

MIDWESTERN
GOTHIC

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THE BELLS OF UTICA SQUARE

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When James came home from work he found a case of cherry brandy on the porch.

“It’s kirsch,” Aubyn said, robe wrapped around her, after he’d lugged it in. “Calling it brandy is *gauche*.”

“I’ve never seen you drink a liqueur,” he said, not sure that cherry brandy was a liqueur, worried he’d seem *gauche* again. He’d never seen her drink anything but beer and vodka, nor had he ever seen her anything but sober or blackout drunk.

“It’s medicine,” she said. “To be drunk before bed.”

“According to whom?”

“My doctor. If you came to appointments with me you’d know.”

“How much did it cost?”

“It’s medicine,” she said again.

He thought but didn’t say *I have a feeling Aetna isn’t going to accept a claim on it*. Aubyn liked expensive things; they soothed her.

Just then, as happens in Tulsa, the weather turned from windy and cold to sunny and the light shifted through the sliding glass door. Aubyn squinted and turned away.

“Get dressed,” he said, tugging on her robe. “Now. Before the clouds come back.”

And they walked over to Utica Square to soak up the warmth before it went away again. Sunlight was supposed to be good for Aubyn. Vitamin D and all that.

Despite her immune deficiencies—despite that she’d spent all of Tuesday and Wednesday in bed and he’d called in sick to sit with her, read to her passages from *Wuthering Heights* (hers) and *In Cold Blood* (his)—she looked round and radiant in the amber afternoon. She was twenty-four, a year older than James, but when she stayed inside all the time she tended to look either much older, skin papery and pale, or much younger, a child swaddled in a sick bed. She’d told him she was Scottish, two generations back. She had the dull reddish hair, gap teeth and farm-girl curves, but he had no idea what intermarriage or other had made her eyes pine-cone colored and her skin quick to tan.

They sat at an outdoor café and shared a piece of sour cream cherry pie. The bells were chiming Sting’s *Fields of Gold*. They didn’t speak and just as James was thinking what lovely, moist chewing noises her mouth made and how perfect it was that they could sit like that in the waning sun and not talk, she did.

“This isn’t a story. Not a good one, anyway.”

"This could be our song," he said. "We're always on a look out for our song. And it is a story. We'll tell our grandkids. Granny and I used to eat a lot of pie." He pursed his lips and ballooned his cheeks out in a way that usually made her laugh, patted his belly. "So much pie."

"Grandkids?" Aubyn said, and he had to remind himself how often she forgot they were engaged. How often he forgot she was dying.

"Can it be our song?"

"This is the upper-middle-class version of muzak. How dare they play pop songs on church bells in the name of retail? And no one likes this song. Not really. It sounds like all his other songs."

He gave up making funny faces, slouched in his chair.

"You're right," he said, because she was, and because, other than the one black eye he'd given her, he never pushed back.

The black eye had been over a year ago, not very long after they'd met, two months maybe, but she was already more or less moved into his place. He was house manager at a small local theatre. It was a touristy place, the kind of thing you did with out-of-towners. James liked theatre for its magic and had started there as a stagehand out of college because he had set-building experience. The actresses that came in to audition were usually pretty-ish and had low enough self-esteem to be good for a backstage fuck, sometimes a week or two of sex. James—nebbishy compared to the actors, but with a handsome, equine face and a bookish look if he wore his glasses—had fallen in quick love with at least six of them by the time he met Aubyn, who came in auditioning for a lead but was offered an understudy. She quit her job waiting tables when James helped her get a secondary role in the next production, even though it paid no better than the understudy, which hadn't paid much to begin with.

By then she was staying at his place most nights and had started taking over drawers and shelves in some of the rooms. They'd been drunk when she accused him of sleeping with a lumpy chorus girl he had, in fact, slept with. He didn't know why he'd fucked the dancer; habit mainly. He was surprised that Aubyn knew about it and hit her, illogically, out of the unadulterated terror of losing her. This woman—this beautiful red-headed girl who loved him back, loved him outside of the broom closet and backseat of her car—was the only object of his devotion, holding on to her was the only thing that mattered. So he threw a fist at her jaw to stop her talking, to stop her saying things that gave her reasons for leaving. But it caught her in the eye. When he'd woken the next morning and she was still there he'd run a shower to mask the sound of his relieved sobs, sat on the wet acrylic floor, puked up a stomach full of Oban single-malt, pushed his own vomit feebly down the shower drain.

