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This thesis is comprised of four short stories. “Stones” and “Muscadine Wine” reimagine North Carolina folktales which (like most folklore) engage with our baser bodily fears; these retellings aim to centralize the female sexualities which are framed as abhorrent by the original tellings. “Next to Godliness” and “Inheritance” are contemporary realist stories that explore the collision between social movements and individual lives; they consider the complex shapes that tolerance and intolerance take within private spheres—the home, the family, and even the self.

I hope that each story asks, in its own way, whether that which alienates us can also be what allows us to approach a shared humanity. Are shame and taboo inextricable, or might they be untethered somehow? What worlds might open up in queer lives if they were?

MUSCADINE WINE

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## MUSCADINE WINE

Them...witches started crackin' and poppin', and ever' one of them witches was burnt plumb up. So Jack made a end of the witch gang in that settle-ment.

-Richard Chase, "Sop, Doll, Sop," *The Jack Tales*

At my wedding I pulled at the fat hearts of ivy that curled around the trellis of the altar. Held my bouquet in one hand and with the other, reached behind me and ripped them one by one from their brown, wormlike vine. I then became so afraid that I wouldn't be able to stop, that I'd pull the whole vine from the archway that I began shaking. Sometimes this happened, this fear that if I gave my hands a little freedom they would take a mile, act completely apart from me, like animals.

My groom knew nothing of these spells I had, but his twin sister Lila, who stood behind me in a maid-of-honor gown, whispered so softly it sounded like wind, reminding me where I was. The mountains quieted. I could hear John's vows. To have and to hold made me think of that saying my mother liked, about having your cake and eating it, too. To have your cake and to hold it. I thought of buttercream icing catching yellow light, the flakes of coconut my mother stirred in on special occasions...and then I was repeating sounds, murmuring, finally, "I do."

At the reception John spun me around like he was trying to shake loose something inside of me, and in between songs I stumbled to the bathroom in hopes that Lila would follow me. I clung to the sink and talked to myself in the mirror, and then she was there,

her face pink. Everyone joked that Lila loved dancing because of her temper, since it was an excuse to stomp her feet. “Doll,” she said, taking my hand. “I am happy for you.”

Banging on the door. The iron knob rattling in its loose hole.

\*\*\*

It had been going on for five years by then. When I was thirteen and she was fourteen, we were ill at the same time, Lila and me. They’d quarantined John and the sickness didn’t touch him. I had heard somewhere about Scarlet Fever, and I thought that’s what it was, because there was a reddish quality to the darkness, as if I was having nightmares about the spots of blood that kept appearing on my bed sheets from the lesions that I scratched in my delirium.

One night the dreams were full of a smell. Heavy as wet bread, salty as jerky, a smell all its own. The smell of quail, yes, but not roasted quail. It was the smell of quail fear.

When I woke I saw the cat in the open window. “Kitty,” I said, cautiously. I liked cats, had always wanted a kitten with a ribbon around its neck, but my mother said they were vile creatures. I lurched out of bed, wanting to stroke its fur.

I landed on all fours, lifted my own paw. A dream, I reasoned vaguely, in some far-off consciousness. The other cat looked at me, and then bounded out of sight. Her fur was the color of the tiger lilies that grew by the pond. I chased her up and down the gables, jumping from the roof into the woods behind the house. As we ran my mind was muted by the shrewd, sharp presence of my senses, the feeling of moss giving like new



skin under my paws, the greenish tinge everything had—not a sick green but a strong, fresh green, like trees and houses and stones in the road were living. We stalked a quail and left its innards on a bed of leaves.

By sunrise I knew a vole from a snake by the exact way each creature's skin moved against the piles of dead leaves. One like a child whispering, the other like ripping old wallpaper. And I knew Lila's cat-voice, from the moment when she rasped, Doll, it's me. That was her name for me, Doll. Ever since we were young and she dressed me up for fun.

Back in my bed, I woke up terrified. I tried to smooth the bedding to shake off what must have been a dream, but then I saw how the light came through it in little pinpricks, the places where claw marks had punctured the linens.

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We'd been hearing all our lives about the kinds of girls who turned to witches in our hollow. Girls whose fathers weren't there and never had been, girls whose hair got matted and clumped from running wild in the woods. Not girls like us, whose fathers had secretaries and worked for the rug weaving company in town.

Lila and John's father, Mr. Thomas, stoked bonfires where the corn liquor ran free and the neighbors came out of all their hiding places to swap tales of the haunts and spirits.

Jack was a sinewy young bachelor with a smile like a jester's, a traveling laborer who dropped in and out of the hollow, telling of ghosts he'd banished from his barn with

ginseng poultices, how his horse spooked at the sight of a witch because he could smell the acid tang under her human-looking skin.

But Mr. Thomas could always one-up Jack's tales. "You know I caught a witch once on this very farm?" he said. A little neighbor girl who should have been in bed clapped her hand over her mouth, though the rest of us had heard it a dozen times by then. Mr. Thomas loved that. "Well," he said. "You ever see a cat acting funny, here's what you do. Put it in a briefcase and carry it around the house. If it's a witch, it'll talk. Beg to be let out. Then you'll know, and you can throw the whole damn thing in the fire." He turned to Jack. "You live here as long as me, you might catch one if you keep trying."

Jack laughed, but the orange firelight that flicked across his face revealed something hard, and when his gaze caught mine it lingered, like he saw something in me he recognized.

Lila and I couldn't have been but ten, but I was used to this story, already had my doubts. Lila let her eyes roll like an angry horse every time. Which is why I thought it was a prank at first, until she told me later that night that it was true, every word of it. That she'd thought she was imagining the screaming until she saw the charred leather in the fire, found patches of dark fur in the ashes.

\*\*\*

And so after I began to change, I often woke tangled in sheets that I was sure were the warped walls of Mr. Thomas's briefcase.

We healed. We didn't speak of it. Lila and John were sent up north for a month to spend time with their aunts, and on their first night back home I was asleep with the

window open, and some night bird was trapped in my room. I was faintly aware of its chirping distress before I woke to my own paw extended, clawing after the black-bead eyes of the bird. I made off to the woods, where I called her name, and she emerged, skulking around the base of a poplar tree, tail curled.

I couldn't change on the trip, she said. So I thought it was done. That I'd grown out of it or something.

You decide to change? I asked.

You'll learn, she said, licking in between her claws. Come on, I'll show you. Ever been up to the tower room in the mill?

The mill wasn't in use anymore, though its red water wheel still turned lazily. The stairs that led to the little storage room on top had rotted away, but the stones that were laid like brick on the outside of the tower were so jagged and uneven that as cats, we could climb up them, jump through the little window like the shards of moonlight did.

Think of your hands, she said. Imagine you're braiding my hair.

I tried, and nothing. A French braid, she said. I began to murmur to myself the Over Under pattern, and then I was standing again, myself, naked. My clothes, I reasoned, were likely flat beneath my bedsheets. Lila was naked too. She and John and I had swum this way in the pond plenty of times, but her body was not the same as at the last swim. "How was the trip, then?"

"Oh, Iris, it was awful," she said. "They kept putting Johnny and me in matching outfits. They'd give him a little pocket square with the same fabric as my dress. I must

have thrown a fit every other day. And it got so cold at night.” There was a scratching sound. Mice in the walls.

“Why do you think this happened to us?” I said. “What did we – I mean—” Lila shrugged, then held my gaze. “I know what you’re looking at,” she said, and before I could deny it she glanced down at her own breasts, swollen asymmetrically. “It happened so fast.”

I was still flat as a washboard, so I shrugged.

“Do you want to know what they feel like?” she asked. “No one will know.” I didn’t want to seem impressed, but curiosity got the better of me, so I placed one palm on each.

“Now look at this,” she said. She stepped back, into the gray light from the window, and pointed at the orange hair growing between her legs. “You can touch it,” she said. It was scruffy, but beneath it she felt slick like a salamander we’d once found in the creek and tried to hold.

\*\*\*

So much separate was this from our waking lives that not once did I consider, when I received my first kiss from John a few months before the wedding, that it was not, in fact, my first kiss. The movement of his tongue, like a timid earthworm poking its head out of the soil, bore no resemblance to Lila’s. Once in awhile, I would think of her during the day, and those were the only times that what was happening scared me. We’d often hugged and held hands before, and now we kept the same polite distance as John and I, though we still giggled and gossiped easily.

On nights that I left the window open and the curtains pulled back, Lila knew she could come for me. Of course, we never did any such thing outside the tower room—never even spoke of it. Nor were we even alone without John all that much. The triplets, sometimes we were called by my mother, a joke she dropped hastily when talk of the proposal came about.

We had all known it was coming, ever since an evening a few months ago when John had kissed me in his doorway. I was disappointed in the taste of it, a sour tang like the smell of the icebox when the ice has melted and the dairy inside is beginning to turn. And sure enough, the next weekend he asked stiffly if I'd "like to accompany" him, instead of if I wanted to go for a walk in the orchards. He plucked two bloated scuppernongs from a nearby vine and ate them in quick succession, chewing vigorously. "I wanted to ask you something," he said, letting go of my fingers and wringing his own two hands together. "I'd like you to be, um, to be my wife." He got down on his knee after he said it, as if realizing he'd forgotten.

I suppose I must have said yes, though I can't remember it, now.

\*\*\*

The night before the wedding, I awoke to John calling out from the tree near my open window. "Come on," he said, and I couldn't think of what to say, so I went, hoping I'd be back before Lila came for me. I climbed clumsily along the roof, which felt smaller with feet and hands, and then we shimmied down the tree.

He led me to one of the old barns that his father no longer used, kissed me hard. "We're so close to married, it'll be forgiven," he whispered.

We lay down in a stall, and though I could see he meant for the hay to be like a pillow it poked me through my clothes. He kissed me a few times before he cinched up my skirt and pressed himself into me. I tried not to yelp, and the pain changed from sharp to sore as I waited. I tried to be still, but then I saw a spider on my arm and I yelled, kicked the back wall. John winced for me not to stop, not now, but I was already wiggling frantically backwards.

He cursed and finished on the knothole at the bottom of the wooden wall. A welt, light purple as the flower I'm named for, rose on my ankle and I saw the spider scampering away through the straw, thick-legged and furry. John lay down next to me, and I could see on his face that he was hurt it had not turned out the way he wanted, that he'd wished for us to grow sleepy here, our sweat leeching into the stale hay as if everything had gone as planned. "Tell me a secret, darling," he said.

I winced at "darling," couldn't help but wish it'd been "Doll" instead. "I don't have any secrets," I said. "Not one." When I saw his face I amended—"well, maybe one." I told him how I stole a handful of horehound candies once, how I threw them in the dirt because I could hear the ringing of the store's welcome bells haunting me, though I was nearly a mile away by then.

On the walk back, there was a sound like a woman screaming. "Foxes," I said wisely. For I'd learned this in childhood when I'd run to my father in the night, begging him to find and rescue the wounded lady, and he had told me that I was only hearing the calls of the whitefox.

“Maybe,” said John. “Or could be witches. Weddings bring them out, you know. All that joy, it hurts their skin. Causes a prickly feeling.”

My own skin began to tingle at the thought of it. “Is that so?”

He whistled. “Oh yes. That’s a witch if I’m a man on earth. Almost sounds like your name, if you listen right. Witches’ll do that, play tricks.”

And sure enough. The “I” was the howl, and the “ris” was a long gasp for breath.

“Doesn’t sound like anything but a fox to me,” I said shakily.

“I’ll tell you a family secret. You know the quilt we’ll be inheriting?” I vaguely recalled something about this, so I nodded. “Well, my great-great-grandfather caught a witch over the mountain from here, and he chopped off her braid. My great-great-grandmother put it in the wool stuffing inside the quilt.” I felt a lurch of nausea, but he was only getting more excited. “It keeps the others at bay. Wards off other kinds of haunts, too. Don’t want anything like that getting near our marriage bed.”

“No,” I whispered. “That’s for sure.”

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After the ceremony I drank one, two, three glasses of the muscadine wine that Mr. Thomas made in the late summers, and when she found me in the bathroom, I wanted to explain that I was sorry, that I’d heard her calling but I’d been with John in the barn, but someone was shaking the door.

“One moment,” Lila called out. Her voice was high and thick.

“Oh,” came John’s voice. “I was looking for Iris. Have you seen her?”

“No, sorry.”

We'd still never spoken of anything that happened, but the wine had lent my head a sort of buzzing levity, and it slipped out easily—"I heard you calling."

"You could hear that all the way by the barn?"

"Are you kidding? You could hear that across the hollow."

For the first time, Lila looked spooked. Her dancing-red face tightened. "If we stopped changing, we'd also stop. You know."

"Obviously," I said, but I took her hand. She stepped back and stumbled. I steadied her the way she'd steadied me at the altar, and my fingers closed around the button at the top of her dress.

We were bent into the shape of the clawfoot tub's cradle when we heard noises from outside. We scrambled up, and she began to button my dress back for me. "You go ahead," she said. "You're the one people are missing." I nodded, tried to rub the smeared lipstick from my chin, and walked out.

John stood at the end of the hall, watching me.

"Oh." I tried to laugh and it came out like a gurgle. "I've had a little too much wine, I think. Lila was just helping me steady myself. I'm all right now, can we dance?"

He took my hand, but did not meet my gaze.

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At first I did not dare change in the night. But two weeks after the wedding John threw out his back tilling, and for days he couldn't get out of bed. I brought him meals and spoonfuls of whiskey for the pain. I doubted Lila was watching, but just in case, I opened the window.



That's how I found out—the cat I became had a belly like a sack, and her litter wagged below me, brushing the grass. Sometimes a few of the kittens moved at once, all in different directions, and it felt like I'd swallowed a live snake.

We stayed in the tower room longer than we ever had, until the darkness purpled with the threat of sunrise.

“Ever since the wedding,” she said, “my mother won't stop talking about how much she wants it to be my turn.”

“And you?” I didn't look at her.

She was quiet for a long time, and then she said, “I think I'd make a good old maid.”

I laughed, but she didn't.

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After a week, John labored to the rocking chair and told me we needed to hire a man. We made a sign—WANTED: FARMHAND—and hung it in the general store in town. Pretty soon, men were coming by inquiring. I was kneading a pie crust and watching Lila through the window while she plucked pecans from the tree when I heard a voice behind me. “Afternoon.”

I didn't recognize him at first, but once he got close his face was unmistakable. Jack the traveling laborer, who always tried to one-up Mr. Thomas's spooky stories. He came straight to the kitchen with his straight, white teeth and a little glint in one eye, the kind of man who always looks like he's having more fun than everyone else.

