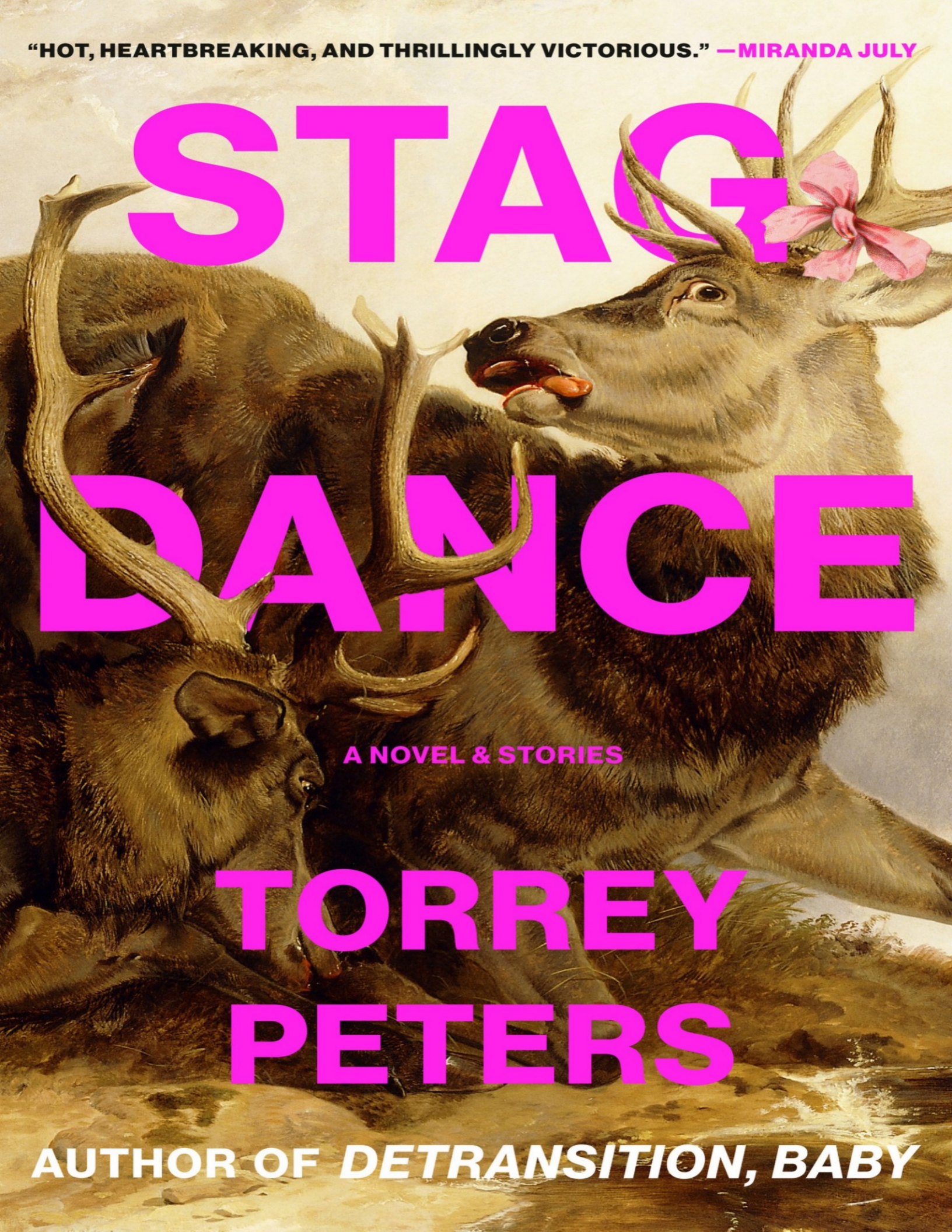


"HOT, HEARTBREAKING, AND THRILLINGLY VICTORIOUS." —MIRANDA JULY



STAG

DANCE

A NOVEL & STORIES

TORREY PETERS

AUTHOR OF *DETRANSITION, BABY*

BY TORREY PETERS

Stag Dance
Detransition, Baby



STAG DANCE

A NOVEL & STORIES

TORREY
PETERS



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*To Cecilia: You asked me to hang out, but instead I worked on this novel,
and then you were gone.*

INFECT YOUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES



Tipton, Iowa, seven years after contagion

I'm lugging a bucket of grain for the sows, using two hands to keep the weight of it, hung from that thin wire, from biting into my somehow never-callousing fingers, when Keith comes up behind me and hoists it away from me with one hand. He holds it up, still with one hand, and *tsks* at me. "Looks like you need some help there, little lady."

He's got the macho bravado of all the T-slabs, complete with the aggression and rages—plus he's six foot five if he's an inch. Our relative heights place my line of vision at his chest, so I'm able to observe from up close how he wears a pair of old Carhartt coveralls unbuttoned down the front to show off his hairy bitch tits. He's so proud of them that even out here in the country he shows them off, a bit of conspicuous consumption that even the most isolated farmers can read: *I'm so flush with testosterone that I overinject. How about that, you low-count ration-dependent weaklings?* I'm grateful he doesn't wear shirts with the chest cutouts, a recent fashion among the slabs.

In business, the customer is supposed to always be right, but Keith takes as his due the notion that he's in charge, and I'm the little follower. He doesn't have any idea that before the contagion spread, I was already trans, already injecting estrogen. He just figures I'm another auntie-boy, one of those males who couldn't afford testosterone after all the hoarding during the Rift Wars and so began injecting poor-quality estrogen. Hence all the "little lady" stuff, which most folks would understand as a gibe about how auntie-boys were said to have survived the war. I let him assume that. I need the black-market estrogen he harvests from those ugly mutant pigs.

With estrogen tightly rationed and regulated, the provisional government allots the good E for women of promising fertility. An older woman would have to have a relative in government or have the money for a really well-placed bribe to get on the ration list. A trans woman? People still believe

that we antediluvian trans women started the contagion. Even if we came out of hiding, there's no bribe large enough to get us estrogen.

Keith is doing curls with the bucket of feed, making the veins in his forearm pop like creeping vines. I wait for him to finish, but now the game is to show that his strength can outlast my patience. I gesture to the sows. "You want to feed the pigs yourself? Go right ahead."

He hands the bucket back to me. "Nah, I like seeing you prance and scurry away from them." Feeding the pigs means getting in the pen and scattering all the grain, hopefully before one of the freakish monsters knocks me over to get a whole bucket of feed to herself.

"Fuck you, Keith."

"Ooh, sweetheart. You just let me know when and where."

I'm paying Keith extra to learn pig husbandry, a pretext, while I wait for an opportune moment to steal a few piglets from him. Then Lexi and I will be able to raise our own drove of sows. Unfortunately, I've come to hate the creatures—both Keith and the pigs. Keith for obvious reasons, and the pigs because they're genetically modified to overproduce hormones bioidentical to those that humans used to produce, back before the contagion. Industrial-grade hormones in my body make *me* a crazy bitch, and I'm not six hundred pounds with inch-long razors for teeth. A month ago, I broke a toe kicking one of those porcine tanks in the snout. She wasn't slowed for a second. Just barreled me over and bit a two-inch gash into my thigh when I didn't immediately dump the feed bucket for her gustatory delight. Another scar.

I manage okay this time—even get a short retaliatory kick in on the black-and-pink one as I hop the fence out of the pen. The monster doesn't notice, but Keith, leaning against the doorframe at the edge of the barn, does.

"Is it your time of the month or something?" he calls out. As if. He shakes his head. "You're bitchier than my pigs. Save some supply for the real girls, huh?" He assumes I'm just a typical dealer, selling to women desperate for fertility and pregnancy. That's what most of his stock goes for—the population is aging, dwindling.

I pick a strand of muddy straw from my pants as I walk over to him. “No periods yet. Are you holding out on the good stuff, Keith?”

He pulls from his pocket a little baggie with ten 5-mL glass vials inside. “This here’s pure. Enough to make a baby factory run for a month. Probably even make an auntie-boy like you preggo.”

I hold out my hand, but he doesn’t move to give me the vials sitting in his fat paw. Just leers at me. “Any of your girls need a stud, you know where to find me.”

“Sure, Keith.” He says this every time I re-up, but for once, I indulge a moment, contemplating the image of Keith trying to seduce and mount Lexi. It’s a funny, satisfying picture. He’d have just enough time, before she’d end his stupid existence, to raise those white-blond eyebrows in surprise at what he found.

Lexi pulls up the hem of her skirt, showing off her thigh, more tattooed than when I last saw it. “See that?” she asks. I’m not thrilled with the vibe. Lexi has to know showing off her thighs won’t have the desired effect on me.

“See what?” I ask.

“Here,” Lexi says, and points. Above a tattoo of a ship is another simpler tattoo, maybe a stick and poke. It reads *t4t*.

“T4t?”

“Yeah,” Lexi says, “like we used to be. Or maybe you never really were.”

“Lexi, can we not do this again?”

She lets her skirt drop, covering the tattoo. “Fine. Anyway, now it’s different. I’m *t4t* for you in the abstract. Trans girls loving trans girls. And you’re trans, so you’re included.”

My annoyance flares: Lexi, deigning to include me in whatever she’s up to now. But she’s half right; Lexi’s somehow ended up maven of the Seattle trans girl scene, and I want to be included. The year during which she and I weren’t speaking was a lonely one. “So what do I get to be a part of?”

“The future,” answers Lexi. “In the future, everyone will be trans.”

I resist an urge to roll my eyes. Often, Lexi sounds like a sophomore who’s just enrolled in a critical theory course. I can’t tell if the other girls listen to her despite her super-basic analysis or because of it. Everything with her and her clique is gender theory, or else it’s transphobia, abusers, outrage, and Down With Cis!

I guess I didn’t fully resist that eye roll, because she pulls back and says, “Oh, I don’t mean that everyone will be trans in some squishy philosophical way. I mean that we’re all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis.” She reconsiders the wording of her statement and then revises: “Especially the cissies.” She’s got a plastic canister next to her that she fetched a few

minutes before. She picks up the canister and taps on it ceremoniously. “You’ll see. When I say the future, I don’t mean some distant era. I mean in about six months.”

“Lexi,” Raleen says. “Don’t, please, just put it back.”

Her voice is nervous. As always, I’ve forgotten about Raleen, because she barely speaks, and even when she does, she hardly makes sense. Somehow, even though she stands a half foot taller than me, in the unobtrusive way she folds herself she appears to take up less space than a child, receding into the couch that is her temporary home until I forget about her once more.

We’re sitting in the living room of the shared house Lexi lives in, a falling down Victorian on the edge of the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle. Even with the siding falling off, Lexi and her roommates shouldn’t be able to afford it, except that it belongs to the uncle of one of the girls, who rents it cheaply while he waits for a developer to come along and offer the right price. To atone for accepting a cis dude’s charity, Lexi offers the couches downstairs to any passing trans woman without a steady place to sleep. For the past few months, it’s been Raleen, who’s apparently homeless, despite her enrollment as an NSF-funded graduate student in molecular biology at the University of Washington. She began transition halfway through her dissertation research, and her faculty mentor lost interest in advising and collaborating with her. Her parents, back home in Podunk, Nowhere, have no idea about her transition, and it seems to be in order to draw out their ignorance, as much as for herself, that she shows up at the lab from time to time and putters around, while everyone waits for the last of her NSF funding to run out. She’s been on 2C-B half the times I’ve seen her, which Lexi says Raleen has synthesized herself. It’s some hallucinogen that is apparently easier to produce than LSD, at least with the chemicals Raleen has access to at her lab. Maybe she’s on it today; maybe that’s why she’s all nervous? Or maybe she’s just a weirdo.

“Raleen, we talked about this,” snaps Lexi.

“About what?” I ask. And suddenly I am the one barely there. Lexi and Raleen ignore me, playing out some wordless argument. From my angle,

Lexi is outlined against the front window, made of five vertical panes of glass, in each of which the girls in the house have hung gauzy transparent fabric in blue, pink, and white, to make the window into a trans flag. They take a lot of selfies in front of it, not just for political reasons, but because the light filters softly and flatteringly through the fabric. Silhouetted in front of the sunlit flag, Lexi looks suddenly striking: propagandistic and imposing.

Raleen loses the staring contest. “Just—oh, never mind,” she mutters, but watches Lexi intently. It sometimes upsets me the way Lexi’s made Raleen her puppy.

Lexi shifts to face me. She’s playing a solo game of hot potato, passing the canister from one hand to another. “Remember that project Raleen talked about a while back? How she’d been messing around with that pig vaccine?”

About a month ago, Raleen had been as talkative as I’d ever seen her. Going on about some Australian vaccine used to castrate pigs—or technically, it wasn’t castration. The vaccine created an autoimmune response that prevented boars from ever being able to metabolize the precursors to testosterone, which otherwise would cause the “boar taint” flavor that ruins pork from male pigs. Raleen said it’d be simple to make a similar vaccine that would work along the same mechanisms in humans. Whoever they injected would need to take some form of hormone therapy for the rest of their lives, as their own body would attack any hormones it produced itself. Raleen, Lexi, and I spent the night jokingly plotting to inject the vaccine into J. Michael Bailey. I liked the joke of making Bailey into some sort of hormone-reliant pseudo-trans. I still like it as a joke.

Lexi waits. She can see I get it. “Lexi, that’s only funny as a fantasy.”

Raleen tries to assure me. “It’s safe. We already tested part of the vaccine on ourselves. One version on me, and a later version on Lexi.” She starts in somewhat incoherently on her testosterone levels, how she hasn’t taken any spiro or blockers in weeks and her T is near zero, then switches subjects in a way I can’t follow. She concludes, “This is the final version.”

At that, Lexi stands up, opens the canister, and pulls out what looks to me like a Tide stick, or an orange felt-tip marker. “See, we loaded it in an autoinjector, like in an EpiPen.”

She takes a few steps toward me, holding it in her outstretched hand as though she wants to pass it to me. She pauses and asks, almost sweetly, “Remember when I used to show you my scars, in bed, back in New Hampshire?”

Again! She won’t stop bringing up when we used to sleep together. She does it even more when she has an audience.

“I’m trying to forget.”

I want to see the EpiPen thing. I reach out from my sitting position so she can hand it to me, but fast, so fast I don’t even flinch, she closes her fingers around it like the hilt of a dagger, and slams the blunt end into my forearm. There’s a prick as the needle goes in, and when I pull back, the point scrapes my skin. By the time I’m instinctively cradling my arm, blood is welling up.

I’m in disbelief, looking at Lexi, trying to understand how, somehow, it could have been a mistake.

“Now you’ll have a scar too,” says Lexi.

Winter, New Hampshire, two years to contagion

Lexi and I are in her bed, and she is showing me her scars. She has many. Morning light bends around the edges of thick black curtains. I wonder if it snowed more overnight, if I'll be able to drive home. Lexi spent all her savings on a small three-room cabin on a lake in rural New Hampshire, the interior marred by half-finished repairs or renovations; nails and screws menace soft fabric or skin from every surface.

Lexi was a committed alcoholic for a few years. She started working for her father's company right out of high school. By the time she hit twenty, she had a daily routine: Come home from work, lower the blackout shades so no one could see in, put on women's clothes, and get to downing a bottle of vodka. She bought the cabin so that she could expand the routine without attracting notice. Occasionally, she'd get it into her head to tear out a cabinet, or pull up a floorboard, then lose interest as the alcohol swamped over her. "This place is a shithole," she said, by way of inviting me in for the first time. In the eight years she has owned the house, I'm the first person she's allowed inside, ashamed to let anyone else see either the skirts and panties or the vodka bottles.

"What's this one?" I ask, tracing a long scar of faded pink on her forearm. I'm lying propped up on one elbow, pressed against her prone body.

"I used to make bats on the lathe for my baseball team," she says. "Didn't always do it sober."

"And this one?" A white button of scar tissue just under her armpit.

"Fell over blacked out and hung myself up from a nail." She isn't bragging. She's matter-of-fact: half a claim of responsibility and half a shrugging abdication of it, the way one might explain that there's garbage everywhere because a raccoon got into the trash. Yeah, you could have fastened down the lid, but raccoons gonna raccoon, so what can you do?

“Any of these scars from bullets?” I ask. Which is not as crazy a question as it sounds. Lexi has a lot of guns. Handguns are scattered on her coffee table the way that television and video-game controllers clutter up mine at home. We are right now lying in bed beneath an arsenal: a sniper rifle, a shotgun, and an AR-15 modified to be automatic, all hung horizontally above the headboard so that you can accelerate from REM sleep to deadly motherfucker in a matter of seconds. Last night, I asked if they were loaded, and Lexi shrugged. “Wouldn’t be much good if they weren’t.” After a few beers, she admitted that a few of the fucked up things in her place were fucked up or half replaced because she had shot them to shit while drunk.

I’m fascinated and repelled by the life on display in this little house. It is nothing like mine. I am getting a doctorate at Dartmouth. I live with my girlfriend of eight years in an apartment attached to a stately New England house that belongs to a professor of medieval literature, a woman who certainly owns no guns. To furnish our apartment, I brought my grandmother’s midcentury Eames table, and my girlfriend brought a vintage Baccarat vase. We both know from Eames and Baccarat. Most of my friends live in one of the five largest American cities and work jobs in media or for firms of some sort. Lexi and I share only three points of commonality: We are both trans, we are both newly on hormones, and we are both lonely as fuck.

I answered Lexi’s ad in the “t4t” section of Craigslist personals. After talking online, we met up at a gay bar in Manchester. There, Lexi admitted to having gone through my Facebook photos. “Your girlfriend is really hot,” and she paused and spun her beer coaster. “So, like, I don’t get why you’re here.” I didn’t know what to say. How do I tell a near-stranger that my girlfriend and I have had sex only once since I went on hormones? How that one time, with my cock hard and vulnerable, I looked down at her so gratefully, admiring that amazing, undulating hair fanned across the pillow like a mermaid’s, just as she furrowed her brow and said disconsolately, “You smell different.” How just then, her face crumpled into tears? How I tried to get her to have sex then anyway? How I wake every morning

afterward to her back, want to spoon her, but pull away from the chill of her grief, knowing that I beckoned it by my choice? How do I talk about the nights spent hiding from her, Skyping men out of a need for validation, the things I tell them so that they'll say *Yes, you're a woman, and I'm gonna fuck you like one*? Most recently, it's a man named Sidney, in Seattle, with whom I play elaborate phone-sex role-play games in which I'm his submissive silicone trophy wife. Why did I want to meet Lexi? The answer is the things I can't say. That I can barely think.

My answer is the same as hers on guns, the same kind of wordlessness. "Why do you need so many?" Four times she began an answer, something about how no one is going to hassle her, that she had grown up with guns always around, that she's not a victim, that she's had some bad trouble. Each time she seemed as unsure as I had been when she asked why I had wanted to meet her. Not that either of us didn't have an answer. Our answers were just unsayable.

The next scar Lexi shows me is on her abdomen, and the next after that, a jagged line cut by a fishing hook where her hip bone kisses against the inside of her skin, which she pulls her panties down and aside to show me, then she asks me, vulnerable as she's ever been, to stay down there.

My arm no longer hurts, but I'm cradling it anyway, to emphasize that I've been wronged. I'm mad in a way I haven't felt in years—mad like I got when I was a teenager. Lexi fled right after she stuck me, stomping up the stairs and locking herself in her room; she's got some kind of metal blaring, so I'm outside her door, screaming through it. I'm not even sure what I've said so far. But the important points I've made are that she and Raleen are fucking losers, and this is what I get for trying to be included in their stupid freak coven. Raleen isn't one for confrontation, so I can't quite understand why she hasn't fled too. She's at the bottom of the stairs, watching me like the dumb puppy Lexi's made of her.

Finally, I whirl on her. "What are you down there waiting for?"

She widens her eyes and shifts her feet, but doesn't move.

"Fuck you both." I pound down the stairs toward Raleen, expecting her to get out of my way, but instead she reaches out and snatches my wrist.

"You can't leave."

"Don't touch me."

She doesn't release my arm. "Say you won't go." Her fingernails dig into my skin.

"Raleen! That hurts. Are you tripping? Let go of me!"

"You're sick," she insists.

I twist my arm, trying to torque it free. "What was in that needle? Your estrogen? Stop playing Lexi's tricks."

Abruptly, she screams, "You're sick!" Her fingers grip down again, cording tight as she pulls herself to her full height for leverage. The aggression slows me, puts a crack of doubt in my anger. She's anxious. Unnerved. When I stop struggling, she drops my hand and raises her arms. "Please," she says. "Let me show you."

On the couch downstairs, she pulls open her laptop, folding her legs up small as I lean toward her to see the screen. She calls up the website of a

bioengineering company called Improvac and protests that she didn't know Lexi would do it. But I can't make sense of the site, so I can't figure out what she's trying to disavow.

When I can get her to stop mewling about what she did and didn't know, she explains how the company, Improvac, has been vaccinating pigs and deer against their own sex hormones for years. The vaccine causes a body's antibodies to bind to gonadotropin (GnRH), the hormone that signals the production of all sex hormones in mammals (estrogen, testosterone, progesterone). The website features an animated video intended for an audience of industrial pig farmers, showing how the vaccine makers synthesize GnRH, then hook it to a foreign protein, which they inject into a body. The antibodies of the immune system then attack and clear the protein, but afterward, the immune system reclassifies the body's natural GnRH as part of an ongoing threat. Subsequently any and all GnRH triggers an autoimmune response, resulting in a complete cessation of the production of all sex hormones.

In the commercial vaccines, the producers bonded synthesized GnRH to an inert protein, or one that the immune system can easily clear. That's what Raleen did in the trial injections she gave herself and Lexi. But the version Lexi stuck in me? That was a GnRH bonded to a live bacteria.

"What does that mean, Raleen?"

She pauses and says quietly, "It means you're contagious."

I want to scream at her again, but I'm afraid she'll clam up. My fists are so tight the nails feel like they're breaking skin, but I hold my tongue.

"I chose a strain of antibiotic-resistant strep pneumonia," Raleen goes on, pulling up a description of the illness on WebMD. "It's a common bacteria that can cause mild ear infections, but that people often carry asymptotically so they don't even know they're spreading it as they go around coughing, sneezing, or touching." She begins to cry.

"What are you crying about?" I snap, "You made this shit, you must have wanted it to spread."

"I just..." Her voice falters. "It's different. I know you. I didn't think she'd start with you. I was picturing—you know—one of the frat boys who

called me faggot.”

I refuse to feel sorry for her. “Stop crying and tell me what to do. How do I make it better? There must be some antibiotic that works?”

She shakes her head.

“You don’t know how to fix it?”

She shakes her head again, just the barest movement.

In the silence that follows, I raise my arm, trying to find the pinprick among the slightly irritated pores where I’d epilated the day before. In a rush, belief washes over me. I’m sick. They infected me. I’d planned to be on hormones the rest of my life, but now I’ve got no choice. A sterile sow.

“Jesus, Raleen.” I can barely whisper it. “What were you thinking?”

She licks her lips, and when she speaks, she’s gone infuriatingly dreamy. “I was thinking...” she says, then stops and starts again. “I was thinking that I want to live in a world where everyone has to choose their gender.”

Summer, Seattle, one and a half years to contagion

Lexi is drunk in a way that I suppose she has been getting drunk for years. For the first half hour, she just sobbed and wanted to know why she was so stupid as to ruin her life trying to be trans, but slowly the drunkenness has turned to rage, and now she's demanding I tell her how she ever could have thought a selfish bitch like me could have ever cared about her.

I point out that she's sitting on that selfish bitch's couch, has been staying in that selfish bitch's apartment.

She laughs, bitterly, and spits on the floor. "Fuck you, these aren't yours." I live there, but the couch is not mine, and neither are the thin Sheetrock walls that it's backed up against, through which I'm sure the neighbors can hear her. Lexi won't say so, but she followed me to Seattle. She knows no one else, has no job leads, no housing prospects. When she announced to me that she was coming, I also realized that she planned to sleep in my bed until she found her own way, and perhaps after that too. To which I was internally like: no way. But when she got here, I put her up.

I've had her here six days so far, and tonight, I told her she needed to leave, at least for a day or two, find a different bed for the night. The bed we have been sharing is a nice Sealy memory foam mattress, while the couch is an Italian daybed from Design Within Reach, and both belong to the man who lets me stay in the apartment, the fifty-year-old real estate developer, Sidney, just then riding high on Seattle's Amazon boom. Initially, I called him my boyfriend rather than my sugar daddy, because I thought that he might find sugar daddy offensive, and I'd lose what he gave me. But I'm beginning to gather that he has fewer illusions about our relationship than I do, and that maybe he'd prefer that I call him anything other than boyfriend. But whatever he is to me, he's supposed to be here in an hour. He cannot find some trans girl in combat boots drunkenly sobbing on his couch.

Sidney found my online profile at the end of my time at Dartmouth, just before my girlfriend finally stopped touching me altogether. In the spring, she took a trip to visit her friends. When I picked her up at the airport afterward, she flinched when I tried to kiss her. I dropped out two weeks later, left her all my belongings, too bereft to even care about the Eames table, having also alienated my parents who'd left it to me. At that stage I looked like neither boy nor girl, but I also didn't fashion a confident genderqueer look, just wore plain slouchy shirts that I thought covered my pointy new tits but learned later from photos sure didn't. *Come to Seattle*, Sidney wrote, *I'll fly you out*. His cis wife was out of town, and he wanted me to pretend to be her, which I happily did. I spent three days sleeping on his wife's side of the bed, living the life she normally lived—and loving it. He sped me down tight curving Pacific roads in his BMW, took me to dinners where I bit down on lemony Hama Hama oysters that released the taste of the sea in a delicious goosh. I walked her cute little terrier at Discovery Park—the dog and I equally excited by the smell of the kelp beds. In Ballard, Sidney held me around the waist, the wind pressing the skirt of one of his wife's maxi dresses against my legs as we watched the salmon jump up the ladders. A seal grabbing an easy lunch on those fatigued fish popped up and—I swear to God—winked at me. I winked back, because that seal and I knew what's up: Fuck doctorates, I wanna be a rich dude's housewife.

Now, I stay in one of Sidney's condos in a forty-unit complex that he developed in Ballard. He gets a tax break for keeping a few of the units for low-income buyers, and rather than break even on selling one of them, he's simply kept and furnished it for himself. The tacit deal is, roughly sketched: I can stay here, and he can come over and fuck or blow me whenever he wants, which has turned out to be three times a month.

Sidney is supposed to be here in an hour. I'm supposed to be looking like a hot trophy wife. My legs, clit, and ass are supposed to be shaved, because Sidney does not like hair. They are not shaved, much less enticingly displayed in the lace teddy he got me. My makeup is not done. I am not looking like a trophy wife, or even a moderately sexy tennis wife—

I'm wearing a pair of ratty yoga pants and looking like a spiritually beat-down soccer mom divorcée whose recalcitrant kids want to live with their dad. My own recalcitrant kid being Lexi, who left when I asked, only to pound on my door a half hour later holding a bottle of Popov. She pushed back into the apartment, plopped herself down on the couch, and ignored all my polite entreaties for her to get the fuck out until she had finished about half the bottle, at which point she turned on the boo-hoos.

Now she's sprawled out on the couch, wiping her nose with a pillow. "All you care about is being just as spoiled an asshole as a girl as you were as a boy," she accuses. "You don't even care about me at all."

"Lexi, can we not?" I'm typing out a text to Sidney, asking him if we can please postpone. I don't let Lexi know her words cut at all. I show her I've got more important concerns than her tantrum. I hit Send and look up.

"Say it," she says. "Say you don't care about me."

"Lexi, what do you want me to tell you? You know that New Hampshire was horrible for me. I didn't know what I wanted."

"You couldn't have told me that *before* you lured me here?"

I'm trying to hold my tongue, but I can't quite swallow this. I lured her? "I didn't lure you anywhere; you lived in a shithole cabin and wanted to leave."

"You are so fucking..." I think maybe she's trailed off, that the alcohol is going to finally subdue her, but instead she roars, "STUCK UP."

God, she's loud. I can't have her shouting like this. I go into the bathroom and lock the door, but I can hear her carrying on outside. She's talking about how she's gonna kick Sidney's ass when he gets here. She's gonna whoop his old man ass with one hand behind her back. I'm unprepared for this. This is not how my girlfriend and I used to fight.

On the cold porcelain of the toilet, I brainstorm how to explain her presence to Sidney. I text him again, but he replies that he's had a hell of a week and needs the stress relief only I can provide. Somewhere behind my anger and anxiety about what Sidney's going to do, I know Lexi's ass-kicking routine is the puffed-up hackles of a dislocated, disoriented, and terrified woman. I think Lexi's traveled outside New Hampshire for longer

than a day twice in her life—once to New York City and once to Vegas with her dad for a conference, before she insisted on dressing in women's clothes at work and he fired her. But I'm too pissed to do her a favor, so I'm trying to convince myself that doing her a favor is doing myself a favor.

I text Sidney and ask him how he feels about road head. I tell him I want to suck him off while he drives down 99, that I want other drivers to look in and see my ponytail bobbing. Now I get a text back: Yeah, babe.

Keep the car running and your cock out, I text back. I'm gonna get in and get to work.

My cock came out after your first text. It's not going to fit back in my pants until you do something about it.

Relief. He's not going to come in. I throw my hair in a ponytail. Start putting on my makeup as fast as I can, no winged liner, just a smudgy smoky eye that forgives hurried sloppiness.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Lexi looks at me, red-eyed, rumpled, and incredulous. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, lucky you, you get to stay here tonight."

She follows me to my bedroom. "I'm coming with you then."

No. Absolutely not. "Lexi, if he so much as sees your face, neither of us will have a place to sleep tonight." I hold up a tight sweater dress, wonder if I can get away with wearing it instead of something slinky.

Lexi takes two steps, pulls it from my hand, and tosses it on the bed. "He's not your boyfriend. He doesn't care about you. With a boyfriend, you can call him and tell him, 'My friend is having a hard time, let's all watch a movie and chill.' "

I pick up the dress from where she dropped it on the bed. "Who says I want to watch a movie and chill?"

She starts to cry again. "I took care of you in New Hampshire! I let you sleep in my bed when your girlfriend wouldn't let you in hers."

She starts putting on her boots, as if she's going to come out with me. "Jesus, Lexi! I throw you one pity-fuck and now I'm responsible for you forever?"

Her mouth falls open and the short little noise that comes out hurts my heart. I push down any regret. It's her own fault.

I look good when I leave. Black Coach heels, sweater dress barely covering naked thighs—legs looking long. Lexi is sitting on the couch holding the vodka bottle between knees that poke vulnerable and pale from her ripped leggings, and I see her take it all in, before I put on my leather jacket, toss keys into my purse, and walk out.

When Sidney drops me back off two hours later, Lexi is gone, and I will not see her again for months, even though she will settle in Seattle, and the few trans girls willing to speak with me after her version of that night spreads—a version of the story that includes uses of capital-A “Abusive”—will only talk about how badass and rad she is.

Winter, Seattle, one year to contagion

I'm waiting at a straight bar for this really cute trans guy I have a crush on to show up for a drink. He noted, teasingly, that I was a "fancy bitch," and so picked a craft cocktail bar that billed itself as a "whiskey and bitters emporium." Unfortunately, the only mixed drink I tolerate is pineapple juice and spicy tequila. The bartender, a dimpled woman with enviable curls, eyed me with curiosity when I ordered it, then said, "On the house" when I began to rummage through my purse for a loose ten. I knew why the drink was free, but just in case I didn't, the bartender said that she'd seen me around and I was a really interesting person. I thought my crush would understand my irritation at this: Like, please, I already know I'm trans, just let me forget it for a second while I try to be a girl on a date with a boy. But when he arrived, he didn't get it. A free drink was a free drink, and she didn't give him one.

Now he wants to know why so many trans girls in Seattle are so angry, act so traumatized. "It's not like you're a bunch of child soldiers. Your parents weren't killed in front of you." He asserts that even when something nice happens, like a free drink, trans girls get triggered. Like everything is a wound, everything is trauma. He starts talking about this trans girl he met a few months ago, how all she did was bitch about AFABs and encourage cis scum to die. He wanted to be her friend, but she called trans guys *Aidens* and did things like pick up all her meals drive-through, because she was convinced people inside would stare at her or misgender her. He describes the house this girl lives in—a coven of trans women polyamorously fucking one another to biblical levels of drama over the soundtrack of *Skyrim* on PS3, all the while saying how shitty the world was outside the house, until they so confused microaggressions for deep violence that they walked around with knives in their boots and canisters of Mace dangling from their purses—and I exhale with frustration when I realize exactly which girl he's talking about.

Two feelings rise. I don't want to be categorized with Lexi. I want to be appealing to my crush. So I tell him I'm not like that. I'm not angry all the time, much less armed. But internally, I'm thinking, of course trans girls all love and fuck one another. Who else will? When I first learned the term *brick* for those square never-will-be-passable trans women, it was auxiliary to an explanation for another term: *masonry*. As in brick-on-brick love—only bricks get stuck to other bricks.

Except what do you do with the meanness of the word *masonry* itself—it was other trans women, the only ones that bricks could supposedly trust, who came up with that hilariously cruel slang. Brick-on-brick betrayal. But we have to understand one another well to be so cruel.

Most of the cruelty I've experienced has been inadvertent, the kind that comes from getting trampled so often that inevitably someone steps somewhere sensitive. My first boyfriend after Sidney was a married man who fell in love with me accidentally. He could not see past his own bafflement at his attraction to see me well enough for anything like intentional cruelty. We met in hotels or he came to my studio apartment after work, and his cruelty, like his love, came accidentally. Once, he took me for a weekend in a fancy hotel in Portland—the Nines—where the Los Angeles Lakers were staying. When I came out of the shower, buoyed on a carpet of steam spilling into a hotel room designed in a modern style—no door, only a frosted glass divider between tiled bathroom and lush bedroom—I stood naked with my back to him, combing my hair, and heard him murmur, “You're so beautiful, I feel sick.” I looked at myself, then at his reflection in the mirror, and saw it was true. I was beautiful and it hurt him. I doubt he ever complimented his wife that way. His wife did not possess the kind of beauty that triggered a desire that made him disgusted with himself. My kind of beauty does not trace a path to stable relationships, a dining room set from Crate & Barrel, a Thanksgiving turkey with his folks. He had no conception of what to do with my beauty other than choke on it.

My friends who date women have it just as bad. Once, in a queer bar, I heard a cute woman in a leather motorcycle jacket joke about her gold star status—she'd never once touched a penis. My friend Michelle had been

drinking G&Ts for an hour before that, working up the nerve to ask this woman out. I found Michelle fifteen minutes later, outside the bar, soaked from hiding in someone's dew-covered hedge on 15th, where she had cried softly in frustration.

"Yeah, that's transphobia," my crush agrees, "but it doesn't have to be trauma." He glances at my now finished drink, and I take it as a rebuke: *Go pay for the next one of those*. The more I try to explain, to list the tiny grievances that added up to an intolerable day in my life, the more I sound unhinged. A man hissed at me on the bus. A bunch of teenagers loudly discussed whether I was really a guy. A girl I knew only on the Internet left a suicide note. The cashier at Whole Foods smirkingly called me "bro." The TV at the nail salon, playing soundlessly, featured some nonsensical ghoul that I realized, with a shock, was someone's idea of a trans woman, someone's idea of me. The guy at the local corner store revealed that he knew where I lived and shrugged when I asked how: "Everyone around here knows about you." And now, I get irritated at one thing, a free drink, and I sound crazy complaining about that, right? Some total loony acting traumatized 'cause a bartender tried to be kind.

My crush sighs and pulls out an ace. He knows people that have actually been raped, have actually been beaten—hell, half of the trans dudes he knows have been, and they aren't paralyzed with anger, convinced they're constantly persecuted. We're talking real trauma, not someone whispering about them on the bus, much less the burden of free drinks. To which I know I can probably come up with some of my own friends' real trauma, but I'm too affronted, so I just shriek, "THE WHOLE WORLD MONITORS AND MOCKS MY EVERY WAKING MOMENT!"

Needless to say, he and I do not hook up. He leaves me to my free drinks and my tinfoil rage hat.

When he's gone, I miss Lexi for the first time.

Mud squishes around my rubber boots, making sucking sounds as I work my way down a little path onto the prairie. The snow has melted and the ground thawed, revealing half-rotten leaves and plants. The dirt smells fecund and the breeze carries a note of green.

At the top of a little knoll—calling anything a hill here would be grandiloquent—I spot what’s left of I-80. A scalloped river of tar, its banks dotted by boulders that I know are abandoned cars. Folks think I’m stupid to plant my seeds so near, but the earth looked rich and black there last year. My plants grew tall and green in the prairie grass, and the specter of bandits or militia cruising I-80 protected my crop from scavengers, even through the famine last summer.

Now, I climb onto the fork of a low bare tree to survey the land. I’ve got a strain of heirloom zucchini known as Black Beauty, and last year it did well down in a depression in the land, where water collected through the hot months.

I smell the dirt bike even before I hear it. Gasoline fumes on the wind. It’s coming down I-80. I jump from the tree, desperate not to be seen, but in the tree, I must have been the tallest thing for miles. A boxy 4x4 follows the bike—maybe a nineties-era Land Cruiser.

Shit. The dirt bike rider swerves off I-80. I must have been seen. I run low, try to make myself invisible in the dead prairie grass. In the summer, he’d never find me, but winter snow beat down all the grass and I’m leaving footprints in the mud. The rider handles the bike expertly, taking it up the embankment, riding across the sodden prairie without getting bogged down in the muck. I find a log and press myself to it, pulling grass over my body. Frigid water seeps through my pants and jacket. All for naught. He’s found my footsteps. He’s parked the bike, waves a rifle to signal to the truck. I don’t want to be found spooning a log. Sometimes dignity is a better defense than you’d think.

I'm sitting on the log waiting when two men and a woman approach me. Not T-slabs. The men look thin and have hunting rifles trained on me. The woman is tall and doesn't appear to have a gun.

"What have you got?" one of the men asks.

A stab of despair comes over me. My seeds, my livelihood, hang obviously in a bright red fanny pack just over my crotch. I should have stashed it. Idiot. "I've got nothing," I say, not even trying to stick the lie.

One of the men, late forties, signals at the woman with the end of his gun. He's clean shaven. They haven't been traveling long. "Search her."

I give her a death glare with my one good eye when she gets near. I wear my bangs over the left side of my face to hide the worst of the dioxin scars. My hair is long and scraggled. I've been avoiding the sight of myself for years, steering clear of my reflection in anything like a car window, much less an actual mirror.

When I first arrived in Iowa, I took a shot of estrogen, intentionally contaminated with dioxins and distributed by a Nebraska militia; it caused rashes and boils that ruined my skin, especially the left side of my face. The physical pain hurts less than allowing myself to contemplate the waste, brevity, and stupidity of my time as a desirable woman. I've heard that the half-life of dioxin in the human body is a few years, and the boils and inflammation have lessened of late, but I will never again be a beauty.

In my sickness-delirium after the shot, I told my traveling companion, a young evangelical, about Seattle: ground zero for the contagion. Confessed myself as Patient Zero. She told me the poison made me imagine things. But when she stripped me, to get me out of my sweat-soaked clothes, she found my cock. Then she believed me. Trans women started the contagion, everyone knew. They were jealous everyone else could breed. She told me the dioxin was God's retribution. But she stayed with me long enough to see me through the worst, and kept my secret for as long as we traveled together.

The tall woman moves toward me carefully now, ignoring my death glare. From five feet away, she tells me to stand up with my hands above my head. I comply, and toss back my bangs to give her a good look at my

ruined face. She pulls up close and looks me in the eye, but with curiosity rather than the disgust I'm used to inspiring.

I don't like it. Disgust is my last defense. I tilt my glance skyward to watch the high fish-scale clouds drift far above. She unclips my fanny pack and tosses it to the men, who examine the contents with little excitement. Her hands roam my torso, searching my clothes, and then the crevices of my body for hidden treasure. I brace myself as her hands go to my crotch. She pats me, pauses a moment, and then carries on as if she were expecting it.

I can't help but glance back down, away from the clouds. She's got her gaze right on my face, her lips lifted into a faint smile. A memory tickles, something familiar, but I can't grab it. Then, subtly, she pushes up her sleeve. On her wrist, a simple stick and poke tattoo: the letters *t4t*. I frown at her.

Abruptly she stands and turns away. "She's clean," she announces to the men. "What's in the pack?"

"Just seeds," the clean-shaven guy grunts. "Barely worth the gas it cost to chase her down."

"Please," I say, "if you don't want them, leave them. It's how I eat and trade."

"Shut up," says the man with my fanny pack.

"Let me see the seeds," the woman says. The clean-shaven guy holding my bag hesitates, but the other guy, gray-haired and wolfish, nods, and the woman strides over. Both guys now have their guns slung across their backs, the strap crosswise over the chest. She reaches out to take the seeds, but quickly and viciously kicks Cleanface in the knee. He falls forward, clutching his leg, and she lunges for the other guy. "Help!" she shouts, and it takes me a second to realize she's talking to me. All three of them are on the ground, but Cleanface is unslinging his gun. She's doing what? Stabbing the other guy? They are both in puffy green down jackets, a jumble of marshmallow man limbs. Cleanface lines up a shot but forgets to take off the safety. He's got it off by the time I grab the barrel of his gun and jerk it upward. The crack of the shot is so loud, I scream. Then pain crackles

through my shin and the prairie grass rushes at my face. He's kicked my leg out. I am prone, offering the back of my skull for an execution shot. My eyes see only grass and dirt, but my mind feels his bullet's desire. My limbs move so slowly, as if through sand, compared to the electric speed of the fear burrowing through my thoughts. It's a split second, an eternity, before I rise, and yet the bullet hasn't come. Like some feral animal, the woman is on Cleanface, hitting him with a stick, then bending back his thumb when he reaches out to fend her off. She screams at me to get the gun. I play tug-of-war with him, my hands on the barrel, the stock, everywhere, contorting myself to keep the end away from me, dancing so it won't point at my feet, and I hear a hollow *clonk*, and his grip releases.

The tall woman scoops up both rifles and the seed bag. "Come on. Hurry." I can't tell if the men are dead or stunned or what. I see she must have stabbed one of them, because she pauses at the dirt bike and slashes the tires with a bloody knife.

When we get to the 4x4—a Mitsubishi Pajero, not a Land Cruiser—she opens the front door and turns the keys, still in the ignition. The diesel engine farts black smoke and comes alive. "Tee furty," she says to me. I have no idea what she's saying and no breath for talking anyway. All I know is that I'm in a truck with a woman who stabbed the last person who shared that same vehicle with her.

An hour later, outside the Quad Cities, she turns down a dirt road, driving slowly past fields gone fallow. There, she begins to talk, and when I hear more of her voice, I realize why she seems so familiar. She's trans. Not auntie-boy trans. Trans trans. Antediluvian trans. That forehead. She had a brow shave, before the war, when you could buy things like that. I try to picture her face with heavy contours and highlights, as she might have once looked in a pageant scene.

"Zoey," she begins by way of introduction.

She seems surprised when I insist that I don't know "tee furty." She says it slower, "Tee-four-tee. Like the letter *t* and the number four," which startles me into a pause before I feign incomprehension. Of course I remember the phrase, but it's all so bound up with Lexi in my memory,

bound up with contagion day so long ago. I'm not about to bring that up. I won't even place myself in the same city as Patient Zero anymore. I've been telling the same story so long now that I practically believe it: I caught the contagion in California, from the masses fleeing the Pacific Northwest, then auntie-boyed my way east to the Prairie Zones.

"The only t4t I know," I say, "is the old Craigslist thing."

"That's right, that's it," she says. "It's kind of a joke. Trans girls fucking trans girls. But really, it's an ethos. Trans girls loving trans girls, above all else. Hoes before bros."

The associations draw on an uncomfortable past. "So it's like a trans girl-gang now?"

She swings the wheel and pulls up to a barn. I see some women on the porch of a farmhouse. I'm on the alert, thinking about trans girls, and for once, I suspect these girls are trans too, not just auntie-boys. "It's not a gang. It's a promise. You just promise to love trans girls above all else. The idea—although maybe not the practice—is that a girl could be your worst enemy, the girl you wouldn't piss on to put out a fire, but if she's trans, you're gonna offer her your bed, you're gonna share your last hormone shot."

"That sounds like some kind of trans girl utopia." I'm so rattled, it's not even sarcastic.

She laughs. "Please. You've met a trans woman before, right? Do you think the words *trans women* and *utopia* ever go together in the same sentence? Even when we're not starved for hormones, we're still bitches. Crabs in a barrel. Fucking utopia, my ass." She glances at me. My nervousness must show plainly. I can't tell if I'm safe or not.

"Here's what it is," she says, a little more gently. "We aim high, trying to love one another, and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for one another. And even if we don't all love one another, we mostly all respect one another."

After a pause she says, "I remember how I used to be before the contagion. Embarrassed to be seen with another trans woman, for fear that her transness would reveal my transness and we'd both get clocked. T4t is

an ideal, I guess, and we fall short of it most of the time. But that's better than before. All it took was the end of the world to make that happen."

I peer through the windshield. Those girls are definitely trans. There's a girl with her shirt cut low and her jacket open. Old-school breast implants.

"What about you then? You're like some kind of t4t badass vigilante?"

"Oh no," she says. "I was looking for you. The girl who started t4t heard you might be out this way. That's why I got myself hooked up with those hunters."

"Fuck." The whisper comes out of me.

"No! Don't be scared. You already know her," says the woman. She takes the muteness of my scrambling reaction for incomprehension and clarifies: "Lexi."

My good eye swivels around and settles on a figure sitting on some low wooden steps, picking the meat off a chicken bone and watching our truck idle. There.

Summer, Seattle, Trans Beach Pride, six months to contagion

The girl down at the water's edge throws the football in a beautiful spiral, so smooth and steady you could use it for a drill bit. I want to catch that football. I haven't caught a football in three years. And normally, I'd be embarrassed—I'm self-conscious about the way displays of athleticism curl my body into the old shape: arms lank, shoulders loose, hips solid and straight, shrugging off the balancing-a-book-on-my-head pose that I've so effortfully cast my body into. But today is Trans Beach Pride at Seattle's Dyke-kiki Beach, so who cares? No one here is going to think I'm manly, and if they do, they'll accuse themselves of internalized transphobia much more cruelly than I could ever voice. It's safe in a way that I yearn for. I've hardly been to any trans-themed events in Seattle. I'm nervous of Lexi and her familiars, an anxiety that's relegated me to a de facto stealth lifestyle. Not that I'm actually stealth, but in trying to avoid the awkwardness of talking trans stuff with cis people, I've ended up allowing my close cis friends to treat me as though I'm just like them, which constrains me to act just like them. Now, at Trans Beach Pride, the sweetness of briefly unfolding my body for once, in front of girls already unfolded, tantalizes as much as the thought of refolding when I leave hurts.

