

ALPHA FEMALE

by Chris Evans

.....

LISA CRISETTE PUSHES away from the conference table and stands, patting her stomach. Nearly everyone else tries to figure out whether the mostly untouched bottle of beer she's leaving at the table is her first or her second. Nobody at this point knows exactly how tipsy Lisa is or how tipsy she plans to become, though hope abounds. She has ingested precisely three slices of pizza while reading some of the harder-core nursing-home stories on the table, something everyone has noticed because three slices is about two-and-a-half more slices than Lisa usually eats but also because Peter Toklas, who fancies himself the group's unofficial spokesman, has been commenting extensively, nearly bite-by-bite, about Lisa's eating more than her usual. The drinking thing, nobody's mentioned.

No one would question Lisa's need to take a constitutional right about now because nearly everybody else on staff has already read that godawful hard-to-stomach piece that Lisa—who's gracefully brushing her lightly frosted bangs away from her glistening eyes and then pulling up her slightly baggy but certainly fashionable faded-indigo jeans—has only this minute finished reading. So good for her: do the sensible thing and take a short walk to clear the head.

She stands there for a moment, pretty.

Just how tipsy could she be?

Editor Andreas Zane, at this point being the only one in the room still completely sober, could swear that Lisa's only opened the one beer for, from Andreas' perspective, Lisa, who, yes, certainly likes a beer every now and again, is an angel sent Fedex from heaven who simply could not be a habitual and/or heavy drinker. Post hoc ergo propter hoc: That's her first beer. In no way could Lisa outdrink the other girls on staff. She simply could not consume as much as Cynthia Prynne, who's actually sipping some kind of hard liquor there at one end of the conference table, or

Tasha Cohen, who even now has her hand on a bottle of wine at the table's other end despite being at least a year underage. Both Cynthia and Tasha have telltale extra padding on their hips, which Lisa Crisette—light and lovely—does not.

Andreas has already written off Lisa's three slices to little more than last-meeting excess, thinking Lisa is merely enjoying (like Andreas) having the entire staff together, the staff of the *Community Caring Times*, for their final editing session, this last and final editing session occurring before the magazine comes out to the student body in twelve days' time, and so she is letting herself have that third slice of pizza—which Andreas bought himself. Truth be told, Andreas has enjoyed watching the pizza enter Lisa's lovely mouth—truly, honestly, thoroughly enjoyed this act, in his bland adverbial way—especially since Lisa is being forced to read that gut-churning car-crash piece, which Andreas, in his at-home pre-proof-meeting proofing, twice came close to bumping from the magazine all together, for matters of taste.

Meanwhile Peter, at Lisa's svelte right elbow and knowing her far better than Andreas knows her, guesses Lisa must be on at least her second beer if not her third—he's wrong, though, and getting drunk himself—and Peter takes this opportunity to make his latest, clumsy, hopeless advance on Lisa, dreaming that perhaps she's at least a little bit tipsy so that the advance will be more smoothly received than he has any realistic hopes of its being.

"So, where y'going, Lise?"

Peter squints over the top rims of his thick black glasses and offers an intentional leer, which doesn't help his case.

"Bathroom," says Lisa.

"So, um, hey," says Peter, "isn't there some rule that some other chick has to go with you or something?"

Cynthia and Tasha look up.

"You know, if neither of these fine ladies has the urge to purge, as it were, their bladders, I could be a surrogate, y'know? You need a surrogate chick for the bathroom, Lise?"

Peter tops this off by winking at Ewen Ezra, who's sitting on the other side of Lisa, but Ewen doesn't notice because he's chewing on a hangnail that he started chewing on when he hit his third glass of wine, into which glass he occasionally dips the pinky finger with the hangnail, as if

the wine were some sort of topical antiseptic.

"Blimey!" says Seaton Coe, who's sitting across from Peter and who's a real Brit but who's been in the U.S. so long that he's started to lose his accent but who also knows that Lisa (and maybe Cynthia and just possibly Tasha) thinks the accent's terribly sexy, so he plays it up. "Give the lass a break, Petah." Blimey and lass not actually being in any vernacular Seaton has ever used, even when he was back in Britain, which was when he was a toddler, essentially.

Lisa smiles at Seaton Coe, who possesses a rugged handsomeness that's allowed him into a fair share of the silkily soft graduate and undergraduate panties worn by the women of the university's Community Services Program, including those of his current girlfriend, Laurel, who he's sure he'd go back to after just two or three passionate nights with Lisa.