“I'm the new hand,” he said. “Y'all are sweet to include lunch in the deal.”

In the icebox, there was a bowl of corned beef hash left over from Sunday that I'd been saving for myself, for a morning when I woke up with my new strange craving squeezing itself into a fist inside my stomach. I allowed myself one deep smell of the hash after I put it to sizzle on the stove, imagined that it was in my mouth. Until Jack ate it front of me, standing up against the kitchen sink, I could almost believe that smelling it was just as good.

"I can't thank you enough, miss," he said. A little bile-colored mustard had collected in the corners of his mouth. "Who's that you were staring at when I first came in here?" he asked. Lila was walking up to the kitchen window.

"I wasn't—She's my sister-in-law." I realized I hadn't said aloud. Even the day before, when we began organizing the new nursery, filling drawers with our own yellowed baby clothes, I hadn't thought of her as anything but Lila.

"Well, how's about that," he said. "If she ain't a cold drink of water."

That night I asked John whether he needed me to bring anything out to the barn for Jack. "Oh, I put a ladder up to the mill tower," he said. "He's limber enough, and it's cleaner up there than in the barn."

\*\*\*

I didn't see Lila alone for a few days, though I spotted her and Jack on more than one evening, taking a long walk through the orchards. When we finally met by the pond one day, Lila told me how she'd let him eat a crabapple thinking it was some sort of special cherry. She'd meant it to be a little mean-spirited, I could tell, a way of putting him in his place, but the way she told it he'd been delighted at her spunk, had spun her

around, spitting all the while. “He’s from Louisiana,” she said. “Can you imagine? Swamps and scorpions and hotter than hell.”

I couldn’t.

“He’s already said I should come back there with him. I told him I’m not from the kind of family where girls go traipsing across state lines with strange men they aren’t married to.”

“And what’d he say to that?”

“That we could be married, if it’d help.”

I’d known it was coming, but still it landed hard. “Do you want to?” I asked.

“Iris,” she said. “Of course I don’t.”

“You could refuse,” I said.

“There’d just be someone else in line.” She laughed a little. “I’m sorry, that sounded so— I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” I said. “We both know you’re—” The words that came to mind were Jack’s. *A cold drink of water.*

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The next week I picked carrots and beets and broccoli from the garden to make a vegetable soup, since John wasn’t up to hunting. Poor people’s soup, my mother had always called it. I was cheerful, as John had been paddling around the house for a few days and had even pruned some bushes; soon he would be fully convalesced, and Jack could be on his way.

As if to pull one over on me, Jack popped into the kitchen the moment I thought of this. “Afternoon, Iris. If I could just trouble you for an old pot? Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

I began to hand him one, but then I got a feeling he planned to piss in it in the middle of the night, and I wrenched my hand back. “Might need that this week, actually.” In the cupboard I found a steel mixing bowl that I never used because no matter how much I washed it, the sheen of lard wouldn’t come off. “This is probably the best I’ve got,” I said.

“Oh, that’ll be more than perfect, ma’am,” he said, looking delighted at his own politeness. That night I found out where the smile came from. Somewhere during all that farm work, he’d had time to ask Mr. Thomas for Lila’s hand.

Lying in bed that night, thinking of him all smug in the tower room, I got an idea.

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It’s always strange to see a man when he doesn’t know he can be seen. But this was the strangest time so far—because of all the things I thought I might catch Jack doing when I changed and sprung up the side of the mill, cooking wasn’t one of them. But sure enough, he had the mixing bowl I gave him over a tiny flame, and he sat Indian-style on the floor of our tower room, a single carrot and three radishes next to him, clumps of our garden’s dirt still clinging to their skins.

I wondered what was making it smell so good, and then I saw it—the four legs and bushy tail, what was left of a squirrel. I smelled its innards bubbling in the stew. I slunk behind the pot and waited. He banged the radishes on the floor to shake the dirt and

I leapt up on my back legs. Leave, I growled, neither a sound nor a word but something in between, and his eyes widened how I'd hoped. He took a step back, and I hissed.

It was so foolish of me, not to think that where there are vegetables for chopping, there must also be a knife. He grabbed it in an instant from the floor beside his rucksack, a circle of hot white candlelight reflected on the silver blade. "You think I'm scared of an old holler witch?" He laughed, swung it wildly. Then, the pain. I heard my paw splash into the soup, sickening as vomit splattering on the floor. As I half scampered, half tumbled down the wall of the tower room, he yelled out, "That should flavor it up! Maybe next time I'll get that tease of a sister-in-law of yours, her paw'd taste right good."

I changed as I ran toward the house, great orbs of purple appearing in my vision with each pulse of pain. By the time I reached the house, it was as I feared. I was a woman again, and I put the stump of my arm in my mouth as I climbed the stairs to keep from wailing, grabbed frantically with my left hand at the doorknob to the half-finished nursery, where little white drawers were already full of handed-down baby clothes from my mother. I grabbed an old cloth, wrapped it tightly around the stump.

Eventually, after two changes of the rag, I managed to stumble into the bedroom where I lay prone next to John's weight, covering my arm with my body.

By the time the roosters began in the distance and I felt John's weight shifting, I was sure he'd smell the iron cut of blood in the air. "I'm ill," I croaked. "Please, get me some water?"

Finally, the sky was more blue than orange, and I could feel that my arm only bled when I moved it. I held the soaked linen up, began to breathe deeply, to gather the

strength to take it into the bathroom for rinsing and to get another cloth, but then I heard men's voices on the stairs. I rolled into prone again, cradled my stumped arm between my breasts.

"Iris?" called John. He did not ask how I was feeling and that was how I knew.

"Who's with you? I'm not decent."

"Ask her, then." Jack's voice, and then John was in the doorway.

"Iris, let me see your hand." I wished for anything he'd call me darling.

"Please, leave it," I begged. "I'm not well. I need to rest."

Jack came in, then, and lifted the sheet up the bedsheet so that I was thrown onto my back. He held my severed hand, bluing and swollen and smelling mangy and rubbery like boiled squirrel. My wedding ring was gone; I imagined it sinking like an anchor to the bottom of the soup pot. It was the strangest feeling I had ever had, looking at my own hand from feet away.

"Don't waste no time," said Jack to John. They rolled me up in the bedsheet, each grabbed an end and I felt myself lifted, swaying. Down the stairs with my head first. I breathed in the smell of my own blood, and as I changed in desperation, scratching at the sheet as my claws appeared, I heard Jack say, "You don't have to pay me, by the way. It's a public service, it is."

I tried to scratch at the blanket, but it was tough as burlap, and I could only make tiny holes. They put me in the mill, the rotted out stairs compartment under the tower room.

The tinny sound of nails boarding up the door, the hiss of a match thrown at the mossy wall. Mr. Thomas's voice: "I always knew there was something funny about her, the little bitch."

If John answered, I didn't hear.

The smoke from the flames began to coat my eyes until I couldn't even see the holes I was trying to widen in the fabric. I blinked and blinked and the stinging did not stop, I imagined Jack and John and Mr. Thomas standing in the yard, flames curling around the sides of the mill and meeting above the tower like dastardly fingertips clicking together. Would the roof burn first, collapsing on me? Or would the support beams in the house stand longest, like a skeleton with its muscle and fat charred off, my body in the ashes at its feet?

I heard Lila, then, my name from her mouth as shrill and plaintive as when she'd called it out as a cat that night. She was getting closer, running through the field; I imagined her skirts billowing in the wind like sheets hung from a drying line. "Doll," she screamed, and I yelled her name, again and again, and I hoped the whole hollow could hear me, too, between Lila's begging John, *Please, Please*. Each breath was more raw in my throat, until the smoke swallowed the sounds before they could leave my mouth. I hoped that after the fire Jack's silver knife would gut my charred belly, and a litter of mewling kittens would tumble out of it, their fur black with soot. Lila would clutch the wriggling cats in her arms, fluids from my body rubbed sour in their fur. And then, they would blink the ashes from their eyes. Open them to the world.

## NEXT TO GODLINESS

My mother got remarried in the hills behind our farmhouse. A small ceremony, the sunlight so dazzling as to seem a little toxic, a parody of a beautiful day. Blake stood in the moss beneath a gnarled oak tree. Twenty feet behind him the shed where I'd found the photos stood audaciously, masquerading as a charming detail in a rustic picture.

Wanda—my mother—began her procession, creamy beige makeup smeared across the shiny scars of her collarbone.

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The slushy Christmas Eve before, Wanda had answered the door. She'd gained some weight, and it looked good. When I stepped inside, she stretched out her arms as if for a hug (which wasn't something we did) except her fingers were spread like the twig hands of a snowman. She wasn't looking at me, but at her own hand, where a ring glinted as garishly as the rest of the sparkling Christmas decorations strung around the room.

"We're going to be a family," said Blake. I spun around. He had this way of always turning up behind you. "Here, let me take that." He slipped his fingers under the strap of my messenger bag, which was cutting into my shoulder. "Christ, Meredith! This is heavy. Whatever they've got you doing is way above your pay grade." He wasn't wrong. I was writing a grant for a multi-sensory tactile playground installation at the local community center.



I had met him a few times at that point, and though I didn't like him, I was trying to. Had been since Wanda had come into Charlotte to meet me for lunch, and said while ripping a piece of bread in half, "Blake doesn't mind my burns. He thinks they're sexy because they tell a story." But he didn't make it easy. There was the Wolfpack logo he'd shaved into the back of his head last basketball season. The adages he spouted as haughtily as if he'd come up with them. "Next to godliness," he said once as he squirted blue dish soap into a cast iron pan. The way he'd said to me upon introduction, as if bestowing me with a precious gift, "Just so you know, I'm totally okay with you. Love is love."

The Christmas tree leaned threateningly toward the open space of the living room. The ornaments, which had looked pretty from the entryway, were gaudy up close: identical cheap red balls with curls of gold glitter.

"Babe," said Wanda as I followed them into the living room. "You said you were gonna trim that."

"Shoot, you're right," he said. "Guess I got distracted by those delicious smells."

"I made mulled wine," beamed Wanda. "Learned from a YouTube video. Here, I'll get you some." She used a ladle to fix three mugs, whole cinnamon sticks and orange peels splashing with the liquid, and brought them to us in the sitting area.

"Well, I have to say I thought you'd be more excited. I guess you're probably not in the best of moods, given the break-up."

I'd had to tell her that Larsen wasn't coming. What she didn't know, thank God, was that I was supposed to be the one showing off an engagement ring. The

coincidence—which was all it was—felt cruel, orchestrated by some invisible, malevolent force.

“Oh, no, I’m excited, really. Just tired from the trip.” I leaned back in the armchair and its hinges squealed. “So how are you guys?”

“Well, your mother hasn’t had a cigarette in six weeks,” said Blake.

“Wow,” I said.

“I know,” said Blake. “All the money we’re saving on health insurance, we’re gonna put it toward a Spa day if when we make it to the New Year.”

“I told him I never smoked as far as United Health Care knows, but he didn’t listen,” said Wanda, looking bemused, as if Blake was a kid with a big imagination.

“She won’t be so wrapped up in these technicalities once she’s in a mineral soak with cucumber slices on both her eyeballs,” said Blake, rubbing Wanda’s thigh. I looked away. Odd that he had an accurate idea of what went on in a Spa. Either he’d been to one, which I seriously doubted, or he paid attention when Wanda talked.

My phone vibrated loudly, and Wanda gave me a simpering look, as if she’d witnessed me doing something wrong or obscene. “So anyway,” said Blake, and I felt a grudging gratitude. “Can you believe it? A white Christmas.” I always forgot he was from Arizona, hadn’t seen snow as a kid.

“It’s actually supposed to be record warm tomorrow,” said Wanda. “It’ll probably melt as soon as it stops. Might hit low fifties in the afternoon. This way the ice will melt before Meredith and me have to get on the roads for dress shopping.”

“How about that,” said Blake. “You know what I say—”

Wanda and Blake spoke the words in unison, beaming. “Everything happens for a reason.”

There it was, that phrase. Wanda got burned almost to death as an eight-year-old when her seersucker Oshkosh party dress caught on fire at a church bonfire. It had eventually made her one of *those*—a pitied wife—for the two decades she spent with my father, who made her keep covered up, wouldn’t let her jog in tank tops, til he finally left her when I was in high school.

A year and a half ago, a holiday bonus sent Wanda back to the plastic surgeon that had done her original reconstruction. She met Blake in the parking lot of the medical office park: he was getting a consult for laser hair removal on his back. Whenever Wanda’s accident came up, Blake liked to drop the old “everything happens for a reason,” and explain how in a way, her accident had brought them together, all these years later. As for the question of why Wanda had to endure third degree burns to have the privilege of Blake’s love, when all he had to do to earn my mother’s was have a hairy back and a plumbing contractor’s salary to burn, well, I’m sure Blake would have a reason ready.

\*\*\*

I turned in early. Around nine Blake had winked at Wanda and said, “If we don’t go to bed soon, Santa won’t come.” I’d tried to forget that as I crawled beneath the polyester lilac comforter of my childhood bedroom, scrolling through my phone. My roommate Rhoda, who thought I’d been rash about the break-up, had sent me a link to a *Huffington Post* article about infidelity. Apparently, it was the cool new thing to be cool

with it. I deleted the message. Rhoda was always saying that I should go to therapy, but then, she thought everyone needed counseling because she was a counselor, or more accurately, finishing her last semester of graduate school in counseling. I always told Rhoda, half-joking, that I already had her for free. I wrote her back, not acknowledging the article, but to tell her about Wanda's engagement.

There was a slew of texts from Larsen, mostly pleas to talk. One was a photo of six wriggling dogs, skin pink as raw meat showing through white wisps of hair, red and green velvet bows around all of their necks. Since her parents' business went under, they'd started breeding schnauzers.

On our first date three years ago, Larsen had asked for an anecdote about my upbringing. I told her of an anonymous email sent to all the girls in my seventh-grade class, in which someone had copy-pasted an AOL instant message conversation between two boys who'd ranked every girl in class from 1-10, and included explanations, written in comic sans. Frantically I'd found myself on the second page. *4. body's an 8!! But she has a mustache!!!!*

Wanda heard me crying on the floor. "Oh, kids are cruel," she said when I explained. "They'll be onto the next thing, just you watch. Besides, this is nothing compared to what it was like for me in junior high." She petted my head, absently, and I cried harder because I knew it was true, what she always implied: that I was ungrateful. And now I had a mustache and a cold heart, both.

The next day I waxed my upper lips with strips I bought at Revco. I left them on longer than the box said because I wanted to be sure, and they took a little skin off with the hair. Left two raw, burning places.