The girl backs up and throws a Hail Mary from the stony beach to a cluster of other girls, out in the shallows, but she's got so much zip that it steams over their heads, toward where I'm standing out on the pier. A split second of muscle hesitation before old instincts release, and I dive off the dock to snatch the stinging ball from just over the water as it passes me by, my body stretched full length when I splash into the end zone below, as I must have a thousand times in high school, when we skipped school in the early autumn to leap for deep bombs into the still-warm waves breaking white over the pier at Edgewater Beach in Chicago.

Coming up from the water, I hold the ball with one hand and use the other to check that my bikini top is still in place, before shrugging to

acknowledge the half-impressed, half-joking claps of the girls who had been waiting to catch the ball. After such a catch, it's socially incumbent upon me to throw the ball back with equally casual skill, but I haven't thrown a football in a few years, and I doubt my arm will work like it used to. I line up my finger pads on the laces and gauge the distance to whoever the girl with the amazing arm is. She's got blond hair with dark roots, and she moves fluidly in a retro-cut one-piece. The throw leaves my hand wobbly and weak, the ball tracing a flaccid arc that ends ten feet short of her toes, which seems to please her. She trots forward and picks it up, then calls out, "You don't have to throw like a girl to impress us. Just throw it like you normally would." When I hear her voice, hear the mockery, I realize it's Lexi—she's dyed her hair, put on some curves.

Some of the other girls, standing ten or twenty feet in from me, widen their eyes at one another. One girl snickers. I feel stupid in my body, ashamed at the inference that I've been caught trying to out-femme a bunch of other trans women. I want to protest: What about that catch I just made? Instead, I needlessly adjust my top and press my lips into a ha-ha-ha-good-one smile.

I feel even more like a shit-eater when I see that a few girls' looks are lingering on me, and I realize that they might know of me only from Lexi, and if so, I probably just confirmed everything I suspect she's ever said about me: stuck-up, aloof girl, who wants everyone to be impressed with her but has no real skills or abilities.

Lexi's next perfect spiral comes right back at me. I have only to stick out my hands, and there it is. The other girls, none of whom I know well, seem relieved and back up to surround me, given to understand that I'm to be included, that the range of Lexi's arm and grace has been just now re-extended.

Lexi and I are lying on her couch, and she is examining my scars. I have many. The morning sun makes bright parallelograms on the floor; a long-haired cat named Ivan has parked in one of them. I wonder how much longer Lexi will let me stay here. She's claimed a tiny cabin next to a little pond, on the edge of the land patrolled by the t4t women. Rot, from years of rainwater streaming in, mottles most of the surfaces. Lexi replaced the Sheetrock on the eastern wall and installed some gorgeous cabinets that she scrounged from one of the abandoned Amish farms, but the renovations mostly call attention to the need for repair everywhere else. "This place is a shithole," she said, by way of inviting me in the first time. "It'll be a step up for you."

She's been living here for two years now. After the rift, she fought in the Texas secession, where she fell in love and married another mercenary soldier, a cis woman named Digna who'd eventually gotten hooked on the luxe Floridian testosterone that so many mercenaries took to stay sharp and strong. On the Luxe T, Digna's personality changed as much as her body and "our love lost its rhythm," which was Lexi's surprisingly poetic way of saying that, in fits of jealousy, Digna repeatedly beat the shit out of her.

In the first few weeks I stayed on the land, I misunderstood Lexi to be some kind of founding leader, but she's not; she's just respected. The girls who first claimed the land simply liked her t4t tattoo and the long-ago ethos that had caused her to stick and poke it into her thigh. They revived it and made it their own with a vengeance that had only been a daydream of Lexi's back in Seattle.

Lexi drags the pad of her finger down my dioxin scars, then over to a scar down the side of my neck. "Any of these from bullets?" Lexi asks. When an evacuation bus in Idaho crashed up in the mountains, a shard of glass sliced into my neck. Between infection and sunburn, the wound healed into a keloid.

“None from bullets,” I answer. “But I’m sure you’ll have your chance yet.” An AR-15 hangs above the couch, and Lexi’s .45 rests on the side table where she set it after it poked me when we lay down to spoon. Lying together fully clothed on the couch is our first touch in all these weeks—our only touch, I suspect, likely the limit of the comfort we can handle from each other. “Your last attempt on me didn’t even scar.” I hold up my arm for her inspection, one of the few places with skin still smooth and immaculate.

I mean it without malice, but Lexi’s jaw sags a little. Remembrance darkens her face like a cloud passing over a field. “Oh, it scarred,” she says, and rubs the peach fuzz on my forearm. “Just everywhere on this earth but your arm.”

Lexi and I have not talked about that day. We don’t know how to talk about it. The unknown Patient Zero and her infector. The two most wanted, most despised, most legend-enshrouded people on this scarred earth. The fear of it, the enormity of it, keeps the words from both our mouths. Now, I ask the nearest question I can stand. “Lexi, why did you want the girls to look for me? Why am I here?”

Lexi begins to explain once more, but I already know the story. The girls had heard from a seed trader about a trans woman from up near West Branch. From the description, Lexi got this notion that it was me. The thought ate at her and she began acting erratic, or at least more erratically than usual. She started organizing a mission with some of the younger girls, especially a gung ho crew of former auntie-boys who figured out that estrogen was right for them, and found an explanation for it in t4t. But some of the older women, including Zoey, were wary of Lexi’s inability to explain her fervor. Lexi wouldn’t divulge anything more than that she thought the West Branch woman sounded like someone from her past. They suspected that past had to do with Digna. The last thing they wanted was any connection to Luxe T on their land. So instead of joining Lexi’s full-on expedition, Zoey linked up with a pair of hunters out of Waterloo. If I turned out to be some kind of Luxe T fiend, she’d let the hunters do their thing. If not, a posse of hunters had raided Zoey’s only milk cow that winter, and she didn’t have much use for them.

“No, not how I got here, Lexi,” I interject. “*Why.*”

She uncurls her arm from around me and lies silent.

“Why am I here?” I repeat.

“For an apology, I guess,” she says heavily, after a time.

Then I say it. And as it comes out of me, it feels good. It is a weight, a shame, that I’ve been wanting to set down for years, much too burdensome to share, so I’m always alone, always just at the edge of life, clinging on, but unsure why. I sometimes think about my regret in the same way as I think about my closeted years. They are nothing alike, except for my desperate need to speak their truth, and my total inability to do so. “I’m sorry, Lexi. I’m really so sorry.”

Her body jerks away from me. “No, that’s not what I meant.” She sits up, as quickly as if I’ve spilled water where she lay. “Wait? What are you sorry for?”

“I was never t4t.”

“Fuck t4t. I’m surrounded by trans women. Have been for years. I have lots of t4t. I wanted you to be t4*me.*”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m sorry about. I was never t4Lexi.”

A court of law, if a just one still exists or ever existed, might convict Lexi for her actions, but mine have been the thought crimes: the cuts that no one could see or feel but Lexi. She had always known what I wouldn’t admit: I had been embarrassed of her. I had thought of myself as too pretty, too high-class and educated, too smart to be stuck with her, except for during my moments of weakness, neediness, or loneliness. I had been ashamed of the ways that I was like her, ashamed of the ways our transness made us sisters, if not lovers.

For a while we sit side by side, our thighs close but not touching, until Ivan interrupts our reverie, demanding pets. Lexi tosses him down irritably, so he tries out my lap, his weight enough for me to grunt. Lexi reaches to push him off me, but I tell her it’s okay and she relents, rubs his ears, then reaches up to touch my lank hair. “You know what?” says Lexi. She lightly tugs my hair, pulling my good eye toward her. “That night, when you came over to my cabin, I couldn’t sleep, I was so excited to have met you. I got

up, and I laid out all the equipment to go ice fishing. I wanted to take you out on the ice the next day. But in the morning you just wanted to leave. All I ever really wanted was to do cool stuff with you.” She lets my hair drop. “You always found a way to reject me for it.”

My eye wanders out the window to the pond. A light breeze ruffles the leaves of the pond-fed trees that stand alone on the prairie field, and textures the water’s surface, breaking the sun’s reflection into thousands of shining strings. I try to imagine Lexi and myself ice fishing on it in the winter, sitting together on upside-down buckets in the cold. The faint taste of butter-fried fish ghosts across my tongue. I want that so bad. “We can still do cool stuff,” I say.

Lexi snorts, then stands abruptly. “Sure, cool stuff!” she says sarcastically, then puts on a girly voice. “Maybe we can play Xbox today, huh? Or, wait, I know! Let’s go to Sephora!”

I deserve that, but it lands hard.

In a way that I know comes from years of habit, but that I still find threatening, she snatches up her .45 and stuffs it into her makeshift hip holster. When she speaks again, her tone has lost its sarcasm. “Despite everything, ever since Zoey brought you back, I’ve been daydreaming up plans that include you,” she says. “God, you and I are so stupid.”

“What plans?” I venture softly, “Could we go fishing on your pond?” I’m stuck in that snowy morning in New Hampshire. What if I had just stuck around long enough to have gone ice fishing?

She purses her lips, as if she’s either going to laugh or cry. “Oh, sweetie, you’re cute. That’s a drainage pond. There’s no fish in there.”

“Oh.”

No one has called me “sweetie” in years, much less described me as cute.

If I keep looking at her, I’ll crumple into tears. “Well, you just said I was stupid,” I choke out.

“We are both stupid,” says Lexi. “Because despite everything, I still want to do stuff with you. Things are never going to be the same. I know

that, but I want to make it not as awful, so I can live with myself. T4t for real. Hormones for the girls.”

And then she tells me about this T-slab farmer up near Tipton, a bloated 'mone-runner named Keith. He's got his hands on a couple of the mutated estrogen piglets that were developed in the Kansas City farm labs, before the Texas militias bombed the whole city in an attempt to starve the provisional government troops of their supply. All we need are a few of his pigs to get started.

Seattle, contagion day

I need to get home. I need to quarantine myself for five or six days, the period over which the strep pneumonia will be most contagious. Raleen tried to get me to stay in the house, but there's no way I'm sharing a roof with Lexi and Raleen for a week. Should I take an Uber? The bus? I risk exposing someone either way. How long until I'm fully contagious? My nose is running, but I convince myself that it's hypochondria, that it's just the cold air outside. The Seattle winter chill. Best to walk. But it's four miles and I'm in high-heeled boots. I'm turning circles on the little patch of sidewalk in front of Lexi's house, unable to decide.

Twenty minutes later, my heels clack-clack along at a pretty good pace. My feet hurt, yes, but I'm altering my stride, swinging my hips, trying to ease the pressure on my toes. I'm nearing Volunteer Park. The walk is maybe two or three blocks shorter if I cut through. I don't like cutting through the park at night. But these feet!

There's a group of teenagers smoking a joint on a bench, their faces orange in the floodlights shining off the brick conservatory at the center of the park. I change my path to cut around the building's side to avoid them. The wind blows crisp, needling through the seams of my too-short leather jacket. Thank god I wore a scarf.

"Hey there." A male voice. Two figures, right next to me. Instantly, the adrenaline rush hits, and I have to work to not show my startle. Where did they come from?

One of them steps out into the thin concrete path. He's in my way. I don't want to slow down, but I don't want to step out into the leaves and clumpy dead grass in these heels. I catch his eye involuntarily. He's youngish. Mid-twenties. White, with hair indeterminately brown in the grubby orange light. Somewhat well dressed, like a frat boy who doesn't often do laundry.

"Puss in boots," he says, softly.

I ignore him, keep walking toward him. I'm going to slide past him on the thin sidewalk. No fear. I press my lips into a line and offer what I hope might be an unafraid and cold nod. I'm past him now. But a hand snakes out, grabs onto my elbow, turns me back toward him, gently but insistently.

"Hey," he says almost wonderingly, "you're not a puss." Then louder so his friend can hear. "Not a puss at all." He's slightly drunk maybe, the last two words slurring together to sound almost British: *a-tall*.

I wait for him to release me. Trying to express no emotion. But he pulls me toward him, hard so that I lose my balance and flop against him, like a woman steadying herself on a heaving ship. "That's cute," he says. "I like that."

His friend laughs. "You're crazy."

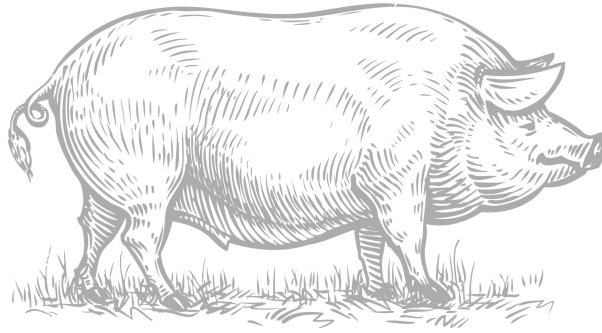
"I need to go home," I say. I feel dead calm. Emotions are shutting down.

"In a minute," the guy says. "I wanna see your dick."

The friend hoots. "You're crazy," he says again. They're both grinning at me, and his grip hasn't loosened. "Go on," the guy says to me, shaking me just a little. "Then I'll let you go."

My emotions are back. Fury, then a wave of bone-weary exhaustion, then back to fury, when they both begin to laugh. How do they think they can do this? How would they like it? I'm so tired of this shit. I want them to know how I suffer. I want them to suffer. I open my mouth to say something, and he leans forward, to catch my words. But no voice comes out. Instead, an elated, vengeful sprite rises up from my lungs, ascends through the passage of my throat, and announces itself to the world as I cough right in his face.

THE CHASER



The reason that Robbie had a slight odor, like leaves decaying in fall, is that he didn't shower. He didn't shower because the boys' dorm only had a gang shower, a beige-tiled room with four showerheads poking out from the wall. Robbie hated getting naked in front of other boys, for anyone to see his chubby, feminine body and his tiny cock.

I didn't like the gang shower either when I first got there. It seemed like some weird holdover from the 1950s. Something that should have been modernized after the sex panics that society had gone through when it realized that boys could be molested too. But nope. The Quakers never got the memo. Probably thought it built character.

Back in the suburbs, my friends would have called our shower room super gay. All of us soaping up in front of one another. But that's not how things were at boarding school. The homo thing was to be afraid of looking at one another's bodies. The hetero thing was to just dangle your dick out while talking to one another, acting like you couldn't care less about the other dicks pointing back at you. And then, even, to outman one another, we would just be naked all the time. This one kid, Kyle, he took the showerhead off the pipe so that the water came out in a hard stream like from a fire hose, and he'd wash his asshole in front of us with the same chill that he brushed his teeth. We all started doing it. We called it the power-shower. If you wanted to show that you weren't homo, just get that power-shower up your ass in front of the other dudes. It was this weird posturing. And it was effective. I respected Kyle. He worked out, he listened to hip-hop, and he washed his ass with the equivalent of a pressure washer like it was no big deal. Weird flex, but still, impressive flex.

There was only one toilet stall that had a door. It was suspect if you took a shit in that stall. If a kid was in there, other kids wouldn't let him shit in peace. *What are you hiding, bro? You jerking off in there?* We had this one toilet by the window. Some kids destroyed the entire stall around it, so to punish us, the head of the boys' dorm refused to fix it. We called that toilet

“the throne,” because upon it, you could hold court, surveying the entire dominion of the bathroom while you shat, and not only did it occupy the position of prominence within the bathroom, it was right next to the window, so to show off, you could lean out and call to any girls that were in the school square, as you plop-plopped in the water. That was the alpha move. The confidence to shit like you weren’t shitting at all.

Anyway, I got placed with Robbie as my roommate the fall semester of my junior year. He had to ditch class so that he could shower when no one else would be around. He’d get detention, but the trade-off was worth it to him for the occasional shower in peace. Early on, I tried to explain to him that if he didn’t want anyone to think he was a fag, he had to just not care what we thought about his body. But of course, he didn’t necessarily want us to think he wasn’t a fag. Not only did he care what boys thought of his body, some part of him wanted boys to notice his body, even if he couldn’t quite bring himself to say that. That’s how it is for girls, too, I think. They want us to notice their bodies, to obsess about their bodies, and that’s why they can’t show them to us. A power washer up the ass might ruin the allure.

—

Robbie and I started hooking up in our last month together as roommates. There had been a strange tension between us for a month before that. I had pretty much ignored him at first. He had two modes: shy and nervous or embarrassingly exuberant. The latter I observed during the day, from a distance, when he’d sit with the girls and they’d get going. I’d look over, and there he’d be, the kid who’d barely raise his voice over a whisper in the dorm, shrieking “Oh my *god*! She did not!” and gesticulating wildly. Girls, especially this one clique of senior girls, really liked Robbie. That was one reason why no one ever outright bullied him. You didn’t want those girls to think you were an asshole. But it wasn’t like you’d score with girls by being nice to Robbie either.

About two months into the semester, he and I got into a habit of quietly talking after lights out. Him on the upper bunk and me below, telling each other about our families, or else he'd share the gossip from the girls' dorm. He had a pretty good window on the girls, one that I for sure didn't have. I found out that he secretly smoked. He had a half a carton of cigarettes hidden in a coffee can out in the weeds near the soccer field, which seemed rebellious for him. One night we opened the dorm window, helped each other out, and shared some smokes out in the field.

"How come I spend like every night sleeping within a couple feet of you," I asked him, when we were sitting out in the grass under a bright moon, "and I never smelled cigarettes?"

He smiled in his shy way, with his dimples and soft cheeks. "I have perfect grooming," he said. I couldn't tell in what way he meant it, if he was joking or not, given his thing about the shower, or what to make of the slight edge of flirtation, the way it invited me to notice the care he took with his body. Actually, he did have a lot of hair care products, and stuff for his skin, and once or twice, I think he wore eyeliner.

I didn't have any products. Boys in the dorm let one another know that products were a sign of weakness. Every boy on the soccer team, including me, washed his hair with bar soap. Obviously, bar soap fucked my hair right up. I was self-conscious about how frizzy it was. The strong thing would have been to just use conditioner and not care what that meant about me, but that wasn't something I could let myself do. The problem wasn't that my hair was bad, the problem was that I was vain enough to care that it was bad, which pointed to a failure inside of me. Using conditioner would have fed a suspect vanity; give it a little and pretty soon I'm primping every time I walk out a door. As a compromise, I wore a hat a lot, the brim over my eyes, to sort of flatten out my hair and ease the frizz.

Before lights-out one night, I was looking in the mirror, trying to ruffle my hair after a day of hat head so tight that the roots of my hair hurt whenever anything stirred them. I didn't realize Robbie was watching me, but then he said, softly, "You'd have such nice hair, if you just took care of it. You're lucky to have hair like that."

I turned to say something biting, but I caught myself. He sat on the bed in a pair of loose cotton pants and a T-shirt, and in the yellow light of his bed lamp, I noticed, not for the first time, that he was sort of pretty, in the way that fat girls are pretty: all chubby cheeks and doe eyes and soft clear skin, like women in old paintings. The urge to snap at him fell away.

He got up, opened a box on a shelf, and pulled out a small plastic tub. “A hair mask,” he said, and handed it to me. Then he started talking to me in that exuberant way I’d only seen him talk with girls. He told me, his hands fluttering, that if I really wanted to heal my hair, and if I didn’t want to buy products, the best thing to do would be to make my own hair mask, with avocado, honey, olive oil, and eggs, to put it in my hair for an hour, then to wash it out, because my hair needed to be able to hold moisture again. “You need as many humectants as you can get.”

I stared at him: *humectants*? But rather than wilt under my look, he reached out, held my wrist with his fingers, and said, “Oh come on, I’ll do it for you.” He led me to his bed, and I was suddenly very turned on. I let him direct me to sit cross-legged on the floor, between his legs, facing away from him, while he massaged the hair mask onto my scalp with lubricated and thorough fingers that slicked through my hair. It was like they woke up all the nerves in my head just to soothe them. From between his soft thighs, I wondered what to do about my hard cock.

Three nights later, I stopped trying to be discreet when I jerked off at night.

—

I was relieved that Robbie didn’t try to sleep in my bed our first time. After I came, he watched me as I breathed heavily for a few moments, until, in the rush of post orgasm regret, I shifted a little, to minimize how much of his torso pressed against mine. Before I came, I had liked the feel of his softness against me, had wanted his torso against mine, even though we didn’t wrap our arms around each other, nothing like the intimacy of an embrace. Instead I lay on my back, arms stiff at my sides and he lay on his

side, one arm beneath him, the other on my cock, and just a bit of his soft stomach rested on my ribs as he leaned over me, the contact of our skin warm. After I came, he moved gingerly away, out of my bed, holding one hand in the air—the hand with my cum on it, so as not to get any on my comforter. He climbed back up into his own bunk, and I think he must have wiped off my cum on his own sheets. Without talking, we both fell asleep.

The next night, long after lights out, I could feel his wakefulness in the bunk above me. He tried to keep still, but I could sense his listening in the cautious, sneaky way he tried to find a comfortable position without making the bunk squeak, like he was some kind of bed ninja. In the distance, an occasional car hissed along the wet asphalt on the main road beyond the school fence. But otherwise, he and I listened to each other not sleep. It started to annoy me. Also, I got a boner again.

Finally, I said, “I can’t sleep.”

He was silent, and for a period, I thought maybe I had been wrong, that he had been asleep this whole time, and it was only I who had projected my anxiety about the night before onto the dark hours.

When he spoke, there was no trace of sleep to his voice. He had been considering what to do. “Me neither,” he said. “I’ve just been awake thinking.”

I was afraid he might want to talk about the night before. That’s not what I wanted. That was the last thing I wanted. “I want help sleeping again,” I said, to avoid the chance for him to suggest anything else.

He didn’t move or speak. I had a sudden stab of fear that he might reject me. I almost got angry thinking about it, even in those brief seconds. What I would have to do if he rejected me. How much I could deny, and how I would have to protect myself.

“Okay,” he said. From above me, his legs appeared as he climbed down from his bunk.

That became our code. Sometimes I would say it: “I can’t sleep.” Sometimes he would ask, “Are you having trouble sleeping?”

The answer was always yes. Then he would slip down into my bunk. Once he told me that he had heard that of all the professions, bakers know the most tricks to fall asleep. Because bakers have to get up at four o’clock in the morning to start their bread, they have to go to sleep just as it gets dark. The baker’s trick, Robbie said, was to smoke half a cigarette, jerk off, smoke the other half of the cigarette, then get immediately between the sheets. The bakers would pass right the fuck out. We made up our own baker’s trick. We snuck out the window, out to the soccer fields where he stashed his cigarettes. We shared a cigarette as he blew me in a dark stand of maples. I handed it down to him as he sucked, he took breaks to puff, so that the cherry faintly illuminated his face, then he passed it back to me and went back at it. Afterward, we each smoked a whole cigarette and then climbed back inside. I slept like a baker.

—

Toward the end of the semester, I tried to touch him. He put his hand gently on mine and moved it away. At first, I thought he moved my hand because he was ashamed of how small he was. I’d seen him naked by then, although he was usually careful about it; even in our room, he would change behind a towel. I tried to touch him again, to let him know that it was okay, that I didn’t care how small he was or about anything else, but again, he moved my hand. This time, the shame was mine. A rejection. It had the same emotional tone as when a girl back home shifted away when we were making out at a party, after I tried to slip my hand into the front of her pants. She gave a careful smile and a quick shake of the head, whispering, “Not yet,” which we both knew was a “no” phrased to spare my feelings, and then she kissed me more aggressively to make up for it. I didn’t know what to do with Robbie reacting like a girl. The whole reason I touched him was to not make him be the girl. I had started feeling bad that he always had to be the girl. I tried to touch him out of guilt—even to show him that I

cared, to toss a token coin to whatever masculinity I'd been taking from him.

After he moved my hand a second time, I turned away from him. I wanted to complain that he touched my dick all the time. I didn't even really want to touch his dick, but it bothered me to be told no, like I was the cock-desperate fag who deserved rejection.

Beside me, he drew up the sheets, as if cold. Then he traced two fingers along my arm, dragging them along the definitions of my triceps. I knew he admired my arms. The food at school wasn't that great, and I spent a couple hours most days running on the soccer field or lifting at the gym. I had abs all over.

"I don't need to touch you," I said, careful to drain all warmth from my voice. "I just thought that maybe you don't always want to be the girl." I meant it to insult him, to let him know that being squeamish about me touching him was girly.

Weirdly, he laughed. Too loud in the night. We had a middle room in the hall. With that loud laugh any other kids in nearby rooms could hear us. I made a face, and pulled back from him. Usually, if I was even a little bit skittish, he went quiet. But this time, he spoke with confidence. "Trust me," he said. Suddenly we were on his turf, conversationally. "I always want to be the girl."

He put his hand back on me, and I didn't speak, wondering whether he wanted to be the girl just in terms of sexual positions—or more generally.

"Fine," I said, finally. "Works better for me anyway."

And it did work for me. Some part of me liked that he wore those cotton sleep pants. I liked the way he had all those hair and skin products lined up, just like girls did. And I came to even like his smell when he got into bed with me, that unshowered funk mixed with the light perfumes of his shampoos and lotion.

I didn't spend too much time thinking about whether this thing with Robbie was gay. That kind of not-too-much thinking was a skill I had.

I had gotten especially good at thinking only the right amount, ever since the winter before, when Johnny and I did acid out on the frozen prairie. It had snowed and then rained. The rain had frozen over the snow in a half-inch sheer reflective crust. As the sun went down, a near mirror image of the sunset reflected upon the unbroken ice crust exactly as on a placid lake—only distorted strangely by the undulations of the prairie beneath, the orb of the reflected sun like one of those surrealist melting clocks. Buzzing under the intensity of the acid we had taken, I half expected ripples to spread out from our footsteps.

In the middle of the prairie, Johnny stopped and swept his arm in a circle. "Look!" he said. "What are these things on the ice around us?" Scattered here and there on the unbroken ice lay tiny black spheres, the size of marbles. Johnny picked one up and held it to the setting sun between his thumb and forefinger, then pressed down upon it. It crunched like a Cocoa Puff.

"What are they?" I asked. I stooped to pick one up. My vision was all fractals and patterns, so it was difficult to examine clearly. Resting in the palm of my hand, it looked like a sphere rolled from onyx clay.

"I don't know. I wonder how they got here," Johnny said. "Ours are the only footsteps out here." Lost in wonder, he let his mouth hang slightly open, revealing white teeth separated by even black gaps. "Could they have fallen from the sky?" he asked, though not to me.

I squeezed the little sphere in my hand, but mine did not crunch like a Cocoa Puff; it smeared, and suddenly I saw what they were. Rabbits, their weight too light to break through the crust, had shat upon the ice, and as the little balls dried, the wind had blown them into the constellations all about us. I saw myself with sudden clarity, from outside myself, as somebody else watching me and judging me: a kid on drugs, smearing himself with rabbit shit. It was pathetic. That's when the bad trip started.

Healing from the fear of that night, I came to understand that there was a dark place inside of me. I had to be aware of the gravitational pull of that

dark place, to keep tabs on it—but never to look directly at the reality of it, like I had on acid. That’s what I mean when I say I could think about something without really thinking about it. Keeping my thoughts on a steady leash was a skill I had to develop when I rebuilt my mind after that horror trip, restacking myself like a fallen Jenga tower.

When I thought in my careful way about Robbie, I thought that he was feminine like a girl, and getting a boner around girls wasn’t gay, and besides I was around naked dudes in the dorm all the time—cocks and muscles and happy trails all over—and all that maleness never did anything for me sexually, so that was enough deliberation about that. Thinking any further and I could sense the dark place rippling at the edges of my consciousness.

—

About a week before Christmas break, I went to do my laundry. In the laundry room, some girl had left a green satin nightie on top of one of the dryers. At first, I didn’t even care; I barely noticed it, except to pick it up to move it from the dryer I wanted. Then, all of a sudden, with the softness of the fabric between my fingers, I wanted Robbie to wear it for me. But that seemed too fucked up, stealing some girl’s nightie for a boy to wear for me. I set it back down on the dryer and left. All afternoon I thought about Robbie. How his plump thighs would look with the lace edge of the nightie falling just below his ass. When the dinner bell rang, I went back to the laundry room, knowing that everyone would be lining up in the dining hall. I’d have the room to myself.

The nightie still lay atop the dryer. I held it up, trying to imagine whether or not it would fit Robbie. Right then, the outer door to the laundry room creaked open. I turned away from the door and stuffed the nightie down the front of my pants, letting my hoodie fall over my belt line just as the inner door opened and my history teacher, Mr. Rossell, walked in carrying his laundry in a plastic basket. Usually the teachers didn’t use the student laundry room. I had been so focused on what it meant to steal a

girl's nightie, the social weirdness of that, that it hadn't occurred to me I could get into official school trouble.

"Why aren't you at dinner?" asked Mr. Rossell. He sent a searching glance about the room, as though he expected to find lines of coke cut and half blown on the laundry folding table. He didn't like me and I didn't like him. He was only twenty-nine years old, but he looked like an aging hippie, bearded and balding, with the thin remaining strands pulled back into a gross ponytail. He had been in a PhD program in American history but, unable to finish his dissertation, had washed up to teach at our boarding school. His bitterness showed in the pleasure and effort he took in catching boys in situations that could demand discipline.

"Doing my laundry," I told him, as if it were obvious. Then I realized that none of the machines were going.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Where's your laundry?"

I thought quickly. "I wanted to make sure the machines weren't all full before I lugged it over."

He gave me a weird look. I decided to turn the tables on him. "Why are you doing your laundry in the student laundry, anyway? Just can't help surrounding yourself with boys' dirty underwear?"

His eyes bulged, and he took a breath. My boarding school, one of the earliest Quaker schools in the western United States, attracted teachers of two types: soft-hearted idealists and mini-tyrants. The best way to deal with the mini-tyrants was to make their tyranny costly enough that small battles just weren't worth it. Insulting a teacher constituted a major rules offense, but I doubted Mr. Rossell would go to the headmaster to report an insult. If he did, during the course of the disciplinary proceedings, the actual insult I'd made would come out. Eventually, I would lose the proceedings and the faculty would punish me, but for the rest of Mr. Rossell's tenure, the stench of my inference would linger: *But wait, had Mr. Rossell really been sniffing briefs when the students were at dinner?* He and I had a laundry room standoff. He took my measure, calculating whether a high school student had the worldliness to understand and deploy the long-term ramifications of this insult and the threat it conferred, which I did understand instinctively,

although my show of confident smugness wavered a little, due to the fact that, hypocritically, I had a nightie shoved in my pants.

“Get to the dining hall,” Mr. Rossell said finally. “I’m going to be there in five minutes, and if you’re not at your seat, you can look forward to a suspension.”

I ate dinner with the nightie still in my pants. Every time any of the girls at my table looked at me, I had this horrible guilt that the nightie might belong to her, that with her intimate fabrics pressed to my crotch, I was violating her in a minor way, even as she asked me to pass the ketchup or whatever, and more, by some occult womanly power, she might sense this. Cockiness came easily with that asshole, Mr. Rossell—he and I knew the codes for each other—but with the girls at my dining hall table, I spent the meal blushing, grunting monosyllables with my face in my plate of spaghetti, just in case one of those girls could somehow read guilt in my eyes.

—

It was worth it. Right before lights-out, I laid the nightie on Robbie’s bed. Told him if he wanted to be the girl, then I wanted him as a girl too. He hesitated for a beat, conflicted, and I couldn’t really blame him about that. It did feel next level. But I wanted him in it badly by then, so when he turned to frown at me, something in how I looked at him must have given him to know that urge, the way I needed him, or maybe he could smell male pheromones or something. Whatever resistance he was putting up fell away and he smiled, and I almost kissed him right there, only we didn’t ever really kiss, not like that, so I held back. But he knew I wanted him, and being wanted like that made him happy. The nightie was proof that I thought of him, even in the daytime. I told him to put it on for me. He blushed but nodded, and then tried to do the thing where he got changed behind a towel, but I told him no. I went to the door and sat against it, so that no one could come in, and I watched him as he got naked, slipped the nightie over his head, and then shyly scrambled up into his own bunk,

where he wrapped the covers around him. When the lights went out, he came back down to my bunk. I touched him all over, rubbed myself against him. His chubby little body felt as good through the fabric as I had hoped, and I had to put a hand over his mouth because he started moaning. I didn't make him go back to his own bed after. He lay next to me, and I idly stroked his hip, covered by the nightie.

"Did you steal it?" he asked.

I had not been looking forward to the question. It was creepy to steal some girl's nightie. I didn't want to taint how happy he was that I got him the nightie with anything creepy. "No," I told him. "They opened a Victoria's Secret in the chemistry lab. You didn't notice?"

"So you stole it. Do you know whose it is?"

The guilt came back. "Yeah, yours."

"It's kind of romantic," Robbie said. "That you risked getting caught just to see me dressed up for you."

That made me feel a different weird about the whole thing. I no longer felt weird about what I had done; I felt weird about Robbie. I could understand how stealing it was sexy, because it made us both horny. But what was wrong with Robbie that he was confusing this with romance?

"Yeah," I said. "I guess so." Then I told him I was tired.

The next day, he acted all moony and dreamy about me. Crushed out, using a lot of "we" statements, talking about "us." Normally I would have put the kibosh on that. Except that week would end with Christmas services, and then the semester would close and everyone would go home for the month, so it just seemed easiest to wait it out, while getting a few more of his crush-fueled blowjobs. The next semester I got assigned Big Keith Bowers as my roommate, the oldest son of an Idaho horse farming family. His sister was a really hot sophomore. As far as I was concerned, that was the end of me and Robbie.

But it wasn't the end of me and Robbie for Robbie. That spring, he got assigned a stoner named Nick as a roommate. I didn't worry about Robbie, because from everything I'd seen, Nick's entire focus was completely consumed in a clandestine weed-procurement-and-smoking regimen. He didn't have an extra fuck to give about Robbie one way or another. What I didn't count on was that Robbie having a chill situation gave him the freedom to obsess about me.

Maybe five days after we got back to school after break, Robbie came up to me while I was lining up a pool shot, in a game with Dan and Tommy. I took my shot, made it, took another one. All the while Robbie just stood there.

At last, Tommy spoke to him. "All good, star?" Tommy's mom was Jamaican, and he had taken to calling everyone "star." The effort seemed clunky and transparent to me—the rest of the time he sounded like every other Coloradan—but it really did charm the girls.

Robbie pointedly ignored Tommy, and asked me, "Can I talk to you, please?"

"I'm in a game." I still had the pool stick in my hand, and I hefted it a little as proof.

"I'll wait," Robbie said and crossed his arms like an angry wife. He continued to stand beside the pool table, so oblivious to the game that he wasn't aware of how, as Dan lined up his shot, the cue was likely to hit him right in the stomach.

"All right, let's talk," I said, and handed my cue to Tommy. "Take over for me."

Tommy made the whipping noise, the sound you make when a guy is pussy-whipped. "Fuck you," I told him lightly, but my skin ran cold, because I thought he knew something. Tommy stared at Robbie with a grin, but Robbie was so focused on me, he didn't even give Tommy the pleasure of understanding that he'd just been called the pussy.

In the hallway, Robbie raised his voice, almost petulant. "Why are you ignoring me?"

I hadn't expected to be accused. For sure, I hadn't expected him to be entitled and whiny about it. "What are you talking about?"

"You're ignoring me. You won't even make eye contact."

I considered denying it. But then I didn't see why I should have to. "So what?" I said.

"So what?" he repeated, like he didn't understand.

"Yeah, so what if I'm ignoring you?"

He licked his lips. Hesitated. Then called my bluff. "Are you going to make me say it? Right here? Because I will."

I grabbed him by the shirt with both hands. It happened really fast. Before I even knew what I was doing, I had my face twisted up close to his. "Let's get clear: I don't owe you shit." He broke eye contact first, like I knew he would. I shoved him roughly away from me, and I figured that would be that.

But he didn't shrink away like he was supposed to. Instead, he insisted, even as his eyes watered up, "You do owe me. I know how you really are."

"I'm not like you," I said, turning away from him.

"No, not like me," he said. "You're a coward." Even though he was the one crying, it stung. But he was right. I didn't do shit but walk away, and there was a new smugness to him as he watched me go.

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After that, he owned me. Everywhere I went, there he was. He didn't exactly do anything. He was just there. I'd be reading, like, *Rolling Stone* from the library during evening study hours, and he'd take another magazine and just sit next to me. If I got up and changed seats, he'd wait a minute or two, then get up and take whatever seat was next to me. If I went and sat with other people, he'd sit with them, too, so then the choice was to say something cruel to him in front of other people, which made me look like an asshole, or just hope that everyone ignored my swishy little familiar. I got less social. Stayed in my room more. I tried to hook up with this girl Erica and it went badly. For some reason, whenever I got really stoned, like

I mean really baked, I had this awful physical sense that I'd pissed my pants. In my super-baked way, I'd be with other people but lose the thread of the conversation, because I'd be thinking about checking my pants, to see if I had peed, wondering am I maybe even peeing right now? But I'd surreptitiously check and no, my pants would be dry, even though they felt wet. And then two minutes later, I'd be like, okay, maybe this time I really did pee my pants, and nope, no. I never have pissed my pants, for the record.

Erica got me really stoned in the old Quaker meetinghouse. When we were making out on the prayer benches, I kept thinking that I'd pissed myself. Each time she started fumbling at my belt, I made some weird stoned excuse to interrupt, so that I could check that I wasn't about to have her touch piss-soaked drawers. She got offended, and demanded to know why I wasn't into it.

Even without failures with girls, winter at boarding school was lonely. The school was two miles from the nearest town. The place, stripped of historical grandness, was just a cluster of drafty wooden buildings in the low prairie before the mountains rose in the distance. Ivy and brick is for the East Coast. My school was founded by western Quakers, people whittled spare by the isolation of the prairies. The traces of their old thought still lingered. Endurance and simplicity and collectivity had been instilled for generations less as virtues than as behaviors required for survival. In the winter snow, you couldn't bike to town, you couldn't play any sports but basketball in our ratty gym, you couldn't do anything but trudge like a donkey circling the grindstone around the path between the same four buildings, in the weak light and short days.

Sometimes, in that depressing routine, with only boredom, chores, and classes stretching out all day, I'd look up and there would be Robbie. When I finally broke and talked to him after so long ignoring him, we were in the empty music room—I was plinking out the first notes to “Riders on the Storm” on an old electric keyboard, humming along, and had the second sense that I wasn't alone. I looked around. Robbie stood in the open door, watching. I wanted to be good at piano but wasn't, so it warmed me that he

seemed impressed enough to listen. We ended up sitting close to each other on the piano bench, chatting as I showed him how to play the bass line.

After that, I went back to trying to stay aloof, but kept breaking. I'd talk to him, and it would be nice. Just "What's up, Robbie?" and then we'd start talking how we did after dark as roommates. In those times, I liked him. In those times, I remembered that he was pretty. Then he'd ask if I wanted to, like, sit with him in the lighting booth in the theater room, and I'd get angry. He had this misplaced idea that the reason I wasn't hooking up with him anymore was logistical. That we just didn't have a situation to do it in anymore. Or he'd suggest that we sneak out after lights-out and meet up in the attic above the woodshop. Maybe he wanted to get all wood-smelling and sawdusty, but that was flat-out repellent to me. Two boys flirting with social seppuku and major rules violations to role-play horny woodworkers and hump each other up against a miter saw in the dark. No. What was hot for me before was that he was feminine and available and I set all the terms.

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Every winter the school took the students on a field trip to a ski hill about three hours west. Not to one of the big mountains but a smaller family-owned ski area with only three lifts, whose owner was not Quaker but who had gotten involved with Quakers during the Vietnam era anti-war movements. He had a fondness for our headmaster left over from that time, the pacifist's version of having been in combat together, and every year he offered our school a day of lifts. We'd pack into Econoline vans at daybreak and get back at midnight.

Unlike nearly every other boy, I did not snowboard. I skied. My dad had taught me to surf, which ruined snowboarding for me. Snowboarding on the best day just touches a mediocre day of surfing. I always skied with a girl named Mary, who grew up in Duluth skiing the icy slush of Mont Du Lac. Western powder set her free. She was better than me, better than any of the boys, which none of us minded. When it came to posturing and fragile egos,

only snowboarding counted. She had a crush on me sophomore year, but nothing came of it, and then she started going out with Phil Oster.

I had no fear of Robbie showing up where I skied on the mountain. He had rented a snowboard. I saw him once from the lift, wobbling and biffing on a green hill. When we were in the vans driving there, it was another story. The clique of girls that he had joined kept trying to talk to me, but with that gossipy teasing girl bullshit that had an edge of meanness, where you feel like you're cut out from an inside joke, and it turns out they just want you to know that so-and-so in the girls' dorm talked about you a lot. Like a lot a lot. Only instead of so-and-so from the girls' dorm, they just kept asking me about this girl Louisa, a mousy sophomore, whom I had only ever barely noticed. Which first baffled me, then alarmed me. Because every time one of the girls brought up Louisa, I'd glance to the back seat of the van, there was Robbie, pretending not to notice me, but smirking.

At the end of the day, as Mary and I rode together on the lift chair, the weight of our skis dangling beneath us, I asked her what the girls were saying about me. She was wearing ski goggles against the wind, and her blond hair whipped around from under a hat pulled low. Even all bundled up, I could tell the question made her uncomfortable.

"I don't know, I don't pay attention to all that," she said.

I pressed her.

"You should ask someone else, I feel weird saying."

Then I had to know. I begged. But we were at the top of the lift and the chair deposited us out in the snow. Drifting on our skis down to the start of the run, she said she'd tell me but that up here it was too cold to say. Then she tore down a fucking black diamond. It was straight out of a Bond movie, like she was trying to leave me impaled on some tree limb, the way she shot in and out of little trails, took jumps off the edges of rocks. And meanwhile, I was so anxious, I was barely paying attention to skiing, just lost in my head, wondering what I had done, if Robbie was telling all the girls about us. I saw Mary go round a turn in a burst of snow, sharper than I had expected. I was ten seconds behind her, but couldn't see why, and still didn't see why until I was there and saw a woman lying in the snow. I tried

to turn as Mary had but didn't make it, and I tumbled forward, my face parting the snow like the prow of a ship.

Mary waited while I collected myself, checked my abraded face, and pulled snow out from where it had slid down my collar. By then I was upset and angry, and I blamed her for my fall. If she had just told me what people were saying, I would have been more focused.

"It's my fault you fell?" she asked incredulously.

Yes, I told her, it was.

"Fine," she said. "You want to know what people are saying? Robbie told us how you stole Louisa's nightie, and how every night you use it to jerk off. That it's your gross jerk-off cumrag that you keep under the bed."

I reeled. "That's not true!"

"Robbie described it. Emerald green, lace trim. Louisa said that's the one of hers that had gone missing. How would Robbie know about that if you hadn't been keeping it under your bed?"

"Because he was the one who stole it!" I shouted. My voice went high. "He did it!"

Mary shook her head skeptically. "Why would Robbie steal Louisa's nightie? What would he want with it?"

I realized that I had been trapped. Outmaneuvered by Robbie, that little bitch. And by my own stupidity. In accusing Robbie, I had lost my chance to deny knowing anything about it. Mary was a cool girl, but eventually, she'd probably tell someone about this. I thought about pleading with her, but what could I beg for? Don't tell anyone that I didn't deny a nightie theft? Could I admit to stealing it, but deny jerking off with it? No. Why else would she believe I'd taken it?

"Robbie stole it because he wanted to wear girls' clothes," I said, finally. Maybe some small part of the truth could save me, just as Robbie had used only part of the truth against me.

Mary looked at me with pity. "We already share all sorts of clothes with Robbie. He's always talking outfits and style with us. Makeup, too. He doesn't need to steal anything. All he'd have to do is ask."

Then she turned, and let gravity dip her out of the presence of a self-confirmed pervert.

I grew up south of Seattle, in a middle-class suburb. I wasn't Quaker. Had never even heard of Quakers before I got sent to boarding school, except for the oats. After my dad divorced my mom, and my mom married the guy she had been cheating with, my dad didn't really want to take care of me full time, but he sure as fuck didn't want my mom's backdoor man to raise his son. So he looked around for a boarding school that he could afford. The East Coast places were beyond his means. Someone told him about this Quaker place in Colorado, how it cost less than your average day school on the coast.

On our block, before my parents split up, lived Pastor Tim. He ran a mid-size evangelical congregation and was a popular guy around the area. When I was about twelve, he slammed his wife's face in a door and the police came. The story of how he had been abusing her got out. About four months later, she disappeared. My mom said she had separated from Pastor Tim and moved to California, but my friend Will was a member of Pastor Tim's congregation, and all the church kids whispered that he had murdered her.

Before that, I remember Pastor Tim being really outgoing and friendly. He was from the South somewhere, with a warm accent, and so emotional and affectionate that my dad said he sounded gay. He was the kind of guy to cry from the pulpit. After his wife disappeared, something weird happened to his face.

You'd see him walk into a room, arms instinctively spread. Then, it was like he'd remember that everyone in the room had heard he was a wife killer, and his arms would tuck back in, as if wounded, and his smile would wobble and turn into a look of anguish. This would be followed by a sort of grit-teeth grimace, like he was telling himself that he didn't care what these losers thought; he'd forge forward anyway. Finally, even that would slip

away, and by the time he greeted anyone, he'd be wearing this mask of manic piety. Then someone would call his name, and the cycle would crank up again.

I mention this because after Mary told me what people were saying, I suspect that I developed my own bizarre face cycle. The winter claustrophobia deepened, and in the sober gloom, even the boys were suspect, possible gossipers or backstabbers. A paranoia cloaked me. I refused to talk at dinner, turned red if called upon in class. I started ditching classes; detention became a secret benefit, a chance to sit for hours a day where no one could speak to me. On the weekends, I'd shoot hoops or run indoor soccer drills with Tommy and Dan, who stayed loyal. Some Saturday that winter, shooting threes, Tommy asked where I'd got that nightie, because with all the prudes at this place, his own left hand was getting too calloused. I understood that Tommy was offering me a way out, like the power-shower or the throne, a way to own what I had done and just let it confirm my manhood. But I couldn't convert the play. I didn't have the skills. Tommy didn't try again.

Through my ostracization, Robbie was everywhere. Watching me. Smirking. Whispering to girls. Once a week, I'd call him a fag, and inevitably, some girl would overhear it, and it made me look cruel and deranged, like I was the one obsessed with him, like I was tormented by his sexuality, when in fact he had ruined me just because I wanted nothing to do with his sexuality anymore. My behavior led to more rumors about me, allowed Robbie to invent whatever sickness he wanted to attach to me, and my skulking at the outskirts only confirmed it. Imagine Pastor Tim's wife stalking him to plant bloodstains everywhere he went but keeping out of sight; how insane and guilty the pastor would look when he pointed to bloodstains as evidence to people that she was still alive.

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In the early spring, I signed up for farm duty to get away from the main campus. The property the school owned extended in an L shape with the

school itself at the hinge. To the south ran a strip of fifty acres of open prairie land that was burned semiannually, a conservation project to preserve native plants. To the east lay a few hundred acres of farmland. The school leased the land to the agricultural program at Fort Collins, which used it as a site to experiment with organic growing techniques. The arrangement provided that the boarding school assigned students to do daily farm chores, and in return, the school kept a large portion of the food, which was what we all ate. The success of the experiments in organic growing varied from year to year, and as a result so did our menu.