Seaton feels himself go mildly erect when Lisa smiles his way.

Lisa pats Peter on the shoulder. "I'll be fine. Be right back." She looks around the table and says, "Anyone who wants to do the next read on this brain injury thing, you're welcome to it."

Nobody moves.

"It's Ewen's," says Peter. "I've put in my time with that thing."

Ewen bites at his hangnail, mumbles "Fine," and takes the pinky out of his mouth and readjusts the cap that he wears morning, noon, and night to hide his prematurely graying hair.

Lisa picks up the proof and hands it to Ewen—who breathes her in—then turns and walks to the door. Peter ogles her body in retreat while Andreas, standing, tries not to ogle her body by concentrating on his own proof sheet, and Seaton grimaces at Peter for being a right fine prick for so obviously ogling her body, and Cynthia and Tasha drink.

It's been a tough semester on the *Community Caring Times*. Most everyone would have dropped out by now if dropping out hadn't meant that they'd have to stop seeing Lisa on a regular schedule.

IN CONVERSATION—here's the thing—Lisa touches a man on the shoulder or chest.

She lets her wide and playful eyes linger on his eyes and

then looks downward and away as if to show how embarrassed she is for being so absorbed, so entertained, and so enamored with him and by him and in him. She wears pale silk and sometimes lace and bluejeans, looking mildly hippie and sorority girl at the same time, and she smells like the first love of a young boy's life. She has a boyfriend who she's been seeing for more than four years now, a boyfriend she has no intention ever of leaving, but somehow during the chest-touching, gaze-linging moments, a man can let himself begin to believe that—given the right circumstances, if he were to put in the right amount of effort and never forget how much attention he must pay to Lisa Crisette—she would one day choose him.

Andreas Zane wants to protect Lisa, for she seems so fragile, and he has not actually dwelled much on thoughts of sleeping with her.

Peter, who enjoys sex to such an extent that he's engaged in it with prostitutes from eleven countries in Europe and Asia, feels he will die miserable if he fails to sleep with Lisa.

Ewen, a virgin, achingly wants to sleep with Lisa and masturbates near-daily to thoughts of her caressing his pepper-gray scalp.

Seaton's girlfriend would be surprised at how quickly she'd get bumped from the bed if Lisa showed up at their apartment door—unless of course she was up for a threesome.

Cynthia and Tasha believe Lisa to be a bitch, for they believe they know her game. But still they keep coming back to these meetings, for beating her at this game is something both Cynthia and Tasha want desperately to do.

EWEN TRANSFERS his pinky from the red wine to his mouth and starts reading the brain-goo story, which involves a nursing home resident being visited by one Dorothea Foster-Wallace, a third-year non-trad grad student in the university's Community Services Program, a poorly written narrative recounting a car-train equation that killed a mother and father and also fundamentally paralyzed their daughter, an American Indian girl named—ironically, the author notes, regarding the extent of the patient's paralysis—Valeri Running-Wolf, who was left able to do little more than drool and move her left leg, which, now as a woman in her 20s, she uses to point out letters on an

alphabet board to communicate her wishes, which half the time involve phrases along the lines of "Please suffocate me."

Few people go into community or social services with black hearts, and so the story, despite the student writer's attempts to turn Valeri's plight into some kind of Triumph of the Human Spirit over Adversity tale has been alternately stressing out or depressing every person who reads it, which means that Ewen, picking up his wine and finishing off the two-thirds of a glass that he has there, is only the latest to begin to succumb to self-pity, and so only the latest to need more distraction than usual.

Lisa's been overtly and subtly propositioned a lot more this afternoon because of this article. No one other than Andreas, singularly sober, has made the mental connection between the article and the yearning for Lisa. Andreas interprets his own desire for Lisa as an affirmation of life, considering that sex leads to reproduction. His reasoning extends to embrace his lack of desire for Cynthia—dowdy—and Tasha—bitchy—on the basis that these other young women are his "friends."

A couple of minutes after Lisa leaves, Peter gets up from his chair and walks the five steps over to the wall of the room that adjoins the women's restroom, and he puts his ear up against the wall and feigns to be listening.

Seaton sits quietly disapproving, wanting mostly for everybody to get through this final editing process as quickly as possible so that the group can move on to the likely pre-production celebration at the Pig and Whistle, a faux-English pub where Seaton plans to make his first actual faux-English move in the direction of Lisa Crisette, with due deference to Laurel, who's away visiting her parents for a few short days.