"This can't be our song," she said. She said almost everything with finality, and the trick for James was figuring out when a conversation was really over. He looked up and past the canopy of the sidewalk umbrella; a bank of indigo clouds was about to obscure the sun. Then he nodded his agreement, as always, and let

her have the last bite of the pie.

At home he poured her two fingers of kirsch, doctor's orders. He yelled from the kitchen to see if she wanted ice, but she didn't answer. He brought it to their bed neat, in a tiny crystal glass imprinted with snowflakes.

It was the last of a four-glass set his grandmother had collected for him from a McDonald's holiday promotion when he was seven or eight. His parents didn't go to McDonald's except on road trips, but he saw the ads for the glass set on Saturday morning cartoons and was dead set on giving it to his mother for Christmas. One etched with holly, one with candy canes, one with tiny trees and the last, the remaining, the snowflake glass. His grandmother was always good for colluding. She took him to McDonald's and they ordered four cheeseburgers and he paid the extra \$1.50 for each one of the set from his allowance money. His grandmother helped tape them up in bubble and gift wrap. He walked by the box under the tree many times a day leading up to Christmas. He admired the look of the box, the weight of it, the way its corners were sharp.

"Jimmy, wherever did you?" she'd said, and held one glass up to the light as if to inspect it. Refracted like that, James could see the color spectrum arcing out from one of the snowflakes.

That same year he'd wanted a magic set more than anything. A big, 150-trick set, like the kind he saw demonstrated at the fancy department store when his family visited Chicago the year prior and the man in the toy department had guessed his card and attached three rings that he, James, had moments earlier determined to be solid. He unwrapped an Erector set, a six-pack of socks, blue pajamas, a make-your-own-clock set and a pair of tickets to the Ice Capades (theme: From the World of Nintendo). James did not particularly like Erector sets or Nintendo, though the clock set had potential. The night before he'd gone to bed thinking his life would end if he didn't get the magic set (for which he'd petitioned Santa in writing and at more than one mall), but with his mother grinning like that, watching twinkling tree lights shine through the glass he'd given her, the magic set didn't seem to matter anymore. Any deck of cards would do.

But just after New Year's he'd found the box of glasses in the holiday trash pile behind their house, next to the dehydrated tree. He slumped to the ground, first heavy with the guilt of having seen it, then with disappointment. He sat there for a long time, an hour maybe, not crying or really even thinking anything specific, but looking at the skyscape of the bare trees against the flat, gray air. When he was called in for lunch he took the snowflake glass, slid it into the pocket of his parka and kept it hidden for the next ten years. It went with him to college and to the house after. It went with him, in a coat pocket, to his grandmother's funeral. His grandmother, he'd often thought, would have approved of Aubyn. They were both no-nonsense ladies; they both liked cheeseburgers; they both loved him.

Aubyn stuck her tongue into the clear liquor and made a face.

"Too sweet," she said.

"I know. I can smell it."

“Smells good,” she said.

She set the glass down and he said “well then” and she crinkled her nose, picked it back up and drank the whole thing. The next night went the same, but after she drank it she locked herself in the bathroom and said “If I have to drink any more of that I’ll be sick.”

Later on, in bed, when he said “Did we really have to buy a case of it?”, gentling the effect with his pronoun, she turned her back to him and said, “We’ll give it as gifts.”

On the third night he came home to find her already asleep, but she’d poured more kirsch into the glass and set it, undrunk, on her nightstand. She woke sometime after one in pain, and he massaged her legs, the same as every night.

“Why the brandy?” he said, working her calf.

“Kirsch,” she said. “Because it smells good.”

“It doesn’t.”

“It does to me. We had cherry trees in the backyard at the house in Louisiana. That’s the exact smell they had in spring, just before you knew the cherries were overripe and would fall to the birds.”

“My uncle in Michigan had cherry trees,” he said.

“It reminds me of when my parents were alive. So you don’t need to worry about how much we have. I’m going to keep a glass of it out from now on.”