The previous summer, some professor had experimented with frogs as pest controls for growing strawberries. Every few rows of plants, he'd deepened a furrow into a trench, lined it with plastic to make a long pond, and then stocked each of those ponds with thousands of tadpoles. We arrived back at school that fall to a biblical plague. Tens of thousands of starving frogs inhabited our fields. They were too weak to jump out of our way, so we had to tread carefully, yet still their tiny fragile bodies crunched underfoot as we walked school sidewalks.

The strawberries were good.

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My first day on farm crew, I got assigned to the pigs. The two other students on farm crew that semester, both girls from the Dakotas, had grown up on farms, even knew how to drive a tractor. They could cast their gaze over the bare frozen dirt of early spring and form opinions about the health of the soil. The farm director, Belle, quickly assessed that I had no idea what to look for in the gardens and fields, wouldn't know the common pests if they were crawling all over my face, and had not once walked a bend of land to contemplate drainage. I could, she ascertained, recognize a big old pile of shit that needed shoveling from the barn. I became the pig boy.

The farm employed an organic Swedish system of raising pigs; each sow occupied her own sty in which she gave birth to a litter of piglets. The sties

were open on one side, with a threshold set at a height tall enough to keep the piglets in but low enough to allow the sow to step over it in order to socialize with other animals in a common yard. The Swedish pig system held that sows were social animals and needed contact with one another. My initial chore would be to feed the sows.

Each day, I hauled a five-gallon bucket of feed grain into the sows' yard area and attempted to pour it out in a line. There was no feeding trough or anything; the sows ate the feed grain right off the dirt they walked and shat on, fighting and pushing one another for their share.

My first day with the pigs, Belle told me that I had to move fast. That once any of the sows noticed me, she'd let out a grunt and lead a stampede. Each of those sows weighed about six hundred pounds, and since I was the source of the food, they'd come straight at me.

I didn't understand just how fast I needed to move. My first time feeding them on my own, I had this idea that, okay, they'd run for their supper, but once arrived, they'd placidly eat the grain I'd scattered on the ground. Instead, because I still held the bucket with a small amount of grain remaining inside, a gigantic sow charged her head into my knee, buckling my leg, so I went over like a tree just as the rest of the herd arrived. The bucket was torn from my hand. I ended up on my back, protecting my face as teeth and snouts flashed around my eyes. Gnashing and grunting and gorging, the sows stepped on me as on any other bump on the ground, so that I felt beaten and robbed of air all at once. I scrabbled for a grip on bristled flesh to pull myself up, slipped, and again went down into the center of their jostling feeding scrum. Under the pigs, I experienced the truest of panics—a panic where there is no thought, just a surety that in the next moment you will die trampled, mangled, suffocated; and when the feed is gone, the thoughtless appetite of the beasts will shift to your broken body. In movies, gangsters use pigs to dispose of corpses. A dozen famished pigs will go through the body of a two-hundred-pound man in an hour, the gangsters threaten one another, bones and all.

My limbs flailed, and I let out a raw yell. The wall of pig bodies offered a small parting, and I clawed up through it, to my feet, and sprang over the

fence. On the other side, I sunk down to my knees and lay on my back in the thawing snow, hyperventilating to hold back a sob, furious and relieved all at once. When I opened my eyes, the farm director, Belle, was staring at me with wonder, like I'd just been up to all sorts of shenanigans. Next to her stood Robbie, apparently amused.

Belle was a Quaker widow in her early fifties. She had run the farm for twenty-five years, after her husband, a Spanish teacher, had passed of cancer just shy of thirty. That day she wore a pair of Carhartt canvas overalls with her curly hair tucked under a knit cap. Years of sun and skepticism had set her face into a perpetual squint, which she aimed my way. "See that," she told Robbie. "I told him, you gotta move quick with those animals. Now he knows why." She raised her voice to address me, where I was still down in the melting snow. "Didn't I tell you?"

She waited for a response. "Yes," I said, as I rolled to rise. "You told me."

Belle shrugged at Robbie. "I told him," she repeated.

After chore period, Belle gave us all a ride back to the school on the tractor. She steered over the empty fields and dropped me, Robbie, and one of the girls from the Dakotas at the path behind the science building. I waited until the girl walked ahead and then sprinted two steps to catch up with Robbie. "What the fuck are you doing at the farm?"

"Ellen asked to trade crews for the semester," Robbie said. "I was on breakfast prep, but I didn't like getting up so early." Ellen was the other girl from the Dakotas. The one who hadn't been there that day.

"Bad swap," I said. No one trades an easy crew like breakfast prep for farm crew. "You took a shit crew just to stalk me. You're less cut out for farm than I am."

"No," Robbie said. "Belle likes me. She always has."

It was true. Belle did like him. I'd seen them walking together after the interminable weekend meetings for worship. And now, I had every afternoon for the rest of the semester in the middle of nowhere with the two of them, some nature girl from North Dakota, and a bunch of pigs. How had I been so roundly outflanked? Weariness settled over me.

Robbie hitched up his backpack, readying to leave me, but caught himself, and slid his backpack back down one arm to his front. “I forgot to give you a Valentine. You didn’t get me one either, so I guess it’s okay. Better late than never.” He pulled off one glove by the fingers with his teeth, and fished around in his bag with that bare hand. He came up with a piece of paper and held it out to me. Without thinking, I took it from him. He left me standing there, paper trembling in my hand from the cold wind blowing between the buildings.

It was an illustrated instruction pamphlet for how to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Robbie must have pulled it down from some wall. A little arrow had been drawn in marker pointing to the choking man with the word *you* inked in beside it. Another arrow said *me* and pointed to the woman embracing the choking man from behind. Over both their heads had been drawn a heart. Fucking weird. Robbie could really be inventive, I’d give him that. I threw the pamphlet in a snow pile and stamped on it. I regretted that later, because it was the only time Robbie ever left evidence that I wasn’t the aggressor.

Every night, I promised myself that the next afternoon of farm crew I would ignore Robbie, but four out of five days a week I failed, so that when I succeeded, I just seemed moody. My own social exile had worn on me. Out at the farm, Robbie was always available. Each time I told myself it was harmless to talk just this once. But then we’d talk and an intimacy would arise, and then I’d say something mean to sever it. Belle saw this and didn’t like it. She gave me the worst jobs on the farm.

I spent hours that spring mucking out pig stalls. I shoveled so much, my muscles changed shape, and I’d wake up with a soreness in my back. I knew Belle meant mucking out stalls to be a small punishment, but with the right mindset, shoveling muck can be satisfying. Like vacuuming a really dirty rug or squeegeeing a window or mowing an overgrown lawn. I just pushed the shit, mud, and decaying hay, bulldozer style, from one side of

the pen into a pile at the other. Each pass revealed bare concrete underneath. I liked to know how much I had done and how much was left to do.

I had thought that maybe being on a farm would make me want to go vegetarian. If anything, farm crew made me respect animals less. Since I didn't respect them, I didn't mind eating them. They were all stench and viscera and base hungers. If a piglet had even the tiniest cut, he had to be isolated. Otherwise, his siblings would lick and gnaw at the open wound. Mucking out the stalls, I once found a dead piglet stuck in the hay, his hindquarters licked and gnawed down to the bone by the little cannibals that frolicked about his corpse. When a cow died, I helped the knacker man dispose of the carcass. The knacker man had a flatbed truck with a winch and a chain that had a hook on the end. He didn't want to get out of his truck in the wind. He told me to take the chain and figure it out. I wrapped it around one stiff leg and hooked it back to itself. The knacker man turned on the winch from his cab. I had never seen true rigor mortis before. I watched with grim amazement as the huge body kept as stiff as one of those molded green plastic army men, even as it clunked up onto the truck bed.

Meanwhile, Belle doted on Robbie. Gave him the full *Charlotte's Web* experience. Walked him around and showed him plants and flowers. Assigned him to the gardens. Sometimes she had him collect eggs, and she showed him how to catch a chicken. I watched him chasing one, flapping as much as the bird he was trying to catch.

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During a spell of warm weather, when the shrubs budded pale green and the starlings returned to the fields, Belle picked us up from the back gate on the tractor and announced that, if we wanted, we could help in castrating the younger piglets. The offer disgusted me. I told Belle I had no interest.

Robbie got a strange expression, like someone had just tickled him behind the knees. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't have the stomach for it?"

"What?" I said, confused.

“You’re a bit dainty for the work, I guess,” Robbie said. He glowed behind his thin skin. Pleased with himself. “And there’s no fainting couch at the barn.”

“Robbie, are you trash-talking about castration?” The question was in earnest. I couldn’t figure out what was going on. Belle grinned at Robbie.

So we were talking shit? Fine, let’s talk shit: “Robbie’s just excited he gets to touch a bunch of cocks today,” I told Belle.

“Jealous?” Robbie shot back. “Get in with the pigs and you can have your turn.”

“You two stop flirting,” Belle told us. She spoke to us lightly, as though we were frivolous girls. Shame flashed over me, which shaded almost immediately into a quiet rage. Not that Belle misunderstood what she had seen. But that she had seen it so easily threatened me, made me furious. Silently, I accused Robbie of telling her something.

At the farm, I leapt down from the tractor, stalked off alone, and leaned into my shoveling chores with ferocity, striving to put distance between myself and Robbie and Belle. Despite myself, I paid attention to them. I could see them at the far end of the barn, Robbie holding the piglets upside down with their heads between his knees as Belle sliced at their undersides with a scalpel and sprayed them down with a disinfectant. Gradually, a cadre of dazed little piglets, their crotches dyed bright blue from the disinfectant, gathered over by my end of the barn.

On the ride back to campus, Robbie sat beside me, away from Belle, on the wooden bench jerry-rigged to the back of the tractor. He spoke to me about the castrations with a fascinated air, but quietly, so that I could barely hear him above the engine. “Their scrotums are on the inside, so you make this little incision and squeeze, and the balls just fly out.” He scrunched together his facial features in wonder. “It was just like when you let me pop one of your back zits.”

A few weeks before spring break, Robbie and I arrived at the farm to find that Belle had gone out of town for a few days. Instead, Jill, the wife of our English teacher, had come by the barn to supervise the chores. She and her husband were Kansas-bred blonds, the sort who say “gosh.” Jill greeted us with something cheery, and I went into the barn.

In the fourth sty I shoveled out, a black-spotted piglet sat in a very odd position. The piglet had a happy expression on his face, one of those piglet smiles. But his hind legs splayed out sideways at ninety-degree angles from his body. At my approach, he attempted to scuttle away, but could only use his front legs to drag his contorted rear around in the muck. I called Jill over to examine the piglet. Jill looked stricken. “The mother pig must have sat on him and crushed his legs.” She watched the little piglet drag himself around a bit more and fidgeted with the hem of her flowered blouse.

“He doesn’t seem to be in pain,” I said. “I think his spine must have been severed clean.” Jill went inside to call Belle. Robbie came over and stood leaning over the edge of the stall. We watched the piglet in silence. The piglet had an expressive face. As the little guy puttered about with his crushed rear end, he looked to be enjoying himself.

Jill came back and told us that we needed to put down the piglet.

“What about a vet or something?” Robbie asked.

Jill shook her head. “I don’t think so. These little guys sell for about thirty-five dollars each. We can’t afford to call a vet for that.” She glanced down at the piglet. He was attempting to nip at three other piglets that had him surrounded and were nosing curiously at his mangled rear. “Honestly, he’d only be healed in time to slaughter him, and the other piglets would be all over him long before that. I don’t want to have to wait for Belle to come back, but oh...I’m not sure I can do it.”

When Robbie responded, he was looking at me. “I’ll do it,” he said.

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I would have thought the best way to kill a piglet would be to shoot it in the face. But gunshots are messy. The blood sprays everywhere and attracts rats

and vermin. You can't have that in a barn for raising food. Piglets have to be killed bloodlessly. Jill said Belle told her of two good ways to kill pigs. The first was to put the piglet in a box and run a hose from the exhaust pipe of a tractor to the interior of the box. We had a tractor, but Jill couldn't find an airtight box for the piglet.

That left the second method. Pick up the piglet by his hind legs. Find a post. Swing the piglet by the hind legs as fast as you can. Once the piglet has reached velocity, smash his neck directly on the post. Done correctly, the neck will snap cleanly. No blood, quick, relatively painless.

Robbie lifted the injured piglet from the stall and cradled him. The piglet struggled, kicking and thrashing, then settled. Robbie took a breath, then began to walk from the barn. I put my hand on his arm.

"Come on, Robbie," I said. "You're not really going to kill it."

He shrugged off my hand. "Yes," he said, "I am. It's the right thing to do. I know how to do the right thing."

I couldn't tell if that was directed at me, but I deflected. "Jill should do it."

"She can't." It was true. Jill had laughed a strange apologetic laugh, but there were tears in her eyes and she had gone to sit over on a hay bale. It felt strangely adult, the woman in charge leaving the decision and execution to Robbie and me. Some other school, some school less committed to their esoteric religious pedagogy, would never have let such a situation arise. For insurance reasons, if nothing else.

"Okay, Robbie. Whatever you're trying to prove, go to town."

I picked up the shovel and walked into the darker main section of the barn, away from the afternoon light. To my surprise, Jill followed me about a minute later. I heard Jill breathe out hard and saw that she was still in tears. "I'm so silly," she said, brushing away the moisture beneath her eyes with her fingertips. Behind her, silhouetted in the square light of the open barn door like a gunfighter heading to a shootout, Robbie held the piglet dangling by its hind legs as he walked outside.

The whole structure of the barn reverberated from the force of a blow. Instead of finding a post, Robbie had smashed the pig against the broad side

of the barn. From outside came a series of shrill squeals. Robbie screamed, "Oh my god, it's not dead!"

"Fucking kill it, Robbie!" My voice sounded odd echoing in the barn. Jill began to cry audibly. Outside, Robbie screamed and the walls again reverberated as he smashed the pig against the barn a second time. The squealing grew louder, the cries of a distressed baby.

Robbie's silhouette reappeared in the barn door. "What do I do?"

Jill said nothing, but I shouted, "Robbie! You wanted to kill the pig; go kill it!"

His figure slipped away. A moment later I heard the piglet's squeals change in tone as he picked it up again. The dull thud of the piglet's skull hitting the side of the barn for the third time echoed to Jill and me on the inside. Silence followed. Then the squeals began again.

I went outside. Robbie was on his knees beside the piglet. He was crying. Two splotches of red shone on the beige metal siding of the barn. The piglet went in and out of seizures.

"I'm sorry," Robbie said. He looked up at me with red eyes. The piglet spasmed.

"Why are you saying sorry to me. Say it to the pig."

"I did it to impress you," Robbie said. "I wanted you to like me again. And you won't even talk to me because I'm...I wanted to show you...I could be the same as you." His voice failed and he gestured at the suffering, convulsing piglet.

"The same as me?" His gesture toward the animal made for a weird, unclear association. I thought he was saying I was the piglet. Then I suspected he meant the kind of strength and cruelty he knew that other boys required of one another. How by wielding it, you make sure to be the one to bestow crude and violent mercy, rather than ever needing it. Or maybe he meant something else, but he answered my question with a different one. "Why don't you like me anymore?"

"I like girls, Robbie."

"Right. So why don't you like me anymore?"

I thought to tell him he wasn't a girl, but it seemed a wrong, if not quite untrue, thing to say.

Still he talked at me. "You make me compete with you in a way we both hate! Why can't you just treat me how we are? You always talk about owning things. Own it."

The piglet spasmed into another seizure, squealing in high gasps. I found nothing to say. Robbie walked away.

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The piglet lay on his side at the base of the barn. The shit-covered shovel leaned against the wall where I had set it when I went out to Robbie. I took a strong two-handed grip on the handle, as though preparing to split a log, and brought the blade down as hard as I could on the pig's face. His body began to convulse. Over and over I smashed his head with the shovel. His skull flattened, and out from his mouth came his tongue, and then the roof of his mouth squeezed through, followed by a smearing of brains. Still his limbs convulsed as I hit him again and again. I didn't know if he was dead or alive, but I was afraid to stop beating him, so I smashed him and smashed him until his head was a broken pulp of blood and brains and bones and shit.

When I finally stopped, I stood up straight and felt the wind coming down from the mountains raise goosebumps on my arms. With my head turned just so, I heard the breeze whistle past my ears and rustle through the dried grasses. I could pick out the scents one by one: hay drifting over from the fields, corn feed blowing off the top of the feed silo, exhaust from the road, the separate odors of chickens, goats, pigs. The dirt and manure from the pens and fields. On top of all that, laid like sauce over a main dish, the tang of blood from the spattered mass lying at my feet. I let all the scents surround me, took awareness of the feeling of my clothes on my skin, of the grain of the wooden handle in my fingers, and, bloody shovel in hand, I stepped away from that piglet puddle toward where Robbie had run into the wheat field.

The school administration held a hearing to consider my expulsion six days later. While everything between me and Robbie and the pig went down, Jill had fled to the farmhouse to call Mr. Cranshaw, the school director. Karen, his secretary, answered the call. Karen was a former women's foosball champion who had moved back to Colorado to care for her mom. Mr. Cranshaw was out when Jill called, and Karen had only worked for the school a single semester; she barely knew the everyday protocols, much less those that applied to an impromptu mercy killing. She set down the phone, stepped into the hallway, and flagged down the first two teachers to pass by her office. Those teachers happened to be Mr. Nieman and the accused underwear sniffer, Mr. Rossell. Something had gone wrong at the farm, she told them.

Mr. Nieman was on his way to teach chemistry, but Mr. Rossell was not one to miss a chance at escalating a crisis. He hopped into his Subaru coupe—the one he tried to pass off as an actual sports car—and came tearing ass down the half-mile tractor trail that ran between the school and the farm. I didn't hear his car—or maybe I did and was just too out of it to have registered the approaching RPMs.

In Mr. Rossell's telling, he opened his car door to Jill pulling at his arm before he'd even fully stood up, the farm dust on her face striped by tears. She bumbled out semi-coherent apologies for "letting it happen," as she tugged Mr. Rossell over to a headless caved-in pig carcass. He stared at the pig without complete comprehension—the smear of blood and shit left on the brown earth was beyond his forensic ability. He asked Jill who had done it. She said it was me—I had done it. Mr. Rossell asked where I had gone. She pointed to the knee-high meadow of wheat where Robbie had fled, and where I, a few minutes later, had followed.

Mr. Rossell told Mr. Cranshaw and the school board that he had found us in a circle of wheat flattened by our bodies: a strong older male student forcing himself on a smaller younger boy, Robbie. The "violated" younger boy, said Mr. Rossell, was weeping, held down by the older boy who was

spattered in blood and pressing kisses on the younger boy, a gory shovel lying in the wheat beside them.

Mr. Rossell spoke so breathlessly it was like he was auditioning for some courtroom drama. But we were not in a courtroom. We were in the library reading area, which doubled as the school's conference room, where the school held the most serious disciplinary hearings, the ones that took place in the late evening so that school board members could attend. From what I could gather, neither members of the school board nor the school director took Mr. Rossell's account as word-for-word gospel. The tendencies of his preening were evident even to other adults. He enjoyed the telling too much. He was himself too much the hero at its center. Modesty remains a Quaker value.

I listened from a plastic school chair set off to the side of the room, exposed to drafts from windows opened to cold air coming in off the prairie, but I refused to change seats. Instead I examined the reactions of the school board members. The unfairness of the whole thing suffocated me. I sat motionless, perhaps in the same way that hopelessly drowning people go still as though it might conserve oxygen.

The school board consisted of four Quakers I had never seen before and two I had: an inquisitive, bright-eyed old woman, Irene, who often showed up at our monthly pizza nights with her own bottle of ranch dressing and ate more than her allotted share of the pineapple slices, and her second husband, Donald, the only Black adult affiliated with the school. He ran a weekend chess club and liked to show off a weathered photo of himself at a tournament where he'd lost to Bobby Fischer. They sat in a line, those six Quakers, along with Mr. Cranshaw, on the squat couches cushioned with foam squares about as soft as a bar of soap. The couches had been bought from UNICOR Prison Industries—a purchase that those very Quakers had authorized after some painful deliberation the prior year. Half the board had objected to state-sanctioned prison labor, while the other half argued that anything built by federal offenders to be strong enough to withstand federal offenders ought to also hold up to high school students—and besides the price was fair. The school operated by the old Quaker decision-making

tradition of unanimous consensus regardless of how much time it took to reach. We got by for months on ancient couches with torn cushions and mended legs until one by one the three holdouts came around to the benefits of prison furniture. Likewise, a student could only be expelled by consensus.

It is true that in the meadow I had found Robbie, and I held him and pressed him down and lay on top of him. In those moments, I heard his snuffling and the soft shifting sounds around our nest as the breeze tousled the bearded heads of winter wheat. I whispered to Robbie how sorry I was, how much I cared for him. He trembled gently as he wept beneath me, so I gripped him hard enough that the cords of my arms went tight, and I pressed my weight over him in the way that he had once told me made him feel safe, in my bed—our bed—that first semester, those times after I had come, and spent, I had spread myself atop him to feel him as mine. In the wheat, his shaking stilled and I kissed him, gently but insistently, and told him it wouldn't be the same after this.

I had my cheek pressed to the nape of his neck, so I could inhale the scent of his hairspray when a force drove into me and knocked me from him. My adrenaline had yet to fully subside from killing the pig. Before I understood what he was, I had sprung up and punched Mr. Rossell twice. Then I knew who he was, but it was too late; he was hitting back in earnest and the separation between teacher and student fell away as a contrivance that in that heightened state could no longer hide how we were simply two men, twelve years apart in age, who hated each other: one with a need for control, the other with a recently honed sense of persecution. Mr. Rossell was a thick man and I was seventeen—strong, but not full-grown. I ended up headlocked with my face in the damp dirt, his forearm compressing my windpipe. I might have passed out, had Robbie not pulled himself up and shrieked at us to stop. A spell broke: We did stop, and when we did, we became student and teacher again, which meant that I became fucked.

My problem was Robbie. Robbie was the person who could have easily cleared up everything. When Mr. Rossell asked Robbie if he was okay, Robbie went silent. He remained silent when I asked him something similar, and then, when I began to understand what Mr. Rossell thought he saw, and told Robbie to tell Mr. Rossell it was okay, Robbie not only stayed mute but stopped looking either of us in the eye. He would neither defend nor accuse me, wouldn't rule my kisses wanted nor unwanted, consensual nor nonconsensual. To the question of why I would have held him down, straddling him, he refused to speak. He refused to say to anyone anything of what went on between us, and as far as I know, never did.

By the time I woke up the morning after I killed the pig, Robbie still refused to talk. His persistent silence was interpreted as evidence of trauma, and the suspicions that Robbie had suffered trauma beneath me quickly turned to assumption. In the face of my looming disgrace, my disgust at it, at Mr. Rossell, at Robbie, and at how poorly the subsequent authority figures' feigned concern masked a dirty curiosity, I resorted to the same tactic: I refused to explain myself. No one wanted my explanation; they wanted their prurience confirmed: a gory psychotic break in which I mutilated my way up the food chain from piglet to Robbie, or maybe a tearful admission of a repressed faggotness leading to a rabid attack on a teacher.

Because neither Robbie nor I would talk, Mr. Cranshaw and the school social worker brought in students to further elaborate their suspicions: accounts of my persistent bullying of Robbie over the course of the year, of my turn toward the antisocial that spoke of some kind of mental ill ease, of my sexual predilections, of intimate items stolen from girls and kept cum-crusted under my bed. Taken with the sum of these anecdotes, the murder of the piglet looked clearly sinister, a final crack of some sort, the assault on Robbie the consequence of that crack.

I was furious at Robbie for his refusal to defend me. He could have made it all go away. Could have told them how wanted my kisses were, that he liked it in my arms. And in light of that, everyone would see that I had been kind, that I had been tolerant, that Mr. Rossell had laid his hand on

underage kids, and that I had defended myself from the violence of a vindictive tyrant. Slowly, over the course of days, as it became clear that Robbie wouldn't save me, I began to indulge in paranoid reveries in which I wondered if Robbie hadn't planned the whole thing. The more I followed that line of thought, the more I began to think of him in the mold of a femme fatale. Could he have predicted all my moves in advance? Was that why he had uncharacteristically volunteered to kill the pig? Movies are full of scorned women enacting that sort of revenge. Ultimately, I didn't fully believe my paranoia—how could Robbie have possibly predicted that Mr. Rossell would be the one to pass by Karen at just that moment? But still doubt plagued me. I needed to hear from Robbie's mouth an assurance that could dispel my paranoia—among the other things I needed him to say.

As a result, I was the one seeking him out, a reversal of our year-long dynamic. The school administrators let him spend the next week cloistered from the other students, resting in the bedroom above the nurse's office, one of the wallpapered rooms up in the old farmhouse that served as both infirmary and lodgings for guests to the school. When I found out where he was, I tried to get to him. I ascended the porch stairs inside the front door, but Belle stepped from the nurse's office onto the landing, blocking my way. She narrowed those wrinkly slits at me and said, "You're not going up there."

"What are you going to do, expel me twice?" I snapped at her.

She made no threat back. She just met my eye and said, "I don't want to see you here again." The way she spoke wasn't like a teacher. It had nothing to do with the disciplinary measures listed in the student handbook that they passed out on the first day of the school year. It had something to do with resolve—the firm address that forces a violent man to take your measure.

I had never seen myself that way. A full-on man to be regarded with wariness and mistrust. It staggered me. Winded me. Then my anger crackled. I wanted to become the threat that Belle had made of me. Compelled by a desire to feel something splinter and break under my fury, I kicked the banister post beside her with a sudden blow. The painted wood and sneaker rubber absorbed the strike in a flaccid squeak. Belle did not

flinch. There was nothing to do but turn back and hope that Robbie would come to me.

As with the Prison Industries furniture, the Quakers on the school board put aside their misgivings in favor of a durable decision, by unanimous consensus: expulsion. My dad had to drive out from Seattle to pick up my belongings and me. To minimize the amount of vacation time he had to use, he made the twenty-hour drive in a day and a half, sleeping at a Motel 6 along the way. I didn't have to go to classes while he drove, and so, from a bench in front of the boys' dorm, I saw him pull into the administration building's gravel parking lot. The wheels crunched to the far end, away from the oak-shaded entrance, so that catkins and bird shit wouldn't fall on his new Tacoma. We lived in the suburbs, but he only drove pickups and couldn't abide an unkempt vehicle.

I met him in the parking lot. He gave me a one-armed hug, then grunted. "You ready?"

"I think Mr. Cranshaw wants to talk to you before we leave."

"They aren't giving me a refund. So it can wait until after we've eaten."

He took me to lunch at a grill-it-yourself steak house. I was glad for the distractions of the meal—glad to grill the meat under the giant indoor hood, to go load up on potatoes at the buffet bar, because my dad barely made eye contact. "This boy," he tried saying finally, "they said at the farm you and he were..." His question trailed off.

"It's not like that, it's that—"

"Good," he cut me off. I saw that he didn't want the explanation, just a denial. Then he compared the grill marks we'd both made on our ribeyes, and complimented me on the well-spaced crisscross I'd gotten, like in the Red Lobster commercials.

He met with Mr. Cranshaw while I packed my belongings in a vinyl trunk. I lugged the trunk to his Tacoma, where I threw it in the bed and tied a tarp around it with polypropylene twine, to protect it from rain on the drive.

I had said goodbye to Tommy and Dan the night before. We drank some Irish whiskey that Tommy had taken from his own dad and had kept hidden. We were in Tommy's room. Tommy had told his roommate, a sophomore, to get out, and he and Dan sat on the school-issued bed while I sat on a folding camp chair he'd bought from Walmart. I had the urge to get wasted, but Tommy didn't share overgenerously. The meager inch or so of whiskey he poured into our mugs couldn't dissipate the unease and embarrassment that hung over the room.

My dad had parked his Tacoma in full view of the science building. As I waited for him to finish talking with Mr. Cranshaw, I began to feel self-conscious and humiliated, imagining that everyone just then in math or physics could look out the window and watch me in a public spectacle of punishment; my legs dangling from where I sat on the folded-down rear gate of my dad's pickup. There's something childish in letting your legs dangle, and my position there began to feel like my own self-made pillory. I hopped down and stood with my thumbs hooked in my belt, doing an impression of flinty and unbothered for anyone who may or may not have been watching.

Finally my dad exited the administration building. From the stiff way that he moved, I knew that he was angry. "Let's go" was all that he said. I got in the passenger side, he put the truck in gear, and in that unceremonious way, I left the school forever.

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We drove past the school farm, on the crumbling asphalt single-lane road, to the intersection of the county road. And there, at the stop sign, was Robbie. He flagged down my dad, who frowned at this little soft kid waiting in the switchgrass at the eroded edge of the road in the middle of the afternoon.

Dad idled the engine and rolled down his window. Robbie approached him. I watched this happen, slower than it should have, in mute agony.

“Sorry,” Robbie apologized to my dad, “I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. Do you mind?”

My dad didn’t respond directly. He paused to examine me. “You want to say goodbye to your friend?” From the way he said it, I realized he didn’t know who Robbie was. But Robbie was so soft then, still so pretty. In the afternoon light, his skin shone clear without any hint of facial hair, cheeks reddened in the wind that I suppose had bit at him while he waited. Robbie’s appearance—what struck me as beauty, but what I’m sure struck my dad as something else—caught my dad’s notice.

“Yeah, all right,” I said. The quality of my dad’s simmering anger, which I knew well from how he held it in his body, sank slightly. He withdrew his gaze with a strange resignation as if he’d asked and I’d answered a very different question. In assent, he shifted the Tacoma into neutral on the empty road and pulled the handbrake. I undid my seatbelt and got out of the cab and stood to the right side of the road, with the engine’s rumble between me and my dad, so that whatever Robbie said to me, my dad couldn’t hear.

I wanted to say something just right to Robbie, something with gravitas, but what I said instead was, “Are you happy now?”

Robbie’s eyebrows wrinkled. His confusion seemed genuine. “No. Why would this make me happy?”

“Because you could have stopped this at any time. You could have told them you wanted me.”

Robbie fidgeted with the zipper of his bright blue windbreaker. “You didn’t need me to say anything,” Robbie said.

“What?”

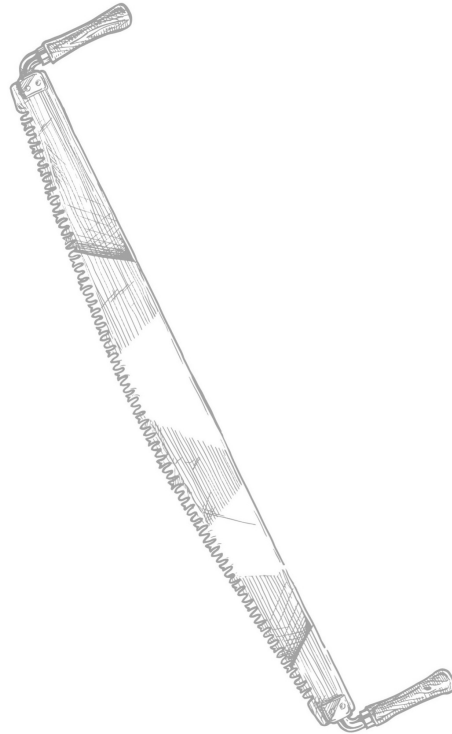
“You could have saved yourself. All you needed to do was tell them that you loved me. That you’ve loved me all year. It would have all gone away. You could have stayed. I was just waiting for you to do it. To finally own it.”

Instinctively, I wanted to deny it, to tell him that I didn't love him. But it seemed pointless, and besides, untrue. "Well, it's too late now."

Robbie looked toward the Tacoma at my dad. I tensed at the two of them sharing eye contact. "Is it?" Robbie asked.

Robbie turned his body back entirely to me and lightly set his hand on my arm, on the triceps, just beneath the edge of my T-shirt sleeve, like he was steadying himself to lean in for an embrace. We stood in silence while my dad watched, with the engine running. I felt the same inner electricity that had run over my body when I killed the pig. Awed by a vista of possibilities. A spinnaker unfurling from a chute. Aware of the hair on my arm ruffling in the wind, the menthol intensity of Robbie's fingertips on my skin, the flap of the tarp in the truck bed. Kindness, mercy, and cruelty jumbled. I gazed at Robbie, fractured by competing desires, pinned at the perfect apex equilibrium of a long ascent, between a need for him to move in and a need to step away. He held me like that, so lightly, for a few moments more. I reached up with my free hand and pressed his fingertips harder into the flesh of my arm. Then my dad laid on the horn, we dropped our hands, and I got back in the cab for the long silent ride away.

STAG DANCE



1.

Thirty-four of us had worked that camp—boomers and bindle stiffs to a man. Our camp sat on a timber trespass on government land where huge ancient larch pine grew up the lee side of the mountain. They were trees uncommon to the eastern side of the state—green gold, absolute candy. Karl Daglish, the landlooker and job shark who set up the camp, had somewhere got his hands on a steam-powered donkey engine, and we raised a high-lead cable line to fell as many of those trees as we could before spring thaw when the state agents and timber inspectors might again take up their patrols and have us all thrown in the coop.

Within the first month, we'd slashed our way far up the mountain's face.

To timber trespass in the full of winter was to countenance ice slicks, frozen fingers, and sunlight hours so short the workday extended from dark to dark. The grade of the slopes made cutting sidewinders a common occasion, and if you weren't careful in how you stacked the cold deck, those massive logs would tumble like straw, snapping knees as they went. All of us had signed on with Daglish for the long winter freeze, in return for a hefty cut of outlaw profits—a quantity of dough that legit operators never offered when they paid by the inch.

Some weeks into the operation, a log came loose from the high line, swung in an arc, and knocked a young donkey puncher from Minnesota on the left side of the head. We dug a grave in the slash and laid him there, the spilled yolk of his noggin seeping into and darkening the torn canvas that was his burial shroud. The next day, a couple of men working as buckers quit—there was a row, because they demanded pay, but Daglish refused, and not only that, Daglish snatched their Red Cards and Wobbly credentials so that he could track them down if they had it in their minds to squeal about our doings to the nearest town clown.

That night, we watched those two pick their way down the mountain, their moonlit figures moving slow over debris on the shorn slopes. When we lined up for slop, Daglish told us to get it clear: Not a one of us was going to see a penny until the timber was sold, so if any of the rest of us were mixing to take a walk, now was the time. We grumbled, but not a one of us bunched it.

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So you can imagine camp morale was low about a month into operation. Spring thaw felt ages away still, and I got it in my head that I'd be whiskered gray by the time the streams began to rush, and that by then my share of the stake would afford me no delight. I began to malingering, as bad as a damn Hoosier, and some of the other men dehorned the liquor that they had stashed away in crannies and bedrolls.

That's when Daglish proposed a stag dance. He made a real production of it—as though we were being invited to a society affair, a cotillion or some such.

He issued the invitation as I was leaned up in a line of men against the hash house shanty awaiting breakfast. Daylight had just then summited the peaks and shone through the ramparts of the boneyard trees left ruined on the east side of camp. The broken limbs cut the pink light into beams that alit here and there on the moisture of breath. All around us yellows and browns brindled the white snow—weeks of tossed grease, spilt offals, spit, and piss. Working a winter camp is filthy that way—everything a body leaves behind stays along until spring.

Being timber pirates, we were a hardtack operation—not much in the way of fancy eating—but that morning, along with the usual spuds, the crumb boss pitched in two hard-boiled cackleberries apiece and a stack of maple-syrup-drowned monkey blankets. I guessed that it was an apology of sorts from Daglish, a way of buttering us up. He had been up since before dawn, with a pinch of Copenhagen deforming his upper lip, and he was spitting, glad-handing, and clapping shoulders, like he was getting into

politics. Finally, he stood up on a deacon seat and proclaimed that we'd all been cordially invited to the First Annual Winter Jungle Dance—to be held a fortnight hence, formal attire requested, but tin pants and long johns accepted, so long as you wore your long johns on the inside. At that, he shot Boomer Campell a blamesome look, because Boomer always wore his long johns over his pants, on the outside. Boomer Campell insisted that his reversed order of wearing was the warmest—but after a month in the woods, his long johns were a disgusting sight.

“My long johns stay out,” yelled Boomer, “excepting when there's women present.”

Daglish did a little impish skip on his deacon seat and grinned. For a heavysset man, Daglish was nifty on the toe, prone to fancy hoofing. He had thick dark hair that stood and glistened in an unwashed wave. A handsome man, of a thickened sort. Before he worked as a timber cruiser, whispers were, he had fled North Dakota after a healthy career as a firebug. Maybe you had a barn in need of burning for insurance reasons? He'd contrive to strike those lucifers to the kerosened hay some Sunday morning while you were in the pews! A godly alibi!

“I'm glad you mentioned women,” Daglish called back to Boomer.

He unfurled a yard of brown fabric—the fabric that I later thought so much about—and held it up for us to see. I stood at the edge of the crowd at that moment, peeling my cackleberry of the last little bits of shell, and I was curious to see what some brown fabric had to do with women. Then Daglish produced a pair of shears and cut off the corner of the fabric into a small triangle, with the hypotenuse maybe three inches in length. He held up the triangle between his cracked and reddened fingers.

“We'll do our stag dance the way I learned in Saskatoon,” Daglish declared. Some of the other men snickered, but I had no notion as to the nature of a Saskatoon dance.

“Any man here that desires to go to the dance as a lady—you just cut yourself off a brown triangle and you pin it right over the fly of your pants, and that's how the rest of us know you're looking to be courted.” He demonstrated by holding the triangle pinched between his fingers in an

inverted position right in front of his crotch, so that it hung like a flat bush, an ersatz twat.

To my left, Brunswick Bob, a wiry little powder monkey who'd singed off his eyebrows in a blast, gave a wolf whistle. He had a reputation as a terrible pest to women, always saying that he only cared for two things: whatever came served up in a bottle and whatever came served up in a corset. I shuddered away from Bob's whistle, and he looked up at me in disdain, as though I were a killjoy Bible-thumping sky pilot—or worse, a prude averting my eyes in disgust, ruining the swell feelings. But in fact, I turned away in shame, because at that moment, I could feel the rising of my own pants, and an unwanted yearning in my chest as I looked at that little fabric hanging at the crook of Daglish's legs.

"Anyone who wears the bush can expect to be courted these next days," Daglish was saying, while his eyebrows went up-down with a philanderer's insistence. "Men, you've got to be sweet if you expect her to accept your invitation to the dance. That means gifts. That means courtesy and flattery." I guessed this proposal was a stroke of genius on the part of Daglish, for everyone was laughing and hooting. The mist of resentment, which had hung damp over the camp these past weeks, burned off as in bright sun. Years dropped off our beat bodies; we had become schoolboys suddenly, speculating about who might dare to wear the bush, who might dare to do the courting.

2.

I had a fellow axeman in a whiskered Welsh undercutter by the name of Schuyler Peeples. After breakfast, up on the eastern slope, he held a scabby hand at his brow to shade the glare as he scanned the lean of an old-growth larch to guess how it would fall, putting his weight on his axe with his other hand as though it were a cane. The old tree was some three feet in diameter at breast height. Standing beside him, I joined in scanning the lean.

Schuyler offered me his view on the day's felling. "Now with a view toward facial cuts," Schuyler said, "I recommend a simple Humbolt notch—we want to land this old girl butt first."

"No," I disagreed. "She'll get hung up on those spruce there." I jutted my chin to where two spruce crossed trunks in a cradle. "Let's do a gap-faced cut, with a snipe to swing her sideways." Uphill and north of the larch lay a clear landing in the twiggy underbrush.

Schuyler thumped at snowy ground with his axe, declining to agree, packing down the ground and stewing himself up.

"Well?" I asked.

I'd felled with Peeples long enough to predict his liability to burst out. Sure enough, that train arrived on time: "I'm sick to drizzled shit of them gap-faced cuts you do," he shouted, throwing down his axe in the snow for emphasis. He made a chopping motion at the trunk with the heel of his hand. "Them cuts compress the fibers, and when the back-cut fucker springs free, it hits too hard—bangs up the butt, busts up the limbs."

"You don't tell me how to cut," I countered. "You cut yourself a dutchman just last week. I saw you do it."

"I never cut a dutchman in my life! And I'll not have some dung-histing Hoosier imply that I ever did." He often bragged that he'd never been east

of the Dakotas. That he'd been thirteen the last time he saw black-dirt farmland.

"I'm a dung-histing Hoosier, you're saying?"

"That I am. That I have done!"

"Look here." I grabbed up his forest axe, short and sharp for limbing—in my outsized hands, it seemed small as a hatchet. Then I cut myself three branches from a fallen spruce, each some four feet in length. I walked a short ways uphill from the old larch and poked the branches into the snow, so they stood upright maybe ten feet apart, their boughs waving like flags.

"You pick yourself a branch," I told Schuyler. "And I'll land this tree to dead on the one you pick, sparing the other two. I'll put ten dollars on it."

Now that there was dough in the offing, Schuyler cooled a tad, turned contemplative. He gazed with skepticism up at the larch. "It's got side lean. How you fixing to hinge it uphill? Better to undercut down that way"—he gestured downslope, in the direct line of the tree's lean—"and do it clean."

"Ten dollars or no."

Schuyler cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed for Runaway Shea, out there somewhere in the forest unseen, yet sure to be close. Schuyler had long teamed with Runaway Shea, signing on to timber operations always as a pair. The twosome was on in years; seasons of logging and bachelorhood had shorn them of niceties, whittled down communication between them to grunts and profane insults by which they made known their mutual affection.

I pushed my opening. "What are you calling Runaway Shea for? A minute ago you told me my business."

Schuyler scowled and thought. I picked up my crosscut and tested the teeth, casual as I could. I'd had Harlan—the smithy—give it a trip to the dentist the night before.

"So I did. All right. Ten dollars."

Schuyler took his pick—the middle branch—and clarified that he didn't want me achieving my branch on a slide. I had to get the middle in one clean wump. We shook on it. Yet by that time, Runaway Shea had come tramping in the snow, and when he heard a bet was afoot, he called over

some other men, and then I had a crowd, and the crowd grew as they themselves passed bets amongst each other.

I heard some jack laugh and make a bet on “Babe Bunyan.” Before I even registered the words, my spine had gone rigid with indignation. I abhorred that name. Bunyan, yes, you’d have guessed it a compliment: axeman of legend. A reference to my uncommon size and strength. I could drive a nail through a two-inch board with a press of my thumb and with one arm pull the Swedish fiddle faster than two men sawing two arms apiece. In fact, give me any saw and I’d make macaroni. But I never asked to be built so, and all my life it caused me problems.

“Babe” was worse still: namesake an ox. A Bunyan I may have been, but with a face like the one that belonged to his famous blue pet. I’d spent my whole life on the far side of ugly, but I never full accepted it—God’s practical joke that should have been brought to an end when he saw I wasn’t laughing. In the rough way of men in camp, I was expected to wear that hurt cheerfully as my name. I never could stomach my own unprettiness; it queasied me.

At the name Babe, I flushed. Then I squeezed fists in the chill wind to get the blood to run inside my fingers. I’d show them who was the Babe.

I doused my saw in kerosene so it’d slide smooth. Then I sighted the fall and made my marks on the trunk. When my fiddle blade bit bark, I made macaroni. Huffs of effort froze on my nose hairs. Pine curls flew. Snow fell from the topmost branches. The air smelled Christmas.

Some sawyers spoke to the trees they sawed, cutting deals and whispering pleas to fall true. Good-hearted trees would turn killer when the fiddle bit. If I’d been a death-falling tree, I’d, too, jump stump to take my executioner along for the journey. That’s why other sawyers were apt to curse a big wolf tree, to threaten it, to intimidate it, to master it—so it wouldn’t think to jump stump, so it would go meekly.

Yet I myself did not curse trees or make pleas. I knew my craft. When I sighted the fall proper, it played out in the mind’s eye before I ever cut that first cut. I sighted clear how the larch would fall—with a reverse Humbolt gap notch. A slice would snipe the left side of the notch, so that when I

banged my wedge in the back cut and struck hard with the maul, the tree would hinge horizontally from the notch just as it hinged vertically from the snipe, opening for me like a slow swung door even as it fell away from its peers.

And it happened just so: The tree crown arced in the sky like the mast of a wave-rolled ship, the last wood fibers ripped and pulled, torsioning and rotating the tree so that it fell with an Old Testament *boom* and staved that middle target branch into the ground with God's own force—not so much as a touch on the other two branches.

I didn't yell "Timber!" because no logger who worked a real camp yelled "Timber!" I don't know which tall tale-telling hack put to paper the notion that "lumberjacks"—which we likewise never called ourselves—shout "Timber!" when a tree tilts down. Makes no sense. Timber is timber, whether standing or falling; it doesn't become timber when gravity takes over. It'd be like a mariner shouting "Boat!" whenever he trims the mainsheet. Therefore, what I shouted as it fell was: "Stand clear! Don't get flat!"

Stand clear they did. Approval came to me in the cheers from the crowd, frenzied by their own bets. I flushed red in victory. I forgot myself; I roared a Viking roar and held out the twelve-pound maul with one loose arm to point it like a warrior sword to where Schuyler stood glum. "That's ten dollars! Maybe now you'll think twice before you tell my business!" I gave another marauder's whoop and with a short laugh, I whacked the maul so that the blade drove into the carcass of the fallen larch.

Schuyler didn't have the dough. I suggested to him that a betting man ought to secure his stake before the winner had a need to spend it.

His eyes went slate expressionless. For a moment it looked as if we might set to. Which would have been beneath my dignity, what with not only the size differential but the age too. Yet. A bet is a bet. Schuyler must have arrived at the same outcome, and then we'd still have to work teamed after. So he tipped a grim nod and said, "I'll have it out of my payout."

All around us bets changed hands, and I pleased myself to imagine what sort of conclusions the men might be admitting to one another: how no, the

Babe wasn't much of a wit, and whew, so ugly he had to sneak up on a dipper just to get a drink—but when it came to axe-work or fiddles, you'd be a fool to bet against him.

3.

With my future ten dollars richer and my present heroic, I strutted down the ravine to get myself a drink. In the ravine, a spring came up from somewhere deep and trickled a ways under skim ice along a rocky cut, freezing into blue spiked formations against anything that slowed or diverted the flow. The cold spring water smarted the teeth—but it tasted clean and sharp. In camp, we melted snow in smoke-blackened pots for drinking, but the thought of imbibing it had begun to nauseate me. Brown and yellow had come to brindle the snow farther and farther from camp, and I no longer trusted the snow gatherers to collect from the unbroken white sheets. I dreamed at night of a long drink gushing from a one-armed Pete pump, or better yet, a foamy topper knifed flat in a saloon.

Brunswick Bob's voice carried through the stunted spruce saplings that held fast the banks of the ravine. I neared and saw that he was potlatching with Mikkels and Stub Nelson. In the snow between the three men knelt a fourth figure.

