

He walked toward her, carrying the bag. Her front light flickered. What could she say to make him understand? *I'm normally more sophisticated.* No, that's not the point. *You're different than other men.* Maybe. *You make me cling to fertility dolls.* God, no. Her hand trembled, clutching the keys.

He held out the bag, but when she reached for it, the paper slipped. He bent and caught the bag before it hit the ground. That felt like a sign.

"Wow," she said.

"I played shortstop in college."

He shrugged. It was no big deal. That's what she needed, a no-big-deal guy.

This time he carefully folded her hand around the bag, and the paper crinkled. He laughed. This was it. She had to tell him now. "In the store," she said, "When we were looking at the cow?" She closed her eyes. "I lied."

"You didn't want it?"

"No. Yes. I love the cow." Her head throbbed, and she felt like she was gasping for air, a tiny fish on the shore. Why was this so hard? "I lied about my niece."

"She doesn't play softball?" He looked confused.

Sandra wanted to run. How could she admit to anyone, let alone Jim, just how flawed she was? He waited, his blue eyes searching but calm. He was such a great guy. He had to understand. Sandra took a deep breath. "I don't have a niece. I lied."

He cocked his head. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, of course not." This was a serious moment, but she felt a sudden urge to laugh. She'd seen this in her nephews—a nervous laugh whenever they got caught. "When you asked about the cow—if it was a gift . . ." She tripped over the *g* and giggled for a second. "Those were just the words I said."

She bit her lip to stop laughing.

"But we talked about softball."

She spoke sheepishly. "My two nephews play baseball?" She pressed her lips together.

They stood at her doorway under the flickering light. Jim looked handsome in blue. She wanted to remember all the details of this moment, when she told the truth and he accepted her. She clutched the paper bag.

He looked down the street, away from her. "It's late," he said.

"I know."

Then he turned and walked back to his car.

As she stood on her porch, his car pulled away, blinkered, and then turned the corner. She unlocked the door and told her hands to be still.

Inside she slumped on her bed and tossed the bag to the other side. She couldn't face that awful udder. Was there anything sweet in the fridge? Last week's cake was long gone and she hadn't bought anything new.

She slipped off her heels and slid between the smooth, cool sheets. God, what was wrong with her, lying to Jim? And why, because she liked him, as if she were an eleven-year-old girl? No other woman would do that. They'd snap him up. Like that clerk in the store. The young woman's face was inviting and wide, the type who would tell him everything, open kimono, all her secrets and dreams laid bare. That's what Jim wanted, what he deserved all along.

She should just call him. Right now. She had to tell him the truth about why she had lied, the full truth, no games. There was no other option. She stared at her clean ceiling for a long time, until she was sure he was home and had changed for bed. Soon he'd be asleep. Without looking, she pulled the cow from the bag and held it to her chest. She remembered his face as they stood on her stoop, his eyes searching and the slow shake of his head. All she had to do was pick up the phone. That's all it would take. She studied the ceiling and stopped at a corner—a cobweb had returned, already—until she knew it was too late to call.

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JOAN WADLEIGH CURRAN

Aftermath, 2016–2017

Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in

