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BITTER REMNANTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

by
Isabella Jetten
B.A. in English
May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Jetten, Isabella, M. A., University of South Alabama, May 2022. *Bitter Remnants*.
Chair of Committee: Charlotte Pence, Ph.D.

Bitter Remnants is composed of six short stories which collectively explore trauma, or the remnants left by life-defining catalysts. Whether through violence, sex, relationships, or emotional or psychological distress, a person's errors leave residue that does not necessarily vanish or heal; it often hides and evolves as the person attempts to move forward. These stories reflect that it is not the act of watching someone's downfall that brings empathy; it is fully immersing oneself in a character's worldview, committing these acts alongside them, and witnessing the effects.

Together, these stories represent the complexity and grayness of "doing wrong." Sex, pain, and death, or fear of death, are deeply rooted in the everyday, so inherently, these can be detrimental when wielded by human beings under pressure. Overall, *Bitter Remnants* traverses the primal, the vulnerable, and the foolish. It acknowledges constraints in order to test them, and it plays in spaces without one singular morality in order to explore erosion, hypocrisy, ethical grayness, and human intricacy. Each story—and this collection as a whole—is intended to be an equally true and absurd portrait of life, as well as a representation of the ways in which people indulge in chaos, only to have to confront the remains.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

As Robert McKee notes in *Story*, “In truth there’s only one story. In essence we have told one another the same tale, one way or another, since the dawn of humanity, and that story could be usefully called the Quest. All stories take the form of a Quest” (196). The stories in *Bitter Remnants*, although distinct from each other, follow the same tradition of fiction being used as a portal to discover unique ways in which to explore narrative and characterization. They also reflect my personal interest in the diversity of story structure, which has become particularly important after my study of the crafts of both fiction and screenwriting.

My writing is naturally reflective of the fiction I consume, from the weird, taboo themes of certain short stories to various examinations of genre and structure in books on craft. The collection *Delicate Edible Birds* by Lauren Groff, particularly the titular story “Delicate Edible Birds,” and her story “The Midnight Zone,” offer rich portraits of human nature. Groff shows a deep understanding of those who face themselves and end up changed. In “The Midnight Zone,” a young mother is injured while watching over her children, while a panther prowls outside. Using the looming presence of the panther, Groff builds on a sense of dread without ever letting the fuse die out, even when the conflict becomes strictly internal. At the end of the story, there is no explosion. Instead, the character’s husband comes home, and the panther never shows.

Groff’s command over tension informs my vision for internal conflict in this collection; her act of introducing a foreboding shadow to amp-up the story’s energy and

make the characters even more vulnerable is used, for instance, in my story “Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men” with the introduction of Jamie’s father’s death (and Jamie’s keeping it secret), which supplies the scene with an added layer of possible conflict, even if that particular conflict does not directly explode or trigger the climax by the end.

“Delicate Edible Birds” is a historical drama about a group held captive under the condition that the female protagonist sleep with their captor in order for them all to be set free. Not only does the versatility of Groff’s stories in her collection influence *Bitter Remnants*, “Delicate Edible Birds” explores people forced to face trauma and then live after with how they reacted. Groff does not focus on a sex scene, which would provide a clear climax. Instead, she focuses on the lead-up and aftermath, from when the group manipulates their friend to give up her body to when the group drives off after, barely speaking, therefore making the climax when the protagonist decides to follow through with the sex, rather than the act itself. In this fashion, my stories “Adventurous and Animal” and “Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men” include sex in the climax, but more time is spent on the before and after, rather than the act being the sole objective of each story, in order to challenge expectation and shift focus back to the characters and their traumas.

My story “Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men” is also influenced by Harold Pinter’s stage play *Betrayal*, Richard Bausch’s dialogue-only short story “The Voices from the Other Room,” and Raymond Carver’s story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” What these works have in common is their minimal physical or plot dressing and their use of dialogue to drive and convey conflict, which are crucial to the

single-setting, single-scene structure of “Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men.” “The Voices from the Other Room” is also an example of how writing can be similar to voyeurism, since a reader is seeing into the private lives of characters to understand the intimate inner-workings. This idea is represented directly in stories like “Adventurous and Animal” and “Dark Rapture,” but it is also reflected in others in this collection like “Wreckage.”

Lord of the Flies by William Golding and the short story “The Most Dangerous Game” by Richard Connell directly influenced the theme of humans returning to primal urges, which is a theme very present in *Bitter Remnants*. Although it is directly shown in “Wreckage,” it is also an underlying theme in “Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men” and “Adventurous and Animal,” showing that once societal pressures, surface personalities, and social norms are stripped from a person, they are faced with their genuine subconscious wants and traumas in tandem.

In my years of studying craft, I have been most influenced by George Saunders and Robert McKee on plot, characterization, and dialogue. McKee’s book *Story*, along with notes on editing by George Saunders, have influenced my decision to make dialogue as distinct and useful as possible on the page, no matter the medium, and their wisdom on the writing process has guided me heavily during storytelling and revising. For certain stories in this collection, I have also sketched out plots using Blake Snyder’s Beat Sheet or Dan Harmon’s Story Circle.

George Saunders notes that “We tend, in discussion, to reduce stories to plot (what happens). We feel, correctly, that something of their meaning resides there. But

stories also mean through their internal dynamics—the manner in which they unfold, the way one part interacts with another, the instantaneous, felt, juxtaposition of elements” (146). He also says that “[w]hat transforms an anecdote into a story is escalation. Or, we might say: when escalation is suddenly felt to be occurring, it is a sign that our anecdote is transforming into a story” (137). Plot should be driven by what the character *needs* or *wants subconsciously*; they may claim to want something, but it is their hidden desire that determines the stakes and who they evolve into by the end of the story. Plot and characterization are directly and authentically connected.

For the story “Dark Rapture,” I used Harmon’s Story Circle, which is focused heavily on a character’s internal journey being reflected in the external conflict. Cult member Elijah discovers that her new husband is doubtful of their leader’s authenticity, which tests her formerly unshakeable faith. This premise is dependent on Elijah’s desire to prove her loyalty, which means that she must somehow be changed by that desire in the end. Because Elijah is active and delivers less introspection, the external plot requires a standard structure like Dan Harmon’s Story Circle. Elijah begins the story in “a zone of comfort,” or a new marriage with fellow cult member Lincoln. To be removed from this static situation, she must have a “want”, or a force driving her; she wants to prove her loyalty to the cult and become the next leader. This want is set alongside her desire for Saffron, an attractive boy she grew up with. Again, to avoid her remaining fixed in the story, she must “enter an unfamiliar situation,” beginning with an inciting incident of Lincoln confessing his doubts. How she addresses this incident, or “adapts,” is to tell her leader about her husband’s doubt, and she gets “what she wanted” by helping him hunt

impious members, although this is a false victory. She must kill Saffron, which is a “heavy price.” However, this is the result needed for the story, and her arc, to be complete. When she “returns to her familiar situation” and finds herself “changed,” the desire that the story is hinged on has been addressed (Harmon).

Saunders says that “Characterization [...] results from [...] increasing specification. The writer asks, ‘Which particular person is this, anyway?’ and answers with a series of facts that have the effect of creating a narrowing path: ruling out certain possibilities, urging others forward” (16). As quoted in *Story*, McKee notes “an ending must be both ‘inevitable and unexpected.’ [...] Given the characters and their world as we’ve come to understand it, the Climax was inevitable and satisfying. But at the same time it must be unexpected, happening in a way the audience could not have anticipated” (311). These stories are vehicles that expose contradictions and imperfections of characters in various states of unrest. Each presents a unique person to bridge the gap between the audience and the narrative, and each covers a variety of traumas that reflect the breadth of complicated issues in reality. The narratives are dependent on and driven by the characters that inhabit their specific worlds.

Sexuality, death, and emotional and physical self-harm recur throughout this collection. These themes are areas of significant vulnerability in everyone, whether they occur leading up to a traumatic act or are reactions to that trauma, and are often confronted in fiction in ways that no other medium can offer. When human beings act out, they must face their own pain, as well as their will to survive. My stories are born from my curiosity and my appetite for testing my own morality and empathy. Each work

is a bit of me, or a product of my subconscious, and a child born of works that came before me; this collection seeks to represent humanity as it is, not as it should ideally be.

WRECKAGE

Water licks at Billie's feet as she wakes. She turns on her stomach, keeping her eyes shut. The wet sand engulfs her manicured fingers as water is pulled down the shore, leaving her surrounded by bubbling white foam. A few feet in front of her, what looks like a roasted chestnut skates slowly over the sand. A horseshoe crab is moving toward a cluster of grayish rocks higher on the shore, where the curves of a body are outlined by the sun.

Billie crawls, dragging dead weight. This is not a dream, she thinks. Then what is it?

The stranger lies limp, as if discarded, among a collection of mollusk shells and swirls of seaweed. She picks vegetation off his wet mouth. His blue Montblanc watch glints, the face full of briny sludge. He is too heavy for her to push onto his stomach. She manages to get him halfway before he braces the sand and starts coughing up milky white.

It is quiet. Only the forest seems to breathe. Over her shoulder, Billie notices no wreckage, no ship at all. All she sees is blue, a cloudless sky mimicking water, restless waves reflecting sky.

Two days ago, the pregnancy test still in his left hand, Billie's husband poured himself a glass of Pinot Grigio. False positives didn't hurt Billie anymore, but Paul stuffed things away. Sometimes, she felt close to getting him talking, typically after sex

or an “I love you,” but it never came to anything. Still, Billie was the person who loved everything broken, so when Paul folded up and distanced himself again, she understood.

She hoped the cruise would give them time. There was no time for anything in their lives. Not enough hours in the day, Paul said, but ten of those hours he spent at work, the rest at the bar and in bed. If being on the water would give them *something*, even if it was temporary, a distraction. Maybe then, they might be happy, or the married equivalent. She never aimed high. She just wanted mutual contentment.

Paul gave Billie the glass. The yellowy wine reached the rim. He was usually a stickler, especially when they were trying for a baby. With every test in the past, he would hide the bottles.

The glass was cold in her hand. She wanted to throw it.

The next day, Paul surprised her with tickets for a cruise to Belize. Billie needed time to decide, but by the end of the month, they were on a ship, and she was standing on the deck, trying not to vomit. Paul was in their room, reading. Bent over the edge of the ship, she hated him, because how dare he want to escape from their escape?

After emptying her stomach, Billie went to the closest restaurant and ordered the cheapest bottle. As she drank, a man watched from a table across the dining room. He was blonde and looked about 26, a sleek blue glittering on his wrist.

Billie thought he wanted to take her to his room. She had no desire for anyone but Paul, but she liked the attention, the “almost”. She could have a baby if she wanted to, but she chose to stay and struggle with Paul. *This* is love, she thinks. This battle, this show of willpower.

It was that love which she brought up in arguments.

The man put his finger up for the check. She noticed hairless knuckles and smiled down at the table. In her glass, white dust was gathering at the bottom. She realized that the cheap wine tasted not only cheap, but odd, and it sat chalky on her tongue.

Beyond the white shore, stone pines stretch upward, their gnarly, gray branches flourishing out under mushroom-like clusters of leaves. There are so many that they form a canopy over the island, covering with shadow an ecosystem of fluffy pampas grass, clusters of verbena, and thistles. Pine cones, stout and thorny, dot the sand, clumping together the closer they are to the trees.

The sand stretches far on either side of Billie. The salt breeze makes the air feel thin as it whistles through the grasses beyond the beach face.

“There’s no ship,” she tells the man. “There’s nothing.”

“Have you looked all around the goddamn island?”

His voice, octaves below Paul’s, startles her.

The man stands, claps his sandy hands on his cargo shorts, and walks. Billie pulls her knees to her chest, staring at the prints his wide feet leave in the sand. In better circumstances, the island could be an oasis. Paul might love the seclusion. They could try for a baby outside the gray walls of their house, which after three years, has become depressive.

Billie’s body slacks. No more than a fleck in the water, a bottle bobs in the waves. She runs, legs flailing as sand shifts under her toes. Time and her body both feel slow.

The cork is stubborn. She smashes the bottle against one of the rocks, making glass fly and glitter. There is a roll of paper inside kept neatly together with a pink ribbon. Her wet hands shake and blot the ink, but this message is clear: they have been left behind. This is followed by words like “experiment,” “isolation,” “primal,” and “procreation.”

Billie’s chin trembles. She takes the note and tosses it, crumpled, on the beach. She thinks she’s misinterpreting, that no real scientists would abandon two people on an island to see how long it takes for them to have a baby. Nothing constitutes leaving them with nothing, withholding food, and waiting for their regression. Because that’s not science, is it?

When the man returns, Billie is cross-legged in the sand. He picks up the paper. She realizes the gravity and hopes that he reads carefully and won’t rape her.

“What if I can’t get pregnant?” she asks.

He nudges the sand with his foot, then becomes violent, kicking up wet clumps that scatter into the waves. Billie stares at her knees, colored pink from the hot sand and the sun, as he asks, “Have you tried?”

She’s thinking of her husband now, how his belly has gotten soft, what it feels like to kiss with the pungent smell of fresh paint filling the house, how he makes his tea in a kettle and pretend-jumps when the kettle screams. She knows better.

When Paul drove them home, he would always take an alternate route, where they would pass the clinic. Each time, Billie wanted to ask, “What if we stop by? Check to

make sure you're okay? And me?" But her gynecologist had given her the "okay" months before.

She knows better.

The man has gathered wood from the edges of the forest and formed a tripod. In trips, he brings mangrove roots from another part of the island, along with large, waxy leaves, and builds walls from the ground up.

Billie stands idle near the water. The setting sun makes her shiver. She worries that if she interrupts the man, she will only be in his way. Still, she climbs the shore.

On the back of the man's shirt, she notices a logo: the head of a snake with 'Golding College' superimposed on its black mouth. It looks menacing and elegant and foreign. Paul went to college over a decade ago. Billie never finished high school. She never had to. Paul had the job, the car, and the house before they met. On their first date, she thought they would stay at the zoo, but he insisted they migrate to dinner, then dessert, then drinks after that. By the time the night was over, he had spent at least three figures.

It baffles Billie to see waste. Despite their differences in class though, she only brings it up when it matters, like when she gets out of the shower to see the same sweater laid out with her clothes. Paul bought the sweater for her as a gift, but she tells him time and time again it is too expensive to wear. Still, every morning, it's there, waiting at the end of their bed.

“Gonna help finally?” the man asks. Red-faced, Billie uses some of the leaves to make a carpet-like layer over the sand inside the tripod. The man builds up the sides, every so often wiping the sweat that gathers on his forehead. Billie steps backwards. Her foot skids through the sand, catching a piece of glass from where she broke the bottle. The impact puts her on all fours. She peels the glass from her heel, the bloodied imprint looking black in the dark.

When they collapse inside the makeshift shelter, Billie can see stars through thin gaps in the walls. She flinches when he turns over on his side and scratches his shorts, speckled with sand.

“There’s no one else here,” he says with certainty. She sees no crow’s feet on his face, no scars. He has the musky smell of a newly graduated man not wanting to grow up or stop wearing his college cologne. She has known men like this, but never up close.

Defeated, she shuts her eyes. When she was faced with the party question, “what would *you* do if you were stranded on a deserted island?”, Billie rolled her eyes. Her sister read an article that explained how to take care of your body, how to build a shelter, how to find food. Billie said, “If I have to eat bugs, I’ll die.” That is all Billie can think of, because she remembers her first phone number, the code to her parents’ garage, the recipe for corn starch lube from the night she and Paul got hammered and horny after her sister’s New Year’s Eve party, but to survive, she remembers nothing.

The rush of the shore makes her dream, not of images, but of shadow, a gentle rocking back and forth. When she wakes, Billie has to orient herself again, realizing it is

still real, and she is lying beside a stranger. For some reason, even alongside the island and the fear of death, this is startling.

When the man sits up, he has to tilt his head against the ceiling. “We should find food,” he says.

Billie balloons with relief. Maybe he doesn’t want to follow through, and the experiment is no match for their willpower, and they can survive until a ship comes to rescue them.

“At least you’re pretty,” he mumbles. “I mean, it could be worse.” It gets hard to breathe. She doesn’t look at him.

