

THIS IS MY BODY

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The woman walked at a brisk pace. Her red hair, tied in a loose ponytail, swayed with the rhythm of her steps. Her arms pumped up and down to the same beat. Obviously, this was a walk for exercise, not a morning stroll. Her legs were toned but deadly pale. Being a redhead, she probably needed to guard against too much sun.

Erika Bultmann, who had been reading on the porch of her summer cottage, stared. She stared not only because the woman was stunning, but because there was so much bare flesh. The last time Erika had seen the Reverend Lucille Bartlett, rector of St. Margaret's by the Sea Episcopal Church, she'd been modestly dressed in a black suit and wearing a clerical collar.

Although Erika had spent a lovely evening with Lucy Bartlett during the winter holidays and found her company stimulating in every sense of the word, she didn't immediately call out to get her attention. Erika was still on her first cup of coffee, hadn't showered, or brushed her teeth. The worn T-shirt and cotton shorts she wore to bed was not an outfit for greeting even the most casual acquaintance, and especially not one whom she very much wanted to impress. Instead, she watched Lucy head down Ocean Road toward the other end of the barrier island.

Erika checked the time on her phone. If she showered quickly, she could be dressed and looking presentable by the time Lucy passed the cottage on her return. Erika set aside her vintage copy of Habermas's *Erkenntnis und Interesse*. It dated back to her graduate school days. The binding had split, and the pages had begun to yellow, but it was full of invaluable notes, so she always handled it with care.

Stripping on the way to the bathroom, Erika headed straight for the shower. *Quick. I need to be quick.* She gave herself a fast scrub in all the important places. She blew dry her chin-length, blond hair, taking a little more time than usual to smooth it. She put on some makeup and lipstick and selected the least-wrinkled polo shirt and Bermuda shorts from her

suitcase.

When she finished dressing, she checked the time, relieved to see that she had five minutes to spare. She brewed a fresh cup of coffee and returned to the porch, where she slouched in an Adirondack chair and resumed reading. Her aim was to appear relaxed and casual when Lucy returned. Erika checked the time on her phone with anxious glances while watching for Lucy out of the corner of her eye. Finally, there she was, right on time.

“Well, hello there!” Erika called when Lucy approached. Startled, the woman stopped in her tracks. She leaned on her knees to catch her breath, then looked all around her, up and down, trying to locate the speaker. Standing in the brilliant sunlight, she couldn’t see into the porch. “Over here!” said Erika, rising. She was less careful of Habermas this time and needed to use her reflexes to rescue the book before it landed on the floor and spilled its pages.

Lucy’s mouth curved up. She had the kind of smile that could light a darkened room. “Erika? Is that you?”

“It is,” said Erika, opening the door. “I hardly recognized you without the collar.”

Lucy blushed a little, which Erika found charming. As she came near, Erika could see the faint freckles on her face. Without makeup, Lucy looked wholesome and girlish.

“It’s so nice to see you again,” said Lucy, stepping into the porch and offering her hand.

“I see you’re out for your morning constitutional.” As she took the woman’s hand, Erika looked directly into her green eyes because she so much wanted to gaze into the cleavage below. Glistening with a faint sheen of perspiration, it simply begged for attention. *Don’t look*, Erika mentally ordered herself. *Don’t!* Lucy turned, distracted by the footsteps of a runner passing by, and Erika stole a quick glance down her shirt. *Good God!* She managed to return her gaze to Lucy’s face just in time.

“I try to get in a walk every day,” Lucy explained. “I don’t always succeed.”

“You’re looking quite fit, so it seems you do.”

Lucy laughed softly. "Thank you. Good genes, I think."

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Erika asked in her most casual voice.

Lucy pulled the phone out of her armband and checked the time. "A quick one. I need to be back by nine thirty for my bereavement group."

"I could drive you to the rectory."

"Which would defeat the purpose of the walk," said Lucy with one of her solar flare smiles.

"Well, come in. It takes only a minute to make a cup. Liz gave me one of those single-serve coffee makers for my birthday. Highly efficient."

"I understand that Germans value efficiency."

"Yes, we do."

Lucy followed Erika into the cottage. "This is so charming," she said, looking around. Erika wondered what she really thought. The furniture was all second hand, perfectly serviceable, if a bit shabby. The New England colonial style had always struck Erika as kitsch, but in Maine such furniture was cheap and abundant. The summer residents furnished their cottages from the second-hand stores masquerading as antique shops along Route 1. Erika drew the line at nautical knickknacks or clutter of any kind. Perhaps Lucy would think the local watercolor seascapes were a bit stark. Erika's mother had painted the few cheerful ones.