Larsen had been floored when I'd told her the story, which I'd chosen partly because I wanted to see if she'd be disgusted by mention of my upper lip hairs; if she was, I'd know I didn't need to bother with a second date. I always gave potential partners these kinds of little tests, and they rarely passed them, though women had slightly better odds than men, which was a lot of the reason I concentrated my energy there.

But Larsen proved herself (or at least I thought so then). She was in finance, which was a strike against her when Rhoda set us up, but she explained on the first date that she'd chosen that major to help her parents save their ailing Kinko's franchise. Perhaps it had something to do with her jawline in the lantern light against the exposed brick of the bar wall, but I was taken with the idea of a twenty-five-year-old woman who made real, tangible sacrifices for other people. Plus, her silverware matched.

The night of the proposal we walked along the crooked Eno river, orange with mud and waning light. It was a few hours later, in bed, that she told me about the guy. At the very beginning, before we were serious. So stupid, she said. An experiment, just to make sure—she'd hated it, just like she figured she would.

A bottle and a half of Rex Goliath after I ended it, the feeling that I'd swallowed something sharp gave way to the feeling that I should have known, some soured version of satisfaction.

\*\*\*

I woke up first on Christmas morning. My phone was in the center of the other pillow, and I felt the onset of a crying jag, jumped out of bed to put the coffee on before it could take hold.

Wanda had no real half-and-half, just Irish Crème flavored Coffee Mate. Blake's influence, probably. I hate black coffee, so I used it anyway. When I closed the fridge back, I noticed a photo of Wanda and Blake at a pumpkin patch, his cheek smushed up against hers.

It was stuck on with a magnet from Telluride that we'd always had, though nobody we knew had ever been there. In my childhood that same magnet had held another photo: my parents in front of the courthouse on their wedding day, close but not touching, Wanda's feet swollen in her sandals from her pregnancy with me. Her hand rested on her abdomen, as if she had acid reflux.

I choked down as much of the sweet, oily coffee as I could, then went to brush my teeth. There were two boxes of nicotine patches on top of the toilet, one bigger than the other, like his 'n hers. I was suddenly ashamed of how Wanda had said I didn't seem excited, and I remembered how the goofy lean of the Christmas tree needed fixing. I went into the living room and knelt down next to the stand, the drying needles tickling my ear unpleasantly, and tried to right the angle. One of the screws in the stand was missing.

I made my way to the shed to look for a replacement, wondering if I'd even know how to get it in there, balking for a moment at the weirdly warm air. The sheen of ice on the pond was melting, audible popcorn cracks. My previous visit home Blake had tried fishing there, spent three hours before he finally pulled up a tiny trout that bled to death

in his hand, smiling all the while with bluing lips. Fish blood looked exactly like people blood. It gathered in the creases of Blake's fingers. He seemed triumphant, said that fishing made him feel closer to God.

In the toolshed, I felt around for the grimy string that hung from the lightbulb. Weak, dusty light. As if someone had curated a museum of my childhood, there was the deflated snow tube, ripped apart by a snagged branch, that my father had always claimed he'd patch up. A box of My Little Ponies in the corner, dust in their cotton-candy colored hair.

The latch to the tool closet was rusted, but I wedged it open. Most of the hooks on the wall were empty, and a rusted Folgers can was filled with nails, but no screws, so I yanked at drawer until it squeaked out.

Some yellowed car repair receipts, which I lifted up in hopes that maybe a lone screw would be rolling around at the bottom of the drawer.

I had forgotten all about the photos. We'd taken a few, pretending to be swimsuit models or whatever. This orange-knit bikini that I can't believe I liked. One leg straight and one bent, hand on the knee, hair curled from the water. As if the brown sludge of Lake Tomahawk in the background was the Miami skyline. Me and my first girlfriend, though nobody had known that's what we were, as I was terrified of it getting back to my father. The summer between sophomore and junior year of high school.

Next to the photos, a jar of Vaseline with the top off, marred with slick indentations, as if it had been punched.

\*\*\*

When I slipped back into the house, Blake and Wanda sat close together at the kitchen table, peeling and slicing grapefruits into segments. “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” played through radio static.

“Where’ve you been?” asked Wanda.

Blake winked. “She hasn’t had her coffee yet.” He stood, kissed her on the top of the head.

“Just went for a walk,” I said. “I thought I’d straighten out the tree for us, so I went hunting in the shed for an extra screw.” Blake had his back to us now, measuring out coffee grinds, but I swear his hand froze for a moment.

“Can you help me with these?” said Wanda, handing me a knife. The slices of grapefruit she’d already cut were piled in a bowl, red and raw as meat. A dish of saran-wrapped custard sat next to them.

“Wanda’s subscribed to a recipe mailing list,” said Blake, like he was talking about a kindergartener who’d learned the alphabet. He started babbling then about some clients of his who had a house in the Poconos, how they were going to lend it to him for the honeymoon.

I excused myself to the bathroom and sat on the floor, pulling my knees to my chest. I stared at all the little hairs and dead ants in the cracks in the linoleum until my vision blurred. I knew I wasn’t crying because of what happened, but because I couldn’t tell Larsen about it.

\*\*\*



Back in my bedroom, I opened the closet and stared at my duffel bag. As a kid I'd carved things on the closet wall, initials of boys I liked encircled in hearts, and random letters that I'd used as codes. Most were made incomprehensible by time, but I did remember that IHMF had stood for "I Hate My Father."

I'd written that one a couple years before he left. My mother had made a cake for him to take to a potluck he had for work, but she'd used baking soda instead of baking powder. He'd cut a piece, dense and shiny as soap, and told her to try it. We saw the pucker of her face against her will, and I waited for him to yell. Instead he said, "Finish it, go ahead. Waste not, want not." And she did.

When he left for the potluck she took me for a drive, and I think I believed we might be making a getaway, racing off toward a new life as outlaws in Florida or something. But she made a U-Turn after ten minutes on 91, took one hand off the steering wheel and put it on my leg. It wasn't something she usually did, but it was nice. The joints of her fingers were chapped. "When you're older, you'll understand, Meredith. In some situations you have to make concessions."

I didn't know the word in that context, had only heard it in reference to the snacks at the movies. But I promised myself right then—concessions were something I'd never make.

I took the two hastily-wrapped Christmas gifts from my bag. For Wanda, I'd gotten a blue topaz necklace, her birth stone.

For Blake, a Wolfpack beanie. I'd known it was a little lame, that he'd like it but that I could also have tried harder, spent more. Now I was glad I hadn't. I tossed it into

the back of the closet, where there was an ancient pile of clothes once meant for Goodwill.

Wanda called from downstairs. “We’re ready anytime, Meredith!” I fired off a text to Rhoda. *I know you’re doing family stuff, but if at any point you can talk...capital c Crazy development.*

I stopped for a few seconds on every single stair, but eventually I still reached the living room. My mother was still in her bathrobe, white with big, floppy-looking irises printed on it.

“Well, Meredith, you’re the guest of honor, so you open one first,” said Blake. The little box he handed me wasn’t wrapped, but it had a ribbon around it. “Big things come in small packages, you know.” That wink again. Inside the box was a gift card to a bridal shop.

“Two hundred dollars,” said Wanda, a little louder than before. “So you can get any dress you want for the wedding. Well, as long as it matches our color scheme.”

“Thanks,” I said, careful to look only at Wanda.

“It’s from both of us,” she hinted.

“Okay,” I said.

They exchanged a glance.

Blake opened fishing equipment from Wanda, who then opened four gifts from him, exclaiming with increasing agitation that they’d “agreed on only having a small Christmas, babe,” to which Blake pleaded forgiveness.

I gave her the necklace at the very end.

“Oh,” said Blake when Wanda opened it. “That is beautiful! You’ll have to wear it at the ceremony – it’ll be your something blue.”

\*\*\*

A few dead fish that had been trapped beneath the ice were floating now, flashes of silver, on the mucky surface of the pond. Wanda stood beside it. When it was clear I hadn’t brought Blake a present, she’d said steely, “I’d like to speak with you outside,” and I’d followed her wordlessly.

“Do you ever think of anyone other than yourself?” she asked.

“He has pictures of me,” I said. “From high school. He’s keeping them in the shed.”

She took a labored breath. “Okay.”

“What do you mean, okay? You’re going to marry a man who jerks off”—here she flinched, but didn’t say anything— “to pictures of your daughter in high school? Pictures of me wearing only—” Suddenly I remembered how my father had made her cover her shoulders and chest with a Sarong when we’d gone once to the Jersey shore. “Pictures of me,” I finished.

“Meredith, I need you to be happy for me. For once.”

“You don’t believe me? I’ll show you. Come on, let’s go.”

Wanda had stopped walking. “Look, I’m sorry about whatever you saw. I really am. But he’s such a good man, Meredith.”

I studied her placid face, and it began to assemble. “Am I telling you something you already know?”

We were far apart now; I had continued walking towards the shed and she hadn't followed. Her arms were crossed. "You want me to be with someone like your father again? Is that what you want for me?"

"Can you please answer my question?"

"We can't all live happily ever after with women."

"Wow," I said.

"Your life isn't tragic, you know. You've got all your rights, you can get married. Nothing tragic has ever happened to you."

"I didn't say any of this was tragic," I said quickly. I could not hear, for the millionth time, her account of the accident. How she didn't know what was her skin and what was the fire. How in the hospital the bandages had covered her eyes so she was in darkness for weeks, and so she thought she was dead, that it would be like that forever. But instead, she said: "You know what disturbs me the most?"

"The thought of your husband getting off on pictures of your kid?"

"What disturbs me the most is that you're clearly thrilled. It's so obvious that you could not be more satisfied."

I could think of nothing to say to that. I remembered what I'd texted Rhoda an hour ago. *What did I tell you about him?! I just KNEW it.* I couldn't look at Wanda, because now that it was named, I could feel my satisfaction, dense and knotted in my chest, an acid, solid thing.

When Wanda was emotional, the skin graft on her neck didn't redden as much as the skin around it, and suddenly its outline showed. Like a pale white quilting square,

clumsily cut, sewed on. “Don’t you stare at me.” Her voice had gotten low, gravelly.

“You ought to be grateful that men even think you’re worth looking at.”

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I left shortly after she disappeared into her bedroom. As I tossed my stuff in my bag I heard snippets of their whispering. It sounded like she claimed I was going through a hard time with my break-up, taking it out on them. I hated the truth and lie of that at once. I grabbed my keys from the living room, the leather couch still indented where Blake had sat. My coffee cup was on the floor by the tree. I considered tossing it onto the branches so that it would drip sickly down onto the carpet, but I just drank it, cloying and greasy as melted ice cream. I had a long drive home.

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It was summer before we spoke again. I hadn’t planned on going to the wedding, but Wanda wore me down with a barrage of emails. She’d been sending them more and more often. I still had time to get a dress, would it kill me to at least answer her? What was she going to tell everyone about why I wasn’t there? I didn’t think it was a threat, but it did get to me, imagining the stories she might craft and feed to my cousins, my friends from childhood.

“I think maybe I should just go,” I said to Rhoda. Lorelei and Rory Gilmore were bantering on her laptop, and her open Human Development textbook was on the coffee table, a flaking Danish resting on it.

She nodded slowly, like she didn’t want to say the wrong thing. Then, “What about asking Larsen to come?”

I snorted.

“I know she’s stopped calling, but it’s not because she’s over you. She isn’t.”

“Rhoda, come on—”

“Not a re-engagement. Just a baby step. I know you miss her.”

“So what?”

“Look,” she said, picking up the Danish but not taking a bite, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but this isn’t you sidestepping some Freudian loop. She’s nothing like your dad.”

“Don’t give me that psychobabble,” I said, and shut the laptop on *Gilmore Girls*.

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Fall was a little ahead of schedule, and so the plan for russet trees at the ceremony was half-baked, the reds and golds giving way to brown. Dead leaves crunched underfoot as I walked down the aisle with Blake’s brother. Squirrels scratched in the trees above.

While getting ready in Wanda’s bedroom, I’d felt a hand brush my lower back. I looked up. It was Blake, not Wanda. “You look good,” he said.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” I said. “You could see Wanda. It’s bad luck.” I tried to make those last two words sound menacing, but it backfired, they came out sing song and childish.

“It’s disrespectful to call her Wanda. She’s your mother.” His tone was steel; he stood too close.

“It’s disrespectful to steal photos of your underage stepdaughter in a bikini,” I said.

He took a step back, but held my eyes before he walked out wordlessly.

At the ceremony, Larsen and Rhoda sat together in the back. Rhoda had asked to bring her instead of a plus one, and I'd agreed. All day, I'd thought about what I would say to her at the reception, and I didn't know. I did know I was glad to see her there.

Her eyes caught mine, then moved to the aisle, where Wanda was beginning her procession. Blake had hired a violinist, and the breeze tossed her train a little as if in time with the notes. The watery topaz stone glinted on her chest. She didn't look beautiful, exactly. I don't think she ever could. But she looked like she felt beautiful, and I guess I have Blake to thank, for that.

## STONES

My father owned the biggest web of mines in the Southern Appalachians—“lapidary company,” he would always correct, when I said the m-word like the common children at school. Because “mine” made you think of black, burnished pits scattered across the landscape, marring the green face of the storied hills like cigarette burns.

But “lapidary,” well. That made you think of the 1,348 carat emerald that four company men found a mere seventy furlongs from our family’s estate. This was back when my grandfather ran the company, though the stone still reclined regally in a dish on our mantle, as if to survey its lowly subjects. It was to show off that particular gem that my father brought guests into the parlor after certain dinners, when golden scotch came out in crenellated goblets after the wine was finished.

Mr. Hart was the company’s treasurer, a thin, graying widower with eyes the faded green of money, whom I had once seen place his hand on my mother’s when he thought they were alone in a room. On one particular night, he brought his boys, Pacer and Lyle. Usually my mother and I were banished upstairs when it came time for the men to pack their pipes, but that night Mr. Hart poured each of us a sip of wine.

Pacer was thirteen like me, and a scar from when he’d been thrown from a horse extended his lips on one side. It made his small, wry smiles seem bigger and kinder than they really were. Lyle, a few years older, had features that were scrunched darkly into the middle of his face, and when he smiled it was always more strange than handsome. Both



were quiet, with eyes that darted uneasily, bats in the night. But Pacer's were the set that kept catching mine.

"Say, what's your favorite gemstone, Annie?" asked Mr. Hart.

"Rhodolite, sir," I said. "I have my very own ring of it." I fluttered my fingers, flashing the pink garnet. "It is endemic," (here I plucked each syllable carefully, as I'd recently mastered the word) "to our Old North State."

