

Wanderers

The rain pours.

I watch it from inside, from the window seat in her bedroom. I lean against the cushion she snatched from her own mother's house, when she fled in the night, when she didn't think anyone could care for an eighteen-year-old with a baby growing inside her womb. A baby with a no-named father, some knockoff jerk from the reject store, like a stained bomber jacket. She'd said once he was this broad-shouldered guy-next-door, but he liked to drink, and he liked it when she tossed her hair and sucked his dick. That was when she'd been drinking too, downing half a bottle of something, or else begging me to join her in a round or so of shots. She'd tell me about the *dick who drove right off into the distance* – but not once did she regret the birth of her son, her only child. The rain slows. Greyer clouds, storm clouds, loom overheard, but build to nothing. Midday shower.

In the garden, puddles arrange themselves haphazardly, a kaleidoscope shimmering in their reflections. Midge slinks past them, until she slips from the muddy brown, and her paws soak in rainwater. She's scowling. Never a fan of water, that cat – when I was ten, and she was the ageless beauty she's been since she sulked into our arms, she fell into the bathtub. Wailed, like a sleepless baby, or a hungered one, and Mum raced to coddle her in a towel; whisper that a little bath water never hurt anybody. She nestles herself between my legs, purring. *Funny cat.*

I heave open the shed door, after I've nudged the brick out of the way. The latch is busted – I broke it a few weeks after she passed away. I've been using a brick to keep it shut, else the wind catches it and thrusts it here and there; else something comes squawking out of it. Inside, a few eggs have been laid – the hens, the ones not yet too old to lay, seem eerily impatient to be mothers, but Bucky the rooster got himself offed last month, so no chance without him. I've thought about living without – the chickens were her thing, and without her, even the subtlest cluck is an explosive.

I receive a phone call at one o'clock.

Mrs Waterford was a *friend* of my mother. Mum wouldn't have used that word, because she and Shannon weren't close, not the way she whispered of secrets, and lies, and fortunes and misfortunes; the way she whispered with her high school classmate, Jill Hobart. Mrs Waterford says she is calling because I must be very lonely here, living all by myself. I remind her I have Midge, and the hens, and sometimes Mr Foster in for dinner, but she brushes this off, brushes it like crumbs speckling her petticoat. She says, *my niece is in town, she's a wonderful girl, of course, and how about I set the two of you up for a spell?* I shake my head, then tell her, "That's nice of you to offer, Mrs Waterford, and I am sure your niece is wonderful, but..." and she hears it in my voice, that sense of unwillingness and dread, coupled with the loss of my mother.

She diverts the subject – *how is sweet Midge doing? I heard about the loss of your rooster from Mr Foster, when he stopped in to town to send a package.* I tell her Midge is fine, but I'll take her to the vet soon enough about her eyesight, and I tell her that Bucky died on his own accord, as morbid as it sounds. I wonder if people in town think the same of my mother – that she deserved to be offed by God for what she did, even if they're referring to something eighteen years ago.

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Sun settles on the horizon; it's a wide, wild world out there.

Midge snuggles up beside me, in the windowsill of my mother's bedroom. Nobody sleeps here but the ghosts of the dead. Her ghost. Sometimes, I can imagine it following me in the halls of a house once-abandoned, and perhaps haunted by ghouls of its own time. In school, the whisper of a *ghost* was an unreal and untrue mirage, what Mrs Travis would utter if a student came to her claiming their home housed spirits from the grave. *Don't be so foolish*, she'd say, and often enough too – it was perhaps her favourite phrase, no matter the situation.

A knock at the door startles me. Beneath the haze of daydreaming, I forgot the day – Mr Foster, the closest thing Mum had to a brother, joins me for dinner every Friday. His first name is Hugh, and she always called him Little Hughey, because he was a year younger, and she would baby him, and she taught him all she knew about flirting and hooking up with guys. He was married once, to a woman named Rebecca, but she disappeared when she was visiting distant relatives, and they never found her body. Mr Foster – Hugh – is waiting at the front door, but he isn't alone. Someone drapes their arm around his broad shoulders. I open the door for them both, and the whiff of putrid whiskey wafts in, caught in the breeze.

Mr Foster assists the man inside, leading him to my mother's bedroom – the only spare bedroom in the house. It pains to see him collapse down upon her dulled sheets, and rest his head upon pillows streaked with tears, and alcohol, and whatever else. He isn't hurt – this Mr Foster says first, slipping shoes from his feet, maintaining a warm smile whenever he glances to me. *He's a drunken fool*, he utters, tucking the man's shoes underneath the bed, *but he needs a place to rest for the night*. Mr Foster asks what I've got cooked up for dinner – stuffed potatoes and buttered rolls from town, I tell him. He smiles, and winks.

"I hope you don't mind letting him crash," he murmurs, when we're at the dining table. He helps himself to another potato. "I'll get him on his feet in the morning, tell him he owes you or something like that." He's sawing into the stuffed potato, innards oozing out, widest grin on his face. For a split second he's a child again, stuffing his face, respectful too as if he's home again, but then he returns to the real world, and he swallows the mouthful down with a swig of red wine. Mr Foster – I know I should call him Hugh now – listens to the cling of the glass against the oakwood table, and the cling as knife and fork bump against the china plate once more.

