs. Nothing came close.

"Let's go over there to the ones that are hanging on those rods. Maybe we'll have better luck. Rose says you can get an Armenian rug that's just beautiful and durable as an authentic Oriental. What do you think of those modern ones with the pictures and scenery?"

"I don't know ma. What do I care what kind of rug you buy? I'm thirsty and hungry. Let me just go down the block to the Texaco station. There's a minimart there."

“Forget it. I’m not letting you wander around under the Bruckner Expressway in this heat. Besides, how can you possibly be hungry after you just devoured a plateful of eggs and three English muffins.”

“That was two hours ago and it’s down the block. Please, I’m dying.”

She twisted around toward the door but sample rolls of padding wrapped around dowels like giant rolls of paper towels over the sink blocked her vision. At least her padding wouldn’t have to be replaced. Thick spongy rust-red padding bought when her belly was as big as a beach ball and she could feel her whole life about to bust open, for the second time. It was entirely possible that Dylan really was hungry and if he were gone for a while she’d be able to concentrate without listening to him whine the whole time they were there.

“15 minutes. I’m timing you.”

“Thanks. I need money,” he said, holding out his hand. “Please.”

Marie sighed the way every mother instinctively sighs when she has time all to herself. In certain ways she had taught him well. He had learned his manners. He took out the garbage regularly, helped with the wash and dropped his plate in the sink after every meal. Yet in this world these things were hardly enough. How would she teach him about making the right choices when she’d been swept off her feet by two handsome men only to be dropped and broken both times. Frank had smacked her twice before she divorced him. And Anthony turned out to be a hostile, selfish bastard with enough balls to threaten to take Dylan when he was the one who cheated on her. And then, to simply pick up and move out to White Plains yet still want the same custody arrangement when Dylan was so young. Back then she had fought and bled to win the right to keep her son where he belonged. The night the divorce papers were signed, she’d actually hopped up on the bar table and danced. In this world you had to be smart and self-reliant. You had to learn to make yourself happy.

One by one Marie pulled and pushed the hanging rugs. Without looking at price tags she could tell that were the more expensive ones. She came across a landscape of a seaside with ferns and shells and admired the details for a minute before sliding the next one forward. Her mouth softened into a smile. Rose and green and gold butterflies sprinkled on a background the color of her blush. (Marie loved all forms of wildlife except house cats, her one phobia.) Wrong color though. She checked her watch. Next came an abstract piece of art, something you’d see at the Guggenheim, certainly not something she wanted to step on. The one following had a barn-red southwestern pattern. Hah she said aloud. The rug was the exact color of her missing kitchen cabinet doors.

Not long after Dylan started walking, she’d grown tired of her red and white cabinets so Anthony unhinged the doors and took them to his shop promising to strip them down to the natural wood. She’d been without cabinet doors for nine years though they actually turned up in one of the offers made by Anthony’s attorney. What a laugh. Everyone in the radiology department knew the missing cabinet doors story. Men were only good for two things she’d told them. One of them was moving furniture.

The next to last rug took her breath away. It was wedding dress ivory with a border of maroon berries threaded through delicate brown branches. A fantastic match for her maroon leather couch, the couch she'd purchased last year by setting aside \$100 each month, and in a moment of recklessness charging the last \$800. Everything else in her living room was so dark and heavy. The ridiculously low coffee table and matching breakfront. The heavy gold drapes. Frank's mother's hand-me-downs. Marie closed her eyes. And when she opened them again, the rug was still there. Still as gorgeous. She reached for the tag, pulled up her glasses from around her neck. "\$1,499! What are they out of their freakin minds," she said loudly and with so much disdain that two shoppers turned and stared.

She felt the ache in her shoulders from pulling open the rugs and then shoving them back to get a better look. 12:50. He should have been back already. It was like those times she'd let him watch too much TV or play in the halls of the building with some little friend of his and later she'd have to pay for her peace and freedom with his Halloween Part 3 nightmares or the neighbor's complaints about the noise. She marched through the warehouse and batted open the door.

Heat wrapped around her like a snake. White circles swirled in her eyes. The air was so thick it hurt to breathe. She peered down from the landing onto the street where the leaves of a few paltry trees appeared tinselled in the high sun. Two sweat-soaked men were tying rugs onto the hoods of cars. A woman sat on the edge of the seat of a car impatient for the AC to start up. At the end of the street the Texaco sign wavered in the china white sky but the Minimart was out of view. Dylan nowhere in sight.

Marie trudged back into the cool of the warehouse where pin drops of sweat broke free behind her knees, inside her elbows, at the base of her spine. She scanned the breadth of the store. Her gaze froze at the large square desk in the center of the warehouse.

