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Reenacting

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Reenacting

In one of the only memories I have now of being alone with Kevin, we're standing in the upstairs hallway of the Civil War Reenactors' Theme House at Gettysburg College, and we're whispering, laughing, rifling through open closets.

"Look at this," I say, incredulous, pressing a vintage hoopskirt to my waist.

Kevin wears a general's hat, like a top hat someone flattened. He adjusts the fit against his forehead and raises an empty copper cup. "I sure am thirsty," he says, squinting into an imaginary sun that is just a corner of the bedroom. "I sure am hungry," he says, rubbing his belly, and I laugh.

This morning—in this house—is the first time I've seen Kevin since his medical leave of absence to resolve suicidal ideation. That was the official term. But what happened, when put simply, is Kevin filled a tub with water. He took the radios, stereos, and speakers from the bedrooms of his roommates, edged them along the rim, and prepared to enter. There was a candle burning on the bathroom countertop, and that's what Evan said was worse—that when he found our mutual friend hunched over the tub's smooth rim, the light itself was moving, as if water.

"It looked wet along his body," Evan said. "I thought I was too late."

I was not in Gettysburg that semester. I was studying in a Mediterranean town so small and quaint it looked like a cluster of tiny seashells from the vantage point of a nearby mountain. I drank wine, ate pucks of soft-ripened cheese, jumped from a rocky cliff that jutted out above blue-green water while men in canvas hats pulled their lines from the darkest depths. But in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in that dimly lit, eerie bathroom, Evan convinced his college roommate to wrap himself in a cranberry towel. He pulled the cords from the nearby socket and then sat beside him against the tub. They waited like that for twenty minutes, he said, until health officials finally arrived.

"What did you two talk about?" I asked once, because to me, those minutes seemed impossible—spaces reserved for situations I thought I'd never have to handle.

"For the most part, we were silent," Evan said. "We didn't talk about what happened, if that's what you want to know."

Kevin spent the five days that followed in the Reading Hospital, three hours east, talking to doctors and watching daytime television in a pair of sweatpants his mother mailed him. Then he returned to our college campus. By spring, he was standing beside me in the reenactors' theme house—where I'd been assigned for the semester—and together, we raised imaginary weapons as we peered off into the distance.

"I've got the enemy in my sights," I said, and Kevin made a firing sound.

Outside, the world was quiet and brightly lit. It had snowed the night before, and the yard looked now like a Christmas card—like something someone arranged carefully as if to make my memory a little brighter. Autumn was long behind us, so we weren't talking about what happened. We weren't talking about what he'd done. We were talking instead about the war: the thousands of men who gave their lives on the battlefields all around us. Forty-six thousand died in the span of three short days, more than any other conflict on U.S. soil in American history, and wasn't it fantastic, we often remarked, how we attended college on that periphery?

"This town has so much history," Kevin said, "and no one even cares."

That house, in particular—and the students who inhabited it—had a role so intertwined with history it was hard to even imagine. To me, it was simply beautiful: a hundred-year-old white Victorian with sloping shutters and a bean-red door. But it had also once been an inn, lodging soldiers and travelers just after the Civil War was won. Now it was student housing: three floors of hardwood lit by large, spacious windows, the rooms padded with bunk beds, small desks, and tall, wide armoires.

It was a point of pride for Gettysburg College, mentioned in brochures and on their website and, later, spotlighted by the *New York Times*, not because of the history within those walls, but because of the students who lived between them: men and women who woke early to reenact the Battle of Gettysburg on Saturday mornings, dressing in vintage clothing, packing pocketknives and handkerchiefs. The women cooked beans in skillets while the men lay flat in fields. They had their battle movements memorized—each and every play—and spent their mornings waiting. They knew exactly when to die. And when at three they won that battle, they caravanned home together, parking their van in our shared drive.

I did not want to be there, living inside their house, but every other building—theme houses and residential halls alike—were full and there was nothing else. There was no other vacancy but in their home.

And because our history was what mattered—or so it read on every brochure, e-mail and flyer—as long as students were present to reenact, Gettysburg College preserved a place for them to live. Inside, students could hang hoopskirts in shared closets and store their muskets under beds. No one stole their canteens; no one filled them with vodka tonics. They were not inundated with jokes about their rucksacks or the purpose of their wineskins. In the house’s only kitchen, they cooked nineteenth-century meals. They dried meat along the rooftop, hung their clothes on a line to dry. Sundays, they baked cornbread and broadcast fife music from iPod speakers.

I moved in and then grew distant, and when they gathered for weekly dinners—salted meats and red-skin potatoes—and knocked gently on my door, I only ever turned their offers down.

“I’ve got a lot of work,” I said, because it seemed best to remain an outsider: a strange and distant foreigner to their world and who they were.