The man leaves the shelter. Billie crawls out on the sand, squinting. He is already heading east with a shard of glass in his hand. Her foot stings, the glass having left an open red line breaking layers of skin on her heel. She tries not to focus on it, but it reminds her that this is a body, this body is her, and she is a fallible human being. She was in therapy for six years to get better. And she is. She has learned to stay grounded, and to cope.

She digs where the sand is still pink and finds the piece of glass. It is dark red with dried blood. Then, she goes out to the water. With every dark spot, she leaps. Stabs. She does not want to be the homemaker here. She wants to be the active party, the one who hunts.

Paul told her once, four years ago, that she caves too easily. They were in an ice cream shop. The way he said it mid-lick, like it was an offhand remark, didn’t hurt her. But she worries he remembers it every time she gives in to kiss him, every time she

smiles. Now, she tries too hard to assert herself. She knows it only gives her away.

Gripping the glass harder, she stabs again.

Every day, the man collects pine nuts. Billie stabs at the water, but the fish are too slick. Hunger shrinks their bodies down. They are alive, but barely, as the days stack up to a week.

Every morning is a chance at bravery. The forest is just along the shore, behind their shelter. Should she carve a spear, run into the trees, and search for animals? Is it better to brave the dark, or to gently fade away? She wonders what her husband would want. How will she look if someone finds her remains? Will anyone find them at all? What would other women do, her sister or her mother? But she can't imagine them there.

The man seems to be biding his time. Like Paul, he must know that she doesn't have courage. It is in his interest to wait as his beard fills out and the days get longer.

On the ninth day, Billie swipes at the water. The glass only brushes the tail of a trout, but this is one of the closer encounters she's had. Two more frustrated strikes, and the man lunges for the glass, maybe to try for himself.

Billie reacts. The jagged edge of the glass lances his forearm. Blood dribbles through his fingers, dripping into the waves. He shoves her hard, and as she tumbles under the water, she wonders if he'll drown her. The thought is like a whisper of hope. An "almost".

He tears his sleeve and wraps his arm. The white cotton turns dark, blotted. Billie keeps to the waves as the man goes into the shelter. He uproots the tripod and carries it on his back, moving turtle-like toward the water. Too weak to fight, she can only watch. The sticks are crushed and thrown into the waves. Anger pulses from his body, making the veins in his neck stick out purple. Paul never sheds his anger like this. She wants to go home.

The water swallows their shelter, unrelenting. Billie watches his arm, which leaks through the fabric. Chest heaving, he runs at her. His steps are brutal, making wild splashes. Movement feels pointless, but she tries to stand up again. Something in her might want to survive.

He shoves her from behind. It feels like a kick. Her teeth gnash her lip as she goes down again. The man lifts her from the water by her collar.

“You wanna hold out? Go make your own fucking place to sleep.”

“I’m married.” Her voice sounds like she’s choking.

“I’m done waiting,” he says. “I’m not like this. I’m a nice person, but I’m done with you ignoring me.”

“I don’t even know what’s happening.”

“We’re *dying*. You wanna die because you’re too goddamn scared? Too righteous? You wanna die ‘faithful’ instead of going home? I got a three-month-old baby, and I have a girlfriend who’s probably wondering where the hell I am. I’m not gonna die just so you feel good about yourself. You think whoever’s out there is gonna care you fucked me if it keeps us alive?”

Billie feels snot and drool on her face and realizes she's sobbing. "What if I can't have a baby?"

"Fuck you. I don't care if you think you can't. I don't care who you are, what your name is, who's out there for you. You're not gonna let me die."

When he lets go, his hands are shaking. He climbs the shore and sits where their shelter had been. She wants to disappear, for him to think she's dead so his soul will sink like a rock. At the same time, she wishes he would just take it from her. Make her do it, so she won't have so much guilt.

Billie pinches her nose and sinks. Her lungs start to burn, but in the water, she is somewhere between the island and home.

At night, Billie pretends she's someone else, someone who cannot be seen in the light. This is not madness, she decides. This is survival, and it is rational. Her foot still stings from the saltwater and the harsh air. It feels like someone else's, this other woman who has earned this somehow, a spy stuck on this island because of the incredible secrets she holds.

This person goes to the new shelter the man has built for himself. She nudges the man awake. She pulls up his shirt and maneuvers him from his cargo shorts, making him gape like a fish.

"What makes you hard?" she asks. It's a voice not her own, deeper and hollow. Billie tries not to cry, a voyeur of these hands that reach for him, this body that is stripped and climbing on a stranger.

The man's eyes are slits, lids heavy like he's taking a drag. He hums, enjoying it. She must be too.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks. Her body moves back and forth, urgent. His hands reach under her shirt for her pierced nipples. Paul overwhelms her. The man is *almost* him. She nearly sobs.

The man sighs deeply. He no longer smells of musk, only salt and something to eat. When he finishes inside her, Billie runs from his shelter for the ocean. She tumbles, limp, into the water and cries.

The last time she and Paul had sex, he had just gotten home from work. He was disheveled, three shirt buttons already undone. Billie was over a cutting board, wearing a sweatshirt she'd had for almost a decade, tattered at the hem, with a pair of pink cotton panties. She noticed in the bright, almost clinical light of the kitchen that Paul was going silver at his temples. His aging felt as natural to her as her own, but it made her think of the negative tests stuffed at the bottom of the garbage bin.

When she bent down for a lower cabinet, she heard him take off his belt. "Do you want to make love to me? Or do you wanna fuck me?" she asked. He didn't say anything. His thumb traced her mouth like he had never seen a mouth before. It seemed they were both wanting passion. For once, they weren't trying.

At night, the man lets Billie stay in his new shelter. It is not as meticulously built as the first, but it blocks the wind. They have sex before they sleep, then again in the morning, only this time by the water.

The other person takes over, watching from Billie's eyes. She is on all-fours. She imagines the man's back flexing and turning red in the heat. The ocean laps and pounds hard against the shore. Counting the seconds between each thrust, she wonders how Billie will tell Paul. He isn't half as good as Paul, she thinks. He doesn't know what she wants.

He pushes her face down into the ground. Her mouth sputters against the sand. Only when the man pulls out of her does he notice the wooden crate floating toward them in the water.

Stark naked, drags it on the shore by a thin rope attached to the corner. Inside, there is a bottle containing a note, and a plastic zipper bag that contains two loaves of sourdough, a cantaloupe, ripe mangoes, strawberries, and two whole, cooked Cornish hens.

They feast. Each rips into their own hen yards apart. Billie cradles the bird in one arm, using her teeth to break the bones for every strand of meat. That night, they fuck again. And again. Over the next two weeks, crates arrive daily. The assortment of food changes, but nothing is spared by the time they're done.

When they aren't eating, they're in different positions. Now, she is propped against the trunk of a stone pine. He is holding her legs around his waist. Her back chafes from the wood, but she clutches him hard.

"You feel so good," she says.

He moves so erratically, he almost drops her. He heaves her up and buries his nose in her shoulder.

He cries out, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

The feeling rises inside her. Her toes curl tight. She tries not to, but she does. Her body betrays her, and Paul, and she realizes now that it *is* her body. The disloyalty is hers. So is the trembling.

The man still hasn't told her his name. Has she asked? She can't remember. All she can think is, Paul Paul Paul Paul. She doesn't know if she says it aloud.

When the man sets her down and goes to rinse off, Billie walks along the shore, following the tracks the man left when foraging, until she forgets what she's done. The forest seems to cover the entire island. In a gap in the leafy canopy made by the pines, there is a grayish swell, like the top of an uneven crag, or a mountain.

A golden-brown horseshoe crab is flipped on the sand. Its pincers and legs click and twitch against the harsh sunlight. She flips it over by its hard shell, and it moves toward the water, leaving winding, tire-like tracks behind.

From behind her, Billie hears the click of a photo being taken. She runs after the sound, into the forest, where all noise is suddenly soaked up. The sun has disappeared.

She only goes in a few feet. Shadows shift as the leafy canopy above is ruffled by the salt breeze. If there is a camera, she can't locate it. There is only the rustling of unseen creatures, the energy of unknown island territory.

Then, she hears it again: a camera shutter, only this time from the brush at her feet. She pushes a thick branch aside. Two glassy black eyes look up at her, reflected

against the thin shafts of light coming in through the shifting leaves. A feathered tail fans out in a U-shape, harp-like, and she realizes it's a bird. It opens its beak and makes the sound again.

It cocks its head and flies at her. She thinks it's drilled a hole in her chest. Her hand covers her mouth, then her breast. But she's fine, still whole. She blinks at the stillness and retreats to shore.

Billie loses count of the weeks before she starts to vomit. If she was at home, Paul would touch her neck, sit with her in the bathroom, and stroke her hair like he did when she was drunk. The man stays asleep. Hunched over the water, she holds her hair back and remembers the bottle that was in the first crate. Food was such a miracle that she hadn't bothered to read it.

Back in the shelter, she shoves him. "Where's the bottle? The one from the first crate?"

"Gone," the man grunts, half-asleep. "I don't know."

"Did you read it? What did it say?"

When he tells her, she doesn't believe him.

From then on, nights in the shelter are hostile. She gets bigger, and she first thinks it's because of her eating, until she remembers the man, the island, the note. Surely, here, this doesn't count, she thinks. Paul won't say this counts, will he?

One night, when her belly is big enough, she tells him, “I can feel it moving.” He never responds. Sometimes though, when her back is turned, she hears him tugging at himself, gasping. She waits for it to end. Her fingers squeeze her stomach so tightly that she worries about the baby.

The night of the birth, there is a storm. Wind whips against the shelter, and water is leaking inside, dripping cold on her face. Billie wants to rip the tripod down herself. Her fist is twisted in his shirt as she sobs. He looks ready to hit her.

Instead, he positions her so her back is against his chest. He grabs her legs and pulls her knees back and apart, opening her wide. Billie screams for hours. She hopes he feels guilty.

They cut the umbilical cord with a piece of glass. Billie looks in the baby’s big, round, human eyes. It looks like him, but it’s hers. She feeds it from her breast, despite everything. The baby curls its hands. Tears sit on Billie’s cheeks.

“Feel her head,” she says. “It’s so soft.”

The man grabs her hair. She thinks he might drag her out to the waves and drown her. Her chin wobbles as he shouts over the storm. “What the fuck are you thinking? What do you expect when you know what’s coming?”

His face contorts in disgust. Billie feels smaller than she thinks she ever has. Stuck inside the shelter with her and the baby, the man turns away and eats the food from the day’s crate himself.

He has his hands around the baby. Billie can feel him prying her from her arms. She tries waking from her deep sleep, but he kicks her away. When she manages to clamber out of the tripod, the man is already past the trees. Twigs crack, and leaves crunch as he disappears deep into the forest.

Billie gets on her feet. Ignoring her soreness and the sting of rocks underfoot, she plows through the pines and into darkness. Her body sags. Her shirt is soaked through, but she follows the squealing. She passes the lyrebird, ignores the branches whipping her legs, struggles through a muddy, freshwater marsh, until she finds herself at the bottom of a small volcano.

The baby is dangling under his arm as he climbs up the side, bypassing vents and precarious ledges. Billie sobs as she tries to climb. He looks down at her. Even as she drags herself upward, she can see that they both know she won't catch him. He is already at the precipice.

He pushes the child up onto the edge of the crater. Billie almost lets herself fall, but she can hear the rock breaking. The man's foothold gives way. Dust rains down on her from above as he tumbles down the flank, the baby discarded on the summit. The baby's cries echo, eerie, in the trees.

Billie climbs again, slowly and cautiously. When she reaches the top, she stands tall. Her chest moves violently in and out. As she looks down at the child, a small, red-faced, wriggling creature, she thinks of the dead man at the bottom of the mountain and the man waiting for her at home. She thinks of the tests: negative, negative, negative, negative. She picks the baby up by its arms and lifts it high.

When it drops from her fingers, it's almost like the weight was more than it was. Her arms rise, as if relieved. The crying fades, until it's gone. Billie stares into the pit. It goes so far that there seems to be no bottom, no measurable depth.

She falls on her hands and knees, listening. The earth rumbles. A hot gust, like breath, rushes up from the abyss. Billie lets herself tip over the side and slide quickly down, moving from ledge to ledge. She falls on her deflated stomach. The man did not land far. His face is turned away, and his hair is glistening wet with blood.

Through the forest, she runs one last time. When she gets to the beach, the sun glares at her again. Wind lashes sand on her arms and shoulders. She is still alive.

A thunderous roar resounds over the island. The volcano, fed, breathes black-gray ash that starts overtaking the blue sky. Flames spout, bright orange, from its top, lapping over molten rock that gurgles down the sides of the mountain.

Weakly, Billie turns to the sea. A small, white ship floats in the near distance. It grows larger and larger, closing in. Billie limps forward and lifts her arms to hope.

ADVENTUROUS AND ANIMAL

When Lynette Brody heard from an artist friend that actor Lee Irving was spotted in their old hometown, she took the train and returned to Calliope. Eternity Motel, even though it was the only one in town, had countless openings. It was once a honeymooner's palace. Now, it was bruised by years of beatings. The pool was still heart-shaped. Lynette could see it from her room, a dry, open pit of leaves, two humps outlined by a membrane of flaky red paint.

“What are you expecting to happen?” her friend asked over the phone. “Don't tell me you're just compelled to see him. Are you in love with him?”

“Enough to follow him here, I guess.”

“No one loves him that much. You definitely shouldn't love him that much.”

Lynette leaned against the window frame in her robe. Stars fought to be seen in the dark sky. The phone cord pulled taut, anchoring Lynette to the carpet to keep the base from falling off the sill. It had taken years for her to finally leave Calliope and escape her parents. Years of prying out her father's fingers. Years of unlearning what her mother had taught her about men, about love.

She had first seen Lee in '51, when she was just a big-eyed child. Her parents had taken her to a local production of *A View from the Bridge* at The Eldritch, the only playhouse in Calliope, Vermont. With a university professor for a mother and a former

theater actor turned casting director for a father, being brought to her first play was being welcomed into all the secrets the adults in her life had to offer.

Lee was just a Calliope man who could fake his way through Eddie Carbone's Brooklyn accent. The play itself Lynette admired. She was enchanted by the adults playing dress-up and shouting at each other. It was uncivilized. She recognized that.

After the play, as the family approached their '46 Roadster, Lynette jumped over a crack in the ground and fell hard, hands and knees buffed by the pavement. Her father Gordon tried pulling her to her feet. She fought him, because when it came to handling his daughter, he usually got rough and unsympathetic. Gordon let go when Lee jogged over, half in costume still with hair powdered gray and cotton shirt half-unbuttoned. Lee got on his knees and weighed her leg in his enormous hands.

Lynette could still conjure from memory the sourness of Lee's sweat and the musk of his cologne. She remembered his dusty brown hair showing through the powder, the soft freckles on his cheeks, the long eyelashes over eyes so pale and blue they frightened her. It was before the magazines called him 'disheveled', 'bloated', 'washed up'. Before the scandals, the marriage, before his belated break in the film *Elevator Blues* as the sex-crazed priest everyone loved to hate.

On the way home, Lynette had held her mother's hand. "I wanna see Uncle Eddie again," she'd said. "I wanna ask him why Catherine left. And tell him she's stupid."

Growing up, Lynette thought of that night, of Lee, in small places, like the bathroom, at school, after auditions, changing her clothes. Inspired by seeing him onstage when she was a girl, she'd found footing in the theatre scene and got a minor part in the

erotic thriller film *The Sculpture*. She had two short lines, but she liked the quiet nature of film. There was no projection. “No vulnerability,” her father insisted. He didn’t like movies after his teenage attempt at directing pulled no money or audience.

At the window, Lynette let her robe drift open. She knew Lee would be able to see when he got back to his room across the alleyway. She wondered if Junior, the owner, might look at her nakedness until then. Too late for modesty, she thought. Her body was everyone’s anyway.

“I don’t think this is love,” Lynette said into the phone.

“Then, what is it?”

“Maybe I want to see how it feels to fuck him.”

Lynette swatted at a fly that kept concussing itself against the glass.

“I’m sure it feels fine,” her friend said. “Like a good sneeze.”

As if for an audience, Lynette raised an eyebrow. “Well, I don’t sneeze much anymore.”

Lee was at the backdoor of the motel, where the sky and dirt were the same, when the air was still and stale and the parking lot peopleless. In the light above, Lee heard a loud fluttering. It was the batting of insects, an assembly of disturbed wings scattering at the noise.