"Ha!" His spit sprayed in the air like mist. "Ain't you a little gem yourself?"

I grinned.

"Ought to be emerald, don't you think?"

"I like feldspar," I offered. The name was swimming in my mind for the taking after I'd eavesdropped on a recent phone call of my father's.

"Feldspar!" His face was turning the rich color of the wine, which I'd set down behind my chair, unable to stomach another sip. "Ha! A regular little comedian you've got here. Tell me, Annie, what do you like to do?"

"Dance," I said, glancing at Pacer, who grinned a little with burgundy-stained lips but then looked away. "And play outside. When I'm allowed, that is."

"Ah-ha. Your mother a worrier?" I nodded, then looked at her for a reprimand, but her face was fixed on Mr. Hart's. "Tell me, Annie," continued Mr. Hart, "you like spooky stories?"

"Now, Larry," said my father. He set his glass down. "I don't know if she's old enough."

"I am!" I said, and my father nodded resignedly to Larry to go on.

He dropped into a loud whisper. “You know how the company’s got a little problem with turnover?” The only turnover I knew was the apple kind, but I nodded wisely. “Well, it really is just men quitting for a factory job. But sometimes, it’s because a miner got eaten by Old Boojum!”

My mother and Mr. Hart exchanged a look.

“That’s right,” he said. “So you be careful playing outside, you hear? You ever hear a low voice calling out for Sarah, you run.”

“Sarah?”

“That was his wife. Can you believe it? A human woman went off to live with Boojum in his lair—”

My mother stifled something like a chuckle, and I saw it Lyle’s face, too, before he lifted his cup and finished the wine in a single sip.

“Okay, Larry, enough,” said my father, reaching for the pearly-handled cane he’d begun using that winter.

“All right,” he said, raising a hand in surrender. “Just a little tale. Just a little fun.”

“Annie, why don’t you be excused,” said my father.

I flounced from the room with extra pizzazz, in case I’d looked scared in front of Pacer. There’d been a time at recess recently when a group of kids were whispering, when I could have sworn I’d heard the word “monster,” but as I’d approached, they’d gone silent as the trees they stood beneath. When I was little these sorts of incidents had made me cry, but I had come to understand that there were certain realities when it came to being the boss’s daughter: drawbacks, yes, but perks as well. I never seemed to be able

to fail a test, and the lunch room ran out of cookies sometimes yet someone always seemed to find a spare tin tucked away for me.

Upstairs in my washroom, I took off my dress and lay my nightgown on the sink, looking at the wild twists of my birthmark for a moment before getting my special salve from the shelf. When I was younger I sometimes skipped the routine, as it ached to work the salve into my skin, but not anymore.

That winter my nipples had popped from my chest as suddenly as two mushrooms from damp moss. I saw my mother's eyes widen over the breakfast table. She insisted that I put on a loose frock for school, and came home with brassieres for me to try, white with little rosettes. As I was parading about in them, the cook came upstairs to ask me whether I liked my lamb as rare as my father did. When she opened the door and saw me standing next to my four poster in nothing but bloomers and the brassiere, she shrieked, clasped her hand over her mouth, and ran down the stairs.

I whirled around, thinking she had seen something behind me, a phantom or a man with an axe. But all I saw was my own reflection; my perfect face and then my birthmark, the swollen violet globules that clung to my abdomen like mollusks to a rock.

I knew then that my body was far more horrifying than my mother had let on. Though I didn't remember it, my mother had told me that I'd been taken to doctors as far North as Pennsylvania in infancy, and they had all agreed that nothing could be done. It had been merely two indigo pustules, then, but every few years (and recently, every few months) a new one would emerge, and by this point most of that side of my torso had erupted. An old maid of ours, Tarena, who lived in the village, was known for home

remedies, and for most of my life my mother had been paying her for the special salve, which smelled like something you'd rub on the calf leather seats in the automobile to keep them shining. Tarena had quit suddenly earlier in the year, though I didn't know why, and afterwards, my mother had told me not to waste the salve, to apply it sparingly.

I listened to the distant peals of laughter from downstairs as I uncorked the bottle, trying to make out which voice was Pacer's. Applying it felt like kneading a bruise, so to distract myself from the soreness, I looked out the window where town appeared between two mountains like a tangled pile of Christmas lights. Beyond it, the alluring dark.

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In the year that followed I thought of Pacer more often than I thought of the monster, though some nights when I couldn't sleep and I stood on my balcony, I craned toward the dark woods for a sight of the beast skulking through the balsams. Of course I never saw anything.

I suppose this is the way it usually works: it was only once I'd nearly forgotten about Boojum that he finally showed himself to me.

There were certain town events where our family was expected to make an appearance, and in these cases, mixing with riff-raff became not only allowed, but encouraged. It was important, my father intoned, to demonstrate our magnanimousness.

Once a year, there was a party for all the workers and their families at the Rhododendron Inn, by far the finest place on this side of the mountain -- an employee appreciation, as my father called it. Lots of townies were there, but so were the higher-ups and their families, the Harts included.

I played cornhole on the grand wraparound porch with Pacer and some kids I knew from school, their faces perpetually open as if to suck in as much of the grandeur as they could: the gilded iron of the lamps and the rambling panorama in the distance.

Pacer was taller and thinner than I remembered, as if he'd been stretched.

I missed the hole with nearly every beanbag. Still, no one laughed at me the way they laughed at each other, and the next time it was my turn I felt Pacer's hand cupping mine, guiding my throw.

It finally went in, and I was disappointed but unsurprised when my parents found me moments later, before the sky had even gone dark; they usually made a point of exiting before things got "rollicking," in my father's words.

"I can walk her home a bit later, sir," said Pacer, approaching my father. "So that she can finish her game."

I bit back my smile but began walking toward my father, knowing his answer—I thought I misheard when he agreed. "I suppose that would be all right," he said. "You're quite the gentleman."

I remembered a comment my mother had made, about handing me down her diamond earrings when I finished school and was old enough to get married to someone suitable. Pacer held the plaid patched beanbags deferentially, as if they were an offering. Suitable. It described him, didn't it?

My first turn after they left, I was so giddy that I tossed the beanbag all the way over the railing. "Come on," said Pacer, "we'll go get it."

We scrambled down the steps into the garden, but before we could begin searching, we heard a murmuring. Hidden in the shadow below the stairs was a group of miners, huddling and hushed. They were dressed for the party, but they each held a dusty black coat – all but Lyle, who of course was not a miner, but a future higher-up. He was in the center, as if to address them, and though the others had their backs to us he spotted Pacer immediately. “You,” he said. “Go on, git.”

I saw the flash of hurt in Pacer’s eyes but thought I shouldn’t mention it.

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After the game, we gathered around a popping fire in the hearth, songs erupting and dissolving before they were finished. Pacer nudged me, and I turned toward him, expecting to see his face near mine, but instead he jerked his head toward the door – two figures stealing away. “That’s Lyle,” he whispered to me. “Wanna follow them?”

Before I knew it we were stealing through the woods, branches whipping each of our bodies in turn. I could have pinched myself for my good luck. We gained on Lyle and the other boy, whom I realized I knew. A townie named Anderson, he was the brother of Tarena, our former maid and the maker of my salve. He’d left school awhile ago, had to be eighteen or nineteen by now.

We wove around twin poplars, and when Lyle whipped his head back at the sound of me tripping on a stump, Pacer cupped his hands around his mouth and howled like a coyote. They cursed and took off running, and we followed, laughing like loons, louder and louder until the gig was up. I was light and untethered at the feeling of being in on the joke, a feeling I always sought and that never seemed to last.

Lyle circled back to us and gave Pacer a brotherly punch, though I thought I saw a flash of something like fear in his face before he beckoned us. “Well, come on then. We’re just off for a swim.” And to me: “Hope you’re not as wussy as you seem.”

We came soon to a clearing with a small pool next to a rock. They took off their shoes and shirts and tossed them aside, wasted no time in climbing the rock. By the time I had unlaced my shoes they stood in a line like lemmings, chests sinewy, toes gripping the wet rock. I imagined what my father would do if he could see the scene. He’d never lifted his cane on me but he sometimes squeezed it like he wanted to.

I removed all but my bloomers and undershirt, which by grace covered my mark. I scampered almost to the top before I slipped, banged my chin hard on a little outcropping, and started again, more carefully. The boys were already dropping fast and heavy into the pool, whooping.

I stared down. The drop was probably the height of a person. In that instant I was sure that the water below me was solid. It was so black, so impenetrable, that I braced myself for impact.

I came up wanting air like I’d never wanted anything, laughed from sheer relief. The boys hollered foolish dares at each other, heads bobbing. I paddled, panting, to keep my feet from touching the slime on the rock. Things on the bottom stirred up that shouldn’t have been. Chunks of algae, little stings of biting minnows, the sharp point of something manmade, like a jagged piece of glass.

I thought at first it was a fish between my legs and I twitched violently, kept from calling out because I wanted to prove my valor, my grittiness, to these boys who I knew found me prim and prudish.

But I felt it again, worming around my thigh. A hand. I looked up at the disembodied head that floated an arm's length away from me: Pacer. I willed myself to stay still while the finger snaked its way into my underwear. I was numb from the cold, could only vaguely feel the pressure of the prodding, the brush as he moved to my breast, but I was enraptured by how his scar shined and twitched.

And then, with no warning, the hand went to my rib, rested for a second on the swollen mass of my birthmark there and I heard his growly yelp. "Jesus!"

"You okay?" called Lyle. The moon was like a little puddle of milk in the black water, lighting up the circle of faces around it.

"She's got—she's got, like," he sputtered. And then Pacer and I both saw at once. Behind the rock, where our clothes lay. Two yellow spots, a pair of fireflies suspended in time. I pointed, and the other heads turned. It was Pacer who screamed first.

"It's eyes! It's his eyes!"

We ran, tripping each other and sliding in the mud: away from the beast was further into the woods. I was last and nearly every branch whipped my face and chest. After a few minutes, I dared to look behind me, and there was only the deep dark, black as water.

We slowed in turn, finally stopped and made a circle, panting, hands on knees.

"I thought he was a wives' tale," said Pacer quietly.



Anderson huffed. “He is and he ain’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You of all people –” said Anderson, but Lyle coughed violently in his direction, and we all fell silent, our breaths rough and uneven as the sounds of the forest.

Finally, Anderson spoke again. “We can go by my house to get warm and I can lend y’all some clothes.”

I brought up the back as we hurried along. A few feet ahead of me, Pacer swung his hands, and I scrambled closer. His fingers were extended just so, an invitation, I knew, but as my own hand made contact with his he jerked it back. My birthmark prickled, in exactly the place his hand had cupped it beneath the water.

He didn’t look back when I tripped over a root in the path and fell into a pile of thistle.

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When we finally arrived at Anderson’s, I thought just he’d taken us to his stables, but when he beckoned us in, there were braided rugs covering the dirt floor and a pile of glittering ashes in the fireplace that still smoked.

“We have a lot of extra clothes we don’t need anymore,” said Anderson.

“Obviously. Though Frank was heftier than the two of you.” So bitterly that Lyle and Pacer both looked down. “My sister might have something for you,” he said. “I’ll check.”

When I heard footsteps again, I looked up and my eyes met Tarena’s.

“Hi,” I managed. Wordlessly, she handed me a dress and pointed to a bedroom. It was the size of a closet, cottony cobwebs in the ceiling corners and yellowing frilled curtains. As I changed the sepia portrait of an unfamiliar man watched me dress.

“Come on,” said Tarena when I emerged, “I’ll take you home.”

I hesitated for a moment; I could hear the boys in the kitchen, caught the words “corn liquor” and heard glasses clinking so loudly I expected one to shatter.

“Pacer,” I said stupidly. She said nothing, only waited for me to follow her.

We walked in silence for the better part of an hour, and just before the gates to our manor I heard her footsteps halt. “You’ll be okay from here.” Phrased like a question and yet somehow I knew it wasn’t one.

As I crept into the house I sucked the bloody spots where the thorns had lanced my arm, and the taste, like sucking on a spoon with salt on it, steeled me somehow, as if I weren’t so fragile as everyone thought.

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The next morning my mother was furious at my mud-speckled skirts, though by some miracle she didn’t seem to notice that they weren’t mine in the first place. “Your father has enough to worry about in his condition,” she said after slapping my cheek the next morning with the back of her bony hand.

“What condition?”

“Jesus, Annie, don’t you ever notice anyone besides yourself? He’s frail.”

I had heard that word before. It had described why Pacer and Lyle’s mother had died in childbirth.

I was locked in my room for the next three days, only allowed to go to the washroom and its little balcony, where I took my meals when the maid brought them up. The nubby peaks of the mountains impaled low-hanging clouds on clear days.

When I got bored, I read my stories and experimented with different patterns of plaits for my hair. I'd gotten a Swedish lamb's wool powder puff for Christmas, and I washed and dried it each night. Slid on a blood-red lipstick I'd stolen from my mother, then scrubbed pink roses out of the pillow case from where my mouth had rubbed in the night.

In the bath I poked at my birthmark in the spot where Pacer's fingers had been. Again and again, as if each time might yield a different result, the feeling of smooth skin. But it was always rough and rumbling beneath my fingers, as I knew it had been beneath his.

When I stood up in the tepid bathwater, a grunge of foam and hairs on the surface, I saw it in the mirror. At the very top, clinging to my rib, a new globule had bloomed, sudden and swollen as a chigger bite, but already bigger than a pencil eraser.

I found a place in my room where the bedpost would block my entire birthmark in my reflection, allowing me to imagine what my skin would look like unmarred. I stole my mother's sewing scissors and cut a chunk out of the rug, a permanent X marks the spot for where to stand. I was enamored with the girl I saw from the X, imagined Pacer was standing somewhere in the room, looking at her, walking toward her, tracing his fingers all over the right side of her body, away, always away from the left.

I always migrated from the X eventually, stood a few feet away from the glass, pushed the monstrous, tender spheres to the point of pain, watching in hopes that they might burst. When I did I saw how the beauty of the rest of me disintegrated, thought of how a few small stones in the pocket of a coat can drown a whole woman's worth of flesh. My birthmark was my pile of stones, though it looked more like a fist of the red grapes my father had shipped in at Christmastime. There was a perverse perfection in the roundness of each part. Fish eggs in a cluster.

When I woke in the middle of the night I always had to shake from my consciousness an image of Pacer's scarred smile turning to fear as his hand closed around my birthmark in the cold water.

Sometimes his eyes were the yellow-brown of a grass snake, the way they were in real life, and other nights, when I slept deeply, they flashed like Boojum's.