"Have a seat," said Erika gesturing to the small table in the kitchen.

Again, Lucy looked around, taking everything in. "When did you get back?" she asked, gazing at the pile of boxes in the corner.

"Last night. I was reading a bit before I tackled unpacking. It's a daunting task. I've brought more than usual. This time, I'm staying through the winter."

"You are?" asked Lucy, a hopeful note rising in her voice.

"I'm on sabbatical."

"That's great! We'll be neighbors now."

"Not exactly," replied Erika for no good reason. Obviously, Lucy wasn't trying to be precise, just making conversation.

"Do you have a project for your sabbatical?" Lucy pulled a Windsor chair away from the table. The legs made a little scraping sound on the

linoleum.

“I’ve been writing a book for years. This summer, I hope to finish it. Now that I’ve resigned as chairman of the department, I have more space in my brain for scholarly pursuits.” Erika tapped her temple with her fingertip for emphasis.

“What’s the subject of your book?”

“Jürgen Habermas and his theories of political discourse. Apt, I think, given the current state of affairs.”

Lucy nodded. Erika wondered if the woman had the least idea who Habermas was. No matter. She was intelligent, and certainly, there were other things to talk about besides philosophy. After thirty-five years of teaching the subject at Colby College, Erika had certainly had her fill.

“I like dark roast,” said Erika, pointing to a coffee bag, “but I have a breakfast blend if that’s too strong for you.”

“No, it’s fine. The darker the better!” said Lucy with another sunny smile.

Erika brewed Lucy’s coffee and set the mug in front of her. She also made coffee for herself. The cup she’d abandoned on the porch would be cold by now, and she didn’t want to waste a second with Lucy to retrieve it.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you breakfast,” said Erika. “I haven’t been to the market yet.”

“Thank you. I’ve eaten.” Again, Lucy looked around, studying the copper pots on the wall. When her gaze returned, her green eyes were mesmerizing.

Erika sat down in the chair opposite her. “Is this the usual route for your walk?”

“Unless I walk on the beach. Sometimes, I walk with Liz Stolz, but she walks too fast, and I’m out of breath by the end.”

Erika nodded. “Liz. I must call and tell her that I’ve arrived, but I know what you mean about walking with her. I like to converse when I walk, and a brisk pace makes it rather difficult.”

“Maybe you could walk with me,” suggested Lucy brightly. “I’m always

happy to slow down for good conversation.”

Erika wanted to leap up and say, “Yes!” But she decided a more casual attitude might serve her better. “What a lovely idea,” she said neutrally. “We must set a time.”

“Unfortunately, it will have to wait. I’m pretty busy this week, so sunrise walks it is.”

“That’s a bit early for me.” Erika became anxious. The opportunity to see Lucy again seemed to be slipping away. “Dinner perhaps?” She instantly scolded herself for being too forward.

Lucy looked momentarily surprised. “Sure. When?”

“Tonight?” Now, she really was being too forward.

But Lucy smiled and said, “All right. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at six.”

Lucy nodded. “Fine.”

Lucy stayed for another half hour, drawing out Erika with questions about teaching at Colby. She listened with the sort of open interest that makes people want to share their stories—a very good quality in a priest, Erika decided.

Her guest glanced at the clock over the sink. “Sorry, but I have to run. I need to get in a shower before my bereavement group.” She got up and carefully rinsed her mug. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes,” said Lucy with another radiant smile. “Soon.”

Erika watched the red ponytail wag as Lucy resumed her power walk. She noted that the bare flesh was firm and barely jiggled despite the brisk pace.

“Here’s Liz,” said the receptionist as a door opened, and a tall woman with iron-gray hair stepped out. Liz Stolz was wearing her summer “uniform”—a polo shirt, cropped pants of some high-performance material, and sturdy hiking sandals. Only the stethoscope around her neck identified her as a doctor and not a tourist in need of medical care.

“Erika!” Liz called in a delighted voice. “*Wann bist du hier angekommen?*”⁹

She caught Erika in a hug.

“*Gestern Abend.*”

“Yesterday! And you didn’t call? Bad girl! You could have come for dinner.”

Erika shook her head. “I got in too late for dinner, and I had to unpack the car. Besides, I never know when you have guests.”

“No one’s visiting now. It’s a little early. The kids are still in school.”

“Of course,” said Erika. “I’d forgotten. College schedules are so different.”

“The good news is the beaches are still empty. More for us!” said Liz with a quick laugh.

Her friend laughed easily now, but at the end of her term as chief of surgery at Yale-New Haven, Liz had become angry and depressed. Being in her company was difficult, especially for Erika, who was naturally pessimistic and cynical. She’d always counted on Liz’s heartiness to cheer her up. Since moving to Maine and buying Hobbs Family Practice, Liz was much more her old self—the wry, witty woman Erika remembered from forty years ago, when she was a graduate student at Yale and Liz, a first-year surgical resident.