Andreas rolls his eyes at Peter's hunching and turns away and walks over to one of the two computers by the windows, which overlook a dreary, rain-doused street, and he sits, having decided that all responsibility for leading the way to deadline-meeting for the *Community Caring Times* lay on his thin but sturdy shoulders, as the rest of the staff keeps slugging back the wine that Tasha brought and the beer that Peter brought and the booze that Cynthia brought. His fingers start moving across and up and down the dusty keyboard.

Peter, listening, says, "She's in there."

To this there is, at the table, almost no reaction, because Peter talks a lot most of the time.

And then he says, "It sounds like she's beating off in there."

This is clearly meant to be a joke, but poor quiet virginal Ewen buys into it a thousand percent or more.

Cynthia hunches her shoulders. Tasha tosses back Ewen's freshly poured half-glass of wine, which Ewen, looking toward Peter now, has momentarily let his eye stray from. Tasha wipes her mouth after.

Ewen gets up to join Peter at the wall.

Cynthia blurts out, "Grow up, you guys."

Immediately afterwards she regrets it. If there's anything Cynthia wants to do other than to Find a Man, it is to appear passionately detached regarding matters of Lisa Crisette.

By the time Ewen has pressed his ear to the wall, Peter has already pulled away and turned back toward his seat, laughing and saying, "Yeah, grow up, Ewen." But Ewen, who in addition to the wine has had two shots of Cynthia's dark liquor and, who's kidding whom, Ewen handles booze like an alcoholic five-year-old handles booze, keeps his ear mashed to the wall in hopes of hearing half-muffled sobs of vaginal self-stimulation coming from the other side. Ewen's buzz-cut gray begins to stand on end at the very thought.

But Ewen does not hear low-level sobs of ecstasy. He believes at first that he might, but this is mostly because Ewen is so inclined as to want to hear little mini-orgasms through the sheet-rock walling that he does, almost, hear them; but instead really what Ewen at first thinks he hears as little Oh Oh Ohs turn more into Ug Ug Acks, which at first Ewen isn't able to identify, once he realizes they aren't mini-orgasms. Not at first, anyway.

"Sounds like she's gagging in there," says Ewen, finally.

Peter's the first to react, inappropriately, in that he stops in his tracks and turns and rushes back to the wall and says, "What? You can hear her?" which causes Seaton to look up, for post-work Pig and Whistle game plan or no, Seaton has at least as much interest as the next guy in hearing Lisa masturbate. Only Cynthia looks up with anything approximating concern.

"Shit, you fucking can hear her," says Peter, his ear again mashed to the wall.

"This is tremendous," whispers Ewen.

"So what is it?" says Cynthia, sounding not as light and airy as she'd like. "Is she coming or gagging?"

Even Andreas has turned away from the computer by this point, his cursor still flashing on the screen but he himself turned entirely toward the wall occupied by Peter and Ewen. Andreas has it in his head that these guys need to show a little more respect for their fellow staff member than to listen to her through a toilet wall but hasn't yet managed to get this thought to his lips. Tasha is in forced denial about wanting to listen and has just depressed herself by pouring what turns out to be the last of the burgundy into her glass, which she's raising to her lips. She worries that she might be a lesbian, which just wouldn't do.

"I don't know," Ewen says, smiling, raising his voice just barely above a whisper, looking sideways over to Cynthia without ever allowing the entirety of his ear to leave the wall, which is growing warmer against his skin. "It sounds really weird. I can't make it out."

"Shhh," says Peter, waving the forearm farthest from the wall in a downward, shushing motion.

"Well, blimey," says Seaton, rising from his seat. "If this is what you Yanks do for fun."

As Cynthia watches, bottom lip parting from top tip in a frightfully unairy reaction, Seaton moves from her right to her left and takes up a position on the wall just south of Ewen.

Reaching over and appropriating the barely touched (first) bottle of beer opened today by Lisa Crisette, non-lesbian Tasha leans back in her chair, takes a long drink, and then afterwards looks at Seaton and Ewen and Peter over against the wall as if seeing them for the first time.

"You guys should be ashamed of yourselves," she says, slurred and indignant.

Peter and Ewen shush the room together.

"It sounds like . . ." says Seaton, but the sound going on on the other side of the wall seems to defy imitation, to Seaton.

