

THE HULA GIRL: SELECTIONS FROM A NOVELLA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Works Consulted.....	v
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	8
Chapter 3.....	14
Chapter 4.....	23
Chapter 5.....	28
Chapter 6.....	36
Chapter 7.....	45
Chapter 8.....	52
Chapter 9.....	57

ABSTRACT

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This creative thesis will contain nine opening chapters of a novella titled *The Hula Girl*. *The Hula Girl* is a novella that implements cultural study and narrative to address a fundamentally emotional issue: how to reconcile identity within a slight midlife crisis. *The Hula Girl* expressly focuses on the mindset of an English professor, John Barry. It is a story of identity and personal acceptance, demonstrating the universality of experiences despite the idiosyncrasies of a specific arrangement with his wife. It is a story of identity and personal acceptance coming out of the long tradition of stories about marital problems, pregnancy issues, familial conflict, and the need to find solace in life. It distinguishes itself from this tradition in its negation of a linear narrative. In the novella, John, a midwestern man in his forties lives in Marquette, Michigan, the community where he grew up and now works at the local university. However, when his wife, Clara, mentions a trial separation, John is forced to readdress his identity. Separated from his wife, he fills his otherwise solitary life with couples therapy and attempts to stay sober. With a new promotion at work, he hires, and is instantly smitten, with the new adjunct instructor, the free-spirited Elizabeth Delphine. But the affair into which they casually fall leads to tragedy for their friends and near disaster for them. As the novel progresses, John ambles along, attempting to rediscover his youth by hanging out with his students & peers, drinking, smoking cigarettes, taking impromptu road trips, and listening to collegiate wisdom. He narrates his adventures, such as they are, but remains little more than a hazy collection of half-formed impressions. *The Hula*

Girl is a novella which focuses on the quotidian: the way John comes to terms with himself and his tier of middle-class angst in the upper peninsula of Michigan. The characters are middle-class Americans a little more wised-up than not—cautious, skeptical, private folks who would rather joke about their problems than complain about them. As John tries to understand where he fits in, he realizes that he cannot entirely escape the narratives which he knows, but finds he is bound to them, nonetheless. So, John moves out, leases a small apartment, begins hanging out with his students & peers, and experiences a reenchantment with the world. But when an unforeseen tragedy throws his foibles into high relief, he's confronted with retracking a world gone suddenly haywire.

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CHAPTER ONE

On my better days, I was John Barry. But on gray April days, the worst kinds of days in Marquette, Michigan, I woke to my body covered in a chill—another day of that existence. I was forty years old. I joined Alcoholics Anonymous two months ago after getting popped for drinking and driving. Before that, I hadn't been sober since I could remember.

No one called my avoidance that, I thought, as I lit a cigarette. I didn't call it that when I had to explain my problems to people. I could have lashed out inappropriately at my students or filtered it in a way that was conducive to something else. Stuff it, would be the correct term, but it couldn't be used. My therapist said so. I tried to clear the persistent idea of what my problem was: me hiding something again. I went to the sink and poured myself a glass of tap water. I drank it slowly.

In April, the residual blizzards of Northern Michigan swept north toward Canada. Lake Superior remained quiet and crystalline. In the white silences, I could hear the boards of my apartment contract and I felt a shrinking in my bones. Each dusk, animals came out of the woods to graze for whatever the raccoons left behind. At night I lay in a queen size bed listening to the coyotes' whoop and holler as they ran down their prey.

Day in, day out, I was sober. At times it was almost stimulating. But I could not remove my memories I felt from that liminal space where only I could go, the nights of Nirvana in Marquette. In my mind's eye I could see the brick buildings and each day's desperation. The buildings housed my favorites bars. The bars I used to stumble out of and into the sidewalk traffic. But I was still on the wagon despite the constant looming threats to my sobriety.

My wife, Clara, once told me that love was like an equation that couldn't be solved. She was always thoughtful and quiet. Clara had a unique symmetry to her: long curly blonde hair, tall legs, her torso stretched to fit her elongated arms descending into her classical pianist fingers. Clara was poised and attentive almost with a touch of bird to her, light, vivacious, though she was just over forty, and had grown pale in the past several years. Her face was long, no impression of foolishness, rather of extreme alertness; she moved in quick bursts. The most remarkable thing about her voice was how, though naturally soft, it elevated effortlessly, and without inflection. She perched in her chair. Because of that I nicknamed her Birdie.

Clara and I tried to make a family, but it didn't work out.

Why me? Why us?

Those were questions that appeared in my head and struck me. Destroyed me. But they were not just words. They were the blood, the dense absence of physicality and depletion of thought. Those thoughts busted in and caught me off guard.

I opened the window for fresh air; I felt confined in my apartment. I stood there smoking and breathing the still night air. With work and alcohol, it was easy. Avoidance was a trade I'd learned from my father, processing emotions into a sardine can and stuffing them deep down until they went away. True, the blow back was always much worse, but I put up protectors to make it just another moment in my day. I was promoted to Director of Writing Studies. I had to monitor and train the new teachers. Teaching educators to open their hearts to students while sequestering myself felt safe. I stuck my head out the window breathing in the thick cold April air as it burned my lips.

I wished I could anesthetize myself and live without feeling anything. Act automatically without any repercussion of where I was going to land, what I was going to observe, how I was

going to move on, nothing more. But I saw everything in large brushstrokes. I understood and didn't talk. The memory was there, and it remained with me.

Society normalized the stigma against hiding emotions or building an exterior; Clara called it my "husk". She knew that husk was a word that didn't convey how quick and ruthless that process was. One word to sum up and classify the unfathomable. The dry outer covering—a carob pod—protecting the framework. To me, an empty term. Change, transformation, shift: synonyms that appeared to mean the same thing, though the choice of one over the other spoke to a distinct view of the world. They'd all normalized the stigma, keep it in, I thought. *Persevere*, another word that caused me major problems.

I remembered when the doctor announced the existence of possible infertility. The hysteria, the worry, the fear. After the news, we tried to make a baby because they'd told us it would take time and a lot of effort. The various attempts and emotional turmoil became almost fatal—starting treatment, ovarian stimulation, trigger injection, egg retrieval and semen collection, reutilization, embryo transfer, luteal phase, pregnancy test. It was negative—again and again. We got one to stick for four months, but we lost him. That was the official line. The words carried the weight necessary to mold us, to suppress all questioning, I thought.

Barefoot, I walked through the house, I felt the emptiness in my skin. After the last time, the world changed. We tried antidotes, donor semination, and just plain vaginal intercourse, but our attempts were squandered and muted. I remembered articles that spoke of adoption and life after loss, others about acts of self-discovery after events like we had, doctors on TV talking about the success of cytoplasmic transfer, a technique in which cytoplasm from a donor egg was drawn into a pipette containing a single sperm from the male partner, after which that donated cytoplasm and the sperm were injected into the patient's egg. I sighed and lit another cigarette.

I was alone. I moved out to this apartment across the city. Clara stayed in our house. It wasn't just that I still missed her, but there was an emptiness in the apartment that kept me awake. That troubled me. I took a book off the shelf. I turned on the light to read, then turned it off. I touched the scar on my thumb. The incident happened a long time ago and it didn't hurt anymore. It was a groundhog. The small animal was close to the road line. I wanted the animal to have a proper way to pass and gave it back to the earth. I was very young, just starting graduate school, and hadn't known that groundhogs played dead if they were threatened, until the animal bit me and almost hit the bone. Clara couldn't stop laughing while she was driving me to the hospital. She was always waiting for me to do something stupid and that was her moment. After that bite, Clara stopped seeing me as some serious, scholar boy she met in college, and I became human to her. You see, I was accepted to my program with the highest merit-based scholarship offered in North America. That day, we had been tubing on the river in the summer, drinking cans of Coors Light in the sun. Neither my brain nor my general existence impressed her after our attempts at having children, nor did she impress me.

I picked up my phone. There were three missed calls from my mother-in-law. None from my wife.

Unable to bear the air, I decided to shower. I turned on the tap and stuck my head under the hot water. I wanted to erase the distant images, the memories that persisted. The doctor slowly shut the door with the vigor only a negative test could muster. A negative symbol meant death. I remember smelling the cleaning solution in the pump jar at the edge of the bed. The doctor came in with his stethoscope draped around his neck and moved with every inhale through the nostrils and exhaled through pursed lips. He didn't have to say anything. Clara exhaled loudly accompanied by a low moan. The low moan was the sign of defeat, of change.

The moment for a sudden audible inhalation through the mouth became a hope bellied up and lifeless even in our dreams.

The hot water fell onto my back. I sat down on the floor of the shower and slowly shook my head. But I couldn't stop remembering. Groups of people had started filing in and out of the waiting room. The muted TV was on the wall. It was a reminder of something instilled in me to compartmentalize until it went away. It didn't matter where it was from. I tilted my head up so the water fell onto my face.

I got out of the shower and barely dried myself off. In the mirror, I saw there were bags under my eyes. I remembered the riots in countries like China, where people killed each other because of overcrowding, though none of the media outlets reported the news from that angle. It was all about *perspective*. The person who said that the world in some sense would always implode was my father: "The planet is going to be destroyed by humans. You'll see, Son, it's either going to be blown to bits by egomaniacs or all of us are going to die from some virus. Look at what's happening in China, they've already started killing themselves because there are so many people, there's no room for them all. And here, there's still room here, but we're running out of resources. Everything is going to hell." I'd looked at my father almost with pity, an alcoholic as well. But I knew he had been right.

Ever since our final attempt to get pregnant, Clara and I had been having some disagreements, some differences of opinion, not a lot, but enough so that things between us were up in the air, and we had talked about separating, the way people do as if we might try something else to improve things. We needed space, some room to maneuver. We had just gotten to the point where we were wondering how we got there. With everything else going on—politics,

terrorism, antisemitism incidents across U.S. amid Israel-Gaza fighting—our problems seemed minuscule. But they were *our* problems, which counted for something.

