

Star-like

by Abby Geni

Somewhere in the woods, an owl is screaming. The cry recurs at irregular intervals, ragged and breathless. The sky is a chalkboard slate, the moon a pastel smudge directly overhead, offering no directional guidance. I have finally admitted to myself that I am lost in the wilds of Tennessee. In the distance, a brook babbles unseen. I move with caution, peering through the gloom for fallen logs and mud slicks. I am forty, too old to be trailblazing at midnight. But I needed a break—from my husband's brothers, and from my husband.

There is a pale beech stump, roughly the size of a man, that I have passed at least five times, scaring the life out of me on each reappearance. I have gone beyond concern, beyond panic, into a kind of quiet resignation. My body will be found days from now, tumbled in the ivy, scavenged by black vultures, and pearled with mushrooms.

I am a planetary geologist, which seems like it should be helpful in this situation. I know about the helium rain, laced with neon, that falls on Jupiter. I know that a day on Venus lasts longer than a year. I know about the alluvial plains of Tennessee and the loess-covered river terraces that surround the city of Dyersburg. But I do not know the way back to my brother-in-law's house.

At the crest of a slope, the ground tips beneath me. I skid helplessly downward, grabbing a tree branch to steady myself and wrenching my wrist. It might be sprained. When I get my bearings, the brook has grown louder. There is a flash of silver in the gloom and a damp, earthy musk. I have reached the water's edge.

And there, in the distance, is the house, the porch light glinting between the leaves. I break into an ecstatic jog, stumbling through the underbrush. Deep in the woods, the owl shrieks like a murder victim. Clutching the stitch in my side, almost sobbing with relief, I tug open the front door.

There is a body on the couch, still and silent. Another curled in a basket chair in the corner. They are all here, of course—all four of my husband's brothers, out cold, one in the armchair, another laid out on the floor, filling the air with their snoring and the collective fume of alcohol leaching from their pores.

Baylor and I have been in Dyersburg for fifty-six hours. In that time, we have never been alone. His brothers have occupied every minute, roughhousing, fishing, singing the fight song from high school, playing darts, eating fried things, and swimming in an ocean of liquor.

I creep down the hall to the guest bedroom. Baylor is tumbled in a heap of sheets, his breath a sour vapor. I climb into bed beside him. It seems like years since we left Boston. The journey here might as well have been our final passage to hell: taxi and plane and taxi again, ill-fitting chairs, enclosed spaces, no privacy, canned air, noise and bustle, waiting and waiting to end up somewhere I did not want to be.

* * *

When I first met Baylor, fifteen years ago, he was not an alcoholic. We were both in grad school then, and he rarely drank at all. Some-

times he smoked marijuana, but who didn't? Occasionally he took pain pills too. It wasn't hard to get his hands on a prescription for codeine or oxycontin; he'd hurt his back playing football in his teens and could always feign a painful flareup. During the crush of final exams, he would pop a handful each evening, playfully mixing his meds, going a little over the line of an acceptable dosage. Then he would quit, just before I began to worry.

Sometimes it was speed instead. Diet pills, ADD medication, even cocaine. Baylor would binge for a week, eschewing sleep, studying with supernatural vibrancy. He would snort a line in the men's bathroom with his fellow MBA students, all of them glimmering like dragonflies. He would keep me up at night talking and talking and talking. My head would spin as I tried to follow his theories on climate change, and the south after the civil war, and the male libido—all of which were connected, in that moment, in his mind. Then he would quit, just before I began to worry.

At that time, I did not perceive the pattern. Baylor had a thousand justifications for his actions. The diet pills kept him alert. The painkillers helped him relax after a tough exam. The cocaine intensified our lovemaking. The marijuana helped him cope with the dead air in between semesters. He would be sober for a month, even two or three. He would take up a new substance and put it down again, treating each as an isolated incident.

I believed him every time he quit. I did not know any better.