He worked on her feet until she fell back asleep, then watched her for a while. It pissed him off that she was careless with his money. More than once after an impulsive buy he’d wanted to punch her again. Sometimes he wanted to scream at her, tell her the thought of her surviving terrified him, that he couldn’t marry a woman who made terrible choices, that he loved her but the idea of forever was still nauseating.

These cycles of thought upset him because he knew he couldn’t voice such fears; knew it would cause a fight at best and her leaving at worst. She was all about the fantasy and he was eager to buy into her daydreams, avoid the reality of hourly pay, failed ambition, of Tulsa itself. He liked to watch her eyes spasm and roll under her lids. He liked to think she was dreaming of him even though she was rarely in his dreams. He liked to think at night she dreamt the same things they daydreamt about together. About living in Paris and trips to gamble in Turkey; about being rich and having things; about needing nothing; about weekday Jaguars and weekend Bentleys and drives along coasts they couldn’t even visualize; about eating lemon desserts in every town in New England; plays at every theatre on Broadway; not worrying.

They would stay in bed and spin these fantasies next to a slowly evaporating glass of kirsch cloying the air. He would fold the laundry—there was always so much laundry—and she would sit with her hands around her knees and tell him stories about the house in Louisiana, her step-sister the stripper, the house in Texas, her ex-lovers. All the time, new details; he marveled at the way she retained details; doubted many of them; disgusted himself with his own doubt. He felt he

had little to say in the face of all this, little to say about his family or lovers or 23 years that fit neatly along a horizontal line and didn't possess as many details (no Baton Rouge heat strokes killing an infirm grandfather; no bloody diaphragm being left in a sink shared with a five year old; no fire ant infestation destroying family heirlooms and nearly suffocating the children in an itchy, angry swarm; no schizophrenic exes writing love songs that ended up on the radio). But he'd always wanted to stay up all night like this, telling the stories that made it feel like your guts were being ripped out just to tell them. He'd always held it as kind of an ideal. So he folded her shirts into perfect rectangles, ignored texts and e-mails and invitations from friends and listened to her stories. Sometimes she cried and he climbed up onto the bed and held her. "I'm sorry," he would say, over and over again.

He told her things, too, about girls he'd fucked, first kisses, promises broken. They both liked fast cars and would invent names for their future dream machines: Otto, Maurice, Elmer, Flakita. One night she found a list he'd made as a senior in high school—a list of all the things he vowed at 17 to do or never stop doing—and she asked him about it.

"Lucky for me you don't play the drums anymore," she said.

He scanned the list, which had been stuck under the clear cover of a three-ring binder in his closet. Memorize the periodic table. Write a play. Seduce a red-head. Drop acid. Drive a race car. Learn to juggle. Always play the drums. Be in an orgy. Marry a woman with whom he could be comfortably quiet. Raise children in a way that made his parents proud. Never stop eating Nutella sandwiches. Never stop playing tennis. And on and on. It culminated in DO MAGIC all in caps, with a string of exclamation points.

"What does that mean, do magic?" Aubyn said.

And he told her about his undercover illusions. He'd never asked for a magic set again for Christmas, though he had often coveted them in the back pages of his mother's Lillian Vernon catalog or in the SkyMall magazine when his family took their annual trip to Colorado. In middle school, when his parents gave him internet privileges, he started looking up basic tricks and trying to memorize them, closing the browser window anytime someone else was in the room, so quickly that his parents probably assumed he was looking at porn. Freshman year of high school he'd noticed a group of boys doing magic tricks under a maple tree in the corner of the school yard at lunchtime. They were gangly seniors. He recognized them from the Shakespeare monologue competition in the fall: Benedick, Mercutio, Jacques, the fat Hamlet. He watched them from a distance for a month. He went home and tried to copy the tricks they did with silk scarves, using an old tie filched from his father's closet. He'd thought he'd nearly worked up the courage to approach them when one lunch period they called to him from across the yard.

"Oi, you going to spy on us every day?" the tallest one said. Posthumus,

James blushed at their knowing he'd been watching and did a limp half point at his own chest to indicate "me?", though he was the only person to whom they

could have been talking.

“Yeah, you. It’s not a secret club, you know.”

They all laughed and another of them, Benedick, called to him: “Clubs won’t have us. Or we wouldn’t want to be had. Or whatever Harpo Marx said.”