There weren't any massive protests or strikes about the matter. I knew colleagues who'd claimed that trial separation worked—in that situation, it was necessary to live. My therapist confirmed that it had a high success rate for some but warned me that it “depends on your goals.”

The benefit was that it was an informal agreement between two spouses to live apart and there were no legal agreements, judges, or lawyers involved. Clara and I were married for seventeen years and had been drifting apart for quite some time with the demands of busy careers, financial stress, and ongoing communication difficulties due to differences in our upbringing and personalities. Clara was from a large family—two brothers and two sisters—who'd all managed to stay close. Her parents were upper middle-class citizens, and her father was the Chancellor for the Father Marquette Catholic Academy, a prestigious private-boarding school, for nearly thirty years.

During the early years of our marriage, we understood each other, and she knew I needed my space and she hers, but I found myself consumed with work. When I got home, I was completely spent, and it was annoying that boundaries were overturned, and no limits were set—our day-to-day debriefing interrupted grading papers and our mandatory dinners felt forced. When we tried for a baby and failed, we had grown weary of ongoing struggles and felt too overwhelmed to decide about staying together or splitting up.

The cold continued to suffocate me. The air was still. I lay down on the couch and tried to sleep. A commercial played again and again in my mind. A young woman who was beautiful but dressed conservatively was putting dinner on the table for her two children and husband. She

looked at the camera and said: “Come and eat, honey!” The whole family smiled and ate their dinner.

Our therapist decided it might be a good idea that we rebranded individually. Clara decided to focus on her art. And I focused on work. Our therapist gave us tips for a trial separation—be honest with each other, set boundaries and expectations, recharge our batteries, and take time to learn more about ourselves. We agreed to meet once a month for couple’s therapy.

I didn’t call it a special situation. I used the technical words to refer to what the separation was: trial separation to enhance a marriage. On the surface, it was an opportunity for us to process and unload our issues in a way for us to understand one another, problem solve, and compromise; on the other hand, I didn’t feel like I wanted to find a solution. If we found solutions to these problems and gave them a name, then we’d be giving them an identity. At that time, I preferred not to call our relationship by any name; I preferred to hide it. It was easier that way. Carry it with me. Was it a question of how to fix a broken life or how broken a life can get before its unfixable?

CHAPTER TWO

I took the long way to work. The road was slushy and muddy from the rain softening winter's lingering snow. It always seemed lengthy to me, a dirt road that ran straight, past miles and miles of empty fields, occasionally animals—cows, sheep, horses—would be in them. The remnants of the iron ore and copper mines reminded me of an old Michigan, one that was far removed. An aborted landscape. Marquette's streets were cold and lonely in the morning. I felt cheated, like I should be getting more out of the drive every day. Old hopes tormented me like phantom limbs, but I hadn't had a drink.

My phone rang. I pulled over and answered the call. It was my mother-in-law, her voice sounded gruff and blighted with a sense of urgency.

"John?" She spoke. "Do you have a minute?"

"Hi, Karen," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm well, John. I just wanted to call and fill you in on everything."

Her lips smacked together with every m- and p- enunciation, pursed with the bright red lipstick she always wore.

"Okay," I said. "How is she?"

"Well, she's going to need more time, she's not ready to move back yet."

"I know this already."

"Well, I wanted to make sure you were aware of her well-being."

"You know, there are terms to this split that we've agreed to. You don't have to update me on her progress. She can call me."

I didn't hear a reply, just a lifted breathing and she hung up. Karen's husband passed away a few years ago. Karen was a devout Catholic and made all her parenting decisions on the basis of a strict morality—no frivolity like cheerleading; no makeup; not dating, ever. Period. She was like an officer when it came to her daughters. Every time the family headed out to church, she inspected the girls. On those mornings, Karen assumed a queenly iciness. Clutching the hands of her daughters, she'd checked each daughter for signs of makeup before allowing her to get in the car, and it was not unusual for her to send Clara back inside to put on a less revealing top.

The university was a double-edged sword for me. It was the smell of the old paint and the 1970s brick that aged like a cheap wine, the hint of wastewater from the sewer outside of my office windows. But, most of all, it was my job.

The desolate attendance of the building forced me to remember, to question, yet again, why I was still in that line of work. I decided to study for my PhD in literature and got a job. My father had approved and been happy about it. But not long after I got the job, I basically lived with my father. The doctors diagnosed him with senile dementia, but I knew he couldn't handle the world anymore, especially since my mother died. It had been that way for a long time. I read many people with dementia suffered an acute depression and gave up on life, others dissociated themselves from reality, some simply committed suicide.

As I drove along the road, I slowly shook my head because I didn't want to remember, but I did. My father talking about the cars that watched over him at night, my father accusing the neighbors of being murderers, my father dancing with my dead mother, my father lost in the fields in his underwear, singing Frankie Valli to a tree, my father in a nursing home, my father's empty stare throughout the day, when I visited.

I entered my office, and something struck me in the chest. It was the smell of the cleaning solution that removed permanent marker from the walls; it choked me. The employees in my office worked in complete silence. At first glance it seemed almost transcendental, a Zen-like silence, but then there was Dr. French, the Department Head, who'd walked by, observing each office. He had cameras all over the office suite.

I went up to Dr. French's office for our Monday meeting. There was never a wait. Invariably his secretary greeted me and served him a coffee in a translucent mug, not bothering to ask if I wanted anything. Dr. French didn't look at people, but instead measured them. He was always smiling. He felt like he was observing people to get a leg up, what he was really doing was removing the façade and trying to read the person deeply, objectively deconstructing the pieces that didn't matter or benefit him. Department Heads were all about numbers and how to capitalize on the dollar—that meant removing the excess fat of the department when needed.

The office was simple, sterile. I looked through the office's high windows to take in the view. I was in time to see three students emerge below, where they continued their conversation on the Student Center steps. The forsythia crept up to the window glowing yellow like a flaming bush. The tall bookshelves resembled a nineteenth century law office—leather-bound and earth tones lined floor-to-ceiling. On the wall hung a cheap recreation of Candy Chang's *Before I Die*. I'd seen the print many times, but it was only that day that I noticed it was originally a chalkboard for people to write something down. It was interactive art with the sole intention for people to create their own paths and identities—put a specific name to something.

“John, I'm glad you're here. Have a seat. With your new position comes some new responsibilities.”

Dr. French talked, recited, as though he were revealing a series of indisputable truths to a large audience. His lips glistened with saliva; they were the lips of a frog or toad. There was a dampness to him, a zigzag to his movements. There was something uncomfortable about him. All I could do was look at my boss in silence, because essentially it was the same speech every time: somebody did something out of order. I thought that Dr. French needed to reaffirm reality through words, as though words created and maintained the world in which he lived.

I understood the admonition. Dr. French was a fund-raiser, the face of the department; in his first years in the job, he'd mounted the most successful capital campaign in the department's history. But the economy of recent years—collapse, crisis, recession—had eroded the department's gains and scared off the donors. His influence on the trustees, once a boundless way into the upper echelon of administration, was now on the wane.

Silently, I imagined the walls of the office slowly beginning to disappear, the floor falling through, and we were vanishing into thin air.

Dr. French's secretary came in with a huge folder. He touched the curriculum vitae as though they were ceremonial objects, explaining how to avoid the duds, which happened because instructors got lazy when they were underpaid, which therefore spawned under-trained future faculty. That was the first time Dr. French showed me the folder. I looked at the CVs that had been placed in front of me but didn't touch them.

"I picked out a couple that sounded promising to me, but I'll give you the reigns on this one. Remember, they need to accommodate to *our* style and *our* pay, or they walk. Understand? The interviews are this afternoon."

"I can do that," I said, swallowing my pride.

As I grabbed the folder, flipping through the CVs, pictures clipped to the front, one applicant stuck out above the rest: Elizabeth Delphine, not by credentials or proficiency, but by her beauty and familiarity. She had features that it appeared she took pride in maintaining, her long curly blonde hair, her heart-shaped face, her wide forehead and pronounced cheekbones gradually decreased in width so that the jawline was the narrowest.

Dr. French pointed out, “There is a process, almost a game, to all of this. We just need to know how to keep our heads down and move forward.” His smile never faded, Dr. French exaggerated the pronunciation of that sentence, and with it ended his speech, following it was a measured silence.

I knew I didn’t have to say anything to him, just agree, but there were words that struck at my brain, accumulated, caused damage. I wished I could say *sadism, manipulative, gaslighting*—colonized to perform under the fear of being eradicated.

But I remained silent and smiled.

Dr. French never accompanied me out, but that time we walked downstairs together.

We walked down the exit hallway from his wing of the building. Dr. French stopped and said, “Keep up the good work.”

Whenever I left his office, I needed a cigarette. Fortunately, I had a good rapport with most of the instructors. A young female adjunct instructor was outside as well. Inevitably she came over to tell me horrific things about Dr. French. Rumor had it Dr. French had a predilection for scotch and younger women. He headhunted employees and maintained a particular reign of terror and it worked.

I finished my cigarette and felt relief. But then I questioned, yet again, why I exposed myself to this. The answer was always the same. I knew why I did that work, because I knew I

was the best and they paid me accordingly, because I didn't know how to do anything else, and because I knew my father's health depended on it.

There were times when I wish I didn't have to bear that weight.

CHAPTER THREE

As I was leaving work, I called my father's nursing home before going into my couple's therapy session. A woman named Regina answered. Regina was a woman who dealt with things that interested her with an exaggerated passion. Her voice was optimistic, but beneath it I sensed a tiredness. She told me that my father, whom she called Dick, was doing fine. I told her I'd stop by for a visit soon, that I'd already transferred the money for this month.

Regina called me "Sweetie," and said, "it's okay, Sweetie, Dick is stable, he has his moments, but he's stable."