* * *

I wake up and have no idea where I am. A blazing window. Cork paneling. A deer head hangs on the wall, glaring at me in an accusatory manner. Beside me, Baylor is flung across the mattress, every limb akimbo. He looks like a man dropped from a great height, falling not to his death but into sleep. I decide not to wake him. I will let the liquor simmer in his blood, boiling away like stock in a stew.

My morning routine has a clockwork consistency. A control freak, Baylor says, but I prefer to think of myself as precise, like a fine Swiss watch. A series of stretches. Twelve-step skin care. A brief meditation, aided by an app on my phone.

Down the hall, a clamor indicates that Baylor's brothers are awake too. I have no desire for conversation. Clutching a blanket around my shoulders, I step onto the side porch. The air is soupy and cold. Moss coats the trees. The sun is not yet visible between the branches, though the eastern sky is soaked with glow.

Baylor grew up in a trailer park on the outskirts of Dyersburg. His brothers all settled within a few miles of the double-wide where his parents still live—except Baylor, the outlier, who moved to the mysterious north with me. The father is a shy mumbler, the mother a wine-addled cipher, but

somehow they managed to generate five huge, loud, charismatic sons. Tall and barrel-chested, Baylor and his brothers all have the same raucous, head-thrown-back laugh. The same galloping stride. The same broad, capable hands. All of them, like Baylor, have begun to manifest the telltale gut of an alcoholic in middle age. The differences between them (a beard, a tattoo, a limp left over from a motorcycle accident) are minor compared to their astonishing similarities. The oldest is Emil, then Jimmy Lee, then the “Irish twins,” Cade and Hank, and finally Baylor, the baby.

They do not, however, go by their given names. The monikers that fly around when they get together are impossible to track. Baylor is both Lil Boy and Big Daddy. When he has done something annoying, he is Baylor Richard Mur-

phy. When he has done something hilarious, he is Captain Jump Up Sit Down Underdog Willie. And, of course, he is often Bo, for short.

Over the years, I have given up trying to keep the brothers' lives straight. I am aware that one of them recently had a cancer scare that turned out to be nothing. One of them breeds hunting dogs. One of them can't hold down a job. Two of them own an auto repair shop together. None of them have kids, though a few are married and might be on the verge. Baylor tries to keep me updated on their lives, but it's hard to parse the family code. "Hankie thinks that Jujube is doing better," Baylor might tell me, or, "You'll never believe it—E-dog says that Sammy Boy has been hiding money from his wife." By the time I figure out who Hankie, Jujube, E-dog, and Sammy Boy are (Hank, Cade, Emil, and Jimmy Lee, respectively), the point of the story is lost.

Now the door bangs open behind me, and a figure strides onto the porch—Cade, our current host, dressed in boxer shorts and an undershirt, a cup of coffee in hand. He nods to me. I settle on the porch swing, leaving room for him, but he elects to remain standing. On closer inspection, his boxers are covered with cartoon bunnies having sex in a trillion different positions. The odor of cigarettes hangs about his person.

"Good morning," I say.

"Is Bebop still sleeping?"

"What?"

His grin fades. "Baylor. Is Baylor still sleeping?"

Mentally I add Bebop to the list of my husband's nicknames. In the distance, a group of wild turkeys begins to sing, hooting and burbling. The sun is rising behind the trees. Cade lives on forty acres of thick forest that blocks any view of the neighbors. He shifts his weight, the boards creaking. I wish he would put on some pants.

"Are you having a rough time?" he says.

"I beg your pardon?" I say, startled. I was not prepared for emotional honesty. Not now. Not here.

He takes a step toward me. "Is it hard being with us? Being in Tennessee?"

"Yes," I say. "It really is."

"I know you ran away last night. I saw you heading into the woods after Baylor and the others passed out. I wondered if you were planning to hitchhike home to Boston."

I manage a laugh, which comes out shaky.

"Glad you found your way back," he says. "Poor thing! We try our best with you. We do try."

For a moment, I see my husband in Cade's eyes. There is Baylor's solidity, a touchstone of frank openness. An instant later, however, the spell is broken.

"Come inside and have a bloody Mary," Cade says, flashing me a mischievous grin.

"Oh, I don't drink."