It was Lisen, a pretty whistle punk from somewhere in Scandahoovia. Old timberbeasts like Mikkels took a special pleasure in ordering Lisen about, making him scamper to fetch this or that. But at night, Lisen liked to do a strange thing. While other men sprawled down to roll the guff, Lisen would pull out a little book he had, a diary of sorts, filled with blank pages—and without asking leave, he'd select a man and begin to sketch him, holding a pencil in his fine slim hands that made a set with the fine bones of his cheek and jaw, which slanted at just the same angle as his glinting eyes, as he stared brazen at his chosen jack. He would never show the jack the sketch, and more common than not, the subject of Lisen's artistic endeavors would find it hard to keep up his own chinjaw under the weight of that brazen stare. Without fail, Lisen's chosen jack would demand to see how his likeness was coming out drawn, to which Lisen would titter and refuse

—giving one to think that he had drawn a mockery of the man, and that saucy giggle would kindle the manly pride of Lisen's artistic subject, who would bellow and snatch at the book, and Lisen would pull it back, flashing those brazen eyes, and the jack would give chase, and soon enough, the two of them would end up rolling in the snow, until Lisen, at last, had to give it up, and the man would see how Lisen thought of him. By and by, everyone knew what it meant when Lisen pulled out his drawing diary, and while a man might feign to pay Lisen no mind, that same man hoped that Lisen would select him to draw, because if so, he'd soon have himself a spell in the duff with a pretty thing giggling beneath.

Most camps in my experience had a punk or two like Lisen—working the whistle or chasing crumbs, a gandy dancing flunky to be prodded about. And I can't say that Lisen didn't perhaps enjoy it, because he was, as I say, a pretty thing, prettier than even any other camp boy I'd seen, with a heavenly smooth pale face and curtain-thick dark hair, cowlicked just so—and saucy in the way he'd pout when he brought you this or that. He never once selected me for his drawing diary, which I told myself was no matter, because in fact, his sauciness disturbed me, or rather, I was disturbed by the unctuous temptation it engendered in me, a queer need like how it feels to forget the perfect word for something, even as you know somewhere in your mind you must have the word, that you don't lack it at all, only its use. As a consequence, I was stilted in Lisen's presence, which made the needy lacking feeling worse, and my stiltedness clearly amused him, so that his lips lifted into a saucy smirk, as if he understood something I didn't, and him being so amused at me struck me as ever the more saucy. I wanted to understand what he understood and have him understand that I understood it, but I couldn't speak around him. My eyes searched him out and followed his movements about camp without my sensibly setting them to. I sometimes blamed him for that—the way my thoughts got all netted up with his person, but other times, I blamed myself. When Lisen caught me looking, he'd give me that sly saucy satisfied smirk of amused understanding, and I would remark to myself that he was awfully saucy.

“Saucy,” I said to myself over and over about him, “an unseemly helping of sauce.” And I told myself that I disliked him.

Down in the ravine, Mikkels had a fabric triangle like the one that Daglish had cut that morning. Mikkels had the unpleasant habit of hanging his tongue out of his mouth whenever he was amused, and such was the case now, that pink tip wagging in the middle of the grown out and graying muttonchops on either side of his face. He dangled the triangle out to Lisen, who was stooped there in the snow, and for once Lisen did not look saucy but instead unhappy.

“You’re going to pin it on for me, seeing as I asked you so nicely,” Mikkels retracted his tongue to say, and Brunswick Bob and Stub Nelson grinned stupid at each other. Brunswick Bob’s grin was all distorted from the Copenhagen he kept lipped away under his nose.

Lisen batted away the triangle. “No, not for you.”

“Oh, no?” Mikkels said. “You’ve got a different man in mind for the dance?”

Lisen scowled but didn’t say anything. He tried to rise to his feet, but Mikkels pushed him back into the snow, and Brunswick Bob and Stub Nelson kept on with their stretched out grins.

“I asked you a question.”

Lisen rolled back halfway up, the wet snow sticking to his canvas overcoat. “Maybe I’m not one to wear the bush. Who says I’m going to attend the dance at all?”

Mikkels took a step forward, his boot spikes crunching in the ice. “You’ll attend the dance,” Mikkels declared. “You wouldn’t miss it, the way you flirt. Getting boys in the swamp to look you up and down.” He looked back at Bob and Stub Nelson, and the tongue flashed out again at his own suggestiveness.

“More than just look him up and down,” said Brunswick Bob.

“That’s true,” Mikkels agreed. “He does do much more than just that. Who’s the latest?”

“Karl Daglish.” Stub Nelson tittered out the name, and his shoulders went up and down as he talked. “The two of them caught blanket fever.

When everyone else worked, they shared a bedroll together in the cougar den at midday then snuck out to the sidehill. Runaway Shea said he saw Lisen catting on all fours. Karl with his pecker in the breeze.”

“Well, now!” Brunswick Bob leaned back on his heels. “Baking buns with the boss! No wonder the little treat don’t get put on road crew.”

“Randy heifer!” said Mikkels, then he again dangled the fabric triangle in Lisen’s face. “Put it on.”

“You put it on,” shot back Lisen. “Anyone here’s a skooch, it’s you three, gossiping like old hens. Who was it peeping at peckers in the woods? Not me.”

Mikkels reached out and gripped a handful of Lisen’s coat collar, but rather than pull Lisen up, he steadied his weight on Lisen. When Mikkels spoke, his voice only just carried over the burble of the spring. “You wall-eared cocksucker. You’re going to wear it for me. Then maybe you do for me like you did for Daglish.”

I piped up then. “Give it here,” I said, meaning the bush triangle. “I want to wear it.”

Brunswick Bob and Stub Nelson startled and twirled round to face me. No one had heard or seen my arrival when I stepped out from the spruce. Mikkels wasn’t so easily flustered. He showed no shame and kept his eyes on Lisen, then slowly raised himself to deal with me.

“Who, you?” Mikkels said. He dangled the triangle before me as though it were something suddenly slimy and repellent, some rotted vermin pulled from a shoe by the tail. “You want this?”

Honest truth: I did want it. In fact, I have to admit that I’d wanted to wear the bush since I saw it pinched between Daglish’s legs that breakfast. When the work or bets hadn’t occupied me, I’d been turning over in my mind how to play volunteer, how to land it as a joke on the one hand, yet at the same such time, not at all a joke, because despite myself, I had many times wondered in earnest about being courted as a woman is courted. This, too, seemed one of God’s attempts at humor: a desire unbidden by me, unspoken, and flummoxing to me, a desire that, without my desiring it to, made itself manifest in sessions of feverish blanketed self-abuse—and that

now against all odds presented itself to me in the tantalizing possibility of a brown fabric triangle.

“The Babe wants to be a skooch for the stag.” Brunswick Bob was incredulous. “Who could even dip you?”

“You think I’m not pretty enough for the bush?” I lilted my voice in the manner of a flirt to disconcert them, and also to conceal my pain at Brunswick Bob having used my nickname, which Brunswick Bob knew I greatly disliked because I had on occasion told him how much I greatly disliked it.

“Well, now,” Stub Nelson began, but then he shoved his one remaining hand into his waxed coat and didn’t share the rest of his thought. Brunswick Bob adjusted his Copenhagen and bent forward to gleek brown juice between his front teeth, but that was the extent of his input.

Of course, we all knew I wasn’t pretty enough for it, nowhere close to a Lisen. Famously the opposite: My face was all rough-hewn pituitary exuberance. You could set a beer glass on my brow shelf. A wedge of nose doglegged and wrinkled at the top and bottom from having been jammed into a space that couldn’t fully accommodate it. I had no true features as such, only protrusions and shadow-shaped recesses in which hid my eyes and lips as eels lurk within dank holes. My knuckles—both finger and toe—sprouted brown tufts, and children could use my shoes for sleds. No mirror had ever befriended me.

Lisen gathered himself up from the ground. This time no one pushed him back down. With dignity, he unbuttoned his jacket front and brushed loose snow that had stuck to the sheep fleece lining. Lisen stood about as tall as little Brunswick Bob, but even slimmer. The four arrayed themselves before me.

“Daglish said anyone wants to wear the bush can wear the bush. He’s camp shark. He has say-so,” I insisted.

“He did say that,” agreed Stub Nelson. “And there’s fabric enough to go around.”

I pointed to the one that Mikkels held. “I want that one.”

Lisen rebuttoned his coat and gave a little snort as he tugged it into place. “That’s a laugh,” he said, not looking at anyone, still adjusting his attire, and the wrath in his voice unsteadied me.

When Lisen’s clothing was again to his liking, he swung around on Mikkels. “Well? Who’s the wall-eared cocksucker now?”

“What?” Mikkels, a known tough, disbelieved being spoken to so.

“You heard her,” Lisen continued, and I realized that in his disdain he meant me—but not in a kind way. “The lady asked you for a favor. You can’t refuse a favor to a *damsel*.”

That Lisen. He had me stilted all over again. Here I thought I’d get a thank-you. Here I thought myself the tillicum hero. Here I thought I’d put us teamed. But the venomous way his voice struck falsetto on *damsel* showed he’d never team with me. He spoke as though he’d long ago recognized, accounted for, and for reasons known to himself, discounted me. I was unaccustomed to being discounted. On account of my size, no one discounted me: You don’t discount a hayburner loose in your bedroom, no matter how mild the temperament. I had told myself that I disliked Lisen, disliked his saucy ways, but it occurred to me that no, he had disliked me first, had passed me over in a crucial respect. He never chose me for his drawing diary. While for him my own skin goosed and my blood smelted—near sick in my throat—every time he chose another jack for his diary. Meantime he’d known I’d never ask to see my likeness, knew that nothing called forth my reluctance so bad as seeing my own likeness as others do. And since I’d never bellow to glimpse my likeness in his book, we’d never roll in the duff. Therefore I could not be a man to contend with him. He knew it. The disdain in his voice said he did.

Brunswick Bob caught to Lisen’s mockery like the true pest he was. He snickered, “That’s true, Mikkels. Have some fucking manners.”

Mikkels didn’t catch right on. “Manners?” The hand that held the brown fabric triangle lowered in stupefaction, while his other mitt pawed at his leathered beak, scorched and peeling from working the sky hooker in snow-blinding sun above the top trees. Mikkels showed a talent for timberbeast meanness, but when it came to smarts, he felled his trees with a blunt axe.

“Mind your etiquette, we’re saying,” said Lisen. “You’ve got your grubby fingers on the lady’s snatch.”

Mikkels jerked his hand and threw the fabric, as though he’d discovered a roach bug in his grip. It fluttered and blew and landed in the spring’s trickle and traveled twirling wet until it caught against the ice in a downstream eddy near where I stood. Then Mikkels laughed. He’d caught on at last. “Hey, Babe, your twat’s getting away.”

These cruel axemen! They made easy terms with malice and stupidity when they numbered three or four on one. Yet no matter. I knelt dignified alongside the spring, so close that the skim ice cracked and gave way like fine glass beneath my weight. But I didn’t go for the fabric right off. With a bare hand cupped, I brought a drink of spring water to my face. The cold of it stung terribly, but I showed nothing. I made like I had put my hand in a warm bath. I went for second helpings and then cupped my hand a third time beneath the chill to roughly bathe my face. Only the last time that I dipped a limb did I fish out the bush.

The whole time, none of those four moved, and only close-watched me. They daren’t do otherwise. Were Mikkels to have turned his back, I might have clopped him upside the ear because I’d been well known to do such things. Even a Bunyan must stand ground from time to time. In fact, the whole time I knelt to drink, I considered that question—whether I had to clop Mikkels or not. In the end, I decided to do what my desire bade: I wanted my turn with the triangle, and clopping Mikkels upside the ear was strictly not a ladylike way to begin my skooch spell.

I wrung dry the fabric in my fist, then held it up wrinkled and damp at the crook of my legs.

“What do you think, boys?” I asked. “Fancy me yet?”

Now the danger had gone. Stub Nelson whistled, and Brunswick Bob gleeked again, this time with approval. Brunswick Bob lent character and commentary to how he spat. Lisen regarded me with a strange and resentful pout, and this came to me as further betrayal—because if I hadn’t along, likely he’d be at the bottom of a three-man snake room dogpile.

“Save me a dance then, sweetheart,” said Mikkels.

“Sorry, Mikkels,” I responded. “I’m sure I’m spoken for.”

“Are you now?” Mikkels was amazed. “By who?”

And then, I don’t know what got into me—or rather I do. It was Lisen. The dismissive spoiled pout, the barefaced discounting of my person, and the way he gave me to understand that he already understood my motivations in any act that came to pass between us. I winked at Lisen and said a name that I’d not much thought of in any kind of social capacity, a name that I’d just heard Stub Nelson utter. “Why, Karl Daglish, I reckon.”

Now Lisen showed a change. Now his brazen eyes went dull and a darkness winged over his countenance. When he again glowered at me from beneath his pretty heavy lashes, I found at last the improbable words for why I got his person all netted up in my mind. Why my likeness wasn’t fit to be drawn in his diary of jack men. In short, I gleaned from his face the meaning that he had long and better gleaned from mine: We were rivals—and to be rivals is to be something the same.

4.

Then came the usual last scurryings of the winter night. The whickers and whinnies of hayburners bedded in from the wind. Pipe tobacco smoke from the corncobs. The metronome spit of Scandahoovian dynamite into a tin mug. The splitting and carrying of a night's wood into the cougar den where we all crammed in for sleep. The stacking of it beside the stove. The bedroll flop-downs. The muttered arguments that arose from those flop-downs: jostles over space, inches of territory battled over, taken, and recaptured night by night. Sleeping set so close we had to climb into our blankets from the short side. Muzzle-loaded. Packed in and tamped down. Out in the dark, the far jabberings of coyotes, the clack of trunks, and the low flute whistle of wind over high-line wires. The wind had been picking itself up all day, growing from an irritant to a hindrance, so that any and all men outdoors huddled with backs into the wind, protecting the face, the way boats at anchor point the same way in a current.

Yet I did not clamber into the cougar den. My bed remained rolled. Instead I hitched a corncrib mule, gray-muzzled and straggle maned, to a wagon and hoofed out like a hair pounder into the bluster and starry cold with the sawyer Martin Frohms. I had long known Frohms. We'd met in Michigan, when I worked the *Ramapo*, a four-thousand-ton icebreaker on a route that steamed from Marquette to Cleveland, churning open the passageway for ore ships. Frohms was the apprentice ship mechanic, and we weren't close. But both of us later cinder-snatched westward along the twin rust streaks, slipping from the Great Lakes maritime trade into the logging industry, as was common a decade ago, when the lake business died out. When we met again, we felt fonder for each other, starting as we did with a bedrock of shared reminiscences.

We reunited by chance, over whiskey in a Billings juicery. At the second instance of Frohms in my life, I was older—and I had more appreciation for

men of simple softheartedness, which Frohms surely was. It was Frohms who signed on with Daglish first, as a sawyer, and he let me know about the trespass. By then, I had a reputation in Montana, and I could work most any camp that I chose. So I'd say that among those of us in the swamp with Daglish, I could mark down Frohms as my oldest and dearest, even if it wasn't a typical bosom-type relation.

Frohms gee-hawed the wagon down the teeth-rattling corduroy road toward a platform built to overhang the creek bank. At the platform, Frohms and I set to pumping water into the double tin tanks in the wagon bed. No one liked the freezing job—but Frohms had gotten near knocked from this life the week before; a big hackmatack tree split into a barber chair, and the low end caught him on the chin. At least ten minutes he lost himself from the known world, and days later he was yet wobbly on his feet. He'd be no good for timber work for at least a month, so Daglish put him on the road job—pumping full the tin tanks on the wagon from the creek, sprinkling it out to freeze smooth the corduroy road. With the road icy slick, the teamsters could slip cones over the log ends and drag them anywhere the road took them.

Normally the freezing job was work for some whistle punk, but Frohms had been asking me to accompany him on the road nights. He had an abashed way of asking. No one wants to freeze the road in the blowing starlight cold. But his fear trumped his sense of imposition. He worried that the noggin-knock might have him woozy enough to faint in the cold and thereby frostbite all his appendages; he wasn't fit and healed for too much pumping. So I agreed, and when we reined in the mule at the creek, I did most of the pumping for him, working up a lather in my jacket as I went up and down with the one-armed Pete affixed to the wagon tanks.

"Look at you go," Frohms said over the gurgle of the creek, and the gusts, and my panting. "You must be eager to get back to your beauty sleep." I stopped pumping. He gazed at me with a crooked sort of grimace, thin grizzled lips pulled back—a face I'd not seen on him before. He was not an expressive man, either verbally or physically; if his personality were a color, it would be that of water-damaged plaster. I liked him for it! I didn't

want him changing. I wondered if the knock on the noggin had given him a palsy.

“I don’t take your meaning.”

“Sure you do.”

“I’m sure I don’t.”

He pointed to my crotch where I’d pinned the fabric triangle in place. I’d put it over my crook as soon as I fished it up from the river, fixed it to my pants with a pin bent back double. It’s true no one but me in camp had yet pinned the triangle to the crotch. That by having worn it so quickly I revealed a suspect overeagerness. Yet hadn’t Daglish told any aspiring skooch to wear it for the stag? Was I not, by so doing, aspiring? Maybe the order of events is jumbled, but it seems that the declaration and the aspiring happen in the same moment.

No one had yet courted me. I’d been wearing my bush all day: a wind-flapped flag to mark me! But I’d been spinstered already. A few snickers, but none of the attention I was abashed to covet. Instead I had a feeling of simple stupidity. That I was performing something for which I’d no talent, and certainly no natural gifts, and the falseness was obvious and embarrassing, without even the thrill of perversion or menace. Plain undignified, which is something a man so large as me ought not be. I’d seen Lisen flirting again at the dinner bell, sassing in the midway with a hand on his hip—and I saw no stupidity to him. He enthralled the rapt-eyed men around him. But now I feared Frohms was giving me some shadow of that attention, and it felt wrong. Not from him. As I say, he was as close to brotherly as I had in that camp.

“I’d have never guessed you’d want to wear it,” he said. “Looking as you do. The Lord plays some tricks on us.”

Then I had a paradoxical urge. Despite the desperate desire to wear the bush, to have my audience recognize my deep need to wear it, and knowing that Frohms, my friend, guessed as to this need—I felt that I ought to introduce some doubt to these motivations. To leave open the possibility that it was all just a joke. And to make it a joke, I told a joke: the first one that came to mind on the subject that seemed to be at hand.

“Do you know how you fit four mollies on a stool?” I said to Frohms.

He wiped snot off his nose and thought about it. Maybe he thought it too direct, a slur that tarred us both just then. But *molly* was the word on my tongue and it sprung out.

Finally he said. “Four mollies? No. I can’t say that I do.”

“Turn the stool upside down.”

Frohms had a face that looked as though all his features had crammed themselves into a too-tight space, so that all traffic jammed up. One of the least mobile countenances I’d ever encountered. His was a face that never was in on a joke. So I couldn’t tell if he didn’t get mine, or if that was just his face. Turned out he didn’t get it.

“Because each of the mollies sit on a leg is how it works.” I explained, and I heard how unfunny it was, how crude, so I set myself back to pumping.

Frohms thought about it. “How do they balance?”

“The stool leg goes up the arse.”

“One leg per arse?” asked Frohms. “Why would they sit that way?”

“Well, they don’t. It’s a what if–type situation. Because they would like to.”

Frohms nodded. “But they must take care not to get splinters.”

We both knew that we weren’t talking about the mechanics of mollies on stools, but were broaching the mechanics of what could be had with each other, or with other boys in the cold swamp. Which was a subject I didn’t want to speak of, not with Frohms, because I saw he didn’t see me how I wanted to be seen, and I never saw him as someone who might see me that way, not how Daglish perhaps saw Lisen, where the problem wasn’t just the mechanics of how to balance on an upside-down stool, but the need for something pretty and lively, something to delight a man.

I did damn hate how I’d been knocked together. A person may indeed dream and sweetly lust of four Lisens, served up on an inverted stool, but four of me served up so could turn a stomach. I deserved disgust, maybe, for thinking such things. And more—saying such things to myself made for a compelling release, a judder of sweet pain to feel my conjecture fit

correctly with all I had experienced of creation and of myself within creation. I must have showed some wince or pain on my face, because Frohms seemed to understand that I had set a lot of store on the bush, despite my efforts at playing it lightly. In fact, that mollies joke had slipped into something sideways true.

“Let’s say that you do want to wear the bush and go to the stag as a skooch—” Frohms hesitated, then struck a lucifer off the side of the wagon. It didn’t light, so he struck another and lit his pipe and stared at me, waiting as if that whole display constituted the completion of his query.

“I did say it.” I stopped my pumping. “It has been said.”

“Okay, you do.” The lamplight burned low enough that the puffs of his pipe lit dull red his tight-fitted features. “And any bark eater out here is entitled to his tendencies—but most weigh an inclination against what it will cost.”

“You say this will cost me?”

Frohms removed his pipe and waved it. Downright expressive for him. I wished he’d settle back down. “Man! Don’t you know? You are Babe Bunyan.”

“And I don’t like it.”

“So what? You are! And you’re talked about in most any camp from here to Idaho. I heard a drunk brag once in a juicery of how you hoisted a mule onto your shoulders and carried the mule to camp, rather than the other way around. The man didn’t even know you! Just knew of you!”

“Carried a mule? To what purpose would I carry a mule?” I never had, though perhaps I could.

“My point is—you don’t take off that triangle, the stories’ll change. You’re not a fellow to just blend into the timber. You’re used to being accorded a measure of respect—hell, awe! You keep up with that triangle, it won’t matter how many mules you did or didn’t hoist.”

I began to pump again with great vehemence, the creak of the old piston and the bang of the check valve and spatter of freezing water on tin producing a din that ended any possibility of more discussion.

As I pumped, Frohms reached to keep steady the pass-through hose on the tank, so it didn't fall off the nipple—but out of nowhere, he dropped it. The hose snaked an arc of water that near wetted me. I stepped back, ready to accuse him of carelessness, but he wasn't looking at me at all.

“It's the damnedest thing!” he declared.

Who was he to keep badgering me when I was giving him my helping hand? He could be out in the snow alone with his unsteady feet! So I banged the pump to show my anger, and I approached him with one hand covering my bush, about which I now felt modest, and said, in my deepest and most declarative roar, “I am not game for your inquires about my private positions!”

Frohms's eyes rolled like a nervous steer's. He reached an arm backward, felt about the wagon bed, and grasped a loose hay hook, which he then clutched as a weapon—a farmer's halberd. For a moment, I thought he intended to use it against me. But then he said, “There! There's something there—on the far bank!”

Frohms took small steps and brandished his hay hook. I looked where he was waving his weapon and got the screaming meemies. A strange drifting light on the far side of the creek moved through shadowcaster trees. Faint, but the faintest illumination shines bright on snowpack. I picked up our hurricane lamp to see better, but the glare of my own flame blinded me to the dark beyond the throw of lantern light. A gust whipped a fine snow to sting my face and whistled serpentine wherever the snow lay open. When I lowered the lantern, the strange glow was gone.

“You saw it?” Frohms was out of breath and clutched the shaft of the hay hook.

“I saw it.”

“Thought it was maybe just another rush from the clop I took on the head.”

“It was there.” I worried it could be a timber inspector. Maybe some town clown heard about a crew of woods pirates cutting the government forests. Maybe one of those boys who went down the mountain had

squealed. I said so to Frohms. I said that I suspected a timber inspector had maybe come to put us in the coop.

He shook his head. “Didn’t look to me like lantern light. Looked to me more blueish, more glow. Fox fire, you think?”

“Fox fire dies in the winter. Besides, it doesn’t move. Someone was out there. Listening to us maybe.” I was shamed more now about the molly joke.

“Or something!”

“Come on, Frohms,” I admonished him, but I had my little hairs all upright too.

The hayburner hitched up to the wagon whickered and swayed in the traces with animal nervousness. The wind continued wearing at us. I squinted and peered up the skid road, toward a clearing for the log decks. Gale streams whistled over the donkey machinery and hummed on the heavy four-gauge cable, blew over slash and swayed Irish baby buggies. Westward, above the treeline, the whole of the range set itself into commotion, blackness waving and undulating without definition in the barest low light, and over all that, cathedral clouds slid in a line to quench the stars.

The wind frolicked as minutes passed. Finally Frohms cautiously set aside his hay hook, then stooped to pick up his pipe where it had fallen. He took a few tries to strike another match into flare with shaking hands.

Frohms was gulping, some word stuck in his tubes. When he finally dislodged it, it was: “Agropelter?”

I might have been spooked, but I wasn’t dumb!

“Do you think I’m some Hoosier? Come out here from my farm? Don’t try Agropelters with me!” At other camps I’d been, the seasoned bark eaters like to play this trick on the young punks come up from the flatland. Told the boys about a horrible beast—the Agropelter—driven west from the big woods of Wisconsin. Any jack with the ill fate to stroll by its abode would get found with his head bashed in. Next to the body, the Agropelter would place a broken tree limb—so it looked as if death came with the usual unlucky widowmaker branch, but no: It was the Agropelter. In this manner,

the beast covered its murderings. The legend got to be such that anytime someone found a jack bashed dead in the woods from a widowmaker, the death got blamed on the Agropelter. It was a favorite sport of the old bark eaters to contrive to send cowbell flatland punks into the woods at night and then sneak after them to give them a terrible fright. “You trying out some skylark on me, Frohms?”

I admit that he didn’t look larksome. “I worked in the Wisconsin West bustadshogen—that was Ojibwe land all up to and through the Canady border. Everyone in those parts will tell you the same: The Agropelter is a true thing.”

“I didn’t figure you for fearing monsters in the dark.”

“I never called the Agropelter a monster. As I say! The Agropelter was an axeman—same as us. A regular Jigger Johnson, in fact, is how I heard it. But then sometime over a long winter in the bustadshogen, he got seduced and possessed by some kind of spirit.” Frohms scrunched up his face in recall.

“What do you mean a spirit?”

“A spirit is what I mean! A wraith, a banshee, an apparition! And I’m guessing a spirit of the female persuasion, because, well, this axeman got to acting awful strange—talking in an odd voice, dressing queer, walking around as if intoxicated—and just breaking all the camp custom. More and more bewitched he got, and his jack fellows began to suspect him of peculiar capacities and inclinations. Said how at night he’d creep cronish about the camp, so that in the dark his long shadow seemed shaped to something no longer a man. He’d slip in and touch the men in their sleep, cooing softly. It got to be intolerable. Before thaw, his fellows banished him into the woods. Chased him out.”

“What? To freeze in the woods?”

“That’s right! But this jack maybe couldn’t die! He’d already submitted to the siren demands of spirit, so that once gone into the woods and there in the deep trees, forlorn and lost, he became the Agropelter.”

Now, I didn’t expect that! Hadn’t Frohms trained in the finicky science of steam engines? “I wouldn’t have guessed you for an occultist. How come

you know so much about this?”

Frohms was emphatic. “Because, I tell you! I encountered it!”

By way of my face, I gave him to know how I remained doubtful.

“I did so!” His voice went up. “It was by the Minnesota line! In the white pines, there was an old log cabin—some dead settler’s shack, abandoned, the roof part fallen in. But with an iron firebox still dry in a stone hearth. And I was landlooking one night with an Irishman who everyone called Stuttering Ed. So we spent a night there, me and him. I woke in the night with a queer dread. Like from one of those dreams where you don’t know yet if you’re awake or not and it’s all whispers in the shadows. I lit a hurricane lamp, and that’s when I saw a beady glint.”

“And you’re going to tell me this beady glint belonged to the Agropelter?”

Frohms tapped out his pipe in the wind and I caught whiff of his tobacco ash as it blew past. “No, no. It was a little brown field mouse.”

“A mouse.”

“A mouse indeed. It was just staring at me—very unnatural. Standing up on his hindquarters. Little mouse hands together in prayer. Like it was watching me with purpose. Not skittish in the slightest. You know...a witchy familiar.”

“You want to scare me, you have to do better than a mouse.”

“That’s what I said to myself! I named myself a fool, and I shooed it. Then I woke up maybe an hour later, and it was back. Same little vigil! Watching me.”

I got irritated. What did a mouse have to do with anything? I said, “Dammit, Frohms! So you had an amorous mouse. What does that have to do with Agropelters?”

“Well, that’s what was strange! You must have heard how it was in those early eastern camps. The infestations of mice in all parts. You hung up your jacket at night, and in the morning, you gave it a squeeze and the mice poured out like brown water. The mattresses would go lumpy and moving with the little creatures.”

Of course I'd well heard of that. I'd even worked some camps where it was near that bad, although I admit that the ancient timberbeasts said the mice in the Minnesota forests had gotten biblical in their rapid reproducing. With a forest savaged by clearings, choppings, and burnings, all manner of critter and pest found refuge in the oases of grain and body warmth inhabited by these newly arrived men.

"So when this bewitched jack got chased out," Frohms went on, "the mice went with. His fellows awoke the next morning, and the mice were gone. That's how come it was clear to all that his bewitching, his strange behavior, wasn't because of madness. It was a spiritual type situation."

"That's the Pied Piper you're thinking of," I helpfully explained to Frohms. "You got confused in your stories. Isn't your family German? You're mixing up your tales."

"No, we're Silesian originally! But that's not—look, I'm not mixed up at all! I'll tell you what I saw with Stuttering Ed! We packed up the next day. Now, tromping home, I saw that mouse everywhere. Every time I stopped in the woods, if I looked around hard enough, I'd peep it. Always stock-still. Up on his hindparts. Always eyes on me. Sometimes along the duff and pine needles on the path, sometimes low on some marm-buttred tree."

Well, that was eerie, I had to admit. But you spend time in the woods, you see some eerie things. The woods are vast and not all is known. There's a mountain in the Beartooths, full of candy timber, and still it's not harvested out of pure superstition. The Blackfeet don't even go there. Said that their own hunters get lost in wind that swirls, unnatural-like, never blows in a straight direction, but encircles in a net, so that you forget which way you came and can't leave. Whole lost tribes up there. The landlookers have expounded theories that this is just a weather phenomenon, but still, not a one has yet to find willing-enough boomers to put together a decent timber camp.

"Was it a distinctive mouse? Who can tell mice apart?" I conjectured that perhaps that part of the woods was infested.

"It was the same mouse!"

"How do you know?"

Frohms sighed. “Because, at last, I killed it. Stuttering Ed had a little varmint gun for shooting stew rabbits.”

“You’re a crack shot, you pick off a mouse in the woods.”

“It was easy.” Frohms appeared the same as always—his face wouldn’t allow him to look otherwise—but he fidgeted with his pipe. “That mouse let me get so close that it was like a tiny Utah execution. Little fellow faced down the firing squad—just watched me line up the shot that was his own death. After that, I didn’t see any more mice peeping at me from the trees. That’s how I know it was the same damned and haunted mouse the whole time. Now what do you make of that?”

Truth told, I didn’t know what to make of it. Had it been anyone but Frohms, I would have bet that I was being wound up. But Frohms didn’t have the humor for it.

“Well, that’s a spooky rodent all right,” I allowed at last. “But you got the better of it.” His story was giving me the heebie-jeebies all over again, so I wanted to comfort him and end the telling, without admitting that Babe Bunyan could get distressed by a mouse.

Frohms bit his pipe. He wasn’t finished. “Next day, Stuttering Ed got brained. Looked as if by a standing dead cedar that blew over while he was taking a piss.” Frohms tapped his pipe on the wagon meaningfully. “Just how they say the Agropelter does it. He left a wife and a son back in Duluth.”

—

The glow did not return. We waited some time, and then—there was nothing for it. Haunted woods and fairy will-o’-the-wisps or not, we had work had to get done, and the cold made for an icy prod. I topped full the twin tanks, and we got to work freezing smooth the road. Frohms directed the mule, and in back, I worked the tank sprinkler. I got to thinking about my bush again—how a true skooch might feel before a dance. Wasn’t that the story from some book? Some foursome of sisters who did or didn’t go to a dance with a neighbor boy? I should have paid attention to the reading

times at school—such as it was. Then again, I guess I never thought those type of stories would apply to my situation. I got to further thinking: Maybe some of the boys—Lisen even—could be sneaking about in the dark. The way that Mikkels had accused Lisen and Daglish of doing. The hair on my arm settled, and I started to laugh.

“What is it?” Frohms asked.

“I bet I can guess the identity of our Agropelter.”

Frohms turned round from his wagon seat. “How so?”

“I heard it today from Mikkels and Stub Nelson—that Lisen. He’s been sneaking off to bake a batch of rolls with some jack or another.”

Frohms snorted, picked stray loose tobacco off his lips, and licked at the spot where it had been—licking too much, in fact.

“They said Lisen’s been catting on all fours, Karl Daglish with his pecker in the breeze!” I was repeating gossip third hand, of course, but I was accurate in it word for word.

“Damn,” Frohms said, finally. “The prettiest punk I’ve seen in any camp or on any barge. Wish I’d have known. This time around, it would have been *me* spying on the Agropelter!”

And I laughed, because I knew I was supposed to enjoy that kind of ribaldry. And I thought I’d have felt better—dismissing the haunting and passing off a bit of camp grapevine all at once, but I couldn’t help but compare how Frohms had been so skeptical of my bush with how he’d spoken of Lisen. *Prettiest punk* and licked at himself.

5.

All next morning the sun shone bright on fresh snow as we felled and dragged—Schuyler and Runaway Shea went red-eyed from the solar burn, and even hats were no good, because the light bounced right off the sheeny fluff so that the underside of a brim was near as lit up as the crown. When clouds lidded over the noonday sun, I marked it a natural gift—even as they darkened and a wet snow began to stick. It's dangerous to fell in the wet. When snow coats the bare high branches, a jack can't tell what's a living branch and what's dead, and the widowmaker limbs are liable to crack off under the weight and dead the jacks beneath them. In the midafternoon, treetops disappeared into the weak gray of falling flakes and the light faltered into the twilight of a true blizzard. Daglish blew a gabriel to call for work stoppage. Back at camp, we huddled blanketed in the cougar dens or under the covered midways, preparing ourselves for cold wet boredom until it came time again to eat or sleep or the blizzard broke.

I myself sat under the birch-bark eaves of the wigwam storehouse set up between the saw dentist and the donkey mechanic's lean-to. I had a shearling cap down low over my ears and eyes and wrapped a wool blanket over my frost fooler pea jacket—as I liked to do during blizzards. But this was a getup for the dry snow of high cold. Wet blowing snow stuck and froze to the wool fibers, and after about a half hour of that, I supposed I would soon have to shelter in the cougar den, which I imagined was just then crammed with ripe jacks and their riper odors, socks hung off every surface. I was considering whether to go tamp myself in when I heard shouts and cheers and then came music. I rose to follow them to their source.

Turned out, the cougar den might have been the quietest spot in camp. In the blizzard boredom, a good portion of the camp had gathered beneath the tarp-roofed midway. Someone had dehorned a hidden stash of Flambeau

lightning. When it came to Flambeau lightning, those stillery squires weren't known for exacting standards. They neglected to discard the head and tails off of the mash as the more legitimate distillers were sure to do—why settle for mere ethanol when, with every sip, you could enjoy the whole tipsy gamut from methanol to fusel oil? Once, after a full mug of Flambeau lightning, I acquired the talent of peering through walls to see everyone on the other side! I was chagrined to discover, when I sobered up, that this talent turned out to be a ramification of the wood alcohol having etched certain hallucinatory images onto the glassy outer parts of my eyeballs, so that I then saw these images on every surface for a time after.

Now, you dehorn cougar milk that spirited, you better expect rowdiness from anyone in the vapor's vicinity. Being that the stag dance was the most exciting future event in the offing, the boys had not drunk long before they decided to stage a preview. The crumb boss produced a pair of shears, and those who decided to wear the bush fashioned the proper triangular announcement to place themselves on the market. By the time I heard the music and wound my way up to the midway, little E. W. Oleson had himself the skooch bush, as did Peer Pfannenstiel, who always introduced himself as "it's pronounced fan-and-steel" and therefore came to be named Fanny Peer around the camps. The two Canady boys were passing back and forth the shears and daring each other.

I ducked under the tarp roof just in time to see that Fanny had tied a burlap bag about his waist as a crude skirt and was swishing it in a burlesque of feminine wiles, one hand over his mouth as if tittering. Then he lifted it to coquettishly exhibit the flag at his crotch—which would have been a good show, except that he broke form and suddenly roared with laughter and pounded the nearest back, that of Johnny Duck Chief, who had been gaping mesmerized by the burlesque, but who now, to show good cheer and sport, pounded Fanny right back.

The tarp that was the roof was too low for my height even on a clear day—but blizzard-weighted, it bellied low under the snowfall, making me stoop as I pushed through the din and commotion. Finally, I secured myself a spot along the wall of the hash house. The tarp was affixed to the roof

over the hash house, so that it was a spot that could accommodate my height without risk of the blizzard-weighted tarp crowning my head as elsewhere. I found myself standing next to Samuel van der Ser. A pinched young man with a face the color and texture of oatmeal, he burned with Jesus fever even while timber trespassing—which was a class of thievery you’d think would be a plumb-cut sin, even with all the helpful render-unto-Caesar workarounds the Bible provides. Perhaps in contrition, van der Ser spent his free hours mumbling in the amen corner, even though no one gave two turds to his preaching—because there’s something irksome in receiving moral instruction from a man a decade your junior, even when he’s a likable sort, which van der Ser wasn’t. Besides, his religiosity concerned itself only with trifles. Throughout the early weeks at camp, he monkishly refused to sleep in the cougar den whenever we burned popple wood in the oven. Van der Ser held that the cross on which his lord and savior had been crucified was built of popple, and therefore he’d not be inhaling any such devil wood as he slept. What’s more, he also never ground his axe on a Sunday, and so went to work on Monday with a blunt blade. We all guessed that one day he’d leave camp to become a flying parson, and the sooner the better.

He scowled at Fanny—and I guess maybe I was doing the same, though for my own reasons, because he said to me, with bosom-buddy insinuation, but so low that I just caught it above the din, “You ever seen the like? Axemen prancing like a flock of sodomites?”

I didn’t say anything, a mistake, because he interpreted that as an invitation to go on, and raising what he must have intended as a scholar’s learned finger, though I couldn’t tell because all his digits were mittened up together, he affected a ponderous register to recite for me: “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.”

“Garments?” I countered. “I wish I did see garments! We got nothing but triangles.” At which moment, he looked down and saw my own bush.

“Oh, Lord help me,” he said.

“Don’t take His name in vain,” I said to goad him, which had the intended effect of causing him to step away from me, though not before he repeated the word “Abomination.”

Now, when I was younger, I had a cousin who, in order to teach me the art of manhood, would sit me beside him on the edge of the dusty porch outside the old trading fort. When a woman passed by on the street, maybe holding up her mud-caked skirt hems or elbow-locked with her husband, my cousin would appraise her for me as if we were at a cattle auction, instructing me as to what traits to prize, what defects to avoid, and he’d elbow me if I got squeamish about hearing it. But whenever a true beauty happened along, he wasn’t appreciative. No! He would mutter, “Dammit!” and for a moment, his face would go stricken, as if he’d been arrow-struck and could only ponder uncomprehendingly the precious life seeping from the puncture. Then he’d snap into a wronged fury. This occasional beauty, by only her presence, seemed to constitute a life-threatening provocation, and he got ever more enraged that she should endanger him so thoughtlessly—even though he’d set himself, and me as well, there on the porch for that precise provocation.

Well, I hadn’t seen my cousin in decades, but I abruptly came to sympathize with him there in the midway. Because just as van der Ser stepped away trailing his fulminating mutters, I caught a glimpse of Lisen. Without thought, I pressed my back into the wall behind me to hide myself from a new and terrible threat to my person, my senses clanging an all-bells alarm. *Dammit!* Pretty! Goddamn plain as day beauty! It did not make me happy at all. And worse still, the wall I backed into was the one that had the tarp hitched to it, so that when my bulk slammed into it, the wall shuddered, the tarp shook, and the accumulating snow slid off in a loud whumping rush. Which caused a number of the reveling men to look my way—at least I suppose they did, but I can’t say for sure, because of what I am sure is that the sound drew Lisen to meet my panicked gaze, and oh, the sauce was thick as Sunday gravy.

It's a sure bet that after such a fright, I demanded more than a few tinfuls of Flambeau lightning. As afternoon graded into dark, the flakes fell more and more thickly and raised fluffy walls around the midway, making the packed-in space feel smaller and tighter, bodies bumping up into each other and occasionally falling against the snow.

The Flambeau lightning warmed me from the chest outward, and the evening began to swim pleasantly. The social dilemmas that so usually cause me consternation began to touch me soft as the falling flakes, and seemed to resolve themselves with the ease of tiny ice crystals melting on my skin. To the degree that, as Harlan the smithy tuned his banjo into some new key because Bill Chattin had fetched his cornstalk violin to play along, I found myself looking down on a cowlick of dark hair just under my chin, and I didn't even flinch when I grasped that it belonged to Lisen. He was potlatching with Johnny Jobs, who was leaning close to speak over the din into Lisen's ear and had one arm gripped around Lisen's shoulder, as if to ensure Lisen wouldn't yet get away.

Now, I wasn't drunk enough to be seeing through walls, but that cougar milk must have thickened my veins a bit, because before I thought about it, I butted right in. Or more correctly, I spoke from above.

"You've proved yourself a liar, haven't you?"

Both Lisen and Johnny Jobs craned back their heads.

"Are you addressing yourself to me?" Johnny Jobs asked. Meantime, Lisen's face had never been so close to mine. It was placid, eyes dark-fringed, with eyebrows neat and smooth.

"No, sir," I said. "Your companion."

"Dammit, Babe," said Johnny, and tightening the circle of his arm around Lisen's shoulders, he continued. "We don't care to be interrupted with any of your hokum notions of—"

"No, please." Lisen stopped him, placing a slim hand on Johnny's arm. "Allow me to defend my honor." He seemed to be aping the tone of a fancy woman. With a graceful shrug, he slipped from beneath Johnny's ever more possessive encroachments.

“Well,” said Johnny, reluctantly. He might have said more, but just then someone bumped him from behind, so that he stumbled forward and mashed his runny nose into my front breast pocket, leaving a trail of wet snot on my frost fooler pea coat. Which wasn’t the maneuver of the dashing valiant he’d set out to portray.

“All right. Thanks, Johnny,” said Lisen, and moved so that his back was to the man.

“Yep, okay,” agreed Johnny, as he got the idea and moved on.

“Jeez,” said Lisen, when Johnny was gone. “Don’t you hate when they trap you like that?”

“Mmm,” I said, in a manner that I hoped could work as an affirmation or a demurral as required.

Lisen appeared to have discovered some sport with me at long last. “You get trapped a lot, I guess?” he asked.

I’d never before had his full attention like this. He was mocking me, I knew, but not unkindly—the word is *teasing*, I’d say. Though I admit I’ve not so much practice with the soft art. Still, I gleaned a notion of why people describe charm as being warm. “Time to time, it’s been known to pass.” I squinted vaguely, as if I could see those incidents far off in the distance.

“Of course,” said Lisen. “So you were saying that *I’m* the liar?”

“Yes! That’s right.” I was pleased to drop my imaginary history.

“How so?”

I pointed at his crotch. “You swore you wouldn’t wear the bush! Down by the creek. And yet here you are!”

He straightened. No longer teasing. The lilt that had been in his voice now went dull as the dead spot on Harlan’s banjo. “What’s it to you?” The pink of his tongue ran along the sharp edge of his top teeth, a snake tasting the air: strike or flee.

I’d entered into a delicate moment. Why had I called him a liar? It wasn’t plain inebriation. I wanted something from him. And I’d provoke him to get it. I wanted him to tell me he recognized what I know he recognized. It was piteous the need that rose in me. I might as well have

never learned a single English word for all that were available to me. How do you beg when you don't even know the words to beg with?

I saw disgust rise up his features—but then came another visit from the inspired spirit of Flambeau lightning. “Just that how are the rest of us supposed to compete?” I grinned stupidly then, horribly stupid, the blood rushing to my face—near to naked in front of his beauty.

He hesitated. Then his fingers reached down inside his pants, and they reemerged pinched tight to a bandanna. He came into the lee of my bulk, and so delicately dabbed at the snail trail Johnny had left on my coat. “First thing,” he said, “maybe don't wander about with another man's snot on yourself.”

I was so tense, my shoulders were up at my ears. The spirit of Flambeau lightning betrayed me then: “What do you do that you got such pretty lashes?”

His derisive little snort rose from the area of my own my chest. “Nothing. I do nothing.”

“No,” I agreed. “Of course not.”

He tucked the handkerchief back into his tin pants. “But if *you* want to, *you* can mix coal dust with petroleum jelly.”

I might have abandoned myself then. Demanded more. Made him give up all his secret wiles. But without warning, the collective mouth of the midway—the bright bloodsong heart of that cold-blanketed mountain—sounded a great pumping cheer, because Harlan and Bill Chattin had started tickling their instruments, and it was a good tune to shout along to.

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Come true dark, we dragged the frozen slash from the edges of camp into the midway, and set ablaze a grand bonfire so hot that it beat back the building snow. As it roared, the effect of the wood-brewed cougar milk liquor began to creep up on parts of my body beneath the head—so I made tracks for the crapper. Normally, I avoided the board-and-batten box setup over a hole—preferring to do my business out in the snow. But it seemed an

affront to my new maidenly status to just squat in the open—for hadn't I made myself available for courting? Even if none had yet courted me? A debutante skooch might maintain a little mystery, so I went to the crapper, which, once inside, I reminded myself to call a "comfort station" for a more ladylike effect—even if only in my mind. For the process of changing oneself, I've heard said, begins with self-talk.

I returned to the musicians caterwauling with the tempo zooming. Lit by the throw of firelight danced that bubble-cuffing sonofabitch Johnny Jobs. He may have been an irritant to Lisen, but the man was catty on the caulks! Like the best river pigs, he'd grown up birling—and now he had his stag pants hiked way up to reveal soles that had become a blur of tapping, just as they might have been on the spin of the birling logs. The musicians played faster and faster, but Johnny Jobs tapped easily to keep up, and we were all cheering, including myself. I'd never seen boots move so fast, and I laughed in incredulous joy at the skill of it—and I thought how I'd declared myself a skooch only a day prior, something I'd never thought I'd do—and I reckoned that this was the most joyful night I'd had in many a year. And of course, just by saying this to myself, it became true: a blizzard for the ages! At least until a moment later, when I looked up and I saw Lisen floating there amongst the stars.

Goddamn! I must have been drunker than I figured!

But when I looked back, sure enough, there he was, giggling and jacket floating as he swooped up in the night sky. It took me more than a few seconds of boggle-eyed gaping to make sense of what I was seeing, and there he went again, launching up in the air, hitting an apex and falling. He disappeared, followed by a grunting heave, and I finally understood what was happening.

A group of men had caught Lisen, put him in a blanket, and were doing a blanket hoist: tossing Lisen high in the air from the four corners of a blanket, and ogling him and roaring. And Lisen, that little slut, was laughing and teasing, kicking like a minx. And even the dance of Johnny Jobs couldn't compete with his slim flying figure, so that men looked away

from Johnny, and Johnny felt the attention go, and then he, too, slowed his presto feet and craned his neck to contemplate the flying strumpet.

