

Elizabeth Porto
from *Ministering to the flesh*

Claims is watching Christmas on TV. Through the glass front of her office, Jane can see the others chomping from bags of microwave popcorn, watching Charlie Brown and his friends decorate the saddest tree ever. The swing shift is quiet tonight. Everyone's at the malls shopping for Christmas presents or at the restaurants in the malls, drinking eggnog. In the office, the lights are out, the only glow the tubelight through the glass and the screensaver on Jane's computer screen, a piece of Christmas fruitcake disappearing mouthful by mouthful until gone, when—presto!—a new slice appears and starts disappearing all over again.

Management has taken Jane off risk assessment. Her analyses have been off lately it seems—five hundred thousand for a customer in a restaurant with a heliobacterial outbreak, a million-two for the shark death of a Marine World employee, a whopping two mill for a family whose child had died in a neighbor's gleaming, shiny swimming pool.

The phone rings, but it's not a client. It's Dede, calling to remind her about the New Year's Eve party she is throwing, a pool party even though it's winter.

While Dede tells her about the party food, Jane wonders if Dede will be swimming, because she has never seen Dede wear anything that is even remotely tight or revealing, not even anything sleeveless.

After five minutes of food inventory—from cocktail shrimp to coddled emu eggs to baked Alaska—Dede lets her go, and Jane wonders what hasn't made the list—stuffed camel, deep-fried stag beetle, pickled eel? Dede is all about wanting—which is why she can't leave anything off the menu, why she will never run out of steak at the party, why there is no need for Christ to pay a visit that day and quietly turn a jug of water into wine.

Jane is all want herself these days, but it's like AA, so she's taken a vow of celibacy. Sometimes she'll be driving on the freeway and spy someone in the next car, or on one of the dusty Hollywood side streets, a man lounging against the gas pump while he fills his tank, or someone who looks like Nando, with his same loping walk, and she has to remind herself, not even one sip. She has to be that strict. Or sweat it out with

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Pastor Mark in confession. Chances of falling off the wagon: Three-to-two. Worse odds than alcohol recidivism, not as likely as gambling.

She remembers them all. The newspaper columnist who wrote wry looks at things like necktie fashions or home decorating fetishes, who, when he took off his own necktie, tossed it lightly onto his coffee table before they had sex on the living room floor. The earnest, young student who looked solemnly into her eyes afterward and said, "I wish I hadn't left my girl home in Jersey." The guys from the market, from the Frolic Room and the Cat and Fiddle, the ones from work. The one who recited sonnets to her afterward. The one with a tattoo on his chest that said, *Love none, lose none*. Sex in the back seat of clapped-out Novas and Rivas, among the old newspapers, empty packs of cigarettes, flyers advertising computer classes and cheap auto body work, coupons clipped from the paper for giant vats of laundry soap and sugary cereal, old clothes that Jane used for a pillow without being sure whether they were rags or still in use, whole lives naked to her.

When at the quarterly meeting at corporate, she had put forth a new actuarial table that proposed an algorithm of charging younger, healthier people more and reducing premiums for the sick, Jeff had taken her aside and said, *We're going to have to give you a furlough*, which meant not being fired exactly, not a demotion, he had said, but a temporary move into claims, a department that was strictly a matter of paperwork and procedure. As if Jeff himself never miscalculated, as if Jane hadn't seen him touch his assistant on the arm when he ran into her in the breakroom and leave his hand there.

She picks up her binoculars and scans the darkness across the ravine behind the building. Christmas lights twinkle, outlining eaves and windows, someone has covered a roof with white insulation to simulate snow, and a life-sized Santa and his sleigh have landed on it.

Through almost all the windows, she can see TVs on, its talk the extra guest in the house. She finds a few with *Holiday Inn* and *Charlie Brown*, and fourteen, she counts, turned to *It's a wonderful life*. All across the city, people are tuned in to the same waves, the same pitches of solitude, the picture of the forlorn Christmas tree, Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire tap-dancing on an empty stage, the sight of Jimmy Stewart so beloved in that small nosy town, so unlike the spread-out houses here with the neighbor's twinkling lights

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demarcating the distances between, as if one were looking at the lights from space instead of from across a ravine.

When she gets home, she can't sleep, so uncaps a beer and sits on the porch in the dark. The house was, is, Mother's, an Echo Park bungalow that looks like all the rest on the street, with its peeling stucco and dried-out front lawn. The neighborhood is full of rentals now, but when they moved there, after Mozambique, it had been families and children, who all walked together to the local school. Now it is single people, young, arty or professional, and hardly a child on the block.

She still can't sleep, wishes she could call Sal out in Palm Desert, but it's too late, instead picks up the video console Nando has left behind. They used to play videogames deep into the night, Nando keeping her company when she couldn't sleep. He was obsessed with one called *Ping!* about a World War II submarine trapped beneath the Arctic Circle. The captain has to overcome German U-boats, torpedoes, hidden bombs, scurvy, mutiny, double agents, giant clams and giant squid, icebergs, a maniacal captain and a paranoid cook, a large, spooky, thirty-year-old shipwreck, and a case of bad diarrhea.

"I'm through the steaming underwater volcano!" Nando would cry. *Ping! Ping!*

"Go through the coral arch! Go through before it closes up!"

Ping! Ping!

In all their months of playing the game, neither one had ever made it out alive.

Ping! bores her now, its fantastical sea mazes and challenges a perplexity she can't think her way through. Now her game has become to see how thickly she can let the dust settle on the vanity, how many mice will be born in the back of the green velvet chair. She lets the newspapers pile up unread beside the sofa, she has to wash a dish every time she brings home food. She wants moths to eat holes in everything—her sweater, the dishtowels, the sofa, let the disarray say, *Baby, I don't care.*

After running the submarine aground beneath the Arctic ice pack, she finally falls into the hallucinogenic day-sleep she's become used to. She sleeps into the afternoon, and is late to meeting, where Dede is holding forth on her arm swollen from edema, and Jane can see that the arm, as fat as a small baby, is bound in a beige elastic sleeve.

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Dede pats herself on the flat side of her chest, which makes, Jane notices, a sort of hollow sound, and looks around the circle of mute faces. “I want my breast back,” Dede says. “I want men to look at me again.”

Todd sniggers. “I don’t think that’s the reason. You’re like 50—or 60!”

Pastor Mark turns to Todd, who looks down at his hands, picking at the skin around his fingernails, and says, “Right, right.”

Jane knows this won’t stop Dede, who needs to talk, who needs to testify every week on her swollen arm, which, in its elastic sleeve does not make men ask for her phone number, no, they do not, and the scar which runs east to west from sternum to underarm and makes the wearing of sleeveless blouses in summer a fool’s game, and the phantom sensations—her nipple is there—she can feel it, really!—when of course it isn’t, and the way the teenage bagger at the market averted his eyes when she did not wear her breast form that one day, for goodness’ sake.

This is what Jane does every Tuesday and Friday before work, sits in a circle with Pastor Mark and the amputee support group just off of Western Avenue, in Christ the Redeemer parish hall, a former furniture showroom.

Walking home from work soon after Frankie died, Jane had spied the amputees through the big plate glass window that fronted on the bleached street outside of Christ the Redeemer. They were clustered around the coffee urn, the midafternoon light slanting onto them through the big window, bathing them in a harsh glare so they looked, to Jane, a true assortment of freaks, with hollowed eyes and stringy hair, but also like figures frozen in a religious tableau.