"Just this once. Have two. Have ten."

"You know—" I begin, but he interrupts me.

"Pretty please," he says. "E-dog and I made a bet a while back. I'm still hoping to win. Fifty bucks if either one of us could get you wasted. Man, I'd give a lot more than fifty bucks to see that. Little Miss Priss on a tear!"

He throws back his head and guffaws. It is my husband's laugh, note for note.

* * *

Even now, I am not sure exactly when Baylor became an alcoholic. It was hard to see the pattern unfolding in real time. At some point, he turned to drink as though he'd been dating around for too long and was ready to settle down. He'd tried those other girls—cocaine, marijuana, pills—but this was love. This was the real thing.

Ten years ago, newly married, we moved to a cozy apartment on the west side of Boston. Bay-

lor found a job at a prestigious marketing firm. I began teaching at Boston University, working my way up the ladder toward tenure. We lazed in bed on Sunday mornings doing crossword puzzles. He made me laugh the way I used to in childhood—a full-bodied, uncontrolled, snorting laugh I thought I had outgrown along with my Hello Kitty wristwatch and training bra. I taught him about the solar system and the existence of quinoa. We made love often, linked by tidal locking like Pluto and Charon, always facing one another, spinning in a private orbit of two. I did not notice the change as it was happening. It was slow. Gradual. Baylor would stop by sports bars on weekends to catch up on “the game.” (I never knew what game it was, or even what sport; I was content for him to share this interest with other people, likeminded people.) He would go out after work with “the boys”—his co-workers, always referred to that way, though many of them were female. He came home wasted and amorous, kissing my neck and expounding on my beauty, never an angry drunk, only affectionate and even more boisterous, the life of the party and a dynamo between the sheets. He took up wine as a hobby, buying excellent vintages to share with me over dinner, then drinking a few more glasses once I went to bed. A beer with lunch. A shot of whiskey to settle his nerves. His career did not suffer; he even got a promotion, due in part to his boozing with the top brass.

There was no benchmark, no line in the sand, no moment when I could have pinpointed his descent in action. Maybe addiction is always like that—only discernible in hindsight, with the clarity offered by distance and retrospection.

* * *

In the afternoon, we visit the local swimming hole—all five brothers, both parents, and three wives, including me. The day is steamy, hung with shimmering curtains of humidity. I set up a beach chair and apply sun screen and bug spray. Baylor’s parents have aged significantly in the past year, shuffling cautiously across the grass to place their lawn chairs. The mother immediately falls asleep, but the father engages me in smalltalk, though his voice is so low and his southern drawl so thick that I cannot catch a word. I just smile brightly, nodding along, until he dozes off too.

The brothers take turns hurling themselves off a rope swing into the water. Jimmy Lee belly-flops, earning jeers and hollers. Further down the beach, Cade crashes through the shallows, attempting to catch a minnow in his hands. They have a thousand inside jokes, almost their own language, like twin-speak expanded to include five. Whenever one of them salutes, the other four strike body builder poses. Jimmy Lee and Emil appear to communicate exclusively in quotes from Calvin & Hobbes. Baylor and Hank keep karate-chopping one another. At one point, Jimmy Lee screams, “Fire in the hole!” and at once, in unison, all five of them drop to the ground as though felled by bullets.

In truth, it is difficult for me to keep the brothers straight today, dazed as I am by the sun- light and the heat, overstimulated by voices and movement, hulking bodies, unkempt brown curls, jiggling beer guts, identical booming laughs, now tossing a frisbee, now leaping off the rope swing again. The other two wives are no help. One of them has been texting since the mo- ment we got here, thumbs flying, long plastic nails clacking against the screen. The other slath- ered herself with baby oil and stretched out on a towel. I can almost hear the sizzle of her skin broiling.