"By moments, do you mean episodes?"

"Don't worry. It's nothing we can't handle."

The call ended and I sat in my car for a few minutes. I looked for my sister's number, and was about to call her, but then I changed my mind.

Dr. Vicki Williams was our Marriage Counselor. Her practice was in an old building down the road from one of my old drinking hangouts: A Clean Well, Lighted Place.

I entered Dr. William's office. Stephanie, her assistant, apologized for being on the phone, said she'd be with me in just a second. Stephanie wore her hair fashionably short, usually moussed up in playful curls; it always looked wet. She had a flushed face and a long thin neck protruding from her white shift dress. Two of her fingers had thimbles on them to grip pages.

I looked around the office, the desk in the corner, the Scandinavian armchairs, and in front of us, the big burgundy Victorian armchair. I thought it looked out of place. The two windows showed the tops of the maple trees—red leaves making their way out of the tiny dormant branches. A bulky mahogany desk stood in the corner of the room with a large calendar

placed in the middle and papers neatly sorted on the corner. The bookshelves were color-coded and from floor to ceiling, built into the wall.

Vicki was smooth. She moved through the air as if gravity was just a construct. Able to control the full magnitude of her body, she moved through people, around things.

When I met Vicki, I thought it was a mistake to work with her, but I agreed to these monthly meetings. She was efficient and one of the few therapists we tried who was able to resolve several problems with little expectation of a full recovery. Her intelligence wasn't the type that needed refinement.

I admired the new family pictures she had on her shelves. We shook hands. I didn't look her in the eye. She was wearing jeans that appeared brand new, tight to her legs. White sneakers. She had an ironed yellow shirt and her red hair pulled back into a ponytail. I didn't say a word. I knew the next steps considering we'd been doing this for almost a year now.

She saw Clara walk in with her cell phone in hand, a device Vicki and Clara both relied on in awkward moments, though I'd never had a reason to invest a large amount of time in one.

Vicki started into our session as she crossed her leg over the other in one large windmill swoop. Clara was uncharacteristically skittish, energetic. She sort of pranced into the office. I was glowering, looking down.

We sat in our usual places. Vicki looked us over, trying to get out in front of us. There was tension. We were wired, nervous. Our last session was not great. Vicki seemed like she was just barely holding onto us bulls and trying to herd us back to safer ground.

“So what's going on?” Vicki said. “I sense something is—”

“As a matter of fact, there is something going on,” Clara said. “I'm going to a conference at NYU. I'm going to be gone for the long weekend starting on Wednesday. So, the idea was that

John would take our dog, Maggie, while I'm away. I was thinking that it would probably work best if he stayed at the house, but John doesn't seem to like the idea. And didn't think to tell me until two days before I left. So, we need your help resolving these issues."

"The conference doesn't go over the weekend," I said evenly. "It runs Wednesday through Friday morning. Clara is staying over in New York."

"Apparently John did some research on the back end," Clara said. "That's alright; it's predictable. Just like you said Vicki."

It was predictable and human. Clara didn't seem deeply upset I did that.

"Your friend Dave is staying with you at the conference, and you two are staying the whole weekend?" Vicki asked.

"I don't know that it's anyone's business, but yes, something like that," Clara said.

"Just to be clear, we all agreed dating others was okay," Vicki said.

I flinched. Vicki noticed.

I went to college with Dave. He was heavysset, and usually had a few days' growth of beard, a double chin, a ruddy nose lined with thick brown veins. Dave dressed in sartorial suits: single-breasted jackets with jetted pockets—that corporate-office-look or fine dining date ensemble. Hugo Boss, Ralph Lauren, and the like. It reminded me of a bloated American Psycho-character, an executive at an international import/export firm. He divided his time between Marquette and New York. Clara met him on a conference she attended.

"Can I ask a personal question?" I said.

Clara sat up in her chair, predicting where this was going. Vicki seemed to notice.

"I don't know, John," Clara said.

"Just one question I'd like to raise," I said.

“What’s your question?” Vicki asked.

“I would like to know if Dave has told his wife about you, Birdie.”

Clara stood up.

“That is ridiculous,” she said. “I can’t believe you. That’s it. This session is done.”

“Sit down,” Vicki said. She commanded her office, her chair, her rules. And Clara listened.

“Why is that such an outlandish question?” Vicki asked.

“It’s...” Clara struggled for a second. “It’s just a way for John to insult Dave. *He hasn’t told his wife. He has been divorced before. He doesn’t see his kids regularly. Blah Blah Blah.* Every implication is directed as an attack to make him look bad.”

“I have never asked about Dave’s kids,” I said.

I could tell Vicki was thinking: *Oh, John, stop it. Too much. Drop the little issues.*

“I am not going to take this shit from you. I will leave,” Clara said. She was beginning to rise out of her chair, again. Vicki flagged the action and lead her back down to the tarmac.

“What does it matter if Dave has told his wife about anything?” Vicki said, looking at me.

“Okay,” I said. “Look. I just looked up the conference and saw that it was only a few days. It’s not rocket science. I just googled it. His wife can do that same thing. Is she going to be curious about Dave’s whereabouts on her end?”

“Why would you care to think about that?” Vicki said.

I shut down, drew into myself, and looked out of the window.

“You had something on your mind,” Vicki said. “Let’s hear it.”

“I thought it might drive his wife crazy.” I said, quietly.

“So she goes crazy,” Vicki said. “Isn’t that a problem Dave needs to worry about?”

“Unless she gets physical,” I said. “Unless she wants revenge.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Clara said. “You’re worried Dave’s wife is going to hurt me?”

“No,” I said. I paused, thinking over what I was going to say. Knowing where this was going. Vicki had a look on her face like she was thinking, *go on, say it, you’re scared*. I felt she was pushing me, directing me. “I was worried she might kill our dog.”

“Fuck,” Clara said. “Are you drinking again?”

It was an outlandish statement. But that was what I needed to say. To get my point across.

“What made you think that?” Vicki asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I think you do,” Vicki said. Her voice was like that of a scolding mother who knows you’re lying. It seemed, Vicki was a master at the trick, of her craft.

“Okay,” I said. “I had a fantasy about killing Dave.”

There was a heated silence where time passed but the facts refused to settle and recede. I ran my hands through my hair, breathed into my abdomen, circled the room with my eyes, and listened to Vicki clear her throat before speaking.

“But you wouldn’t do that, would you?” Vicki said.

I had been looking down, now I looked up at Vicki and then over at Clara.

“No, of course not,” I said.

Usually, Vicki didn’t pay much attention to the world beyond her small office. The illicit meeting in upstate Michigan. Where Clara was going for a long weekend. What Dave’s wife knew. Everything happened outside of her office’s bounds.

To Vicki, the important story was what happened between us, inside of her office.

It was what she had to focus on, it was the story, it was what was really happening. Of course, it was tempting to get caught up in the peripheral drama. The sex, the betrayals, the hijinks! The soap opera that was life. But her true passion was there, inside her office.

“I don’t mind taking Maggie,” I said, traversing the killing of the animal.

Vicki allowed the subject change.

“Can I say something? Clara said, moving away from the subject as well. “John says he doesn’t mind taking Maggie. Like it’s something he chooses to do. It’s his dog too. This choice is not optional. Why are we treating it that way?”

“I want to take care of Maggie, Birdie” I said. “Okay?”

“Then do it, and don’t complain about it,” Clara said.

“Can we just back up for a moment,” Vicki said. “Clara, you said it was predictable that John would look into the conference information. If you knew this fact, then why didn’t you tell him the whole story up front?”

“It’s none of his business,” Clara said.

“But here we are talking about it, both of you upset,” Vicki said. “What would have happened if you’d just said, “Look, I’m going to a conference in New York with Dave, can you take Maggie for a few days?”

“Am I supposed to tell John about my love life? Clara said.

“Directness is the cure for a vilified past.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not sure saying what you’re doing while he’s got Maggie covers your love life or transparency,” Vicki said. “But anyway, if you had told John what was going on, then he wouldn’t be following you.”

“I’m not stalking her,” I said.

“Whatever you want to call it,” Clara said. “What do you call it then, John?”

I didn’t answer. So, we called it that.

“I’d like to go back to my prior question,” Vicki said. “John, how would you have felt if Clara had told you she was going on this long weekend with a friend?”

“I would have been angry,” I said. Then I hesitated, thinking. “Okay, I would have been really hurt. But at least I would have felt the trust was there.”

“Am I supposed to tell John every time I see someone?” Clara asked. “We are not living together anymore. I want a life of my own.”

“You have Maggie during the week, right? And if I remember correctly, this weekend you’re going to New York whereas normally John doesn’t see Maggie regularly. Unless he comes by the house when you’re at work. Have you ever asked John to take Maggie for you? Is this the first time?”

“Yes, it is,” Clara said.

“So, this is sort of a big deal, isn’t it,” Vicki said.

“Yes, that is a big deal, I admit that. It’s the first time he’d had Maggie alone for four days in his life or took responsibility for anything. But I don’t want to explain my life to him. It’ll create more issues.”

“I think all of this is connected,” Vicki said.

It seemed Vicki touched a nerve. Why was she so defensive? I'm not sure exactly what's going on, but Vicki seemed to be working an angle.

We all sat for a few moments, letting everything subside.

"You said you wanted John to watch Maggie at your house?" Vicki said finally, "Why was that, Clara? Why not his apartment?"

"To give John some back up," Clara said. "We have a big house, and we have good neighbors. John is in a one-bedroom apartment. At his place, it's sort of like camping."

"Why do you have a one-bedroom apartment, John?" Vicki said, looking at John.

"It's all crazy," John said. "At first, Clara planned to move downstate. We were thinking about selling our house, but now she's staying. I had moved in with my dad for a little bit. I came upon this apartment that was near our house. I think there was a sign up somewhere. I just rented it. I wasn't thinking. I was just looking for a place to stay, by myself. I looked at it for five minutes and told the moving guys to grab my things from our garage and take them to my new apartment. Most of Clara's stuff was packed, even. They were in the process of shifting Clara's stuff to the other side of the garage. But you know what the movers said?"