The customer looked straight out of a 40's movie with a filmy collared blouse and straight black skirt covering her knees. Her hair was in a bun. She was speaking with a German or Dutch accent, frantically and loudly trying to explain something to one of the managers behind the desk. Marie moved closer. "A 3 years old girl with straight blonde hair and a ribbon, wearing a red dress, and a charm bracelet and white shoes with straps across the ankles. Her name is Corinna."

From across the floor a pale skinny boy trotted towards the woman. "I still don't find her," said the child huffing. The father touched the mother's shoulder. "Her name is Corinna Boda," the mother said to the manager. "Corinna Boda."

Marie knew the terror. She could have read the woman's mind. She remembered the time she thought she lost Dylan in the mall. He couldn't have been more than a few months old. After making several purchases including a new set of flannel sheets she'd glanced into the stroller and saw that it was empty. She had stopped breathing. Her throat had locked. The terror bit down on her heart and chewed it up. Those few seconds had stretched out with a potency that

made it feel like hours until she realized that she'd been holding him in her arms all along.

Marie was confident that they'd find the girl. The warehouse was a hide n' seekers dream-come-true. But it was then that she felt the first spasm of worry. Teenage boys did not get lost unless it was on purpose. She was on her way out again, the car keys already dangling in her hand when she spotted Dylan leaning on the wall by the runners, popping mini sugared donuts. A surge of relief. Then anger, which was in a way, a relief in itself.

"Where were you?"

"I was here." He held out a donut that she shooed away.

"That's bullshit. I went out to look for you."

"I saw the way you looked for me for all of five seconds."

"Don't turn this around Dylan. You were late."

"I was not," he said, glaring at her.

"15 minutes. How am I supposed to trust you?"

"I don't have a watch."

Overhead the loud speaker announced the little girl's name. She thought they'd have found her by now.

"Do I get any change?" she said, holding out her hand. He pulled out a limp dollar from his back pocket along with a book of matches, which he quickly tried to conceal with his thumb.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

"That's not nothing. It's something. What the hell are you doing with matches? Dylan I'm talking to you."

"Nothing."

"Nothing. It's always nothing with you. Tell me what you're doing with these matches in your pocket or I swear to God you won't see any of your friends before you leave, not a single one. I want the truth, Dylan."

"I'm not going," he said and his dark eyes got darker, hotter, moister.

"Oh yes you are. You are *definitely* going."

"I had a cigarette, okay," he said with a curled lip.

"What are you crazy?" she hissed.

"Take a chill pill ma. I didn't even like it." The cocky smile flashed across his face.

"You're a smart mouthed kid, you know that. I swear I feel like ripping that ridiculous gold ball. I ought to. Just get away from me. Just go sit over there and play with your Gameboy or eat a donut or something and don't you move a muscle!"

Once, Marie had been a heavy smoker until Dylan's pediatrician warned her that with Dylan's asthma the way it was, she might as well have put a gun to his head. So she'd given it up cold turkey and gained 25 pounds. How could she not when she cooked him full meals—pigs in a blanket, lamb chops and baked potatoes smothered with ketchup, risotto and shrimp—nearly every night, except

Friday when she went bowling and left out cold cuts or pizza money. Smoking was nothing less than suicide. Who knew if he was even telling the truth about the cigarette? Who knew what he was even smoking. He'd be better off going to school in White Plains, living with Anthony. She could visit on weekends.

How can you love someone so much and still he does wrong or stupid things? Was grounding him and then baking a lasagna so he'd have something to eat a mistake? Buying him a beeper? Sending him to her sister's for a week when he was five so she could get the divorce. Naming him Dylan? A month ago she'd been called into school because they found a five dollar pocketknife on him which he claimed he'd bought from another kid. "All the kids had them, ma." There was the pierced tongue (which she'd left alone after she saw how miserable he was if he caught a cold and could hardly stand eating.) And last summer when he'd been invited to stay with Nelson and Danielle he'd stolen the keys to Nelson's car and driven it around the block. A Lexus for God's sake! Nelson still wasn't talking to Dylan, wouldn't talk to him on Christmas day. It tore her in half if she thought for too long about the two of them not speaking. But wasn't Nelson's anger justified? Did Dylan even have the slightest notion of how dangerous that was? What could have happened!