Baylor keeps shooting glances back at me, shading his eyes with a hand. Tennessee has al-

ways been a minefield for us. At home, we do well enough. We move seamlessly around each other. I go to bed at ten on the dot, while he sleeps whenever and wherever the mood strikes him. He works long hours; I set my own schedule. On weekends we hike through the nature preserve, and Baylor sweetly feigns interest as I classify the sedimentary strata of every rock that catches my eye. I return the favor by letting him show me incomprehensible memes on his phone every five minutes. In public, I can be standoffish, while Baylor charms everyone he meets. He has talked his way into free dessert, into a tour of the back rooms of my favorite museum; he “could sell sand to a camel,” in his own words. We still have explosive, spontaneous, no-holds-barred sex. We are living proof that opposites attract. We balance each other out.

In Tennessee, however, our system invariably begins to break down. During previous visits, Baylor and I have found ourselves fighting over everything under the sun. My use of five-dollar words. His dirty socks. The way I pick at my food. The way he flirts with waitresses. We have squabbled over our finances. We have quarreled over our decision—made long ago, and only revisited here in Dyersburg—never to have children. We have fought over his drinking. His drinking, his drinking, his drinking. More than once, Tennessee has nearly detonated our relationship.

Now Jimmy Lee hefts a cooler from the back of his pickup. The brothers swarm around it, and the air resounds with the crackle and hiss of beer cans opening. Baylor flops down on the grass beside me, pressing an ice cold can against his neck.

“Tell me something about Jupiter,” he says.

“It’s big,” I say shortly.

“Oh yeah? How many moons does it have?”

“Seventy-nine.”

Baylor runs a hand through his damp curls. “Jupiter is near the asteroid belt, right?”

“Right.”

“And how did the asteroid belt form again? I know you’ve told me, but I forget.”

Against my will, I smile a little. This is Baylor’s usual peacemaking strategy—drawing me out on my favorite topic. The annoying thing is that it works.

“Gravity makes things circular,” I tell him. “Gas and dust swirl around until they settle into a ball. That’s how the planets formed. But not the asteroid belt. It’s too close to Jupiter, and Jupiter is almost big enough to be a star. Its gravity is so intense that a rocky planet couldn’t form near it. So instead, there are millions of asteroids orbiting the sun in a wide cloud.”

Baylor stares up at me. The sun has brought out his freckles, a dusting across his nose and forehead. "Millions?" he asks. "Really?"

"Some of them are the size of pebbles. Most are around a kilometer across."

"What does the word asteroid mean?" Baylor asks, his voice soft.

"Star-like. They look like stars to us, especially when they fall out of the belt. When they hit our atmosphere. Shooting stars."

"Star-like. I never knew that." Baylor runs a finger down the length of my arm, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

"Bo!" Jimmy Lee yells. "We need you to be tie-breaker over here."

My husband bounds to his feet and joins his brothers.

* * *

There was an afternoon in autumn, perhaps ten years ago, when I caught a glint of light where none should be. I was at my desk, working on a lesson plan, when I saw something shining in the soil of my fiddle leaf fig tree. On closer inspection, the gleam was coming from the tiny gap in between the plastic pot and the pretty basket I'd

bought to cover it. I fished out the offending object: a bottle of bourbon.

Baylor had taken to hiding stashes of liquor around our home. I knew he was drinking, and he knew that I knew, but he still hid the evidence from me. Addiction is furtive by nature. In that moment, I felt compelled to discover exactly where each bottle might be.

And so I set aside my papers and scoured the apartment. I got down on my hands and knees to examine the underside of the couch. I peered into the tank of the toilet, where Baylor had stashed a quart of vodka a few months back. In the kitchen, I disarranged the cans and spice jars. In the mud room, I groped inside each of the boots.

Our apartment was not infinite in scope. In less than an hour, I had located a bottle on top of the refrigerator and another under the bed, swathed in a bin of Baylor's winter sweaters. Two more bottles were hidden in the bathroom, standing incognito among Baylor's toiletries.

I set all five in a row on the mantel—biggest to smallest, like children in a class photo. The bottles gleamed in the light. I weighed my options. I could leave them in pride of place where they were, a silent accusation for Baylor when he came home. I could tuck each one back where I had found it and say nothing. I could pour the bottles down the drain, rinsing each one carefully, patting it dry, and carrying it out to the recycling bin, as I did with my yogurt cups and milk jugs. I could smash the five bottles on the floor, leaving a glorious mess of congealed liquor and glittering shards to greet Baylor on his arrival.