It wasn’t that I hated the reenactors individually, but collectively, as a whole: their conversations and their wardrobes and the smells that followed them home. Like campfire, and meat, and smoke. Like kerosene and lighter fluid. Their faces, charcoal-bruised and sweaty, and how they tied their hair back in mousy braids. They even refused to use deodorant, citing a need for “authentic odors.”

It was simple, at twenty-one, to think I had everything figured out. Emily was still alive, and Kevin, of course, had not yet killed her. The reenactors were my main concern, and I was better, I believed, for recognizing the futility in what they did. No matter how often they reenacted—no matter how fiercely they wanted change—their outcome was predetermined; they could never escape their fate. Those who died would always die, and those granted life would have to live it, and always in the shadow—and the memory—of what had been lost.

For all of my resistance to their house and who they were, what’s strangest to me now is that in this memory, I am grateful. I’m not upset but, frankly, pleased to be living inside their home. It’s the first Saturday back on campus since my return to the United States and Kevin’s discharge from the Reading Hospital, and the reenactors are reenacting, fighting a war we cannot see, so I tell Kevin to come over to peek through dresser drawers and private closets.

“I bet they have the weirdest trinkets,” I say, “antique viewfinders and vintage hats.”

Kevin is a history major, and this is precisely why my new placement is so convenient—it's *exactly what he needs*, I think, *to distract him from all that happened*. I am twenty-one and have no experience addressing issues of mental illness or suicidal ideation; it seems beyond me to even try. So instead, I attempt distraction, saying, "We'll have full rein of the entire house."

"You can even be the Union," I joke. "I'll go unabashedly Confederate."

Kevin and I have been friends for years, but still there seems a limit on the type of conversations we can share. Mental illness is difficult, *heavy*, and we've only ever talked about movies, music, the books we're reading and whether we think they're any good. And of course, we talk about the Civil War—the very thing that brought us together during the first week of our freshmen year. Kevin and I were just two of seven hundred students then, stumbling aimlessly through narrow streets, and he pointed up to historic buildings I found only ugly, gray, and crumbling.

"There are bullet holes in those walls," he said, or, "Jennie Wade died inside that house."

She was the only civilian killed in Gettysburg, he explained, struck dead when a stray bullet pierced her left shoulder and then shot straight through her heart. It came to rest within her corset—"the detail many find most compelling"—as she was kneading a ball of dough.

This was 8:30 in the morning.

"Can you imagine?" he asked me, and I did my best to try: I saw her standing in a pleated apron, the bullet splintering a pane of glass the way ice cracks beneath your feet.

It was then Kevin told me he'd been obsessed with the Civil War since childhood, since "before I could talk, probably," he said, and that's why he chose to enroll at Gettysburg. He wanted to be a part of something big. He said, "I want to be living in a place that matters."

"I just came because they accepted me," I said. "And it's pretty, and familiar, and close."

It was Kevin's sense of duty I liked most: how he felt the things he did could matter or carry a weight all their own. At eighteen, Kevin showed a sense and maturity I wanted for myself, and some days, after class, I'd follow him as if on instinct up a failing fire escape, past flower-lined office windows and crumbling brick, until we reached the black tar rooftop, where he kept lawn chairs beside the chimney. He seemed so secure in where we were—its place in history and how it shaped us—and so I didn't think, when I'm being honest, that he was capable of such a big mistake.

He stood tall along that rooftop, the town—his whole life—ahead of him. And so of course I did not predict that the worst was still to come, or that if given the right scenario—if an invisible illness continued to progress—a mind could become inoperable, synapses firing until they broke, and then really anything could happen.

That Kevin will be proof of who, exactly, it could happen to.

I first learned of Kevin's institutionalization through an e-mail from Evan that arrived in my small French bedroom at eleven thirty at night, and later, I'd blame everything on this distance: how I was not present when it happened. The news was nothing more than a few clipped sentences beside a small, red iconic flag, trivial in shape, something I could easily delete, and did.

Kevin's not well, Evan wrote. *He left campus to receive treatment.*

But I was three thousand miles away. The best I could offer Kevin was a Hallmark card in a foreign language, a phrase he wouldn't even understand. *Je suis désolé*, or some photo of purple flowers. It would cross the country and then an ocean to arrive in the States pitifully late.

Okay, I wrote back. *Let me know as things progress.*

It seemed strange to me that Kevin was suffering so intensely, so invisibly, so quietly, without any of us knowing, but what seemed strangest most of all was what I'd purchased for him that evening in the Christmas market in the *rotonde*. I'd spent my night purchasing chocolates and packs of notecards, boxes of almond-shaped candies called *calissons*, but for my closest friends in Gettysburg, I'd bought small bars of homemade soap—clunky blocks shaped smooth and round by the hands of perfect strangers. They were scented with herbs and peels of fruit, and they were cheap and European. They seemed an easy gift to buy. Just a small, simple French trinket, something my friends would tease me about, but like.