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Days after I completed my punishment, I followed my father up a spiral staircase, snippets of the blue mountains in the circular windows. With the help of his walking stick he navigated the stairs effortlessly, the dulcet clink of the cane on the marble as quick and regular as a metronome.

That morning he'd demanded that I put on my church clothes and accompany him to the office. My mother had looked unsurprised, but perhaps a bit disapproving, as she told the maid to fix up an extra sandwich. It was only to deliver forgotten lunch satchels that I had been to the office before, and then always on foot. Today, my father's driver had dropped up us at an entrance I'd never seen before.

At the stop of the staircase, we entered a room with a fireplace and a tongue-red chaise longue. Silver plates of unpolished gems were placed casually around the room, and a black telephone stood next to the wooden desk. The only window was small, and it looked down several stories onto the building's lobby. "Go on, take a gander," he said. From this purview, the men were like swarming black ants, crawling senselessly about.

One of my father's hands was tight around the pearled handle of his cane, but the other came to rest on my arm. "Usually I use the employee entrance. It's good to be seen putting in the time just like everyone else. But I wanted some privacy with you, today. Take a seat, Annie."

"Thank you." I felt as if I was meeting my father for the first time. When had we last talked? I couldn't recall.

"I wish we could have given you a brother, but we didn't."

"It's okay," I said, though I knew it wasn't—not to him. There'd been comments like this, once in awhile.

"Well, perhaps from where you stand, it is okay. Because all of this will be yours one day. Well, technically it'll be your husband's—but you'll be how he's got it and we'll make sure he doesn't forget.

"Listen, I'm getting along in years, and I'll need time to train whomever we choose for you."

I nodded, and imagined my lips against the scar on Pacer's mouth, but said nothing.

“There’s some important things you’ll need to know. When this becomes your husbands’s. And here’s the first. No matter what they might grumble to the contrary, our men are lucky for a few reasons. Hard rock mining’s safer than coal, and they know it. And the demand for luxury won’t ever go away. Diamonds have been in style for four hundred years, and they aren’t going out with beaded combs anymore than they did with hoop skirts.”

“I’m still getting the diamond earrings on my eighteenth birthday, right?”

“Or your wedding, whichever comes first.”

My whole body seemed to absorb the word “wedding” before my mind had a chance to catch up, and I craned in toward him.

“I doubt you’ll remember this, Annie, but when you were younger, we had a dinner party one night where Mr. Hart told you a certain little story.”

“The monster,” I said.

I didn’t dare tell him about the time we’d spotted Boojum’s eyes. To explain what had happened that night, my mother had said that I was wading in the river just yards away. He’d likely chain me to my bedpost if he knew I’d been so deep into the woods with the boys.

“Oh, Annie. Perhaps you will understand one day, but it is a painful thing, to know that the world will talk with your child without your permission. I do wish that I’d been able to shield you from hearing that, even if you would have come to know in the end. In any case, I’ll ask you to settle in, as I have another story for you.”

By this point I realized that he did not seem to be expecting a response, nor was he really looking at me. He stood by the window and talked toward the sky.

“When your great-grandfather Wyatt Lowell founded this company, he had ten employees. Simple types, provincial. Believed in that old folk tale, a monster in the woods who howled at night because his human wife had left their cave to rejoin her brethren in town. They told of how he roamed the hills looking for Sarah.

“Imagine Wyatt’s shock when, on an expedition, he came face-to-face with the monster himself. He pulled a knife, but the monster did not threaten him, just gamboled off into the woods. Almost like he was scared of Wyatt, if you can believe.

“Now,” he said. “Here’s the part that I think you are ready for, and if I am wrong, I will pay dearly to your mother, who does not think so, and maybe to others, too.”

“I’m ready,” I said, with honest conviction.

“If my health was better,” he answered quietly, “you would have a few more years. And for that, I’m sorry. When we find your husband, he will of course be briefed as well.” He walked to his desk and sipped from a cup that I hadn’t noticed was there.

“Luxury comes with a price, Annie. There have been seventy-nine deaths in the four generations that our fine company has walked this earth. Accidents. In the mines, especially along the ridge where the rock is always shifting. Sometimes, one miner survives and another does not, and then he’s here to tell the family the story. We offer our condolences, in words and in gems.

“Often, though, and Annie, look at me—” I looked, and his fingers seemed to purple with how tightly he held his glass — “there isn’t a witness. And in those cases it is

much easier for everyone involved, and kinder, to the families, if we let the bereaved assume that old Boojum has gotten their loved ones. It gives them something besides us to be angry at.”

Looking back, I don’t think I fully understood him in this instant, though perhaps that is something I tell myself, in order to explain the way I put on my most contemplative and grown-up face and took to nodding.

“You understand, Annie? Why this is necessary?”

“It is easier for everyone,” I repeated. “But—I have a question. Tarena. I’m not sure if you remember her—”

“Yes,” he said. “A terrible tragedy, Frank. They were newlyweds. A small rock slide on the easterly face.”

“They think Boojum got him?”

He studied me. “We’ve never lied, Annie. If people want to believe in Old Wives’ tales, that’s their concern. Simple people like to bite the hand that feeds them – we don’t need to make that any easier.”

“He exists, though, right?”

My father shrugged. “Who am I to say he doesn’t? There’s much that’s unknown in these hills.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, and he smiled.

“Your mother doesn’t think you’re ready for a husband, Annie, but I disagree. I think you are — or at any rate, that you’ve got to be.” He coughed into his handkerchief, and I noticed, for the first time, ruby speckles on the white linen.



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I didn't see Pacer for months, not until my father was delayed in his return from visiting a mine near the Tennessee border, and though to my knowledge we had never entertained company without him, the Harts came over. "It was scheduled," said my mother. "And it's rude to cancel, after all."

Pacer and I sat on one side, my mother and Mr. Hart on the other. I didn't ask where Lyle was. In fact, I didn't ask or say much of anything. There was something about the way my mother and Mr. Hart's bodies were turned just the slightest bit towards each other. Something I wouldn't have noticed before the swim, but that made me realize the great oak slab of table might conceal things as well as the black surface of the swimming hole had, even if such things were, in this case, Mr. Hart's rheumatic fingers brushing my mother's like a reed in the darkness. Then again, perhaps my imagination had simply begun to gallop out of proportion, what with all this talk of monsters these days.

I tried to catch Pacer's glance, to see if perhaps he had noticed the same thing, but his eyes darted away from mine.

After dinner, Mr. Hart sent Pacer and me on a walk to the koi pond ("don't you dirty your skirt bottoms, though," my mother had called lamely after us). The swans flapped threateningly nearby.

Each time I willed myself to say something, I felt a chicken bone lodged in my throat, piercing my insides when I breathed.

We sat silently on the marble bench that was engraved with the date that the famous emerald had been found, as well as its proportions. The curly capital L's of

*Lowell Lapidary Subsidiaries* had cost extra, he'd boasted – the bench likely was worth more than some people's houses. It couldn't have been true, I'd thought then, but now I remembered Tarena standing in the middle of the shack, the rubber piping that fed into a bucket where the sink should have been.

“So, how have you been?” I said finally, and I could have sworn his eyes flashed to my rib, his body seemed to cave into itself, away from me. Please, I thought. Just don't let him have told anyone else.

He shrugged, but met my eyes.

“I got invited by Paul Schaeffer and Ray Lockeye to the contradance,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But I told them I had to think about it. Because I wanted to see who else would ask me.”

I watched his face carefully. It was blank, but then he said. “Oh. Well, would you wanna go with me, then?”

The chicken bone disappeared. “Oh,” I said. “I didn't even think of that. But sure. Why not?” I bit my smile away and leaned forward, thinking for a moment that maybe he would kiss me, but he just looked out at the iron water. I breathed deep for his smell, but the only scent was the dark, loamy earth we'd kicked up at our feet.

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Before the contradance, my mother walked unannounced into my room. Still fully clothed, I stood at the vanity, slipping pins into my hair.

She put her hand on my shoulder, a bit too hard, as if she wanted to push my jutting collarbone back in. “Annie, you look nice.”

“Thanks.”

She tried to adjust one of the hairpins, but I flinched like her fingers were a fly that had landed on the back of my neck.

“Have I ever told you,” she began, “that my family wasn’t well-off? Not like your father’s?”

I shrugged. As far as I knew she hadn’t, but ever since she told me I only thought of myself I’d been careful not to let on when I didn’t remember something.

“People don’t like to talk about things like this,” she said. “But I wasn’t good enough for your father’s family. The only reason it ever worked was that, well.” She looked at herself pointedly in the mirror. “You look at me and see a matron, I know. But I was like you once. I was the most beautiful girl in my town. Look carefully, and you can still see its ghost.”

It was true. She had spiderweb-colored strands in her hair, but most of it was still like mine, like a tree with fall leaves, changing brown to red to yellow with the right light. The symmetry of our faces was impeccable, our eyelashes long.

“Each day at school, your father saw me walking to the store that my family owned, and called out to me. I never answered back, because I didn’t know what he wanted. And then one day, I came into work and your grandparents were standing in front of the licorice bins, waiting to talk to me. They gave him anything he wanted.

“I’m not superstitious, Annie. But when you came out with that—that thing on you, I wondered.”

“Wondered what?” Our eyes met in the mirror.

“If I wasn’t being punished, somehow. If it isn’t the plainness inside trying to get out.” I instinctively put my hand over my mark, though the layers of taffeta on my dress were textured enough to conceal it. Suddenly I was quite sure that it did look like an animal trying to claw its way out from the inside.

“Luxury has a price,” I muttered, and she looked surprised.

“Yes, that is exactly it. Yes, it does. Maybe your father was right about you. You are growing up.”

“Is that all?” I asked, nicely.

“Annie, I don’t mean to be cruel, I don’t. But when your father asked for my hand, no one ever told me that I might not get everything I want. I simply don’t want to get your hopes up.”

“Why shouldn’t I have my hopes up?” I snapped, jerking my shoulder away from her hand. I held up my boars hair brush by the bristles, willing myself not to hit her with the chestnut handle.

She sighed. “My heavens, you really are a beautiful girl.”

“I know,” I huffed, just to irk her.

“Most men,” she tried again. “Have certain needs.”

“What do you mean, most men?”

“Your marriage may be a little different, Annie.”

“How would you know? You don’t know who I’m marrying. That’s up to father.”

“Actually,” she said, voice like nails, “I’ve taken care of it. Mr. Hart and I have teamed up. To make a special kind of arrangement.”

I nearly flung my arms around her, but instead I hurried downstairs. The cook was balling melon for tomorrow’s breakfast, and I plucked one from the bowl, slurping it obscenely. Twirled around like my haughtiness was a ball gown.

She emerged in the kitchen. “So you’re excited?” A wry smile.

“Who wouldn’t be excited to be Mrs. Pacer Hart?” I asked, licking the melon juice from my lips.

“Oh.” Her face caved in. “Annie, sweetheart. Not Pacer. Lyle.”

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That night the gauzy curtains of my canopy bed felt like a cage, and when I whipped them open, the walls of my room loomed in the same way. Barefoot, I crept downstairs, out the door, past the pond, and over the fence. I padded aimlessly over the spongy wet leaves. It seemed silly that I’d never done this before. I’d always felt too delicate for these woods, with their ravaging wildness, but as I let the strange loudness of them in I knew my body was a vessel that had been waiting to be filled with exactly this chaos.

I heard it. A bellowing lament, faint but certain, filtered through the pines like a wind’s scream or a coyote’s yelp. I supposed the syllables were Sar-ah, but I couldn’t hear the sounds, only the rhythm. Two-part heartbeats vibrating through the cluster of my mark.

The next night I went again, and the next night after that, and each time, I went a little further, and the name he called sounded more and more like my own.

When I returned to my room I stood at the X in front of my mirror, willed myself to change the face on the familiar imagined figure next to me from Pacer's to Lyle's. With some concentration, I could do it. I remembered him, jumping shirtless from the rock. A man, not a boy. Beastlike hair from his navel to his trousers.

I had learned from listening to the maids over the years what happens on the wedding night. It was all quite nasty, the way they said it. Muffs and peckers. Sordid stuff. Still, I confess I was thrilled to discover how it all actually worked.

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I did not see Lyle before the ceremony at the Rhododendron Inn. My mother and father placed on me a tiara that had been in the family since the great discovery: a rose of winding garnets, with emerald leaves.

As I waited to walk down the aisle a blue jay swooped down and began to peck at the top of my head, perhaps thinking the flower in my crown was real. I smacked it and it made off with a sprig of juniper from the braided knot just as the fiddlers began to play.

My father had wanted to abandon his cane for the walk, but my mother had insisted that he take it. I kept my eyes on his feet, hoping he would not trip, and so I did not notice until the front that there were empty seats in all rows except the first three, where our families and associates sat. Which wouldn't have been strange, except that each empty seat had draped on its back a black coat.

I scanned the crowd. In the fourth row back there was Anderson Pruitt and Tarena, an empty seat between them, the coat stained with mud. They stared determinedly forward, faces like stones.

My father and mother whispered something as my father took the seat next to her, but from then, the ceremony went on as scheduled. Mr. Hart's face was so angry that I was afraid to look in the direction of his row; behind Lyle, Pacer glanced between his brother and his father again and again, clearly trying to keep his head still as his eyes flitted wildly.

The holes in the crowd looked ugly and obscene, like moth bites on lace. When I looked back at Lyle, he shook his head almost imperceptibly. What he was warning me against I did not know. When he slid the ring on my finger he smiled at me the way you smile at a child who amuses you.

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The reception was in the grand lobby, but my mother ushered me off into the dressing room the minute the reception was over. "We will smooth this over later," she said sharply. "Tonight, I need you pretend all is well, and soon enough it will be."

"What—"

"Suffice it to say that our concerns about Lyle's ambition were clearly unfounded. Mr. Hart is speaking to him now."

"Why were there coats?" I thought I had worked out the answer, but perhaps I hadn't.

“Take this as your first lesson, Annie. Any sign of unionizing has to be squelched immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said. I surprised myself by realizing it was true.

When I came out, the Pruitts and the five other families, as far as I could tell, were gone.

Mint juleps were passed down the bar and a live brass band was set up by the fireplace. My father gathered the guests around at the beginning and told a story of how the company had auctioned off a one-ton quartz geode when I was four. To prove its size, he’d brought me up on stage, set me in one half, and had two men place the other half over me. I fit comfortably in there, could stick my finger through the cracks of light in some places.