From his heavenstuck throne, Lisen spotted me. “No more, for god’s sake. No more!” he demanded, so that the tossing men grudgingly caught him in the blanket to unangel him back to earth. Then a queenly finger pointed at me: “Hoist the Babe. Give all the *ladies* a flight!”

The men cheered lustily at this notion. Lisen declared me a lady and in so saying, I became one. I guess everyone figured that he ought to know who was and wasn’t a skooch, the way royalty could not just name a knight but *make* one, with a tap of the sword. With a pretty finger, Lisen had me anointed.

Then I was being chased, stumbling through the snow, before a posse of men who likewise had a milk-crooked gait. The posse included men I’d not traded more than a dozen words with my whole time in camp and who I knew mainly by sight and name: Eight Day Bill, Jack Hambone, Bug House Lynch, and even Dan the Dangler. I was laughing—no, I was *giggling*. A sound that hadn’t arisen from the barrel of my lungs since early youth. It was mine to partake in a bit of coyness—that I should run protesting lightly and allow myself to be caught, and then placed in the blanket. Which I did do—but then the love-potion illusion of the moment ran aground on stone reality: I was too damn big to fit in the blanket. Too damn heavy to hoist. I arranged myself, trying to flirt gamely, but consternation passed on the faces of the boys trying to hoist me, because they could not. The men called over others, so that—to my shame—two men stood to a corner. Lisen had not even required half that. I sat snugging myself into a ball in the center of the blanket. Sets of dirty knuckles surrounded me and paled as they gripped hold of the blanket edges, the many men chivalrously trying to hoist me as they had done Lisen, as a pretty skooch deserved to fly. With a stout heave they shifted me, and then a second time, but I did not fly as Lisen had. I was as earthbound as a great granite boulder, barely budging, and I felt the horrible unladylike column of myself, my own stupid and off-putting mass.

“Give ’er snoose!” cried Eight Day Bill, and they put more back into the effort. On the third groaning heave, they got me off the ground, and I went

up in a flaccid launch—hardly soaring, my backside lifted an inch or so above the blanket. When the men tried to slow my return to earth, the blanket gave way with a loud tear, and I slipped through the rip, thudding shortly onto the ground, the full weight of me landing plumb on some rock hidden by snow. My tailbone crunched an awful audible crumble. Such a pain in my ass I had never before withstood. It nauseated me, and vomit rose, saliva welling, so that my pooled spittle flew as I began to bellow.

Johnny Jobs quipped that, well, hey, the Babe went looking for an ass-fucking and found one. That unhitched everyone else to laugh, to dispel the veil of desire Lisen's proclamation had draped about me, so that I was nakedly ridiculous once more: rolling about on the ruined blanket, my legs kicking like a baby, and clutching my broken ass as drunken jacks brayed, a generalized doubled-over, hooting, mean-spirited high-jinked hilarity to which I had never before been subjected.

Pride took over, no matter the pain, and I pulled myself to a crawling position, then finally upright, and slowly I made my way to lay my aching ass in the cougar den. I had so much hurt on which to focus that I barely noticed Lisen, who leaned up smoking by the V-plow wagon. But when I recognized him, he still had his full helping of sauce. He had in his hand his sketchbook, and when I limped near, I heard rip as he tore out a page. With a smirk he held it out to me, fluttering like a hankie in the wind.

I took it from him, but couldn't see it well in the dark. "What's this?"

"Our portraits."

"Yours and mine?"

"Mmmhmm. A keepsake."

"How come you think I would want to remember getting my ass so busted?"

Even in the dark, I saw the whites of his eyes, he had rolled them so high. "I think we both know how come." What sauce! He didn't even give me a chance to respond, but took his leave from me abruptly, moving back toward the music and yelps at the fire below.

For some time, I'd secretly longed to see my likeness drawn by him as he'd drawn it for the other jacks, yet I feared it too, feared that he'd make

an exaggerated depiction of my crude features—the great brow shelf and doglegged nose and thick lips and tiny eyes—perhaps arranged into a terrible grimace of ogre stupidity.

In the cougar den, I held the torn-out page to the lantern light to give it an examination. What appeared on the page gave me a judder. I had never actually seen his drawings before. He kept all his work tight in that drawing diary, and the only men chosen to see it were those he'd chosen for a roll in the duff. I had pictured painful captures—a stropped razor edge that cut caricatures just so. That the men who saw their likeness would instantly see themselves, recognize the ears that stuck out too much, a lopsidedness to the lips, or some other feature captured with deadeye aim.

That was not what Lisen had given me. It was a pencil sketch, crudely done, at best the work of a hopeful child. I have never been accused of too-ardent appreciation of the arts—I expect that my eye is as indifferent to the shades of artistry as the next. But the botched amateurishness of his drawing offended even my clumsy eye. He'd sketched two figures, in triangular gowns, apparently floating heavenly above a fire. Around the fire he'd drawn more figures, figures I presume were meant to be men—too-round eyes and hands too small or too large for the bodies—staring up at them, presumably peeping up the floating skirts. One of the gowned figures had a beard. The penny dropped for me: Those floaters were meant to be him and me. Beneath the drawing, Lisen had written, as if in title: *Angels*.

The drawing put me in the mind to second-guess myself. How simple and nakedly had he put us teamed as angels. Like something misplaced in time from the play games of my youth. How could his art be so artless? I fretted that I had misjudged Lisen. I considered the possibility that I knew nothing of Lisen as he actually trod the woods, and beheld himself in his own heart, even though I had come to feel sure that I had indeed apprehended all that. What if this saucy and glint-eyed seductress who bestowed and withdrew favor with a haughty glance was yet a green youngster playing at assuredness while barely negotiating the predations of the camp jacks? Somehow, the notion seemed almost worse than the

strumpet I'd been imagining. What if I was deluded about Lisen—wouldn't that put me double deluded about myself?

But then I considered, equally, how a true seductress would wield artlessness with artfulness. What better way to gain the upper hand than for your rival to underestimate you, to pity your feigned prey-animal ineptitude? This thought made me feel better, and it was such comfort in mind that I fell asleep, despite the sore throbbing of my tailbone.

Next day, the whole of creation preened in bridal finery. Branches swanned in their drapery and folds, while hillocks and hummocks puffed up pleased in their newly softened garb. Schuyler Peeples and I had set to felling a stand of larch down in a gully, where the snow had drifted neck-deep in spots, and even with bear-paw snowshoes, I'd frequently flub my footing and tumble in for a snowswim. Midmorning we broke work because the crumb boss announced that arbuckle was on the brew. We figured we ought to put some more pep into the day, and while I was filling my mug for seconds—taking a whiff of the chicory that the crumb boss had thrown into the grounds—I heard shouts of “Babe!” coming from a group of boys who had rigged the old steam donkey into a position to take down log-lengths from where the main high line crested on the near peak.

Seems that the cable had jammed. This was a common occurrence. Normally, you'd have to hitch an ox to the cable to pull the cable in reverse through the machine—which Babe the Blue Ox famously did so well. Elsewise, you'd have to affix a temporary pulley system to get the needed leverage and purchase to unjam the mechanism. But in the past, I had pried free the main clutch to loose this sort of jam on strength alone. So before I had even appreciated my second cup of coffee, I found myself conscripted into unjamming someone else's blunder.

Now! This request chapped my privates, for sure. Because when I trudged uphill to where they'd braced the steam donkey against a pole tree, who was there? Johnny Jobs. Stub Nelson. Mikkels. Johnny Duck Chief. In other words, the very men who'd partaken of such hilarity at the expense of my busted ass and skooch aspirations less than a day before.

The gall of Johnny Jobs! Looking at me expectantly! As if it were not himself who'd quipped that I'd been looking for an ass-fucking! And him

now standing there, examining the jam, while these boys expected me to do something about it!

I began to feel the welling up of resentment.

Yes. Fine. Indeed: I'd flown the bush—I'd made it known that I wanted a man to court me for the stag dance. And I'm the first person to know my own unseemliness. I never did forget it! Nor could I! Even after having undergone many mirrorless months, my hulking appearance remained ever present in my mind. I recall well how the manly aspects of a person can overgrow and overtake him, cancer-like, to becoming beastly and monstrous—the way canker causes a tree to encrust itself in bark so thick that it comes to appear deformed and tumorous in its own treeness. I know it, dammit! Believe me, I am mindful of begging the leap of faith!

Lisen had worked his magic. He'd knighted me a skooch. But then these very men had duly mocked me for a molly. It didn't seem right to me—or even consistent!—that I should be mocked as a molly one night, and then asked the favor of doing an ox's work the following morning. Either I'm a molly, and you don't come to me asking for feats of manly strength, or I'm an ox, in which case you don't get to sport and giggle at the items that seek entrance to my rear—rock or otherwise!

—

As these complaints boiled up in my thoughts, I scowled—but not at the boys encircling me, waiting for me to take responsibility for their jam-up; no, I scowled at the steam turbine, and the smoke trailing up from the coal and carbon embers dying in its lower chambers.

“Well?” said Johnny Duck Chief, at last. “Can you pull her free or not?”

“I could,” I said, “but I can't.”

“You could but you can't?” Mikkels turned over the declaration in his mouth. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I'm saying normally I could—but today I can't.”

“Why is today so special?”

We were all of us half leaned over the guts of the machine, as if around a wounded patient. “Because you boys dropped me on my ass yesterday is why!”

Johnny Jobs seemed surprised, which galled me. “But you got up eventually,” he protested. “You walked on back to the cougar den just fine on your own steam!”

“Well, today I’m not fine! Today I got myself a pain in my ass you wouldn’t believe!” This was a lie. I did have a pain, but it stemmed from my pride as much as my ass. The brave thing would have been to tell them so. To tell them that I didn’t appreciate how they’d laughed at me, and that I wanted better in that regard. That laughing at her was no courtly nor gentlemanly way to treat a skooch. And even if they weren’t interested in seeing me in any such way—even if it were impossible, ridiculous to so see me—then they still ought to have courtesy enough to play along. After all, Johnny Jobs strayed to us from Mormon stock, and I refrain from telling him that there’s no way his Joseph Smith read his holy book with special specs! And don’t I refrain from calling O’Hara, the crumb boss, a papist and insisting that his man in Rome has not bent the ear of the Lord—even if that’s what my mother taught me to say of the papists? And don’t I refrain from demanding of Johnny Duck Chief the secrets of the powwow? I do refrain! I accord them all their faith out of courtesy! No matter whether I respect a faith or not—and seeing as my mother was Lutheran, in general, most faiths I quietly do not respect! But I offer that courtesy to whosoever will ask for it because we live together in the cold of high winter while we toil to increase our common outlaw profits! I nod along with my fellows no matter what mystical claptrap they proclaim. I wish them well on their mortal journey! There’s boys all types of strange that find woodsy refuge! And seems to me that ought to include one very large and very ugly skooch!

But I was not brave, so I said nothing of the like. It was easier—less dangerous—to pretend that they had hurt me physically than to disclose that they had injured my spirit. After all, in the swamp there’s only one well-recognized treatment to heal a hurt spirit, and that’s to clop him that did the hurting. Perhaps I could have clopped Stub Nelson, Jobs, Mikkels, and

Johnny Duck Chief all in turn; yet if I did, then no one nowhere would see me for the skooch I'd named myself—which was my main aim from the outset. Only a few days as a skooch and already I began to see why so many of the fairer sex harbor such exasperation with their menfolk: The only medicine menfolk respect is a good clopping, yet the same menfolk insist that it is a certain reticence to hand out cloppings that makes the fairer sex fairer.

So what can a skooch do? Why, I suppose the secret is to overexploit what hurt you do have! And this solution arrived to me as if by instinct! Which is why, without outright planning to, I began to make hay of the now near-nonexistent pain in my ass.

“When blew the gabriel this morning, I could barely walk,” I said to Johnny Jobs. “I hobbled to breakfast codgered like a geezer thanks to your carelessness.”

Johnny Jobs looked disconcerted. I suppose the faintest flutter of guilt must have brushed him, but he couldn't reconcile it with the bulk of me before him. “Ah, come on, Babe. You know it was just sport—”

“No!” I cried, further warming to the satisfaction of feeling wronged. “No! You gotta know that you can damage a person! You want to toss a skooch in a blanket, do so with care!”

Mikkels smoothed down his scant eyebrow hairs, which he did whenever he couldn't get his thoughts to line up in file. “Boy, you were felling trees just this morning. I saw you!”

“In great pain!” I roared, pointing my thick mitt at my baffled audience. “I felled those trees in great pain!” I reiterated, at volume. “Due to your thoughtless actions!”

Mikkels took a step back in consternation. Johnny Duck Chief struck up a tuneless humming, and I guessed that he was embarrassed. In fact, most of the men were casting about, fidgeting like scolded schoolboys. Which made me the schoolmarm—a far shot from my aimed target, yet somewhat closer than an ox.

When I set out back to camp, I gingerly placed a hand over my ass and put on a slight limp to play up my suffering the best I was able. I refused to

peep back to see the effect of my performance, but I gratified myself by imagining that guilt slashed at them, that I had forced them to reckon with how I maybe never was quite the impervious brute they'd assumed from my aspect, rather that I was in some ways fragile! Delicate, even. As I hobbled my sham hobble, I wondered whether heaping guilt on a person might be a more effective retribution than even a clopping! A man who declines to commit a misdeed in order to evade a clopping acts only out of fear, whereas guilt requires that the same man feel regret—and therefore love and care—toward the injured party. I wondered whether, between fear and guilt, to force upon a man the sentiment dependent on love and care might not be the stronger, more shattering action. In all honesty, when I conjured in my mind a vision of those jacks up at the donkey engine turning shamefaced with guilt, it satisfied me more than the mightiest of clops I've yet dealt.

However! My lofty attempt to guilt those jacks by way of untruth then burdened me with a practical dilemma: I had to keep up the pretense of an injured hind end.

7.

Now, I had always been a great fan of spruce pitch gum; it keeps the breath crisp, and of course, it costs nothing. To obtain a tasty gum, you just scrape the rosin from the bark of a weeping tree, then allow it to dry down before rolling it into gummy balls between finger and thumb, balls that are wonderful for jawing when hunger rises in the swamp. A jack at my last camp had whittled himself a birch snuffbox, for which I swapped him a good glass jar with a proper tin lid, and I had stored my spruce pitch gum in that birch box ever since. Whenever you came across me in the timber, you'd be correct to guess that spruce pitch gum was not far from my person, and in fact frequently in my yap.

I mention spruce gum because I offered Daglish a gummy ball of it when I sought to extend my guilt-inducing malingering by informing him that I wasn't fit for more work that day, due to the incapacitating injury those drunken jacks had inflicted on my hind end.

I had found Daglish in the ramshackle lean-to that he called, with some humor, the commissary office. Inside was nothing but a couple of planks to make a desk, a three-legged stool with a seat made from a cookie cut from the thin end of a long larch, and a trunk lockbox. When I ducked into the lean-to, he had an old single-shot .410 poacher shotgun laid out on the planks, half disassembled, and he was bent over it, with brush in hand, painting the polished wooden stock an ugly yellow color. He had strong bony hands, taut tendons running over his knuckles like piano wires.

"I keep setting the damn thing in the snow," he said by way of greeting and explanation, "and then I lose track of it. With it being this ugly as hell yellow, at least I'll be able to spot it."

"I guess an ugly gun is better than a lost gun," I said. I allowed how at another camp I'd worked, we'd painted axe-handles orange for the same reason.

“This thing’s not worth shit, so I don’t care,” Daglish agreed, still focused on painting the stock. “Runaway Shea and Jurgen the Protestant said they scared up winter grouse out by Two-Boulder Bluff, and I’m hankering for some meat beyond tinned goldfish—” He set aside the brush and slid the stool to face me. “Anyway, what can I do for you?”

Blueish sunlight slipped through a crack in the chinking between the unpeeled log walls to cast a shining line across his face, on which some amusement flickered over his handsome thick features. I hesitated, because I well recalled how down by the creek I’d named him my suitor for the stag—and I’m sure he’d heard the tittle. By January, we’d well exhausted most topics of knowledgeable conversation, which left either gossip or silence. Loggers have a reputation for reticence, and that’s accurate as far as generalizations go, yet if you do succeed in getting a taciturn winterbound logger to gab, what’s liable to spill out will be unadulterated tittle.

Fumbling for time, I offered him my birch box, and he picked out a gummy ball with yellow-flecked fingers. I popped one in my mouth as well, and with the piney taste on my tongue, I calmed myself. “I’ve injured myself,” I informed him. “I need a day or two off of felling—put me on some other work. Sled work or wagon work most preferred.”

He scowled, and I could see the news put his nose out of joint. “Two days? I’ll compliment you to say that at the speed you work, that’s like four days’ payday for most men. Plus the blizzard, plus the donkey jam...shit. Makes for a setback.”

“Sir, I know it.” I don’t know why I called him *sir* just then. I never had done before—it was always just Daglish. Never even Karl or a nickname. Daglish: always and only. The wryness came back to his face, and he pulled off his toque. The greasy wave of his hair remained in the shape of his hat. “What’s hurt with you, anyhow?” he asked.

“The boys dropped me on my ass. Maybe broke my tailbone.”

“Dropped you on your ass?”

“In a blanket toss.”

Now he wasn’t hiding his amusement. “In fact, I did hear that you let yourself get put in a blanket!”

“They did it for all those playing volunteer as skooch.”

He rose all of a sudden—an action that, in the limited space of the little log shanty, put us near nose to nose. There was hardly room for one man in there, much less two large men, much less one large man and one near giant. I stooped forward beneath the log joists, which put my face even closer to his. He glanced down to my triangle. A queer giddiness passed over me, as when you stumble upon and catch eyes with a moose in the woods, and for an instant hangs the possibility that all you know might go lopsided. We both of us just waited. I could see his breath light up whenever the vapor drifted across the sunbeams shining through the chinking. We both of us smelled of piney spruce gum.

“Well, turn around,” he said finally. “Let’s get a look at it.”

“A look at what?”

“Your injury.”

I gripped my leather belt to loose it—but then halted myself.

“But as I say—it’s my ass.”

“That’s the customary spot for a tailbone.”

He couldn’t mean it. “Unbuckle the galluses? Here and now?”

He twirled a finger, indicating for me to get on with it. “Didn’t I sort Jakub out? I’d have made a decent shade-tree sawbones.” Jakub was one of our bohunks who spoke barely a word of English. First week in camp, he unloaded big-burled timber up at the fourth tier, when it cannoned and caved in his slats. Daglish had wrapped and set those ribs himself—and Jakub was back working within days. Daglish did appear to have some medical know-how, which was perhaps the worse for me, since I had no real bad injury to inspect, much less put to healing. But worse would be to back out now and reveal myself as a malingerer.

I gripped the leather of my belt to slip it free of the buckle as I pointed my boots toward the door. I stiffened and straightened when his hands untucked my shirttails.

“Easy now,” laughed Daglish. He put his hands on either of my hips, the rough strong fingers pressing into my flesh to grip like handles the cresting bones of my pelvis—adjusting my position before him as a captain turns the

big wheel to slightly alter a ship's heading. My repositioned gaze fell level with the header on the doorjamb, and for lack of anything else to look at, my eyes fixed to the pegs on which usually rested his poacher gun. Inanely, I noted that they were whittled of aspen, white as matchsticks.

"My hands cold?" he asked.

"A bit."

That was in some ways the correct answer—because he let go my hips and lowered the waistband of my trousers. Cold air rushed over my skin, and I'm sure the down of my ass stood saluting at attention.

"Bend over a bit. I can't get a good look." I put my open palms on the rough bark of the wall and incrementally hinged forward at the waist. My own stale odor wafted rankly, and I wrestled with a turmoil of modesty, shame, and yearning that sluiced up in my roaring ears, at odds with the stillness and snow quiet of the shanty lean-to. I must admit—amongst my solitary bedroll reveries numbered certain wonderings about finding myself in a position not unlike this one, reveries that had caused my body to respond and proceed along its due animal course. And such was the case now: my mortification rising and swelling in multiple respects, threatening release. The pad of Daglish's finger pressed against a crevice where none had before spelunked save for my own digit. I scrunched close my eyes, and my tongue lolled walrusy and too large in my mouth.

"How's that feeling?" Daglish's voice came from somewhere behind my left ear.

"Good." The phlegm in my throat made the word heavy and wet.

"Good?"

I recalled, with the bleariness of a sudden wakening, that I had declared myself suffering from a broken tailbone.

"By good I meant to say that it doesn't smart so bad as it might. Not good as in fine."

"You're pretty banged up back here. Purpled with bruise."

"Ah-yep." I could no longer utter proper words, due to the voluptuous flame licking up from the base of my spine, threatening to convulse my person, as he probed my supposedly injured spots.

I had my eyes closed still—but I sensed Daglish fumbling with his free hand, and heard a sharp inhale in his nose, and he said to me, with some urgency, “Turn round.”

But I made no move. I did not want him to see what state of shameful manliness he had put me in.

Daglish made his demand more needfully, and once more gripped the wheel of my pelvis to spin me. Come round 180 degrees, he was in the same state as I! We pointed at each other. He grinned his gold-capped grin at me, a grin that was meant to disarm me. But I could not grin back. I had long fought disgust in regard to any suggestion that I reveal my own proof of manhood. In point of fact, I had kept myself swaddled up to my own detriment in the past; I was not one to wield myself about priapic, which hesitance had cast suspicion upon me on various occasions from certain parties who sought to have me behave otherwise.

I pondered whether I ought to do something. Ought to reach out and stroke him. Or let him touch me. We’d seen each other engorged and pregnable, and to me this signified some change in our relations, which ought to have been sealed with an act. The way that boys will slice thumbs and mix blood to prove fealty and devotion. I supposed that amongst men and women, it was the standard love act that made for the same oathful admixture. But we made no act, which struck me as leaving a work unfinished. As though we’d sliced thumbs and then just put them in our pockets. And that was near to what was happening. Daglish, deflating and putting himself back in the pants.

“If we’re done playing doctor—” he said, gruffly.

“Yes,” I agreed.

He flipped a page of a logbook, traced down a column of figures with the same finger that had spelunked me. His rigid focus on the logbook gave me to understand that we were done. I pushed open the low door and ducked myself under a serration of jeweled icicles.

“Hold on,” he called to me. I turned back. Already my eyes had tightened in the bright snow glare, so that I could barely see his features through the gloom inside the little shanty. “I can’t spare you two days

healing, but if you aren't able to fell, what I need is for you to accompany Lisen to the Beddoe spread. I don't want him crossing the pass alone."

"The Beddoe spread? What for?"

"We need to hire oxen-men to skid the decks down to the Beddoe spread. Beddoe himself is fronting us the dough."

"Lisen's going to be carrying that stash on his person? That's salary enough for twelve men!"

"So that's why you're going!"

"I'm an axeman! I'm no bodyguard! Send someone else besides Lisen. Some jack well known to be able in a scrap!"

With no warning, without either standing or even changing his expression, Daglish roared to counter me: "Who's the shark in this camp? You or me? Tell me now!"

"You are!" I near to whispered it, willing him to pipe down; jacks in Canady were liable to have heard that roar.

"That's right," he said, at a reasonable and placid volume, as if he'd been talking peaceably all along. "I'm the camp shark. And I say that Lisen goes. Any man able enough to scrap isn't a man I trust with Beddoe's fronted cash. Lisen won't run—for a number of reasons. And you go with him. Not even the most woodsy stickup artist is going to be tempted to set to with you."

At that inference, my sentiments got involved. I thought we'd just had soft moments together! Had trusted each other. Now I'm the scarecrow you put out to frighten off the bandits and scavengers?

Daglish dusted off his hands and then came to where I darkened the threshold of his commissary. I suppose having proved himself sharkiest, maybe he got a whiff of my dismay. "Look. Think of it this way: Who am I sending? The two I trust."

At that, some wind inside my body shifted direction and blew from southerly climes, warm and balmy. Lisen and I: the two trusted. And why? Perhaps because we were alike, and Daglish had seen it, too, seen something beyond our mismatched shapes. Had tried himself with both of us. Daglish put his hand to my shoulder, comforting-like. "You don't think

bodyguard is worthy work, you can go ahead and fathom the skid road and scout where to place the cold decks while you're there. But just get Lisen there and back with no trouble. All right?"

I nodded and he gave my arm a squeeze.

I ought to here spare a few words on Alexander Beddoe. Between all the various Beddoe relations, a sizeable percentage of the vast county's desirable acreage is deeded in that surname. Alex Beddoe's own properties included a parcel of four thousand acres of river land just down the valley from our pirate cove.

Well known in addition to the Beddoe name was how Alex Beddoe had killed two men when he was younger, both Irish hands on his land, workers who accused him of welshing on a work pay. To underscore their complaint, they set fire to his barn. He shot them both from his porch with an old Martin big-bore lever-action rifle. A hundred yards off, his targets silhouette-lit by the blaze, the same the way he shot grazing antelope at sunset, or so he was overheard bragging. That was before Beddoe's uncle was elected state senator. Yet even then, Beddoe got off easy in court. You imagine that now, with the family clout, he might no longer be required even to go to court.

With all timber trespassing, the work of felling trees and sawing them to proper log length for transport is but half the job. The second and more specially piratical part of the timber pirate's task involves finagling how to get paid for those logs. That secondary work means getting them to an obliging sawmill without attracting the notice of the state timber inspector. In the old days of timberbeast logging, farther east in the flatlands, it wasn't hard to find an out-of-the-way put-in point on some river and float them down to the nearest mill. But it's not like that in the high country. The land being rocky rugged as it is, any easy put-in spot on a river is nowadays spoken for.

So any trespassing timber pirate looking to scratch together a decent outfit must find a fence: someone with malleable morals and private access to a river. Someone on handshake arrangements with a sawmill outfit and

bribing terms with any official in the vicinity. Daglish had both his fence and financier in Alexander Beddoe—who owned, as I say, four thousand acres, twelve miles upriver from a mill in which some other Beddoe relation had a stake, though by blood or marriage, I can't remember. In the low counties, you can't hardly find a bank or a brokerage without a Beddoe tucked somewhere within.

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To Beddoe's spread we went! Up through Ondersma Pass, I pulled a sled piled with kill poles and knot bumpers and other such kit suitable for cutting a quick rough slash through the bustadshogen. I had leather traces running from the sled's kingbolt over my shoulders—like a sled hound, or rather an ox—but even so encumbered, I had often to pause for Lisen. He carried over his slight shoulders only a kennebecker pack crammed with his own supplies, but he sucked wind nonetheless. He was unused to trudging bear-pawed through deep powder. At the top of any little crest, he'd draw to a halt—pink pinwheels prettily ablaze on either shiny cheek, those wide-set slanted eyes dazed and unfocused by thin air—to beg a minute's rest. He spent half the morning with his face leaned up for support against the nearest glitter-rimed tree, huffing and blowing. You'd have thought he was some pagan on pilgrimage to commune with each and every hilltop copse, and I his hired Sherpa.

I ignored solicitously his lack of snow prowess. But my deference drew attention to itself uncomfortably. Any other jack that couldn't scale a ridge without puffing would have been told to hike back to cowbell country. Lisen knew it. I expect that he noted and resented the special delicate mountain buttercup treatment, but he was just too spent to sneer so to me.

Descending down past Little Messi Butte, on the southern face, the snow thinned so that rocks poked through the blanket, and Lisen's panting settled, and in turn so did my oversolicitude. Which is when I asked Lisen if he often fetched dough from Beddoe.

"Once before," he puffed, "Daglish brought me down to meet Beddoe."

“So you could doughboy and courier?”

Lisen grabbed at a sapling and rested so much of his weight on it that it bent sideways, and he had to grab another to steady himself. He inhaled enough air for a protest. “Do you want to chinjaw or make tracks? I can’t do both.”

In answer, I kicked down the flip-brake on the sled.

Lisen nodded. “Truth is, I didn’t know I’d be courier. Daglish went to see that Beddoe had paid off the eastern timber inspectors.”

“So what’d you go for?”

Lisen pushed himself up off the saplings. I winced, because he tensed up like he was going to cut me with one of his saucy sharp utterances, but he just sighed.

“Daglish told me there’d be a feather bed. I never slept in one before, and he said I ought to sleep in one sometime.”

That bit of information put me to pondering. I guess what was obvious was that they’d had themselves a luxury tryst in one of the Beddoe guesthouses. Myself, I had in fact slept in a feather bed before, after I’d joined some other jacks on a spree and had yet another of my failed frolics with a “fancy lady;” this time at the Paris House in Duluth, an establishment where they called the rooms “chambers” in the Frenchy way. I’m thankful for how that kindhearted girl did not hold my failures against me, and in fact with some sympathy let me sleep off the cougar milk for an hour or two in the downy fluff of her bed, even though my legs hung off it from the knees on down. And so I know the associations with feather beds! There’s a wanton sensuality to sharing a feather bed—and therefore I had an inkling of what Daglish and Lisen had gotten up to on that trip. After a moment, I realized that I had not solved any riddle—that in fact the mention of the feather bed was Lisen’s sly way to confirm to me the nature of their night.

That put me to further pondering! Why did Lisen want me to know? Was it to reclaim Daglish as his own? Or was it to make us two of a kind?

“But now,” Lisen went on, “I’ve met Beddoe with Daglish. Beddoe will recognize me. I’m like Daglish’s wax seal. With me along, Beddoe can

know for sure it's Daglish asking and getting the money."

I sighed as that put my role in dreaded familiar terms. "And I'm the muscle to protect you."

Now it was Lisen peeping me carefully, as I'd eyed him so many times. "Well, I've been wondering about that too. He could have lent his poacher gun to any of the jacks to have muscle and meantime not lost one of his best axemen."

"It's my ass," I explained to Lisen. "I asked for a day's break from felling after the blanket toss put me on my ass."

Lisen shrugged. "Maybe so. But I also think when it comes to dough, there's two sorts of man. The first is the man who keeps his wife ignorant to all things money, doesn't trust her with a penny, and keeps his affairs with other men. The second sort of man, when it comes to dough, won't trust a man, and will *only* trust his wife. By my lights, Daglish is the second."

Perhaps Lisen had the sight for those sorts of knowings. Certainly he'd deduced and seemed to disdain those parts of my character which I'd tried to hide from even myself; why would it differ with Daglish? And yet! We had been discussing my role on this dip down to the valley, not his!

"Wait. Who are you supposing to be, the wife in this supposition?"

Lisen shrugged. "You're the one flying the triangle, not me."

—

Now I had become the broody marcher on the path. The furrows above my great brow ridge flattened themselves in thought so that my shaggy eyebrows came into view from above. I examined over and again our situation. Was my job to protect Lisen with him being doughboy? Or to protect the dough from Lisen? Or were the two of us mutually assured to fink on each other to Daglish and he knew it and so insured us against each other? Maybe my very presence was indeed an insult not just to Lisen's prowess as a jack who could handle himself in a scrap, but in addition to his trustworthiness. I'd never had an instinct for the social complexities of scheming and plotting, which is why, I suppose, I'd never risen above

axeman and faller, why despite my competence in the timber, I'd never come close to running an outfit, not even a pirate dash. Even now, in camp standing and shares, I ranked even and teamed with the likes of Schuyler Peebles and Runaway Shea. Good axemen yes, but both of them as dim and unsociable as I was said to be ugly.

Perhaps in order to lighten my brooding, or perhaps in order to prove that he was not so winded and green as he had seemed, Lisen got to putting inquires to me, the go-to topics on which you could bet a jack would have an opinion one way or another: Did you carry a Wobbly card? For or against the protective timber tariffs? Would the long-promised road over the Beartooths ensure an end to possible land grabs by the common man? Lisen had a rote way of peppering out the questions. It was an exercise in sociability, just how strangers on a coach might politely chinjaw on the state of the local horse races—the point being to show yourself as friendly and knowledgeable on the issues that should interest a man amongst men. But the insincerity in Lisen's approach didn't trouble me too much—in truth, I had little to add. I never did trouble myself about the Wobblies, nor politicians of any other sort, and Lisen's efforts to talk seemed some small concession toward companionship. He talked, I noticed, out of one side of his mouth—a side talker, a sidler, so that every phrase seemed a little aside meant only for your ears.

At some point, it became clear that neither of us had any abiding opinions on the intricacies of international timber tariff policy—the two strangers on the coach finally admitting they'd neither of them been to a horse race in their lives. We found more potlatch over when Lisen brought up the murderess scandal that had been all over the Billings papers. A fancy girl by the name of Hazel Dishane had seduced the wealthy rancher Earnest Messman—who made his money by crossbreeding the Oregon Dorset sheep with a Navajo-Churro to produce a wooly breed that could survive high in the mountains where your standard Rambouillet would perish. Messman married Dishane within a month of their first meeting. Between long stretches warming the wedding bed, she insisted on cooking him pea soup to soothe his ever more painful stomach, a malady to which he shortly

succumbed. As his widow, she inherited and sold the ranch. Six months passed before a farmhand who worked for the new owner discovered two empty cans of Paris green buried in the barn.

The Billings papers regularly reported Dishane spotted in various western cities—but never apprehended.

“Would you do it?” Lisen asked, suddenly merry-eyed. “If you thought you’d get away with it like she did?”

I supposed Lisen deserved to have his little revenge for my solicitousness up on the ridge, for having seen him so winded and helpless. I adopted a tolerant tone—so he’d understand that I understood he was teasing me, and that I was indulging him in turn. “For me, the problem isn’t whether I could poison a wealthy farmer—it’s getting him to marry me in the first place.”

He weighed that thought. “Because of your size?”

Yes, of course, I was referring to that—but I didn’t appreciate it said so plain.

“Or,” Lisen continued, “because of your looks?”

Now that was just ungracious!

“Neither! Neither have nothing to do with the question! How many times you seen a man propose a wedding to another man?”

Lisen, perhaps abashed at how hard-nosed I took the insults—clamped shut his pert mouth. But then, ever saucy, he turned and pushed back his beaver hat on his forehead with the bone of his slender wrist. The part of his black-bronze hair gleamed in the sun. “Well, I been proposed to twice myself.”

Him so smug I couldn’t tell if it were an act, and me so well stupefied that even as a prank he could count it a success. “Twice?”

I rushed to catch up and ask more just as Lisen reached out to push past a low-bent branch of a lodgepole pine that hung over the trail. In doing so he knocked the branch free of snow, and unburdened, the branch sprung upward, striking its upstairs neighbor, which in turn struck its upstairs neighbor, and a torrent of sparkling snow cascaded down upon me just behind him.

“Oh damn,” Lisen apologized. He tried to brush me clean.

I hardly noticed the snow for curiosity. “You tell me how it is that you been twice proposed.”

Which is when Lisen shared with me this story.

—

He came over with his family from old Scandahoovia at a tender age. He said when North America came into view, all the passengers rushed to the deck. On the stern, held aloft on his father’s shoulders to see the coastline, a cinder from the ship’s smokestack sailed into his eye.

As I listened, he pulled taut his cheek to show off a small scar at the edge of his eye, which I had in fact before noticed, but it was the type of scar that was beautifying, a little accent over an almond.

“The buttonhook men at the port saw that my eye was all inflamed, but my parents spoke no English, so we couldn’t explain about the cinder. They peeled my lids and diagnosed me with a case of infectious trachoma.” The authorities bundled Lisen back onto the ship, Lisen told me. His sister, mother, and father stayed on—that first trip had already cost them more money than they had. Lisen lived half his childhood with a grandmother back in Scandahoovia. Six years later, his mother sent the money for a second trip. When Lisen arrived to where the family had rooted in Wisconsin, he discovered his father had drowned in a bridge construction accident and his mother had remarried herself to a station agent who worked the hoot owl shift in La Crosse. He and his sister did a few years of schooling but mostly assisted his stepfather with the station house chores, eventually working the smokestand hawking tobacco to the disembarking passengers—from plugs to cigars depending on the depth of the pocket—work which Lisen said improved greatly his English. I imagined him putting to his customers the same sort of rote questions he’d earlier put to me. *Fancy that Kentuck tobac? Rained for two days, so I suppose the river is cresting south of here? Hear about the mayor’s wife? And so forth,*

tiresome questions from a boy whose uncommon prettiness compelled the weary travelers to linger in conversation.

Now, here's the titillating part of the story. When she was eighteen, Lisen's sister Elenora made the acquaintance of a young man named Jacob Spaulding, Jr., son of Jacob Spaulding, Sr., who set up the Shanghai House Hotel in Black River Falls. Jacob the younger met Elenora at the grocery, the summer before he went to Chicago to study at law.

"He was always sending Elenora letters after that," said Lisen, who had begun to pilfer the letters from his sister's bureau. "Love letters, you know. In love with the notion of himself in love. Full of self-congratulations—imagining himself the son of an important man, thwarting his father to love an immigrant girl. I liked reading them—I liked a man pouring out his heart. Talking about his need for care. How he'd make his future with her."

Lisen told me that Elenora wrote Junior back—but chaste, boring letters. Meantime, Lisen found himself thinking about Spaulding, Jr., a lot. How the life that Spaulding proposed to Elenora sounded like a life that he, Lisen, would enjoy. Lisen came to suspect that he, Lisen, had better capacity for Spaulding-satisfaction than his sister. So one day, Lisen got some paper and wrote his own letter to Spaulding. "Since I was pretending to be her, I freed myself to write all the sentiments I've ever harbored for menfolk. The yearning and excitement I feel for some men—I gave that all to Junior. I didn't sign it, neither my name nor my Elenora's. But my sister and I have the same hair—we look alike in plenty of ways—and so I cut a lock of my hair, and I tied it up and sent it with that."

Lisen started intercepting Spaulding's letters. And got to writing more and more feverish, indecent things. Anything that got him riled. Descriptions of his body and the like. Always including bits of his hair.

"And what did you get him to say?"

Lisen's dark eyes caught the afternoon light. He shifted his weight to one hip. "I was fifteen then, you see? Those letters were a schooling. Junior loved to write about his body for me too. What effect my presence had on him and his bits. Describe how he thought mine own would be to touch. He started calling me 'his little piglet,' and he wrote a lot about how he wanted

to lick my toes. How he wanted to put his nose in my every crevice and my every wrinkle to inhale. He was abusing himself as he wrote, which is not supposition—he wrote how he was doing just that. But he proposed marriage too. Over and over, he talked about how this is what he needed—had always needed. A little piglet wife to smell.”

We had come down to the low parts of Three Finger Creek by then, where the rapids had by that point in winter frozen fast, so that they looked like sculptures of themselves mid-fall, rippling and stalactite toothed. I felt stupid, scandalized, and naïve—how many years had I spent barely able to talk about what I might yearn and desire, and here’s Lisen, barely older than a boy, laughing over such intimacies as smelling your little piglet wife? “And so—didn’t your sister suspect?” I dared not ask more, sure that judgment or jealousy would warp the turn of my tone.

“No. First thing happened was that my mother found where I had hidden his letters in the root cellar—she thought they were *for* my sister.”

“Dang, but—”

“My mother showed them to her husband; he showed them to Spaulding, Sr. Of course, Senior showed them to Junior, who defended himself by proclaiming he’d been only responding to the even more filthy letters that my sister had sent. My sister denied everything, but rumors are greased for speed in La Crosse, especially for any kind of hussy business. Eventually she took work at a boarding house in Illinois, where not so many people knew her.”

The story dismayed and confounded me. Both the content and the telling. What kind of siblings betray each other like that? It seemed to me uncommon and sinister. But I never did understand well the niceties of blood relations. My own had dispersed with neither effort nor regret: Our blood lacked the iron upon which the essential magnetism of family acts to keep kin globbed together. But being so iron deficient in the first place, neither did we have the tendency toward a violent reversal in magnetic polarity. “And the guilt didn’t eat at you?”

Lisen winced, then tucked his thumbs beneath the straps of his kennebecker and leaned forward to keep his bear paws trudging. I heard

grim pride in his voice when he answered. “My mother, she got off the ship with Elenora. You see? They had to make a choice and they chose her. And what? Now you want me to feel sorry for my sister?”

“I’ve no say on you how should feel,” I told him.

His puffy lips had chapped in the dry heights. As we walked, he rubbed a spot of excess oil wax from his jacket sleeve along the curve of his lips. “I’m positive Jacob knew it was me all along,” he said. “He liked the letters I sent. He liked sending his own—we’d found a way to release needs one to the other. His letters were heavy with it. I came to think that marriage proposal never was meant for my sister. It was meant for his little piglet.”

Lisen wiped the rest of the oil wax on his pants. How much of this story had he related for my benefit? I supposed that he saw that I craved for myself the things he had, and I considered if this little tale from his past was how he’d impart knowledge that I didn’t know to ask for. But then, too, I remembered the childish drawing of the angels he’d given me—the niggling suspicion that I had fooled myself about his worldliness. That he wasn’t a calculated seducer but a guileless boy. The story further confused me, because I had a twin vision of Lisen: the clever cutting of the hair, the intercepting of the letters—looked at one way, it was the hapless work of an ungrown and unwanted child, still too innocent to grasp the plot in which he meddled, a pawn for the gratification of this Spaulding fellow. But grant to youth its due cleverness, and you’d be just as liable to judge the betrayal of his own sister as the knowing work of a succubus.

Lisen’s tone notched tighter as he wound toward his conclusion. “But then, my mother wouldn’t quit the topic of the letters. She told everyone who came through the station house—including potential guests at the Shanghai House—that Jacob Spaulding was a liar, a pervert, and a corrupter. That her daughter Elenora didn’t have the spirit to have written such letters. Finally, to shut her up, Senior and Junior came together to bring my mother one of the letters, which of course had a lock of hair affixed. My mother knew well Elenora’s vanity—there wasn’t a man in the county for whom she’d butcher her hair. But my mother remembered how

for a spell, no matter her scoldings, I kept slipping away with her shears to trim myself lopsided haircuts.”

“And then?” I prodded him.

“Then I got my comeuppance. Now I’m here. No one dreams of pearl diving for a crumb boss in a Montana timber trespass.”

It did seem a high price for a marriage proposal. Even one from another man, such as I had not suspected could exist.

—

We had come out to the moraine and the meadows at the eastern side of the Beddoe spread when I realized Lisen had neglected to tell me the whole story.

“Who’s the second, then?” I asked.

“The second what?”

“You said two men had proposed to you. Who’s the second?”

Lisen winked—a merry, overdone, and skylarking jape of a wink. I recalled suddenly how, down in the creek, I had myself winked at him—I had winked when I had taken the triangle and claimed his suitor. Witnessing his wink, I knew the answer—but I wanted to hear him say it.

“Why Karl Daglish, I reckon.”

Triangle or no, I guess we knew who Daglish trusted to be wife.

The snow on the ground coming down from off the mountain had thinned such that we took off our bear paws and were walking in only caulks when came Alexander Beddow's foreman up the trail. He rode a sprightly painted pony, her hooves greased against ice and kicking up powder against her own belly, as horsekind will do when happy in the snow. He wasn't expecting us, but neither did our appearance on the trail seem to much trouble him. I expect that various visitors snow-stumbling hither and thither to deal with Alexander Beddow would have been a common sight to his foreman.

He introduced himself as Left-Foot Hank—after some time in the woods, you forget to question a name like that, to barely even notice it, any more than you might take note were a man to proffer his hand and call himself John Smith. Most likely something had gone amiss with his left foot. That's usually the case. Equally possible, however, that something was wrong with his right foot, and Left-Foot Hank was a woodsy-dry form of humor. But more memorably than his name, Left-Foot Hank wore a fur felt derby in emerald green. You didn't see those much. Under the brim, he had sunburned his droopy windbitten face to a crimson so painful that it near hid all the broken veins in his nose, and against which his pure white hair and mustache shone like blank spots on a canvas. Lisen held out a hand to pat the painted pony's velvet nose as he informed Left-Foot Hank that he had a request from beyond Ondersma Pass to deliver to Mr. Beddow.

At this, Hank's eyes lit with knowing. He'd been trying to place us without ever showing a need. "Ah, right. A doughboy from the timber pirates. How are the decks?"

"Just candy," grunted Lisen, with the bit-off gruff of a timberbeast—which surprised me, because I couldn't recall Lisen having felled a single

candy tree all long winter. Yet he said it with know-how. Just as I would have said it.

“And what’s he for?” Left-Foot asked Lisen, inclining his head toward me. “To send the grizzlies scooting away in fear?”

“I’ve heard it all,” I said to him. “Or you thought you were the first man to tell a joke about my size?”

“Your size? Now, I hadn’t noticed your size,” smirked Left-Foot Hank with a hint of brogue. “I was referring to that puss you got.”

It took a breath’s time for me to recall that puss is how some Easterners call a face, and I might have cordially returned the insult, but during that breath’s time my instinct was instead to slap my big hands down over my triangle, covering it as if out of modesty, heart booming that he had noticed it so quickly. And then, of course, when I gathered his actual meaning, I pulled them away, trying to regain some aspect of even nerves. It was a strange flap, a heron trying for and giving up on flight. Both Hank and Lisen noticed.

I readied myself for Lisen’s snicker—but when it came, it was directed to Left-Foot Hank. “You seen your head, old man?” Lisen addressed him. “Red, white, and the hat emerald green. You look like a Christmas bauble.”

Yes! Those were Left-Foot Hank’s very colors! Trade his pony for a reindeer and you’d have one of Saint Nick’s elves! Lisen’s was an insult that jerks a laugh from your person at the shock of it being just so. I did laugh! And I slapped my knee, out of admiration for Lisen’s cleverness and also to hide that I was moved that he’d been moved to defend me.

“Your daughter’s got a mouth on her,” said Left-Foot Hank to me, but his tone allowed that Lisen had delivered a good clapping. Then he took off his hat. “Shit,” he said, turning it over in his hands. “I liked the green too.”

With all three of us proper and roundly insulted in turn, we’d completed our ritual greeting and could now team together. But to tell the truth, I’d never been on completely easy terms with gruff raillery, the boxing of ears, the ass-banditry, by which a man signals his friendliness and fellowship toward another man. Jocular chaffery came hard to me, body and soul. Since I’d been wearing the triangle, I’d grown ever more mindful of my

usual stiffness; I had come to feel that it arose from a sense that I ought to be approached otherwise. I suspected that having always been approached wrongwise may have been the chief cause for my lifelong rigidity in matters of fraternal ease.

“In reply to your earlier remark,” I informed Left-Foot Hank, “I’m not here to scoot any grizzlies.” I heard how I sounded priss-persnickety. Somehow, Lisen got to grunting about candy trees, while I got sensitive about grizzly-scooting. In consequence, I decided to reestablish that I, too, had a role in our coming-down-the-mountain. “My job is to fathom the skid road for decking the timber.”

Lisen glanced at me. “You’re fathoming now? Not coming along?”

Hank answered for me, and sharply too. “Not unless he’s planning to deck logs in Mr. Beddow’s salon room.”