“You should see ‘em when the train comes,” Junior said, fishing out a rusty key from his pocket. The door resisted. “They go nuts.”

Lee met Junior years ago at a bar after singing. They talked about nothing, except when Junior mentioned he'd gotten a motel as inheritance. When Junior called a week ago to catch up, Lee recognized a chance for privacy and flew back to Calliope.

When the door gave way, Junior smiled. "Welcome to Eternity. We know you'll have a pleasant stay."

Lee took the key from him. "Thank you."

"Whatcha reading?"

Lee's copy of *All the President's Men* was snug under his arm. He offered it. The dog-ear on page 11 winked as Junior flipped through. A folded paper slid out onto the ground.

"It's a keepsake," Lee said. "Article about me. It covers the work from '68 to '75."

"You ever get followed?" Junior asked.

Lee took the book back from him. The flashes of 35mm Canons still blinked at him in the backs of crowds, but he always ran from them in a baseball cap with a wiry beard that made him look too much like his father.

"Not much anymore," he said.

"I'm just saying, you might bring good business here."

"Not this time, I hope."

"Well, thanks for it all, Lee."

Junior gave him a wave as he strode back to the front of the building. Junior always ended conversations with a “Thanks for it all,” like people were doing him favors by talking to him.

The door thudded hard behind Lee as he dragged himself to the eighth floor. A single lamp lit his modest room and buzzed with years. The shade hung askew, a sheet of gray dust clinging just so that it could peel up with the breeze huffing from the window.

On the radio, The Ink Spots. In his head, his parents dancing.

Lee dropped on the mustard yellow sofa. He often wondered if he was not as thankful for the negative press as he should have been. He’d been too emotionally drained to understand the value of media attention. To one writer, he’d been ‘every woman’s nightmare.’ Others followed with articles titled ‘Why the Feminists Hate Lee Irving’ and ‘What Makes a Good Boy Bad?’. Yet there was a time those same rags called him ‘one to watch’ instead of ‘one to watch out for.’ He had been a darling, sexy, sought after, with interviews like ‘Our Gentleman Recounts His Most Salacious Dalliances!’ and ‘What a Real Man Thinks About Art, Romance, and His Own Nude Scenes.’

When did ‘playboy’ become ‘pervert’? Lee wondered if hiding at Eternity made him a worse man. Maybe he’d be better if he walked into the lights, gave the people the stones. What did Melissa want? Did she prefer him hidden for the sake of her name, their son, their legacy? He supposed it didn’t matter now. Once they signed the papers, her legacy would be different, something apart from what he’d tried to build for her. He supposed he would find out soon.

Lee tossed the book on the coffee table. Dust mushroomed out from all sides.

There was movement in the window from across the alleyway. Dust and pollen made it difficult to see through the glass, but he saw to the next building. A woman stood in a thin, translucent robe. Her hair was disheveled, frayed, almost white. Between her legs, he saw flourishing black curls that thinned to a strip and climbed to her navel. The woman lit a cigarette, eyes blinking, as if half-drunk. From what he could tell, she was alone.

He didn't get off to strangers anymore. Maybe because the last time, the papers got wind of how 'former heartthrob left sick wife at home to fondle their son's nanny!' She was actually a nurse he met buying six ten-dollar bottles of Rosatello Moscato. And he and Melissa never hired a nanny.

'Handsome film star and former local playhouse actor caught with a hand down his pants next to his son's grave.' It was true, and Lee could never remember whose hand it was. Only that it was soft, and it wasn't his wife's. He'd been rejected by a podunk publishing house. A memoir might have worked if he was thirty again, if anyone cared about Lee Irving. He didn't end up at Freddie's grave that day. Like a boy left alone, he sat on the grass of the cemetery and cried. Snot dribbled on his mouth, and he wished over and over it was blood, because he was thinking about the book, not his dead child buried five feet away.

The motel room was engulfed by the low, building howl of the Calliope train. It was so close to the building that the slow squeal of steel pinched Lee's ears. The woman's robe fluttered, but she didn't move. It reminded Lee of the light outside, a host to winged things.

Maybe he didn't get off to strangers because of Melissa. It was strange that the guilt finally ate him *after* she filed for divorce, not when they were still married and he could turn things around. Maybe it was because she stayed. Even after he left someone's lipstick on his neck and couldn't answer why. Even after nights of mouthless, lifeless sex. Even after they had a son, who she could have easily taken from him.

When she got sick and gave it to Freddie, Lee didn't blame her, but Freddie died. Then, there was the nurse, the therapy, the pornos, all punctuated with other affairs Melissa never found out about. He'd never admit them either, because Melissa was important to him. She was beautiful and harsh and real like a gun.

He hoped she would respond to his letter, because he would wait at Eternity until she did. He hoped she would still love him, even if she didn't forgive him.

The woman across the alley was watching him now. Smoke jetted from her nostrils. She touched her own belly, then lower, long fingers splitting the hairs on her mound. Then, she waved.

Lee felt his pants tighten. It was moments like those, when he felt young again, that he forgot about his life. It was as if it all never happened, and he was a young actor beloved by all, completely and dangerously free.

Lynette stopped waving. Her skin felt like stone. Was this what she had imagined it being like? Being wanted by him?

When Lee smiled, she noticed that one of his teeth had yellowed. But it was him. After so many years, he looked like the man she'd met as a child, only now there was authenticity in the graying hair and slow hands.

She'd learned about men from the letters they wrote her, where they told her how they wanted her thin, titless body, and then on her eighteenth birthday, after her first nude scene in an independent film canned by critics and viewers alike. The middle-aged director liked the following she brought with her. He had her spread out on a bed, posing like the stone sculpture from her breakout film, for an extended shot. Letters came in fast, pens bleeding over pages of wishful thinking, 'beautiful body' and 'glad you're grown now' and 'I've been waiting waiting waiting'.

Had Lee been waiting? If not for her, some other woman to remind him of how big and proud and adored he used to be?

Lee was opening the window and stepping onto the balcony. Breathing in, Lynette pushed open her own window, letting the breeze in.

"Lee Irving," she said. "You're an actor."

"Don't say it too loud."

"I won't. Don't want to be associated." She took a drag, leaning against the window frame. "I've acted. You don't know my face?" The smoke caught the breeze and drifted away. "Figures, since my movies were shit. I'm done with the acting thing. I think I want to be a pilot."

"Why's that?"

“There are people who know me, sometimes in ways I don’t even know myself. But I don’t know them at all.”

“Piloting isn't something you do on a whim.”

“Why not?” she asked, tilting her head. “Can’t I do anything?”

“You sound like a kid trying to decide what to do when they grow up.”

“Maybe I am. I don’t know that I’ve grown up yet. I don’t know that I *want* to.”

The conversation trickled off, and Lee went back inside, shutting the window behind him. Lynette opened her suitcase and pulled out a pink dress and fresh underwear. She was told once by her mother’s mother that, if a girl was hurt or hit by a car, her rescuer would judge her by her underwear, since no good family would let a girl out of the house without a good pair of panties. As if, in peril or after death, her reputation would rely on a piece of fabric.

What did she look to accomplish by seducing Lee Irving? Maybe she would get vengeance. Power. Maybe love, even.

Lee poured himself a glass of red wine that was left in the refrigerator. It didn’t matter to him what it tasted like, only that it was strong enough to burn the back of his tongue. He needed to kill his erection. For Melissa, the divorce, and the letter that was sure to come.

Playing *Rear Window* with the woman next door wasn’t what a good man would do, but he was past being bashful. He had been to a few adult theaters with Melissa over the years, when they still hoped the problem wasn’t that they’d stopped loving each other.

If critics could have seen him then, splayed open during cheap pornos like *Eva's Secret Garden Party* and *Whatcha Got in That Honey Pot?* in those sleazy public palaces for the adventurous and animal.

Once, Melissa had been between his legs, and his head tipped back far enough that his hat fell off. She caught it and laughed. For a moment, they might have been in love. It was fleeting, but suddenly they were both young again and new to each other, and he believed in it. But she went back to her movements, more muscle memory than want, and he remembered.

They were in therapy once a week, fumbling with their grief, when the magazines found out Melissa had given Freddie the pneumonia. She spent every morning balled up in bed. Watching her, while the sun heated the curtains, he decided that he did love her. But then she filed for divorce.

Melissa once joked that he would've done well in that *porno chic* phase. She said, "It's so sex-positive these days." He hadn't acted in years, so he knew it was a dig. And he deserved it. But he'd just been running to the liquor store and hadn't thought he'd meet a woman who didn't smell like her. He didn't anticipate the rush of a woman admiring him for his work, and soon he was taking her against the bathroom wall, forgetting Melissa, fingers in a warm, new place, forgetting...

Downing his glass, Lee wondered if signing the papers would give her what she deserved, if he loved her enough to wish her well, if he could let her find a man who didn't know that other women tasted like sin when you had a wife at home.

Lynette went down the stairs and sidewalk and stood at the edge of the heart-shaped pool. The red paint was cracked, showing pale concrete. Leaves were piled high where they fell from the branches of maple trees stretching high above.

The wind picked up, making her dress swirl around her legs, as she climbed down the ladder and stepped down into the leaves. She sank to her knees. She could see Lee's window, lit by a lamp. At the shallow end, the leaf piles were thin. She made herself a corner and sat on the dusty concrete, looking at the landscape of dead flora.

She hated dead things. After her parents died, one from a gun to the chin on Lynette's 21st birthday, one from refusing to eat three months later, she met a man like her father, controlling and cynical, and got married. They divorced. She traveled, lost control, got pregnant and lost that too. It was all the drugs and the drinking. The thing is, she'd known she was pregnant. She wanted to kill it. And when she did, she felt nothing.

She left her second fiancé, because he wasn't her father or Lee, and she wasn't even sure he was fully himself, because men never were what they said unless they said they were going to rape her. Still, she sometimes wondered where he was those days, two years since they last spoke. Did he maintain his 'goodness,' or did he succumb to something else? Did he give it to some other girl?

The backdoor of the building squealed from above. Lynette stood up, peering over the edge of the pool, nose almost touching the paint.

Lee was under the light, hands in his pockets. She'd wanted to run into him in the morning or catch him through the window again. It was too soon.

"While you're here, want a smoke?" he asked.

She waited. “Are you gonna have one?”

“My wife smoked. I just have them... I don’t know why I have them.”

“You’re still married?”

Lynette climbed the ladder when he gave no response. As she rounded the pool, his eyes followed.

“Still married,” he finally said. “Almost divorced.”

He spat on the ground. The bubbled glob made her think maybe she should put him in the past and wipe his thumbprint from her life forever.

“I’ll have a smoke,” she said.

Lee offered her the pack. “Keep them.”

“I’m not taking your wife’s cigarettes.”

“We’ve got a fifty-fifty shot she won’t be my wife soon.”

Lee was watching as Lynette balanced a cigarette in her lips. The bugs in the light made shadows kaleidoscope on his face.

“You want a drink?” she asked.

“I’m done taking drinks from strangers.”

“I’m not a stranger. I’m Lynette Brody in B11.”

He smiled. It was charming, the way his eyes glittered. She almost fell in love again, like she did when she was a child.

“What is this, Lynette Brody?”

Lynette blew smoke from her nostrils and took another drag.

“Just a conversation,” she said.

“Conversations are dangerous.”

“Why?”

“They usually turn into sex.”

“Is that bad?”

“Married,” Lee said.

“Fifty-fifty shot,” said Lynette.

When he smiled and didn't kiss her, Lynette took one last drag. As elegantly as possible, she snubbed out the cigarette under her heel and left him outside alone.

When Lee returned to his room, the rotary was ringing. He shut and locked the door, waiting to see if the caller would hang up. After three shrill rings, he sat on the sofa and picked up.

“Lee?”

He didn't recognize the voice. After a few seconds, he realized it was Melissa.

“You got the letter?” he said. “I'm glad you called.”

“I want you to sign the papers. I sent them to the motel days ago.”

Lee pressed his teeth together, staring at the sickly yellow fabric on the couch. He could make out a faint pattern that had rubbed away from years of use.

“Why now?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You always stayed. Through everything. I fucked other women, for Christ's sake.”

“Well, I loved you.” He heard the rustling of paper on the other end of the phone. “You say you love me on the page, but you don’t love me. I love *you*. I can’t be empty anymore. Other than that love, I was empty. And you didn’t even notice, because you’re emptier than me. When you were sleeping around, I think I convinced myself it wasn’t happening, because I ruined myself with love for you.” She was breathing heavily, and he knew she was close to crying. “I’m done with the magazines and the grief. I have enough guilt without having to worry about you.”

Lee breathed in. “You never said.”

“What?” she murmured.

“That you still loved me.”

“Sign the damn papers when they get there.”

Lee held onto the receiver after she hung up. He bared his teeth and threw the phone out the half-open window. As it clattered and broke apart in the alley below, Lynette came into view in her room across the way. She was back in her robe and a pair of lacy lingerie. One of Melissa’s cigarettes was in her mouth, the box lying on its side on the bed.

When she looked at him, Lee was waving.

Lynette saw a change in Lee’s eyes then; pale blue but ferocious, like he wanted every naked inch of her. And he seemed less concerned, more eager. She opened her window and sat on the sill, swinging a leg over so that he would see it.

“Bad news?” she asked.

“Is it too late to continue our conversation?”

“I thought that was too dangerous.”

“Not too dangerous. I just knew my odds.”

She smiled, feeling her cheeks warm up like she was a girl again.

“B11,” she said. “The door’s unlocked.”

When Lee entered her motel room, she was sitting on the end of the bed, legs crossed, with her robe already discarded on the floor. He seemed almost nervous, shutting and locking the door and taking slow steps across the carpet. She leaned back on her elbows and smiled up at him.

He shrugged off his jacket and climbed on top of her. He smelled almost like he did in the past, like sweat and cologne, but it was a different brand, one that must have been more expensive. His hands were still big on her thighs, still strong as they skid across her skin and yanked her panties. She gasped as they ripped up the side. It must have been loud, because he stared at her.

“What, did I hurt your feelings?”

“I just bought those,” she said. The pale eyes and long lashes made her feel small. He looked irritated. Lynette glanced at the ceiling and lied back fully, letting the underwear tumble onto the floor.

When he was inside her, she started thinking of his wife, why she left, what sort of man he was. He didn’t last long. A few strokes, and he made a mess of her bed, then stood up to pull his pants back on. The silver hair on his chest made him look like an animal.

She stayed where she was, wondering if what happened really happened, and if it was over. She had imagined it differently over the course of her life. Every moment seemed wrong, twisted somehow. She never thought about what to do or how to think *after* having sex with Lee Irving.

“You’re quiet,” he said.

When she ignored him, he left, closing the door quietly behind him. Lynette sat up and pulled her robe around her shoulders again. Something had happened, but was it really Lee Irving? Was it really her? She felt like she had died and become a ghost. She felt stretched out, like a rope that carried a body instead of a body herself, frayed like hair dyed too many times and panties worn until they tore.

Lee climbed the steps to his room. He felt old, and even worse, he felt like his father. He wondered if he ever returned home like this. His parents were like all parents; Mother was kind and intelligent, and she played naive when Pop went away for weekends with Geraldine.

“We do what your mother won’t,” he’d said. “If your wife won’t do it, you make it happen.”

As a child, Lee wondered why adults locked their doors. When he was old enough, his brother nudged him from the top bunk and told him what they did that made them adults. At 57, Lee wondered what an ‘adult’ was. He sometimes felt 17. Some days, he still felt like a boy. Lynette couldn’t have been over thirty.

He could visit his family's graves while in Calliope, where they'd be a train ride away, but he knew himself. He knew the gravestones from the funerals, from his memory.

When Lee got to the room, he noticed an envelope under the door. He pulled it out and set it on the coffee table. Before opening the seal, he turned the radio on. His parents danced in his head, and he started to sway, stepping a little and laughing like his father might have done.

Close to midnight, Lynette left her room. She climbed into the pool and lay down in the crisp dead leaves. For what felt like hours, she stared at the stars. She listened to the sounds of crickets whistling from the grass and the faint hums of Lee's music wafting from his window. Her tears blurred everything.

The train wailed in the distance, haunting in the deep dark. She shut her eyes, imagining herself taking the train, drifting off to some unknown place. She wondered who she would be if she had never gone to the theater. Did that person exist somewhere? Could she be living inside of her still?

