

1st Place I'll Tell You No Lies by Alison Woodhouse

'Ed?'

I'm polishing a glass, raising it to the light every three wipes to check for smears.

'Ed?'

The faces on the other side of the bar change but the stories don't. *My wife's left me. My lover beats me. My partner stole my money. I'm gay, I'm bi, I'm straight, can't get a date. Pour me another drink Ed, to hell with tomorrow.*

The glass feels fragile. This woman's been coming in for a couple of weeks. She's not from round here. I know everyone in this town. They come because I don't close early and I serve the drunks no one else lets in. I don't need a bouncer. I'm 6'5" and do weights every morning. I've got tattoo sleeves and a buzz-cut and I let them know I've spent a few years in prison.

She drinks vodka and ice and blows a little puff into the glass after every sip, as if she doesn't really like it. She's beautiful, of course. The sort any man would be happy to buy a drink for, just to sit with awhile and pretend.

Her head's on the bar and her hair's lying in a pool of beer. I put down the glass I'm cleaning as quietly as I can. The bones of her spine are visible through her shirt and I can see a strip of skin where it doesn't quite meet her skirt. I want to reach over and touch. My hands shake: I'm big and clumsy and scared.

'Ed?'

It's my whiskey time. I should say no but I've already poured her another vodka and pushed it her way.

'Thanks.'

She's quiet for a bit. We both are. Usually they launch straight at you with their stories, all red faced and self-justifying. I walk around the bar, pull up a stool and sit as close as I dare, my thigh inches from hers.

Imagine if we were two regular people, decent souls with respectable jobs and families we could visit at Christmas? The sort who are good with kids, do the car shares to football games and host neighborhood sleepovers. Who've got enough money to get out of renting and buy their own place. This could be our anniversary. We could be laughing about how shy we were on our first date, until she took me back to hers. We didn't fuck - we made love like movie stars; in the shower, all slow motion and shadows, her palm sliding down the wet glass, fade to black.

Except.

Fast forward.

We didn't have kids. She couldn't. I couldn't. Whatever. She lost her mum, I lost my job, we moved. She had affairs, lots of them. We broke up, made up, again, again. I lost my temper. Haven't seen her in twenty years.

'Ed,' she breathes.

I'm glad this one doesn't want to talk.

My hand strays to her thigh, as if it belongs there.

We paired the palms like prayers and built them into bundles before we pulled brown paper over them in a hug. Mum did 'outwork' for the glove factory for years. Her second and third fingers began to veer to the left and she winced with the ache but she loved the softness and the smell of wool. She stitched wafer-thin leather palms onto the cream gloves telling me about the grand price tag they would carry in the swankiest shops and the delight of fine ladies who would notice each stitch. My job was to spear the loops on each finger and pull them together before finishing off. I was sometimes bored and sought my own small amusement by spitting on this wool before I threaded my fat needle.

We headed to the factory lugging our burden. The hairy string dug deep into our hands as we rattled the gate. I stayed close to her pinny as angry steam from the pipes snaked round our ankles. The gaffer in turn-ups grabbed at our parcel, 'Ye're gey late this wik, we've nae time for slacking.' He pushed a brown packet with a clear window into my mum's hand watched by the girls in patterned head squares and dark painted lips. They simmered and cursed as they stretched out the gloves over hot metal hands. They winked at us.

On Friday the 6th June, just before his break, the supervisor met us at the door and he button-holed mum. I couldn't hear the detail above the factory clatter. Mum scrunched up the brown packet he gave her and dragged me by the arm as the metal door caught at my ankle. We walked home at top speed. Mum flicked on the lobby light and asked me to thread up her sewing machine for her. She treddled like fury and I waited for the right moment to place tea at her elbow. She took up hems for neighbours instead of 'outwork' until that dried up too.

Months later, I stretched for the white envelope at the dark end of my sock drawer tore it open and released the crumpled tissue paper parcel. I laid my offerings next to mum and took a step back. Two pairs of cashmere gloves shivered with the finest of hairs and

displayed their brown leather palms. For mum, one pair for autumn and one pair for winter to soothe cold fingers. Mum cried, then shook me and I realised for the first time that I had wrecked things for her. Our bundle had been short. She shook her head and said we must burn the beautiful cashmere gloves in the coarse coal fire and say sorry for what I had done. We tossed in the autumn pair and choked with the smell but the winter pair refused to be thrown. They writhed as mum held them, caressing mum's palm and warming her skin as I breathed, her fingers straightened as my ring finger curled.

The path to our house was crumbling tarmac in a short steep curve from the road. Each morning and evening I walked up and down it to the school bus, shouldering the weight of displacement. This was not my home, as their words reminded me daily, sinking into my skin like the bruised ground where the sheep trod – stark and blunt. After seven years I still hadn't lost my accent, my own voice the thing that betrayed me, as inescapable as the names that went with it. Incomer. Unwelcome. Not a local.

It was late spring, and most of our sheep had lambs. I wasn't allowed to get attached, no names or bottles or blankets by the fire. By then they had mostly passed that skinny stage where they look like empty cushion covers on sticks, so all twenty of them were up on the croft behind the house. When I saw the new sheep at the gable end I knew she wasn't one of ours – the coloured stripes sprayed on the fleece to mark them were different. And beside her –

I thought my eyes must be wrong. How could a lamb be arched the wrong way, twisted at the front on broken strings. Tiny, front legs bent back at the knee, in prostration. It stumbled, nudged by its mother as she tried to make it move like it was supposed to.

Dad said sentimental, and don't be. Said Jimmy had laughed so hard he'd doubled over when he brought them – a gift for the incomer's meagre flock.

I knew the lamb would die. It stepped on backwards stilts, following the confused ewe. I felt I tread its path, dejected. Not meant to survive this place.