"I refuse to believe that this is the sound of Lisa coming," says Peter.

"Yeah, but this isn't your sex," says Seaton. "This is strictly the touchy touch." A statement and phrase that even Seaton isn't sure could be counted as British.

"Five dollars says she moans during sex," says Peter.

"You guys need to cut that out," says Cynthia. She feels

herself on the verge of growing ill on Lisa's behalf.

"Shhh!" says Ewen.

For a moment everything goes quiet on the other side of the wall, and Ewen and Peter are pretty horrified that perhaps they've shushed one time too loudly, which is to say loud enough to be heard by Lisa Crisette in the restroom, with Ewen even going so far as to turn himself away from the wall, taking a full step away and toward his chair, as if perhaps Lisa, who's clearly still on the other side of the wall doing something, whether masturbating and vocally orgasming or something else, is likely to somehow immediately walk through the door and see Ewen half-hunched there with Seaton and Peter, listening.

"What's that noise, anyway?" says Seaton.

"Ga ka, ga ka, ga ka, kind of like," says Peter. "It sounds like . . ."

Tasha drinks.

"Listen, you guys," says Cynthia.

"It sounds like . . ."

But then everyone in the conference room can hear exactly what the sound sounds like.

Because first there's another tiny ga-ka.

And then a second.

And then after that the mini ga-ka sound amplifies twofold or tenfold into a really easy to identify kind of broad sound, a sound with ending and resonance.

It's like the sound of sewage dumping into the slow-flowing and polluted East River some several blocks from Andreas' upper-East Side apartment. But this is just one childhood-memory way to imagine it.

"Jesus," says Peter, standing up.

It sounds like Tasha's newborn cousin's bowel movement gushing inside a diaper, or Mrs. Ezra's pitcher of iced strawberry Kool-Aid hitting the Bermuda grass of the front lawn in pinkish-red chunks. Like the unhygienic mopwater from Cynthia's Saturday morning chores doing the same, but into a drain.

It sounds like Peter's favorite half-gallon jar of marbles being upended into a shallow muddy puddle by the neighborhood bully, or a dozen yellow-white loogies aimed at and dropping into a plastic bucket on Seaton's primary school playground, where the first schoolboy to miss is forced to drink the cup right then and there in front of all of his sadistic fuck classmates.

It sounds a lot like what everyone imagines Valeri Running-Wolf must have heard as she felt her body collapse between her own dying mother and own dying father, there in the front seat of the car on the train tracks.

It sounds, pretty obviously, like vomit surging from the wide-open throat of Lisa Crisette.

Vomit.

And then silence. Enough time for a dainty wiping of the mouth with an extended index finger.

Nobody moves. Or says anything.

Ewen looks over at Lisa's empty plate, at the remnants of the three large slices—two-and-a-half more than Lisa normally eats.

Seaton goes white.

Peter says, "What the hell?"

"Is she all right?" says Andreas.

And Peter, "Jesus."

Tasha sees Ewen looking at Lisa's plate and thinks he's looking at her, at her holding the now-empty bottle from Lisa's only beer, and she raises herself to her full sitting height and says, "What? She wasn't going to drink it."

"Jesus fuck," says Peter.

"Christ," says Cynthia. "Shut up."

Peter looks at the wall as if he's got issues with this wall that he's only beginning to come to terms with.

"Wow," says Ewen, which Cynthia ignores.

Andreas, who still envisions himself as the group's leader, says, "Hey, we need to get back to work."

Cynthia lets her head sink a little toward the table. She hunches her shoulders.

Seaton pulls himself fully out of his crouch and walks back toward his seat, not looking at anybody, an action which spurs Ewen and Peter to do the same.

Sounds issuing from the restroom on the other side of the wall have ceased, or in any case they've dropped to a level where a person would need to have his ear right up against the wall to hear them. With the exception of Andreas over by the computers, who for reasons he's not sure of has stood up and remained standing, everybody's sitting at the table. Except for the hum and whine of the computers and the soft constant splatter of rain on the hermetically sealed windows and maybe the background noise from the fluorescent lights, the room is silent.

Seaton stares at the page he's supposed to be proofing.