Lynette was startled by footsteps from above, then a gentle swishing sound moving back and forth. She opened her eyes to see Junior peering over the edge of the pool, a broom clutched at his side.

"You okay?" he called. "You're not a dead woman, are you?"

"No," she said. "I'm not."

The train moved along. No one looked up from their newspapers or novels to recognize him. Lee glanced around the swaying car, watching the anxious fidgeting of the ones about to get off. His own fingers twitched.

The whistle of the train felt like a roar. He was in the belly of it now. Back in Calliope, he wondered if the woman heard the cry. He imagined her at the window again, blowing smoke into the wind. He wondered if Junior would find the envelope on the counter with the divorce papers left inside.

Through the window, lights passed quickly. Lee saw the silhouettes of hills and fences even blacker than the night.

Thanks for it all, he thought. But the noise of the train swallowed everything.

DARK RAPTURE

As Gail pins my hair to the back of my head, I feel You watching. The air is lighter with You around, and breathing feels simpler, less like a chore of the mortal body. Gail's fingers stumble from the palsy, but I stay quiet, because who am I to judge the oldest of Pilgrim's wives? She is what all of us young people aspire to be—gray-haired, stern, and loved by Pilgrim until we pass onto the next life.

I glow under Gail's wax candle, which bends mangled like a rotted yellow tree on the windowsill. She spreads lavender oil onto my shoulders. It feels like a blessing.

Pilgrim will pair me with Lincoln today, the tallest of the boys in our family. He had six lives before this one. In his first, he was an Egyptian warrior. In the next, the wife of a shipbuilder. He has been a boy king, a physician, a labrador retriever, and a midwife. I envy the age of his soul.

Before our pairing ceremony, Pilgrim will give me a thorough test, more rigorous than he did even to his wives. I believe it is because he knows I am more than them—more capable and devout. If I pass his test, I will join his wives and live with him to bear his holy children. If not, I will be sent to live with Lincoln, or I will be sent to the pit, which I would leave after forty days with a strong conviction in my faith and an even stronger spine. My final hope is for a burnt orange sunrise, where You may appear and pass final judgment, even if Pilgrim decides I am not worthy.

When the tent flap opens, the daylight turns my vision white. Like angels, rows of familiar faces start to form. Each of the members hold candles, protecting the flames with

cupped hands. The deep woods surrounding our encampment always reminds me of the closeness of our family, as we are the only faithful people in this world. Pilgrim stands at the altar under an arch of branches and ferns twisted and bound together with blue and green ribbon. On the grass beside him, Lincoln is nude, gleaming with oil. He looks confident, puffing his chest out as his penis hangs, long and skinny, between his legs.

An aisle of hot coals glows before me, the orange embers pulsing in and out, their heat making the air swirl, water-like. I have to believe in the calluses on my feet; I recite the doctrine under my breath. I step briskly, crunching the coals underfoot. Sweat beads at my brow and trickles into my eyes, but I dare not wipe it. My hands are balled at my sides. They keep me balanced, and as my fingernails cut into my palms, I'm distracted from the heat.

When I reach the altar, the only thing I know is that I've done it. Pilgrim steps up on the wooden platform and lowers the hood of his raccoon-skin cloak. The dense gray fur blends with his body hair, making him look like a thundercloud.

"Your name is Elijah," he decides. His voice is deep, gravelly like the coals. We haven't heard Pilgrim speak since Willa's ritual several months ago; his Grand Men always act as his messengers, enforcing his divinations. "Whom do you obey?"

"You, my lord."

"Whom do you serve?"

"None but myself."

I have yet to look at Lincoln. I only remember he's beside me when he takes my hands. Up close, his chest is hairless and beautiful. Pilgrim's knife presses under my

navel, drawing blood. As it drips down and warms my black curls, Lincoln is cut, and he winces. His weakness embarrasses me.

As blood trickles down our legs, Lincoln squeezes my fingers, then gives me to Pilgrim, who takes my hand and leads me to his cabin. Over my shoulder, the family bows in prayer, perfectly unified. Do You hear them?

Pilgrim's blankets stick to my damp legs. He snores like a panther, and each breath surrounds me in the small room. Overhead, a wooden beam is delicately painted in shades of orange and purple. Pilgrim is depicted in a crown of flames, which sprouts holy beams of gold. Behind him are three figures bent at a river, drinking—the first three members of our family, the ones who followed Pilgrim in complete faith. I feel divine suddenly, remembering how he touched me, and feel around my belly, hoping they are reborn inside me as Pilgrim's triplets from the prophecy.

I climb out of bed, careful not to wake Pilgrim, and walk through the curtain that separates Pilgrim's room from the rest of the cabin. Six bodies, cloaked in white, are sitting on woven mats around what Pilgrim calls a hearth. I've never seen fire contained like this, because it isn't often Pilgrim shows us his magic.

The wives are mumbling softly. They gently rock back and forth, starting from one end of the half-circle to the other. It sounds like a song, but none of the words make sense. There is a sharp pop, and an ember floats out to the women. Fresia, Pilgrim's fourth wife, is the first to catch it on her tongue. She bends down, stretching her arms out toward the flames.

Heavy hands grip my shoulders from behind. The window, I notice, reveals an orange sky. My head tilts back so I can see Pilgrim's face hovering above me. My stomach drops. From his reclining chair, he takes a purple cloak and sets it around me. The fabric is unlike anything I've felt before, thick, warm, covered in tiny, soft hairs.

"You're loyal, Elijah," he says. "Unbroken. But go home."

Unbroken. It makes me sound whole, but inside I feel hollow.

As I walk along the tents, I pass by the woman who gave birth to me. Her belly is swollen again. Because of Pilgrim's commandments, we avoid each other. Even so, I hope she sees my cloak and finds that, despite me not becoming a wife, I pleased our leader more than she did.

Still, I thought I might join his holy women. Am I not enough? I'm one of the first born in our family, a devout follower of Yours. I can recite the doctrine without breaking for seven minutes. Now, my only chance to ascend is to bear Pilgrim's triplets.

In Lincoln's tent, he is at the table, dipping shredded bits of bread into olive oil.

"He sent you home," he says.

"I can still be pregnant. Then I will return to him."

"Are you angry?" He swallows, setting the bread and oil aside. "You don't remember a life before this."

"I had none."

"I mean, a childhood. You were born *here*. You don't look anyone in the eye, because you aren't allowed to. Do you know how sad that is?"

“I don’t understand.”

“A few years ago, I had parents. I’d just got out of high school. Pilgrim met me when I was vulnerable. I needed a higher power, and to feel enlightened, because I was just a boy and wanted to be more. I didn’t realize that that was all there was.”

Heat rises in my face. “Are you questioning Him? Do you remember what happened to those who doubted? The ones who left the family? They went into the forest and met the Devil. They ate their own hands, and Pilgrim cursed them, so the bleeding never stopped. And because of their sins, their impiety, they died and suffer forever in Hell.”

“But did you see them? Did you know them?”

“Pilgrim is going to hear about this, unless you confess.”

“I’ll confess.” He sounds defeated. “I’m sorry.”

I climb onto our cot and turn away, wondering how You will deal with him. My chest is pounding, not out of fear but of anger, because my heart is too big for such small men.

I recite the doctrine loudly.

“I shall forever follow You beyond the borders of this life. I am willing and open to be a conduit for Your prophecies. If I shall be the Mother, holiest of holy women, fill me with children. Use me to bring back the original members and lead when Pilgrim is gone. If I shall be a witness, guide me with Your wisdom. If I shall be a failure, remake me to be good. Make me a stone, proof of Your power. Make me a weed that overcomes

everything. Make me a knife, so I cut down the weak. Make me a fire that grows bigger and bigger...”

When I return to Pilgrim’s cabin in the morning and tell him everything Lincoln said, he doesn’t flinch. I hope for praise, but instead, he sends me away again. When I walk outside, there is no orange sunrise. Instead, the sky is gray like slate. I spend several hours walking along the tents, trying to maintain my composure.

By the afternoon, Saffron is in his garden, yanking a weed from where it’s wrapped around one of the tent stakes. He is covered in chestnut freckles, and he is the only member of the family with feathery orange hair. The bulge under his smock is large and fat. And when we were eleven years old, he gave me a ginseng root from his garden. I keep it in my smock still, even though it’s withered and dry.

I say his name without thinking. He motions me to him.

The garden glitters with dew under the growing light. Climbing vines have since overtaken the wooden gate he built, and his clay pots have burst open from overgrown roots that escaped their containers to ripple under the dirt. He used to take such care with it. Over the years, on my morning walks, I watched it deteriorate. Does he remember those ginseng roots he used to keep alive and healthy? But even disheveled, the place feels sublime.

“Where is Lincoln?” he asks. “I haven’t seen him.”

“Can I help?”

“I’m thinking I’ll pull out the weeds and just be done with it.” He grips and shakes part of the rotting fence, making his arm flex. “Elijah.”

My new name sounds holy in his mouth. I watch the freckles on his throat disappear under his collar, suggesting everything.

“We can fix it. I’ll work until next sunrise.”

“I don’t have the time for upkeep anymore.”

I try to hide my sadness. Saffron’s hand goes into the pocket of his smock, and then his fingers graze my arm. In his hand is a ginseng root. He smiles, perhaps knowing this is a secret between us. I hide it in the pocket of my smock with the dried one from our childhood.

Behind him, Willa emerges from their tent, bulbous with twins. Her belly is large, distended almost, like an abnormal growth. So close to triplets, but not close enough.

Saffron pats my hand like a friend before I return home.

Please, give me triplets. Make me the Mother in Pilgrim’s prophecy. Let me lead after Pilgrim goes to his next life. Use me.

In the evening, I still have yet to see Lincoln. I thought he must be at the river, washing, but he isn’t. Still in my cloak, I boil water over the fire just outside our tent. My teacup is full of fresh lavender buds. As I pour the water over them, white steam climbs into the breeze.

“Elijah?”

Gail sits beside me on the stump, clasping her hands in her lap. My chest fills with hope.

“Am I returning to Pilgrim?” I ask. She shakes her head.

“I have news. Tomorrow, you will be paired with a new member of the family. You deserve a strong husband, devoted to the faith.”

I keep myself from showing any reaction; I want to ask where Lincoln is, but I know from her tone that he must be in the pit, and if he is, I am not to speak of it, as those in the pit must be forgotten in order for them to learn and grow as You intend.

“Pilgrim is very proud of you, Elijah,” Gail says, standing. “Like a sickness, we must stop doubt before it spreads, if it hasn’t already.”

Tonight, I am alone on the cot in Lincoln’s tent, watching shadows ripple across the fabric as Pilgrim’s Grand Men put out the fires for the night. I can see their silhouettes stretching and shifting like phantoms. I close my eyes once the land is dark, listening to the frogs bellowing. I can imagine their bulbous throats as they sing.

I am woken by the sound of dry grasses crunching underfoot mingling with whispers in the air. No member of the family is awake during the night. Even Pilgrim’s Grand Men stay by his cabin, where they guard him and escort the wives in and out.

I wait until it stops before I leave my tent. The encampment is black as pitch, but I discern the shapes of things from the bluish glow of the sky. I follow the sound to the river, then beyond, almost a mile away.

Three of Pilgrim's Grand Men stand at the pit. They each carry bags of various shapes and sizes, all coated and dripping with dark liquid. Together, they remove the large cement slab covering the top. A rotten smell fills my nose. As they toss the bags into the pit, I can hear them hitting the bottom, each *thunking* with weight.

When the Grand Men leave to return to their posts, I follow their tracks to the pit. My feet stick in the mud, but I push through until I can touch the cement slab. It is too heavy to move, but as I feel around it, I find a sliver of space where the cement has broken away. I put my eye near the opening and hold my nose shut.

In the pit, there are no people, only piles of bags covered in flies. From one, I notice the distinct shape of toes.

When I return to my tent, I am soaked in a layer of dirt and sweat. I wash my muddy feet in the basin of water beside the cot. I recite the doctrine again.

At dawn, when I reemerge from my tent, Willa is pacing, red-faced. Despite how grotesque her belly is, I hope that for mine.

"Have you seen Saffron?" she asks. "I saw him talking with Lincoln the other morning, around sunrise." I shake my head. "I thought he might have told you."

I want to protest against her all-knowing tone. Saffron doesn't give me anything he doesn't give her first. But I fear Saffron has been marked by Lincoln's doubt.

"Pilgrim has been looking for him," she says, and I can sense her own worry. I follow her to her tent, only to see that it is on its side, the cot crumpled and upturned and

the table askew. Their home looks like a series of simple objects now. Pilgrim is on his knees in the ruins, ripping a blanket apart, layer by layer, as if searching for something.

He grabs my arm, yanking me on my knees beside him. It hurts, but I bite my lip. His strength is that of fifty men. When he yells at me, I realize that Saffron is gone, and Pilgrim doesn't know where he's gone, only that he knew Lincoln, and Lincoln doubted.

“You've been a good, obedient daughter, Elijah, and I'm sorry,” he says, letting go of my arm. It confuses me. I have never heard Pilgrim apologize, because he is without sin.

In a whisper, he reminds me about the members who left through the woods, their suffering. The same will happen to Saffron if he travels too far. The Devil will find him. We have to find him first.

The woods are dark, full of whispers underfoot. I follow Pilgrim closely, so as not to wake spirits. They might mistake me for a runner, a nonbeliever, which makes it easier for the Devil to enter my heart. Pilgrim's ax gleams when it catches sunlight. We follow the sound of rushing water. The river, he says, is where everyone stops to drink. I duck under the delicate web of a brown spider, before Pilgrim grabs my smock and pulls me against his chest, pointing a hairy finger.

On a bank of pebbles, Saffron is crouched, lowering his hands in the pale water. Pilgrim reaches into his pocket and puts a small, fat blade in my hand. He tells me to wait. “Be good and obedient,” he whispers. I hold the blade so tightly, I feel my skin break.

Pilgrim brings the ax down toward Saffron's head. It takes off an ear, and blood splashes the gray rocks and washes down the river. Holding his head, Saffron starts running. My lungs ache, but I chase him. His red hair makes him easy to spot among the green. A tree limb, broken and jagged, snags the end of his smock. He surrenders to the ground with an awkwardly bent leg. Thank You for this.

I leap on him with all of my weight. Madly, I swipe the blade, catching his lip and a nostril. He tries wrestling me, but he seems to hesitate so as not to hurt me.

"We kill them," he tries to say.

I push the blade into his belly, ignoring the resistance of muscle and bone. I pull it out and do it again, high on his chest, as liquid gurgles out of the opening I made, and a red stain expands on the fabric like a dark cloud of dye.

Saffron looks confused, then afraid, then defeated. The emotions pass over his face in rapid succession as my hands ignore the warmth of his insides still in the blood, on my hands. When he falls still, Pilgrim touches my shoulder like a father.

I remove my blood-speckled smock and leave it next to Saffron's body. Pilgrim and I trudge through the woods toward home under the growing light of an orange sunrise. Under his breath, Pilgrim begins to pray. I know, because he says Your name.

BLOODY AVENUE

I've been followed around by a younger version of myself since I was sixteen. She wears a pink cotton dress, white buckled sandals, and a Ghostface mask she cycles blood through using a piping mechanism in her left hand. As we trudge down Inkberry Avenue, I ignore the breath-like huffs of the pump she's squeezing in her pocket.

“What if he kills you?” she asks, shivering. “What if he's a *predator*?”

We've been walking since before sunrise. I still feel raw, vulnerable to the world, but I haven't cried for a few minutes now. Five hours ago, I was on the floor of the Emergency Room with tears and snot on my face, wailing “fix me” over and over. The nurse emerging from the bathroom didn't know what to do with me, so he sent me back to my hotel in a cab. I had the driver drop me off just a block down when I got a notification from my dog-walking app—I had been hired by Petyr Ivanovska who lives on Inkberry Avenue just down the way.

It's a long, pebbled road walled in on either side with well-manicured gardens. On my left, goldenrod and witch hazel, like orange-yellow spiders, flourish in the shade of tall wooden fences. Trumpet honeysuckles, skinny and coral, look like long, deflated balloons that clowns twist up into animals. To my right, dewy-wet holly and wild strawberries cluster at the base of a cast stone birdbath. My younger self looks in the water, pricking the pristine surface with a finger. It ripples the reflection of the mask, which stretches and dances in uncanny angles.