He told the story, I think, to show how small I’d been and how big I had become, but to hear it made me feel like I was still small. Lyle put his hand around mine and squeezed, but when I turned to look at him, his eyes went quick to the ceiling. He led me by the hand during our first dance, bearlike.

Someone got up and called a square dance, and Lyle was nowhere to be found. Pacer was there, though, and no matter who my partner was, I seemed to know in my bones exactly how many men there were between Pacer and me. And he could dance. Whenever he lifted one leg behind the other, he’d slap it with a hand, an extra flourish that had him looking limber as a marionette. I pretended for the duration of the dance that he was my groom.



My father sat in a wing-backed chair that dwarfed him, and the flames flickered on his face as if he were made of marble.

The musicians took a break and many of the earlier generation, including my parents, retired. Panting and tasting the vestiges of my earlier lipstick, I waltzed off to freshen up. The green carpet of the hall had two regal gold lines, the stone walls peppered with portraits of the Inn's most famous guests, some all the way from Europe.

At the very end of the hallway, I spotted them: Lyle and his father—Mr. Hart was shaking his son's shoulders. I wondered if I ought to go and rescue my husband. But I wasn't sure I could stand if he didn't look happy to see me.

After fifteen more minutes back in the lobby, I worried that the stragglers would begin to find Lyle's absence strange, and to talk, and so I went to wait for him in our honeymoon suite. There were two glasses of champagne on the nightstand. I drank them both down and made sure the door was unlocked.

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The rest is in patches, all cut up from drink and fury. There was the waking up alone in bed hours after. A gag that only brought up a bit of spit, stumbling to the cigarette porch. Descending into the gardens, manicured in the day but wild, somehow, in the light of the three-quarter moon, or perhaps I merely veered from the path in my drunkenness.

What I saw first was four hands, in a line, pressing flat against the outside wall of the greenhouse as if trying to pull it up from the ground. They were so alike that it looked at first as if they all belonged to Lyle, his movements those of some many-armed beast.

But I now know that two were his, and two were Anderson Pruitt's.

My wedding night. The sight of my husband doing what men did, but instead of his face, I was given only his bare back.

His buttocks pulsed, expanded and retreated like the throats of two bull frogs. He stood on the tips of his feet and I heard someone call out. A startled passerby, I thought at first, but it was the voice of the man in his grips.

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The next patch was from the sunrise, when I found my mother, sipping coffee in a wing-back chair in the lobby. One look at me and she dragged me by the arm somewhere out of sight, glancing all around her again and again for people we might know.

We passed an abandoned glass of water with a lemon wedge floating and I grabbed it and drank it empty.

I leaned against the wood paneling of a nook she'd found, in front of a janitorial closet.

"I thought you understood," she said. As she lifted her own mug, the tiny clink of her wedding ring against the ceramic. "This was an arrangement, Annie."

"What kind of arrangement makes room for something like –" I faltered, because I hadn't said a word to her and yet she seemed to know what I had seen.

"You had certain expectations of your wedding night, I presume." She said it as though such expectations were indulgent, a child's fantasy. "Well, I suppose I wasn't clear with you. I thought you would, well, read between the lines, as it were." She sipped her coffee and breathed its burnt smell back out at me. "Once all of this political

nonsense is handled, and Lyle understands where his own interests lie, we'll have another discussion. Either we will let everyone assume that you are barren, or we will pay someone, a man from a poor family. You see, it helps both of you. Otherwise we might never have found someone from a suitable family who would agree."

"I see." I was suddenly aware of the sore tenderness of my mark. Almost as if it had heard.

"You know, I really thought you'd be grateful. Initially he refused to marry anyone, a terrible scandal if it ever got out. A threat to the whole company, really, thank God we kept your father in the dark." She was contorting her mouth and I really thought she might spit. Instead she just huffed like an angry horse.

When I pushed past her and through the inn's doors, the sun was almost all the way above the mountains. I went for the woods.

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There is something primal, I think, in the way my body responded to coming upon a river in the woods. An interruption of not seeing. Like finding a slab of mica in the red clay of the road after rainfall.

Certainly it was the same place where we'd been swimming, though I'd never seen it in daylight. The colors of the sunrise were on the surface of the pool beneath the chubby little waterfall, making it look like I always imagined moonshine would be before I saw it was only yellowed water. Iridescent, purple into blue like you see when the sun catches an oil spill from an automobile. I stripped and went in. Took off even my underclothes, this time.

It was so frigid that it banished my nausea. No room for anything but cold. I opened my eyes underwater and all was clear. Rocks the color of bone and rocks the color of skin and rocks the color of coal. A metallic trout, so still it could be dead, except I saw it blink.

Beneath the waterfall there was a great white burst, and I swam into it. Though the gentle pounding on my head didn't hurt, exactly, I imagined it as penance for my naivete. Take that, I said to myself each time my head pulsed. I wanted to come up for air, but made myself wait until I could not. This was what I deserved.

I finally came to behind the wall of water. I put a finger in it and the water adjusted, like a fabric curtain. You are ugly, I yelled, but I couldn't even tell if I made noise, my lungs no match for its permanent scream.

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I thought it was a bear at first, the flash of brown in the trees. When I saw that it was him, I do not know if I went to him because I hoped he would chew me up and end the whole thing, or if I somehow knew that he wouldn't. What matters is I followed him.

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Honeymoon. As a girl, the word conjured a mythic, flaming orange moon with two figures, a man and a woman, their limbs etched in the craters' shadows. They were still as insects in amber. Now, I like to think those figures were two beasts, looking down on earth.

In the mornings, a triangle of light comes into the cave. We sleep in the far corner, where it stays dark the longest, and Boojum doesn't awaken until the light falls on

his face. But I wake up the moment the sun creeps over the mountains, their soft line on the horizon like a sheet billowing out from a clothesline, the bounds of our strange and wild kingdom. Black snakes coiled in the sun like piles of bear scat. Coyotes with scales of fish collecting in their gums. Orphaned chimneys of stacked stones, blanketed over with moss. Rainfall fermenting in a gnarled pouch at the crotch of a beech tree.

Far off, I can see the mines, black and brown eyes always open in the canopy. When I look too long, it seems sure they are the ghost eyes of men I've never known.

Sometimes I walk down to the stream, passing jack-in-the-pulpits, and bathe.

Other times I sit on the ledge, letting my legs dangle over, naked but for the rhodolite and gold still on my pinkie finger. My wedding ring is gone, tossed from the overhang into the hills like a coin to a wishing well. The sounds of Boojum sleeping would be obscene indoors, but here his grunting snores take their place between cicadas and owls and the winds in the longleaf pines.

My birthmark is spreading. Lapping at the bottom of my left breast, now, and will likely creep onto it soon. I tell Boojum sometimes that we are two monsters, but he can't speak, so he does not know the word. And perhaps it means nothing out here. Nothing, in this place without mirrors.

## INHERITANCE

Wayne was sitting in his highlander, waiting to pick his daughter Charity up from an audition, when he saw Mason's face on the app. Among the mosaic of pixelated bare chests, Mason alone wore a t-shirt. Fifteen years imploded in a couple seconds.

Wayne had been in Civics with Mason sophomore year of high school, but only spoken to him once. Mason had watched Wayne and his friends at soccer practice from the sidelines one day. "Whatcha lookin' at?" called one of the players, and when Mason shrugged, he kicked the ball right into his face, immediately sung out a sardonic apology.

"Two laps, Moran," said the coach. Then, to Wayne: "Go grab that boy an ice baggie."

Wayne trotted into the locker room and took one of the frosted blue gel packs from the freezer, then jogged back to where Mason waited near the bleachers. "Here," Wayne barked, but Mason stood still, so Wayne stepped forward and pressed the pack roughly into Mason's cheek.

Mason gave a tiny gasp at the shock of cold, a primal sound, like coming up for air after being dunked underwater. It cut to something in Wayne's core and he turned and left, heard the gel pack fall to the cement. Back in the locker room Wayne shut himself in a bathroom stall, terrified Mason would follow him in and hoping it, too. He hadn't. But Wayne knew then, for sure, what he probably had all along. He was fucked, completely fucked.

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On Wayne's wedding night four years later Trish had bitten her bottom lip to keep from wincing, told him it was okay, to keep going. He had to close his eyes. The lamplight filtered through his eyelids burst into purple nebulae that reminded him of the bruise that had bloomed on Mason's face. He conjured that small gasp from Mason's pink mouth, all those years ago, and then he finally came.

Eight months and three weeks later, they had Charity. It had taken Trish more than a decade to figure out the truth, but when she had, she'd been ruthless.

Mason sent Wayne a message seconds after Wayne had viewed his profile. *I remember you.* Then, moments later, *I'm back in town for a couple months. Want to get a drink this Friday? Or a bite to eat?* This was not what the app was for. There was no need for euphemisms like *get a drink*.

At thirty-nine years old, Wayne had never been on a date with a man.

Looking again at Mason's message, he felt a real flicker of disgust at the idea of two men—who, in his mind, looked nothing like him or Mason—sitting across a table from each other, candlelight across their crude, hairy faces. But then there was the other feeling, like a bear who'd been hibernating in his chest was stirring, raising its head at the scent of spring.

*Just old friends, catching up,* Mason wrote. Which was absurd, as they'd never spoken before or after the day with soccer ball.

But it was what Wayne needed. *I'll be in Black Mountain on Friday for work,* Wayne lied. *I don't suppose you'd be up for coming there?*

Charity rapped on the door and Wayne thrust the phone in his pocket before hitting the unlock button. “How was it?”

“Really good, I think,” she said, face rosy with the adrenaline of competition. “I have a really good feeling about it.”

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Wayne extended his hand for a shake when he spotted Mason, who went for a hug, so that Wayne speared him in the stomach with his fingers.

“Thanks for coming all this way,” he said. Black Mountain was far enough that Wayne had figured he wouldn’t see anyone he knew, but not so far that it was bizarre to suggest that Mason drive there. There was only one other occupied table in the restaurant, a big family clustered around an old lady with a stack of birthday gifts. Still, Wayne scanned for familiar faces.

“Girly drinks, shall we?” asked Mason when they were shown to their table, where a tiny jasmine flower floated in a bowl of water. “And this is on me, by the way. I’ve recently come into a small inheritance.”

This was a mistake. No one talked like that. “No, I wouldn’t feel right.” Wayne’s mind swirled, panicked, with memories of the weirder profiles he’d seen on the app, Sugar Daddies and the like. He wanted to ask something that would rule this out, but he didn’t know how to put it into words, so instead he said, “Who died?” Then, “I mean, I’m sorry—”

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Mason. “It was my father. And yes, he’d be turning in his grave if he knew I was spending his money wining and dining a man—even as friends.”



He glanced at Wayne, bemused. “Well, makes it that much more satisfying. He always said he’d cut me out of his will. Turned out he never bothered to make a will. He and Mom divorced when I was in high school, so I’m next of kin.” He picked up the cocktail menu and snorted. “Linie Aquavit is everywhere all of a sudden. Do you know how they make it?”

Wayne shook his head.

“They literally carry the liquor in barrels from Norway to Australia and back because they think the rocking of the waves transforms the taste somehow. This is the kind of pretentious shit you learn when all your friends are in academia.”

“Call me old fashioned, but I think I’ll just stick with an Old Fashioned.” It was something Wayne had heard his father say, and in his nervousness it slipped out. Mason laughed, thank God.

“Ever been to Scandinavia?” Wayne shook his head, trying to remember where that actually was. “Well,” continued Mason, “they absolutely love fags there. But it’s cold as shit. That’s about all you need to know. You can save yourself the trouble, now. Unless you’re really into fjords. There’s not much to do there but look at them.”

“I’m saving up to take my daughter to London when she graduates high school,” said Wayne.

“Wow. She’s gonna love you. What’s her name?”

“Charity. She’s sixteen.” He’d never mentioned his daughter’s name to a man from online. Then again, he’d never been asked. “She sings and acts. I’m sure you think I’m biased, but she’s really good.”

“You guys close?” asked Mason.

Wayne thought about his last weekend with her, when she’d gotten teary because she saw a picture on Instagram of two girls who she thought of as friends at a get-together she hadn’t been invited to. At first she’d said nothing was wrong, but he’d gotten the story out of her pretty quickly. After that, though, he’d felt useless. Made her tea she didn’t drink and offered to put on *Shrek*, which had been her favorite movie in middle school. By that point she was clearly trying to make him feel better about what a terrible job he was doing comforting her. But then, maybe that was the sweet part.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d say we are.” The waiter came and Mason ordered a pineapple jalapeno margarita for himself, and the old-fashioned for Wayne.

“I didn’t peg you for the type to come back here,” said Wayne.

“Well, it might not be permanent. I inherited my old man’s farm. Ideally I can sell it, but it needs fixing up. I’m in a Ph.D. program and I’m A.B.D., so I thought I’d hole up in the place and try to get at least the first two chapters done –”

“You’re writing a book?”

“A dissertation. So, effectively yes.”

“God, I could never write a book.”

“Yeah, you could,” Mason said. “You just start writing and instead of stopping, you keep going. Anyone can do it. Writing a good book, that’s another thing. But I don’t claim to be able to do that myself.”

“I bet it’s good.” Wayne hated that his opinion meant nothing.

“Let’s say, someone holds a gun to your head, says you gotta write a book. About anything you want. What do you write about?”

“Charity,” said Wayne automatically. “I’d write a book about everything I haven’t told her and give it to her when she turned eighteen. Well, maybe not everything I haven’t told her.”

“So she doesn’t know?”

“I get two weekends a month with Charity, and that’s only because I somehow convinced her not to mention to the judge that the affair I had was with a man. I think she probably agreed because she was too embarrassed to say it, not because she believed me when I claimed it was a one-off.”

“God, what a bitch,” said Mason.

The word stunned Wayne. There’d been moments during the custody battle where he himself had thought it, but he had never uttered it aloud. “It’s what she believes is right.” They both took long sips of their cocktails, though only Wayne’s seemed to be half gone when they set their goblets down in near succession. Mercifully the waiter approached then, and since Wayne hadn’t looked at the menu, he just said “same,” after Mason ordered the pork belly.

It was quiet, and suddenly Wayne remembered how he’d stared at Mason in Civics, how much more obvious he must have been than he’d thought. He been Charity’s current age, he realized, which was unsettling. Quietly, he asked, “I guess you’re out to your family, then. How’d that go?”

Mason responded at normal volume. “God, it’s such a cliché, Wayne. My mom and I watched *Brokeback Mountain* together and both cried like motherfucking babies. It’s just embarrassing.”

Wayne jerked his head toward the birthday family, but they weren’t paying attention. “I haven’t seen it.”

“You’re kidding me –”

“I know, I know. I wasn’t ready.”

