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The Rope

Sara has light hair, dark eyes, and breasts of a size that cause the men populating this particular office to be unsure about other aspects of her person, such as the appearance of her face and the thick rope knotted in a noose and wrapped twice more around her neck, trailing to an end at her buttocks. It is her bust they greet, her bust they recognize. It is her buttocks after which they nod in passing, in time with the lightly slapping rope. As to the noose, they register only a vague impression that somehow she is not utilizing her full potential.

Her first day temping here, Sara feels a rumble beneath her pumps. She kicks one off, positions her sole against the industrial grade carpeting. Is this an earthquake? Or is there construction nearby, perhaps an oversized truck barreling along the parkway out front? Thick slats of horizontal blinds block her view. So Sara stands. She pulls the cord. The slats draw up and sunlight streams in. Through the overwhelming brightness, she can just make out the green lawn, the blue of sky. Her coworkers cringe in the shadows. They hunch over their monitors, attempt to shield them from the glare as if the damage might be permanent.

A throat clears behind her. The CEO. He is small in stature, his mouth pinched, eyes menacing. “We keep the blinds closed here.”

Sara can almost feel it, something stirring just behind that triangle-shaped blade, beneath where neck and shoulder muscles meet, that space to either side of the giant knot. It must just be the rope hitting oddly, or pulling, or the portion slung around the back of her chair picking up vibrations through the floorboards.

Sara nods. She pulls the cord at the proper angle to drop the blinds, slowly guiding the bar on an even keel to perfectly meet the low sill. Crows, she tells herself, when she hears what sounds like the flap of wings. Or a hawk. What else could it be? Sara sits. On the computer screen in front of her, a dense wall

of text. She sighs. She resumes striking through it.

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Sara majored in English because she likes to read. Her primary pleasure is in discovering what fate holds for the characters, the plot points leading like breadcrumbs to an inevitable end. She also likes things neat and tidy and in their place, which makes grammar appealing. It also makes her a good roommate for the other two young women she has lived with since before she graduated college the month before. Presented with the choice to either find a job or move back home as third wheel to her mother and stepfather, she received a mailer from a temp agency and applied.

Sara is one of two females in the office, both temps. There is also Annette in Accounting who wields a knife, but she is almost as old as Sara's grandmother. The men refer to Sara and the other temp as "skirts," which strikes Sara as quaint, old-timey. She still refers to herself as a "girl" and enjoys the attention her youth and curvy build brings. Her smile still functions as a prize for which men will open doors and shower compliments, for which they will reach, lift, carry.

But at the office, things are different. Sara senses this, but not the how of it. She ignores the furtive glances from the programmer crouching behind his monitor like a demented groundhog and manages not to catch the gestures that the guy with a look like Eastern European mafia makes to the others behind her back. Yet, when she arrives on her second day to find the other female temp gone and an offer of a staff position—she imagines a path emerging and takes it.

Perhaps from proofreading software manuals, she will move up to writing the manuals, or into Sales & Marketing to write ad copy, which she has heard pays well. She can move out on her own, perhaps fall in love and settle down eventually, start her own family. Maybe she'll even be the breadwinner.

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Yet months pass, and Sara's duties and pay do not change.

There is no talk of them changing, of her moving up. Each day that Sara sits with the thick knot heavy between her shoulder blades, the noose grows longer, thicker, but slowly, by almost imperceptible degrees. The rest of the rope lies coiled with some slack around the top rung of her stationary chair's hard back, tethering her there. She chips tirelessly (if only!) through one belabored sentence after another until she is no longer sure where clauses begin and end, which preposition is correct, what verb most precise, the point of any of it. At the end of the day, the bricks of text crowding the computer screen in front of her are still stacked one on top of another, regardless of what alterations she has made.

Still, Sara settles into this job she'd intended to work only as a prelude to something else. Now that she is here, she doesn't know how to move on or what to move on to. She doesn't know how long she should stick it out to build her resume. Her boyfriend says a year; her roommates advise two. Her mother hasn't worked since Sara's father died, and as is typical, she offers no help or advice whatsoever.