“Groucho,” called James, walking towards them. “Groucho said it.”

And that was that.

He would learn and not-eat with them every day, but at first was careful to carry a certain disdain for the boys, their Society of Creative Anachronism friends and their lifestyle (so as not to be one of them; no Renaissance Faire for him) until he realized they all had girlfriends. Not cheerleaders, but real girls with mouths and hands and pieces of clothing the magicians disappeared behind school and in backseats. These guys were always making out in the basement hallways or back stage in the theatre. The girls were drama geeks and library nerds, they wore shorts over tights and some of them carried flasks of whisky to school. They knew how to play guitar. They were loyal to their boyfriends. They knew—he was told by the boys—how to give good blow jobs and lots else besides. Their hair may have been unbrushed and sometimes their legs unshaved, but they’d love you and they’d swallow.

James preferred the younger girls, and as he was still learning his tricks—like real magicians, he called them effects—his mentors graduated and he, being anti-social, had no more competition for the easy attentions of the make-up-less, snaggle-toothed girls. He impressed them by perfecting Twisting the Aces, Miser’s Dream, Scotch and Soda and Key Bending. He listened to the mix CDs they made him. He aspired to the Dove Pan and the Indian Rope Trick. He slept with all of them, desperate to please each one of them, not loyal like his predecessors. He loved them equally (and said so to each, often), cherished the feel of their many names on his lips, needed one no more than any other, needed them as a whole like he needed air—or, if that was a bit dramatic, at least as much as he needed a deck of cards. In the end most of them hated him. Worse, some pitied him, continuing with dead eyes to watch him practice his effects long after they’d stopped sleeping with him. He could see them still, smoking clove cigarettes, shaking their heads, sometimes touching him on the knee as if with condolence. He could see himself at seventeen, full of self-loathing and confusion and the certainty that they’d all go on to wed magicians who could do a perfect Bullet Catch and in other ways act like a real man. He’d convinced himself that they’d all broken his heart, instead of the other way around. He could see himself writing “DO MAGIC!!!!!!” on a piece of notebook paper and sticking it inside a binder. He remembered, with a salty jolt, how much he’d meant it then.

“So show me a trick,” Aubyn said, sitting up in bed, buoyant. For the most part she moved with reluctance and loud little exhales, as if everything hurt, the way a dying person might be expected to move, but sometimes her body slid through space as easily as sand. He liked when he made her body and face awake with smiles.

He shook his head. "My hands probably aren't fast enough anymore. Anyway I don't have supplies."

"Where'd they go?"

"I didn't have much to begin with. It was sort of a secret from my parents? But I got rid of them after college. What's an old pile of silks?"

"We have a deck of cards."

"It's missing the Jack and the Ace."

"You're just saying that," she said, which was true.

When she asked him why he kept magic a secret from his parents he realized he didn't know; felt ashamed at his own life. When had he become so boring? He'd let go of all the things that used to make him not-a-drone. He had a black car that had long ago lost its shine. He had a house with windows and shingles and roots in the plumbing like every other house on his street. He had a job that he pretended was creative but really entailed turning the same four walls into a beach, a castle, a ballpark, the North Pole, a beach again. He gave overlong answers to questions—even questions about the weather—and could hear himself talking on as peoples' expressions glazed, but somehow couldn't stop himself from continuing to talk. He caught himself using the same jejune phrases over and over. "Back in college." "It's a funny story, because." "As a matter of fact."

What were his interests? He liked to play the music loud in his car. But who didn't? He tried to eat healthfully. He drank expensive whisky. He thought about getting another tattoo. He loved Aubyn. He spent his days trying to please Aubyn—so scared that she'd leave him—but somehow still found himself in the broom closet with auditioning actresses, usually the ugly ones. He used to trade on his unreliability as a point of interest. In college he stopped with the magic but continued with the easy, under-appreciated girls and always knew that part of his appeal was that he wasn't reliable: not emotionally, not even physically (so many nights spent with hysterical, mousy-haired girls explaining that it was his problem, not theirs; that they'd try again in the morning; that—and this was true—he cared more about her come than his own). He was a challenge for them.

But now that everything revolved around Aubyn—now that his residual unreliability was a backstage secret, almost as if carried out by a different person, not the man who doted on a dying fiancé—what did he have, really? He worried that she was onto him. He worried, even in the limited time she had left, that she'd become bored.