“Well, I think I have the DVD somewhere. It’s actually based on a short story which is amazing, too. It’s online somewhere.”

Wayne nodded and the silence lapsed quickly into awkwardness. “So,” said Mason quickly, “it wouldn’t be a first date without the What do you do question.”

Wayne laughed. “I inspect houses.”

“Wow, very manly. You must get a lot of attention from guys who don’t know how to flip their own breaker boxes when a fuse goes out.”

“Actually, I can’t really fix anything. I can just tell you what needs to be fixed, who to call.”

“So you’re a middle man.”

“That’s me. The one you’d cut out if you could.”

Right as the food came, Mason’s phone buzzed. “Shit, I’m sorry, I have to take this.”

Wayne sipped his cocktail. It was incredibly smooth. He’d said house bourbon was fine, but Mason had cut in and insisted on Woodford.

It felt like a long time before Mason came back in, and instead of returning to the table, he went over to the hostess. Leaned in to talk to her, handed her something, then walked back to the table. “I am so, so sorry Wayne. My mom had a fall. I’ve got to drive over there. I already paid for the meal, tipped, everything. You should stay and eat it. Please.”

They were both silent for a second, and Mason took one step forward, as if to take Wayne’s hand, but then he whirled around and hurried out the door.

Wayne pinched the skin between his thumb and index finger so hard it made him woozy. Never again. He’d seen this kind of thing on TV. Set up a date, plan a friend to give you a phone call in case it’s going badly. Mason hadn’t been able to tolerate another minute of his company. He drank the dregs of his cocktail, mostly ice melt by then. Reached for Mason’s, too, but then figured there was something about that, touching his lips to a place where Mason’s lips had been. More pathetic than that would be to sit here alone and eat a meal that he’d paid for, pity meat. That was rungs below a pity fuck, even.

On the walk to his car he was determined to locate the exact moment he’d fucked it up, the point of no return. When Mason had mentioned his book and Wayne had had nothing to say. Or maybe Mason had been able to tell Wayne didn’t really know what a fjord was. Or had he known that Wayne had chosen the seat that faced the door, just so he could be on alert, just in case. Mason had been slick, setting up the whole situation, mentioning his frail mother ten minutes before. Laying the groundwork, not man enough to just admit the truth.

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At 9:45, an hour after Wayne got home, Charity still wasn't there. She'd never missed her curfew. He watched the clock above the TV for fifteen minutes, then called her, but she didn't pick up. 10:06, 10:11, 10:15. He called again, was in the middle of leaving a voicemail when he saw lights in the driveway.

As soon as he saw that she was okay, all his shaky fear steeled into an anger that seemed to make his whole body rigid, to have its own voice. He waved robotically to her friend Meggie through the window, waited til she'd made a seven-point turnaround and was rolling away down the dirt drive to speak to Charity. "You know your curfew is ten."

"Dad, it's ten fifteen."

"My point exactly. Go to your room. You're grounded."

She went, but she looked back at him with anger and something else, too. "You know, I'm not going to tell Mom you let me stay out late, if that's what you're worried about."

"Of course not," said Wayne. "I was worried about you."

"Well," she said. "I'm perfectly fine. I guess that makes one of us. Goodnight."

He stood in place for a few seconds after her door had closed.

That night he passed over all the Stephen King titles he'd read again and again, and eventually he went to the wheezy desktop in the living room and googled READ BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN ORIGINAL. He started to feel a little better as he scrolled slowly through the dense jungle of language, like he was coming into shape after being blurred by the events of the night.

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When he woke up, Charity was already dressed and drinking coffee at the table, though it was early. “I got the part,” she said. “Liesl. That’s why I was late getting home. I made Meggie pull over while I took the phone call.”

“Congratulations,” he said.

“Thanks.” She didn’t smile.

“I might have been a little hard on you. You know I was worried.”

She nodded. “I accept your apology.”

He went to the empty coffee maker and scooped in two heaping spoonfuls of Folgers. “What did Mom say?” he asked.

“I haven’t told her yet. I just want to see her face, you know?”

“I do.” Trish wasn’t a big smiler, but this would do it, get one of her rare grins.

When Wayne’s phone went off that afternoon he felt his chest swell with the recognition of the M on the screen. *Let me make it up to you. Please?*

He’d been positive, so much so that he still didn’t believe the text. This must just be another part of it, a way to make it more convincing. He put the phone back into his pocket. Almost as soon as he did, it buzzed again. *I was gonna show up at your house with Brokeback Mountain and a bottle of wine, but I wanted to respect the situation with Charity.* Seeing Charity’s name written, when he would have expected “your daughter,” loosened something in Wayne. *I appreciate it,* he typed. *How’s your mom?* He let his finger hover impotently above the delete key. Then, *I guess I could come to you.* He stared at that before he sent it, deleted the *I guess.*

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As he drove down the bumpy road to Mason's cabin, he caught himself pretending to be hesitating, like down the road it would matter that he'd thought better of it before he'd done it. Low-hanging branches whipped his rearview mirror and once he slammed on his brakes for a fox, spewing muddy water from one of the potholes all over his windshield.

When he pulled up to the cabin, he had a flush of panic before he remembered he wasn't here to inspect it. The front steps sagged with so much wood rot that Wayne barely trusted them with his own weight, and the proportions of the wraparound porch were all off. He imagined giving Mason his standard speech about a toddler slipping his head between the rungs of the railing.

When Wayne opened the front door a taxidermied doe stared down at him with eyes like black marbles. The window was lined with Budweiser cans full of bullet holes, cobwebs stretched between them. All the furniture was the same dark brown as the floor and the walls.

"I took down the rebel flag outside, but haven't bothered to clean much up," said Mason. "Been working on fixing the kitchen ceiling, mostly."

"Did there used to be animals?"

"When I was growing up? Yeah. Sheep, two horses."

"So your mom's all right?"

"Yeah. Once I got Dad's money I moved her to a pretty nice home. They're attentive there."



Wayne accepted the beer that Mason brought him and sat down in a mammoth plush chair. “I have to say I didn’t think you’d have remembered me.”

“Oh, I remember you,” said Mason, “After that day at the soccer fields, I could feel your eyes on the back of my head. I knew better than to approach you, though.”

“I wish you had.”

Mason shook his head. “You would have lashed out.”

“I don’t know.” Wayne thumbed the metal tab on the beer can a few times. The sound reverberated like a plucked guitar string. “You had a black eye at graduation. Who did it?”

“You’re sitting in his La-Z-Boy.” Wayne drew in a breath. Mason walked over to Wayne, looked back over his head. Put his palm against Wayne’s chest and kissed him. As Wayne pressed his back into the chair, it reclined and the footrest popped out.

Wayne had seen on the app that Mason was vers like him, but since he was used to guys assuming he only topped, he wasn’t surprised when Mason took a condom from his pocket and handed it to Wayne. But then Mason said, “It’s for me. I just want you to put it on.”

Wayne interlaced his fingers with Mason’s, which were greasy from the condom, and lay his head on Mason’s shoulder, face burrowing into the chair’s fraying brown cover. It smelled like mothballs.

When they were finished, Mason sat up, his hand beneath Wayne’s t-shirt and smirked. “Good catching up with old friends, isn’t it?”

Wayne bit back a smile.

“You were a little jumpy at dinner, I noticed. Like, I don’t know, maybe you didn’t want the soccer boys to see us together?”

“Please,” said Wayne. But he wasn’t sure what else he could say.

Mason asked then if he wanted to move to the bedroom. It was messy, a thin silver computer with a fluorescent white Apple logo out of place on a rustic wooden desk. A stack of books tall as a nightstand leaned against the bed. The book on top was called *Masculinity and the New Testament*.

“Did you grow up religious?” said Wayne as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

Mason shook his head. “Trying to tell me that you had a spiritual experience in the chair back there?”

“Well—”

“I was kidding. We just went to church holidays. You?”

“Pretty much the same. Trish always said she didn’t mind the gays, but I guess that was before she knew she had one in her bed.”

“*The gays*,” said Mason. “The article says so much.”

It was true, Wayne realized. There was something about it. The kinds of phrases it evoked. *The bends*. *The runs*.

“So how’d you tell her?”

“I didn’t. When Charity was younger I had someone in my car. She found the condom. She thought it was a secretary from my office, or a whore or something. It was awful because she thought, well, she thought it wouldn’t have happened if she had been meeting my needs more often. She was on me all the time and if I tried to shake her off,

she'd cry about how maybe I just wanted 'Her.' That was how she always said it. I never had to make up a name. It went on like that for a while."

"And then?"

"She'd had my mom over for iced tea and my mom found – well, she was taking the trash out and a needle poked through, split the bag. It was from an at-home HIV test I took – it was negative, don't worry."

"And your daughter was there?"

"At school. Thank God." That was the only mercy about how it had been to pull in the driveway and see the two formidable women standing fiercely next to strewn trash, each wearing one of the yellow rubber gloves that Trish normally used to clean the toilet.

Wayne heard his phone then, a ringtone that sounded like a stone skipping across a pond. Charity had shown him how to set it so that when she texted him, it made a different sound from anyone else.

"Got another date?" asked Mason.

"When Charity goes to sleepovers, she's got to text me before she goes to sleep to tell me she's alive. It's a rule we have."

"Go check it, then."

Wayne hesitated for a second, feeling like if he stood up, he'd break some thin film around them.

It was the usual. *I'm alive*. Plus an emoticon that smiled upside down. He didn't know what that was supposed to mean. Each time, he stared at the words for a few minutes in awe. Not because he thought something would happen to her, but because

seventeen years after she'd first announced herself with a wail, covered in Trish's sour-smelling fluids, the truth of her existence could still knock the wind out of him. "She's alive," he said. Mason was in bed, held up the covers next to him for Wayne to crawl in.

"Well, I guess that's something," said Mason.

"It really is." Wayne sighed. His mother had once said that if two same-sex people were meant to be together, God would've made them able to make a baby. And the first time Wayne had held Charity, he'd gotten what she meant—known that the act that made her had to have been the most natural thing in the world. Though he couldn't square that with how it had felt—a playacting of closeness, squelching noises that were strange and embarrassing and made him want to go take a shower.

"I know Trish threatened you," said Mason. "But have you ever thought about telling Charity?"

"I'm sure she knows about the affair. I mean, we've never talked about it. But I'm positive she doesn't know I'm gay.

"How can you be sure?"

"I just am. It feels skeezy to tell her she has to keep a secret from her own mother. I know they're close. And there was a time, well, it's silly—"

"No, tell me."

"Well, I overheard her talking to a friend about some guy they were in a show with. How gross it was seeing him kiss his boyfriend on the lips."

"Recently?" asked Mason.

“Well, no. She was probably in middle school.” There was a long silence then and Wayne didn’t know if it was bad or not. Got nervous that it was, had to say something. “Trish always wanted to watch movies with Tom Cruise in them. I didn’t much mind.” Mason didn’t make a sound, but Wayne could feel his chest lift with laughter. “Speaking of. We didn’t watch *Brokeback Mountain*.”

“If we don’t get to it, I have another chance to invite you back.”

Wayne could feel his face burn. “That’d be alright,” he said.

“You know,” said Mason. “One of my exes is a lawyer. We’re still on good terms. If you want, you could maybe have coffee with him. Just to ask about the custody stuff.”

“Oh,” said Wayne. “Oh, that’s really nice. I’ll think about it.”

The last thought Wayne had before he slept was that he’d never before slept next to a man. Even once he’d started going to men’s houses sometimes, with the app, it was hurried – always after, and usually before, too. There was Charity to pick up, or the other man had a boyfriend or a wife coming home. Once he’d come close; a man had asked him to lie down next to him after. Wayne had, and from the bed he’d noticed a pair of pink underwear slung over the side of the laundry hamper, like it had been thrown and gotten caught. It reminded him of Trish’s: it was pale pink, cotton, Fruit of the Loom with that thick elastic band. “I’ve got to get going,” he had said.

Wayne woke up in the middle of the night with his mouth pressed open against Mason’s arm. Mason’s skin was wet with a spot of Wayne’s drool, and he hurried to wipe it away before he realized that the rest of Mason’s skin was damp anyway with sweat, a sheen. He realized he could taste it, salty and a little bitter, like something fermented in

the sun. The cicadas were frantically loud, and he worried he wouldn't fall back asleep. It was the last thought he had before he did.

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The next time he went to Mason's, and the time after that, they pretended to remember *Brokeback Mountain* only when it was too late to watch it. He made lists of things Mason would need to do get the place up to code, wrote phone numbers on post-its that he put on the fridge. Brought coffee out to the porch just to stare for a moment at the wedge of blue mountain, such a small thing and yet it solidified the sense that in fifteen minutes Wayne had left his life in town.

Sometimes Wayne dozed and then woke up to find that Mason had brought his laptop into the bed, was typing while Wayne slept. Mason told him bits about the book here and there, and since Wayne didn't ever know anything smart to say back, he asked questions. According to Mason, the book was basically about whether men and women would actually exist in the same way if the words for "men" and "women" were different. Wayne asked about all the other countries, where they still had men and women even though they called them something else. "Yeah, there's basically a chapter about that," Mason had said. "The thing is that there's no Western language that doesn't have two different words. If you see what I mean."

After the fourth time they fucked, Wayne lay awake. He wanted to tell Mason—though he knew he wouldn't, because of how much it would give away—that he'd never been with the same man more than four times. It hadn't been a rule, really, just the way

things had seemed to work out. Between the covert bars he used to drive to, then, more recently, the app.

“Sometimes I think about your book while we’re fucking.”

“Seriously? Even I don’t think about my book while we’re fucking.”

“No, it’s just—if there were one word for how I feel about you, and it was the same word as how I felt about Trish, I mean. No offense to her, but that wouldn’t make it the same at all.”

“Sex is the same word,” said Mason. “It’s what you do with me and it’s what you did with her.”

“That seems impossible.” He realized, then, the difference in what he’d said—how I feel—and what Mason had said—what we do.

“This is just sex to you,” said Wayne quietly. “So let me just ask you, why the fancy dinner?”

Mason sighed and propped his head up on his elbow. “I ever tell you about my first?”

Wayne shook his head.

“I was eighteen but Brian was older, lived in Baton Rouge and came here a lot for business. When I told my father, he was waiting outside with an unloaded .22, just in case he needed to make an entrance.

“It was good with him, short and intense like a first should be, til he met someone his own age. And then I spent most of my twenties paying it forward. And I’m just done, Wayne. I’m done with the phase where I take closet cases under my wing.”

“I’m not a closet case just because I don’t wanna lose my kid. You don’t understand what it’s like.”