After lunch each afternoon, like clockwork, the customer service reps slide open desk drawers to grab their afternoon pick-me-up. Sara slides out her desk drawer, too, adding her own squeal of metal to the fray. Her own stash of energy drinks roll and clank. VIGOR®, the cans read in white against a blue background. A muscle-bound, white-haired god-figure reaches out with one finger along the can's side, as if to touch the tip of hers as she opens the tab.

Energy! Vitality! Life! The can promises. Sara pops the top in chorus with her male colleagues. She drinks. The thick, sweet fluid catches in her throat.

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In a dream, Sara finds herself suspended in a room dimly lit with the glow of computer screens. She is caught on the edge of a hole excavated in the ceiling, as if while attempting to dig her way up, she has fallen in the process. A fly buzzes along a row of blinds, searching for an escape through the slats. The air is thick with dust. If she can just—. But the curtain before her

remains closed, oxblood, velvet. The audience's eager thumping intensifies to an insistent pound, a sound like fists at the door, demanding her performance. With that noose around her neck, how can she do anything else?

Sara's roommates interpret this to mean that her progress at her job is stymied. How long has she been there now? Sara resolves to take action. She suggests to the manager, not just once, but three times that rather than outsourcing this would-be technical writing along with the technology being written about, she could just write it in the first place. Wouldn't this be more efficient, more cost-effective—even with her slight pay raise—than paying both someone to write it *and* her to decipher and write it again?

The first time, the manager ignores her, walking off without so much as a twitch of his mustache. The second time he deflects, complimenting the necklace she is wearing instead, fingering the moonlike orb resting just above her sternum and the cleavage it's nearly impossible for her to hide. The third time, he throws back his head and laughs. He walks away, still laughing, the reverberations from his throat reminding her of the collar around hers, crushing any remaining confidence.

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~~If you desire to be preserving the accumulation of all mental and physical efforts, want to save your work, it is suggested that the button labeled *press the "save"* is pressed in order to avoid losing or otherwise deleting all that for which has been so exhaustively labored *button*.~~

There it is. So direct, concise. Using a quarter the amount of words. Yet already the letters are making new spaces for themselves. Leaving spaces. Running out, even as Sara blinks. They are deleting, no *liberating* themselves, snapping through red lines like thread.

This must be a sign. And so, Sara mounts her desk, throwing herself on top of it much less gracefully than she imaged, what with the noose practically growing into the back of the chair. She grabs the rope at hip level, with both hands, and yanks the chair up with it. But even if she were to carefully

unwind the rope as she does each time she uses the restroom, there is no way to affix the end above her desk, she sees. No way to really get it up there.

Sara sits on the chair on top of her desk. She stares for a moment at the ceiling. She has no idea what she is doing, what has come over her. She returns herself to the floor, then lowers the chair. She assumes her proper place in it. Only then does everyone turn around and resume their work. Only then, do they stop staring.

“I’d like to see you in my office,” The CEO says.

The CEO’s office is lush with greenery, bright with sunlight from a window spanning an entire wall. The CEO points out the fully stocked mini-fridge and bar. He eyes a gap between buttons on Sara’s blouse while running one hand along the lacquered mahogany of his L-shaped desk.

Sara wants to leave but does not know how to extricate herself. She turns to the window, takes in the electric blue sky over the sloping lawn ending at the tree-lined parkway. An insect throws itself against the glass as she watches carts move behind the hedge of the golf course across the road. The CEO stands behind her now. He closes the blinds in two practiced moves.

Sara turns. The CEO’s teeth gleam white. He leans in, his breath unpleasant. The air conditioning blows much too cold. “The document you’ve been working on, how is it coming?” He brushes two fingers along the goose bumps on her arm much too familiarly.

Sara’s throat is dry, hoarse, but she remembers her line as the CEO thrusts the same two fingers deep inside the folds of the rope. “If you want to save your work, press the save button.”

Sara doesn’t know how else to protest. But The CEO does not seem to hear her. She eyes a ceiling hook above his desk. It’s missing something: a mobile, mosquito netting, or perhaps a spider plant in a macramé pot. This absence bothers her more than it seems it should.

When the CEO finally slinks away on his executive stealth model loafers, Sara sits in his chair. She pours herself a drink. Why not? She opens a can of nuts, unleashing a swarm of insects. They whir and land around her as she sits and watches

the golfers across the parkway take their last swings into the sunset, as she watches a red trail of cars cut through the night. The insects fold gauzy wings under iridescent coats. Fuzzy forks frame their heads. They cover the desk like green and gold metallic buttons. If she only knew the right one to press.