All at once, a great weariness fell across my shoulders. The situation was as well-choreographed as the orbit of planets around the sun. I had done all these things before, every single one. I had pitched a fit, screaming and sobbing. I had begged Baylor to think of his health. Once I printed out photographs of diseased livers and taped them up all around the apartment. Once I got hold of a list of surgical patients waiting for liver donations and hand-wrote my husband's name on top, pinning it to the fridge. (The fight that followed was epic. Baylor accused me of being a drama queen, which may have been accurate.) Once or twice, I drank myself blind along with him, getting sloppy on purpose to make a point. I'd dragged him to AA meetings ("too much God talk"). I'd made appointments for him with a therapist ("too much jawing about feelings"). I'd coddled him, cooking his favorite meals and behaving as though the latest relapse was nothing more serious than a bout of flu.

But nothing I did could shift Baylor from his path. I could see that now. He was caught in the gravity well of alcohol. I pictured the void of space like a blanket, strewn with orbs of different shapes and sizes. As each planet settles into the cloth, nearby objects roll toward the ensuing depression, pulled by gravity. The largest objects—like Jupiter, like the sun—create a hollow as deep and unforgiving as a hole dug straight down through solid earth to locate water underground.

Sometimes the Earth carves a perfect circle through space as it spins around the sun, circumscribing the rim of our star's gravity well. Sometimes Jupiter or Saturn reaches out grasping

fingers and warps our orbit slightly, pulling our world a few degrees outward, changing our path from circle to oval. But the modification is minor, and the primacy of the sun's gravity remains, keeping us close.

If I made enough of a fuss, Baylor might pretend to change his ways for a short while. He might promise to cut back or stick to wine, but eventually, inexorably, he would return to the status quo. Every option before me—to pour the liquor out, to drink the stuff myself—was, at its core, a minute variation in the orbital rotation,

like a faint tug from distant Jupiter, scarcely strong enough to register. A gravity well is an irresistible thing, bending even the fabric of space- time to its will.

* * *

My last morning in Tennessee is cool and sweet. The air smells as though it has been scrubbed clean. I reach for Baylor and find his side of the bed empty. Then I remember. The brothers dropped me, their parents, and the other wives off after the swimming hole and went out together to “raise a little hell,” in Cade’s words. I did not ask what this meant; I did not want to know. I spent the evening reading in silence. Very late, Baylor called to stay that he’d be sleeping over at Jimmy Lee’s place. He did not add that he was too drunk to drive back to me; I gathered that much from the slurring of his speech. He told me he loved me. He told me again and again.

Dragging my suitcase onto the bed, I begin folding my clothes. Jeans, headbands, and lacy underwear—soon these things, like me, will be back in Boston where they belong. In ten hours, I will board a plane and leave this place in my dust. Like a loving wife, I pack for Baylor, too. In filling his suitcase, I exercise far less care—wrinkling his slacks, incorrectly matching his socks into pairs, and shoving his toothbrush among the T-shirts without sleeving it in a plastic bag. I doubt he will even notice, but these gestures relieve my spirit anyway, petty revenges for my bruised heart.

As the sun climbs the sky, I get out my laptop and work on a lesson plan about asteroids. My conversation with Baylor sparked an idea. Next semester, I will give a lecture on asteroid families. I have done research on the subject: a whirling cluster of rocks that all share common orbits and spectra. Their coloration is identical: black for carbon or red for nickel-iron. Asteroids in the same family were once a single organism, but something broke them apart—an impact with another body in space or the tempestuous gravitational pull of nearby Jupiter, cratering a larger asteroid into many smaller ones. There are more than 120 such families in the belt, and they even have their own surnames: Nysa, Flora, Hungaria. Excellent fodder for a lecture.

I am waiting for my cell phone to chime. Whenever he wakes up, Baylor will text me. I pick up the phone, making sure it isn’t silenced. Surely he will reach out soon. It’s almost noon, and even the most hungover of the brothers must be awake by now.