Now, I’d been a bit curious about sizing up Alexander Beddow in person. Some names grow bigger in the imagination when there’s no face to put them to. Take H. H. Plummer of the Alder Gulch Innocents, in previous generations the most dangerous road agent in the state, greatly feared in part because no one knew his looks—at least until he was given the notorious “clean and decent lynching” by the vigilantes of the Stuart’s Strangers stockman association and every paper north of Denver finally displayed a photograph of his limp dead features. To be clear, I’m not suggesting that Alexander Beddow holds a candle to a Plummer or a Stuart’s Strangler, those legendary names of a previous time. But to us jacks, the name Beddow still came off the tongue in a mephitic puff and settled in chill shadows as do heavy gases. I feared Beddow not a little myself. I’d heard many times the cold story of how he’d shot those Irishmen to whom he’d owed wages. Not only that, but it was said that the bodies which bobbed up in summertime, swollen putrid to near featureless, at the bend just before the Bluebell River meets the Yellowstone, had been recognized as rustlers who had tried to operate in the vicinity of the Beddow spread. Rumors went on how these very rustlers had not been treated lightly when Beddow sent his stockmen in pursuit—some of which stockmen, as word further had it, had previously found employment not in roping cattle, but in roping men. That

is to say, detectives for hire whose advantageous and uncertain lawfulness had been pioneered by the Pinkerton and Thiel agencies, most frequently at the say-so of landowners and boss-types. Amongst jacks, the word “detective” came to take a sound as foul as job shark, because more and more, these detectives found work not in hanging rustlers as in days of legend, but in strike-breaking, as occurred with the much lamented incidents of the western forests. That Beddoe himself had signed on a few of the more disgraced detectives as stockmen, even as he bankrolled and facilitated Daglish’s outlaw logging, was thought to be a harbinger of great villainy, treachery, and shiftiness by my fellow fallers Schuyler Peeples and Runaway Shea. I had been treated to many long disquisitions on the topic as we made our macaroni.

Therefore, when I pictured Beddoe, I had in my mind an image appropriate to his reputation: I saw some mixture of war god and accountant, decked out in an old cutaway frock suit, the blazing barn reflected in his spectacles to hide eyes capable of acts beyond my ken. I knew that Beddoe couldn’t be that, but my fear sketched in a vision appropriate to itself. I hoped that meeting him might dispel that fear. Hard to fear a man as war-god dangerous once you’ve seen how he has spinach in his teeth and rubs his knuckles at the circles under his eyes.

Yet now, in my pride, I had stupidly pledged myself to fathom the skid road as Daglish had asked, instead of going along with Lisen to meet with Beddoe.

“Maybe it’s better that I come to accompany you,” I said to Lisen.

“No, Beddoe will know me still, and not you. Better you fathom the skid to the decks. We both know I’m no use at that.”

Grudgingly, I agreed. Therefore, I did not go along with Lisen when Left-Foot Hank told him to follow the fox trail down to the ranch house where Beddoe would be lunching late. I say this to prove that, furthermore, when I later told Daglish that I did not know how much dough Beddoe gave to Lisen, that was the god-honest truth. I never saw the handover. I never did a count.

Left-Foot Hank showed me to a meadow where a bow in the river ran aspen-lined along a shallow stretch of smooth white stones. Already, at this lower altitude, the water had begun to run. The ice had worn away except at the banks and the sound of water burbled direct from the surface, rather than in the low rush of deep winter, when you can barely make out noise from under the crust.

Hank gestured at the line of bare white hillocks to the east. “You ice the roads coming down this first rise. You follow that fence line”—I peeped where snow had built up in drifts against a buck rail fence of logs aged to silver—“to this side. We graze our animals on the far side and don’t need the land skidded into mud.”

“Right.”

“You need anything else, or do you know your work?”

“I know my work.”

He nodded. “I’ll send your friend out this way when he’s done.”

While Lisen was gone, I spent two hours fathoming the snow with a kill pole long enough to touch dirt through even the deepest drifts. I guessed that we could lay out cold decks at twice a man’s height on an uphill bank and set them against a few of the aspens. Then when the river rushed, anyone could cut the aspens and release the logs tumbling into the water to be birlled and danced downstream to the mill. Daglish would be happy with that, I figured. Following the fence line Hank had pointed out, I came across a tributary running down from a gulch in the hills and turned east to follow it up along an icicle-riven cutbank into the woody steeps beyond the meadows. I used my forest axe to strike notches in the trees as I went, a little Hansel and Gretel trail for jacks to cut the skid road after me. As near as I could tell, the state hinterland bordered the Beddoe spread somewhere in the gulch, which meant if we cut the skid roads before thaw, we could get

the logs decked without crossing any known trails. Done right, the logs would be lumber and we'd be gone before any timber inspector might investigate the skid up the mountain.

When I came back down to the put-in point, I threw my forest axe back onto the sled. I turned round for one last survey—so I'd be sure to report back correctly the decking plan to Daglish. The shadows of the buck rail fence on the snow had blued as the sun dipped toward the far mountain peaks.

Then one of the upright fence posts of weathered silver wood appeared to grow wings right at the top. The wings flapped and then the top piece of the post separated and took flight. I saw that it was a gyrfalcon, that it had been sitting there for some time, so well disguised with the snow and bark that even eyeing it dead on, I couldn't have seen it for what it was. It wheeled on a lift around the meadow, in ever widening rounds, the path of a gyre in reverse, and I supposed that was perhaps the very reason they called the bird a gyrfalcon. I pondered this with my head craned back.

When I finally came level again with the meadow, Lisen was carrying a wooden apple box with both hands across the field. I heard clinking in time to his trudging.

"What that you've got?" I asked him, when he clinked close.

He always looked pressed clean to me, but I suppose it was something in his features, because now his face seemed paler, and my guess was that he truly was a bit cleaner. Perhaps he'd washed his face in a basin at Beddow's. I got an awareness of my own griminess, and I was pleased at least to see that Lisen's collar was still plenty greasy and soiled, as was normal.

"Whiskey. I told Beddow about the stag—he gifted us some bottles."

"And what about the money?"

Lisen shifted the apple box to pat at his breast pocket, but then had to grab it again quickly, because he wasn't strong enough to balance it with one hand. I thought he'd drop those bottles. But he recovered himself and without so much as an ask set the apple box he'd been holding on the sled, to which I had already tethered myself. Inside, poorly padded with rags, sloshed twelve unmarked amber bottles.

He showed his fine teeth. “I think we command a bottle ourselves for the trouble.”

“Whose trouble? Seems like it’s all mine, if I’m the one to sled them over the mountains.”

“Well, I carried them here, didn’t I?”

“Barely a constitutional.”

He didn’t argue. Just set about lashing the box tight to the sled with the tail of the rope that I had used to fix tight the leather traces over my shoulders to the kingbolt between the runners.

Once again the ox! Babe hitched to a load!

We had luck with the moon. Near full. With half the trees bare, the moon bright, and the snow so deep and smooth that it gave a second life to even the faintest light, I figured we could make the return trip over Ondersma Pass in the winter nightshine. Get back to camp in time for some spuds and the cougar den cozy warm. I had half expected Lisen to insist that we spend the night at Beddow's—and I maybe could have been easily talked into that. Hadn't he spoken of feather beds? But Lisen didn't even consider it. The packet of dough in his breast pocket beat against his chest like a second heart, he told me, and it was better to just get up and over at night. Less chance of being followed or coming across anyone in the trees. He walked faster than in the morning—not fast, mind you, but with a different grit.

His plan may well have been a good one. Maybe we might have gotten back to camp as planned, but for the fact that after less than an hour, at the top of a steep scramble, I put my left foot wrong between two drift-hidden boulders in such a way that the outer frame of my bear-paw snowshoe cracked under my weight. I tried to go on, but the front half drooped and caught in the snow fluff to near trip me with every step. I got frustrated, and I declared that we'd have to camp. We'd make a fire, I told Lisen, sleep close for a few hours. Repair my bear paw at first light and get on. We had jerky and fry coins enough to eat, snow enough to melt.

Lisen knelt to examine my shoe in the nightshine. "Let's go back down."

I stepped my broken bear paw away from him. "You'd rather walk twice this walk than share my bedroll?" Of all the things! From the sounds of it, who else hadn't shared a bedroll with Lisen?

"We'll have to set some fresh wood along the rail." Lisen pointed to my bear paw where the weft had slipped off. "Then reweave the hide around both. Be nice to do that with some young aspen, lots of it growing a little

lower. Besides, there's no way I'm sleeping in the open with a packet on me."

That was true enough. Totting it up, he had some genuine woodsy know-how. And just as I was thinking this, he struck a thunderbolt with his in-the-know. He said that we didn't have to go back down to Beddoe's begging to stay. There was a cave not far off from where the Glistenfoss Creek crossed the trail. Some trappers had spent a season in that cave, Lisen said, and they'd outfitted it to be near habitable.

I guess he supposed that I might be as incredulous as I sure was, because he added, shyly, "When I came down with Daglish, he showed it to me."

We shared a bedroll after all. The den was as Lisen said it would be: a shallow cave where some years back a pair of trappers had wintered. The trappers had found three-sided shelter in the cave itself, and had built themselves a fourth wall out of stone and hewn log, ancient dried moss stuffed in the chinking. They set a pit for fire into the stone, built so that the mass would radiate heat through the night, even when the fire dwindled to ash. I expected the place would have dripped with damp after the thaw, but in the long freeze, it felt so dry and still that we didn't even bother to make a fire, but for some kindling to see in the dark. I commanded the bottle Lisen had promised, and we passed it back and forth a few times while setting—without having to ask—our woolen blankets together, a single bedroll to share each other's warmth. We fell asleep pressed together, but arms at our sides.

—

I awoke in the night to discover that we had entwined in the manner of large spoon and small spoon, and yet, the small spoon was me. Lisen's arm thrust from behind into my armpit, with his leg thrown over mine. I thought that he must not lie this way with Daglish. That certainly Daglish must be the encompassing spoon—but then, what did I know? I wanted to wear the triangle. Maybe Daglish liked to be the cradled spoon. It was clear from our mutual pointing in the shed that Daglish had his own tastes, and the more I

learned, the more I had to see that taste did not correspond plumb to appearances, or even outward behavior. Lisen was Daglish's taste, and yet, so had I been, and now here I was an encompassed small spoon to a person a fraction of my size.

I kept still, even as I let my mind spool around these notions, dipping in and out of sleep. At times I must have had my eyes open, but it didn't matter. The moon had set or clouds had covered it. Within the cave sparked not the barest glimmer of light. Eyelids up or down made for no change to the black of sight.

But just as I released my muscles back to sleep again, a light, outside the cave: I caught a glimpse through gaps in the chinking between logs. I pushed myself upright fast.

Lisen too awoke. "Is someone there?" he asked. "Do you think it's road agents or somesuch?"

The answer rose within me unbidden. "Agropelter."

"What? Did you say...Could someone have followed us?"

I could hear him patting at the money in his jacket. Cold air rushed over my legs when he pulled the blanket with him as he too sat up.

"Agropelter," I repeated.

"Don't skylark," he hissed. "You don't have the humor for it."

I stood now. "I'll remember you said that—but I'm not skylarking. I saw it before. With Frohms."

"Come on. There's someone out there. Let's avoid getting this packet robbed."

I fingered about my pockets in the dark and came up with my matches. I struck the phosphorous and from the squirmy dark appeared the log wall right in front of my face. I turned, held the lucifer in my fingers, searching about for beady reflections until it burned down, then struck another. "Do you see any mice?" I asked Lisen.

"Mice? You *are* skylarking—"

"Frohms said, before, that his encounter was due to a mouse, you see—mice are the sign of the Agropelter."

“Sign of the Agropelter? Get yourself together. Someone at Beddoe’s must have heard we left with cash.”

The match went out.

“Anyone turning road agent on Beddoe would risk his stockmen,” I said into the dark. “They know better. And I tell you: Frohms said the mice come before the Agropelter.”

“You mean to say the Agropelter is more liable to be real than that a man turns greedy and—”

Lisen cut himself off. He grabbed at my leg, scrambling himself to his feet. “Shit. There really is someone out there,” he allowed. “I peeped a light through the chinking.”

I struck a third lucifer. “As did I. Find the kindling.”

“There’s none.”

I thrust toward him the box of matches as the next one went out. He struck another, and I collected my hat and stuffed my feet into my unlaced caulk boots and pushed out the ancient hide-flap door into the forest.

—

With the moon gone, the forest clacked around me in the dark, bone branches one on another, high up where the wind stirred them. Snow on the conifers had built and frozen to bulbous ice, making smudgy white primeval shapes that I could just make out in the slabbering dark.

Lisen pushed into the cold beside me, and together we breathed quietly, listening. A snap here, the rub of branches there. Somewhere far off the laughter of a snow owl. Lisen cleared his throat. Then nearer, the crunch of ice.

“We got followed,” said Lisen.

“How so? We doubled back.” And as I said so, I caught movement from the corner of my eye. A flit across a near branch. The scurry of little paws. The darting rodent-like disappearance.

“Mouse,” I declared.

Lisen examined me. I came dawning into how demented I must have sounded just then. I thought about how prolonged winter winds are said to drive men senseless, the ceaseless fingers of cold prodding at any seam or bare skin, how it all grows nigh unbearable hour by hour and day by day until it provokes gibberings and outbursts, strange imaginings, and futile mutinies against the state of creation. And I was just convincing myself that such was the case for me, when a figure formed itself some yards before me, formed itself clear out of the devil's winter, stepping out from the twiggy tangle of leaf-bare alder. Then it was gone. I huffed my nostrils, the animal in me readying itself.

I caught sight of movement, pointed. I don't know what moved; I peeped nothing of clear form whatsoever. But the ancient part of the eye, the vestigial part that survived for centuries on the surety that when something moved in the night it must signal, had signaled. I moved fast then, toward that hint of movement, so that it would know itself spotted, would move again. And it did.

The figure came black and sleek in the dark, slipping through the trees toward me—and I gave a roar and ran full out toward it. It stopped then, and I made out the flapping of a cloak, a long-brimmed hat, and I had it then for this winter Beelzebub. I put out my hands and doubled in my sprint. Lisen cried behind me. I closed on it. It raised a limb to point at the sky.

Loud, so loud and close, a flash and a crack of sound that echoed to all points.

I cut left, slammed into a tree, tried to press my bulk low behind it.

"Hey now," said this winter Beelzebub. "Hey, now, easy. Just a warning shot, right? I wasn't trying to come up on your camp. I'm putting away my gun, right?"

He scratched a lucifer to flame and put it to a kerosene lamp he carried. The glow confirmed what I had begun to suspect: namely that he was, after all, human. What need has a winter Beelzebub Agropelter for a firearm? Under his hat, I discovered the kind of face you find on a knife-whittled figurine: little slashes for eyes and deep lines cut from his nose to the corner

of his wide mouth. What I had taken for a devilish cloak or cape turned out to be a duster many sizes too large for him. A road agent. Just as Lisen had said. How could I have feared the Agropelter?

He spoke again, slow and easy enough to soothe a hackled dog: “We’re on state land. I got every right to be here. I’m not trying to commandeer your camp.”

I came out from behind the tree. “I thought you were an Agropelter,” I declared. How else to explain my rush?

“What?”

“An Agropelter.”

He held up the lantern, peered at me. “Shit man, you don’t look cowbell enough to be falling for the Agropelter caper. What do you come from, Nebraska?”

Lisen arrived now, out of breath and brandishing my long kill pole, and the man put up his hand, signaling for everyone to just settle down. “You been playing tricks on your friend?”

“No,” said Lisen, cutting a look sideways to me. “He started bellowing about the Agropelter on his own. I feared you were a road agent myself.”

“Not much road to be had up here,” the man commented. “Be a strange place for a highwayman. But truth told, I’ve been jumpy myself. Normal, I wouldn’t have let off a shot so quick.”

“No harm done,” I allowed. But my blood still hammered.

“If you knew there were no road agents up here,” Lisen asked the man, “why should you be jumpy?”

“Well, for one thing, a giant just took a rush at me. But for a second: Surely you all must have heard about the long axes up this way?”

I had to digest for a moment this statement, which was not, in fact, a confusion about the kill pole that Lisen brandished, “long axe” instead being the old logger way of declaring a man had cut on a neighbor’s property. The axe handle so long it reaches across fence lines. It was an accusation of timber piracy.

“Is it your business to care the length of an axe?” asked Lisen.

“I’m afraid so,” said the man, as if that were simple enough.

I asked myself if he could be a timber inspector: but he'd have to be the most dedicated damn timber inspector the state had ever employed to be out at the darkest hours, come all the way up the mountain. But then again, that would explain the gun. But then one more again, most people liable to crawl the woods at night carried a gun, and perhaps we were the fools for not having one, especially with a breast pocket full of bills. But then for the final again, though I was loathe to admit it, the point of sending me with Lisen was to provide a sight which would make a gun unnecessary. So at last, there was nothing to do but ask.

"What are you doing up here in dark?" I asked the man.

"Keeping my skin from getting perforated."

"What do you mean?" asked Lisen.

He gestured with the lantern, and his breath was illuminated in the shine. "Do you think I'd come up here in the cold, crossing unknown bustadshogen, right behind the Beddoe spread in the bright of day? I'm not looking to get shot by some Beddoe detective looking to prove his loyalty, nor by Karl Daglish."

It confounded me to hear from a stranger the name that I'd been turning over in my own mind—that'd I been gnawing on for a day or two. "You know Daglish?"

"So it is Daglish, eh?" the man laughed, gladdened. I realized I'd walked right into easy bamboozlement. That I'd sung the name Daglish without any prodding. Confirmed Daglish's captaincy of our piracy operation. Lisen groaned and put his hand to his face.

"Look here," I demanded. "Spit it out. Are you a timber inspector? Is that your business?"

The man pulled back his duster, put his hand back to his holster, and, with the same hand that held his lantern, tipped his hat. He slipped away, slinky and devilish as he came.

Huddled around a fire in the den, I told Lisen that the man couldn't be a timber inspector, because Beddoe was supposed to have paid off the timber inspectors. Besides, what kind of dedication would the man have to come up snooping in the winter night?

Lisen stared weirdly at the fire. Then he said, "Of course he was a timber inspector. I think you about sunk us."

I demanded to know how that could be so. The man never outright said he was a timber inspector.

"He didn't need to," Lisen said. "What good would it have been to affirm it for us if he's planning to get us all arrested? You think when a sheriff comes to raid a hideout, he first goes to find the stickup men and politely informs them about when and how?"

A lump of nausea expanded just a little further in my gut.

"But it's worse," Lisen went on. "You sung Daglish's name. And you did right near the Beddoe property line. If we get arrested, you good as tied the two of them together. And neither Beddoe nor Daglish can tolerate that."

I snuffed in disbelief. What? Did Lisen think I'd be murdered just to be rid of a tongue that once slipped? It seemed a tenderfoot fantasy. Wasn't I Babe Bunyan? How would my disappearance get explained? My mind balked at the thought. I rejected the idea. Mostly, I felt that if we just acted as if it didn't happen, it was pretty much as good as it didn't happen. Who was to know that I sung anyway? If that fellow was a timber inspector, and I wasn't ready to admit he was, then what difference did a name sung really mean? If we were sunk, we were already sunk, is how I saw it. But I also wanted to see it as we weren't sunk. I wanted to go back up. I wanted to see Daglish. I wanted to wear my triangle to the stag, as I'd been granted a chance to do.

Lisen coughed from the small smoky fire. I'd left the hide flap open so the smoke would billow toward the door, away from us, but instead it wreathed heavily about our heads. Outside, the first presentiments of day blued the bark and rock faces and snow. Lisen's hand snaked into his jacket, and he pulled from it a brown paper wrapping. The bundle of cash he couriered.

"Daglish is well and truly afraid of Beddoe," Lisen said. "He told me that if he could have gotten a fence in any other man he would have done it. If Daglish finds out you sung his name on the Beddoe line, it doesn't matter if the timber inspector comes or no. Because Daglish thinks Beddoe will sell us to the town clowns to save his own name, before he'd ever defend us. Worse still, he could set his detectives on us, and the law never even has a chance to get involved."

"They're just stockmen now," I said, as if that made his prediction any less so.

"The point is, Beddoe doesn't need us, if we risk him more than he profits."

I thought about Daglish playing doctor with myself in the lean-to. Whether he'd rid himself of me just as quick as Lisen said Beddoe would rid himself of Daglish. The whole idea pulled in my nauseated gut. I felt like I'd eaten a wedge of high meat. "It's too late now," I sighed. "What can we do at this point other than hope it doesn't go down that bad road?"

He still had the dough in his hand. Now he hefted the money packet as if weighing it. "We could take it."

He sounded the words like a question but meant it as a proposition. "If the camp is sunk. We take it now. It's enough to pay two weeks of work for four oxen teams. More than we'd make in our cuts."

"More than you'd make, anyway," I muttered, mostly because I couldn't get a clear idea on the outcomes of such an action. I couldn't see clear how to get away with it. I've not ever had the quickness of an imaginative schemer.

"More than you'd make too." He held the packet out to me in an open palm.

“Weren’t you just boasting that Daglish asked you to be his wife? You playing at Hazel Dishane after all? Maybe you got some Paris green as well?”

“Maybe so. Whatever we wanted to do, we could. She got away with it, didn’t she? No reason we couldn’t either, and we don’t even have to do any poisoning.” He spoke evenly now, urging me. “Things we talked about on the trip down. You could try it all. This one time, in Spearfish, I went to this traveling show. And you know who was one of the acts? Jean de Villers. You know who that is? That’s a protégé of Julian Eltinge, that female mimic who even got in the papers from New York to California—”

Lisen tilted his head and had his knowing smirk. Double conspirators we were. Once in money and twice in our ways, so that I again had the sense he knew me better than I knew myself but wouldn’t tell me what I fully needed to know. He knew well that I’d already know the name Julian Eltinge. That I probably couldn’t help but have been interested, to have perked up. He was right. I’d seen pictures of Julian Eltinge, been well and truly fascinated by them. But Lisen was wrong in one big way. No one would ever snap my likeness as Julian Eltinge had been snapped. Lisen was trying to spin a web for me, but it was my curse to know I was too big to get stuck up in it. All at once, I got sour. I got the righteous feel of having been betrayed. On my own behalf. On behalf of Daglish, on whatever unspoken code you don’t let your fellow jacks drop. Better than the guilt, the remorse, the fear that had sickened me the moments before.

“You put that dough back into your jacket and button it tight.”

“I’m telling you, you cooked the camp. If that man comes back, we’ll be cooped. Or we turn up bloated drowned on the Bluebell. Yet, we take this money, it’s doing everyone a favor.”

“How’s that, exactly? Giving Beddoe’s stockmen some new pursuits to practice their detective work?”

“We don’t come back, Daglish gets tipped that something went awry.”

I spat into the fire. “I have a different proposition for you,” I said, stilling my anger. “You don’t tell anyone that I sung Daglish’s name, and I

don't tell the men at camp that you proposed pinching their salaries. Does that sound about fair?"

Lisen whooshed out like I'd sucker-punched his gut. He squeezed the cash in his fingers, tested its weight, appearing as though he planned to do a runner and needed to know how much it'd drag him down in the sprint. Then Lisen put the money back in his jacket. "Fine," he said, but so grudging, it was almost as if he felt hurt or rejected, not just thwarted.

At dawn, I found an aspen and mended my bear paw. When I lashed myself to the sled's kingbolt to trudge up the mountain, Lisen shrugged on his kennebecker and favored me with the flashingest of smiles, the full friend shebang, which I'd figured I'd never get from him. "I guess we know who's Daglish's trusty wife after all."

Good to his word, Lisen stashed another whiskey bottle for us before he presented the lot to camp. Loaded with the ten remaining bottles of proper whiskey the day before the stag, we got a hearty welcome. Well, from all but Daglish, who snatched up the clinking apple box and demanded to know if we were idiots. “You put out the bottles, and they get drunk. That’s how liquor works. Meanwhile, I’m trying to run work in this camp.”

Later in the day, I sketched for Daglish a map of the river on the backside of the top card torn from a cigar box. I marked where I thought we’d best skid and deck the logs, and presented it to him. I had come with some hopeful notion that the need for a map was nothing but a pretext. That maybe he’d ask to examine how my ass was healing. But no, he examined the card in real earnestness. Then he asked if I had thought Beddoe lived up to the fearsome reputation. I told him I hadn’t met the man. That I’d split off to do the fathoming and that Left-Foot Hank had sent on ahead, so I hadn’t had opportunity to size him up or do a comparison to his reputation. “But,” I admitted, somewhat sheepish, “I wasn’t present for the handoff.” This as if it were a dereliction of duty.

Daglish hadn’t shaved in days. The stubble was eyebrow hair length all over his face. He pulled at the strands of beard at the corners of his mouth, as if he were twirling the world’s shortest mustache. For a moment, he went gone and slack-faced in thought. Then he appeared to recollect my presence. “You didn’t see how much Beddoe gave Lisen then. There wasn’t a counting?”

I gave him my assurance that I’d seen the money at one point. It was wrapped in a packet of brown paper, and Lisen had it on him the whole time.

“You vouch then?” Daglish said. “Nothing went amiss with it?”

I recalled the deal Lisen and I had struck. Therefore I vouched.

They had got the donkey engine unjammed while we were gone. I felt both relieved and a little redundant that they had managed to do it without me. But with the donkey kicking, over the next two days, I was made to make up for the work I had missed. Runaway Shea, Schuyler Peeples, and I must have felled an entire slope. We had weather so fine that in the sun I could work without jacket or hat, kept toasty warm off my own furnace so that my muscles sang. We felled the big larches faster than the hayburners could skid clear the logs. It was good to work, to give up fretting about timber inspectors or stag dates or anything other than how to get the trees to fell where I directed them. Schuyler and Runaway Shea left me alone about my plans for the stag, because they had long-standing bickers to work out with each other, mostly having to do with red politics and whether Runaway Shea whistled too much, and tunelessly at that.

At night I fell into my bedroll without the strength to remove my socks, but still I didn't sleep well for fretting. Over and over, I told myself all the reasons that the man in the woods, timber inspector or no, wouldn't be able to find the camp, much less raid it in time. It was a bit like when you check the undercarriage on a cart and discover a minor fracture on the axle. You know probably you should do something about it, because it might break and then the whole load gets dumped. But also, so long as the axle keeps spinning fine, it's easier to tell yourself that probably it won't break anytime soon. For that matter, maybe it won't ever break. In so telling yourself that, you don't really ever convince yourself, but eventually you stop really worrying about it at all, because other cares turn up that seem more pressing, and may well be more pressing. Unless, of course, the axle does suddenly give way, seemingly out of the blue. Then you're all jammed up.

And for all that fretting, I did nothing. I decided to just ignore that fracture, because as the dance approached, the jacks were getting more excited to get within courting distance of any volunteer skooch. Sick-Boy, who had run away from the Sikh rail-work camps in Idaho, gave E. W. Oleson a bundle of evergreen twigs, festooned with pine cones, that he

called a bouquet. That being a success, he followed up the bouquet with an act of true chivalry: He presented me his extra cackleberry the morning before the dance, to much joviality, and Stub Nelson took to calling him Lady Killer instead of Sick-Boy.

Day of the stag, Daglish blew the gabriel for a late midday meal, and we came down the slopes to find the crumb boss had outdone himself such as he could: biscuits and fried murphies and jerk water as usual, but he'd also made a stew from the goat that he'd slaughtered in the first weeks on the mountain and kept frozen and buried in a little wolverine-repelling pit that he'd dug behind the cookhouse. The crumb boss loved himself a little goat grease to put some animal flavor to a spud stew—but for once we had big chunks of meat floating in with the spuds. All the cutlery scraping on bowls all at once, it was a symphony in tin such that no one bothered to talk.

We'd been expecting that Daglish would call the afternoon off—and so he did, even when van der Ser stood to say that if a stag dance was cause for a break in our labor, then ought it to be the same for Sunday, which was in fact demanded by the Lord, and that's when I knew that some men had already dehorned the liquor sometime earlier in the swamp work, because Mikkels yelled, "Sky pilot!" at an uncalibrated volume and some other jack threw a spud at van der Ser's head, which missed, but did cause him to sit down. Mikkels was not overly fond of religious men always steering themselves toward heaven.

Me, I took a sleep and then gathered my blanket and went down past the midway to prepare myself for the stag. I found a low hollow between the humps of the snow-draped ramparts of branches and slash meant for burn piles, and there I set myself up for vanity. The notion of preparing myself came attended by a surprising giddiness. A sense of my own audacity. None of the other jacks would dare to prepare themselves such as I planned to! It was, well, an adventure. Not of the usual sort you'd expect for a Bunyan: the wrestling of a wolf on a winter night or some such thing. No, mine was

a social adventure. A premonition that I might henceforth expect something in the way of drama and intrigue for myself, and this excited me much more than telling tall tales about strangling a wolf. Fact is, I like wolves. Very majestic!

Carefully, I stropped my razor to a mean edge and cut away my beard in earnest for the first time in many months. Usually, the flat edge of my razor serves as my mirror—and seeing as that was my very shaving implement, I did it by feel, and nicked myself only a few times. I wiped at the blood with handfuls of snow: the cold is good for closing small cuts. Unfortunate for me, looking into a band of my reflection on the shined polish of my razor, I discovered that my face was two-toned—sun- and snow-burnt around my eyes, and pale white under the former armor of my beard. With the beard gone, my eyebrows seemed to me ever the more unladylike in contrast—thick twin beaver pelts—so I went at them with the razor as well. Too bad that I’d never attempted such a thing before, and going only by touch, I near removed my entire right brow in my excitement and nervousness, so I went easier on the left, which—holding the razor at arm’s length to examine my whole reflection—gave a lopsided aspect to my appearance. If my head were a globe, the northern hemisphere was dark and the southern white, while the eastern was hairless and the western still pelted.

I experienced some despair at this. The difference between what I had somehow hoped and the dull clay reminder of my actual self effected in me a mortal frustration, a certainty that I was not deserving of any loveliness—a hatred of my own person that as I experienced it, I knew was laughable. Such a disproportional reaction to the cause: a mistrimmed eyebrow!

So there I was, on the crux of either laughing at myself or crying, when Lisen came up behind me. He had the bottle that he’d commanded for us and a small tin mug. At the sight of my new face, he caught himself midstep and bestowed upon me a long dawning examination.

“What have you done to yourself?”

His clear shock at my very person put a finger on the scales that had been teetering between laughing and crying. The cups of my eyes stung with water. Lisen stuck the bottle in the crook of his armpit to reach out to

my shoulder. He spoke to me in the tone that you hear mothers use, saying to their children, “There, there. There, there.”

What Lisen did actually say was not “There, there”; what he said was “Everyone will be lekkered blind by the wood alcohol anyhow.”

I nodded, but it did not fully assuage me because I had a helpless notion that I might have been lovely to someone. Even without needing the dissolved eyeball visions of wood alcohol. I avoided looking at Lisen out of shame and bashfulness.

With kindness, Lisen tugged on the ends of my hair. “At least you didn’t go at your hair. You’ve well-thick hair.” I do agree that I have well-thick hair that usually goes unnoted. It gets washed out with my general ugly, the same way that many tramps and bums have well-thick hair, but I don’t notice anyone says a word to them on that.

“You put some petroleum jelly in your hair,” he said. “It’ll shine without showing scalp; your hair is thick enough.”

Running a hand through my hair, I asked a brave question. “If we get the jelly, will you show me how to do the trick to darken the eyelashes?”

“In my case,” he said, “I’m going to need to do the full coal.”

Now I finally had the courage to look at him. All at once, I noted that Lisen himself was not one hundred percent flush and pert. He had a swell to his right eye: a shiner not yet bloomed, and a small split of crusted blood in the tail of his eyebrow. I said, lightly as I could, “I guess I need return the question! What have you done to yourself?”

“I slipped up,” he said. “I broke our deal.”

At this, a pressure of fear came into my lungs, so that I blurted out, “Tell me you didn’t spill how I sung Daglish’s name?”

Lisen put a hand on me again. Second time after the touch to my hair. A comfort on my shoulder. “No! Never. But I pinched a few bills from the packet I couriered. One hundred and fifty dollars. I couldn’t stop fretting about that man we met in the woods. What I said to you down in the den is true: If we’re sunk, I need money to get away.”

I waited, but he waited back, glum. Therefore I said, to prompt him on. “So then, are you saying that Daglish caught you?”

“He didn’t have to. I went to him and gave it back.”

Daglish, Lisen said, already had touted up the money as missing. Moreover, Lisen said, Daglish knew that I hadn’t been there to collect the money, and that when asked about the money, I had acted sheepish and shirkish about not having counted or handled the money. My sheepishness put Daglish in the mind that it had surely been Lisen who’d pinched those bills. Only a natural criminal mind, a dissembler and a machinator, would have the foresight to pretend to act sheepish about not having been close enough to pilfer the prize—and this, Daglish had concluded, he told Lisen, was obviously not my nature.

Lisen reported this insult as though I should be glad. Which I was glad, but not so much as I might have been. It’s not wonderful to be cleared of guilt on account of your presumed simpleness or incapacity. No seductress here, came clear the message.

“And then?” I prompted.

“And then I tried to get him to forgive me, since I had owned up. But he called me a tramp not worthy of trust. I went to tell him no, but he tossed me down. Physically, I mean. We were by the wigwam. My knee banged my eye when I fell. I can feel it puffing.”

He prodded at the lower orbital beneath his eye with a slender finger and winced, and a sadness pulled down his lips, dowsing the customary bright glint that, like a carbon arc lamp pointed right at you, prevents you from seeing the person operating it from behind. But with Lisen’s blinding glint dowsed, I peeped again his second more secret face. Not the schemer or the rival, but the green and tenderfoot youngster—playing at sauce to manage the men about him who may mean him harm. I didn’t want to be one such man. And as far as rival, I saw that he had comforted me, his “There, there,” and in terms of rivalry, that offering of comfort seemed to be worth trying to match. So I patted a spot on the split log that was my makeshift seat. “Well,” I said, “I’m going to need some know-how to draw on my lost eyebrow, and it seems you might want to cover yours as well. We’ll do it together.”

Two hours later, a chill rose off the long shadows and we had readied ourselves for the dance. We'd consumed half the bottle in swigs and mug sips. With spirits, my spirits had entirely reversed. I admired the quality of the whiskey too. No cougar milk there. Beddoe had provided the real mash for a clean spree. On top of that, Lisen had tied for me my good brown corduroy shirt as a skirt, and I had my eyelashes darkened and the missing eyebrow drawn back in. He pricked his finger with the tip of a pocket blade, and on the newly exposed globes of my cheeks, we made circles of rouge. He drew similar on his own.

I'd never shared such a time with any other person. Never been so open and sharing and naked in the intentions of our bodily preparations. Not brother, not sister, not good-time girls, not fellow jacks. Lisen, sitting beside me, held up the razor-slice of mirror to reflect back our twin blood-rouged cheeks. We were matching especially in the matter of our left eyebrows—both drawn and enlarged to cover swelling and absence respectively. He pressed his face close to mine in the reflection and said, “Sisters!” I know, perhaps, that he meant it in jest—in reference to our matching mangled brows and the family relation inherent to that pairing. But it didn't enter my ears that jestful way. The word entered my head like a pin, to burst some terrible balloon that had been there always, obstructing clear passage. In the reflection, my face near to popped from bashful pride.

I turned chicken as soon as I made my way to the bonfire for the stag. We strode down together, Lisen and I, careful not to splash snow-mud upon the shirts hanging as skirts, but nearing the prospect of eyes on me besides Lisen's, I declared that I looked stupid and moved to untie the shirt. Lisen smacked at my hand and told me not to ruin the effect. So we proceeded.

I felt my innards flutter, and it felt strange, but also soft and pleasant, to be nervous as such—a vulnerability foreign to me, and precious for its rarity. I thought about photographs of debbs I'd seen in the big-town papers. The anxious presentation of their womanly availability to society at large. And in fact, I was commiserating with them, imagining their similar walks, the descending of grand staircases, when I found that I was already at the circle of the stag.

As far as debuts go, mine came a close second to Lisen's for instigating generalized confoundment. Finding myself still chickenish, I hung back when Lisen stepped into the firelight and presented herself, as it were, with triangle bullseye pinned to the crotch. Until Lisen showed up, most of the boys who wore the triangles were joking and scampering about the bonfire, slowly melting a circle of boot-trodden snow. Like me, E. W. Oleson and the Canady boys had shirts and burlap hung about their waists as skirts, lifting them to flash the fabric bush, then guffawing and thumping at each other, demanding swigs of one another's liquor. A few others had volunteered skooch as well, but had done with only a triangle—no skirts or cosmetics needed. It was all a larkery, and liquor would do in place of costumes.

But then Lisen appeared. The larkery crawled back down the throats of anyone who caught the dark glints of her eyes. Lisen's infernal prettiness stunned. By daylight her face, made up like my own, with charcoal and blood rouge, with the oversized eyebrows, appeared obviously and crudely

cosmeticized. But in the flame light of the bonfire, the rustic cosmetics disappeared into Lisen's features, so that their enhancements became a part of her as on the most elegant of women, where she and her accoutrements meld indivisibly to bewitch those who come into her orbit, so you don't know if the bewitching results from inherent and unique potency within the woman, or merely how skillfully she wields her tools—not that it matters; the bewitched remain compelled by the effect regardless of source. Such it was with Lisen. Even those heavy coal eyebrows somehow lent broody depth to her regal inspection of the troops lit before her, awaiting her approval. Expression dropped from the jack faces that beheld the planes and recesses of her face, the lithe sway of her figure. All around her, bodies and resolve both stiffened, and the men pulled themselves somber, deadly serious; the ridiculous courtship piss-takes of moments before evaporated into nothingness. Now, facing Lisen's beauty, the men found themselves as near to the profound cycles of life and death as a funeral or a wedding night.

I saw my own chance, and stepped up to Lisen's side. We stood there, facing the appraising bonfire eyes. I tried to cling to Lisen—but then came Sick-Boy, who audaciously tugged at Lisen's arm, begging a dance, although there was not yet any music, while other men eyed carefully the scene, watching Lisen with raptor eyes, waiting for a moment to themselves descend.

I stood alone after that. I had with me the remaining half bottle of whiskey, from which I poured at least a tin mug's worth. When Peeples passed me by, I offered him a swig, and although he accepted, his evident skepticism of my rouge and lashes and charcoal eyebrow stained even that mild encounter, so that it seemed my generosity counted against me. That even an offer of whiskey by one so painted came off as indecent. He left me with the sense that I had propositioned him and that he had declined, despite that on the surface, he had just drunk my whiskey.

After the Peeples encounter, I found I could make no eye contact. I looked at the fire, or the far outlines of dark trees against the navy sky. But not at the men near me, though it's also true that they didn't get too near.

When one jack or another did stumble close—*stumble* being the word, as fire melted the ice, which then trickled and refroze glassier—I just couldn't bring myself to proffer acknowledgment. I had it in my mind that I'd smile, let it be a joke, let my attempt at skoochhood be a pleasantry, to offer good cheer to any who sought to see it that way. I wanted to double my meanings: in earnest to those with the vision to perceive my bush as mine, a jester to those who would jeer. But my face wouldn't comply. I felt my own rigidity, my brick shithouse cladding—scowling, fierce, dignified by anger—and in that way, I gave myself away. I was not a jack who wore a bush in jest, or lark. I was guileless and obvious: My bush mattered ferociously to me. It was a declaration made despite myself. I might as well have shown up grasping a Bible or solemnly folding a flag. Oh, that I were merry, that I might have twirled a burlap skirt and toe-tapped a burlesque—but the skooch I hoped to be had lodged her stick more mud-stuck than even my jack self.

The best I managed was what I'm sure appeared to be a heartsick wince, punctuated by various grotesque grimaces, as I carefully stared into the flames of the bonfire, unwilling to meet the gazes of those who beheld me. And so because I refused to acknowledge anyone else, of the reactions to my debut, I can only report on the sounds. The snickers, a hoot, a burble of ten or twenty “get a load of” type expressions murmured or whispered over each other, which I'm sure were accompanied by nudging elbows, and a round of what I expect was Scandahoovian dynamite gleeked in disgust. Elsewhere those same murmurs turned appreciative and desirous when Lisen circled round. The bonfire sparks rose high in the forest tops above the sheltered lee of camp where a breeze hummed in the high-line cables at rest for the night. A wave of my shame crested as well, and I had the sense of my soul rising on it, a seagull taking flight from atop a wave—so that I felt above myself: not that I could see myself, but that I felt myself from without, that I watched myself unseeing, no room for a soul in a body brimming with shame.

Mercifully, a banjo began to play. An old murder ballad. It was Harlan, whose fingers stroked instruments with the same ease as blades. “Little

Omie Wise,” it was. A warble haunted Harlan’s voice, the sort that normally would call men around to listen. Yet, collective attention amongst the stag attendees continued to fasten itself to the spectacle of me and the beauty of Lisen, even as Harlan’s song crept up on the murder of pretty little Omie Wise:

*Little Omie, little Omie, I’ll tell you my mind.
My mind is to drown you and leave you behind.*

The eyes and snickers now set to music became intolerable to me, my dignity broke, and for want of any way to away myself, I put my feet to shuffle. A dance of sorts. Stiff, up-down, at the knees. A fixed-faced bobbing.

*He kissed her and hugged her and turned her around,
Then pushed her in deep waters where he knew that she would
drown.*

I discovered how I had hips. That they did sway. The ball joints in my pelvis allowed for that. And so I swayed them. Tremorously, the music bore me.

*He got on his pony and away he did ride,
As the screams of little Omie went down by his side.*

I circled the fire, hips creaking and pumping my rump. A piston rusting in desuetude fired for the first time in years. Men stepped back into the dark to give me berth. The snickers stopped. There was just Harlan’s voice, the picking of his banjo, and the icy trod of my boots on parade.

*Two boys went a-fishin’ one fine summer day,
And saw little Omie’s body go floating away.*

As I drew close my circle around the fire, a big man stood before me. An obstacle that demanded I not ignore it. But I, too, refused to acknowledge this man. I feared that if I stopped my dance, I might cry or run away in front of the assembled jacks. I kept my eyes up, above the heads of the flame-lit audience, as my agonized debut turned into an impromptu performance. From the periphery of my focus a sense of strength gathered about this person before me. Still, not a man in camp was so large as me. I would push past him.

*They threw their net around her and drew her to the bank.
Her clothes all wet and muddy, they laid her on a plank.*

But when I made to push by, he matched his hips to mine, slowly stepped steps backward, reciprocal to my own shuffle—and I realized, horrified and thrilled, that he had fallen into dance on my own terms. Still I craned my neck heavenward, refusing to acknowledge him, even as we danced. I feared to discover that our dance was all in mockery. But if it was mockery, it was a long mockery. An entire circle together we made like that.

*He made no confession but they carried him to jail.
No friends or relations would go on his bail.*

Harlan picked out the melody line, a short coda, then let his strings go silent and set his instrument aside. I stopped my movements and at last brought my eyes low enough to recognize my dance partner. My own Karl Daglish. I had not seen him when he had arrived. Karl grinned his gold-tipped grin, and there, before all, took my huge hand, and gave it a simple squeeze.

I well and truly blushed.

Leastwise until, at the edge of the circle, I caught Lisen's eyes, as disdainful, as saucy, as defiantly betrayed as I'd ever seen them. No sign of the green youngster she occasionally let slip, but only a rival arrowed on me. I ought to have suffered guilt. But instead, the comfort I'd wanted to

share with her earlier inverted in the alchemy of her hateful stare. Hadn't she always had her turn? She couldn't share even now? Always she had to be first between us, didn't she?

Her hurt came to me as a coronation. The bead of sudden envy trained on me felt a vindication. There in front of the whole camp, I pumped hips with the man who'd tossed her down and swollen her eye. She crowned me by making her jealousy so visible. Who could have imagined? Lisen, jealous of the Babe. Desirous of what the Babe had allured. I had our whiskey on my tongue and it tasted sweet, and with Daglish beside me, my hand recently squeezed in his, I held out the bottle to her, magnanimous as the queen she had been before me. In turn, she glowered a pained loathing that wafted gustily as the bonfire heat.

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Daglish dehorned those other whiskeys we had brought. It flowed fast. Then came the cougar milk, the Flambeau lightning, the Scandahoovian dynamite, the corncobs, and any other kind of inebriation known to the bustadshogen jack. No doubt the kerosene was huffed here and there from a rag.

Other men wanted to dance with me then. Karl Daglish had done the dance with me for all to see. Karl was a fine man, a leader, and if he did it, there was nothing to be ashamed about. Harlan picked out more ballads, maybe half of them murderous, and the men got more forward. An hour in, I had my first-ever experience of being pulled about, hands and hips against all parts of my body, nudging with more and more force my person into a desired placement. And the size of me seemed forgotten. If I didn't bend right with a light touch, the men were happy to grip harder to accomplish their aims. Hands all over me, to be honest, kneading my person. Dipping me. It was the smallest I'd ever felt, and a warm pleasure kindled inside me, a kitten wakening to stretch. Beneath that, a second pleasure, less innocent, a brightness, an awareness of my fabric triangle, a sheeting flash of urgent need each time a daring and searching hand darted to pet my triangle in the

midst of a dance. The rough laughter following the first few times turning thick-throated and heavy as the petting proceeded.

Time and time again, I whirled. On occasion, I bumped into Lisen and that sister of mine shot me looks like you couldn't imagine. Hateful looks. Dark-eyed menace. Pure demonic spell-casting jealousy. The men that had been hers drunkenly whirled me now; me feeling so small, even though in my true height, I looked down upon the firelit scene, my bare hair tousled by a stiff cold wind, a good head taller than every other reveler, watching them enjoy me from the angle of a god.

Often Daglish danced with one volunteer skooch or another, holding her, swaying to some slow-picked minor key affair, and now the jealousy was mine. Yet never did he once dance with Lisen. Then there came an instant when Daglish winked my way over the shoulder of his momentary skooch—so fast that I might have tricked myself into seeing it through hope, were it not for the flash of his gold caps as he smirked, his high-stepping jig-spry feet revolving him away. My god, the man could dance! At that, I begged for rest from my own partner—Runaway Shea, I was surprised to find it was, sotted with home-brewed cougar milk, cooing as he moved, a voice I'd never heard when we stood together axe in fist. When I pulled away, Schuyler took my place with Shea, their fingers drunkenly intertwined, and I wondered how many times that twosome might have danced together before, in their years of companionly bickering travels, and what more they might have shared.

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The circle had become skating ice by that point, smoothed even by boots, and made ever the more treacherous by intemperance. Dancers clung to each other now, well and truly clung, to stay upright, but it gave an aspect of abandon and needfulness to the affair. Or maybe it was needfulness, months of loneliness finally on melt, and glassy footing was but an excuse for men to fling themselves together, to go down rolling, one on top of another. Even axemen known for goaty sure-footedness, whose natural

stance day in and day out had been fixed into an elbows-out readiness, now scrabbled down, grabby and booming, and a watcher such as myself had to suspect that the slips were as much spiritual as bodily. As the firelit figures abandoned bipedalism in favor of hand-bound writhings, slithering, and arse-scootings, I experienced myself at the center of a primitive rite, the debauched boozy bacchanalia warned against by revival tent sermonizers, probity-pounding soapbox Wobblies, and prim Anti-Saloon Leaguers. In the trees sounded retchings, moanings, and pissings. Not that I stood in judgment of this. No, at some point I had gone down on my ass as well, had hit right where I had damaged it in the blanket-banging, and gave a howl. Clutching my own ass, I retreated to the trees for a piss, relieving myself at length.