When I get to where the fence ends, my legs ache. The cottage sits behind a white picket gate covered in holly. Even through the trees and shrubs, the place looks worth over a million with its three levels, rustic stone walls, and massive steeped entrance covered in climbing ivy. It's isolated, no noise from cars or people. Any neighbors must be hidden along Inkberry at least a mile down.

The doorbell is like a gong. I wait impatiently, ripping my nails with my teeth as my younger self watches the door.

"I bet he doesn't even have a dog," she says. "What if he's gross? What if you bleed through your pants?"

"I won't," I say.

"What if?"

"We're coming!" He sounds normal through the door. When it opens, the collie bursts out. She sniffs down my jeans while her tail thunks hard against the doorframe. The man steps out—mid-30s, messy blonde curls, brown eyes, trimmed beard. Caucasian cherub.

"Hi, hi," he says, holding the leash. "Petyr. And she's Circe."

I get on my knees, shaking my hands in the collie's mane. I notice he's offering me the leash, but as I stand and wrap it in my hand, Circe's snout is in my crotch.

"Molly, right?"

"Right," I say.

Circe is insistent when it comes to exploring. Do I smell that bad? I ignore the judgmental stare of my younger self. She must think I deserve this. Sometimes, I wonder

if she knows we're the same, and whatever happens to me is going to happen to her.

She's a little cunt, actually.

"Where is it you're from again?"

"Complicated," I say, turning my hips. "My mother is from Uganda. My father was born Scottish but moved to London at fifteen. I was born in London, but we moved to America when I was three. And then back to Scotland two years ago. And then I came back here."

Petyr pushes Circe's head to the side, freeing me so I can tug her down the steps.

"So, you're an American with an accent."

I want to argue, American *is* an accent, but I'm thinking about how much I wish the sun would explode and swallow everything so that he's not thinking about what my pussy might smell like.

"You've got a month here. Right?"

"For a film project," I say. "Grad school."

I don't mention that I got 'removed from the project' three days ago. I don't want to talk at all. I just want to walk his dog. I think he senses that, because he just nods and goes inside.

After walking Circe, I return to the cottage and relinquish the leash from the bottom of the steps. Petyr digs in his pockets and gives me a check. I feel guilty when I see the amount. He seems to notice my face and insists. Glancing at the size of his house, I fold the check and slide it in my pocket. It's enough for basic props and a few buckets of fake blood.

With the money from Petyr, I get a cheap suit, a scarf, a gown, and food coloring (for the 32 drops of green that go into each gallon of blood). Being back in my hotel room feels less like a failure when I'm dressed as someone else. In fact, it's exciting.

For the first scene of my short film, I dress as The Woman, a succubus that walks the night, then preys on men that are awake in the early morning hours. She looks girlish, with long soft hair and a cheeky smile. She has cat eyes now, because those are the only contact lenses I brought with me.

After fitting myself in the white velvet gown and applying the yellow contacts, I set up the tripod and camera. The shot is simple, but stunning. Orbs of light are being projected onto the sepia-tone wall from the blinds, and the sheets are crumpled messily at one end of the bed. Just before I sit on the bed to record, the room glows with the light from my cell phone.

Fifteen missed calls from Kenneth. I don't call him back, because he's my father. I want to shake off his presence and be enveloped by the scene, but my eyes are stinging. In costume, I sit on the bed, staring at the fuzzy blur of car lights through the window. My young self sits next to me, swinging her legs and bouncing her butt on the mattress.

When I stand up, a speckle of red is on the blankets. I go to the toilet and sit, yanking out the tampon to insert the new one. The first time I got my period, I thought I was dying, and I told no one. My parents had never mentioned my 'changing body' before. Was it called a period, because it was the end of something? The end of innocence?

Once you see blood, is that 'it'?

When I pick up Circe the next morning, she leads me excitedly onto the avenue. I notice as we walk that Petyr is grabbing a wool peacoat from a hook behind his front door, and instead of getting into his car for work, he's following us. I can't help but look at my young self, confused.

"You don't want me to walk her?" I ask.

"No, I do. Mind if I come along?"

I nod, not sure if I mind or not. Every few steps, Circe glances back at her master, awaiting his movements and commands. It's sweet. And annoying. Because why the hell would he pay me to walk his dog when he can walk her his damn self? Unless he has some disability that makes him unable to walk dogs, in which case I'm an asshole.

"If you see any birds, you'll want to grip the leash," he says and pauses thoughtfully. "Your accent changes every few words, it seems like."

"I didn't say anything."

"When you were talking yesterday, I noticed."

"It depends who I'm talking to," I say. "If I'm on the phone with my mother, I mimic her. I don't know. I got a lot of it from movies, I think."

"I know fuck all about movies. I don't even own a TV. Not a working one, at least."

"But you live in a house like that."

"Like what?"

He sidesteps a bike rack, brushing a straw basket on one of the attached bicycles. I stop to let Circe pose among the bluets bunched in gray-blues and gray-purples at her feet, each one's pale petals twitching around a burst of yellow at its center. Circe's fur separates and wisps around her face, whipped by the wind.

"Ever seen a horror movie?" I ask. "*Carrie? Night of the Comet? Slumber Party Massacre?*"

"No."

"*Slumber Party Massacre II?*"

"Who likes getting scared? I mean, genuinely?" He seems perturbed as I start down the avenue again. "Oh. You do. I can tell."

"I like movies."

"They're gratuitous."

"I like when they're gratuitous."

"It's just murder," he says. "Naked women being chopped up."

"It's catharsis with blood and boobs. A lot of people like boobs."

"That's fair. I've heard of those people."

"Why pretend we don't think about sex and blood and all that?"

"I don't know. To be a productive society, maybe?"

"I can't be productive if I'm thinking about boobs?"

"I mean, I can't."

We walk another mile, saying nothing. It's a comfortable silence. Petyr is warming his hands in his pants pockets. My younger self kicks pebbles down the road,

sighing boredly every few seconds. I breathe into my knitted scarf, smelling my mother, before we all turn around.

“Do you not have work today?” I ask, glancing at him.

“I know it’s weird to walk with you. To be honest, I don’t get to talk to a lot of people.”

“Is that why you hired a dog walker? For the talking?”

He shrugs. I suppose people with big houses tend to keep small circles. I wonder if he goes to therapy, or if he needs it. It takes me a moment to notice my young self is tugging at the end of my scarf.

“Check your pants,” she says.

When Petyr gets ahead a few feet, I turn to check. No stains. I glare at my younger self, who makes a fart sound with her mouth behind the mask.

Resigned, I admit Petyr is nice to look at. At the very least, I prefer the walk to my own company. Anything to draw me out of myself and into the fresh air. Then again, I’ve known myself for a long time. There’s only so much we can argue about anymore.

For six hours, I am locked in my hotel room, poring over my script. I haven’t stopped since I got back from walking with Petyr. After a month of letting it sit in my backpack, scribbled with notes in multiple colored pens, I run through with a red marker and check over the dialogue, making sure my newest revisions are consistent: two characters, instead of four, both played by me.

When the other grad students fired me from the film project, they said it was because I was hysterical. So, I screamed at them and threw things. They could have the movie, since the script wasn't mine anyway. No one had been interested in *my* submission for the final project, so we had opted for a script from one of the other group members. My script was not funny enough, and it was too ambitious.

From the moment I left the studio, I was determined to get my own props and makeup and make it myself. To pay for these though, and to keep my room at the hotel, I applied to be a dog walker on a local neighborhood app.

Then, my phone lit up. A text message from Mother.

Please call him!!!

She never understood my relationship with my father. I don't think I ever understood hers either.

He was never involved with me like he was with my brothers. With them, he was overly bonded. They all turned out just like him: stoic, masculine, soulless. Knowing how warm they were when they were young, they might as well have died. I had to mourn them just the same, and so did Mother, even if she tried to hide it.

Walking to the cottage down Inkberry feels duller today, more one-note. I wonder if, a few days into this arrangement, there's a possibility for sex. But maybe yesterday was a fluke, and now, Petyr will be the faceless rich guy from the internet who wants a dog walker when he isn't at home.

In front of the white-painted gate, beside his brick mailbox, he's flicking through a stack of envelopes. In the yard, Circe is rolling through the grass, gathering burrs. It's strange, almost creepy, and maybe charming that he's at home again. I decide it's nice, actually.

"Morning," he says, waving me over. "Sleep okay?"

"I did."

"No nightmares?"

"Aside from the one where I'm naked and chopped up, not really."

"See?" He points at me with an envelope, making his face grave. "It's all the blood and boobs. And you're not even fazed. You're *desensitized*. That's the worst bit."

With Circe, Petyr and I walk down Inkberry. He goes all two miles with me, where the avenue is interrupted by a busy street. He and I shoot the shit, avoiding topics like love, childhood, family, and the soul. We sidestep the fact that I'm on my period and the truth of our desperate, hungry egos, as well as our deep-rooted fears of failing and losing our joys to the inevitability of death. Instead, we talk about the basket on the bicycle, now yellow with pollen. About his job as a computer technician. About Circe's need to chase birds. About how Roger Ebert didn't actually hate horror movies.

On the way back, when my finger is in my mouth, I realize my nails have grown. Did I not bite them yesterday?

He says goodbye casually. I realize we are both in this routine together, and he is assuming I will be back tomorrow. I will be, but I don't often meet people who think of a future with me in it.

I smile at him, but it's fake. On the brink of leaving, I am suddenly thinking about the missed calls and my mother's blood. I look forward to seeing him tomorrow.

All of this happens every morning for almost a week.

I should be sleeping, but instead I sit in the bathtub with scissors in my hand, and I wonder if it's worth it. Between two fingers, I stretch out the front portion of my hair. The blades hover near my forehead, but I can't make myself do it.

Kenneth hasn't called since yesterday, but I can't stop thinking about him.

Everyone used to say I look just like my father. I would look in the mirror and see his nose, his chin, and his eyes on my face, and I'd fixate on it until all I could see was Kenneth. As a child, I thought it was strange but tolerable. When I was thirteen, after what happened with my mother, I let my nails grow out and bit them into points. When I was in front of him, I'd claw at my face. The doctor said I was seeking attention, which I think should have been a sign to give me more of it. My father took it as me being hysterical and distanced himself even more. My mother, despite being loving, got so emotional I couldn't take it. They started to tape up my fingers with duct tape to keep me from scratching.

One night, I went into my oldest brother's room and put on the Ghostface mask I found in his closet. Kenneth threatened to put me in a box and send me away if I didn't take it off, but by that age, I was wise enough to know he was a coward. I wore the mask to every event for months. Mother tried coaxing me out of it at first, but it got me to stop clawing, so she let it go. It didn't come off until I got a therapist at sixteen.

My young self sits across from me in the bath, her tiny hands trembling around the blood pump. She knows I want to cut my hair to play the part of The Man in my film, but she won't stop talking.

"You'll look just like him," she says.

"Shut the fuck up."

"You've got his eyes, and his nose, and his chin, and you don't feel anything."

I put pressure on the scissors. The blades force their way through, and the hair falls and floats down, dark and curled on the white porcelain between us. I take another piece and cut, then another. The hairs, finally freed, tickle the goosebumps on my naked thighs.

"Fucking stupid," she tells me.

On the eighth day of knowing Petyr, I explain my haircut to him. For some reason, I feel the need to be ashamed.

"I've been working on a short film," I say.

He nods, as if intrigued. I've run out of outfits to wear on our walks, but I try to mix and match what I have stuffed in my suitcase at the hotel. Petyr seems to have an endless array of beautiful coats, sweaters, and button-downs, all of which compliment the beard he is growing and maintaining on his jaw.

"I have a friend with a damn good camera," he says. "I think he worked in commercials. I could pass your name along?"

"Is he rich like you?"

Petyr chuckles, unoffended by everything. “If I’m rich, sure.”

“Are you a trust fund baby?”

“Oh, you can tell by my hands.” He lifts them, showing off his well-manicured nails. “No calluses, no tan. These are no workman’s hands.”

“I see that much.”

“When my uncle died, he left me the house. Not much intrigue, I’m sorry to say.”

“I don’t know. You could have a wife or two hidden away in there.”

My younger self leaps out from behind Petyr, almost making me jump. She always follows closely behind us, but some mornings, like today, I almost forget her.

“I’ve got to tell you something cool,” Petyr says suddenly. It sounds like he’s been thinking about it. I realize with this change of subject that we might be breaching new territory, maybe a new relationship. “I’m related to Shakespeare on my mom’s side. I’ve got a painting of him in my foyer.” He looks at me seriously. “I’m not kidding.”

I don’t know if my urge to laugh is from my doubt, the fact that he thinks this is an acceptable explanation, or the fact that I want to believe him anyway. I still don’t quite know when he’s joking.

“You’re sure?”

“I’ve got records and everything.”

“I believe you.”

Petyr smiles to himself, looking content as we approach the house. He unlocks the front door, letting Circe inside, but the door is half-open behind him as he stands in front of me and fiddles with his keyring.

“We can go inside?” he says.

“It feels nice out here, actually.”

He nods. Then he snaps his fingers, as if with an idea. His hand rests on my arm, brief but not brief enough to be nothing, before he steps in the foyer. I hear him greet Circe as the door shuts behind him.

My younger self kicks the bottom step over and over. She hasn't taken her mask off in years. Some days, I hate to admit, it makes me sad. All I know of her anymore is the ghostly face wet with Red 40 dye and the soft thump-and-fizzle sounds she makes by squeezing the pump in her hand.

“He's not gonna have sex with you now,” she says. “He gave you the in. You didn't wanna do it, coward.”

I start down the steps to walk back to the hotel, but the door opens. Petyr has shed his coat. He has a backpack on his shoulder with a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses balanced in the other. He sets the bottle on the stone and unfolds a tiny corkscrew from his keychain.

“Do you drink?” he asks. I nod as Petyr yanks out the cork and fills each glass halfway.

We walk down the avenue, taking our time. Without Circe to lead us, I grasp the implications.

About half a mile down the road, Petyr points out a cluster of holly, which hides a wooden bench shaded from the sun by two fenced-in trees. He sets the backpack

containing the wine bottle on the grass. Sitting this close to him, I smell cologne and pine and a hint of sweet honey.

“Your cheeks are red,” he says. The brown of his eyes looks more amber in this light. “I hope I’m not making you nervous.”

I want to make a joke. Instead, I’m honest. “I’ll get through it.”

My younger self tosses rocks over the fence on the other side of the avenue. The sound distracts me, but I force myself to keep eye contact with Petyr. We sit in silence, listening to the sudden *birdie-birdie-birdie* call of a cardinal somewhere in the thicket. I feel the wine becoming a reason for me to say what I’m thinking. The more I’m truthful, the more my younger self seems to fade away, or at least get easier to ignore.

“I’m not good at this,” I mumble.

“What’s ‘this’?”

“I mean, I’m not good with sex.”

“Like, you’re not okay with it?”

“No, I’m not good. *At. It.*”

“Ah.”

“How many people have you been with?” I ask.

Petyr shrugs. “I could fill a church.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s just something. I’m not really proud of it, but I’m not ashamed of it.”

“I had a boyfriend in high school who called his dick the Jawbreaker.”

“Are you saying that’s why you’re not good at sex?”

“I’m just saying it’s pretty funny.”

As Petyr pours a second glass, I look in mine and pick out a spikelet of witch hazel. He stops talking, opting for quick, big gulps. I realize he thinks he needs the drink. Maybe he does.

A red cardinal flutters and lands on the edge of the birdbath. The crest on his head tilts in the wind. My young self approaches it, close enough to touch its wing. At that age, I was curious why the females were less beautiful than the males. But what makes the color red so beautiful? What makes it masculine? I know now it all means nothing, and the cardinals that are red just happen to be male, and I can still be red if I want to.

After Petyr’s second glass, I see his movements slowing. Still, I pick up mine from where I set it in the grass, and I offer it.

“Getting me drunk is naughty, naughty,” he says. Still, he takes it.

“You seem like you want to get a little wasted.”

“I don’t usually drink like this. For Circe.” He says it matter-of-factly but gulps down the rest, then hands me the glass again. “You’re gorgeous.”

“It’s weird you waited until you were drunk to say that.”

“If anything, my mind’s much clearer.” He swirls his fingers over his temples. “Social expectations aren’t in the way, fogging up my goddamn brain. You’re right. I’m done pretending I don’t think about *boobs*.”