But it seemed strange and coincidental how of all the things to buy, I'd chosen the gift of a bath accessory. And if I gave that gift to Kevin, I wondered, would it remind him of what he did? Would it remind him of that desire? Would he know they told me, too?

And in that moment when Evan found him—when he saw Kevin's body stretching outward across the tub—was there a second where he lingered? Unsure how to tell our friend he shouldn't do it? That life would soon get better? That all he needed was to wait and see?

And after everything that's happened, I wonder now if he'd still say it.

It was the distance, I tell myself when I need to. *That's really what's to blame.*

But in truth, I never asked how Kevin was doing for fear it was an inappropriate question. Even when I returned to campus—when I finally finished setting up my room—I avoided Kevin for days. When at last I invited him over, he must have known how strange I felt; he stood holding a thermos of coffee, and his gaze was on his shoes.

“I got us blueberry bagels,” he said. “I know you like them best.”

Miles away, the reenactors lay still in snowy grass, so I propped open their heavy door, gesturing for Kevin to come inside. “Please,” I said. “Join me,” and I bowed as he passed me by.

They had this coming, is what I thought—these grown men who spent their mornings in barren fields, children who played make-believe. They were strange, and awkward, and oafish, their faces pocked with acne scars, and they smelled like something sour: like dough rising in a bowl. I hated who they were and how I’d been placed right there beside them, so what else could I do but make fun of the way they lived? I didn’t feel bad pulling apart their dressers, or pushing their hangers from side to side.

In the room just off the parlor, I held up a lacy bonnet, a sweat stain permeating its inner rim. “Look,” I said to Kevin, pulling it down over my ears.

“Be sure to put that back,” he said. “I bet this stuff’s expensive.”

In the kitchen, I made us coffee while Kevin walked slowly down their hallway, running his fingers first over door frames and then each small, bronze rectangular sign. I could hear over the running water—“This one charged Seminary Ridge,” he said; “this one fought at Devil’s Den”—and I leaned out into the hallway, calling back to him.

“Each room is dedicated to a key Civil War player,” I said. “You can read which by their placard outside each door.”

And while the house featured the Buford Room and the Hooker Room and the Meade Room and more, I had been gifted the Abraham Lincoln bedroom, easily the nicest in the house. It was gigantic, with a boxy corner for a desk and two padded bay windows. Morning light poured through twin oak trees and shined liquid across the floorboards, and it was tucked quietly in the back, with a separate entrance and private, spacious bathroom.

“This is so incredible,” Kevin said. “I wanted to live here but never did.”

“So pretend you do for now,” I said, leading him up their staircase. He walked beside me, solemn, quiet, but when we reached General Lee’s Headquarters—a cramped, one-person alcove with a slanted ceiling and

small, round window—he looked at me expectantly, unsure how exactly to proceed.

I walked over and turned the knob.

From the window, we could see all of Gettysburg: the buildings and streets and shops, and beyond, the observation towers and all those fields. They were white and soft and shining, glittering like glass beneath the sun.

“This is great,” he said excitedly, and I felt suddenly proud to stand beside him. *He’s not wishing for his death*, I thought, *but the vivacity of his future*.

“The Confederates moved that way,” he said, dragging his finger through the clean, clear air. “They moved in dense formation until they reached the rocks of Devil’s Den.”

He said it and I tried to picture them, take interest the way he did. I pictured men and then whole armies, soldiers hidden amongst the rocks. I saw clusters of young, tan men, clutching rifles, their foreheads hot. I saw them crouching low, their bodies hiding among the brush, while women waited in clapboard houses, their children clinging to nightgown hems.

The bayonet I remember plainly. It was a replica, likely plastic, and leaned against the farthest corner, propped up neatly against the wall. When Kevin held it in his hands, his face turned with raw exuberance.

“Cool,” he said softly, as if any loudness would make it fade. Then he laughed and soon lunged forward, pretending to stab me in the chest.

“You’ve got me,” I said, falling, and when I rose, we ate our bagels.

We explored that house for another hour, and then Kevin left and I forgot: about his hospitalization, his depression, any responsibility I had to him as his friend. I let the days turn into weeks and those weeks turn into months. An entire year went by, and we cooked dinners and went to movies, hung out with friends and drank cheap beer, but never—in all that time—did I ask Kevin how he’d felt, or how it was that he felt now.

I kept his bar of soap in a drawer inside my desk.

When the following fall he began to date Emily Silverstein, I was happiest for him. She brought him out of himself, he said. She talked about things that truly mattered.

“It’s like I completely open up,” he said. “I can tell her anything.”

I knew precisely what he meant, but again there was that discomfort. Mental illness seemed too taboo, too intimate a conversation to share between two friends; it seemed some secret, private burden, one I—and many others—thought he could carry on his own.