Baylor and I always check in regularly. When he’s at work, when I’m on campus, scarcely an hour goes by without one of us making contact. He might photograph the pile of paperwork on his desk and send it to me with a sad emoticon. I might send him a passive-aggressive text about the laundry. These moments matter—me sharing a snapshot of my newly-pedicured toes, him informing me that he has just discovered his hair is thinning. The sensation of my phone vibrating in my pocket, containing a note from my husband, a note that tells me nothing important, nothing

romantic, can be as intimate as a caress.

Today, however, there has been no word. One of us is giving the other the silent treatment, but I am not sure who is the perpetrator and who is the victim.

* * *

Fourteen months ago, Baylor got sober. He did it himself, without the benefit of AA or rehab. He did it the “dude way”—which, to my untrained eye, looked excruciating.

First he went on a tear, drinking all the liquor in our apartment and vomiting it back up over the course of a gruesome twenty-four hours.

Then he sank into a kind of hibernation. He crawled into bed, emerging only to get himself aspirin while glowering at the sunshine. During that phase, he seemed to be not so much recovering as devolving. His beard grew thick and wild. The smell of him pervaded the apartment. I brought him water and tried to make him eat. I would tap nervously at the mound of quilts he had piled over his huddled frame, and he would gradually emerge, a sweaty, bleary-eyed wreck of a man. There followed a few difficult months. Baylor was not drinking. When I asked him how he was, he would say, "I'm not drinking." When I asked him what he was thinking about, he would say, "I'm not drinking." Everything in front of him—the TV, his dinner, his wife—was clearly being compared to the attractions of a good bottle of bourbon and found wanting.

I kept track of his sobriety in my calendar. A circle marked each dry day—the image, in my mind, of an empty glass. He passed four months, the longest stretch he'd ever done. Five. Six. Seven. I was not sure what was motivating him. He had been wanting to quit for years—forever, really. Every addict always wants to quit. Maybe something had shifted in him physically, his liver crying foul. Maybe it was simply time, as though he had been saving up his willpower in some internal vault for years, and now, at last, there was enough accumulated to see him through.

He stopped going to bars. He avoided his weekly poker game. He let "the boys" go out after work without him. In the past, he had stayed up late to drink after I went to bed. Now his secret behaviors included watching infomercials, reading spy novels, and eating all the Popsicles in the freezer.

I was different too. In a word, I was happy. After ten months passed—a nice round number—I stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop. I no longer sniffed Baylor's breath every morning as a reflex. I stopped wincing, in restaurants, when the waiter set down the wine list. I stopped reaching convulsively for my husband's arm as we strolled past a liquor store, a metaphorical leash, keeping him from bolting.

There is nothing worse than hope. It is an illusion, ephemeral, like the light emitted by a far-away star that has since reached the end of its life cycle, exploding or contracting into nothingness, even as it appears to twinkle on in our night sky.

* * *

Hours later, I wake for a second time, covered in sweat. The quality of light pouring through the window suggests mid-afternoon. I am prone on the couch, my neck bent at an uncomfortable angle, a sour taste in my mouth. I push myself upright, brushing sweat-dampened hair from my brow. I am not usually a napper, but the Tennessee heat is as powerful a soporific as ether.

There is another person in the room, planted in the armchair, staring at me. I jump halfway out of my skin. Brown curls. A barrel chest. Clasped hands.

"Baylor!" I cry.

The man rises to his feet. "No, sorry. It's Hank," he says.

I blink, clearing my head. "Where's Baylor?"

"You know, that's a funny thing," he says.

"Funny how?"

"Here." Hank smacks his hands on his thighs. "I'm going to get you some water. That's what I'm going to do."

"I don't need—" I begin, but he is already on his feet, clattering in the kitchen. As he hands me a glass, I notice that he is avoiding my gaze.

"Okay," I say. "I'm awake now. What time is it? We have to leave for our flight."

Hank sits down in the armchair again.