I smile, watching him slump back a little to watch the graying sky above. He swallows hard enough that his Adam’s apple jumps. He looks a little on-edge.

“Just relax,” I say. I lean back too, like I’ve known him longer than I have. “I’ll be here.”

The sun is leaving fast, and the air is cool. The bottle is empty. So are the glasses.

Petyr leans against me as we walk back to the cottage. His backpack dangles on my back as I use all of my weight to keep us steady, and even then, it isn’t quite enough.

“Petyr, you’re going down,” I say.

“What?”

He starts crumbling, so I bend my knees, letting him slowly down on the grass to prevent a violent fall. Still, his butt hits the ground hard. He rocks a little.

“I’m gonna teach you how to fuck,” he says, eyes half-lidded as he nods to himself.

I smile despite myself, holding his biceps to keep him sitting. “Maybe when you’re sober.”

His hands explore my hair, ruffling and mashing it against my face, and brush my nose and eyelashes. I sniff hard into his hands. He chuckles, clumsily taking my forearms as he falls backward, pulling me down in a loose hug. As he starts to breathe steadily with sleep, I breathe in, forgetting for a moment about the mask, the movie, the inevitability of death.

We wake in the same spot at the edge of the road, tangled together like ribbons on the wet grass. I only open my eyes when he starts squirming under me. He shields his eyes from the sun with one hand, white teeth bared in a grimace.

“Fuck. Why am I outside?”

“You got drunk and fell down,” I say. “And went to sleep.”

I move off him, covering his forehead to block the sun from his eyes. He forces himself up, squinting. His hair is covered in dewy blades of grass.

“Why are you here?” he asks.

“You think I can pick you up?”

“You could’ve called someone. I’ve got my phone in my pocket.”

“I wanted to stay.”

As I get off my knees, Petyr touches my shoulder. He clearly has no intention of getting off the ground. He kisses my forehead, nose, and the bow below. It feels warm and normal, like ‘bliss’, like what adults do, yet he pulls away before he reaches my mouth.

I don’t pursue it, and I don’t know why. I just help him on his feet, pick grass from his curls, and we let each other go.

In the hotel parking lot, I mount the camera on the tripod. My cropped hair is matted, and my suit has been drenched in fake blood for the second part of my movie’s climactic scene, where The Man and The Woman finally meet. The rising sun makes everything orange.

As I turn the camera on, I notice my reflection on the screen, the short hair and my father's chin. When I think of my father, I think of the blood. I was twelve when I got home from school and found my mother on the kitchen floor. At first, there was so much blood, I didn't know where she was hurt, but as she reached for me, I saw it was her wrists. I remember the nausea, my vision rushing sideways as her wet hands ran slick down my face.

Kenneth was the one to call an ambulance. Once the paramedics got to the house, I went into the bathroom and saw her blood streaked down my face. I worried if she died, that would be all I had left of her. So, I refused to wash it. I left her blood on my skin until my father came into my room that night with a wet rag, held me down, and scrubbed it from me.

My mother was treated and transferred to a mental hospital for two weeks. When she came back home, my father ignored her. When she asked a question or offered him dinner, he didn't even give her the courtesy of a look. He didn't speak a word to either of us. I can't remember how long that lasted. I just remember Mother alone, crying, while her husband shut her out.

It feels like the suit is strangling me. I want to rip off the jacket and tie, but I've waited for this moment for months. I sit on the pavement, legs crossed, and breathe. I count the seconds, like I used to do in therapy, but it isn't working. My heart makes my chest feel thin with its pounding.

I give up and bring my camera inside when the sun rises high enough to ruin my scene.

That morning, I sit on the curb in front of Inkberry, watching the busy street, still covered in fake blood. I wipe the residue from my eyes. My young self and I don't look so different for once.

I know Petyr must be waiting. It's selfish, but I want him to worry. I want someone to care and show it. He doesn't call.

The realization comes after noon, when I know we would be returning from the walk. Several cars slow to ask me if I'm okay. One man tries to get out. I realize I look heinous, and their concern doesn't suit me anymore. In fact, it makes me feel bad.

Finally, I walk down Inkberry. Then, I run. I shed the bloody suit jacket and tie I'm wearing, then my undershirt, and toss them on the bench as I go by. Even though my bra is stained with red, I think I might look less crazy. Maybe.

I barely notice the house as I go through the gate and leap up the steps. The ring of the doorbell reverberates.

"Molly?" Petyr is crossing the yard from the driveway, his keys jingling in his hand. "Is that blood?"

"Fake blood," I say. I point to my bra. "And boobs. I'm sorry I didn't show up."

"I thought you took the money and ran." He looks content as I descend the steps. "Or I scared you, which... I guess you do like being scared."

"Yeah. I do."

When I get close, he touches my forehead, which I think is sweet. I see his nails, now coated in the greasy red blood still matting my hair.

“So, fake blood. Are the boobs real?”

I almost give him a line, but I remember my shirt discarded on the bench down the avenue and suddenly feel stupid. I see out of the corner of my eye that my young self is beside me. As Petyr talks, she tries to interrupt, but I ignore her.

As we walk again, Petyr reaches for me, and I decide to take his hand.

MRS. SCOTT SCORNED

When I found out my husband was fucking Georgia Vaughn, it wasn't a grenade to my day or my marriage. It was a simple hand on the shoulder; a gentle murmur that said, indeed, something hadn't been right for a long time.

I first met Georgia two weeks ago over cocktails at the Feather Cap Gala, an annual charity auction to raise money for the Museum of Migratory Birds. My husband, Senator Gregory Scott, prided himself on his work for the environment. And it was deserved. He was a bird-watcher, a conservationist, and a donor to many shelters and environmental centers located in the tri-state area. Every hopeful senatorial candidate who rubbed elbows with him or me tended to gain the attention of the average liberal voter. And because of my husband's bank account, every move we made got the attention of the media, local and otherwise.

Georgia had arrived with her husband, an actor famous enough to be valued for his work in summer blockbusters *and* his awareness of social issues, but not too famous to not RSVP. She must have been twenty-five, maybe younger.

Thinking back, I almost feel guilty for what I did to her. Almost.

Before the event started, she and I stood at the bar, a stool between us. Her forest-green satin gown hugged her muscular thighs. The sleeves were draped delicately over her biceps, keeping her tanned shoulders exposed, and she had a beautiful white silk train that spilled over the floor behind her. The dress was paired with tall, impossibly thin red heels and a string of white pearls, luminescent against her collar bone.

Every so often, I glanced over. She took eager sips of champagne. My wrist twirled and ached at my side. My tics always got worse in crowded places.

She suddenly looked at me. "I can't concentrate on my champagne," she said. Her voice was sharp over the bass thumping behind the walls. She swayed a little, clearly tipsy. "Your bracelet keeps clicking around."

"It's a tic," I said. "Tourette's."

"Does your wrist hurt? Moving it like that?"

"Not all the time, but yes. It aches a lot."

"Have you ever sat on your hand until it gets numb, so it's like somebody else is jacking him off?"

"Who?"

"Your husband."

She said it with a smile. I kept my wrist in my lap, struggling to unclasp my metal bracelet.

"I've never done that," I said.

Georgia tipped her drink at me and swallowed until it was empty. The red wine vibrated in my glass as the music got louder. Her dress, I noticed, hugged her chest so that her breasts looked perfectly round.

"How do you get them so full-looking?" I tried to sound silken, but it was less 'femme fatale' and more 'leery pervert.' I almost backed off, but Georgia began peeling down her bodice. She pulled her skin to lift her boob slightly and show the peach-colored

tape covering a nipple. Another piece was stretched across the undersides of her breasts, holding them together to create the illusion of naturally deep cleavage.

She put her breasts away and ordered another drink. Nursing from her straw, she walked off, then wagged her fingers at me in a wave, like we were gal pals. I lifted a hand to respond but Georgia had already left, presumably to rejoin her husband.

Georgia made her official gala entrance a half-hour later, which I watched holding my husband's arm. The bulkiness of his jacket made his touch feel even colder than normal. Georgia leaned against her own husband, tilting her head so the cameras could find her neckline. Seeing her like that made me realize the creases around my eyes and mouth.

Gregory asked in my ear, "Do you think those pearls are real?"

I knew it was code for *god*, her tits.

"She uses boob tape," I said. I didn't mention I saw Georgia's breasts. I was worried my husband would be jealous and say something like "Well, that's every man's dream," and claim it was a joke.

"She reminds me of you," he said, which was worse.

The reaction was rabid and alive. From Twitter and YouTube to personal blogs and fashion forums, the talk was that Georgia's dress was "too low-cut." She was too sexual, "classless" even. She looked more like a mistress than a wife. She was newly married to a respectable actor who was notoriously kind, easy to work with, traditional.

How dare she make *him*, of all people, look bad? Surely, *he* didn't condone this. There were *children* there, for god's sake. The dress was ugly anyway. She was ugly anyway.

To all of these things, I had only this to say: who actually cared about some event for birds? It was nothing more than a circle jerk for senators and other millionaires to flaunt their fashion and wealth and charity.

But people did care. Georgia Vaughn made them.

The last time I saw Georgia that night was during a performance by the George Jitters Jazz Ensemble. I had taken my heels off under the table and, with my fork, poked at the dry baked chicken on my plate. Georgia was three tables to the right, being scolded by a waiter for smoking at the table she shared with the curator of the museum and owners of the venue.

Georgia tossed her cigarette in her water glass. The waiter jolted, thinking she was throwing it in the vodka. Her laugh carried over trumpet and piano and trombone, her head tossed back like she knew just how beautiful her neck was. It felt like a very young thing to do.

Gregory was beside me with his hand on my thigh, his attention on the band. He often touched me in public as though we had a sexual relationship. But other than the occasional request for a hand- or blowjob, he didn't want a part of it.

Once, I suggested my blue vibrator, a blindfold, and a pair of red handcuffs, and he looked ready to hit me. Not that I didn't want to hit him too, or that I truly cared if it was him at the other end of the toy. We hadn't had sex in eleven months. I made such a firm nest on my side of the bed that it took me weeks to notice he wasn't sleeping beside

me anymore. I would have liked connection, but my vibrator was very much my companion. It was no replacement, but it didn't get tired, didn't complain. It didn't call me a nympho for wanting someone to go down on me for more than ten minutes. It just went on, humming in silence.

That day was like every other one. I could hear Gregory in the shower from where I was in the study, curled up in a chair by the radiator. The rush of water against the marble tub reminded me of rain. I used to love when it rained. As a child, I would sneak out my window and run down the street with bare feet, until I was soaked with water and my skin was chilled. Whenever the sun was out, I remembered those moments and wondered where my excitement went. Were those feelings stored so deep inside me, I forgot them? Or was I just turning old days into too-good memories?

I yawned, and my jaw popped. At 42, I felt old, and I didn't know if that was normal, or if it was my life, the way it dragged on and on. Wrapping my robe tighter, I walked along the shelves of our books, running my finger over the tops of their spines. I was close to pulling away, not choosing. But as my hand ran over my tattered copy of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, I felt the ruffled edges of a bundle of papers stuffed inside.

I had just put it back on the shelf a week ago. Those papers were not mine.

When I pulled the book out and turned it over, dozens of pages fluttered around me to my feet. They opened at the creases and landed, tented, around me. I picked one up, unfolding it to see a letter in black ink.

I noticed a line toward the bottom of the page: “You make me cum every time, I promise.” It was signed, “Georgia.” And she *promised*. What a darling.

I picked up another page, the lines scrawled in my husband’s blue pen.

“Dearest Georgia...”

I was surprised and confused, not only because Gregory never talked like that, but because he used not the word “dear” but “dearest,” as in “the most dear of all the women that he knew.”

I did not rip open the shower curtain or slap him across the jaw or throw his clothes off the balcony into the pool. I collected the pages, held them to my chest, and searched through his desk. I read and reread bank statements and receipts from jewelers, motels, and fine restaurants from nights we fought. I called his voice mailbox and listened to dozens of messages left by ‘Georgie.’ I got my driver to take me around town to every place they had been, from the hot dog stand near the fountain in the square to the Nikita Sunrise Motel to the path through the botanical gardens that cut through the same woods where he and I used to share our morning jogs.

At each motel and vendor and bar, the staff greeted me with a cheery, “Oh, hello, Mrs. Scott.” Then I asked them with specificity, and they answered in the same guilty way: it *was* him. It was her.

That night, Gregory and I ate dinner without speaking, like someone had died. He picked at his peas in a way that made me hate him even more.

“I found the statements,” I said across the table. “The voicemails. I talked to the staff at every place you’ve been. Don’t say anything. Don’t look at me, even.” He didn’t, which made me angrier, because I wanted the courtesy of his defiance, some form of feeling. “If you didn’t want me to find out, you should have met at the country house, instead of motels. You should have paid in cash and cleared out your voicemail. You should have used fake names, taken different cabs, watched for cameras. But you didn’t.” I carved a harsh line in my steak, making blood gush pink and pool on the white china. Even as the serrated knife scraped harshly against the plate, I kept on. “It’s not like your old dick satisfies me, but you’re playing with my life. You’re making me look like a bitch. There’s no way I come out of this *not* looking like one.”

“Maybe you’re being a bitch,” he said. “You’re ruining my grandmother’s china.”

“You wanted me to find out. Or you thought you didn’t have to hide much, because I barely notice when you’re in the room with me.” I stopped scraping to take a bite and chew until the meat turned to puree in my mouth. “You could’ve just said you wanted someone else. I would’ve understood. Because I’m a good goddamn wife.”

He took his food and left the dining room. I stared at the grandfather clock as it ticked next to the window. No scandal left a woman unscathed. A scandal left you a whore, a bitch, or both. Marilyn Monroe, Pamela Anderson, Mary Magdalene... it doesn’t matter what they did before, or what they accomplished after. Even if they tread lightly all their lives, somebody pushed them over, and the world made sure to watch them fall.

I stayed at the table and stabbed my steak with the knife over and over until the plate cracked.

In the morning, while Gregory was in a campaign meeting, I sat at my computer and called my designer. I knew how I might sound to her—frigid, hysterical, vengeful—but everything was driving me. I wondered if she would judge me, but as a woman, I hoped she would understand.

When she answered the phone, my throat felt clogged. It took me a few seconds to speak. My cursor hovered over the photo.

“I need a dress before my husband’s rally on Sunday,” I said. “I want it forest green with a white silk train, and hemmed to my thighs with a low, deep neckline. And I want pearls and red high heels.” I assumed the pearls would tip her off if the rest hadn’t, but she was quiet. “I can send you a reference.”

“I know the dress,” she said. “It was custom-made, Mrs. Scott.”

“And you know the designer?”

“He’s a friend.”

“You don’t need to rip anyone off. Make the dress your own, or get him to make one for me. I’ll sit on this phone until Sunday if that’s what it takes. I’ll give any amount of money, but it doesn’t have to be to you. In fact, I don’t have to be your client at all.” I waited, but I heard her shuffling papers on the other end. “If my name’s good for something, it should be this, right? Asking for favors?”

“With all due respect, no one usually calls to copy an ensemble, Mrs. Scott. In fact—”

“I want this dress. I don’t care what I have to do or who I have to hire or what morals you’ve got left. I’ll get it.” I waited, then added, “And I want boob tape too.”

I slept in one of the recliners in the study that night, hugging the letters under my robe. In the morning, the aching in my back woke me up from a dream. For hours, I stared out the window over the crystalline pool in the backyard, wondering if Gregory and Georgia had sex there since we had the new string lights installed on the patio. I imagined him thrusting into her under the water, while the white bulbs twinkled above them and speckled the water with light, but even in that betrayal of his own making, I couldn’t picture him smiling.

“I’m going to the stadium,” he said from the doorway.

I felt my lip quiver, so I bit down.

“You didn’t make her cum every time,” I said, not turning my head. “There’s no way.”

“How do you know?”

“Women fake it.”

“Georgia didn’t.”

I listened to the clicks of his shoes descend down the staircase, through the foyer, and out the front doors. Once I heard the car turn off the street, I looked over my shoulder at the empty doorway. The room settled.

