Absolutely

 Natalie’s body throbbed in time with her heartbeat as the morning sun screamed through her open bedroom blinds. The night mostly blurred after she got home from dinner with her friend Amy. Natalie had wanted to tell her everything going on between her and her husband Jack, why she hadn’t been calling or messaging, why she wasn’t posting anything to Facebook, why she didn’t feel like being around anyone. But she didn’t bring it up. Amy tried to go there, but Natalie shut her down repeatedly, using a phantom illness as her excuse. After three well-intentioned attempts, Amy dropped it. Jack was Natalie’s third husband, something she seemed ashamed about, some sort of stigma that made her feel like this was what she deserved, that there was nothing better out there, so why bother? Natalie *knew* better, but somehow didn’t really believe it.

 Natalie’s youngest son, Jim, away at college in West Virginia, had called on his way home. “Hey, Mom! Just wanted to let you know that some friends and I are driving up to Pittsburgh tomorrow, in case you call or text and I don’t answer.” She smiled. She was proud of both of her boys. Each was doing great things in his own way. It was hard on her when they both moved out last summer. She had felt like her life collapsed completely. Both boys served as buffers when Jack started smack-talking after a few too many shots of Absolut. But she couldn’t keep them from living their own lives. Couldn’t admit to them that being in that house alone with Jack when he got drunk absolutely terrified her…

 Jack had never struck her, drunk or not. But when he was drunk, he talked big. And when he talked big, he dug in underneath Natalie’s foundation, weakening her belief in herself, her belief in good in the world, her belief in the possibility that things could get any better than they were. Then he had a miraculous ability to put a spin on anything he said that made her question herself – *was* she too cold? – *was* she too bold? – *did* she really need to be knocked down a few pegs because she thought that she was so high and mighty and better than Jack was?

 After hanging up with Jim, Jack had called. She didn’t have to ask; he was drunk again. She asked, anyway. “For Pete’s sake, Natalie! I had two shots! It’s not like I’m drunk. Just a little to take the edge off. Work was crap today. Boss said if I can’t keep up with what he wants me to do, I can find another job. I almost told him he’s right; I sure *can* find another job! He’s lucky to have me working there in the first place. I know ten times more about that new system than anyone else does.”

Natalie wanted to say, *Maybe so, but nobody else there is going through DT’s because they struck the boss two weeks ago, drunk from his thermos contents, and had the boss lay it on the line that they get clean and stay clean, or hit the door and not look back*. Instead, she pursed her lips. “Jack, you promised that was the end of it, that you were quitting for good.”

“Get off my case! It was two little shots! You’re so perfect. I *need* alcohol or I can’t stand to be around you. I don’t know what anyone sees in you, Nat. Honestly! You’re just like a gnat. That’s the perfect nickname for you. They pick and swarm, and just buzz to be buzzing, anything to tick you off! Well, gnats get slapped, and one of these days, that’s what I’m gonna do. Slap down that gnat that’s been driving me crazy for the past ten years!”

She ended the call. Tears stung her eyes, although she had grown accustomed to things like this. She wasn’t afraid of him, though. She knew that she could take him in a fight. She heard Amy’s voice warning her one night when she’d said something similar. “We all think that until someone gets enough alcohol in them that they don’t know or care anymore who they hurt or why, Natalie. Please, kick him out before something awful happens to one of you.” It amazed Natalie, really. She had only ever told three friends anything about Jack’s drinking. Amy had told her more than once, though, “You don’t have to tell anyone anything. He reeks of alcohol 24/7. Most people need help to be *that much* of a jackass, Natalie.” She agreed that her life had become a disaster.

She drove the rest of the way home more slowly, dreading how bad Jack might be by the time she arrived. She refused to cry; she wouldn’t show him her tears, because there was too much satisfaction in it for him. She shuttered her heart and marched into the house defiantly, daring him to cross her; it was the only way she knew how to stand up for herself, the only way she knew how to deal with him, despite whatever mood presented itself when they faced off each time he drank.

She paused, listening carefully at the door. Nothing. Was there an ambush coming? She walked through the kitchen and saw the empty Absolut bottle sitting on the counter. “Two shots, my butt,” she whispered. She knew how much was in the bottle after he’d gotten in trouble at work two weeks earlier. Jack had downed eight shots, maybe ten, and his shot glass was absent. Maybe he had passed out after their argument… She held her breath as she walked by his living room chair. He was slung across it at an odd angle, and the shot glass had rolled under the coffee table. Out cold. Good, that gave her time to pack and get out. One way or another, this ended tonight. There was something in his words earlier that didn’t sit well with her psyche. She had never believed that he would harm her physically, but now she knew he might.