Amazingly, I smiled for that moment.

"I got to know the movers over the course of that day. Nice guys. They said, 'are you leaving her all of the good things from the house? The piano, the couch, nice chairs.' I said she had a larger place. Oddly, they asked why she had the bigger place. It wasn't as if I was giving up all my stuff to her. It was like I was on a large boat and the ship was going down, and all the stuff on the ship was just kind of floating away."

The mood had changed for me. I wasn't as angry anymore. I had accepted it all: Clara's weekend in New York, her new friend, our separation. For this small moment, I finally had perspective.

"From a practical point of view, it might have been better if I'd told John about my plans for the weekend," Clara said. "If he was going to find out about it anyway."

"From a practical point of view, you're going to want to know Maggie is in good hands while you're gone, aren't you?" Vicki said.

That caught Clara up. It seemed Vicki thought that Clara might not have thought about the issue at all.

"Yes, I will," Clara said.

"How are you planning on doing that?"

"I guess I'll text John. To see how things are going. Or he'll text me."

"And if there is a big problem, then what?" Vicki said.

"Then I guess he calls me," Clara said.

And the same thing happened between Dave and his wife, I thought. Only, he was lying.

"Yes, I should have told John what was happening this weekend," Clara said. "I see it now."

She looked over at me.

"Is there anything you want to know about the weekend?" Clara asked me.

"I know enough," I said.

CHAPTER FOUR

I got up early the next morning because I had to stop by our house to grab Maggie. Clara stayed at her mother's place for the night before she left for an early flight that morning to New York.

The house seemed elaborate at first, but it was a quaint little house dovetailed to the curve of the bay before it turned out to Lake Superior—a craftsman with a cheerful red and white theme, with the back of the house overlooking the water. The lawn started at the road and followed the straight shot to the lake, jumping over sun dials and flagstone walkways and gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though it was part of the foundation, it exposed some of the detailed features of the structure. The front was broken by a line of double-hung windows with stained wood interiors. Casement windows surrounded the sides of the house—glowing now with reflected brass hardware—wide open to the cool afternoons, and plenty of room on the covered front porch embellished with rocking chairs, seasonal décor, and custom lighting. The heavy tapered columns supported the pitched gable roofs and overhanging eaves with exposed rafters and beams.

The house was previously owned by a Finnish woman and her dog. She was the wife of one of the last proprietors of the iron ore mine in town, not far from where the house was located. The neighbors said she used to sing Finnish folk songs in the summers while she made the beds and cooked breakfast.

The interior of the house was inviting and warm thanks to the woodwork and natural materials. The living room was a dark lacquer design with built bookshelves, a floor-to-ceiling

fireplace, and a series of leather chairs and couches drawing a visual and physical connection between the living room and porch.

I went into a bedroom that was empty except for a desk and a twin bed against its center wall. A jewelry box stood on Clara's desk with several rings: a big amethyst, a silver spoon handle, and an assortment of what looked like mood rings. I touched the bed's maple wood. On the headboard, there was a drawing of a bear and deer running. They were surrounded by squirrels and butterflies and trees and a pronounced sun. There were no clouds or humans. It had been our guest bed and then it was going to be our child's bed someday. Products with sweet, innocent animals on them were hardly ever sold anymore. An heirloom from Clara's mother. They were replaced by flowers, fairies, and gnomes. I knew I had to get rid of it, to destroy and burn it before my wife came back. But I couldn't.

We moved into this house shortly after I accepted my position at the university. The house was sold to us for cheap. We hadn't given it much thought, at first, but we slowly grew to love the place. We were in our early thirties. The neighbors noticed the rings on our hands and started bringing gifts and welcome-to-the-neighborhood meals. We were decently isolated, but the surrounding residents kept a close tab on one another—an elongated gated community if you will.

Mrs. Richardson lived in the next house down the street. Our houses were separated by tall pine trees. She seemed nice enough, and so did her husband before he passed away. I left a stack of twenty-dollar bills on the jewelry box for Maggie's vet bill.

Big Bay Road was one long line of old craftsmen homes from the twenties. Standing on the road, you would not have seen these homes. The lots were long and narrow, backing up to the bay. From outside, if you saw anything, you could see one front door, one front-door light,

one-mailbox at the road, and a house number on the mailbox. You might, perhaps, spot meters, but those were usually hidden by fake landscaping rocks, per city ordinance. Only if you came up the driveway would you see the two inner doors, one leading to the apartment above the garage, one to our walk-in basement. The front door was up the stairs and across the porch. Every house held families that worked at the university or some other professional status in the town. They had been elected that way for over a century. This designation allowed the city planners to preserve the appearance of the street, as everyone knew neighborhoods with less desirable homes. It was an aesthetic sliced out of a long forgotten gilded age.

Our section of Marquette was like that. There were rules, specific unofficial rules, an unendorsed Homeowners Association, about what you could and could not do, as I began to learn when we settled into our new place. We were required to maintain the appearance of our architecture and the integrity of our land. I learned that maintaining a pole barn required regular stabilization to ensure the posts did not rot from the harsh winters by creating back up steel cables and wall sheathing. That helped with wind resistance as well. There was a large hedge at the edge of our property we were required to sustain. I learned that we were to place our garbage cans behind the hedges on Friday mornings to avoid the unsightly spectacle of trash cans cluttering the side of the street as if that was possible on such a long stretch of road. Large trucks, each piloted by a man in an orange work suit, zipped down to each house to collect the garbage in the privacy of the front yard, ferrying it to a much larger truck idling at the busier road down one mile away. We got used to it eventually, just as we got used to the detached processes that accompanied living in this neighborhood—again to preserve the street view. Later, when we went downstate for two weeks to visit family, we learned that an unmown lawn would

result in a polite but stern letter from our neighborhood representative, Mr. George Taft, whom we politely coined “The Neighborhood Watch.”

I walked through the small foyer to the kitchen.

I was drinking coffee when I heard the horn of a truck outside of the house’s front door. It startled me and I almost dropped the coffee mug, burning myself.

My house was isolated. The closest neighbors were a couple miles away. To get to it, you’d have to open a gate, which I thought remained locked, and followed the road lined on both sides with pine trees. I’m surprised I never noticed the car before if it had been there. Maggie used to chase after approaching cars and bark at them.

I moved down to the front door and stared at the white pine trees that surrounded our driveway like a small canopy. Someone was clapping and calling my name, “Hello, sir? I’ve got a package,” the driver said. “This place is hard to find.”

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I can take it. Thank you.”

I signed without thinking. The package was addressed to Clara from Dave.

I thought, *why would Dave be sending something to Birdie?*

The man handed me the package and then walked over to his truck. He closed the back, got in, and drove off. The truck—already battered—pattered away down the driveway, toward the road, where the trees were closer together and the yard narrowed in focus.

I stood there not knowing what to do, and looked at the truck driving away, confused. I wondered what it was. I shook the box and it felt light, something small and soft. I tugged on the lip of the box top to peek in, but it was taped too well. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew what I wanted to do. I moved submissively. I tightened my shoulders and held out my other hand to the opposite lip. But the box, again, didn’t have an edge on the other side for me to lift. So, I

walked inside to grab a knife. If I cut the tape well enough, I could just put another piece of packing tape along the original tape strip—Birdie wouldn't notice the difference. As I cut down the strip of tape, I knew I should have felt like I was betraying her trust. The flaps opened like a blossoming flower; each flap sprang forward.

Inside the box was a pair of red baby shoes.

CHAPTER FIVE

The toughest part about driving into the city was that I had to go into my old neighborhood, because I had to see our old hangouts, because I had to drive past my father's nursing home, because the buildings and the plazas and the streets remind me that Clara tried and was successful with Dave, because I found it hard to believe life was growing all around me and I remained static like a dormant seed.

I went to see Holly. We dated in college and worked together at the university. I didn't know what else to do. Holly recently divorced her second husband. Her first husband died in a motorcycle accident shortly after college. The second husband turned out to be an abusive asshole.

It had been a while since we last spoke. We'd seen each other at work but didn't talk much. We worked in different buildings. But she said to call any time. So, I did. We went to see a movie together and afterward stood outside the theater talking about the movie, shuffling our feet, bantering. Rekindling an old flame was strange territory unto itself, an energy field with laws and conditions all its own. We saw each other every now and then, typically certain things were understood as exes, but I felt like this was a raw experiment. It felt like we were dating again, the potential for groping and fumbling, with looming skepticism. There was no getting past the fact that it could blow up in our faces, that everything about the two of us was tentative, primal, merely conjectural. I was in a sea of ambiguity in which I needed to swim or sink. But she was hard to read. With a constantly changing life, it was necessary to adapt to new struggles, new measures, new tastes. Holly was the first and the quickest to do so, because she handled people with a sometimes-chilling detachment.

It was a cold night; spring was not well advanced yet. People's optimism about the weather didn't arrive until closer to June. We all remained bundled the way we should. Holly and I were no exception—she wore an orange cardigan, and I an old black sweatshirt. We walked with a destination in mind, but kept moving, and soon fell into a constant motion of roaming the streets talking about our past relationships. Both of us stayed in town for college and eventually got jobs in the same department, though she worked in a different building. We did not hold hands or even link arms but applied ourselves in earnest to the immediate task, the task of keeping each other company, with ongoing series of personal issues and frank admissions.

“You know, Clara used to be fat,” I said as we crossed on to Front Street, along the bay.

“It happens,” she said.

“They used to call her cankles.”

“Rough. How long did that last?”

“Till she was about eighteen. That's when she shot up and grew into her body. Well, kind of.”