Peter looks through his glasses and into the space just a little to the left of Cynthia's ear. Cynthia reaches into her purse to see whether she has any cigarettes. Ewen sucks at his hangnail. Andreas feels blindly anxious in the area just behind his eyes because he knows in his heart of hearts that he's supposed to step up and lead at a time like this. Tasha puts the heel of her right hand up to her left temple, which has started to ache like a motherfuck; and she tries to figure out what's going on; and as events arrange and rearrange in her head, she tries to fight off the urge to release right there onto the conference table all the wine and beer and dark-brown liquor that she's put into her system so far today.

And then there she is.

She walks in.

Quietly appears Lisa Crisette, whose face is so thin and drawn that the dark circles under her eyes seem to stretch an eternity down her face—who's so emaciated that the jeans she wore comfortably six months ago she now has to cinch up with a new belt, and even then the pants hang loose about her waist—whose hands have ugly blue lines in them—whose once-full breasts seem vanished under the loose top she wears—who's shaking as she sits down.

No one stares for any second longer than anyone would consider appropriate. Within two clicks everybody's looking down again and some of them are even working at changing things like "He observed" to "He noticed" and circling words, putting circles and question marks by quotes to indicate doubt as to whether somebody actually honestly said something like "She's lain" or whether the writer of the piece has changed the quote for the sake of grammar, which Andreas always says should not be done, not if a writer wants to protect and defend the integrity of a quote. Everyone occupies himself or herself with these tasks.

Nobody, not even Cynthia, says anything when Lisa sits down and says, "Hey, where's my beer?"

Normally there would be a comment at this time from Peter. Lisa looks around and it's obvious she feels uneasy.

Finally Cynthia says, "Tasha drank it, I think," which is the truth, but then there's Tasha's denial and then Lisa's expected, "Oh, yeah, Tasha, because we all know you don't drink," which Lisa offers with a wink to Seaton, just as he looks up.

Lisa Crisette, obviously thinner than anyone has ever

noticed, rubs a bony hand on Ewen's back, Ewen who's sitting to her left and leaning a little forward and looking a little green, and she says, "Ooh, somebody's had his drink limit for today," and then she looks to Peter, who adjusts his glasses and smiles a kind of crooked half-smile.

Despite everything, Ewen realizes he's enjoying the touch of Lisa's skeletal fingers on his back, the gentle caress on the other side of his thin cotton-poly shirt. He's hanging his head, trying not to look drunk, with the brim of his cap just barely touching the table. He breathes in and feels sluggishly reassured by Lisa's perfume.

"Hey Ewen, honey," says Lisa, still standing. She nods just past him and toward the pizza box at his left. "Pizza me."

Ewen glances up and looks around the table, a little too noticeably trying to gauge how he should respond to Lisa's request, for he has no idea. He makes eye contact with Lisa, who's leaning forward a bit and searching him out, Lisa whose blue-green eyes, sunken or no, really are the most beautiful blue-green eyes Ewen has ever had a chance to stare into during his uneventful, shy life. And at this moment Lisa's the only one giving Ewen eye-time; everybody else around the table is staring down, with the exception of Tasha, who has her empty wine glass pushed firmly up and to her lips, sucking, and Cynthia, who looks up for perhaps a half-second, but more to see what Ewen plans to do rather than to offer him help of any kind. Peter's looking into his hand, which he has up to his face, as if he's pushing up his glasses, but he's frozen like that, and has been for quite a few seconds now.

"Sure," Ewen says, and he reaches out to take Lisa's plate.

Then—nobody saw it coming, but if anybody had been counting the number of drinks going down her underage throat, they might have—Tasha says, "So Lisa, what was all that noise you were making in the bathroom, anyway?"

Lisa's plate is still hanging in mid-air. Ewen has one hand on the plate but he hasn't taken it entirely, and Lisa's still holding onto the other side. Seaton's looking halfway at his proofs and halfway up at Lisa, and he stays like this, uncertain whether he should look all the way back down or up to see how Lisa is going to react. Peter kind of nervously giggles and shakes his head and Andreas is over by the computers and he keeps looking at the screen like nobody's

said anything at all.

Cynthia glowers at Tasha with a look that clearly says Shut the fuck up, Tasha, but Tasha either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

Computers whine and rain splatters and the fluorescent lights aggressively hum.

A couple of unnecessarily empty seconds tick by, and Lisa keeps her hand on the plastic picnic plate that Ewen has the other side of. The plate begins shaking just the tiniest bit—but then Lisa Crisette, letting go of the plate, snaps her head around and smiles and levels the entirety of the brilliance of her smile upon Tasha and says more lightly and more airily than Cynthia Prynne would ever in her lifetime be able to pull off: "What'd'you mean, Tash?"