“I stopped by to ask if you have time for lunch today,” Erika explained.

Liz drummed her fingers on the counter of the receptionist station. “Ginny, can you look at my schedule to see if I have time for lunch with Erika?”

The office manager scanned her computer screen. “Mrs. Petersen canceled her one o’clock. After your twelve thirty, you’re free for the rest of the day,” she said in an efficient voice.

Liz turned back to Erika. “One o’clock okay? That will give me time to finish my notes and wind down here.”

“Perfect. I’ll pick up my groceries. Then I’ll meet you back here.”

After she left the office, Erika headed to the grocery store. She had deliberately planned to arrive in the middle of the week. Saturday was changeover day for the summer cottages. The weekend traffic was

ridiculous, and the lines in the supermarket invariably stretched back into the aisles. Because Memorial Day was fast approaching, there were more visitors than usual. Erika made quick work of her purchases, mostly perishables she hadn't brought from her apartment in the faculty residence at Colby.

After she put away her groceries, she still had some time before meeting Liz, so she unpacked her clothing. As she did, she found a child's toy under the dresser. She puzzled over it for a moment until she realized it belonged to one of Maggie's granddaughters. When she saw Liz, she'd give it to her to return.

Her offer of the cottage to Maggie's daughter and her two young children had been impulsive. One reason she hated to rent the place was the possibility of a mess on her return, but she was pleased to see the place was orderly and spotless.

Erika met Liz in her office at the appointed hour. Liz was running late with a patient, as usual.

"She won't be much longer," Ginny assured her. "When did you get in, Dr. Bultmann?"

"Last night. I'm still unpacking. And please, call me Erika."

"You came at the right time. The spring has been so cold and rainy. That's how it is here in Maine. After a long winter, it's suddenly summer."

"It was a long, dreary winter in Waterville as well, and an equally dreary spring."

Liz came down the hall with her patient, an elderly man with a cane, and gave Ginny instructions for scheduling a future appointment. Then she turned to Erika with a smile. "Ready?"

"Absolutely!"

"Leave your car here," said Liz, as they headed out to the parking lot. "I'll drop you off on the way back. Down the Hatch okay?"

"Yes, it's not summer without a lobster roll and a cup of chowder."

"You sound like a tourist."

"I'm officially a resident. I qualify for a beach pass, even though I don't

need one.”

“That’s true,” said Liz, climbing into the cab of her truck. “Got mine already.” She pointed to a brightly colored sticker on her windshield.

“You look good, Liz.” Erika strapped herself into the passenger seat. “Married life agrees with you. You seem very content.”

“I am. Maggie takes good care of me.”

“And her health is good? No recurrence?”

“Not yet,” said Liz, tapping her head with her knuckles because there was no wood in reach.

Erika sighed. “Liz, please don’t become a pessimist. That’s my job.”

Liz laughed. “I wouldn’t dare deprive you.” When Liz looked at her for more than a moment, Erika had the sense that she was doing a quick, physician’s assessment. “You look pretty good yourself. Are you in a better place with Jeannine’s death?”

“Yes and no. Sometimes I think I’m fine about it. I go about my business as usual and feel relatively normal. Then, I find myself sobbing with grief.”

Liz nodded thoughtfully. “Grief doesn’t run in a straight path. You know, Lucy Bartlett runs a bereavement group at her church.”

Erika shook her head. “Psychoanalysis is nonsense, and groups? Not for me.” She sighed. “Sometimes, I wish Jeannine and I had made more of a commitment. I always thought we’d have more time.” Erika shook her head. “You never know.”

“No, you don’t. But you never struck me as the commitment type.”

“Well, we were together for almost twenty years. That’s not insignificant.”

“But you both had other partners.”

“We did, and it worked for us.”

Liz turned on Harbor Road. “Tide’s in, I see. The marsh is so much prettier when it is.”

Erika leaned forward to take in the full view of the salt marsh. “Spectacular. This is why I love it here, all those myriad shades of green. I’m so glad you talked me into buying the cottage.”

“It was a good investment. The house is small, but it has good bones.”

“As long as I can count on you as my handy man, it’s a good thing.”

“Are you still thinking about adding on?”

Erika nodded. “I have all the plans and the planning board has approved them. Thank heavens, the previous owner raised the cottage to the level for the new flood map, or I could never afford it.”

“So, what’s preventing you from going ahead?”

“I’m not convinced I need all that space. After all, I’m only one person. And I’m still undecided about where to retire.”