“Eighteen, jeez. At that age, we were working at your dad's plant. Remember, you stole cigarettes from the gas station across the street.”

“Never did such a thing.”

“You most certainly did. The owner thought it was me.”

“Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned anything.”

“How do you mean?”

“I struck a sore spot.”

“But you didn't, you know, give them to little kids or anything like that.”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I just drove around. Picked up friends from the dorms.

Pretended for a while that I was someone I wasn't.”

“Did you ever get caught?”

“Never did. Lucky, I guess.”

There was something that struck a nerve in me. I hadn't thought about my youth in years. But right away I saw Holly and smiled, though seeing her was always complicated. I assumed she didn't have anyone to talk to, any one to share her thoughts with. I also believed that Holly would be willing to lie down with me again and that she'd be just as efficient and distant as she'd been when I wasn't yet a man. Or not. Now she'd be vulnerable, opening her eyes so that I could enter in through the cold.

Holly and I were two of the only professors to stay on when most left. I knew she was indifferent to the world. The only thing she could do was teach writing and she did this with the coolness of a Fulbright scholar.

The angsty energy of the students, the cold, sterile air in which smells were suspended, the white ceiling tiles intended to affirm structural hygiene, the podium with years of dirt and a rounded base from constant movement, it was all the same to her. For Holly, teaching, researching, grinding, writing, revision, workshop, once something blank and lifeless, was an automatic task, but it was done with precision. Hers was a passion that was contained, calculated.

But people usually didn't know what she thought about matters, her stoicism, her shield. Except for me.

She usually had a teaching assistant, Greg, connected to her hip. I'd never known him to say a word. The assistant did the drudge work; he did most of the monotonous grading for the composition courses and attended conferences she couldn't make. His gaze was like that of a

dog: unconditional loyalty and potential ferocity. At first, I didn't know the assistant's name, since Holly never addressed him; he often made himself scarce when I came to visit.

"I'm not surprised," I said. "My dad was pretty oblivious to most of what I did."

"Mine too."

"Before my mom died, my parents went through cycles of not speaking to each other. One time it lasted a whole year."

"How can that even be possible?"

"They would talk. Well, to me. Just not to each other. And if there was nobody around, if it was just us kids, then sooner or later it would be them talking through me to one another."

"So, would you comply?"

"Yes, I would. I would repeat the message. I guess I was too young to figure out that I could stay out of it."

"When I was real little," she said, "my parents were the same way. Only slightly different."

"Oh, yeah," I said."

"He hit her, and she'd hit him back. High bullying situations. Always the same."

"I never knew that."

"I never talked about it."

We both went silent and searched for our phones. Our pictures of each other changed again slightly.

"Did your dad bully you?" I asked.

"Not really. I was in the background," she said.

“Well, at least he didn’t hang out in the basement in a lazy boy where his booze stash was. You’d hear him muttering, and you knew that by dinnertime he’d be drunk. And you’d be creeping around, so you didn’t bother him until dinner.”

“Rough,” she said, still adjusting.

“It was a long time ago. He’s basically a vegetable now. And she’s dead. And now Clara is dead to me too.”

“Relationships suck; they’re so complicated,” she said.

“In my family I think the hardest part was the pretense,” I said. “I mean, a lot of times things were great, but even when they weren’t, you could count on him to go to work, dinner would be on the table at six, we’d all sit down, they’d talk to me, and they’d go to bed every night, together. Stuff would happen and we’d pretend it didn’t happen. I never thought I’d take it with me to my own relationships.”

“What’s the problem exactly?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Clara isn’t great at monogamy.”

“Monogamy wasn’t designed for humans. Humans weren’t designed for monogamy. However you want to frame it.”

“You think so?”

“You have proof.”

“Did your parents have that problem?”

“Actually, no.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, I did,” she said. “My ex-husband had one love and that was whiskey.”

“That has nothing to do with monogamy.”

“Everybody cheats sooner or later, one way or another.”

The exchange caught my attention, made me stop and think. But the alarm bells that should have been sounding in my head were silent. I thought, Holly said strange things sometimes. Usually, I wanted the visit to be over with as soon as possible because her intensity used to make me nervous. But I wanted to pursue her. And Holly kept me there like she always could—just like when I started working at my father’s plant and she brought me to the stock room after everybody had left.

As we headed toward the water, past the iron ore dock, past the banks and shops and city hall, there was an overwhelming sense of walking through a tunnel, the single point of view created by the bay and the moon, the silver sky at the end of the dock with its magnetic pull forward. We sat down on a bench. She pulled a bottle of wine out of her bag. I talked about my mother dying, how I devoted myself to my father’s care because he was dying anyway, how Clara and I were inseparable until we weren’t anymore.

“Dave is yellow and stinks of alcohol,” I said. “His hands shake, and he can’t control his bladder. He used to piss himself at parties. The day my suite mates carried him out of the house, I had to put the sofa out in the trash.”

“You must have been a saint to do that,” she said.

“I should have left her years ago.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Some kind of perverse loyalty? Who the fuck knows? Marriage is a confusing institution.”

“I get that.”

“I suppose you know better than anybody. Twice over.”

“Not exactly. I lost one husband and the other was a bust. My whole family hated him. Well, my dad and brothers did. Not my mother.”

“Why not?”

“I guess she went through the same thing. I don’t know. Maybe it had to do with her disappointments in life. My mother was a trained singer, but she never got beyond the church choir. Her dream was to move to New York, but she settled for my father and humming show tunes around the house. She’s a little zany. So, I suppose I inherited that, let’s say.”

“Aren’t girls supposed to take after their mother?”

“Unfortunately, in my case, that’s what they say.”

“*Unfortunately*, I’m like my father.”

The wind came in strong off the bay and the air felt thick with humidity. Rain. Holly knew a place we could go for shelter. She led me to a storage shed in the park with a wooden table, chairs, and stacks of cleaning resources and lawn care equipment on shelves around the periphery. I couldn’t stand the smell of bleach, the stench of the cleaning solutions, sterilizing the building, it made me think of the hospital, the reek made me want to vomit. It made me feel sick and miserable. She asked me to take a seat, removed the bottle of wine from her purse, screwed off the top, and took a swig. I wanted to drink the wine so I could look her in the eye, so she might remember that time when we were undergrads, at the stamping plant, the way she pushed me onto the table and lowered my pants without saying a word. The way she lifted her skirt, which was tight but stretchy, climbed onto the table where I laid naked, and carefully lowered herself, supporting herself with the filing cabinets on each side of the table.

It’s not that I thought Holly was dangerous, or conniving, or that I pictured her naked, or that I’d only met a few people like her and that all of them had been impossible to decipher. It

was more that I wanted the wine so I could listen to her calmly, because her words drove at my brain. They're frigid, stabbing words, when she said, "No," and grabbed my arms and held them against the table forcefully, after I'd tried to touch her. Or when I went up to her the next day and she wrote off our exchange with no explanation, no affection.

I looked closely as she finished another hefty swig of wine. Holly had an arrested beauty about her. It disturbed me that there was something vulnerable under her cold exterior that she took great care to maintain. There was something admirable in her artificiality—her coping mechanism.

I didn't drink the wine. But I wanted to.

CHAPTER SIX

After work, I'd always spent the night walking around the city. That way I saved myself from falling back into my old habits; it was the way I stayed on the defense. But Elizabeth Delphine's introductory meeting was at six in the afternoon, so I had to stay in the office. Her hiring interview had been via phone. I was nervous. I recognized her name. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I hadn't taught her before, the rolodex in my head wasn't landing on a particular page.

I opened my office door to the foyer. Elizabeth was sitting in the chair reading a book, not noticing me at first despite the creak of the old pine door. The water was almost empty in the dispenser. She prodded her cheek with her thumb as she read a tough passage. She saw me, lifted her head up, and tossed her curly blonde hair from her chest to her back. Her shoulders were modest and gently sloping. Similar soft limbs and graceful fingers to Clara.

I bathed her in the most charming smile I could muster. Still, I felt jittery, as if addressing an authority-wielding elder as opposed to someone little over a decade younger than me.

Elizabeth tapped her foot against the warped maple floorboards of my office foyer on the second floor of Sill Hall, swirled a last drop of her water bottle. It was the last afternoon of April, the third anniversary of my tenure.

"Hi Elizabeth," I said. "Come on in." What a strange thing love was. I met an excruciatingly beautiful creature, one who seemed too well formed to have come from our imperfect error-prone conception process.

Besides the love seat, my office contained two wooden-spindle-backed chairs, two wooden filing cabinets, a credenza with materials, and a desk I used to keep my dark liquor in.

The built-in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were filled with leather-bound volumes of various disciplines, most of which were for show, alongside rows of green and yellow binders related to the business of NMU's writing program, and hidden speakers fastened to the corners of the shelves. I kept my more colorful collection of fiction and World War II nonfiction in my study at home, along with the handful of truly valuable books I owned, a first edition Hemingway *Winner Take Nothing* and a few limited-edition Fitzgerald and Twain novels as well.

But my most prized possession, my picture of NHL hall of famer, Steve Yzerman, was above the chair Elizabeth was in. She sank deeper into the leather, scratched at the cuticles on her fingers, glared down at the lone melting candle I lit to rid the office of that cleaning solution smell.

"Midnight Moon," she said. "One of my favorites."

I sat at my desk. The chill started coming off the windows at my back and reminded me of having a beer and a hotdog at the bar, before driving down to watch the NMU vs. Michigan Tech ice hockey game from the university suite.

I cleared my throat. "Now that we cleared the business out of the way, I like to get to know the faculty members before they start. You know, answer any questions, address any concerns, that kind of thing."

Elizabeth met my eyes steadily, "I love that approach. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. These kinds of things can be so formal and nerve-racking."

I understood the feeling. I was once in her shoes, the face of a starving academic. My first year I was a fund-raiser, teacher, student, and scholar—boundless energy, but was gently on the wane. My father started showing signs of his dementia around that time.