Natalie tiptoed down the hall to her bedroom. To *their* bedroom, although Jack never slept there anymore. Typically, because he had passed out elsewhere, like tonight. She locked the door and threw open the closet doors, reaching behind several other things to grab two suitcases. Flashes of happier times for them, when their relationship was still new, when they went places together, did things together, when she didn’t just sit in disgust and watch him killing himself little by little. Didn’t he understand how much she loved him? Why did he do this to himself? Then the drinking got to be bigger than just Jack. The drinking interfered with work. At least a dozen jobs in five years, and that included the two years of covid when he did nothing and tried to convince the world that it was because he had “convictions” and refused to get the vaccine. Natalie had convictions, too – about paying bills on time, having groceries and a roof over her head, and living up to promises she made. Those kinds of convictions didn’t matter as much to Jack, somehow. Well, they had to matter to someone, so Natalie plowed on in her stressful job that she was lucky enough to work from home during the pandemic, and after some sense of normalcy returned to the world. Normal. What a loaded word! What in the world *is* normal, even?

Clothes flew from hangers, folded into neat little bundles, almost effortlessly, as she hurried through her work. Where was she going when she got things loaded up? She had no clue, but she was in a sure-fire hurry to get there.

Her toiletry bag zipper got stuck and she cursed herself for trying to get too much in there. *It’s just make-up*, she told herself, *you can get more when you get to where you’re going*. There it was again. Where *was* she going? Exhausted, she collapsed onto the bed and tears came. Not in quiet trickles, but in torrents down her beautiful face. She was so tired of trying to figure out all the answers. Angry. Fatigued. Disgraced. Displaced. Absolutely lost. Where was she going to go?

*Nowhere*, she heard her muffled voice say calmly into the pillow. The tears stopped as suddenly as they came, and she sat up on the bed, staring straight ahead at nothing.

The truth was, she could go to a hotel – there was one less than a mile away. But the house was in her name because Jack’s credit had made it too much of a risk to put his on anything once they finally decided to get married six years ago. He had made everything seem like a dream the four years they dated, the second half of which they had decided to live together in her house, since he didn’t have one of his own. She would lose it all if she left. She would also lose it all if she tried to kick him out and divorce him, though – because without a paycheck on his end, she would face financial ruin. Fifty-two years old and tottering on the brink of despair is a lonely precipice. Natalie shivered at the thought.

Sleep overtook her and, although she knew it could end at any moment when Jack awoke from his hazy, wasted state, she felt the urgency turn to peace. Something transformed in the darkness. She wouldn’t exactly call it hope, but it was something that let her know, when morning came, she would be ready to do what she needed to do.

When the morning sun screamed through the open blinds and her whole body throbbed in time with her heartbeat, Natalie initially thought she had just slept wrong. Or that she was still tired, maybe even dreaming that morning had dawned so peacefully. She rose from the bed, washed her face and hands, and suddenly realized that all her toiletries were in their correct spots in the bathroom. She went to the closet. All of her clothes hung neatly, and the suitcases were back in their proper places. *Lord, did I dream all of that*, she wondered, as she closed her hand over the bedroom door, only to find it still locked. Confused, she clicked the door open, and proceeded cautiously down the hall. No sounds anywhere in the house. He’d never stayed passed out this long.

She was almost to the living room when she heard the front door open. She closed her eyes, whispering a prayer, for what, though, she wasn’t sure. It was Brandon, her oldest son. He walked through the kitchen and greeted her with a long hug and kiss on the cheek. She started whispering, warning him that Jack was passed out on the couch. Brandon walked in front of her, into the living room where Jack was still splayed over the chair. Vomit covered the floor below Jack. Natalie hadn’t seen it in the nighttime shadows. The room reeked of vomit, urine, and alcohol, noxious and nauseating.

Brandon reached over and kicked at Jack, not giving him the courtesy of a vocal wake-up call. The body barely budged. Then he touched Jack’s face, turning it ever-slightly upward towards the light. It was ashen, a look of horror painted across it, frozen as the morning mocked him in its early light. Brandon quickly dropped his stepfather’s face and stepped backwards, bumping into Natalie, who had moved in close behind him during the inspection of the body.

“Is he –”

Brandon nodded, with a hint of a smile on his face. “He’s dead, Mom. Absolutely dead.”