A pair of rough hands grabbed at the shirt I had tied at my waist for a skirt.

Daglish, his voice slurred by whiskey. “Seems this is how we meet.”

I was mid-flow. “How we meet? We’ve not crossed streams before!”

Any change in my position risked getting piss on him or me. So I didn’t say or do anything but continue. He sidled close behind me, pressed his body into mine. “I saw you fall. I thought you might have hurt your ass again.”

I was unsteady on my feet, lekkered good, and I leaned back into him. “That’s so. Banged it awful,” I murmured, and it occurred to me that it was the right thing to have said. That I had correctly flirted. I reached to tuck myself away, and from behind he fumbled at my bush as if to help; as strangely intimate as anything that came before with us.

He linked his elbow to mine. “Come back to the doctor’s office. We’ll get you fixed up again.”

—

In the dark of “the commissary,” Daglish’s little lean-to where we’d had our last near-tryst, we got right to it. Wrestling in the little space, trying to do to the other what need bade, and getting in each other’s way. We lit no lantern

nor candle, and so rammed each other into the makeshift desk, tripped at the stool, caught ourselves banging into the barken long wall. Finally, I got hold of his belt and tugged at his pants, daring in a way I'd never before loosed myself to do. The dancing, the glances, the dark-eyed envy—the whole night had made me feel a new breed of powerful. I wanted to touch him. To kiss at him. When I did, the sharp novel scratches of his beard on my fresh-shaved face sent me into a frenzy. I laughed incredulous at the sensation. An exact feeling I couldn't quite have thought to imagine, only experienced, it smarted a little, like mashing a broom bristle first into the chin. This was the best night I'd had in many a memory—I said so. I said to Daglish, “This is the best night I've had in many a memory.”

By then, he had his belt undone and wasn't listening to me.

“Whiskey,” he said hoarsely. “Effect of the whiskey.”

I gathered he was having troubles of a manly sort.

“You want me to—”

“Turn away. Just turn away from me for a moment.”

My blood was rushing; the arousal had become physical, so that every breath I took felt rich as if I'd been pulling on corncob tobacco. The few times I'd baked a batch with the fancy girls, gone to do my duty with one jack or another in a town spree, I'd never felt this kind of urgent heat. The absolute thoughtlessness of it. Nowhere close.

The buckle of his belt jingled rhythmically as his elbow pumped. It was all I could do to give him the moment to ready himself that he'd asked. Same as when I'd last been in, our full frames filled near the whole of the tiny room, but for the planks that made up his desk on which his painted poacher gun dried yellowly. Daglish put his boot up on the trunk lockbox to go at himself with even more vigor.

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With one hand occupied, he reached out for my sagging trousers. His fingers found my triangle pinned to the crotch. And then that bony strong-wired hand rubbed with surprising tenderness the symbol of womanhood

that he himself had chosen for the stag—the inverted triangle—as his free hand pistoned at high throttle.

Now, you don't have to long-log timber in the wildwoods or swamps for much time before you come across men who've lost body bits to accidents and mishaps, to axes and to cables, to cannoning logs and to spinning gears: fingers pulled off, toes split in two, legs crushed, elbows shattered—hell, one time I witnessed a “degloving,” the gruesome and piteous event, reminiscent of an ancient torture, which occurs when some unfortunate jack gets his skin caught on a fast-moving cable or pinched between spinning rods, so that the momentum of the machine flays long large strips of hide from his limbs to expose muscle and bone beneath. I personally attest to and have witnessed how the skin of the hand may be removed intact in one go, making for a gory glove, an action that I saw occur to a Kentuck lokey-man, who placed his paw into the engine works of a skeleton boat and removed it again gloveless. He let forth a scream that curdled my soul—and that was before I even peeped his haunted meat mitt.

Yet if the variety and horror of the mishaps that accompany the logging trade can awe a person, so too can the methods of healing, the workarounds that a jack might fashion to make up for a lost appendage, a missing eye, a dragging nerveless leg, a dangling mangled digit. Harnesses, patches, prosthetics, pulley systems, obscure fasteners, whittled hands: the backwoods tinkering of mechanical magicians. That same Kentuck lokey-man who lost his glove and whose haunted hand eventually scarred and fused like the branches of a corkscrew willow tree, invented himself a contraption of leather straps that held a cant dog—like a short-handled peavy—and made for himself better earnings as a river pig than he ever did as a lokey-man. Everyone in the big woods gets wise to how—out of necessity or practice—a body comes to include more than a body: men tending to hook-hands or wrapping splint-stays to ribs and shoulders turned arthritic and dislocated by years of heavy labor. Even the hale young bark eaters swore how they'd been birthed with axe in hand—chuted from the womb gripping a Kelly Axe bestowed upon them by nature no different than a foot or brown hair.

Well, now, here's my point: Each morning, a lopped-limbed man finds himself complete when he straps on his wooden leg at the knee, but even more so—his mind comes to feel that leg as part of a whole, so that if you kick him in the peg, he might utter a curse of pain, phantom nerves trailing up from the wooden appurtenance. In this very fashion—I can't explain it any other way—as Daglish stroked my triangle bush, I discovered that it had joined with me, as me. An appendage that had been missing from my person my whole life, without my realizing it, and which my mind and soul had incorporated into my whole to assuage a hunger that, until sated, had been so ever-present for so long that I had never truly grown mindful of it. Balm and succor to my empyrean degloving. The stroke of Daglish's rough fingers traced a gentle V-shape down the fabric that sent a velvety shudder up the wires of my back. The calluses in his fingers worried the weft of burlap, and my mind knew their rough texture by spooky action, the fabric more sensitive to the friction of his touch than the thinnest most nervy skin elsewhere on my person. With eyes closed, there existed no difference between the triangle and myself: Distinction collapsed; it was on me and of me and in me, and the prodding of his fingers overwhelmed me, so that I moaned, and lost all shape of myself, the contour lines of my body collapsing and rearranging themselves into a shining triangular pleasure. My groans shifted down into a deep hadopelagic hum, vibrating apart into pulsing particulate all that had once seemed my solid unitary fate.

“Oh-ah.” Daglish orked like a seal: “Oh-ah, oh-ah, oh—yeeaaaah!”

Amongst our rank odors I detected a gamey, yeastish scent, a lovely odor that confirmed his spurt had impregnated the brown and burlap fabric of my triangle.

Hastily, Daglish sorted himself, tucking and buckling himself away. With servile drowsiness, I sat myself on the three-legged stool, my skirt shirt tied still round my waist, my galluses loose and unhitched.

Daglish put flame to a kerosene lamp. Outside the lean-to sounded drunken voices and boot crunches as one man chased another. The flat accent of Johnny Duck Chief as he said, “You stupid fuck, I saw you rooting in my bedroll. Give it back.” Then the voices carried along toward the cold deck and faded.

“I’m winding down,” said Daglish, and I gathered he meant for me to know that we had finished. Yet I wanted to know if what it had been for him was what it had been for me. How for whole minutes there, my body had summed to something greater than myself, greater than it had ever been, how we’d gained more than actuality together. But I didn’t know how to put any of that. What I said was: “Lisen says you asked her to be your wife.”

“Camp wife was what I proposed. I already got a wife.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t ever put my mind to considering how he might have yet another wife elsewhere, beyond camp. Once again, the camp seemed the whole of the world to me while we were in it. The new information put me on a detour to curious. Was his wife back East or where? Was she lonesome over how he was gone to the woods the better part of time? Seemed to me it would be lonesome for a wife. Moreover, was she aware that he was chief shark of a timber trespass? More to the point, had she some mind of his predilection for camp fancies? Yet then, I guess, more than a few of the men in camp had wives. E. W. Oleson had a wife and three children, and yet he had worn the bush. The rules and constraints of society, acquaintances, and even family got hazy after enough time spent under snow crowns in the bustadshogen.

“Is what happens with you and Lisen what happened with us?”

Daglish ignored me as he shaped a pinch of snus and popped it in under his top lip protruding from under his nose. I was near relieved to find those lips had turned repulsive, nigh unkissable. “Yeah,” said Daglish. He didn’t elaborate.

“Can I confess to you something?”

Daglish shrugged.

“When you rubbed my triangle—I sensed it as part of me.” My voice announced itself too naked: too giddy, excitable, and fluttery. Like a traveling show actress. Yet equally, I could argue that such excited flutterings were the furthest from acting, that such uttering had been let free by a true deed. I tried to insist on it. “No, no, that’s not right. It *was* a part of me. You made me a skooch.”

Daglish gleeked on the dirt floor. “I didn’t make you one. Lisen neither.”

“Are you meaning to say that I’m not a skooch? Or that I am one, but you didn’t make me it?”

He adjusted his collar, then gestured palm up at the walls around us. “We have a winter camp here.” He declared the obvious as preamble. “As far as how you decide to endure the time in the cold or how I decide to endure it, no one who hasn’t done it himself can judge. I say there’s nothing untoward to what we did. No, what’s untoward is to believe in it too much, do you hear me?”

As far as Daglish went, I supposed this constituted a brimming over of emotions. But it was no kind of utterance or poetry that would belong to the seasoned romantic I had desired, hoped for, or imagined. Nothing of dash for a woman, or even camaraderie for a man. He had said the opposite, even—he’d been of the opinion that my own making of so much of the triangle was “believing too much.” Yet I couldn’t leave it at that. I needed him to indicate where what we’d done stood us. I needed him to tell me whether what we had done was different or the same or in what ways different and the same from what he’d done with Lisen—whether that too was untoward or not. I needed him to tell me about Lisen. Not just if we had done the same as Lisen but if I myself was, in his opinion, a person similar to Lisen or not at all. Worse, I yearned for him to tell me we’d keep on with it. That

together, under the rim of winter sky, we'd found a path beyond the old and civilized ways, and indeed we'd follow where this path led us, even, come thaw, down from the mountain and back into the plains and towns. The path could not end here! I wanted Daglish to assure me that by dint of the unnaturalness, the depravity, the glory of the act we'd committed, I could never go back to being seen as the Babe. Stupid to ask for surety, for conviction, and for absolutes from a former firebug timber trespasser, but it was a former firebug timber trespasser who'd magicked my triangle to become briefly my flesh. Certainly there could remain no doubt that I believed too much.

Then the door banged open, interrupting whatever Daglish would have or more likely would not have said to me. Lisen was the culprit. The charcoal we'd put on together was all down her face. I shifted to pull up my pants, still loose on the stool I sat, teasing my nakedness.

"Daglish." Pleading in her voice. "I swear to you that—"

Lisen didn't finish whatever she'd planned to say. She could not ignore how my bulk took up near half the space. Like busting into a closet and finding it already occupied by a horse. Her nose wrinkled, and I wondered if she could smell what we'd done. Whatever she would have said to Daglish, she left it. Her hand moved like a rattlesnake strike and ripped my triangle from my pants. She held it up and spoke low and cutting to me. "You snatch for yourself everything that's mine. Starting with this."

The way she said *snatch*. The disgust. How you might cuss finding a silver bug in your shoe. She held it out before her pinched. Dangled it in my face. I aimed to pluck it back, but she moved faster than I. She pulled it back, and then quickly, with her other hand, she gripped it, elbows out to each side, and jerked. The fabric tore in two with a sound that nauseated me. I can't say I experienced physical pain, but only moments before the fabric had been part of me, so when she maimed it—maimed me, I should say—I felt it as one might upon waking after an accident and finding a limb missing and the nub stitched clean closed: no pain exactly, but a capsizing wave of terrible despair, the unwholeness of yourself overwhelming yourself, a personhood robbed by fate and God both. Like bile, a pleading

sound rose up my throat, long after it was too late. Lisen tossed the two halves with disdain at my face. I seized one fluttering half from the air and held it in my fist. I had barely to touch it to feel its deadness, whatever numinous power previously within now discharged, as in squeezing the hand of a loved one passed.

Daglish now spoke as hotly as he had since we'd done our act. "Goddammit. Don't try to pull some dramatics. Why would I dance with a thief?"

At that, Lisen stepped across the room. Her hands petted at Daglish as he sat, as if to soothe him, the way you might a child, and her voice got going in a quick high stream. "You don't know! I had to take it!" Lisen's voice went up in a beseeching wail. "And now we're sunk, so I had to—"

Daglish grabbed one of Lisen's petting-patting hands, and he stood to his feet, bending back her thin wrist as he rose. "Bullshit! Bullshit!"

She made a noise of pain as her wrist contorted back, but he didn't release her. "What happened is that you crawled into my bedroll and thought you found a patsy. Thought I'd make goo-goo eyes and let you get away with slipping off the top."

Lisen was shuffling sideways to counter the twist of her hand. She cried out to me, "Tell him! Tell him why I had to take it."

Daglish released her hand. As she rubbed the pain out of her wrist, he eyed me expectantly. "Well?"

I still clenched half the triangle in my fist. I unfolded my fingers and held it out so that it rested lifeless in the center of my palm. The sight of it took me emotionally, so that all at once I got overwhelmed with sadness, with regret, with wishing it were not so; anger had not yet arrived. "Look what she did."

Lisen struck snakelike again. "You are a clown," she hissed. "An oafish and embarrassing clown. You think a little cut-up triangle makes you a skooch? A piece of burlap is all it takes? I'd never of guessed that someone so big could be such a little creep. Diddling all about on your precious fabric—you make me sick. You ought to experience, just for once, what an

actual skooch puts up with. Hell, do you have any idea what I put up with? You think it's some lark having every disgusting jack in camp—"

The onslaught winded me. I had an urge to retreat backward, and in fact, I found that I had unconsciously pushed my back to the barked log wall, so that the rough broken knots and nubs of branches pressed against me, causing me pain, so much did I want to put distance between my person and Lisen's words. I held up a hand, searching for the statement that would stop her. "You said we were sisters" was the best I could manage.

"Oh, trust me," she shot back, "it's easy to be ashamed of your own sister."

"Knock it off!" Daglish now stood, leaning first toward me, then toward her. "I don't give a goddamn about sisters or what." He pointed a finger at Lisen. "You took the money. That's all there is to it. You don't come back after that."

Lisen spoke quietly now. "Ask him why."

Daglish pointed now to me, but he didn't look at me; instead he moved close to Lisen. Menacing her. "What does it matter what he thinks? He didn't take any money, you did."

Lisen met his eyes, daring him. "I took the money because this camp is sunk. The Babe sunk it."

"Hey now, we had a deal!" I interrupted.

That was a big flub on my part.

Daglish rotated his attention back around to me. "A *deal*. What deal? You in on it after all?"

"Lisen tried to take all the dough. Not just some. Proposed we flee with the whole stack. I said no."

Lisen shot in: "And why did I propose that?"

I waited for Daglish to tell her to shut up. But he didn't. He wanted my answer.

I shrugged, helpless. "You know. Greedy, I guess."

The momentum of righteousness in the tiny room ran toward her, like water sloshing from one side to the other in the bathtub. Lisen knew she held the deep side, because she spoke plain, matter of fact. "He told a

timber inspector your name. Right on the Beddoe line. The law will know you're tied to Beddoe. And worse, Beddoe will know that we tied him to us. The whole camp is sunk, the law will come soon. And more for the worse, Beddoe will think it's our doing, because the timber inspector will say how he found out. This one"—she flipped a wrist disdainfully my way—"begged me not to tell you. So I thought to take the money! We're all sunk, and I don't know when, but shouldn't I have ready money when it happens?"

Daglish pulled out his snus from under his nose. A brown line of tobacco dripped down the cleft of his lips. He appeared dazed, at a loss. "A timber inspector?"

"Maybe he wasn't one," I said weakly.

But Lisen spoke in a rush, her words ran right roughshod over me. "He sure was! He came cat-footing around in the middle of the night—he already knew all about Beddoe, and Beddoe's boys. Said he was going at night to keep from getting perforated. But it was the Babe that sung your name."

Daglish gazed at me and asked quietly. "You sung my name to an inspector?"

"Now hold on," I said.

"Did you speak my name or not? Did my name fall from your mouth?"

I hesitated. "Yes, but I got tricked into singing."

"You sung my name on Beddoe's land? You know what he'll do when he finds out? More especially to you?" I thought about the stories of what the Beddoe clan could do to those who'd crossed with them.

"It wasn't quite his land. We were by the Glistenfoss. Government land." I chewed the words mumbling them.

"Goddammit." I'd not heard Daglish scared before. "Goddammit, you're as stupid as you are ugly."

Lisen pressed herself back toward the door. I guess she knew him that well, better than me, because she anticipated him, and she flinched. In that little shack, he and I took up all the space. Neither of us could even back up. A fight in there was like an animal stuffing: when gamblers tie a cat and a

ferret in a sack and bet on which animal will emerge. Her flinch tipped me he'd move on me. I was almost so morose that I would have let him, but instinct flinched in me same as it did in Lisen. I put out my knee an instant before he made his move. He stumbled and came into my arms. The touch of him made me want to apologize. To soothe him and protest, because hadn't we opened a new door? We could fix it all. I could yet be his skooch. And so I squeezed him, to hold him tight and somehow have him understand it by how I held him still. He got one hand of his on my forearm to free himself from my bear hug, but then I got my right hand locked tight on my left wrist, so I had good leverage to crush down, and I crushed down until he stopped struggling and started panting. Tender, I let him go.

He fell gasping against the plank desk, and I tried out my most reasonable tone, palms open. "As I say, maybe the man wasn't even a timber inspector. But anyhow, he already knew your name. I didn't need to say it."

He came at me again, and so I clopped him quick and hard—not glancing either; I connected dead on the side of his skull. It has been well testified that I deliver a mighty clop. Even a man so thick and robust as Daglish staggered, his knee joints slackened, so that he wobbled. He caught himself on the planks of his desk, for which I was grateful.

"Now listen!" I insisted. "Probably that man was already snooping for a while. There was another night with Frohms, pumping tanks for the icing, when I saw a lantern moving in the woods. I didn't know what it was then, but now I am sure that lantern belonged to the same man. It was him already. So I say that we were already sunk, if we are sunk, whether I sung your name by accident or not."

All while I protested, while I blathered my case, Daglish barely moved. He'd been having to collect himself. When I finished, I grasped that my words had not penetrated Daglish's reasonings. He'd gone to granite. I understood right then that such a clop as I had delivered had been a great blunder. For Daglish to have encountered such might as my fist may deliver had not knocked the sense from him but restored it—so that when he got his knees back tight beneath him, whatever spell we'd cast together to obscure

the physical fact of my body had boiled away. He gave me the up-down and took me in anew: oxen and crudely huge. I cried out to feel the change.

“As for having clopped you,” my voice rose to a plead, “you gave me no choice!”

Daglish swept his arm across his desk, clearing his books and pen, as if in a fury, so I didn’t note until too late that he was in fact lunging for his yellow poacher gun. My reaction—having been fixated on searching myself for a comforting phrase that might restore us, or at least whip up a temporary grace between Daglish and me—came too slow. I folded toward him ungainly, maybe half a foot from the barrel, snatching at it frantically, when the shot boomed off.

Following that, my lungs refused to do their customary breathing.

Each time I awoke in the dark, I had to mentally sort through a jumble of fragments, shards of memory, and misorderings of events. I can tell you now that when I finally began to get a handle on it all, I did so in the old hunter's cave on the banks of the Glistenfoss, where Lisen and I had been sleeping when the timber inspector came upon us.

But some days had passed before I could have even told you that. The poacher's gun had been loaded with small-gauge bird shot. The pellets exited the muzzle at an angle to crush a cavity up into my chest, a ragged scoop of flesh from my right breast to my shoulder.

I can't recall taking leave of the shanty. I suppose I must have bulled my way out. I recall that I fell down by the cold decks. I suppose the whole camp heard the shot, and the question was just who was or wasn't drunken enough to register it. Frohms had been taking a smoke atop the cold decks, and he leaned back to look up at the stars, with a tin of cougar milk on his chest. It's a foolish place to lie back, since decks shift from time to time, can crush a jack—but I was in no state to even think about that when I limped upon him. I gather that seeing me, he must have struggled with my weight, set me up against the deck, and pressed his jacket against my wound, and I lost consciousness again.

When I came to once more, it was to Frohms slapping and shaking me. Frohms leaned over me, hissing that we must get into the woods. He had a kennebecker pack and was thrusting it at me. I can't tell you the words he said. The jist, which took me some time and effort to comprehend, was that Daglish, explaining the shot to everyone who gathered, said that I'd sunk the trespass. That I'd sung all about it to the timber inspector. I remember, strangely, irritation. Putting up my hands to Frohms's mouth as if to cover it, to shut him up. He kept slapping me, goading me to get up, and saying, "Didn't I tell you so? I did tell you so. I told you not to pin that triangle.

Three weeks ago, no one would have believed the Babe would sing to the law.” I pawed at him, trying to shut him up, while also trying to hold the blood-sopped jacket to my chest. “Now, they’re looking for you. Singing would be just the thing a punk would do under a little pressure. All your strange acting of late. A betrayal starts to make sense.”

He slipped the kennebecker pack over my uninjured arm. “There’s tack and a blanket within. Get down from the mountain.” He got me to understand how the jacks had gone on a spree at the news of the trespass getting sunk. Already drunk, they’d ransacked the stores, turned blood hungry, and not a one felt charitable toward my person.

The last thing I remember Frohms saying to me: “Can you blame them? How you’ve been strange acting? Mollying about and trying to get on the jacks? If we hadn’t shipped together, not even I would trust you, not even me.”

—

I didn’t go down the mountain. I didn’t heed Frohms’s advice at all. He urged me on with a push and I set out dazed, but the mind staggering under a burden of pain is a queer fixating thing. I understood vaguely my purpose. I was aiming to go down the mountain, to find help, to fix my arm and shoulder. But it seemed to me that help would cost money, that doctors charge their fees. Yet dough wasn’t an item that Frohms had mentioned including. Which led me to reflect on how Schuyler Peeples owed me ten dollars, and the more my shoulder ached, the more I thought I would need those ten dollars, and the more out of joint I got over it, so that not long after having been sent out by Frohms, I circled back, drawn like a moth to what I thought was the orange glow of the bonfire where we’d done the dance. I don’t suppose I had a clear plan to collect those ten dollars, but maybe in a fugue of hurt, collecting the ten dollars made for a simpler task than picking my way down a mountain.

So circling back from the west, I followed the skid path to gain a vantage on the camp, on the little crest that led down the side path, maybe a

hundred yards from the hash house shanty. From that slope, I grew disoriented, because the bonfire should have been farther away, down closer to the hollow by the cougar den. Only then did I gather how the glow did not come from the dance bonfire at all. No, the jacks had set ablaze the supplies wigwam: a fire larger than any around which we had danced, a fire that explained how I could peep the camp lit up even from such a distance away. Flames tornadoed skyward on the updrafts of their own heat, eye-squinchingly bright as they warped wooden planking so that it peeled back like skin to expose the charring skeleton wigwam, and within, the food that was supposed to last us until thaw.

As the camp was lit, I got to fearing that I, too, could be lit. I searched my surroundings. Near to me on the slope from where I spied down, I spotted a pile of boneyard tree limbs, the slash left shorn and stacked to be burned at some later date. Gingerly, I leaned up in them, obscuring myself, and then laddered up the pile a bit, for a view below. Carefully, I pressed my jacket bandage, and with the sleeves tied it into a sort of sling. A wave of ill came over me, and to stave it off, I aimed my attention to the commotion of camp.

Around the blaze dashed the jacks, and the air carried shouts: the scene of a rural riot. A hand-to-hand medieval wooded chaos perhaps not peeped since the storybook fights of Sherwood Forest. Logging tools brandished in hand as sudden weapons. Canvas falling and sagging. A strange wild energy, a disaster euphoria in the flame-lit night. Some individual moments I seem to remember: Boomer throwing snow futilely to douse the flames, then tackled by Casoni. And then there, at the center: Daglish, alongside McAlister, striking out left and right with axe handles, knocking the drunken furious jacks aside, until they had gained the center and Daglish stood on the deacon seat, just as he had stood when he announced the dance. "HO!" he boomed with his hands on either side of his mouth. "HO! HO!" and over and over, and from the slope above, I saw the men slow in their frenzied endeavors, one by one, like ants picking up a scent, and slowly organize themselves to listen. "It's not all sunk!" Daglish implored. "Dammit, stop it! We're not yet sunk."

“You wouldn’t have shot him if it wasn’t,” cried Johnny Duck Chief. And there were other calls too.

Daglish pointed his axe handle to Johnny. “I damn well would have and did!

“Now listen! Listen!” But again no one was listening, and E. W. Oleson shoved Daglish hard, to make an especial protest. From behind, Stub Nelson knocked E. W. Oleson across the head with the axe handle and Oleson fell, and Daglish rose again on the deacon seat, and this time the listening began in earnest.

“The Babe squealed, yes,” called Daglish. He held his body tall, commanding by force of his person the sort of attention that a preacher learns to call to himself by urging his flock to contemplate damnation or salvation, the charisma of misfortune prognosticated, so that you can’t help but listen, whether or not you yourself believe or maybe especially if you doubt. “But the state will need a whole crew to come coop us; it’ll take them a good two weeks to put it together, if not until thaw, which we expected anyway! We quit felling now, and that gives us time to get the decks down to Beddoes. We won’t make what we might have, but we come out in profit!”

“You want us to work a week dragging on no food!” cried Eight Day Bill. “Lekkered idiots burned the food!”

“Blame that on the Babe!” responded Daglish. And then, the very jacks—Sick-Boy and Jack Hambone, I recall distinctly, amongst others—who had danced with me the most roared in angry agreement. And a generalized fury again broke out, which seemed to me, now, complaints about my person. How I should have been run out of camp weeks before, when I started mollying about. How I’d put a hex on those around me. Made everyone ashamed and uncomfortable, so that the natural comradeliness of jack men stoppered up and turned bilious. How a working camp can’t withstand that breed of unnaturalness. It should have never been put up with. This confounded me! What had I to do with burning the wigwam? As if I were the only jack to have flown the bush? Maybe my crime wasn’t flying the bush, but meaning it. Believing in it too much, as Daglish had

accused me. And by that belief, it seemed to me that somehow, all of a sudden, I had become a receptacle for any and all faults.

Only a short time ago, I had been top axeman. I called my falls. And any and all knew not to bet against me. And yet, what? A triangle had changed this? Made me blameworthy for all and sundry, even and maybe especially by those who had done a turn of dance at my waist? And just as I was fulminating in my own mind over this, I heard Schuyler Peeples demanding to know why Daglish had let me get away. How could Daglish, Peeples wanted to know, his voice like the whiny buzz of a fly rising above the general din, have let that weaseling snitch molly oaf slip away unpunished? When I ought to have been left unmarked in a slash grave for what I did to this camp?

I forgot my pain. I remembered only my rage. My own sense of having been double-dealt. The disbelief that my fellow faller should have turned Judas against me, I who had given him a stay on the ten dollars owed to me fairly for my prowess and skill, molly, triangle bush, or no. There from the slope above, I could not contain myself, and I roared in my own rage: “Slander from a man who owes me ten dollars!”

—

The fleeing over Ondersma Pass: I can't tell much about it. I do believe the jacks meant to string me up, that I can say. They came boiling up the slope. I took to run-staggering. In the daylight, I guess my trail would have been left in blood-drops, but the dark held, and no one, save van der Ser, could have been any degree of sober. I can't say why I chose Ondersma Pass. A descent toward the civilization of Crain's Bluff Town would have been a more sensible direction. Looking back, I think the idea of the Glistenfoss cave, of Lisen and the inspector, had swirled in my thoughts insensibly, and my body, looking for any clue amongst the turmoil of unplanned flight, had gone to the place linked to those fragments of mind. I suppose this illogic saved my skin too. Anyone looking to follow me had a terrible uphill chase to give over rocks and deep snow. Such a thing saved me from Mikkels and

Stub Nelson, who did give chase, and who near caught up with me by Little Messi Butte, and might have dragged me back or left me there. But on the switchbacks, I had the high ground, and I dislodged with my good arm a small boulder which tumbled down and clopped Stub Nelson on the shin, and I heard them shout and discuss whether more boulders might be forthcoming, and they were reminded, soberingly, that my one good arm might be worth two arms of a normal man, and thus they reappraised the timing and route of their chase.

Sometime toward dawn, I found the trappers' cave—drawn by instinct. As I say, I don't remember parts of that ragged flight. I must have collapsed, I suppose, and slept. When I awoke again, the sun had pinkened the snow coming down, and infection had set in on my arm, still slung in that filthy blood-crusting jacket. Red streaked down my arm from the awful gore of the scoop. I tried to eat the hardtack Frohms had hastily packed in the kennebecker, but could not, due to the fever—and with the fever came a new sort of pain, a pain that threatened to make redundant those recent jack efforts to see me buried.

I thought I would succumb; I wanted to succumb, to release myself, but yet again, this giant and hale body betrayed and denied me. When you are suffering so, time stretches out like an ocean. You are on a boat in the ocean, and land might never come; there is only the ocean and the pain, and you must sit in the boat and the pain is your companion, and you hate him, you are hungry and you want to eat him, but he has begun instead to eat you, proclaiming that you are so big, one arm could last him many meals. But the arm doesn't last so long. So first he eats your arm, then your foot all the way up to the knee. You think land might come and so he won't eat your other arm, but land doesn't come, and he looks at you with a sad smile and tests the blade of his knife. Oh, how you hate him, because he is rubbing his stomach, gurgling and full, because he has your hands and feet. And now you are a stump, a stump on the floor of the boat, and you can't even see the ocean, but you can feel the swells, and so you get so seasick, and the stumps of your feet and knees and arms moan and itch, and still, your companion is wondering aloud how to best prepare what is left of you, but you can't die, no, you can't die, because then what would he have fresh to eat? And even as he chatters on, you get sleepy, but if you fall asleep, he'll take your buttock—you've seen him eyeing it—but you can't help yourself and your eyelids close. When you awake, after some time, your companion is gone. You feel nothing and you are alone, a stump alone on the ocean, and a part of you wishes your companion would come back, because even though you hated him, hated him desperately, he was company, he was life, and now there is nothing, only the barren waves lapping at the side of the boat, and even those are growing faint and still.

It was some time after that, drifting on the glassy gray sea, that I grew gradually aware of a series of sharp pains and scatches about my face. I turned away, wanting again the waveless peace of windless water. But the

little pains came again. Cutting and insistent. The more they pained me, the more they called into question the otherwise firm notion that I, at that present moment, suffered in the bilge of a drifting boat. Instead I began to recall other portions of my life, and all at once came to me the suspicion that I was yet breathing in the trappers' cave on the Glistenfoss. That I mustn't have died. No, obviously, I mustn't have. Moreover, the dark stillness around me was the dark of simple night. And if that was indeed the case, then it seemed to me days had passed, but I couldn't say how many, and now it was night again. The sharp small pains came again, and I lifted my good arm to my face, where I touched, only momentarily, a fragile construction tufted in fur, which then skittered across my face. Another pain at my ear. Another scurrying. Then pain at the fingers of my injured arm. All at once, I understood that the pains were the gnawing of mice, chewing at my stilled form in the dark. The horror of it caused me to jerk back my bad arm, and the overwhelming pain of that movement jolted me into the first true awakesness I'd experienced in a long while. I dragged myself upright, one arm stiff and crusted to unmoving. Slowly, slow as I've ever been, I drew myself bone by bone upright to standing, and then pushed out foot before foot until I was out in the trees. The Glistenfoss bubbled near. In the moonlight, I saw the skitters across the crusts of snow, the quick, darted movements of mice. Dozens of the things. Even hundreds. Following me. Stopping to watch me. Eyes aglitter.

A voice trailed from far off in the moon-shadowed slopes. It twisted and echoed, the words beyond decipher; voice sometimes seeming singular, sometimes multiple, until finally, it separated and cohered into two voices. Arguing. Approaching. The trees swayed low and dark birds arrowed so fast amongst the bare branches, I could not catch one full in my sight. The whole winter forest wavering before me as in a heat mirage. Or so it appeared, before I understood that in fact all was still. That what I was seeing was the movement of shadows, as a lantern floated through the forest: as I had seen with Frohms, as I had seen with Lisen. The lantern light bobbed and drew to approach, but I was too weary to run, and what's more, I was unafraid. I rested the burden of my heavy self against a

standing dead aspen, aged and bone white, the bark long since fallen, peeled from its flesh.

Two figures appeared. Figures I came to recognize. Lisen and Daglish. They stopped in front of the cave that had been my abode. Not thirty feet from where I stood in the dark, but they peeped me not at all.

“Here?” Daglish asked Lisen.

“It was here,” Lisen agreed. “The inspector went downstream. So you see, it wasn’t my fault. He was already prowling.”

Daglish nodded, and in some kind of relief, Lisen pressed close, melded that lithe body to Daglish, who after a moment put an arm over Lisen’s shoulder.

“When we get down to the house,” Daglish warned, “you tell the whole thing to Beddoe, and then we’ll—”

Lisen jumped away from Daglish. “Oof. Mouse! It just ran at me!”

Daglish huffed, irritable. “Listen! When Beddoe—”

Lisen stepped, knees high, like a Russian dance, trying to keep her feet from the earth. “Look at all of them! They’re just staring at us!”

“Forget the damn mice!”

“No, Daglish! It’s...they’re all over!”

Daglish grabbed Lisen’s wrist. “I said cut with the squeamishness!”

But Lisen pulled away. Her voice rose with urgency, unable to stop. “It’s unnatural! The Babe too shouted about the mice. Demanded to know if I caught glimpse of mice, because he said that mice always arrive with the —”

The mice flowed toward me then and Daglish lifted the lantern to follow their direction of travel. I did nothing to hide, and the lantern light lit me up head to toe. I supposed myself that Daglish would finish what he’d started, and I felt too weary to counter it. I had nothing left in me to move against him. Yet a queer thing occurred. Lisen took another tumbling step away from Daglish. A horrible scream of fright. But one that was also a word: “*Agropelter!*”

You’d have expected that Daglish would have corrected her. That he would have said, “No, that’s just the Babe, who I shot some days ago.” But

he did not say that. He roared with a terrible fright as well, his hands grabbing at his belt knife, his eyes ever fixed on the sight of the creature before him. Clutching the knife, Daglish held it before him, pointed to fend off the beast's impending charge.

The Agropelter shoved with mighty force against the standing dead aspen—as Agropelters are known to do—and the old aspen trunk tilted, sprung back. A second time, the Agropelter put terrible and legendary strength against the aspen. The tree cannoned, splintering from its stump, gathering momentum for its plunge to earth, slowly and then fast, with Lisen and Daglish pinned in the shadow of its fall. Daglish shoved Lisen sprawling aside, an effort that cost Daglish the necessary moments in which the tree still fell slowly—before acceleration and gravity took full heave on the trunk, and a hefty section of topmost branch broke free: a widowmaker. It caught Daglish on the noggin as he dove away, broke the yolk, and swatted him crumpled to the ground, the same simple arc by which a swatter clops a fly from its flight line. I expect he had gone on before his limbs came to rest.

I stared at his corpse. As across a long expanse of water, I remember the tenderness I had nurtured for him, the roles I had sought to have us play: Skooch and Jack. Skooch and Jack. And so, I limped toward his unmoving figure and the gasping screams that its lifelessness compelled from Lisen.

Still Lisen seemed not to recognize me. She wriggled where she had fallen. Those beautiful glinting eyes beseeching the corpse beside her, then darting to following the progress of the Agropelter.

The creature stooped, and with a beastly paw, picked up the knife that Daglish had dropped. Lisen's mouth screamed all the while, and the screams intensified as the Agropelter rotated on heel to limp toward her. It peered down with its awful face, then knelt a huge animal bulk beside her. With knife in bloody fist, it traced the blade softly down her flinching, fear-held torso, not so much pressure as to even nick a scratch, much less slice a cut. At her crotch, the Agropelter applied gentle force—so shallow as to only slit the front fabric of her trousers in a line, no skin broken. She tried to flee but the Agropelter shifted its weight upon her, stilling her, but for her

tremors and screams. Again the Agropelter repeated a gentle slice at her nethers, this time at a slightly different angle, and then again, while the screaming carried on and on. From her crotch, the creature extracted only a bloodless fabric triangle and clutched it dear. Prize in fist, the Agropelter rose, then slipped the triangle to hang at the crook between its trunklike legs, and thus adorned, ambled slowly into the darkened and misty forest.

THE MASKER



Muffled beats in the hallway announce that I've found the party. The Riviera, with its threadbare carpets and dated Formica, is the only casino on the strip willing to host a week-long event for cross-dressers and trans women. For tonight's event, the organizers have rented the penthouse suite on the top floor of the south tower. A little vestibule separates the hallway from the penthouse, so it's not until I part the beaded curtains at the entryway that I take in both the scene and the accompanying rush of disappointment.

I will not be meeting friends here, and I am dumb for ever thinking I would. I am an eighth-grade girl who thought she'd find the clique of popular girls at a Tuesday night senior citizen bowling league. I see none of the girls from Facebook, none of the girls who wrote to say that they wanted to go. In fact, I see no one below the age of forty. Everyone already knows one another and looks two to five decades older than I am. Mostly cross-dressers, with a smattering of older trans women, discernable by button noses and buoyant boobs.

Tonight's theme is "Lingerie Love," named in remembrance of a longtime party attendee, Virginia Love, who loved lingerie and passed of a heart attack earlier in the year. On the piano in the center of the suite stands an 18" x 24" soft-focus memorial boudoir portrait of Virginia lounging in a red teddy. Fifties rock, the kind that kids dance to at bar mitzvah parties, plays from an unmanned DJ booth.

To my embarrassment, quite a few of the cross-dressers recognize me as "that online sissy," even though I'm wearing one of the most demure dresses of anyone there—a knee-length black cocktail dress. "Why didn't you wear one of your fabulous sissy outfits?" asks a middle-aged woman wearing a short prom dress, who has decided to be encouraging of what she takes to be a shy girl who needs a little prodding to bloom. "This is exactly the place where you could have worn those ruffles!"

"This is a Diane von Fürstenberg dress," I say. "I wanted to look classy."

A tall trans woman overhears and laughs, a sort of *tut-tut* sound. Ms. Prom Queen announces her drink needs refreshing, and the tall woman spins on a pair of wedge heels to appraise me. “You can’t expect a cross-dresser to care about brands,” she says. “They dress with their cocks, the shorter the skirt the better. Women dress for one another, which is why I can tell you: That’s a cute dress.”

“Yours, too,” I say, although I don’t actually like it. A white and black polka-dot dress with a flouncy skirt cut short enough that you can see the tattoo of a teddy bear on her left thigh.

“Thank you, honey. I’m Sally,” she says, leaning forward for an introductory air-kiss. “Sally Sanslaw.”

Her face is ageless, in the way that certain plastic surgeries erase years but don’t quite restore youth. Her face is familiar to me, not because I recognize Sally, but because I recognize faces like hers from years of perusing photos of trans women online. It’s a Baronowski, the work of the plastic surgeon in Chicago who gives all trans women who come to him the same pert, one-size-fits-all doll’s face, so that his patients resemble fembot sisters of varying heights and colors.

“I’m Krys,” I say.

“Good,” Sally says. “Now, Krys, tell me something important. Do I have lipstick on my teeth?”

—

Sally wants to introduce me to another trans woman, Olivia, who founded the party. But as we’re threading our way through the crowd, Sally shoots out a big beringed hand and grabs my wrist, like I’m about to step into traffic. “Look at that,” she says, “that’s some *Silence of the Lambs* shit.”

She’s looking at a very tall, older trans woman dressed like a dominatrix on the other side of the room.

“The outfit?” I’m a little shocked at her reference. The Buffalo Bill character is a real sore spot for trans women. They won’t shut up about it online.

“No,” Sally corrects me, and pulls me a foot to the left. “Behind her!”

Cross-dressers in various sorts of fetish attire fill the room. To me it either all looks like spectacle or none of it looks like spectacle, so I can’t figure out what the *Silence of the Lambs* shit might be.

Then I see the masker.

“Oh, shit!” The words come out involuntarily.

“Yeah,” says Sally. “Told you.”

Eyeholes in a garish motionless face, the barest bump of a ski-jump nose and fat red lips perpetually parted on the cusp of a moan. A bad blond wig. It takes me a moment to process the costume that hangs from the curves of the full-body silicone suit. It’s an abused cheerleader getup: flared skirt, white top embroidered with the letter *C* in a collegiate font, but the arm hangs in a sling, and a purple circle of makeup smeared on the face approximates a black eye. The masker is alone, at the edge of the dance floor, vamping like a starlet at his reflection in the plateglass windows, the poreless silicone skin wrinkling and folding at the joints.

“Olivia said he was coming.” Sally fumes. “He was on an episode of *My Strange Addiction* on TLC. There were a bunch of female maskers, but the episode focused on him, even though he never took off his mask. I told Olivia to refund his money, but she has no standards. She thinks anyone who registers can come. I didn’t go through everything”—Sally waves up and down her body—“to be in the same club with that kind of pervert. But Olivia wouldn’t listen.”

I’m openly staring at the masker. When he turns, two eyes glittering in the mask catch mine. I expect him to stop moving, but he doesn’t; he gyrates more, putting on a show for Sally and me, his movements heavy with sexual gratification. I can see nothing beneath the skirt and silicone skin, but from the disturbing knowledge that comes from distinguishing in others the parts of yourself that you most hate, I just know that beneath that silicone suit, his cock is hard.

“If he doesn’t stop looking at me, I swear I’m gonna punch him,” says Sally. For a moment, I tell myself that she’s wrong, that you can’t judge someone, much less punch someone, for enjoying their fetish. But no, this

is icky. He is icky. Icky in a way that disturbs me, icky in the ways I suspect the ugliest parts of myself to be. He reminds me of pictures I've taken of myself alone, in outfits that speak to some deep archetypal part of me—my body hidden in ruffles, my hard cock peeping out, my eyes dilated from the pleasure of it. Pink fog, cross-dressers call it—the distorting euphoria of dressing, of finally giving in.

Other people are staring at him now too. Some smirking, some disgusted. He turns back to his reflection in the window, running his hands up and down his silicone skin, stripper style, pink fog degassing through the seams of the suit.

This is my first-ever trip to Vegas. I'd never seen the allure until recently, now that I live in the drabest part of rural Iowa. These days, I'm like a bird for anything shiny and glitzy.

I graduated from college with a bachelor's in American Studies, which everyone had warned me would be useless, and which everyone was right about. I received exactly one job offer: as an archivist at the largest collection of railroad memorabilia in the country, housed at Grinnell College, in Grinnell, Iowa, a small liberal arts school sandwiched into the thin plane between dead blond corn and anvil sky.

My last year of college, I barely went out. On Friday nights, while my friends pregame and played beer pong, I camped out in my dorm room with the door locked, jerking off to forced feminization erotica, or browsing fetish clothes on eBay. The prospect of Iowa and the train museum appeared more and more enticing as a retreat, a place to resolve my weird gender shit, to dress up alone and read those forced femme stories, or better yet, to figure out how to never dress up again, then arrive to some glimmering coastal metropolis triumphant and cured.

But nothing has really changed, except that I'm lonely, and that now, I know so fucking much about trains. Want to know what distinguishes the standard wheel layout on a 1912 ALCO steam locomotive from the company's distinctive "mountain" edition locomotive of the same year? Neither do I. But the difference between the two, I can tell you, is that the

4-8-2 wheel arrangement on the mountain edition was better for pulling heavy loads up steep slopes than the more efficient and standard 2-8-4.

Usually, the most exciting moment of my day comes when I check the messages on the Facebook profile for my girl self. I post a lot of selfies in different outfits on there, and some porny shots too. My inbox is all flattering, pushy letters from men in faraway cities and countries (*hi! i love u shemale lady! walk on me! step on me all over?*). Last fall, I had around two thousand followers. But after I got a sissy dress, my follower count exploded.

A Republican fundraiser in Florida sent me the dress. I figured out who he was when a pair of panties he sent me came with a receipt charged to a credit card in his real name. The dress is classic sissy fetish—super-pretty boys dressed in ridiculously feminine satin outfits—frills and bows dripping in a profusion not seen on a cis woman since the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When I opened the box, the ruffles of the petticoat spilled from their confines like over-carbonated soda. Of all the cross-dresser fetishes you can have, the sissy fetish is probably the most embarrassing. At least women wear latex and leather, but only sissies wear sissy dresses. Still, the first time I saw myself in it, saw the silhouette I cut in the full short skirt and puffy sleeves, I never wanted to take it off. The dress overwhelms my body. My shoulders, my biceps, my narrow hips? All invisible when I wear a sissy dress. The only thing you see is the most old-fashionedly girly of shapes. There's a kind of safety in it too. You can't even shame me for not looking like a woman, because it's a sissy dress—calling me a faggot or a perv when I wear it is just redundant.

At first, I just wore the dress to read my favorite type of stories: forced feminization erotica on sites like Fictionmania or Nifty.org. All the stories followed the same basic narrative—a powerful person feminizes an ostensibly unwilling male who comes to accept his (or her) feminization. The stories just swap in an author's preferred fetishes, details, and acceptable degree of coercion. I liked the ones with the handsome men making a boy into a sissy girl. I discovered forced femme stories when I was thirteen, and have been reading them since. There are twenty thousand

or so stories on just the Fictionmania website, and my sense of aloneness dissipates when I imagine the sheer volume of people not just writing but reading shared versions of my sexuality and fantasies. And then, once I had the sissy outfit, I could suddenly dress like the boys in the stories, not just read about them.

I only had to post a few pics of myself sissified and pouting before some sissy blogs and Tumblrs discovered them. I hit the five thousand friends count allowed by Facebook within a month, and I had to make a page for myself as a celebrity. Then these other girls, also part-time cross-dressers, but flirting with transition and porn, with follower counts in the tens of thousands, started liking my photos, commenting on my posts, and chatting with me. The other girls go on and off of hormones that they buy online—trying to sand off their masculine edges and lessen secondary sex attributes, without necessarily altering the fundamental structures of their bodies. But I haven't tried hormones.

In the same way that one might offer to lend a DVD or book, the other girls and I pass around our gift-buying fans, mostly married men or cross-dressers who can't pass and who live vicariously through us. I get the sissies and sissy-lovers. After a month or two, I started having phone sex with some of them, which resulted in a closet foaming with ruffles. Finally, I started asking for gift cards to Sephora instead, which I sometimes get, but more grudgingly.