“And now,” she said. “I’m here. Ready to put all these new initiatives to work. I have some experience with inventory at my last position, but I can fill in for anything that you need. I worked with several student groups at Warren-Wilson. I’d love to rediscover campus for all that it is. I haven’t been here in a couple years.”

I’d been looking closely at Elizabeth—the same applicant’s CV and picture I had picked out of the stack when I first looked through the pool. But she didn’t need to know that.

“The students,” said Elizabeth, “they live in a weird world. But I am close enough in age to be able to relate to them.

I slid out a water bottle from my fridge, wondering what else Elizabeth found strange. Was it strange for a director to show so much interest in an adjunct faculty member? To invite the faculty member for an introduction? I didn’t do that for all my new hires. I usually did it in a group setting.

“That’s marvelous,” I said. “How long were you here before you left?”

“My scholarship only covered four years,” she said.

“Scholarship?” I asked. “I didn’t see that on your resume.”

“Yes, well. I don’t really like to mention it. I think it puts me at a disadvantage.”

“May I ask what it was?”

“It’s the Orphan Foundation Scholarship. I won an essay contest about my life. Something I don’t typically mention in detail.”

“That’s okay. You have a right to your privacy, but I think it’s quite the achievement to hail from that background.”

“How long have you been working here?” Elizabeth asked.

I stared up at the bookshelf, “A little over a decade now.”

“I love Steve Yzerman,” she said, pointing above her shoulder at the picture of him on my wall.” I used to play on the club team when I was a student here. It was fun, but I wasn’t very good. Got to travel around the U.P., Wisconsin, and Minnesota though. It also helped me get a roommate.”

Roommate! Yes, of course, I remembered: how I’d been enlisted by the Admissions Office, six years ago, to convince Elizabeth to take a roommate from a similar background. The roommate was a late admittance and supposedly some kind of hockey phenom from a similar background, former foster youth. Although, hockey was an expensive sport, the player was far enough north to have hockey readily available on outside platforms. I was serving on an organization for independent, non-traditional students, part of my tenure path requirements. I didn’t typically like special treatment for athletes and didn’t necessarily see how it would help a former orphan, but I complied. The phenom eventually started the National Women’s Hockey League, and the other was Elizabeth, my newest employee.

I had the opportunity to chair the committee, which meant I got to read some of the essays. I admired the elegance of Elizabeth’s writing, the breadth of her reading. I don’t remember much about her student application, test scores, or GPA, but that was all strictly business, or had seemed so at the time. I typically avoided entanglements with students, and one within the department definitely never crossed my mind.

“He’s my favorite.” I said. I tried to look at her, but my eyes couldn’t focus. I was nervous.

It was late, a thick rain started falling, and the hallways were quiet. I was immersed; Elizabeth was alert.

She looked beautiful, beautiful in a way that a Jolie Blonde might be beautiful, the dark green branches of the old oak tree outside my office window formed with the sky and framed the young blonde so the brown paisley filigree of the chair retraced and revived its century long lapse in life. Elizabeth had a timelessness to her, a patina. She had the sort of green northern Irish skin; her eyes were blue and hazel around the pupil, and she'd looked closer to a Spaniard despite what her dirty blonde hair represented. And of course, the fragility of her past only increased her appeal.

I hesitated to say anything. The peaceful rain, smooth and chilled. My impulse was to move toward her chair and offer her some kind of drink, to bless and thank her for applying to the job. To give me something to look forward to every day. However, this feeling was counteracted by the fear that whatever gesture I made seemed exaggerated and inappropriate. Finally, I moved from my office chair to a closer one to her. I walked past the desk, feeling as if I were committing some tiny but unforgiveable crime of caution and sat down in the adjacent chair beside the window.

“How did the meeting with the trustees go?” she said.

“What?” I said.

“The meeting with the trustee you mentioned earlier.”

I smiled. “Yes, right.” I said. “I think we’re on to something.”

“I feel comfortable talking here,” Elizabeth paused with the obvious scare of inconveniencing me. “Usually, I’m not.”

She had a wide heart-shaped face and pushed at her cuticles, or what remained of them, out of nervousness. It appeared she was on the fence: half with indignation toward the interview process of introverts, half with the ease of conversation calming her nerves.

“Great. I’m glad you feel comfortable,” I said, feeling a little more at ease with my decision to change chairs closer to her.

“I love your library of books,” she said. “I’ve always been obsessed with color coordinating books, but my ex-boyfriend wanted them in alphabetical order. Naturally, that didn’t work out,” she said, laughing.

“I’m sorry to hear you are no longer together.” I said, suppressing a smile.

“No, no. It was for the best.”

“What do you like to read?”

“I like a lot of contemporary stuff, feminist criticism, historical fiction, but my favorite is Ernest Hemingway, which is an oxymoron with Feminist-anything.”

“Really? I have a first edition book of short stories of his at home,”

“Which one?”

“*Winner Take Nothing.*”

“Did I know him? Did I love him? You ask me that? I knew him like you know nobody in the world, and I loved him like you love God.”

My heart grew calm at the sound of Elizabeth’s voice reciting Hemingway’s words I’ve read clinically for years, and here, the words have been reframed. So much of one’s life was spent reading; it made sense to share it with people who were close to you. I’d always loved that story and what the narrator admired in the conversations of life even while the narrator insisted that life was the idea of nothingness.

“Ah, so you know it!” I said.

“It’s one of my favorites,” she replied, delighted. “First edition? Wow, that must be worth a fortune.”

“I’ll let you borrow it, if you want.”

“Seriously? I couldn’t take that.”

“Sure, you can.”

“What’s your favorite book? Or story?”

“Honestly, I’m boring, mine is *The Old Man and the Sea*.”

“Mine too. I lost my version when I broke up with my boyfriend. He was spiteful and never returned a lot my books. That added insult to hefty injury.”

The side of her mouth perked into a smile. I shifted my gaze to her eyes. There it was, plain as day, that green light of opportunity winking in the distance tempting me to return. Custodians exchanged a few words outside of our door indicating they were going to start cleaning the floors. I thought of my sobriety as a streak and all streaks came to an end at some point. I pictured the whole crowd—the newcomers and the local hockey players and the miners and the warriors who worked on the line in the stamping plant—rising and applauding my return like I was on an epic journey.

“You know there’s a new Hemingway themed bar here in Marquette,” I said. “I don’t think you’ve been back since it was built.”

“Really?” she said.

“We could go. That’s of course if you want to.”

“What’s the name of it?”

“A Clean Well-Lighted Place.”

“Clever name.”

“It’s one of the one’s you least expect.”

“Unfortunately, I am going to have to pass tonight. It has been a long journey for me today. But it was good to meet with you and thank you for the opportunity. I won’t let you down.”

“I’m sure you won’t.”

I realized that this, more than the swelling of my insecurities, was what Alcoholics Anonymous warned me about: if I succumb to the power greater than myself it could restore me to insanity. Elizabeth—so vulnerable and so lovely—saved me from two misfortunes.

“Hey before you leave, I want you to have this.”

I walked to my desk and opened the drawer where I used to keep my brown liquor and pulled out my copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*.”

“Here you go. Take it.”

“Do you have another copy?”

“Nope. It’s my pleasure. I don’t need it anymore.”

“I’ll bring something for you, next time.”

“No, no,” I said. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist.”

I pulled myself to the door to open it for her—I could bear to do so now that I’d welcomed a return visit. On the way to the door a wave of courage swept over me, and I extended my hand for a shake. Normally something formal and unattached, oddly, I felt I had to work my way back to such a physical action. Her skin felt surprisingly warm, and my first impulse was to ask if she was hot. Then I realized that it wasn’t the heat of a fever, just the warmth young people exuded. Embarrassed, I removed my hand and thrust it in my jacket pocket. I didn’t want to know how my touch felt to her—no doubt, cold. No wonder I’d finally

fallen in love—now that I had so little warmth of my own left to give. I truly felt foolish. I moved toward the door, feeling defeated.

“Okay. I have an idea,” she said. “How about we exchange books every week? If we’ve read it, we’ll pick another one. Or we’ll reread to see if we get a different perspective. Deal?”

I thought about it. “That works perfect.”

“So, bring a book next time,” she said.

“Of course.” I replied.

And just that easily, I was renewed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Regina's call woke me up. "Dick had a breakdown, sweetie. Nothing serious, but I thought you should know. I don't need you to come in, though it would be nice. You know your father's always happy to see you, even if he doesn't recognize you. His episodes drop once you visit."

"Thank you, Regina," I said, wiping the sleep from my eyes. "I'll be there soon."

I hung up and laid in bed thinking I didn't want the day to begin.

Once I started the coffee maker, I got dressed. It was like clockwork. While I took the first sip of coffee, I called Dr. French to explain that I had a family emergency, said I'll get my classes covered. Then I called my co-worker to tell him that he'll need to cover my sections until the afternoon. He told me to take as long as I needed, he was sure adjuncts would love the extra cash.

After thinking it over for a few seconds, I called my sister. I told her that our father was doing fine and that she should visit him. She said she was busy, raising two kids and running the house. She didn't have any free time, but she would soon. It was harder for her to get to the nursing home from Wisconsin, it was too far away, and she was afraid to drive in the dark—a mandated curfew on herself. She said this with contempt, as though the world were to blame for her choices. Then she changed the tone of her voice and told me that we'd hadn't seen each other in a long time, said she wanted to have Clara and me over for dinner, and asked how Clara was doing. I said I'd call her back soon and hung up.

I pictured Clara drifting into that strange liminal space where people couldn't follow. Clara—how old she looked, how worn she looked, I thought. Then I thought about her smile, the beautiful stoic sort of way her emotions were always loudest when she was silent.