I got up, pulled a hardback off the shelf. Then another. I let them fall around my feet, each sound echoing against the hardwood. The room spun as I shoved my hands into the shelves, knocking all of the books free. I was grenade-like. There were no more hidden letters, but still, everything fell around me, piling, corners spiking my bare toes. I kept on until his bookcase was empty, and I was left violently shaking the frame. Then I picked up my copy of *Thérèse Raquin* from the pile and sat back in the chair. I spent the day rereading every word and annotating in the margins with question marks whenever I wondered if they'd had sex the way Thérèse and Laurent did in the book, and if they wanted to kill me, or if it this book being their hiding place was just a coincidence and they hadn't thought of me at all.

I put on pearls to answer the front door on Sunday, when my designer's assistant came with the dress. Thankfully, Gregory was already at the stadium, probably nitpicking the decor in preparation for the rally. He hadn't spoken to me since he saw the mess in the study. For some reason, the thought of cleaning it felt disgusting and weak and traumatic.

I took the dress to the bedroom and laid it out on the bed. Not on a body, the dress looked hideous. It was too funky, especially for someone my age. The sleeves were puffed, and the neckline was risqué. For a fuckable twenty-something, it might have been "just slutty enough," or if it *was* too slutty, she would at least be easy. For me, it was a reminder to society that "nobody wants to see that."

In the bathroom, I bent over the tub and shaved. I nicked my knee and watched a bead of blood stream down my leg. My fingers shook as I taped up my breasts and

slipped on the gown, the hem smearing the red trail across my calf. The dress was cut high on my thighs, even higher than Georgia's. My legs weren't as muscular, and my short, thin hair was too high up my neck to stack. The forest green and white fabrics did not suit my complexion, and the red heels were so tall I was afraid to walk.

At 5:27 PM, I left the house. Every few minutes, my driver glanced back at me in the rear-view mirror.

"There's paparazzi at the drop-off," he said. "Are you sure, Mrs. Scott?"

Mrs. Scott felt like a name far and away from me then. I cringed and wondered, "How dare he?" How dare he not know my pain? How dare he look at me and doubt?

"I'm not going to apologize for what I'm going to do," I said. "Before or after."

The driver was quiet for the rest of the way. We stopped at the curb in front of the stadium where three lucky photographers were waiting. As I stepped out of the car, I ignored my driver, because we were no longer allies, at least for that trip. His job was done.

The flashes of the cameras were rapid and bright. I lifted the silk train to keep it off the rain-damp concrete. Bending down, I knew my breasts were on display, but the tape kept them from popping out, and it pressed them together to make deep-looking cleavage. The string of pearls clicked against my clavicle. It was all I could hear.

Clicks. The clicks of cameras, and the clicks of the necklace skittering as I spun stylishly, deliberately, for the paparazzi. I wanted them to get every angle. Even in the moment, I knew the reverberations would be felt forever. I made my place in the media, carved it out with a knife I wanted to use on my husband.

But this would do, I thought. It would destroy me, *but...*

In the stadium, the dashing senator was in the hallway, being interviewed from behind the ropes about his reelection campaign. In his last five minutes before he needed to go backstage, he wanted to prop himself up and rattle on about his voters, his promises. He always promised his voters the world. He was even wearing his “lucky” blue tie. I never believed in luck, only life and choices and consequences.

When he glanced my way, he went silent. He looked pale, so disturbed that the reporters turned my way. I couldn’t suppress a slow, honest smile. My wrist was twirling at my side, but I felt *real*. I could only describe the feeling as bubbly, not as in ‘friendly,’ but as in champagne, like I was there to celebrate something big and monumental.

That night, I was lying in our bed, still dressed like my husband’s mistress. I stared as the ceiling fan rocked and spun, the chain clicking rhythmically against the glass dome covering the bulb. It ticked like a metronome. I wondered if it was too late for me to have a child.

Gregory was tearing off his tie as he walked in. I thought I might react when I saw him again, maybe with a well-deserved tantrum, but there was nothing. My hands were steady.

“I know what’s wrong with me now,” I said. “It’s you.”

“You’re psychotic.”

“Is she as crazy as me?”

“You’re gonna ruin me.” He tossed the tie and let it fall to the floor. “And that’s going to ruin you.”

“I think I’ve been ruined for a while.”

“You were happy. I don’t care if your mother ‘pushed it.’ I don’t care if you felt like you had to. You said *yes*.”

“I was too young.”

“Well, you’re a middle-aged woman now. I’m tired of you holding onto this. You never let things go. You never, for a second, give me your hand. I’ve always got to take it. You’re like a dead fish.”

I sat up, dangling my legs off the bed and swinging them idly. “Maybe I feel the same way I did on our wedding night, but all the time. I’m sad. Angry. I always have been, but you don’t see it. You see a wife, but what about what else I am? I’m a lot of things, Gregory.”

“What do you want me to say to you? I’m sorry I love someone else.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry.”

“Are you wanting a divorce?” He threw his suit jacket onto the bed beside me and sat in my vanity chair to stare at me from afar. “You’re acting like some battered wife, when you’re better than that. You know courts don’t smile on men. You go to them with a sad little story, they’ll believe it. And I’m not giving you any money.”

“What makes you think I want your money?”

“Well, where the hell are you gonna go? You got no family, no skills, no schooling. You gonna mooch off some conservative this time?”

“I want to be something,” I said. “I always wanted to be something, ever since I was little. You took that from me.”

“Are you comfortable?” the interviewer asked.

The cold newsroom made the skin on my hands tingle. My wrist twirled.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Across from me, the interviewer’s pert nipples poked against her thin white button-down. She was a young redhead with ironed curls, plump cheeks, and half-lidded eyes. Blowjob eyes, as Gregory would say, because the woman as a whole was worth what she could offer a man. Her identity was irrelevant, aside from her eyes, which could be full of dreams and secret thoughts, but no man would ever ask, because he was too busy thinking of her on her knees worshiping him, not from doing anything of note, but simply from having a dick.

I stopped myself. I couldn’t be an angry feminist, at least not on TV. But when I flipped through the adjectives in my head—mad, bored, anxious, hurt—I realized I did not have much else inside me. But, why should I not be an angry feminist? I was that before and after I got married, only now, being a feminist was less “uncool.” Still, it also wasn’t quite “sexy.”

“When we go live, I suggest drinking water when you need a second,” she continued. “It’s a trick I use when I get nervous.”

I thought, see, she’s nice, collected, and experienced at her job. What was her name again?

The camera spun toward us. The interviewer turned on suddenly, talking to the audience in a crisp, even voice that was almost alien, and I had no idea what to do but look at her nipples. I wondered how she did this every day.

It had been three weeks since I last saw my husband. That was the bombshell I had to drop. But I knew that no matter the content of the interview or how eloquent I was, the magazines would report on my choice of clothing, my voice, my expression, my demeanor. Vulnerability would be interpreted as hysteria. A poor word choice would become reflective of my personality. The interviewer might have been used to that level of scrutiny, like Georgia Vaughn, but I realized I was not meant for TV.

The interviewer's voice faded in. "And how is your marriage to Senator Scott? Is there a divorce in the works?"

"We don't speak."

"Have you spoken to Georgia Vaughn since all this?"

I shook my head. The interviewer turned over a few cards on the table, seeming to know the camera was focused elsewhere, which I assumed meant it was closing in on me.

"Well," she continued, "what many may not know is that you have always been a very shy person. Did you ever see yourself being thrown into the public eye like this?"

"I did what felt right at the time, not for the damage but for the act of doing something to combat whatever feelings I had."

"What feelings were those? Jealousy, maybe?"

"Anger. Just anger at being discarded. Discounted. What if I wanted to be great?"

"And you think you were kept from that?"

“I’m the senator’s wife. What else have I done?”

The interviewer laughed. I had no idea if it was out of nerves or amusement, but I was offended.

“Well, ‘hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,’” she said.

My wrist flexed and twirled again. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

The interviewer looked down at her lap. My own sharp tone echoed in my head. I could still see her nipples, but I also saw regret. I looked at the camera and thought, *I’m a vindictive, coldblooded bitch.*

“You don’t often wear pearls,” the interviewer said. “In fact, you’ve never worn pearls in public before. But you’re wearing them today. Why is that?”

I realized the interviewer’s eyes had gone cold and unfriendly, less blowjob and more blow-me, and gulped from the glass of water between us.

“I bought them,” I said. “I’m going to get my use out of them.”

“You don’t think it’s a little tasteless? Since Georgia Vaughn always wears them.”

The interviewer observed me for a few seconds, until it felt like dissection. “Georgia Vaughn is here today. She agreed to meet you and me, here, live.”

I looked out at the studio audience, unable to make out more than a few thin silhouettes in a sea of darkness behind the bright studio lights. I stared down at my feet, very aware of my drab pantsuit, clunky flats, and dry hair.

The audience rustled, excited, as the interviewer stood up. It was an opportunity for her, a battle between one woman and the ‘other’ woman, maybe a catfight on live

television. I was indeed the scorned wife, the bitch, too afraid to even look at coverage on Georgia, let alone speak to her.

Through the steady noise of the audience, Georgia made her way onstage. I knew it by the clicking of her heels, since I did not let myself glance up. I only looked when Georgia sat beside me on the couch, and the cushion dipped slightly. She was wearing a bright purple skirt and blazer to match. Her collar was high, modest. She seemed to have learned from public opinion.

Maybe that made her better than me. Looking at Georgia's face, angular and beautiful and tinted pink, I wondered, was there supposed to be a difference between us? Was I supposed to feel something? Maybe I was like Georgia, in the end—cold, scheming, self-important. Was I not also the 'other' woman, a footnote in Georgia's story, a bullet point to her affair? And maybe the senator did have a preference leaning more toward "bitch." Maybe that *was* why I wore pearls today.

When Georgia leaned close to me, her glossy lips caught the lights. "I thought what you did was cool," she said. "Very sexy."

The interviewer repeated the word "sexy" for the audience's benefit, and they laughed. She spoke to the cameras until they cut to commercial. When the interviewer left her chair, I almost got up, but Georgia was seated politely, like she expected a conversation.

"It wasn't sexy," I said. "I feel so stupid. I don't even like my husband."

Georgia seemed to consider that for a moment. "Still, we protect what's ours."

"I don't think he's mine though. Or that he ever was."

“I always admired your elegance.” She looked soft, almost deer-like under the harsh studio lights. I felt my face twisting in confusion. “It might sound stupid, but I don’t want you to think badly of me.”

“You’re fucking my husband.”

“But, do you hate me?”

I studied her young face, letting the words repeat over and over in my head. Was I allowed to not hate Georgia Vaughn? She looked vulnerable, hopeful, but what was appropriate? What was fair? And more importantly, what was real?

“I don’t hate you,” I said. “I don’t.”

Georgia faced forward. The interviewer returned onstage with a new glass of water, which she set on the table between the chair and sofa. I heard Georgia whisper something else, but I didn’t answer anymore. Georgia looked seemingly disappointed, but she sat up straight.

I realized then that Georgia was trying to be a grownup. She might have been an adult, but she had yet to know who and what she was. Perhaps she had yet to experience the trauma and intensity and danger of being alive, of being a woman. Or maybe she had, but it hadn’t caught up to her and made her like me.

Discreetly, I motioned to Georgia, pulling out my collar. I let my husband’s mistress look down my shirt, where my breasts were strapped together with tape. She smiled, eyes wide, seeming to revel in the secret.

When the interviewer faced us, Georgia and I avoided each other's eyes. I knew we would never see each other again once we stopped sharing that sofa, but that moment felt appropriate. It was big and real and monumental. It felt like champagne.

BITTER REMNANTS AND UNMADE MEN

Jamie Murphy has become a man untethered, a man who sits in his car to cry. When he gets the mail at his apartment complex, he sees other men walk down the sidewalk with their shoulders back like they've won a prize. Who are they in the moments their worlds go thin? Where are the other off-kilter men? The men who, like him, shake over their steering wheels, dripping snot and spittle?

Maybe men don't do this. Certainly, his father doesn't. Didn't. But he's not a woman either. He's not his mother.

Jamie checks the rear-view mirror. His lip trembles as he breathes in, lungs like crumpled paper balls accordioneering in and out. His boss, Addison Alarie, is waiting in the cottage outside. Tonight is supposed to be a celebration for Jamie's promotion to mediator, but Jamie doesn't know how well he can play pretend or hide his speech impediment, because his dad died eleven hours ago.

"How long have you wanted to fuck my wife?" That was the question Addison asked Jamie the last time they spoke a week ago, after-hours, at the office; the question that made Jamie turn over at night. When Addison said it, and so casually, Jamie had no idea how to respond. He just buried his face in his hands, and his boss left him there. Through the window, he watched Addison slide into his Jag and surge through the green light just as it turned yellow.

Jamie had thought for sure he was fired. And yet here he is, in Addison's driveway. He'd be suspicious at the invitation, but he admires Addison. He turns Jamie into someone malleable and desperate for praise.

The car door punches shut as Jamie walks up the driveway, wiping his face. A raindrop skims the back of his neck like a cold finger. The bushes lining the gravel are full of honeysuckles. Although they must be fresh and yellow during the day, they sag as a steady rush fills the neighborhood, and water starts to fall.

Lightning cuts the sky, casting stark white, and Jamie imagines it halving him violently on the porch of the cottage. He knocks and kicks the welcome rug, leaving mud. The front door is shedding paint chips. In the dark, they look like little scattered wings.

Curtains shift in the window. Light suddenly pours over him, and Monet, Addison's wife, is awash in warmth. She tilts her head, as if intrigued, and her tangled auburn hair skates along her shoulder.

"Good to see you, Jamie," she says. On her loose peach tee, there's the swooping black logo, *Alarie & Stenson, P.C.* The hem hides her shorts, a wicked illusion. Jamie knows she wears the shirt for Addison, but he tucks the sight away, because it's his firm too.

"How are you, Monet?"

"Been working on the new exhibit, but I managed to sneak out of the office."

Passing her, there is a faint, flirting brush of vanilla. She closes the door behind him and sweeps her hair from one shoulder. The peach fuzz on her skin makes her neck radiate. It reminds him of a swan, a marble column.

The den is crackling. A fireplace turns it into a dream, rosy and hot like a womb. There's a mantle of framed photos, carved wooden characters, beach shells labeled with years in black and blue pen. Wallpaper, yellowed, is patterned with pale pink figures floating like pixies. As the flames dance, so do they.

Sitting comfortably by the fire is Addison. Among the pastels, he's a dark beacon. His hair is wild, tampered with, temples brushed with gray. The fire casts shadows on his face, making his lashes streak his cheeks. The wedding band glints as he lifts a glass to his lips.

"Jamie, how the hell are you?"

"I didn't know it'd be the three of us," Jamie says.

"I'll be working," Monet says. "Just wanted to greet you."

Addison stands to get a grip on Jamie's shoulder. He towers in that masculine way. Jamie is unsure what to do. "How was the drive, Jamie?"

"A lot of time to think. I don't mind it."

"That tiny apartment you're in can't be worth that fucking much of a drive. Mon told me there's a few houses down the road for sale. Aren't they nice too, baby?"

"Mine's closer to my dad," Jamie says.

"Right. How is he?"

"Good."

It passes, the chance to say his father is dead. Jamie could say, a few hours ago, Roger Murphy became another nursing home body taken away on wheels. But nobody

knows how to talk about death. No one knows when they're going to die. No one knows what happens after.

Jamie ducks out of Addison's grip to shed his coat. Monet steps between them to stoke the fire. Her shirt slips and tents around her. Jamie watches the curve of her back, then looks away, feeling caught. But her husband is also looking, his hand on her spine.

Her pouched stomach is covered in silvery stretch marks. They remind Jamie that she'd been pregnant. And weeks later, when she came by the office to visit Addison, her belly was deflated, but there was no baby. They never made a formal announcement, despite the preparations, the cards, and the gifts. Only through breakroom gossip did Jamie learn about the late-term abortion, after an anomaly that would've possibly killed her and definitely killed the baby. There were days after, when Addison came back to the office, his eyes were full of loss and exhaustion.

Monet sets the poker down. As she goes to the kitchen, Jamie finds again that her husband's eyes, like his, are following. Addison takes a drink as Jamie looks at the flames.

"Once my dad dies, I'll look around," Jamie says.

"Jamie, I didn't mean anything by it."

Addison sits back in his chair, kingly, and finishes his glass. Jamie takes the seat opposite and listens to Monet bang a glass with a breathy "shit."

Each of these people once seemed infallible. To Jamie, they have been like mountains. Then they come together on a night like tonight, a collision, and Jamie's world is off-balance. It belongs to them.

