Churchtown

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Extract

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There is a saying the men have in Churchtown: Ms. Suzy's an old bag and a whore. And though the statement is mostly metaphor, it also holds a degree of truth – which in this town is often saturated with alcohol and all but spewed forth, distorted by the liar-lilies who limply hold up the bar's walls. What the men don't say is that their knotted spines untie when Ms. Suzy slips a slow hand up a left thigh. What they don't say is that they need her like aspirin, to thin their fat blood, to make it fast blood, free-flowing through clogged veins, to pump life into their numb limbs.

In this town's bar of mahogany and tarnished brass and low-lighting lamps, bulging bell-like over red velvet couches, Ms. Suzy floats daily, a white cloud in layers of loose fitting chiffon, baby blue chiffon, royal blue chiffon, aquamarine, and sky-blue chiffon that trails her all the way to the floor. Ms. Suzy's chiffon lounges.

Sometimes the bar's men spew discreetly into the bar's toilet. Not in shades of blue, but in whites, whiskeys and chardonnays, or if one of them has managed to smuggle a cabernet from the wife's private stock, rose pink, sun-setting like the dusky sky.

What the men's wives can be overheard saying while their husbands vomit or screw Ms. Suzy Delou is, "Thank God for Ms. Suzy Delou." They say this while in line at the gourmet supermarket across the bridge, or sitting under the hair-dryer, or while rubbing the bellies of their beloved cats.

Sometimes Ms. Suzy picks one of the bar's randier flowers, puts him in her mouth and dances flamenco with castanets on her fingers around the fine mahogany of the back room's pool table.

Sometimes Ms. Suzy helps one, two, all ten of the town's men, ease their pain in the bar's back room, on top of the pool table.

Ms. Suzy is sixty-eight years old.

Ms. Suzy doesn't mind her men old, but won't take them cold. "No dead lays, please," says Ms. Suzy to her lovers.

Ms. Suzy has never been paid for her services, but Ms. Suzy has paid: most recently a big tipper to the strapping new Super-Mart man who just last night crossed over the bridge into Churchtown to deliver her oestrogen, her collagen tablets, her do-it-yourself Botox, to deliver unto himself, and himself unto, Ms. Suzy Delou.

At Ms. Suzy's request the Super-Mart man will park, as he has been parking for over a month now, his Super-Mart van a good three or four feet off the curb side, the yellow curb side to boot, the no-parking curb. This enflames, like a chigger's bite, Faye Fiddle – Ms.

Suzy's closest neighbour of the 12 houses, a local bar, and derelict church that form the town of Churchtown. For over fifty years, Faye and Ms. Suzy have lived next to one another at this dead end of Churchtown, this too-tight-to-turn cul-de-sac of Churchtown. For all but a handful of those years, Faye has monitored the street's parking from her home's carefully veiled windows.

The Super-Mart manager has received more than a few phone calls about "the big white van sitting still and grotesque as a sick dog waiting for his delinquent master in the no parking zone." The Super-Mart manager has had several talks with his new man, and just as many chuckles and nudges. "But seriously," he's been overheard saying, "no more taking upwards of half and hour distributing the medicines to her cabinets. Can't you get the job done in fifteen minutes?" thereby inducing another fit of nudges and chuckles in them both.

When Faye is not keeping track of Churchtown's parking, she is manicuring her lawn and attending to her "too busy" (Ms. Suzy's words), flower garden. In more positive words, Faye's flower garden might be said to be full: long legged lilacs, baby pink roses, carnations and daffodils aligned straight as ducks and tilting their faces toward the sun. When she has finished with her garden, she moves to the sidewalk grass that lays itself like a pristine rug in front of her property. She wears a luminescent track suit, pink with purple trim. "I'm not gonna let these weeds run rampant over me," she says to the neighbours walking their dogs. "I won't tolerate it."

"Shut it, ya old goat," these neighbours, her fellow Churchtown men and Churchtown wives say.

For too many years she has been out just after dawn, frantically bending her tall frame, levering her spine, pulling out all that dares bud through her sidewalk's cracks overnight. She runs her weed-whacker, scrapes her rake, pushes her loud electric lawn mower. As early as five in the morning, one might see Faye trimming her scraggly briar-like hedges.

Whack – Scrape – Rev – Cut – Pull –Trim.

And then the culmination of her morning's ritual. A raking of the yard. A sweeping of the sidewalk. A final picking up of the remaining debris: an offending cigarette butt, a vagrant piece of newspaper in hand. Her thin behind... bending.

Bend.

Despite the fact that this is the most noiseless of Faye's neuroses, Faye's bending sickens Suzy the most, makes her lose her chiffon composure, makes her scream obscenities like "Crazy cunt!" or "Faye, get laid!"

In the decent hours of the day, those long hours of late afternoon, Ms. Suzy's anger takes a more subtle form of retaliation. She might begin what's to be a long, late cocktail party. She'll play the loud music – early bootlegs of "The Winsome Wonder of