I opened the front door. I woke with a start. My boots were finally dry from last night's rain. I saw the cover of *Winner Take Nothing* on the shelf and grabbed it to bring to Elizabeth. I couldn't help but smile. When I got back, I had to take the trash out, I thought tiredly. My landlord sat on her porch, smoking a cigarette in her bathrobe. I hardly looked at her, because she was a nuisance, that half-naked woman on her crumbling porch.

Once I got in my car, I drove to the nursing home. I never let Regina know exactly when I was to arrive. It was the best and most expensive facility in the county that I was paying for, and I felt it was my right to show up when I felt necessary.

The nursing home was located between my apartment and the city. It was in a residential area of gated communities. Whenever I went to visit my father, I made a stop a few miles before the home.

I parked and walked toward the river next to an abandoned hotel, the rooms dry and empty. Going to the river was risky because there were still remnants of the car accident. I knew that, and I didn't care. My mother was driving the car with my father in the passenger seat. It was said that all parties involved were drunk. Others abandoned that notion and said only my father was drunk. Nothing had ever happened, but people said it was dangerous to walk around that place alone—too many memories. My father blamed himself, but never talked about it.

I walked to the bank of the river. The water flowed north toward Lake Superior. The mist of the waterfall carried south toward me. I lit a cigarette and looked out into the empty space.

I thought about a time my father brought me there to fish. My father didn't know what to do with the boy who didn't cry, who hadn't said a thing since his mother died. My sister was a little kid, close family friends watched her most of the time.

My father took me to the movies, to the plaza, to the circus, anywhere that was far from home, far from the photos in our attic covered in his tears of guilt, far from his B.A. in Business from NMU, the tweed suit he wore to his graduation. There was print of a painting in our house by Marc Chagall where a couple were floating in their hotel room, a bunt cake on a plate, an ornate window, a bouquet of flowers in symbolic colors, and a lonely black stool surrounded by all of this with an almost silhouetted body on it. The couple were in a precarious position: the man floated backwards as if he just remembered his wife was below him before he left her; but the woman was alert and responsive, patiently trying to maintain the euphoric love between young lovers in a blissful yet ordinary setting where happiness oozed out of every square inch of the canvas. There was something that spoke to the craziness of the world, a craziness at times cheerful, and hurtful, even though all the figures were serious. The print hung in my house. The house Clara occupied.

I remembered the river was full of families fishing, picnics, laughter, shades of yellow, white, blue, and green. My father would say, "Look, Johnny, a flying squirrel. Look, Johnny, a garter snake. Look, Johnny, a big fish." I would look without speaking because I felt my father didn't have any more words, that even the ones he said weren't truly meaningful. I intuited when my mother died my father's words echoed words that were broken, that they were held together by loose threads.

When my father reached for his fishing pole, he dropped his flask in the water and watched it float away. He stood there and didn't say anything. For one moment, we sat there

resting in the sun. The normal ferocity wasn't there; the silence was wonderful. Someone had bread to feed the birds. My father looked on in indifference. We were so far away, I thought, and at that moment all I wanted was to feed the birds and the fish and go to sleep. I would have liked to pet them. The other children shouted and squawked at the birds. But then suddenly everyone went silent when a black bear came out of the shadows, out of the woods, and slowly ambled along. I looked at my father and said, "Dad, the bear, the bear's over there, do you see it?" But my father's head was down, he was fading among all those people. And though he wasn't crying, the tears were there, behind the words he couldn't say.

I finished my cigarette and tossed it into the water, it hissed as the ember went out. Then, I got up to leave.

Slowly I walked back to my car, my hands in my pants pockets. I heard a roar in the distance. I stopped and looked around to see if I could make anything out.

I arrived at the Sugarloaf Mountain Nursing Home. It was a large house surrounded by well-kept grounds with benches, trees, and fountains with dyed water that looked like blue honey. I was once told that the blue in the ponds wasn't poisonous to the ducks. The pond was empty when I arrived. The ducks were nowhere to be seen.

When I rang the bell, a nurse answered. I could never remember their names by heart, but they all remembered mine.

"Hi John," she said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm well," I said. "And you?"

"Good. We'll bring your father over in just a moment."

I made sure that all the nursing home employees were nurses. I didn't want caregivers or volunteers with no education touching my father. Ironically, that's how I met Clara; she was a volunteer.

The first thing I noticed every time I walked in was the faint smell of used diapers and lemons—the artificial odor of chemicals that created a film around the place. Unfortunately, urine was almost impossible to eradicate from a place like that. The home made an effort to refer to the patients as seniors, out of respect—not all of them were grandparents.

The nurse led me to the waiting room and offered me something to drink. I sat down in a fake leather armchair facing a huge window that opened out to the empty pond. No one went for a walk on the premises without supervision. Some seniors might have run off and others feared the wildlife. I once saw a woman fall out of her chair to get away from a robin. A senior shook her cane at the animal while muttering something under her breath. Then, she fell asleep in her seat.

I'd been sitting in the armchair, waiting. I thought about Clara, briefly. Regina wasn't there and Clara had taken me to my father. In those days my father walked and was somewhat aware on my visits. When I stood up and saw her, I didn't feel anything in particular. Just another volunteer carting people to their parents. But then she began to talk, and I paid attention. It was the most beautiful voice. She talked about art, traveling, and books until the nurse came. The nurse let me know my father's vitals were normal. Clara stayed around to continue talking. I saw the lights surrounding me and felt her voice could lift me up.

After what happened with the attempted pregnancies, Clara's words became distant shots into the dark, they began to disappear altogether.

There was a TV on with no volume. It was an old rerun of Wheel of Fortune. The contestants spent a weekday trying to win a car. The audience were queued to applaud.

I picked up a brochure for the nursing home. It was on the side table, next to the AARP and National Geographic magazines. On the cover, a man and woman were smiling like they always did. The brochures used frolicking seniors as if most of them could move in such a way. A sign read “Security: all hours of the day/night”. It was known that in public nursing homes, when the majority of the seniors died, or were left to die, they were pumped full of pharmaceuticals until they were claimed by family.

I refused to have my father subscribe to such a death.

From the waiting room, I could see the lounge area where the seniors had their leisure time. They were sitting and watching television, playing board games, and doing physical therapy. It was how they occupied most of their time. That was why they were so excited when they had visitors.

Time suffocated that place. The hours added wrinkles and pierced the skin. Better to ignore it’s passing.

“Hi there, Johnny,” Regina said. “How are you doing? It’s nice to see you, Sweetie.” She had brought my father over in a wheelchair, then hugged me because we’d known each other for well over a decade, because all the nurses knew me.

Clara and I got one baby to stick for four months. We named him Jack after my grandfather. He had a heartbeat, and he was the most beautiful little alien in the ultrasound. I woke one morning to Clara with a blood stain in the crotch of her robe. That was the last time I remembered crying.

Ever since then, Regina started hugging me.

I crouched down and took my father's hands. "Hi, Pop," I said. My father's gaze was lost, bleak.

"How's Dad, feeling any better? Feeling at all?" I said, getting up. "What happened exactly?"

I took a seat. Regina left my father next to the chair, looking out at the pond. We sat close by, at a table with four chairs.

"Dick had another episode, Sweetie. Yesterday, he formed a body out of pillows in his bed and went into the kitchen and ate the entire meatloaf that was made for dinner today."

I subdued a smile. A robin landed on the branch outside as my dad looked out the window. He happily pointed at the bird. I pushed his wheelchair closer to the window. Regina looked at him with affection and pity.

"John, we're going to need a night nurse for him again," she said. "I need you to sign the authorization form. It's going to increase his care as well as his fees. You know I don't like doing this to him, but it's for his own safety. He could hurt himself or others. Today it's meatloaf and tomorrow it's who knows what."

Regina left to grab the forms.

My father was basically a mute. He emitted sounds every now and then, mostly complaints.

The words were there, behind the disease like a cauterized wound festering on the inside.

I sat down in the armchair and looked out the window. The robin was still there. Then I took my father's hand. My father looked at me as though I were a stranger, but he kept his hand in mine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I arrived at Sill Hall. It was isolated and nobody else was in the building yet. The mornings were timid when it rained. People naturally lagged on the rainy days. I was like the rest of my employees, climbing over one another, cutting myself in-and-out of scenarios to make the better move. But the new generation of adjuncts just made do with the leftovers, the pieces that didn't have much use.

Dr. French called me in for a surprise meeting. Before going to my office, I sat in my car for a few minutes, looking at the complex of buildings. They were white, compact, and efficient. There was nothing to indicate that inside them were vessels of learning and comradery. I remembered the photos of the old Student Center. There was a series of motivational words aligned on the large brick wall. Most of the building had been destroyed by age, but the façade remained intact, the word “PERSERVERANCE” struck out in silence. Huge and alone, the word resisted, didn't disappear. It held out refusing to be broken down by the weather, by the wind that perforated the stone, by the climate that ate away at the façade that my mother told me had an art deco influence. The gray letters stood against the backdrop of the sky. It didn't matter what the sky looked like, if it was an oppressive blue, an overcast sky, or a dark black; the word remained, the word that spoke to the implacable truth behind a beautiful building. “PERSERVERANCE,” because there, persevering took place.

The morning Security Guard, Charlie, was reading the paper. He closed the paper right away and waved nervously when he saw me sitting in my car. Charlie opened the door for me and said, in a voice that was a bit forced, “Good Morning, sir, how are you doing?” I acknowledged him with a movement of my hand and nod of my head.

I got out of the car. Before going in, I had a smoke, arms propped up on the car roof, still, watching. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. This meeting was abnormal for Dr. French; the man lived and died by his calendar.

There was no one in the vicinity of the building. No one as far as the eye could see. There was a space that's been cleared for a few solitary trees and a bench. I was cold, but I smoked slowly, stretching out the minutes before I entered the building.

I went straight up to Dr. French's office. A few employees greeted me on the way. Dr. French's secretary got him some coffee and said, "I'll let you know when Dr. French is ready for you."