Tasha looks around the table for support, but nobody will look up. She brings her eyes back to Lisa and sneers and says, "We all heard it." She looks around the table again. Peter looks at her, but with an expression begging Tasha to stop. His eyes are pleading for Tasha to say Never mind and to have another drink and to relax and to let it all go. Cynthia wishes she had a cigarette.

"All of us heard you," says Tasha, feeling sure, omnipotent, fiercely heterosexual. "What? You bulimic? Cuz that shit is sick. If you got problems, you need help."

And there it is.

Tasha offers full and accusatory eye-contact to Lisa, who's clearly about to back down. About to crack. About to crack open and spill out right there in front of everybody.

"Christ, Tasha," says Cynthia.

"Heard what?" says Lisa. Her hand, the one not waiting for the pizza plate, is grabbing at something on the table that's not quite there.

Ewen thinks spasmodically about how he could help. Maybe he could go ahead and serve up the pizza and step in to the rescue. Then he notices the invisible grasping that Lisa is doing, and his heart hurts, he wants that much to help, and he keeps on staring at her hand.

Tasha feels so powerful that she is getting downright horny—for a man, for some grunt, for dick. Maybe she'll take Ewen, sitting so close. Or Peter. Any of them. They all want her. She could take any one of them.

"You know what we heard," says Tasha. "I'm talking 'bout what you were doing in the toilet. The puking."

Peter laughs nervously.

"So, ah, Tasha," he says, "you been listening at the wall or something?"

At this, Seaton half-laughs too, nervously.

"Well it wasn't me listening, I tell you that," says Tasha.

"Damn, sweetie," says Lisa, looking back to Ewen for only a second and then right back to Tasha, this time with an aw-shucks embarrassed but once-again fully brilliant smile and says, "Hon, can't a girl take a dump without everybody getting involved?"

Tasha squints.

Lisa's hand is clawing at the table, like she's inside a coffin, scratching to get out.

Peter laughs. Ewen, lowering the plate to the table, laughs, too. Seaton smiles and rotates a crick out of his neck and looks back at his proofs. Andreas, his hands on the keyboard, feels his shoulders reflexively and automatically relax.

Cynthia lets out a hard "Yeah, Tasha," which is meant to be a warning, even Tasha can tell.

Tasha scowls at Lisa. Lisa smiles at Tasha. Lisa's eyes are bright. Ewen's getting the pizza. Peter and Seaton and Cynthia are looking at their proofs.

From the computer bank, Andreas says, "Hey, guys, enough talk. We need to get to work. I'm not kidding about this deadline, you know."

Lisa won't look away. Tasha's starting to feel woozy again, like she really could throw up, right here at the table.

But not from pizza, Tasha thinks. I wouldn't throw up because of pizza.

Lisa's hand stops clawing at the table.

"Whatever," says Tasha. She reaches out toward a second bottle of wine.

"I guess," says Lisa, shrugging, taking the plate from Ewen.

"Whatever the fuck," says Tasha.

"Wow, I tell ya," says Lisa, easing herself into her chair, putting the pizza in front of her, positioning it so the tip is pointing her way. "It's good to know people on this staff care so much about whether or not I shit." And clearly Lisa means this as a joke. "It's good to know that my bowels are so important."

So everybody laughs a little. Or at least smiles. Except Tasha, who's looking around for a corkscrew.

"Whatever," says Tasha.

Lisa's hands are still shaking. She won't look at anyone right now, she seems so fixated on the slice of double pepperoni in front of her.

It's hard to know what to do when Lisa Crisette won't look at you, but Peter has the vocabulary. He reaches in and says something about how good that first drink is going to taste once everybody finishes the work and they all get down to the bar and can put the day behind them.

This relaxes at least most of the people a little more. Really, honestly, getting a drink after work. By god damn good and well, this is a plan nearly everyone can get behind.

But Tasha cannot. She feels sick to her stomach, literally, but she's not going to share this fact here or now. Instead, she stands, steps into the hallway, and turns left and away.

Lisa looks after her, turns back to the table, and says, "What was her problem?"

The other people at the table, almost as a unit, shrug their shoulders.

Then everybody gets back to work, reading closely, making good sentence-level changes, everyone thankful that the troublemaker among them has finally left the room, if only for a few minutes.