"Well," he says. "The thing is, Baylor had to have his stomach pumped."

"What?"

"I said, he had—"

"What?"

"It happened last night. I guess you'd call it alcohol poisoning."

A sound escapes me, somewhere between a gasp and a groan.

"We took him to the E.R. All of us went to- gether." Hank raises a hand, tapping thoughtfully at his temple. "You know, maybe they didn't pump his stomach. Maybe they just gave him that stuff that makes you puke. What's that stuff? I've had it. Man, it tastes terrible."

"Is he all right?" I say. Glancing down, I realize that I am still holding the glass of water. With a bang, I set it on the coffee table. "Where is he? I should be— Let me get my purse, and I'll be ready to go."

Hank holds up his palms. "Whoa, whoa. Baylor's just fine."

"He had his stomach pumped."

"Happens to the best of us."

"Not to Baylor," I fire back. "It's never been that bad. He's never been hospitalized before."

Hank nods solemnly, taking this in. "It just got away from him, I think. We hit Joe's Bar. Stayed up late. Headed over to Big E's place. We noticed that Baylor seemed—well. He had blacked out. We couldn't wake him."

"Why the hell didn't anyone call me?"

"We didn't want to bug you until we knew how serious it was." He darts his eyes sheepishly to the side. "And then, in the hospital, Baylor told us not to."

All the fight goes out of me, and I sink back against the couch. A hot wind gusts through the screen, carrying humidity and the chime of crickets.

"He's doing good," Hank says. "Really."

"Cross your heart?"

"Hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye."

I nod. The full weight of his news is still sinking in. There is a strange sensation in my chest, as though my heart has become dislodged, slipping to the side. A silence descends. Hank has my husband's calm composure, the ability to weather an uncomfortable pause with equanimity.

"We're not leaving today, are we?" I ask. "We were supposed to leave today."

"Well," Hank says. "That's a funny thing too."

"I bet."

"The doctors seemed to think that it might be hard for him to fly the same day he—he—"

Hank trails off, looking at me as though I might suddenly go for his throat. I hear the wind scraping against the wall outside. I hear the turkeys in the distance, warbling their dissonant song. The peace of the countryside is a myth.

"He's never had to go to the hospital before," I say again. "We've been through a lot, but never that."

Hank blushes. "There's one more thing. Baylor wanted me to tell you—I told him I didn't feel quite right about it, but—"

"Spit it out," I say coldly.

He is crimson now, all the way up to the tips of his ears. "He's going to stay at Emil's place once he's discharged. He doesn't want to see you." Quickly, he corrects himself, "I mean, he doesn't want you to see him. Not like this."

"Fine by me," I say.

"Right." At once, Hank is on his feet, moving toward the door. "Well, it's been real nice talking with you."

This little pleasantry almost makes me laugh aloud. He offers it automatically, as a penance, perhaps, for having shoved himself so awkwardly into the middle of my marriage. He fumbles for

the doorknob and escapes into the sunshine.

* * *

Three weeks ago, Baylor told me that he wanted to come to Tennessee. Almost before the words were out of his mouth, I heard alarm bells ringing. He had been sober for fourteen months, he said, as though I hadn't been keeping my own count. He told me that he could not bear to go any longer without seeing his brothers. I was on my summer break, and he had vacation days accrued. It was time, he said.

On the morning of our trip, I woke to a sinking feeling—a crumbling, as of hope deflating. We spent the ride to the airport sniping at each other. The highway was a mass of angry red tail lights, winking and flashing like morse code. Horns blared. There was a musical precision to it; one would shrill, another would answer, and a conversation would ensue, back and forth, each side trying to get in the last word. Our driver bawled ceaselessly into his radio. Baylor's shoulders hunched together. My knuckles went white. A quarrel about our respective packing styles carried us all the way to the airport, through the security checkpoint, and onto the plane.

But the real war didn't start until we were airborne. It was a gorgeous sunset, all watercolor hues and smoky clouds. In the window seat, I watched the ground fall away. Down below, Boston was in darkness, the roads a network of glittering lines, reminiscent of the lava rivers on Io, one of Jupiter's moons, the most volcanic world in our solar system. When we reached the cloud layer, my view was swallowed up by gray.