I sat in the chair in the lobby while I heard him finish a call. I had time to refill the Keurig and eat a donut. The secretary heard a buzzer on her phone and picked it up.

"Yes sir, I'll send him in," she said, then looked at me. "He's ready for you."

I entered his office. He was on the phone. He smiled and motioned that he'd be right with me.

Dr. French's words were usually hard hitting but today, scarce. He said little and spoke uncharacteristically slow.

He was one of those people who was not made for normal life. His face looked like a portrait that turned out awkward, one an artist gave up on. He didn't quite fit in anywhere. He was not interested in human contact, which was why he had his office remodeled. First, he isolated it, so that only his secretary could hear him and see him. Then he added another door. The door opened to a staircase that took him straight to the private parking lot behind the building. The employees saw him infrequently or not at all.

Working for Dr. French, I'd seen how the man ran the department to perfection: when it came to numbers and transactions, he was the best. If it was a question of abstract concepts, market trends, statistics, Dr. French excelled; however, he hated people. He hated saying hello, and the formality of making small talk about the temperature, listening to their problems, learning their names, keeping track of who was on leave and who'd had children. That's why Dr. French needed me. I was the one they all respected and liked because none of them *knew* me. Few of them knew I lost a child, that Clara left me, that my father was collapsing into a dark and demented silence.

"I have two applicants waiting in the adjunct pool. Didn't you see them with the stack?" Dr. French asked.

"Yes," I said, "But I chose Elizabeth. She interviewed the best."

"I know. But I want you to give these two a second interview. I'm only interested in hiring the better of the two."

"Got it."

"The better of the two will be Greg Anderson. You understand?"

"Why Greg Anderson?"

"He's Holly's TA. He'll be graduating and needs a job."

"Yes, sir."

"When that's done, give me the updates. Filling the position is more pressing."

I got up to leave, but Dr. French motioned me to sit down.

"There's something else."

There was a silence. He shuffled in his seat, crossing one leg over the other, placing his hands on his thighs.

“An employee was found with another in an uncourteous manner.”

“Who?”

“We don’t know. It was a he said-she said type of thing. There’s nothing I can really do about it.”

“How did they catch them?”

“It was an anonymous letter I received under my office door this morning. I know that’s not enough to indite somebody, but I can’t leave it alone either.”

“Who do you think it was?”

“It could be anybody, but policy prohibits any inner-work relationships. This has been the policy since before I was even a graduate student.”

“What happens now?”

“That’s a lot of questions, John. I’m just telling you because I trust you to get to the bottom of this. You’re my eyes and ears. I can’t have the reputation of this department tarnished by some PhDs trying to be kids again or whatever the hell happened.”

“Right, I understand, especially since we’re trying to get some money.”

“Ah! Precisely!” Dr. French said. “See, you’ll be a great administrator one day.”

When I got up to leave, I saw Dr French’s secretary bringing him coffee. She came across as fragile, but I knew if Dr. French ordered her to fire a whole line of employees, she would, singlehandedly without a single muscle in her body twitching.

“Do you have the applicant’s information?” the secretary said, motioning toward the door.

“I do,” I said. “Thank you.”

“One more thing,” she said, “Elizabeth is in your office. She came here by mistake. I sent her down. While you were in Dr. French’s office.”

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth was waiting in the foyer, silently. I introduced her to some of the other employees. I looked outside and the sun was shining, the rain had ceased.

“I didn’t know you were coming in today.” I said.

“I wasn’t supposed to, but I thought I’d bring your book to you now.”

“Oh, great!” I said. “What do you say we go for a walk? It’s been quite a morning.”

“Sure.”

As we walked down the unloading deck of the building, I asked her why she had wanted the job. I didn’t expect an elaborate answer, just the truth. I knew applicants were not in short supply, but there was constant turnover. Few people could handle working in these conditions. Before long, necessity wasn’t enough. They’d rather earn less and do something that didn’t involve a passionless occupation.

“You know, I’ve thought about this question a lot,” she said. “I’d kicked around the idea of pursuing writing, so the M.F.A made sense to me; however, the instructors said it took them a while to get recognition for their work. Teaching seemed to be the next logical, and most popular, choice.”

“I was in your shoes before,” I said. “I was encouraged by a mentor to apply to some PhD programs and fortunately I got into this one. My wife and I needed the money a professorship could provide.”

“You’re married?”

“Was. Well, still am.”

“I’m confused.”

“Well, we’re on a trial separation.”

There was a heavy silence. She didn’t answer right away and then said that a friend who worked at her previous university had a similar situation. I didn’t believe her at first, not for a second, I figured she was trying to make me feel better. But her eyes told me I could trust her.

We reached the fountain in the quad, in the center of campus. The stream of water constantly shot from the center of the quad in three different variations. Then, we emerged from Plumber Hall and, made our way across a foreshortened strip of spring-damp lawn that separated Plumber from Sill Hall. She discussed her problems with her boyfriend. The conversation sent a misguided feeling of jealousy through me, not unlike the one I’d suffered when I found out about Dave and Clara. Imagine that: jealous of kids in their twenties, for having a relationship. I checked my tie and cuffs in the reflection of a window, and we headed back toward Sill Hall.

“Can you believe this campus?” Elizabeth said, “I don’t know why I ever left.”

“Barely,” I said.

“On one hand I think, why don’t I go somewhere warm? Is it really necessary to come back to the land of harsh winters? We might as well be above the arctic circle. And really, the south was great. But I did miss it here.”

I lit a cigarette and stared at Elizabeth’s long legs in the reflections on the glass of the buildings.

“Oh, don’t be modest,” she said. “This campus is so quaint, so...natural around the edges. I’m embarrassed that it took this long for me to return. You just had to get me to visit.”

She ran her hands through her hair, which was blowing in the wind, sleekly feminine. She was wearing a green skirt and a yellow blouse with a brown cardigan over her shoulders. Her bracelets were gold and jingling together as she moved her arms.

“I’m glad I’m here for an extended period of time this time around,” she said.

“I’m definitely glad you’re here,” I said cautiously, extending my hand to Elizabeth for help stepping over a large puddle, feeling an electric thrill as our palms clapped together. “Don’t want you to fall in that.”

Elizabeth smiled out of the side of her mouth, turning red. “Well, it’s nice to have someone looking out for me,” she said. Our hands stayed together a little longer than expected.

We moved back to Sill Hall and up to my office.

Upstairs, I opened the blinds, encouraging Elizabeth to take a seat.

“My ankle is starting to get sore,” she said. “I twisted it when I was moving my stuff into my apartment.”

“Oh, my. Please,” I said. “Don’t stand on ceremony here.”

I pulled a small table to her chair and put a pillow under her foot, on the front of which was red and swollen. I heard the twist of that beautiful ankle in my head and immediately grabbed the crutches from the corner of my office, just in case.

“Does that feel better?” I said.

Elizabeth nodded warily, “I’ve felt worse. My weak papier-mâché ankles.”

“When? That looks like it hurts quite a bit.”

The swelling spread all the way down to the blood-stiffened protrusion on her ankle—red, dotted with purple—so that her movements were long and dragging.

“I’m a little dizzy,” she said. “Hard to tell if it’s because I haven’t eaten or if it’s the painkillers my doctor gave me.”

The Campus Chapel bells were tolling like they did every hour.

Elizabeth laid her hands on the swell of her stomach and closed her eyes. “I did feel worse once. When my boyfriend broke up with me.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that,” I said, sincerely, though happily as well.

“Being good-looking doesn’t mean you’re good-natured. Know what I mean?”

“I don’t remember that part,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” Elizabeth said, coyly. “He was one of the best-looking guys I’ve ever been with. He might even have been better-looking than you.” Elizabeth rubbed the back of her head, her tone evaluative and probably a little teasing. I blanched. If Elizabeth thought her boyfriend was the best-looking man and I was almost to his level, then that was a compliment. But being compared unfavorably to a bum of an ex-boyfriend was a bit of a slight. But her tone implied flirting—conditional, but clear. I thought, why was I so bad at reading it? I returned to the seat adjacent to the couch and was perusing the bookshelves, her back turned, sipping her water.

“It hurt that much?” I asked quietly, meaning the breakup.

“I couldn’t eat or sleep,” she said. “I had to force feed myself. I drank all my calories.”

She opened her eyes and looked me in mine, “I don’t like getting my heart broken.”

Before I could digest this, Elizabeth arranged herself, though hobbling, beside me on the other chair, crossing those long, wonderful legs in my direction.

“John, this is quite an office.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

She looked around, her chin lifted thoughtfully, “I truly do. But it’s certainly very...”

“Boring?”

“I was going to say academic.”

“I guess that isn’t a bad thing...”

“Masculine. Straight-forward. Very...Hemingway. Not a bad thing at all,” she intoned playfully.

“Do you have any suggestions of how I could make it better?”

Elizabeth wagged her finger in my direction. “The whole point is for *me* to help *you*. A simple ‘thank you’ for the opportunity.”

“And how were you thinking?”

“I *think* I have some ideas.”

I thought, was she blatantly flirting? Her legs and pose suggested it. Or maybe it was me that was flirting, trying to relate.

What could I do if I couldn’t directly flirt or charm in return? I could keep the conversation playful, but that could be misconstrued as well. For a split second, I thought that Elizabeth’s foot was tickling my thigh; it scared me. I dropped my cup of water and kicked her chair by accident. It turned out to be my ringing cell phone.

“Easy,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, jeez. Sorry about that,” I said. “My phone scared me.” I pulled my phone out from my pocket and checked the caller ID. Clara was calling me. She probably wanted to talk about Maggie or the package or to discuss our next therapy session or the next menial nonsense she wanted to put me through or some other bullshit that she wanted me to agree to while she moved on with her life. I could picture her returning from New York with a call log stuffed with unrequited calls. At first, bewildered; then, overcome with anger. I let it ring.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s go to the bar.”