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Sara tells no one. Who could she tell? What would she say? Instead, she spends the next afternoon bursting bags of chips between her palms, one after another. Pop! Pop! Pop! Until the guy next to her yells, “Knock it off!” She pops another for good measure, then goes to the kitchenette for more.

There, Sara finds Annette from Accounting wielding her customary knife. Annette is near retirement age, round and relatively cheery. She eyes a fly buzzing in circles, tracks it with the blade’s tip. When the fly finally lands, Annette plunges the knife into the wall after it. The fly takes off, lands again. Again, Annette strikes. It’s a large knife, and the fly continues to dodge the blade. The wall is not so lucky. A deep, ragged horizontal line appears at chin level through the beige wallpaper and the sheetrock beyond. At either edge of this line, Annette slices down toward the floor as easily as cutting a sheet cake. And so a door-sized hole appears. Annette salutes, then grins as she ducks and steps through.

Over the next few weeks, the flies multiply. They line the counters, flit beneath closed doors and in and out of mouths. The flies breed maggots. Their swatted bodies leave goo on desks, on windows and walls. Unswatted, they alight on eyelashes and lips. They rub their legs together and wait.

Sara sits at her desk and bounces her pumps against where the wall meets the glass hidden behind the blinds. She can feel it now, something coming loose.

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Sara knocks. No one answers. She finds the CEO’s office empty, so she closes and locks the door. She brushes insects aside to stand on the CEO’s desk, then pushes out two ceiling panels.

She ties the end of the noose securely to a metal beam. Clutching the beam on either side, Sara leverages the desk with her thighs, heaves it at an angle. The insects covering it take flight. It's a large desk, but she is stronger than even she realizes from evenings spent at the gym. She tilts the desk off balance just enough that the floor to ceiling window gives under its weight.

The glass explodes as Sara lets go, suspended now only by the noose, her body framed in a jagged piano-sized hole. The insects spill out of it like secrets. Brakes squeal on the parkway below. People stream out of offices. They gape at the executive's desk on the lawn; at her hanging there with her breasts popping out of her blouse, her skirt riding up, her feet still kicking.

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As a child, Sara would run and swim and flip on jungle gyms unencumbered by her noose, little more than vestigial, then. She believed, somehow, that she'd shed it like sunburned or scabbed over skin, like her first set of teeth. Even though she came from a long line of hanged women, her mother's noose wrapped around her shoulders high like an Elizabethan collar; her grandmother's coiled thick as an anaconda over her dowager's hump. Women who'd fallen into their circumstances and stayed there. Yet they, too, had been young once, their thin and relatively light ropes left to trail down their backs. Sara's aunt, her mother's younger sister, encouraged the female cousins to examine hers, to grasp it and even turn it for the others to jump over. The noose is an appendage, but it is tradition as well. The women in her family take pride in piling it around their shoulders, in enduring its weight. They have never questioned it.

The flies buzz, angry and metallic as cicadas. Telephone buttons flash. Someone on hold, suspended on the line, held here by the end of her rope.

But something shifts. The pressure lessens around Sara's throat. She opens her eyes to find the world upended, the rules of gravity changed. Above her (which is now below) she sees the ceiling tiles. In this new position, the rope goes slack. The noose loosens and slips from Sara's neck. The hard knot hits a panel with enough force to dislodge it, revealing sunlit grass.

Another falls, and then another. There is no structure beyond these tiles breaking free, spinning downward toward the golf course marked with flags and golfers in polo shirts extending their clubs.

Wings unfurl from behind Sara's shoulder blades. The hanging not an end, it seems, but a means to unleash these appendages, or rather, the rope a means to hold them down. Sara's stomach drops with the last of the tiles, then the rest of her body with it. The wings are fibrous and feathered, and catch the wind to hold her up. They stretch taut as Sara soars, then swoops in an arc around the office windows. She laughs, a sound so deep it shakes the building's foundation. The blinds draw up, and she sees her coworkers cower. They do not recognize her. She does not recognize herself.