Plates are almost cleaned.

The sudsy water is warm as it encircles my hands, and so the glass slips from them, as Mr Foster slides his arms around me from behind. "Worry about the dishes in the morning," he mumbles, touching me, embracing me with his ginormous man hands. They aren't so large – I don't slip from them, not when he holds me close.

I can't help but think about the man sleeping in my mother's bedroom. At dinner, Hugh told me his name is Ian, he's the Hammond's son. I remember the Hammonds. This is their hometown, but they tend to gravitate towards the city nowadays, for Mr Hammond's work. Mum used to say Mrs Hammond – Carlotta Shanes, back then – would be practically riding Mr Hammond's dick in high school. None of the teachers would've cared for that description.

Ian would be in Mum's bedroom, cuddling up to her pillows, making the sheets smell bitterly of alcohol. I imagine she wouldn't have cared. Some nights the couch seemed comfortable enough for her, so she would fall asleep there, with the television still on. I know Mr Foster opened the window for him, so it wasn't so stuffy in her old bedroom. In the morning, he'll wake up with a hangover, and what will I do with him? What will I do?

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Mr Foster is tying up the laces on his shoes.

"I'll see you next Friday, Greg," he murmurs, smiling at me one last time before he turns the handle of the bedroom door and exits. Maybe he'll check up on Ian – Ian who might still be sleeping, and Ian who might've vomited on Mum's sheets. Who knows.

I force myself out of bed, and start towards her room down the hall, not before I find something to wear. Some of my clothes are hand-me-downs from Hugh, some are the few things Mum bought for me, when she'd travel into the city. I slip on the reddish plaid button-up that smells like him, his cologne and his scent – smells like forest, almost. I pace down the hallway, towards Mum's old bedroom. From inside, I hear him stir, and bump into something – the bedside table, likely. I shove open the bedroom door, staring inside.

He doesn't notice me right away.

Ian sits on the edge of the bed, fumbling with his socks. Fumbling in a haze, no doubt, because at first, he slips them off his feet, and then he slides them on again, the wrong way. He gives in and shifts his stare, noticing me idling in the doorway. I am some stranger to him, and yet he smiles, as warmly as he can, and nods his head. "You're Greg then?" he utters, and he waves me over, "thanks for letting me crash."

We tiptoe around each other all morning. I make him something for breakfast – scrambled eggs, from the coop outside, and bacon from the store – and he helps me wash up, but then I head outside after feeding Midge, and he lurks in doorways and scurries away if I catch him watching me. At midday, he showers. The gushing water reminds me of yesterday's rain, when it poured and poured. Sometimes Mum and I would stand out there, in the windswept storm of rain, and shower ourselves in it, or jump around like fools.

At one o'clock, I hear him moaning from her bedroom, soft little sounds barely heard – wouldn't have been heard amidst rain, if it was raining this afternoon. He left a slit of the door open, so I can peer inside. He leans back against the pillows, and there's the one Mum stole from her mother, the embroidered one. I feel childish peeking in on him, ogling as he strokes it, knowing he must've found Mum's secret stash in the floorboards of the closet. She kept a flask in there too – half full, whiskey. I tipped it down the sink the day she died. Splash, splash, amber-brown liquid drained from glass down the drain. Ian doesn't care if I hear him. His screams and moans are no more muffled; now he climaxes, now he drains himself.

He tells me he'll see me around, when he goes to leave at two-thirty. "Why don't you stay for dinner?" I offer, and he pauses, staring at the ground beneath his feet. Bare dirt and gravel, the driveway, a patch emptied for coming and going. Never staying, unlike I do. He shifts his weight, smirking, saying *why the hell not* with his eyes.

Ian helps me slaughter the hens.

I want to cook them for dinner, every single one of them, but he settles me, because he knows what a waste that would be. He smiles, my shoulders in his hands, and he kisses my forehead. He says, *I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have...* but I tell him it's alright, alright that he kissed my flesh, bare flesh, and that it was even just my forehead. Foreheads are nothing, a patch of nothing, a patch I try to hide underneath my fringe. A head of hair that needs a cut, unlike his. In the kitchen, flour dusting our fingers, we crumb butchered chicken. Ian sprinkles me with the flour, it dusts my hair, and not immediately do I think of washing it tonight, I think of him.

But there is nothing here. He waits in the kitchen, hovering by the oven, waiting for the chicken to brown in the pan; I wash my hands in the basin in the bathroom, soap dripping. I linger there, but not to stare at myself in the mirror – I avoid myself, avoid my reflection, cautious the statue staring back would be unrecognisable. I claw at my imperfections. When I walk into the kitchen, he's removing the chicken from the oven, delicate and patient, and something inside of me whispers. I hear it first, slow and soft, and then it repeats.

There is something. Run away with it.

We eat dinner, then we lie on the floor of the living room.