“That’s good,” I told him, simply, and then I changed the subject to the weather.

Kevin and Emily dated off and on for seven months, and then—four weeks before graduation—Kevin stabbed her in quick succession twenty-seven times in the neck and upper torso. It was what doctors would later call a “psychotic break” or a “disassociate episode” induced by months of severe depression and suicidal ideation. He went into a “psychotic dissociation,” they wrote after hours of extensive evaluations, and was “not aware of his environment.” He sat with her body for twenty to forty minutes, then phoned the local police, saying he was sorry, he was so sorry, and he was scared, and would they come?

“I don’t know what happened,” he said, “but I’ll be waiting for you out front.”

For the eighteen months that followed, Kevin awaited trial just five miles away from our quiet college, where the view from his only window was of mountains we used to hike. I visited only once, driving the three hours after my summer job folding jeans at the local mall, and in the many months that followed, I occasionally ran his name through a search engine, glossed the articles for something new, but for the longest time, there was nothing. When finally a plea deal was accepted—sentencing Kevin to twenty-seven to fifty years in a maximum-security prison in lieu of a public trial—I thought I’d feel a sense of closure. His future was a jail cell, a small clock radio and a sterile basin, but he killed a young woman, and *what a selfish thing to do*.

It was only after Kevin’s sentencing and relocation—after his case, documents became public record—that I drove five states east to Gettysburg’s historic courthouse. And it was then, and only then, that I learned what had really happened. That he was trying to take his own life. That Emily had tried to stop him.

“She was exhausted and run down,” her friends stated to police. “She was the only one talking to Kevin,” or perhaps the only one he felt would truly listen, “but she couldn’t take it any more.”

They should take a break, Emily suggested, until the situation improved.

This is when he went into the kitchen to find a knife, a psychiatrist noted during an evaluation. He states he was not angry at Emily and did not have homicidal urges toward her. He said he had only a wish to die.

Emily began pleading—“Kevin, please, Kevin, stop”—and when he raised the blade to his thin, white skin, she lunged forward in an attempt to grab it.

This is where Kevin's memory becomes fuzzy, the psychiatrist wrote. Kevin reported pushing her back and somehow he wound up on top of her and began stabbing her in the neck.

It happened instantly, and after he came to, Kevin tried desperately to revive her: first tying fabric around her wounds in an attempt to alleviate the loss of blood, then finally carrying her to the tub, thinking at least he could contain it. He sat beside her for twenty minutes, crying, before finally phoning the Gettysburg police, and when asked why he didn't take his own life—if that was really what he meant to do—he told police, very simply, “I didn't mean to hurt her.”

He said, “It was *my* life I wanted to take.”

It's not a memory, but I can picture it: I see my friend sitting at a table on the night of his arrest, his hands folded across his lap, grown men standing all around him. His wrists are bound in handcuffs; his eyes are red and raw. It isn't difficult to envision, and there is paperwork to back it up: evidence, and crime scene notes, and not one but three mental health evaluations that all attest to what he claims: that he wanted to end his own life, that the pain seemed all at once unbearable.

It is my professional opinion, one reads, that Mr. Schaeffer demonstrated signs of impaired functioning prior to and at the time of the offense, and therefore lacked the capacity to comprehend the wrongfulness of his actions and conform his behaviors to the requirements of the law.

Kevin was unclear as to what he was doing or why he was doing it, reads another, but I believe he had no thought of ever killing Emily.

And finally, there is this: *This is truly a tragic case.*

I replay that sunlit, winter memory now, and I'm always looking for something new: a detail I never noticed, a way to make the ending change. It's almost as if I can will it into existence—as if, if I want it bad enough, I have the power to rewrite everything: to turn to Kevin in that upstairs bedroom and say, “I am someone you can talk to,” say, “I am here for you.”

“I've never done that,” I might have said, “but I understand how someone could.”

How, sometimes, life feels hard. How maybe it's only normal not to want it.

“This is something we can talk about,” or, “We don't have to keep this quiet.”

Instead, I said nothing and now I wonder. For the many moments that have escaped me, I still recall that morning with exactitude: the snow, the smell of coffee, my friend standing, youthful, inside that hall. And

in a letter that would arrive many months from that peaceful morning, Kevin would write to inquire why we all brushed his suicide attempt under the rug.

It's not like you're to blame, of course, he wrote, but I sort of felt like a leper—all those months, I couldn't understand why you all acted like nothing had happened.

But each time, I'm only reenacting, attempting revision, and always failing. I hold up a fraying hoopskirt, pull the vintage fabric over my jeans.

“Look,” I say to Kevin, spinning, pretending I'm a ballerina. “A Civil War ballerina,” I say, and I hold the fabric to my hips and move.