I glanced over and saw that Baylor had ordered himself a glass of wine.

Before I could open my mouth, he snapped, "I don't like flying. You know that."

When he ordered his second glass, he said, "I'm going to drink this week. No choice, once my brothers get involved. Might as well start now."

By the third glass, he had his headphones on and was humming along to the music. I would nudge him to be quiet, and he would pause momentarily as I gritted my teeth, counting. Seven, eight, nine, ten—and he would be humming again.

The plane climbed above the clouds. Through the window, a milky landscape emerged, pale peaks and ghostly valleys. Bulbous puffs drifted eerily above the plateau. The upper atmosphere appeared to be a wild place, judging by the shapes carved out of the cloud layer by the wind—whorls and loops, towers and hillsides.

Baylor ordered another glass of wine, and I wiped the tears from my eyes.

* * *

That night, the silence in Cade's house is oppressive, the guest bed too wide. The television is full of nothing but love stories. I do not want to think about my husband. I do not want to picture him nestled, ashen and shaky, in Emil's blankets. I do not want to wonder whether anyone is taking care of him as I have so often done—bringing him tea, aspirin, a cool cloth for his brow. I do not want to think at all.

My cell phone rings. I fumble for my purse and answer without bothering to check the screen. I know who it is. I'm sure Baylor has been picking up his phone all day, almost dialing, and putting it away again.

"Hi." He clears his throat and tries again. "Hey, babe."

"You sound terrible."

"Been better."

"This is a new low, huh?" I ask, unable to keep the rancor out of my voice. "I thought you hit bottom last time, but I guess not."

There is a pause, and then, without anger, he says, "There's always somewhere further down." I get to my feet and walk to the window. The woods are a silvery mesh. A flowering tree releases a cloud of white petals, floating on the air like snow.

"Our flight is at four," Baylor says. "Tomorrow afternoon."

"Fine."

"I'll pick you up. Hank will drive us out."

"Okay."

"You know I love you," he says.

"I know."

He waits for reciprocation. I do not offer it.

"I can't talk much," he says. "They put a tube down my throat. I'm pretty sore. Listen, honey—"

I interrupt him. "I'm not going to take care of you this time."

"I'm quitting," he says pleadingly. "For real. For good. I mean it."

I breathe steadily, my eyes closed.

"I've learned my lesson," he says. "This whole thing has shown me the light. I'm on the wagon now. Forever. I promise."

"If you ever drink again, I'll kill you," I say.

"What?"

"I'll kill you."

The words come out in a rush, as though someone else is saying them. Baylor takes in an astonished breath. I hang up and turn off my phone.

* * *

At midnight, sleepless, anguished, I step outside. The night is full of wind, a chaotic breeze swelling this way and that. I walk into the grass. In the distance, an owl shrieks, shrill and grating.

My own words to Baylor ring through my mind. I hear my voice, hardened by emotion into a rough tenor: I will kill you. In this moment, however, the words come back to me differently. I hear myself saying, I will leave you.

Because that's what I meant, what I should have told him, what I will tell him once we're back home and somewhat recovered. If you ever drink again, I will leave you. That is the truth I have come to understand during my final trip to Tennessee.

Saturn glimmers overhead, the ringed planet, first spotted by Galileo Galilei's telescope. Venus is visible too, a fiery hellscape of ochre-colored sulfuric acid that looks serene from this distance. Light pollution usually obscures the Milky Way in Boston, but here I can see it clearly, a beaded quilt thrown over the treetops.

Before my eyes, a pinpoint of light detaches itself from the sky and falls. I would make a wish, but I know it is not a star. It is star-like, an asteroid wrenched from its family, untethered from Jupiter's thrall, achieving escape velocity, plunging through miles of inky void to enter our atmosphere. Maybe it will burn up in the air, charring and crumbling into harmless ash. But I hope it survives the terrible descent. I hope it beats the ground hollow when it lands on the other side of the world.

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