I brush the hair from my eyes, then I stare at him. "Mr Foster found me last night on the side of the road, hurling in the grass," he mumbles, eyes glued to the ceiling. "Told me I'd have a place to stay just a little way off – your place," he smiles at me, "and I would've grumbled something, I can't remember, and he brought me here." He fidgets with his hands, with his fingers, but he's still staring at the ceiling, smiling so widely, so complete and whole.

"I don't get much company nowadays," I whisper, soft enough that he might've missed it, and it wouldn't matter if he did. Shouldn't matter.

He turns his head – our eyes meet. "I used to not believe in stuff like fate, because Dad didn't," he says, fumbling for something. "I used to think shit happened because you made it happen, but..." and I realise he was fumbling for my hand, because he finds it, and he squeezes it, "but I started to believe in it a year back, and it's got to be fate that brought me here."

The pillow beneath my head is soft, light as a feather, but it's a cushion from our sofa, so it's imperfect, and it's patchy, and Mum might've stained it with something, or she might now if she were still here with us. But at least she isn't here now, when I lie here with him – the universe fades anyhow, fades except for him, and except for this pillow. "I didn't think you'd be like this," I whisper, holding his hand, "I thought you'd walk right out that door in the morning, and that'd be it."

The words hurt, and yet the words are the truth, interwoven of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. He tells me he almost did, until we spoke. I'd told him about my mother, and about the cat named Midge, who sulked all day in the backyard, and I'd told him that part of him reminded me of her. She'd come stumbling home some nights, and I cared too much to worry, or stress. I cared for her, I let her hurl, and I let her sleep, and then we'd cook breakfast, and she went outside and fed the hens. Routine, something usual. So, he stayed. He says he hoped to flirt more, or even simply speak more, but I say don't worry, and he kisses my forehead.

Foreheads are nothing, I remind myself. No, not at all.

Ian and I fall asleep in one bedroom, still dressed, still clothed.

I like it that way, with him. I don't crave something else. I don't expect it. I've woken up at 2:24am, early morning, and I can hear the cat purring at the closed door. I let her in and wrap my arms around her. Today I say goodbye to her. I'll call Mr Foster later in the morning – tell him I'd be busy next Friday, so can we have dinner Tuesday night? He'll find Midge, and the dead hens in the freezer, if he searches for them. I shove the brick out of the way, to open the chicken shed. Pour every last drop of Mum's leftover stash on the putrid floor, chicken shit and feathers, uncleaned because I'd been too lazy to bother. I could burn the shed in a cloud of ash and smoke, but I'd be tearing her down. The booze is a sacrifice to mother. To the goddess.

When he wakes up, it's 7:33am. He finds me wandering the backyard, sometimes halting to dig at the roots of a dying plant – something Mum and I planted a blue moon ago. I've forgotten what I was doing out here, just before he came to rescue me.

"Morning," he mumbles, unsure whether or not to touch me, "we'll eat something, then set off, as long as you've made sure everything is good here." I follow him back inside, listening to the call of birds, the songbirds perching in the aging trees, and the ones that float on top of the world. He cooks up some more of the chicken, says his Mum used to teach him to cook before she boarded the next train to the city to marry some well-established accountant. She'd used those words, he said, because his dad was far from well-established. He'd end up peddling his woodwork across town if nobody kept him tabs on him. I've forgotten where I am.

"You still want this –"

I see him freeze, his lip quiver. I smile at him. "Yeah, I do."

We're the ones who wander, the ones who leave down the gravelled driveway. The burning sphere of ravenous rage pales in the opalescent sky, bursts of cerulean blue and milky whites, the clouds. It'll rain today, this afternoon, or an hour after midday. Ian closes the property gate behind us. With the tires bumping on the road beneath, and him guiding us, I close my eyes. Only for a moment, to think. I see her sitting there, in the window seat in her bedroom, stroking Midge. She smiles, but is she smiling at me, or because the soft patter of rain soothes her eyes, because her eyes are closed too. Midge's soft purrs mimic her breath, her breathing, inhale, exhale. Her ghost fades away. Left in the abyss but not forgotten.

I trust him to lead me someplace – anyplace.

We've been on the road for a few days. Stopped into a motel the first couple of nights, but tonight we'll be camping, he says. Picked up a tent back in town. I tell him I would prefer a bed, in a muffled whisper, but he smiles and says, "We're in the middle of nowhere," and returns to stare down the emptiness ahead of him, the vast stretch of road.

Friday is the end. He dries himself with a deep-maroon towel in the hotel room, his bareness canvassed in the mirror, reflected for him to see, and for me. I wonder if Mr Foster plans to sell the house, if he plans to forget about me, and about my mother, even the moment he helped bury her. Ian dresses himself. We glance at each other through reflections, the mirrored version of what could be beside us, the version that grimaces. I'll catch the train into the city, the next one, and he'll drive someplace. I can restart.

The mist of the early morning is outside the carriage window. The clouds are duller, overhanging like the canopies of forests, and a woman in front of me is on the phone to her husband. She tells him she loves him and hangs up. The rain drizzles upon the windowpane.