The glass door was blocked with two men in security uniforms. Every time Marie passed another shopper she sensed the unease, the suspicious eyes, and stiffened shoulders. People with children (and there were many) held them by the sleeves of their shirts. Dylan hadn't budged. He was slouching against the wall near the exit staring off into space. The loud speaker bellowed the little girl's name again. She became like a bad smell Marie could only pretend to ignore. Another pair of rug-flipping men snuck up from behind her and started to turn back a pile of rugs. Were they following her with their empty eyes and robot arms? Purposefully taunting her? Did they think she was an easy target for a sale? She could barely pay attention to what she was looking at and was sure she was starting to see repeats.

An electric cart with a salesman and the lost girl's mother weaved through the stacks of rugs. Corinna, Corinna the mother called. Corinna's mother's heart was being bitten. Marie could hear it in the fading voice after the cart disappeared into the back of the warehouse where rolls of carpet stood like an army of sentinels.

Dylan. She turned toward the wall to check on him but was distracted by a small crowd of people gathered in the middle of the store where several portable racks of hanging rugs (like movable coat racks) were mashed together against a partition. The spot on the wall where he had been standing was empty. Her eyes swam back to the commotion by the hanging rugs. She took a few tentative steps to see what was happening. That was when she laid her eyes on the shoes sticking out from under one of the racks of discarded rugs. Two big dirty Reeboks and a tiny pair of white Mary Janes.

She pictured him with his long strong arms clutched around the girl's narrow shoulders, lips pressed to her baby cheek, saying *I'd like to stick my cock in your warm fuzzy cunt* over and over. A uniformed policeman yanking him up, cuffing

him, leading him away. Ma don't let him take me he screamed. Ma please. Someone screamed "over here" and whipped the rugs aside so fast it seemed as if a great wind had blown off their patterns. Ten yards in front of Marie, just beyond the daydream, the real Dylan, with his dark shimmering eyes and buzzed head was seated next to the little girl, his Gameboy in her lap. The mother leapt out of the crowd and swooped down on the child. People applauded and cheered. Someone whistled. The father pumped Dylan's hand in both of his. He sprang from the crowd and looked around.

Marie's hands were icy. Her face had pins and needles. She needed a breath mint, longed for a cigarette to get her blood moving. In the blink of an eye she had entertained the possibility that her son was a monster worthy of jail. She had twisted the longing of an adolescent boy to get into a girl's pants into the story of a mother who wanted her son locked away for good. She felt weak and angry and deeply ashamed of herself as he galloped towards her like a big happy puppy.

"Did you see it, I found her. I found her. It was so cool ma. She was crying and crying and I told her her mother was looking for her. I told her not to be scared." The silver ball waggled in his tongue. She wouldn't have been surprised if he bounded up and licked her face. "I told her mothers always find their kids. I should get some kind of reward, don't you think?"

"Yea, I'll give you reward," she said. She'd meant it as a joke but it came out sounding cynical and mean.

The family paraded out in front of them – the little girl in the red dress perched on her father's shoulder like a beautiful bird, her mother with her arm around the husband's elbow, her other arm linked with her son's.

"How about 10 new CD's?" said Dylan half-walking and half-jumping.

"How about you not pulling anymore disappearing acts."

"Okay I'll settle for five," he said and flicked up the corner of a rug as he strutted towards the exit.

"Two CD's and you never smoke another cigarette as long as you live," said Marie keeping pace.

"Two CD's. You pay for a movie and we stop at Taco Bell on the way home."

"And?" said Marie.

"And I never smoke another cigarette as long as I live."

Marie smiled softly and touched his cheek, making a mental note to remind Anthony that she gave Dylan \$3.00 every day for pizza and soda in the late afternoon, that unless he ate almost continually he became unmanageable.

Over the summer she would come back to the store alone and buy a rug. She would replace the red Formica, get some new base cabinets, watch her "love story crap" movies whenever she wanted. She would have a few rum and cokes, play Frank Sinatra and Aretha when she cleaned, crank it up until the chandelier shook. She would join Jenny Craig.

But in the fall she would take him back because he had never been oppressive or menacing and because she knew she could never ever send him away for good.

He was just a teenage boy she was desperately afraid of losing. The kid who had found the lost little girl. He was her son and she loved him.

Dylan flung open the warehouse door.

“Wanna race?” he yelled, flying past her.

She waded into her bag for her car keys and sunglasses. Because of the crushed grill, it was easy to locate her Skylark down the block in front of a deserted used car lot. (A mechanic from the hospital who’d been so cruelly burned in a fire he was hard to look at, had offered to fix it for a night of her company at a bar and grill, but she’d turned down his offer knowing what would come of it, with the way she drank when she was in the mood). Although it was dusk, the temperature had barely dropped. The air hung listlessly like a faded orange blanket. Marie felt the heat in her cheeks, the dampness releasing under her arms. In the distance the round gold sun hovered just above the Bruckner Expressway.