Jamie first met Monet during a September after-party a few years ago, the night Addison was named senior partner. It was held in a convention center across the street from their offices. The ceiling was decorated with strings of white Christmas lights, wedding-like. Despite an extensive guest list, only a handful showed. Addison was never popular in the office with his strong opinions and superior attitude, but he was every bit the person Jamie wished he was. No matter the cost or consequence, Addison got what he wanted.

Addison stood above them, glass raised high. He thanked the group and said that, before anything, he was “her husband,” even though he hadn’t introduced Monet yet. Occasionally, he would use a “fuck” or variation that quieted the room. Jamie watched Addison’s eyes flicker as he spoke, like he was picking each word so deliberately. Addison never looked his way.

Monet watched from an alcove behind two stacked speakers. With her blue tailored suit, electric pink bowtie, and matching heels, she was a spectacle. She looked elegant, because she made cheap look expensive. And the way she applauded Addison, eyes lit up, cheeks rosy, she was in love.

After the speech, Addison ducked in the alcove. Through heads and clapping hands, Jamie saw Monet lean in the way one might go for a bite on the throat. She whispered something that made him smile. Jamie wondered if they made love that night.

At the refreshment table, Jamie watched Addison and Monet entertain a few starry-eyed paralegals. She was an inch taller than Addison in her heels. He had one hand

on the small of her back. She'd meet his eyes, grinning and looking down at him like they were in a secret. She caught Jamie looking and laughed with her shoulders, like he too was part of it. Face flushed, Jamie tipped his plastic cup to her. Then Addison said something in her ear and motioned to Jamie. They looked amused, like they knew him, but in what way he couldn't tell.

Even now, Jamie doesn't think he knows himself more than they know him. Maybe that night at the party, Jamie was transparent for them in a way he never is to himself. He wonders if he could ask them who he is, what makes him *him*, what made them smile at him, invite him to eat, celebrate his own promotion. It wasn't his dad dying, because to them, his dad wasn't dead.

When Jamie got home that night, he dreamed of Monet. They fell on the sheets, which roiled under their bodies like ink-black water. He was prey, legs stretched out, feast to a wolf. Her hands moved through him, real enough to hurt. He can still smell the sweet of her and taste the bitter remnants.

Jamie clears his throat to get Addison's attention. "Thank you for your hospitality, sir," he says. "I didn't expect an invitation."

"I'm hopeful about you. I didn't have a say in the end, but I knew you'd go damn far. Intern to paralegal in a year, mediator in two or three. Right?"

They pass the bottle back and forth, Jamie keeping his glass half-filled, Addison always topping his off once it gets low. Addison is animated as he speaks. His work is a source of energy for him in a way that radiates, a way Jamie can't reciprocate.

Jamie waits to sip again until his boss does. “I wasn’t that quick about it.”

“Christ, even Monet noticed the work you did. You excelled as an intern. The Bar was hell for me. I studied six months, still unprepared. Everybody else was smarter than me.”

“It worked out for you in the end though.”

“You’ve got to be an asshole, Jamie. Making partner changed my life, but being a paralegal built it. I miss that drive. I was using every part of me. There’s something special about that.”

Jamie hopes Addison doesn’t sense a lack of enthusiasm, but he’s tired. The wine puts him in a vulnerable place without walls, and he needs walls. He suddenly wonders if this is the plan—getting him drunk and vulnerable enough to admit that he thinks of Monet, of both of them, all the time.

A gust of wind shakes the trees outside the window. Monet crosses them to plug in her phone to charge. Addison smiles as Monet brushes his shoulder with her fingers. Her nails, bright blue, catch Jamie’s eye, before she shuts herself in a room down the hall.

“No more ‘sir’s,” Addison says. “I won’t answer to it anymore tonight. And don’t say you can’t. I never abided by that ‘sir’ shit anyway.”

Looking into Addison’s eyes, his fears slip away. Jamie takes another sip, too eager. There was a stint when he refused alcohol, but for them, he drinks. He can hear Monet shuffling papers. He wants her to come back. He wants to talk about her, but she’s not his wife, and this is not his house.

Is he a bad man, given how tight his gut feels, how his mind fumbles with her when he tries to sleep? Maybe the warmth on his cheeks should remind him of hellfire. Instead, it reminds him of Monet, how her body glides, how her voice goes husky when she talks long enough, how they touched, but not really, in a dream.

The wood pops in the hearth. When Addison stokes the fire, their knees brush. “She’s been holed up in that office for days,” he says. “The gallery’s preparing a new exhibit. Greek art, I think. She’s been at it for months. I can hardly get a moment in.”

Addison smiles at himself. Jamie sets his glass on the brick and goes to the bathroom. He looks down the hall at the cracked office door, listening to the chaotic ebb and flow of computer keys. Monet hums to herself inside.

The sink is an elegant green, marblesque bowl. He stands at it, avoiding the mirror. On either side of the sink are toothbrushes, one blue, one purple electric. With the blue is a bar of soap punctuated with tiny, coarse beard hairs. He rubs it between his hands.

The sound of typing has stopped. Jamie waits, but it doesn’t start again. On her side of the sink are tiny, mismatched shampoos taken from local hotels. He knows by the labels. He almost picks one to investigate, but it feels like an invasion. He wipes his hands on the hanging towel and straightens it before leaving.

Addison still watches the fire, only now Monet is squished beside him. Her arm is around his neck, long legs crossed and luminous. She teases the seam on his shoulder. They feed off each other like nature. When Addison laughs, Jamie realizes it’s the first soft sound he has heard from him. The betrayal he feels is frustrating. Is it her touching

him? Is it him touching her? Is it himself, outside, not being touched? In any case, it's a mumble in his mind as he reenters the room. Another invasion.

“Hope you don't mind me joining the party,” Monet says.

Jamie sits, sinking, getting used to it. In their home, rulers of their world, their bodies, he can't fault them for loving. Addison, fourteen years her senior, is brash and sturdy. He is frugal but maintains a rich life. He is a magnificent mind, the epitome of sophistication, a world traveler, champion of three marriages. And Monet is a person who demands to be seen, who came from nothing and became everything. The gap in her front teeth punctuates her words, always honest. She is the pillar Addison watches to keep from falling off the world. And Jamie decides he could live a life in this moment, the endless warmth, their wound-together intimacy. But soon he will be back in his car, heading home, cold as morning, completely alone. He checks his watch.

“It's not late,” she says.

“Fuck,” Addison cuts in. “Have some wine, darling. And Jamie.” He says his name firmly. “You seem unhappy.”

“Don't be a bastard,” Monet says.

She stands, grabbing the bottle from the bucket, now slush and cool water. Addison goes after her. They move like players on a stage, like they've done this a hundred times. Jamie hears harsh whispers from the kitchen and rises and falls with the climax. It's a sequence of miscommunications, a build to anger, to frustration, and the inevitable end, with the two finding each other on the same woody path. Jamie hears

them kiss, him bound with apologies, her resigned to his affection. He kisses again and again, and she laughs, warning him to stop.

When they return, they're smiling. Jamie has finished his glass. Addison has a cigar in his mouth. Monet squeezes in again, and his big hand sits on her thigh, fingers stretching over her knee. His nails are trimmed and clean.

"Drag?" he asks, blowing smoke.

Monet puffs, and through the cloud, offers Jamie the cigar. He puts his mouth where theirs have been and waits before inhaling. Water fills his eyes. His throat tightens. But he holds on, until his cheeks are taut and he can't anymore. He coughs hard into his sleeve. Addison laughs, taking the cigar back. Jamie blushes, embarrassed, but his boss seems more amused than anything like cruel.

"Too much?" he says.

"Dad smoked these, but I never did," Jamie says. "I want to say something. I don't want you to think I am what I'm not. I'm not unhappy. I get by just enough. Even if I'm not at the peak of joy, I'm drifting along." They both watch him now. "I'm grateful. It's got nothing to do with that." Monet leans forward, elbows on her knees. Jamie adjusts his glasses. His shoulders are loose, and he knows he's in the deep. Whatever he says, he will regret. "You invited me here, and I truly, honestly, am grateful. I'd be more eloquent, but you both make me nervous." She smiles, amused. "This is why I don't drink anymore. I talk too much. I don't like it."

"Do you like art?" She stands up. For a moment, her legs are all Jamie sees. Her hands motion encouragingly. "Up."

Addison stays with his cigar, not looking, and Jamie follows her out. Barefoot, Monet walks at his height. Her smell clouds him, and he imagines her tongue on his teeth, his hands wrapping her legs around his waist, his nails cutting pink imprints in her skin.

She opens a door at the end of the hall. The master bedroom is wide and open with a high ceiling, furnished with dark, antique wood. The bed is unmade, cotton sheets bunched up. She makes no mention of the mess where their feet might have been tangled, tight and feverish, before he arrived.

Jamie smells candles, the sweet salt of a waxy beach that's covering another scent, something deeper. He knows he has encroached on foreign territory. To be where they share themselves, private moments of oblivion, he struggles for footing. The barrier between what he knows of them and what he creates is thinning.

"I'm glad you came tonight, Jamie. You should come see me when the exhibit opens."

Monet turns from the bedside table with a stack of photos in her hand. Jamie takes them and sifts through. Each frames a vase, a figurine, a fresco.

"I took a class on Greek art in college," he says. "My girlfriend was taking it. I slept through a lot of it. But I always liked the frescoes."

As Monet sits on the edge of the bed, Jamie returns the photos to the table. He doesn't want to tell her that he won't visit the gallery, because her and him together like this shouldn't happen.

"Jamie, you don't have to be embarrassed. It's okay to talk."

Something about that cracks him open. He can't stand it. And he can't see what they've done in bed together, but he knows it exists. It lingers and ghosts around him, too much, not enough.

Monet smiles like she's covering a wound. He wonders then if she knows his nothingness, or if she blindly believes in her own pain. "You know, that one you like is fake. The fresco. And the amphora after it, actually." She shrugs. "I'm not here to uphold the integrity of art or history. I want something to mean something for a second. You felt it."

"Nostalgia."

"Not happiness?"

"I don't know. Memories usually seem happy, don't they?"

"Depending," she says. "Not all your life was happy, was it?" She leans against the doorframe, crossing her arms. "I always felt like I barely scraped by with everything."

"I'd say most memories aren't happy," he says.

"Is it your dad you're worried about? I know you take care of him."

"My dad and I are complicated."

"It's always that way. My mom was violent. Addison hated her. So did I, in fact, but I'd bend to her. So much, actually, Addison and I ended up separating. He decided he couldn't see me like that. And he was right, of course, about what she made me turn into. But she was still Mom. She braided my hair before church for years. I still remember how soft her fingers were, and that thin pink color she used on her nails. We used to hike and look for moths. She knew their scientific names. I remember *Alucita hexadactyla*, but she

knew them all. It's still your parent. It's love and hate at the same time. I don't know how those can exist in the same place, but they do."

She looks at Jamie differently than before. He understands now that she has been wanting to talk, even if it is with him. He has given her something he didn't know he was giving. But Jamie's teeth stay clenched. He doesn't tell her his father used to steal booze and pass out on the street outside their house, or that he remembers trying to drag him inside by his hair, or that when he was seven years old, there was an accident with hot oil he doesn't remember much of aside from the bandages. His mother had said his father did it while he was drunk. She was the person Jamie trusted, the only woman to an only child, except she wanted out of the marriage with full custody. It wasn't until Jamie was in his late twenties that he found out his mother had done it, but by then, she had died and his father was too old to remember.

All Jamie can say is, "How does it not kill us?"

Monet leads him out and returns to her office. Jamie hesitates before going back to the den, where Addison has spread his legs in his chair. Jamie looks at the exit, but he feels okay. The ghosts are gone for now. He plants himself in the empty seat across, folding his hands.

"You're a good man, Jamie," Addison whispers. He licks his lips. Even slouched in ease, he is more animal than Jamie, and more refined. In the flex of his thighs, there is confidence, and in his half-smile, arrogance. He brushes a hand down the front of his shirt, feeling his own buttons. "A good man. But I like you."

He says it slowly, between a flickering smile. Jamie struggles to maintain their stare, to keep up his end of the tipping boat. The shadows of Addison's lashes are running down his face again.

"I would like to move out here," Jamie says. "Little cottages almost. Everything where I am is so square."

"You can't bring your father with you?"

"He's a prick. That's harsh, but all I really know is who he was when I was young."

"You're still young."

"But, I guess you don't forget what your parents did when you were small. He made fun of my stutter when I was learning how to read. When he got old though, he forgot everything. I don't even think the man I knew exists. Just this feeling in the pit of my stomach."

"Sounds like paradise. Forgetting your mistakes, having somebody wipe your ass for you." Addison tosses his cigar in the fireplace. He leans into the heat, eyes half-lidded. His cheeks are pink. "How long have you wanted to fuck my wife, Jamie?"

The words are a battering ram. Again, Jamie is struck off-guard, but his face scrunches with pain. He hears himself moan, and he wishes he was home, hidden away. With no steering wheel to grab, he hunches over to hide the tears.

Addison, silent, goes to the bathroom. Once the door shuts, his stream hits the water. It's a rush of vulnerability, a commonality between men that makes Jamie feel oddly comfortable.

The room is darker without either of them, darker than that abyss of night. It's the advantage of an enemy camp; Jamie feels it stirring. Too afraid to escape, he learns on his phone that the *Alucita hexadactyla* has no wings, only feathery plumes that flare outward like a hand fan. The twenty-plume moth often lives in France, where Addison was born, and was introduced to North America, like Monet and Jamie. He wonders if Addison knows the name, if the *Alucita hexadactyla* is a secret they too share, or if that moment of her story was just for him.

Again, a spark. He imagines a picture of them together in their tangle of sheets. Jamie wonders how often it happens, who touches the other first, who is the most desperate for it when the moment comes. Is it happy? Are they happy?

After relieving himself to a trickle, Addison crosses to the kitchen. Jamie wants to pretend that nothing ever happened. He wonders if his boss knows about the dreams, the fleeting fantasies, the calls to the void, and if he'll punch him. He thinks Addison might come back with a bat or a gun. Instead, he returns with a cup of black coffee. It's bitter, thin, tar-like, but as he hands it over, Jamie's eyes are full of tears.

"My dad died today," he finally says. "I didn't want to see him. I never thought he'd die. I've never lived a day where he wasn't alive. I don't know what to do." Jamie sets the cup down and stands. "I think about both of you, and it's too much."

Addison squeezes his shoulder, tenderly this time. He says his name just as gently.

"I don't want to leave," Jamie says.

"Don't."

Leaning forward, Jamie finds Addison with his mouth, making a soft imprint. Addison's fingers find Jamie's, thick and rough and warm. Before Jamie can catch his lip in his teeth, Addison drags him closer by the belt. He smells of soap and fresh cologne. They eye each other, no longer two ships vying to stay afloat, just two men.

Behind Addison, Monet is in the hall. Jamie breaks free. Addison's eyes feel far away, his lips farther still.

Jamie almost gets his coat, but Monet touches his shoulders, brushing her thumbs over his throat. She kisses him. Addison stands behind her, kissing the closest parts of her, head, neck, shoulder. Jamie trembles as Addison's fingers reach across her ribs and find his buttons, then the rough, uneven skin behind.

In a moment, Jamie is following them down the hall, to their room, in their bed. They are slow hands, heat, a mouth on a mouth on a mouth. The night becomes something shared and secret and overwhelmingly *theirs*.

Jamie is staring at Addison's face with Monet's warm body pressed to his back. The three of them are covered in the remnants of what they did together, what they might still be doing. They fill the room with breathing until their chests move together, in and out.

In the window, Jamie can see the distant tree line, the glitter of city lights. The glow lifts the dark, from the edge of the sky a soft gradient starting gray to velvet black. Trees branch over the sides of the window, scraping the glass. The leaves are wet and bending down, offering.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Isabella Jetten graduated from the University of South Alabama in 2020 with a Bachelor's of Arts in English and in 2022 with a Master's of Arts in English and Creative Writing. She has been honored with Teaching and Graduate Assistantships by the USA English Department and multiple scholarships, such as the English Department Endowed Graduate Award, the Shelley Memorial Graduate Scholarship in Creative Writing, and the Angelia and Steven Stokes Graduate Fiction Scholarship, which was awarded to her for her short story "Bitter Remnants and Unmade Men."