Liz found a parking space along the road. “Sorry we have to walk so far. I didn’t expect it to be this busy.”

They walked back to the restaurant, which was little more than an old shack. An enclosed porch had been added to create a dining room. There was a beached lobster boat sitting next to the completely filled parking area. Tourists took a while to find the place, but once they did, it was hard to keep them away.

The tables were arranged family style. Diners sat wherever they found vacant places at the long tables. A roll of paper towels, hanging overhead, provided napkins. Condiments were arranged in a small galvanized bucket. The salt and pepper came in beer bottles with holes in the caps. The rustic atmosphere was part of the appeal, but the food was excellent.

“I wish this place were open all year,” Liz said as they sat down. She scrunched up her legs to her body to get them under the table without kicking her neighbor. “At times like this, it’s no fun being tall.”

“Agreed,” said Erika, doing the same. She squinted as she studied the offerings on the chalk board. “I already know what I want, and fortunately, it’s on special.”

“Lobster rolls and chowder are always on special when the summer people are here.”

The waitress came and they ordered a local beer to accompany the special. A few minutes later, their beer arrived in frosted glasses. “To summer!” Liz proposed. They clicked glasses and drank. The brew was crisp and citrusy.

“Delicious,” said Erika.

With the back of her hand, Liz wiped a bit of foam from her upper lip. “Was your place clean? Alina left it in good shape when she moved out, but I asked Ellie to give it a once over before you arrived.”

“Your housekeeper is excellent. The place was spotless. But I did find this.” Erika took the miniature horse out of her bag.

“That’s Nicki’s. I’ll return it for you.” Liz smiled and set the toy on the table. “I hope you know how grateful Alina is for letting them stay there this winter.”

Erika shrugged. “No one else was using it. I was glad to have the cottage occupied.” She took a sip of beer. “So, now you’ve bought her a condominium? In Scarborough?”

“I didn’t *buy it* for her. I’m holding the mortgage because her credit was wrecked by her idiot husband.”

“It’s a shame. So many young women raising children alone. Men just aren’t what they used to be.”

Liz laughed. “Neither are women.”

“Speaking of women. I saw her.”

“Who?”

“The good Reverend Bartlett.”

Liz raised her brows. “That didn’t take long.”

“Her morning constitutional takes her past my cottage.”

“When she doesn’t walk with me on the beach...”

“She said you walk too fast.”

Liz made a face. “Really? She never told me.”

“Maybe she’s afraid of you. Most people are until they get to know you.”

“Good to know. Thanks, Erika,” said Liz, sounding mildly insulted.

“My pleasure.” Erika knew Liz would be easily mollified with some sarcasm and a smile. “I invited her for dinner.”

Liz sat up straight. “But I already told Maggie you were coming for dinner. She’s making your favorite—tandoori chicken.”

Erika frowned at the wrinkle in her plans, but she hadn’t seen Liz and

Maggie since spring and certainly owed them a visit. “Do you mind if I bring a friend?”

Liz grinned. “Lucy? Sure. Why not? Although I’m surprised she’s still speaking to you.”

“And why wouldn’t she?”

“She asked for your email address, but she said you never replied.”

Erika sighed. “Oh, I meant to reply, but her email showed up in the middle of that ridiculous sexual harassment suit. What a mess! I ended up firing the bastard, but there was tenure involved, so it wasn’t easy. Lawyers and board meetings ad nauseam. If I ever talk about taking on an administrative role again, shoot me.”

“I wouldn’t suggest that to me. You know I can.” Liz patted her handbag, the special one in which she carried her pistol.

“If I ever find myself incapacitated, I may ask you to do me the favor.”

“We have drugs for that, and it’s the law now.”

“That created quite a ruckus. Idiotic religious right.” Erika rolled her eyes to convey her loathing for such people.

Liz put down her glass after a few gulps of beer. “Was she friendly?”

“Lucy? Very much so,” said Erika. “What’s her story? I wonder.”

Liz raised her shoulders to her ears.

“Liz! You know something. Tell me!”

“She’s my patient. I can’t.”

“That’s not fair. I’m your oldest friend.”

“Actually, Maggie is my oldest friend.”

“Don’t get technical on me. You know what I mean. If you can’t say anything, just answer yes or no. If I made an advance, would she be repulsed?”

“I doubt it. She’s a worldly woman, despite the collar, and very open minded.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“I know what you meant.”

Erika leaned forward and gave her a pleading look. “Liz, please. Just give me a tiny hint.” She raised pinched fingers to indicate how small a hint

she was willing to accept.

Liz shook her head. “Sorry. You’ll just have to figure it out for yourself.”