“Nobody who knows your ex-wife was gonna walk into that restaurant in Black Mountain, Wayne. But you wouldn’t have known it from the way you were acting.”

Wayne shifted his weight toward Mason and the mattress squealed. “Your lawyer friend,” he said. “What’s his name again?”

“Lee.” Mason looked surprised, and Wayne relished it. “You wanna grab a beer with him?”

“I just might.”

“I mean, I really doubt Trish could do anything to you if she found out, I can’t imagine it’s legal. But I wouldn’t know. Lee might.”

He grabbed Mason’s jeans with a roughness that he hoped would communicate what he wasn’t going to say. The fifth time was going to be different.

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“Daddy,” said Charity over coffee two Sunday mornings later. He figured she wanted something, or she felt bad about something.

“Yes?”

“Do you, like, have a girlfriend or something?”

“Why would you say that?”

“You went out last night. You never do that. And you’re always on your phone.”

He searched for an explanation that he could give her, and when he came up with nothing, he said, “Maybe.”



“Oh my God, are you serious? When can I meet her?”

“Charity, it’s not a big deal like that. I don’t want someone to get to meet you until I’m serious about them.” He hated himself for the way he’d contorted the sentence to be able to use “them” and not “her,” which was supposed to make him feel like he wasn’t lying. It didn’t.

“I’m not going to be upset if I meet her and then you don’t, like, marry her. You know. I’m almost an adult. I get it. Relationships are like, really complicated.” He said nothing. “Can I meet her if you’re still together in two weeks?”

“Charity—”

“How about the weekend after prom?” Charity had convinced Trish to allow her to attend prom in a group of friends from the new show, though she was just a sophomore.

“There’s no girlfriend,” he said. If he let her think there was, and then suddenly there wasn’t anymore, he’d risk a lecture from Trish on the importance of the stability of the home environment.

“I won’t say anything to Mom about her, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she said, taking a big slurp of coffee.

“If you said something to Mom, you’d be lying, because there’s no girlfriend,” said Wayne.

Once Charity was gone, he scrolled through the latest pics and banter in his text thread with Mason. A week ago, he’d texted Lee’s number. Wayne saved it to his contacts as “Lee Lawyer,” nearly composed something. But then, there was no rush.

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The following Saturday was Trish's weekend with Charity, so Wayne invited Mason over. He spent the entire day trying to make chicken parmesan from a recipe online. He kept having to unlock his phone to double check things when his fingers were covered in raw chicken and flour, and when Mason finally arrived he'd just sanitized the screen with a Clorox wipe. The smell mingled unpleasantly with the cheese-coated chicken breasts bubbling in the oven.

"Wow, thought I'd never make it in here," said Mason, slipping a hand into Wayne's jeans pocket. "Mind if I play some music?"

"Please God," said Wayne, "anything but 'I Am Sixteen Going on Seventeen'." He told Charity he couldn't ever get tired of hearing her practicing, but this role was pushing it.

"That should be doable," laughed Mason. The chicken breasts turned out alright, if a little dry, and they went well with the local stout that Mason had brought. They each drank half the six pack, and though Wayne only felt the tiniest lightness, he could tell that there was an aura of tipsiness around Mason, who was a lot smaller.

They had sex on the couch, and after Wayne told Mason that he'd made his way through the "Brokeback Mountain" story three times now. "I find myself getting jealous of them even though their lives were awful," he said. "All those camping trips they'd take together. I was thinking maybe, well, maybe we could go away to the Smokies for a weekend or something."

“I’d like that,” said Mason. “But if we did, well. I don’t guess you’d tell anyone the truth about where you were going?”

“I mean, whose business would it be?”

“You’re just kind of a private guy, I guess.” Sarcasm. He hadn’t ever heard it from Mason before.

“Hey,” said Wayne. “Come on, not now.” He slipped a finger into the elastic of Mason’s boxer briefs and felt him inhale, weighing whether to acquiesce, but then there was a sound of a car outside. Wayne sat up. “Hey, no, keep going,” said Mason, trying to push him back down, but Wayne put his head by the window. The car was definitely coming up the driveway, which he didn’t share. “Hold on,” he said. He could tell by the sound of how it rode the potholes that it was an old clunker, but it wasn’t until the floodlights came on that he recognized it as Charity’s friend Meggie’s. For a horrible minute he thought she was going to hit Mason’s car, expecting that spot to be empty, but she lurched to a stop.

“Shit!” He said. “Go in my room, I’ll be there as soon as I can. She’s supposed to be at her mom’s—” He watched Charity lurch out of the car and knew instantly what was going on. He rushed to pull on his jeans in time for her to show up in the doorway. He could hear her key missing the hole again and again. When he opened the door she made a noise like a small animal, and threw up all over her dress. “It’s okay,” said Wayne. “Come on, let’s go to the bathroom.” He helped her up the stairs.

She was crying, like she always had as a kid when she’d gotten sick. “I’m really sorry,” she said. “Please, please don’t tell Mom.”

“It’s okay,” he called again from behind her. “Better out than in.” It was what his own mother had always said to him. She kneeled by the toilet, still crying. “I’m gonna get you a change of clothes, okay, sweetheart? But I’ll be right back.” She shook her head. “Okay, then. I’ll stay here for a little while first.” He opened the cabinet, found some kind of plastic clippy thing. Twisted her hair together and wedged the barrette around it before she threw up again, clutching his leg with a damp hand. He’d been waiting and waiting for her to ask about Mason’s car, but she never did.

After he’d finally carried her to her bed, where she passed out on top of the covers, he called Trish. “Everything’s fine,” he said as soon as she picked up, and heard the choking catch of relief in her breath. “She was a little worried about the driver and so she called me because I was closer. Super responsible,” he said. “I’ll get her back to you first thing.”

He crept back to his own bedroom, where Mason had gotten fully dressed, even his shoes, and sat on the edge of the bed. “I guess you’re kicking me out.”

“It’s not like that,” said Wayne. Mason didn’t say anything. “Look, we can talk about maybe telling her. Maybe. But this is not the right way to find out. You know that.”

“I do,” he said.

He walked Mason out. Wanting to kiss him good-bye, he turned around first to double check that there was no light coming out from under Charity’s door. By the time he was sure and turned back around, Mason was already walking away.

“Wait,” said Wayne, and he turned around.

“I don’t suppose you’ve given Lee a call.” He didn’t wait for Wayne to stammer an answer.

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The next morning over the phone, Wayne gave Trish a more extended version of Charity’s alleged upstanding behavior. “You owe me,” Wayne told her.

Charity held a full cup of coffee that she hadn’t yet sipped. “I know.”

Wayne couldn’t help but wonder. If they kept this secret from Trish together, could they maybe keep another?

Wayne and Trish usually handed Charity off at a Home Depot, because it was the first place to pull off on the exit equally between them on I-40. Wayne associated the transaction of his daughter with whatever was being sold outside: white wicker porch furniture, portable grills, a \$999 backyard play set with a squiggly yellow slide that’d been there since Charity was young enough to stare longingly at it. Trish usually rolled down her window and they asked each other how things were. This time, while Charity was throwing her bag in Wayne’s trunk, Trish said, softly, “I heard you were seeing someone.” He nodded. “Tell me it’s a woman, Wayne.” He had to say yes, but he dreaded it. He remembered how Trish’s eyes had been shiny with envy when she’d first thought he had been with another woman. How she’d asked what she looked like, started offering Wayne blow jobs when before she’d always refused.

“Of course,” he said. “Of course it’s a woman.”

“Okay.” Her voice had jumped into a higher register, like a squealing hinge on a screen door. “Well, if she’s going to be around Charity, I’d like to meet her sometime, then.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Wayne.

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Wayne’s Old Fashioned had a single, abnormally large ice cube. He cleared the liquid around it in three gulps, telling Mason about the conversation with Trish.

“Jesus Christ,” said Mason. “I feel like this whole thing could be funny if it happened to someone else. And maybe it will be, looking back.”

“Humor is tragedy plus time,” said Wayne. Charity had told him that; she’d heard it from her director at *Shakespeare in the Park* one summer.

“That could describe coming out,” said Mason. “The joy of falling in love with a man is tragedy plus time.” Wayne almost dropped his drink at that word. “Hypothetically, of course,” Mason said.

They were on the patio of a bar tucked into the steep grade of Lexington Avenue, across from a string of boutiques that had popped up where there used to be a church that gave free peanut butter sandwiches to the homeless on weekends. “I can’t keep up with my own hometown,” said Wayne, watching two women in wedges and daisy dukes look from their phones to the street sign and back again.

“Look,” said Mason, voice low and gravelly and utterly different from what it had been moments before. “I can’t keep doing this.”

The hubbub around was suddenly assaultingly loud, as if the women were yelling in his ear. *That's because it's a one way, stupid. You've got it set on driving.*

“Doing what?” Wayne managed.

“You know, I was serious about swearing off this sneaking around shit. But you surprised me. Because I realized pretty early that I could do two years of this, if I really believed that it was the only way for you to keep Charity. If I really believed that the day she'd turn eighteen, you'd bring me home for Christmas on your arm. I don't believe any of that, though, and I shouldn't, should I?”

Wayne set his empty glass down hard enough that the people at the next table stared. “Listen. Charity is the most important thing in my life. Period.”

“I know she is. And she's also not the only reason, or even the main reason, that you're terrified someone you know is going to walk down this street and know from the way we're sitting that we fuck each others' brains out whenever we're in private.”

Wayne willed himself not to look around to see who might have heard.

“Look,” said Mason, with a sort of patient kindness that was even worse than the anger, “this is a new age. I'm not saying there's not shit, but nobody's gonna come beat you to death with a tire iron for fucking me.” Wayne hadn't told Mason how that scene had made his sinuses burn with withheld tears, how he felt sick every time he saw tomatoes since he read it.

“I never said that.” Wayne heard how bitter and closed he sounded. “And you really did get beat. No one's ever laid a hand on me.”

“Look,” said Mason, “for so long I was in love with men I saw on the street, in pictures, next to me in the bathroom stall, whatever. And the more I felt it the more I wanted to change. But once I met Brian, someone who actually loved me back, the self-loathing just stopped making sense. Maybe it sounds like a cop-out, but it’s the truth. I don’t know who your first love was, but I guess it wasn’t like that.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“Not easy exactly. But easier than the alternative. To me, at least. I guess everyone’s different.” He paused pointedly. Then, “I know you’re not great at the whole tit-for-tat thing, but this is the part where you tell me about your first love.”

Wayne’s glass was tight in his hand, and though it wasn’t really cold anymore, if he closed his eyes it could be that blue gel pack, years ago.

He sighed, almost dismissively. “You know, I’m really not getting much writing done up here,” said Mason. “I’ve been thinking I should just head back to Atlanta for now.” He stood up and stuck his hands in his back pockets. “I’d kiss you goodbye if I thought you wanted it,” he said. Loudly, relishing how loudly, Wayne could tell. And then he was walking away.

He grabbed Mason’s unfinished vodka soda and drank the dregs, thinking of Mason’s mouth, seconds before on the glass. Something a lovesick teenager would do. Which was what Wayne guessed he was.

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The weekend that followed was the opener for *The Sound of Music*. Wayne went alone. Though he knew that Trish was in the audience, they never went together to



Charity's shows intentionally, just ran into each other at intermission in the bar line sometimes. If Trish was ahead of him Wayne would mouth along with her order. *Diet Coke with an orange slice.*

He had only a vague idea of what was going on in the show by the time Charity's solo, "I Am Sixteen Going on Seventeen," came around, and though Wayne had heard it a thousand times from Charity's room, it was different with the band. The whole premise was so absurd that it was kind of goofy, her doing these choreographed dances with a Nazi, but you forgot that when you watched. Charity made you believe it.

After the show, Charity threw her arms around Wayne and Trish in turn and insisted on getting a picture with them. Wayne saw at least two gay men walk by while they waited for Charity to find someone to take the photo, and those were just the obvious ones. She came back with Meggie, who'd been one of the nuns, and who held Charity's beloved new rose-gold iPhone while she lifted her arms, beckoning Trish onto one side and Wayne onto the other. He could feel Trish's fingers inches from his on Charity's back. The flash blinded him for a moment, purple splotches across his vision.

"You were a tour de force," said Wayne. It was a joke between them. As a kid she had read that phrase somewhere, asked him how to pronounce it (he'd made up his best guess answer), and said that was what she wanted to be when she grew up.

He waited a few seconds after Trish walked away and made to head out, but Charity yelled, "Dad!" Two older men were following her. "I want you to meet the director. This is Sean."

The first man shook hands with Wayne. “It’s such a pleasure to work with your daughter, sir.”

He began a gracious thank you, but Charity interrupted. “And this is Sean’s *boyfriend*.” She held eye contact with him as Wayne shook hands with the other man.

“Very nice to meet you.”

“Aren’t they nice?” asked Charity when pleasantries dwindled and the couple walked away. She sighed theatrically, holding Wayne’s gaze. “I just *love* them.”

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It was Trish’s weekend, so that night he was alone. There was a man on the app who usually showed up pretty close to his house, who’d messaged him once: *Lemme blow you* and sent a picture of a tongue ring. Wayne hadn’t responded, but now he did, acting as if the message were 2 minutes old instead of 2 months. *Ok*. The guy answered *my place or urs?* Wayne thought of how there was no reason not to offer up his house, his bed, but he didn’t.

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The guy’s mattress had a musty, damp smell, though the white sheets were new and, Wayne suspected, unwashed, still with the creases of packaging in them. He lived by the river and its hiss was loud through the open window, its faintly fecal smell of storm runoff wafting in. When they were done, he closed his eyes and thought as he often had about why Charity loved her plays, her imagining, her pretending to be someone else. He touched his lip to the crook of this nameless man’s elbow, closed his eyes and pretended

it was Mason's arm. It was so close, but the taste was not quite the same. There was a bitterness, a tinny sort of taste that he missed.

When he got home he went to the computer, ostensibly to watch porn though he knew it would make him feel worse. He jiggled until the screensaver disappeared, and he realized that in the browser he'd left open the tab with the text of "Brokeback Mountain." How long had this been visible? Since before Charity's last weekend? Things began to assemble themselves.

He wrote a text to Mason he knew he wouldn't send. *I keep thinking that if I'd just said something different, you'd still be here now, but I know it doesn't matter. You wanted actions, not words.* Then he remembered Mason's book, how the whole point of it was that words could change everything. He deleted what he'd written, put some coffee on, and closed the window with "Brokeback Mountain." Picked up his phone, scrolled through the contacts for "Lee Lawyer," and began to write.