

# mother at the polling station | Kurt Kennedy

“How are the kids, Carol?” Mike asked, slouched in his green folding chair across the long, plastic table inside the Village Clubhouse. He wore a plaid shirt, glasses hanging from the collar, and a gray sleeveless sweater. His salt-and-pepper hair, which usually hugged the sides of his otherwise-bald head, was disheveled. He’d been running his hands through it, either in exhaustion from the slew of “I Voted” stickers he’d handed out or relief that his day of worthy service was almost over. I figured the latter, because he sat with one leg crossed, butt on the edge of the seat, and shoulders on the backrest, which had to be horrible for his back.

“They’re good,” I answered. “Lauren and her husband live in Deerfield now. Oh, I’ve got to show you a picture of little Kaylee.” My arms jiggled a little as I got in my purse and found my wallet. I became so worried about Mike noticing that I forgot I was looking for a photo of my granddaughter.

“Aw, she’s cute—getting big.”

“That’s my little doll-baby,” I said and put the wallet away.

“Do you talk to Derek much?”

“He e-mails every week. He always asks me to ship him different books.” I looked both ways to see who might be listening in the sparsely populated room and leaned closer. “I guess that Iraq is really a dump. Derek’s always mentioning how disgusting it is.”

“Really? Mmm, mmm.” Mike shook his head. “Well, let me get your ballot.” He popped upright, spun the binder in front of him to face me, showed me where to sign, then handed me the ballot and a marker. “Just complete the arrow—foolproof.”

I walked to a booth on the north side of the room, the room where we had Derek’s going-away party. I uncapped the marker, but paused and looked up and out the big windows in front of me. I saw the hillside amphitheatre where Dan and I watched Oedipus the previous summer. I thought of the Greeks, which made me think “war.” Then I remembered when Derek told me he’d enlisted. I had an impulse to say, “God’s will be done,” like Henry Fleming’s mother had said before her son went off to seek

his red badge. Instead I said, “I hope you get shot—it’ll serve you right, doing this to me.”

I considered voting Democrat. I figured I better move to another booth to make a more level-headed decision.

The old wood creaked under my feet as I walked to the south side of the room. Mike looked at me suspiciously. I smiled and kept walking to a booth. I stood and looked out those windows for a minute. I spotted a man, woman, and girl on the playground. This reminded me of Lauren’s call last week—she was crying and said Jeff cheated on her. I said: “I told you he’d do something like this. Now you’re stuck because you’ve got a child. I told you to listen to me.”

I thought about family values and swayed back Republican. My marker was a centimeter away from the paper when I decided to move again.

I walked to the east side. Mike furrowed his brow.

“Sorry,” I said, shrugging my shoulders, ducking my head, and curling into myself.

I saw Lake Michigan through the windows. The calming effect of the water helped me focus. I’d go Democrat, it was settled. Then my husband Dan’s voice popped into my head: “Democrat! What the hell? Our son’s military.” I couldn’t remember the rest of this argument, but remembered it ending by me telling him if it weren’t for having to take him to chemo, I’d have time to think these things through. I completed the arrow pointing to the Democrat.

I walked to the ballot machine, and it sucked mine up like a vacuum. I walked back to Mike. He smiled and handed me my sticker.

“Say ‘hi’ to Dan. And, if you would, say a prayer for Maggie this Sunday. She got laid off last week—a year from retirement.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Hon, tell her if there’s anything I can do, just call.” I raised my hand to cover my suddenly queasy stomach. I wanted to rip open the ballot box and change my vote.

Mike smiled and nodded.

I walked out.