I don't really need the clothes—I only ever wear them in my apartment anyway. I just like getting gifts, because something about getting gifts lets me feel my femininity and value in ways I can't access by myself. I get to see myself through the eyes of men and collect material proof that I'm pretty. Like, how pretty did they think I was last week? Six satin panties, a \$20 Sephora gift card, and a Modcloth.com retro-style dress worth of pretty.

Last Saint Patrick's Day, in a Jimmy John's, a couple of college girls with shamrocks painted on their faces one table over triggered a double despair meltdown in me: I would never be feminine like them. On top of that, I remembered the previous Saint Patty's Day, when I went drinking with Danny in New York City, back when I was handsome with light

stubble and a well-cut wool jacket. Then, it didn't make me feel weird to have Danny's friendly drunken arm over my shoulders in a way that I know it now would; feeling the weight of it, with my face close to his, imagining what he'd think if he ever saw me in my sissy dress. A combination of grief and disgust at myself welled up and fell as tears into the gross avocado paste that Jimmy John's slathers on their sandwiches, while the shamrock girls carefully ignored my muffled boo-hoos.

I collected myself enough to glance at my reflection in the plateglass window and then had a sense that maybe my tear-stained face looked tragic. The vanity of that assessment cut short my pity party and I resolved to do more than just dress frilly alone online.

The next week, some of my Facebook girls told me about a weeklong gathering for "trans feminine people" in Vegas. One that actually looked fun: all fruity cocktails and dressing up slutty, none of the panels on voice training, surgery, or activism that made all the other trans conferences seem so deadly. I bought plane tickets that night: one hundred and fifty bucks on Hooters Air, Des Moines to Vegas roundtrip, chicken wings included.

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Out on the penthouse balcony, Sally smokes and fumes. "That freak makes me so mad. I'm all woman. I changed everything. I went through so much. And he thinks he can put on a mask and be like me? Have other people think I'm like him? No, I'm not standing for that."

Sally is an ex-DEA special agent who became a professional bowler in a women's league when she transitioned. None of the other partygoers approach us, except to nod. "Everybody knows I'm a cranky bitch," Sally explains. Sally has been named as one of *Out* magazine's trans pioneers. I'm a bit gratified that she sees me as a woman that she fights for, rather than a fetishist like the masker, because firstly, her ire is impressive, and secondly, I wouldn't necessarily see myself as such a sure bet for her team, even though I'm flattered to be picked.

She's currently enmeshed in a protracted lawsuit with the California chapter of the Professional Women's Bowling Association, who tried to ban her from tournaments on the basis of her being a trans woman. She's had over a decade of harassment, starting from the first time *CBS Sports* featured her on a broadcast. After that, people spat on her. Threw cups of beer at her at bowling alleys. "Who cares when old fat men get all worked up at me?" she's saying. "What kind of losers make women's bowling their crusade anyway? But I've had moms get their daughters, these cute little angels, to come up to me like they were going to ask for an autograph, and then the mom says, 'Honey, that's the freak who's ruining women's bowling!' " She coughs. "Said that right to my face—like women's bowling is some china plate I took a shit on. Breaks my heart. I worked hard to be good—" She drops one hand to cup a massive boob, the filter of her lit cigarette pressed to her bust. "I had to relearn my whole approach just so I wouldn't smack myself in the tits every frame."

She had perfected her bowling in a league with her DEA buddies. "That was my life," she says. "You make a bust in the day—you get drunk at the lanes at night. We had an agency league. I was a real bastard. Now I hate the agency, cops, all those types, and they hate me back. But I'll tell you something." She smirks and taps my hand excitedly. "I still shoot at the same range where cops go—*blam blam blam*—right on target, so they know what's coming to them if they fuck with me."

She's a good storyteller, one anecdote gliding right into the next, her voice—croaky from what I assumed was tobacco but turns out to be botched voice surgery—rising and falling for emphasis. Already she's on to the story of how she got outed in her branch of the agency. She had tried to just be a cross-dresser. In the early nineties, eBay auctions freed her to buy as much slutty bimbo apparel as she wanted. Blond wigs, thigh-high boots, bustiers, corsets, fishnets, the works.

Then one day, one of her DEA buddies asked her if she had an eBay account, and could she bid on a car he's selling to drive up the price? Sure, she said, and did. Back in those days, other people on eBay could look at the buying history of anyone who bid on your item to verify that they were

likely to pay. Her friend looked at her buying history. “I got a call in the middle of the night,” she says. “Got told not to show up at work, that faggot trannies get what’s coming. I called in sick for a week. Finally, I called one of my friends, and he called me a faggot, too, but his wife talked to me. She told me that word about me was already out.”

That next weekend, the Los Angeles division of the DEA held their yearly Christmas party. They had rented a karaoke machine, and each department nominated a couple of guys to develop an act. Three hundred DEA agents and their wives sat facing the stage when Sally sauntered in, dressed in a sexy Mrs. Claus outfit—the red velvet minidress trimmed in faux white fur and knee-high black leather boots. Six hundred eyes of the law trained themselves on Sally.

“Isn’t someone going to buy a girl a drink?” Sally asked to a silent room. No one said anything, and finally her superior said, “Someone get him a drink.” She downed the whiskey handed to her, marched up to the stage, picked up the microphone, and sang a rendition of Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’ ” a cappella, because of course no one moved to cue up the song when she asked for it. To hear her tell it, you could’ve heard a pin drop. Then she announced her resignation from the force and catwalked out. “My bitch ex-wife got half of everything. I even had to sell the ’57 Chevy hot rod I restored, but I sold it super cheap so she’d get half of almost nothing. And half of it for me was still enough to buy Miss Muffin.”

“Miss Muffin?”

“That’s what I named my pussy. She’s real pretty. I showed her to my cousin, and she said mine looked better than hers.”

The badass Christmas party story impressed me—but c’mon, Miss Muffin? I must have made a face.

“You’ll have one too,” she assures me. “I can tell—you in your little DVF dress. You’re the type that’s gonna want one real bad real soon.”

The Miss Muffin thing weirds me out. As does the idea of anyone thinking about my potential vagina. “I don’t think so,” I say. “I mean, no

offense, but I'm not dysphoric about my junk. I think I'm all right just being a cross-dresser."

She scoffs. "Look, you want to end up like them in there?" She jerks a thumb at the cross-dressers inside the suite. "I don't think so. I'm a real woman. And I'll bet my left tit that you're gonna want to be one too."

—

A tall man with wavy dark hair, glinting stubble, and a well-fitting light gray suit sits next to me at a blackjack table to which I've escaped the party and Sally's hectoring about my womanhood. The guy looks like Superman, if Clark Kent had gotten into ballet instead of Kryptonite steroid abuse. I've only played blackjack twice before, but I'm up thirty dollars—which, for once this week, makes me feel like a cosmic winner. Then, on the first hand I play next to Superman, I go bust. He *tsks* at me.

"You should have split your cards," he says.

I don't know what it means to split my cards. I glance at the dealer. She holds my look, but her face stays flat and impassive. I want to ask the rules of splitting, but since it's been imprinted on me that everyone in Vegas will shark me, I'm afraid of making her, the room, the cosmos, aware that I don't even know the rules of the game on which I've put money.

"What will you drink?" the skinny Superman asks me, and snaps his fingers at a passing cocktail waitress, somehow elegantly, in a way that makes me think he must be European.

"Nothing, thanks."

"Nothing to drink? Every trans woman that I've ever met has been a dedicated alcoholic. But not you?"

A heat passes through my chest. I know I don't pass to anyone who looks at me longer than a minute or two—but he sees me as a trans woman, rather than just a cross-dresser. Maybe I don't pass as a woman, but at least it looks like I eat their hormones. "No, I'm not an alcoholic," I say, grasping for hauteur. "My vices are emotional."

Superman laughs. “Here’s a tip: A line like that is a dead giveaway that you’re an innocent. Old cynics know to at least fake naïveté.” Some sort of slight accent—a generic European sophistication—gives extra weight to his appraisal. I can’t think of a good response. Superman orders a whiskey and then he and the dealer, who paused while he ordered, exchange some rapid Spanish—he’s one of those men, apparently, for whom all women’s actions politely cease when his attention wanders elsewhere—and only when he focuses back on her does she resume flicking out new cards. He slides his cards off the table with a hand that looks manicured, the motions so gliding that his limbs appear nearly without joints. Without averting his glance from the cards, that same hand gracefully deducts a short stack of chips from a larger one and tosses them onto the felt for a bet.

I spin on the stool and look at him openly. He must be in his mid-forties—his skin tan and slightly sunburned, like he spent the day at a pool, and there are asterisks of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, while the irises stand out caramel against the sunburn. “Are you negging me?” I ask.

“I’m sorry, negging?”

“The pickup artist’s trick. Where you subtly insult a girl to make her focus her attention on you, prove you wrong.”

When he speaks, his tone has changed, now earnest and almost fatherly. “No, I’m not negging you, I am flirting. I called you young and offered you a drink, because yes, I would like to pick you up.”

—

He picks me up. It’s thrilling. He takes me to the Voodoo Lounge on the top floor of the Rio Casino, hundreds of feet up, where I catch a reflection of myself in the dark glass, and can’t quite believe how glamorous I look. The desert breeze toys with strands of my wig, presses my skirt to my legs and lets it spinnaker behind my ass, while a slim besuited Superman gently steers me by the elbow, as he might the tiller of a sailboat in a light wind. Felix is his name, an Argentine doctor, an ob-gyn, now living in Los Angeles. Even the cis women, the tall beauties in bandage dresses, can’t

help but to appraise him and pass hopefully close, their unfamiliar envy more soothing to me than even the balmy breeze.

He's honest with me. He's got a wife and daughter back in L.A., but he likes trans women. He comes to Vegas every few months. Sometimes he goes to the Las Vegas Lounge and picks up a girl for the weekend and they pretend they are a couple. "I've been living in this country for twenty years," he says, "but my wife is Argentine too. And she would never understand. Maybe if I had grown up here, I would have married a transsexual. We Argentines get mocked as the last holdout of Freudian psychoanalysis, but actually we're repressed about what we want." I laugh knowingly, even though I've never heard this stereotype, much less made fun of an Argentine for it. Maybe someday I will.

He shows me pictures of his house on his phone. They're taken from a lounge chair in the backyard, like one of those shots that girls take of their thighs at the beach, only instead of the tanned hot dog legs and ocean, there's a pair of trousers tipped in oxblood leather brogue shoes, set against a very blue pool in the foreground and a view of the hills outside L.A. backdropping the scene.

He tells me that I'd make a good wife, that I'm funny, that I cast my eyes down shyly when I laugh. The idea of myself as a wife, of belonging to a man like this, makes me feel demure, vulnerable, and turned on. I'm suddenly very aware of my nipples.

"I want to take you shopping tomorrow," he proposes, then holds up a hand, as though I'm about to interrupt, when already I'm nodding enthusiastically. "I know, it's very *Pretty Woman*. But one of the fun things about girls like you is how excited you get over clothes. My wife, she doesn't like to dress up for me like that. I love shopping with the girls I meet here."

I squeeze his hand in a yes. This is why I've spent so many cold Iowa nights under the covers touching myself: my online sissy fantasy daddy come to life.

He appraises my dress. "If you like designer dresses, we can go to some of the high-end boutiques, but—" He pauses and beckons me forward with

a finger, and when I lean toward him, he says softly, “I want you to wear a pair of sheer panties. I want your cock on display to me through your panties every time you change clothes.”

I’m in so much pink fog, it’s as if 1850s London were a city in Candy Land.

Felix and I get out of the taxi back at the Riviera. Even at 3:30 A.M., guests line the taxi queue. Felix is in charge, paying the taxi, tipping the valet. I let myself daydream about the movie *Casino*, where, in a voice-over, Robert De Niro muses that the taxi valets are the most connected men in Vegas, the men who know who arrives with whom, who has drugs, the destinations of the cars into which climb starlets and high rollers.

“Hey!”

I think about Sharon Stone in that movie, with her short dresses and the long blond seventies hair bound up in a high pony. That Vegas hustler girl she played, in love with a skeezy con man, taking the casino mafioso men for a ride, even as they constantly humiliated her. Ever since Felix told me that he wanted to see me in sheer panties, he’s been calling me Princess. The men in the forced femme stories always call their prey Princess. And the sissy-lovers online also call me Princess. But the word is more intense in real life—people overhear, and each time feels like I’m being complimented and put in my place all at once.

“Hey!”

This is a glamorous moment, the first taste of a future me. A handsome man is coming back to my hotel room. Tomorrow, he’s going to dress me up, make me his prize. Felix puts his hand on my lower back, one finger tracing the top of my panties through the fabric of my dress. I press into him coyly, Sharon Stone-style.

“Hey! Rubber boy!”

Felix’s hand stops its panty exploration. There’s a large woman staring at me, waving her hand to get my attention. Some lizard part of my brain

processes that she's trans, even before I recognize her as Sally.

"You going somewhere with him?" she demands. She's angry and intimidating. I suddenly see how she could have been a bastard cop. A big French-tipped hand points at Felix. The partiers in line for a taxi titter and glances bounce from Sally to me. Any sense of glamour seeps away as anticipation crackles through the drunken taxi line: tranny fight!

Instead of walking around the velvet rope for the taxi queue, Felix reaches to unclip it, fumbles with the clip, and then annoyed, steps awkwardly over the fuzzy-caterpillar part of the partition. He's talking as he disentangles his legs. "What is your problem with me?" It's the first time all night I've seen him lose his grace.

"My problem is that you're a pervert. My problem is that you don't belong here. You're not part of our sisterhood."

That Felix is not part of any sisterhood seems obvious to me, still standing in the taxi queue with an audience of strangers. Sally points at me again. "My problem is that now I see you snatching off the youngest girl at the party." Her volubility falters, and she waves her hand. "For whatever *Silence of the Lambs* shit you're into."

There it is again. *Silence of the Lambs*. And then, abruptly, like two film slides superimposed over each other, I see the match. His manicured hands, which I had found sophisticatedly European, now obviously feminine. His slim figure, no longer dashing, but fey and cephalopodan. Those glittering eyes, now cold. The masker.

I'm on the other side of the velvet rope without even knowing how I got there. My dad's eyes pop out unattractively when he's affronted, and although I've never seen myself angry, I've heard mine do too. "Did you follow me to the blackjack table?" The accusations sputter out of me. "You were staring at me at the party! You followed me! You tricked me!"

Sally closes in alongside me. "What were you planning to do with her? Make yourself a real skin suit?"

A confused laugh barks out from the taxi queue. The masker cocks his head at me, almost morosely. "Felix" now seems like a disguise, while the

mask showed his true self. “How could I trick you? I was only nice to you,” he says. “I didn’t lie to you; I tried to be what you wanted.”

“Leave her alone,” Sally says.

And then, the masker’s expression sours, and his voice lowers into a snarl. “You leave me alone, you freak. You’ve hounded me since before I even showed up.”

Sally tuts, a dismissal.

The masker points at her face, sneers, and observes, “At least I can take my masks off. You’re botched plastic surgery Barbie forever.”

Her inhale is audible. With that, he’s away, pushing out across the parking lot, while the taxi queue gawks, with mounting disappointment, at the two trannies who neglect to fight each other.

—

I’m awake, disoriented in an unfamiliar hotel room, the crusts of old makeup stinging my eyes. On the far side of the king bed lies Sally, her long red hair waterfalling over the pillows, beer-bottle-green eyes watching me. She croaks out a good morning and lights a cigarette. Her room is bigger than mine, white sunlight hitting a balcony beyond a gauzy curtain. The night before plays through the cracked lens of my mind’s projector, and I say thank you to her, recalling her rescue, and then my attempts to calm her down after she confronted Felix, attempts that ended up with me falling asleep in her room. She seemed so sad, so lonely, and so grateful when I offered to sleep there.

“I got a T-shirt you can wear, and some shorts, if you don’t want to do the walk of shame back to your room,” she says. She won’t let me thank her, cuts me off to insist that sisters look out for each other. She decides that she’ll take me around for the day. That she’s my big sister has become a fact, without my really acceding to it.

“Everything on the Vegas Strip is overpriced,” she says, lighting another cigarette and opening the door to her balcony. “You get washed and changed. I have a car. We can go into the real Vegas. We’ll have some

wonton soup for lunch, and then I'm going to get my hair styled. You come with and we'll see what Lety—that's the girl who does my hair—can do for you. She's in a place far from the strip—it's called Curl Up and Dye, isn't that cute?"

I tell her that I wear wigs, but she shakes her head, like I've said something childish. "There comes a day where you have to give that up. Every girl should wear her own hair—you let Lety work on you today." She regards me. "Even in your boy clothes, she'll know you're a girl."

I've got blond highlights now, and my hair has a pixie look to it—I keep wanting to examine it in the reflection of my phone. But in the dark of the tiki bar, the faux thatch ceiling dimly illuminated only by the light of digital poker machines, I can't make out any detail. I cried when I saw my hair—out of happiness, actually, the whole salon experience, treated like a woman in a room full of women, the way Lety fussed over my hair, and how she took for granted that I'd want the blond to bring out the flecks of gold in my eyes, that she even noticed those flecks, in the way that I've seen women instinctively notice and appraise one another's attributes—all of it added up to waterworks when she passed me a hand mirror so that I could examine my hair from all sides. Sally started to cry, too, and then Lety teared up—then all these salon girls, tattooed Latinas, going "Awww."

Now at the tiki bar, Sally's drinking out of a souvenir cup in the shape of a tiki head. She collects them, and you can only get them by ordering cocktails at this bar, she insists. A picture on her phone shows an entire shelf of them in a cramped room decorated in the color scheme of Malibu Barbie's DreamHouse. The photo hurts my heart. As does almost everything else she says as she gets drunk. She has plans to take me to Victoria's Secret once I start hormones, which she has taken as a given that I have been dying to do, because, she says, every girl dreams about her first trip to VS. I imagine some poor salesgirl scoffing to her friends, after fitting me for a bra with giant Sally watching and prattling on about her little

sister. The thought of it makes me hate myself, hate how I'm saddled with a stupid fetish or gender or whatever that constantly, slowly compels me to rob myself of any dignity. It also makes me sort of hate Sally. Sally talks the bartender into selling her three souvenir cups without having to buy cocktails. To me, it seems like he agrees in order to not have to talk to her anymore, but when he turns away, she strikes an ultra girly coquettish pose, bent at the wrists with her nails under her chin. "I always get the cute girl discount!"

It's all I can do not to point out that she's in her sixties.

She tells me what kind of dress to wear when I next see my parents. "You have to show them your womanhood," she advises. "They have to see it. Otherwise they'll never accept that it's true." Then she offers to talk to my parents for me. She says she's great with mothers.

I recoil at the idea. I've never seen my mom wear makeup. And although she makes her living as a corporate lawyer whose main function seems to be telling any opposing male counsel to go creatively fuck himself, she has the disdain for femininity of second-wave feminism without the accompanying sense of female solidarity. When I brought home my first girlfriend, who wore eyeliner for the occasion, and a shirt that revealed her bra straps, my mom beckoned me into the other room and told me, loudly enough for my girlfriend to overhear, to keep my hussies out of both her house and my little sister's sight. My mom would dismiss Sally as a grotesque of womanhood, a cautionary example of man's own sexist fantasies overtaking him. Were Sally to approach her to suggest that her only son become exactly that sort of grotesque, my mom would open the floodgates holding back the malice and bitterness that she usually only lets trickle into her family life.

"I think it's better you stay far away from my mom," I say.

Even in the dim light, I can see Sally jerk back, as though I had slapped her. "It's just that my mom is kind of a bitch," I add, to soften my reaction.

"Don't talk about your mother that way," Sally snaps. "You don't know when she'll be all you have."

We don't say much for a few minutes. Rockabilly music plays, and with every sip of my vanilla-flavored drink, I can smell the lingering odor of the products in my hair. Finally, Sally says, "I have a plan for that creepy masker. I know you'll want to help."

She orders one more drink for each of us—mine comes in a teal tiki mug that will round out this year's collection—and lays out her scheme. Thursday night, two nights away, is the night of the party buses. Every year on Thursday, all the cross-dressers and trans women put on outrageous outfits, pile into neon-lit buses with stripper poles and open bars, and drive from casino to casino, making grand entrances and flash mobbing the gaming floors with trannies. It's supposed to be the most fun night of the whole week.

To prevent robbery or cheating, it's illegal to wear a mask in any casino in Vegas, says Sally. "It's useful being an ex-cop. I know all the laws here, and I checked up on it." The Riv knows that there are CDs all over, Sally explains, but the other casinos don't. According to Sally, the Cosmopolitan in particular really hates trans girls—they got sued for kicking out trans women who use women's bathrooms. "It's the newest place on the strip; their whole thing is being classy. That's the place that really won't want a masker inside. They already want to harass us, but they don't have the right." She puts her hand lightly on my arm for emphasis. "But they can legally arrest the masker. He'll be charged with a felony."

"That seems kind of harsh," I say.

Her hand on my arm tightens. "Girl, you don't understand men yet. He probably would have raped you."

The accusation lands like an alien. I understand vaguely, intellectually, that I am rapeable, but the possibility isn't an emotional reality for me. Sally goes on. "That freak is not a woman. He uses us. He uses our struggle so he can get off on his perversions. You understand? We struggle! People spit on me! They boo me! But I still show up at the lanes, to prove that I deserve my womanhood. That you deserve yours! I don't do it so some freak can put on a mask and rape young girls."

The couple beside us, blond Midwestern types, whip their heads around at her outburst. Sally glares back. For a second, I think she's going to insult them.

"So you're going to call in an anonymous tip or something?" I ask, willing her attention back on me. "Have security waiting and on the lookout for a masker?"

"Not quite," says Sally. "Everyone already knows that I hate the masker. I threw a fuss when he signed up for this. I need an alibi. So that's why you have to call in the tip."

—

It's eight p.m. and an indoor sun appears to be setting over the gently ruined Italianate shops. Painted pink clouds float completely still overhead, and everyone shopping looks gorgeous in the golden light. I know it's an illusion, and I know that I should find the illusion cheap—but the indoor Venetian walkway at the Forum Shops at Caesars are blowing my mind. I know that everything in Vegas is a replica, but the Forum Shops are more like my fantasy of Venice than Venice could ever be: the sunlight always hovering at the golden hour, cars never having been invented, the aging streets gleaming spotlessly, and a man who looked like a fashion magazine's idea of Italian masculine beauty guiding me gracefully along. Felix, holding my hand, really looks amazing.

He'd knocked on my door in the late afternoon. "Hey Princess," he said when I swung open the door. "Can I come in?" It was like the end of last night hadn't happened. He wanted to take me shopping, just as he had promised. He'd seen a black body-con-style dress in one of the windows. He said he couldn't wait to see me try it on.

It's the "Princess" that made me give in. The whole thing perfectly followed the scripts of the forced feminization erotica stories I'd been reading my whole life. I knew my role, and whatever realities actually existed between me and him, whatever plot Sally had for us, whatever thing Felix did with his masks, I wanted to put it all out of my mind. *The Odyssey*

might be the foundational text for Western culture, but forced femme erotica is the foundational text for closeted cross-dressers, and I'm erotica-literate enough to know that the stories only get hot when authors don't mess up the basic narrative: When a man calls you Princess and wants to dress you up, a sissy will blush and defer to his strength.

Under a Styrofoam stone arch, Felix sets down on a bench a shopping bag from Marc Jacobs, inside of which lies a cute dress in a flowered pattern. It wasn't what I would have chosen for myself, but half the fun is in letting Felix dress me, being a man's dress-up doll, having him tell the clerk at the store, with complete confidence, which dresses he wanted me to try on, and watching how she, in the face of Felix's confidence and Amex, maintains the conceit that it is perfectly natural for him to bring in a boy to try on the dresses. Each time, I barely had to speak. Felix only took me to the more expensive stores, where the commissions were high enough no one cared who was buying.

At my hotel room, Felix insisted that he hadn't followed me last night, and I believed him. Now, at the Forum Shops, he points to the window display of Agent Provocateur. Quietly, he says, "I want to buy you those sheer panties, Princess. You'd love that, wouldn't you?"

I meet his eyes and nod.

"Then say you're sorry."

I want to pull back slightly, but his grip is tight on my arm. Fear lightly twangs the strings of my nerves. Not fear that he will hit me, but fear that he will somehow humiliate me in this ersatz Venice. "I don't...I don't understand. Sorry for what?"

"For last night. You judged me. You accused me."

"I thought you had followed me. I felt tricked."

"That's not an apology." His eyes narrow and his crow's-feet lengthen. I don't know him very well, but the twanging of my nerves increases.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you or judged you."

"That was pretty hypocritical of you, wasn't it? You're a little pervert sissy faggot, aren't you? You think you have the right to judge me?"

The words sting, especially since they come when I'm in the fanciest mall in Vegas, vulnerable and dependent on him. I gather myself, remind myself that no one can talk to me that way, but as I do, he smirks slightly, and suddenly I realize that he's both deadly serious about the apology, and that this is a sexual game.

"Yes." I pause, but I say what I know he wants. "I'm a little pervert."

"And a sissy faggot."

"And a sissy faggot." People are walking right by us. I try to keep my gaze on him, try not to look to see if they've heard.

"Yes, you are. You don't know anything. That's why you need a man like me to take care of you. Now tell me, Princess, I bet you need a new pair of panties, don't you? I bet yours just got all wet."

He's right. I'm hard. Gaggles of tourists walk by, and I'm standing there with my clit, or cock, or whatever, straining against the light fabric of my drawstring pants, as nervous and turned on as I've ever been. I try to arrange my satchel, the purse that could pass for androgynous, to cover my crotch. Felix slides his hand down my arm, and for a second, I both fear and hope that he's going to touch me there. I can't tell if it's me, or if the amazing sunset-emulating lights have changed slightly, but everything—the glitzy storefronts, the plaster ruins, Felix's skin tone, have all gotten richer, more saturated and vivid. My senses are awake like they've never been, like I'm some kind of tropical prey, holding dead still, but taking in torrents of unprocessed sensory stimuli as a panther pads softly by. Felix doesn't touch me, instead he pulls away my satchel and places it at my side, revealing the hard-on barely hidden in the tent of my pants without ever touching it. Then the sex and menace in his stance recede.

"I know my masking is new to you. But don't you understand? It's because I, too, have fetishes that I know so well how you need to be treated. You're a lucky girl that you met a masker."

I apologize again, and tell him that I'm sure he's right, that I'm lucky. He reaches down, and lightly, so that almost no one could catch it, pats the tent of my linen pants. "All right, Princess. Now you're in the right condition to try on those panties for me."

Felix has parked his BMW on a pullout on the highway up to the Red Rock Canyon. Below, darkened patches at the outskirts of the city mar the messy grid of Vegas streetlights, where only a few houses in the failed developments of the housing boom are illuminated. My mouth tastes like semen. Up until ten minutes ago, I didn't really know what a man's semen tasted like, but now my mouth is thick with the flavor, and I'm still not sure how to describe what it actually tastes like, but it won't go away, no matter how much I swallow. Felix is talking about those abandoned developments, but I'm barely listening. I'm focused on my internal monologue, as if I'm split, my one half of consciousness outside myself, talking to the other half, which is inside of me, but quiet, listening and emoting as it's lectured. *Krys, you're a cocksucker now*, is what the part outside of me keeps saying. The part of me inside my body, listening, wants to be ashamed, but is instead helplessly excited at each repetition. *Krys, you blew a man in his car while he spanked your pantied ass. Krys, you are officially a cum-eating whore. Krys, this man bought your slut mouth for the price of a dress. And then, weirdly: Krys, now you will never be president of the United States.*

I jump. Felix has pinched my thigh. "Are you listening to me, Princess?"

"Oh, I spaced out—a little dazed."

He leans over and puts one finger under my chin, gently turning my head toward him. "A little ditzy. That's cute. But I was just saying that you're an ungrateful bitch."

"What? Why?"

Did I do it wrong? Was I bad at it?

"Because you're wasting a gift."

I can't think of anything he'd given me that I'd wasted. But he goes on, "Almost everyone at that party is wasting a gift. The trans women especially." His fingers find mine and intertwine. I'm dismayed that his grip reveals how much thicker my hands are than his. I have stout hands, unfortunately, a terror to play Mercy against.

“Let me tell you something.” It’s dark enough in the car that I mostly see his profile in outline. He doesn’t wait for my assent. “I’m in private practice now, but about five years ago, I was working in a public hospital in L.A. I saw a lot of horrible things. Always on call, delivering preemies for mothers who’d just as soon have let the baby die. There was a lot of burnout among doctors; there’s NA and AA meetings just for MDs. But I was always known as very calm, very together, very reliable. I’m that way as a husband too. You know why?”

I understand that I’m supposed to answer. “No, why?”

“Because on the bad days, I went home and put on a female mask, and I felt sexy and relaxed and at peace. Do you know what a gift that is? Normal people, they have to drink alcohol, they have to take cocaine, to kick their dogs, bully their wives, or punch strangers at bars. But you and I have a superpower. You can just go home and put on a sissy dress. But you’re not grateful for your gift. You think it means something is wrong with you, that you should be a woman. Actually, you are as you were intended to be. Every transsexual I have met has wasted their gift and picked up so many worse habits to replace it. But our gift can bring us joy.”

In the dark, I feel his hand drop mine. Lightly he traces the outline of my clit with the back of his nails through the panties he got me. I haven’t come yet, and almost instantly, my body responds. I like what he’s saying. I’ve told myself similar things so many times. Why can’t I just let my cross-dressing be a fetish? What if I was unashamed of it and let it be a small, contained, but important part of my life? What if I just owned it? If I told my friends—hey, this is something I like and do alone, same as anything they’re into. Why does my particular fetish have to take such precedence that I change my whole life, my whole body, just to accord with it? Why can’t it be a gift just as it is?

“Everything is in balance for me.” Felix is still toying with me. “You’ve seen pictures of my house and pool. I love being a father—I taught my daughter to play soccer, and she’s varsity even though she’s only a freshman. My parents back in Argentina get to be grandparents. You understand? It’s a good life.” I’m grinding my pelvis back against his hand

and Felix is saying, “I take care of my family, and I have my little escapades. My favorite is when I can share them with someone like you. I want more with you. You’re so pretty. Men will want you just as you are. If you embrace yourself, you’ll always have people to share yourself with. But you listen to someone like that plastic surgery nightmare you were with the other day, and you’ll end up like it.”

The *it* startles me out of my lust. A wrong note played against the rhythm of his stroking. I picture Sally. The way she cried for me when I showed off my hair. “She hates you,” I say.

“Yes, I know.” His hand goes still. “Sally has been threatening me online since I signed up for this week. She appears to be a very lonely and sad person.”

“Yes, but don’t underestimate her.”

“Why would you say that? Why would I need to estimate her at all?”

I want his smooth hand back on me. “Okay,” I say, “but don’t get mad; she was just talking.” And then I tell him about her plan, how she figured out it was illegal to wear masks in the casino, and how she wanted me to call in a tip.

“I wasn’t going to report you,” I assure him, although I hadn’t really decided until I remembered her plan just now. “I just listened to her vent because I thought you had tricked me. But maybe it’s actually good that she still wants me to call it in, because I can say I will, and then she’ll miss her chance.” I feel pretty satisfied with this explanation. It positions me as his savior.

Abruptly, he flips on the overhead lamp, and the car floods with light, a fishbowl illuminated in the black of the desert foothills. I’m wearing just the panties he bought me, exposed to any driver that happens to pass by. As I reach for my shirt, my arms half caught in the folds of the fabric, Felix’s hand flashes out and slaps me. “You stupid faggot,” he hisses.

I’ve never been slapped before. The cracking sound shocks me less than the disbelief that he’s touched me.

“You could ruin my life,” he says.

I stare at him, cradling the left side of my face in my palm, instinctively, arms still only half in my shirt. He slams a fist on the leather steering wheel, and I flinch. “Do you understand what you’re playing with?” His voice goes high. “I deliver babies. Do you know what that arrest would do to me? To my family?”

I barely hear him. The sting recedes, replaced by outrage. “I thought you were bragging how you’re so calm, so peaceful.” My tone is as sarcastic as I can manage. “Maybe you need to put on your mask again.”

“Get the fuck out of my car.”

I don’t have my pants on. We’re in the middle of nowhere. I look at him in disbelief.

“Get the fuck out!” The shout is so loud in the quiet. And now I am scared. I see myself alone, with my new highlights and panties, walking in the desert night.

“Wait. No. I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m really sorry.”

He reaches over, and I raise my hands in defense, but he leans past me, pulls the door handle, and the BMW door releases with a lush luxury sound and swings smoothly ajar. He points.

“Please. I’m really sorry. I didn’t want Sally to do it, that’s why I told you.”

He starts the car.

“Shut the door,” he says and I do.

After a moment, he shifts the car in reverse. “You did tell me,” he says quietly. “And for that, I’ll drive you back.”

Felix slurs the car through dark curves, pulling my stomach with the force. Heat flushes the left side of my face. The moment of the slap loops in my thoughts. He slapped me as I had seen women slapped in movies, by brutes larger than them, without fear or consideration that the woman might retaliate. Assured of her physical helplessness. I am not that much smaller than Felix. My hands are larger. Yet I took the slap without even thinking of hitting back, had even apologized, meek as an abused woman. Whatever size I might be, whatever shape, the slap was clear proof that Felix saw me as a woman; he could treat me as a vulnerable woman, confident that I’d

react as one. And I did. The thought turns me on. His slap is the most feminizing thing that has ever happened to me, the most pure forced feminization of my life. I still haven't come, and now I reach down and adjust myself.

At a stoplight back in the city, Felix glances over and notices my excitement. Now his hand finds me.

"You deserved that slap, didn't you?" He speaks in his velvety tone again. He's smiling in the red light of the traffic signal. He's either been reading my thoughts, or has been lost in his own inverse, reciprocal version of them. "That's what happens to little bitches that get out of line, isn't it, Princess?"

I hold out my assent, unwilling to go that far. He pinches.

"Okay, yes! I deserved it."

"Good girl."

At the Riviera, Felix pulls to the side of the parking lot and lets the car idle. "Okay, sweetie, here's what you're going to do to make this up to me. You're going to prove what a loyal girl you can be for your man. So you're going to call in the tip to report someone wearing a mask, just like Sally asked. But you're going to take note of Sally's outfit, and when you describe the supposed masker, you're going to describe Sally. That mess she calls her face is more fake-looking than any mask of mine."

—

Sally towers over a small cross-dresser who's sitting beside me on the party bus. "Scoot yourself," Sally tells her, and when space is made, Sally plops down beside me with a grunt. A middle-aged trans woman, but only recently on hormones, I gather, attempts to spin around the stripper pole in the back of the bus, to a chorus of encouraging woos. Neon lights flash in time to the Rihanna song bumping from the back bench, which is itself a giant speaker beneath a flat-screen TV. Another woman, unsteady from either drink or too-high heels, attempts to join the first on the pole, and they both slide down into a heap on the bus floor. I join the others in a half-

hearted woo. Sally shoots me a glare. For a moment, I worry that Sally knows about Felix and me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, tentatively.

“Don’t encourage her,” says Sally with disgust, then in an only slightly more friendly tone calls out to the woman, “Hey, your balls fell out.” It’s true; the second woman’s short dress has come up in her tumble and a pair of shaven balls has escaped the side of her panties.

The woman stands and I recognize that I have talked to her at an earlier party. I can’t remember her name, but she’s a closeted, very very part-time cross-dresser, who sells flooring to large stores. Somewhat belligerently, she retucks her junk, and then as a sudden afterthought swipes a glowstick from her seat and stuffs it in her panties as well, so her crotch emits a muffled shine through the fabric. “Is that discreet enough for your delicate sensibilities?” she asks the bus, and gets a round of cackles in reply. Sally waves her hand as if casting a spell to make her disappear from sight.

The bus still hasn’t left the Riviera. Girls are getting on and leaving, trading bottles to stock the party bus bar. “You know, this isn’t the end for us, you and me,” Sally says. “We’re just starting our friendship. And I’m going to be in Chicago this summer!” She beams.

“Oh, that’s cool, maybe I could drive to the city for a night?”

“No, not just that,” Sally says. “You said your parents live in Chicago?”

“Yes.” I can’t bring myself to say more than that on the subject of my parents.

“Hey, look at this,” says Sally, and she rummages around her purse for a moment and pulls out her phone. Squinting, she looks down at it and pulls up something. “Is this your mom?” she asks, turning the screen toward me.

A flush comes over me. It’s my mom staring at me on the dark of the party bus. It’s so unexpected that I can’t quite comprehend it, as if Alice, wandering through Wonderland, came upon her parents sipping tea with the Mad Hatter.

“What? Where did you get that?”

“You said your mom was so fierce, but I googled her! She looks like a sweetheart!” She zooms out the screen, and I see it’s a corporate headshot

from my mom's company website. No one, so far as I know, has ever described my mom as a sweetheart, including my dad.

"So, I have an idea," Sally goes on. "We'll do up your hair and all, and you can introduce your real self to them. Then you have me for support, and they can ask any questions they have to a woman closer to their age! It'll be great, you'll see."

Sally wears a leather bustier studded with metal rivets. The image of her sitting down with my mom would be like some kind of half-baked fan-fic crossover: two universes never meant to collide, that could only ever collide with horrible, ruinous results.

Now Sally is talking about her own mother, how just after she transitioned, her car broke down; she called her mom to ask for her AAA membership number, but her mom insisted that she'd come herself. "You know what she said to me?" Sally said, "She said, 'I don't leave my child on the side of the highway no matter how you're dressed.' Mom hasn't seen me dressed like a man since. It'll be the same for you."

How well do I even know Sally? She found my mom on the Internet. Anyone can see she's lonely, and from her stories, I know she's unpredictable. Now she's googling my family? That's crazy. What if she decides to contact my mom?

"Sally, I don't know about that," I say. "My parents aren't like yours."

"Parents are all the same," she replies confidently. "At the bottom of their heart, they love their kids."

"Sally," I say, "Have you seen any news stories about parents in the last ten years?" But she doesn't hear me. The choruses of wooing drown me out. Someone new gets on the bus. Someone dancing with a cup of liquor above her head, but I don't recognize her face. Then I see why I don't recognize her face. It's not really a face—it's a mask.

Felix is dancing, jointlessly, the breasts of his silicone body suit jiggling. The ass is more padded than last time, beneath a tight sequined red dress. A Jessica Rabbit outfit with proportions to match. He's by us now, at the pole, twerking against it, the lumps of his ass flopping to the beat. He spins around it, poses. The other girls on the bus, mostly part-time cross-dressers,

love it—so fun! They are wilding out on Felix, like bachelorettes at a male strip club revue. The flooring salesperson gets up and spanks Felix's ass, then grinds her glowing crotch into Felix's rear. I remember the flooring salesperson said she had a wife and three kids—who know nothing about her dressing. Everyone is laughing, save Sally and me.

My own laugh dies on the vine. The picture of my mom glows behind my eyes, and when Felix turns, his mask points at my face. I cannot see him behind the bright blue eyes of the mask, just the dark slits, eyeholes disguised in the curve of eyelids. Strangers, unpredictable strangers, all around me. Then a jiggle of movement and the blank eyes, the pert fake lips, swoop toward Sally, then pull back, long enough to be a taunt, but briefly enough to appear as mere accident.

The bus jerks into motion, glides through the parking lot and down the strip. Beside me, Sally glowers. Other girls are grinding on Felix now, laughing and falling over one another whenever the bus brakes. Even sitting, Sally keeps her shoulders rounded defensively, the tendons of her knuckles taut, still gripping her phone. The lights inside the bus match those around us—bright, gaudy, glitzy. Big costume jewels flash on earrings, rings, necklaces. The Bellagio fountains swirl by, water jets bopping to the beat of our bus. Girls shout out the sites: the Trop! The Luxor! Excalibur! The Strat! Now we're headed to the Las Vegas sign! We're gonna freak out the straights getting their wedding pictures!

Someone hands Felix a drink, and he pulls off his mask to drink it. And I'm so relieved. God, he's handsome. And he's just his normal self! His hair is a little disheveled, and he's sweating, but he leaves off the mask, and when he passes me by, he grins and winks. He's laughing now, throwing back his head and dancing with the other girls. I get up, dance my way near him, but not too close, wary of Sally's gaze. He sees me, grins, and I can't help but watch him. He looks so happy and mischievous. I picture him as a young man, like the guys at college who dressed up for parties. Nothing scary, just a bit of clowning—the big boobs, the giant ass, nothing worse than parody, right?

He's watching me, and I know it, so I turn away, swing my hips. I've never danced this way in front of other people, but I know how it looks, I've done it for strangers on cam. I know how to move for sex. The driver announces that we all have to sit down while he's driving on the highway, but no one listens. Felix dances behind me and leans in. "A good princess listens to her daddy. You know what you need to do." I keep my hips going.

When I turn to gauge the effect of my wiggles, I find Sally between him and me. "You need to sit down for the highway," she's shouting. "You have to sit down if we're going to get on the highway."

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," shouts glow-crotch.

Now Sally snaps. "Sit the fuck down so the man can drive us!"

The driver lowers the music just in time for Felix to say, too loudly, "Once a narc, always a narc, huh girls?"

Sally doesn't sit at all. "Who told you I was a narc?" She and Felix are both in heels, but she's broader than him, taller than him. She's probably punched lots of people in her life, I realize.

But Felix laughs at her. "Maybe there's just something about you that says G-man." It's hard to tell whether he is intentionally emphasizing the *man*.

The bus corners. Her hand shoots out for the stripper pole to catch her fall.

"Or maybe someone told me," Felix says, and gracefully, for being encased in silicone, takes a seat. "But I thought we were sitting down?"

Sally whips her head around. The other girls are following Felix's lead. Heavily, Sally plods back to our seat, holding the loops hanging from the ceiling for balance. She looks betrayed. Did I tell Felix she was a cop? I must have when I told him her plan. Was that not general knowledge?

When Sally sits back down beside me, I reach out to pat her shoulder, but she shrugs me off. "Just make that phone call, okay?"

She pulls out her own phone. For a split second, when she turns it on, my mom's face flashes across the screen, before Sally hits the home button. App icons zoom over my mom's face. Then Sally pulls up the number for Cosmopolitan Casino security, and texts it to me.

Our bus pulls up to the Vegas sign, along with the three other party buses, and all the CD/TV/TS girls tumble out, heels clacking on the cement, skirts pulled up, hundreds of girls flooding the scant space around the sign. Newlyweds posing for photos blanch, and approving car horns Doppler by on either side of the highway around us.

As I get off the bus, Sally whispers, “Go!” I turn out from the parade of girls walking to the sign. There’s a little lean-to at the edge of the parking lot, a glass wall screening out the noise of passing cars. Behind the lean-to I crouch, resting on my heels, out of view of the others.

I came to Vegas because I need something somehow in my life to change. I can’t bear to live in stasis in Iowa much longer. For a moment, I hesitate, my mind oscillating between two images: Felix, whispering “Princess” as I danced for him, and Sally, with my mom lurking in her phone. The fun of forced femme fantasy, of clothes, of sexy power games versus the reality of transition. If I’m honest with myself, I know which one I want, maybe which one I’ve always wanted.

I pull up the number for Cosmopolitan security and hit the call button.

—

Back in his room, Felix still hasn’t removed his mask. He pushes me up against the wall, and his hands cup my crotch, then he pulls up my dress. I reach out to touch his arms, but they are cool, clammy, slightly sticky. It’s the silicone skin. I keep forgetting, touching, then pulling back my fingers. His mask is close to my face, the huge eyes sightlessly watching me like two circles painted on a bobbing helium balloon. For an instant, I catch its smell—something like old paint and sweat, but he grabs my hair, and then everything is perfume from his wrist. He demands I squeeze his tits, so I reach for them, squeeze them through his dress, and he moans, then squeezes mine. I feel stupid, both of us squeezing falsies.

“That old bitch really got it, didn’t she?” he asks, and the mask emits a mirthless dry laugh. “I didn’t really think you’d do it. You’re really the most

obedient sissy I've ever had." He's been talking in a strange Minnie Mouse falsetto since he latched shut the door to the room.

I feel nauseated and wish I'd brought my drink with me. I wish he'd stop bringing up Sally. My mind won't cooperate with me; it keeps loading the film of the three security guards waiting for Sally, on the lookout for clothing that matched my descriptions. Even with Felix pressed against me now, my mind plays the scene. They grabbed her. I saw them coming, I tried to get away, but she saw me, saw me dart away from her, and I know she understood. She watched me, her face actually a mask then, one of those Shakespearean masks of tragic comprehension. But then a security guard must have twisted her arm wrong, because she cried out, pulled away, and shoved the man. "I'm a cop too, asshole; that's not the way you do it."

The two other guards replaced the first, telling her variations of *Calm down, sir, don't struggle, sir, we just need you to come with us.*

I couldn't hear what she said, because halfway through, the three of them tumbled down. She landed on her boobs already bound tight in her bustier and her face contorted in pain. Then she went still as they pulled her up.

The cross-dressers near her moved away. A few made half-hearted attempts at protesting transphobia, but when the security men looked up, they shuffled back meekly. They've got wives, kids, and jobs. They can't afford an arrest. Sally was crying silently when they marched her off, her boobs half out of her top, but arms pinned so she couldn't adjust them, her head low in humiliation.

Then Felix was behind me, his mask off, whispering, "Good job, Princess" and holding me by the hips, his crotch against my ass.

Now I want to shake the image of Sally crying from my head. I want to enjoy this man for whom I've betrayed her. I need her out of my mind when he fucks me, as we both want him to do. But he won't take off his mask. He won't show himself to me. His falsetto grates on my ears, deep moans and grunts, then high-pitched dirty talk. I'm still squeezing his boobs, unwilling to touch the silicone skin when he pulls me from the wall and pushes me onto the bed. One heel falls off, and I'm on my back when his weight is on

top of me. The suffocating silicone covering me like a blanket. His face comes close to mine, my nose tip to tip with the little bump of the mask's nose. I can't feel his own nose behind the bump. He's still for a moment. Then a tongue extrudes from between the plump barely parted lips of the mask and finds my own lips, pushes its way into my mouth. We are both still for the barest moment. Then I lick his tongue back and tell myself that this is hot. I tell myself that this is better than ending up like Sally. I tell myself that this is what I want.

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I wrote the pieces in this book over a course of ten years. They were the stories I wrote to puzzle out, through genre, the inconvenient aspects of my never-ending transition—otherwise known as ongoing trans life—aspects that didn’t seem to accord with slogans, “good” politics, or the currently available language: Trans community (“Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones,” autumn 2015, spec-fic); the borders and porousness of sexuality, gender, and fetish (“The Masker,” winter 2016, horror); the ambiguity, dual perceptions, and desire to re-narrativize when looking back on pre-transition relationships (“The Chaser,” spring 2020, teen romance); and finally, the arbitrariness of one’s given body and what constitutes a felicitous transition (“Stag Dance,” 2023, western/tall tale).

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Torrey Peters is the bestselling author of the novel *Detransition, Baby*, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel and was named one of the 100 Best Books of the 21st Century by *The New York Times*. Peters rides a pink motorcycle and splits her time between Brooklyn and an off-grid cabin in Vermont.

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