She nudged him. "Were you afraid they would think it nerdy?"

"Do you think it's nerdy?" he said.

"Oh, incredibly," she said, and nuzzled against his hair. "I'd like to see one of your tricks."

He turned her over and said something silly like "I'll show you a trick," and she didn't sigh as if she was breaking when he climbed on top of her, didn't close her eyes in pain but instead ground herself onto him, held him in place, made her own effect against his pelvic bone, then let him pump into her until he was done.

The next day he came home from work and she was neither lying in the bed nor slumped along the couch. He stood in the threshold between the bedroom and living room, letting all his unacknowledged fears flood him: she never had been sick, there were no fire ants, she didn't intend to marry him even if she lived. There were long strips of eggshell paint missing from the doorframe, where the mint color from some previous owner showed through. He rested his head against the peeling wood and wondered if that was one of the reasons she left. He couldn't even handle the touch-up painting. He left her every day in a house in need of paint although he spent his days painting. He clonked his head against the wood again and again.

"Is that you?" Her voice was more robust than he'd ever heard; at first he wasn't sure it was actually Aubyn calling him. "I'm in the garage. James, I'm in the garage."

He went running, at first thinking she was in some sort of trouble. But she was standing in the empty half of the garage, hands held out over the old folding table his folks stored there. A magic set, five hundred pieces at least, was spread out on the table in front of her, exactly as it was on the cover of the box that stood behind all the intricate little parts.

It was expensive. It would have been hard to find in Tulsa, he couldn't imagine how she'd done it. It was useless to him, all ball tricks and magic wands. But his heart thumped at the sight of those interlocking rings—so shiny, so solid—exactly as they'd been in the Chicago department store and his mother's catalogues. It was child's play, all of it, no real skills for these effects, and it was also the nicest thing anyone had done for him since his grandmother was alive.

Her tawny face was tense with expectancy.

"Wherever did you?" he said, but his words were muffled because at the same time his words came so did a cry. She shuffled around the table and put her arms around his neck.

"Show me a trick," she said.

He picked up the stiff deck of cards and led her back in the house, set her in the bed, performed flawlessly *The Four Robbers, The Red and the Black, A Simple Reverse*. He pulled a card from the pocket of her pilled robe. And then, doing an absent-minded *Three-card Monte* on the rumpled bedspread, he told her about the glasses he'd given his mother, a story he'd never told anyone.

"This glass here?" she said, pointing to the kirsch, now syrup, and stroking his hair with her other hand. It was damp with anxious sweat. He nodded, trying to breathe back a second round of tears, and she lowered her face next to his, kissed his chin, his lips, his nose, his forehead.

He moved his face up, toward her, he closed his eyes. He told her about the refracted rainbow, even, and he felt her mouth like medicine, like cherry brandy burning sweet against his skin.

"At least you still have a mom," she said, lips pressed against his ear. And he wilted onto the pillow, first disappointed at having his own story taken from him,

then with a great, inexpressible guilt at still having what Aubyn did not.

So when one night she said she wanted to drive a BMW Z3 before she died it seemed more reasonable than a year in Paris or a weekday Jaguar named Elmer or even than the prospect that she'd live long enough to have his mother become her mother. It seemed like the least he could do in exchange for the magic set he'd never use. He took his paycheck stubs to the dealership the next day and brought one home.

* * *

There was one great week. The car perked Aubyn up, made her forget a little about her sickness, even erased the pale of her cheeks. She named it Stravinsky. They drove it for hours through the corn and cotton fields, the saturated summer air blasting the sallow from her. The sky at dusk was the same color as her hair, and from the passenger's seat he imagined her becoming one with the landscape, the sickness rolling off her like the bits of seeded, late-harvest cotton blowing down the highway. They borrowed a tent and set out to go camping, but doused the campfire before midnight just to drive the thing back home, hair full of black walnut smoke. They drove along the Arkansas River and waved at people they didn't know, then drove up through the expensive neighborhoods along the left bank, pointing at which houses they would (or would not) live in. They took it out towards Stillwater, towards his alma mater, and he suggested they stop and see some friends but she leaned in and said "Your friends won't get us. Let's not spoil the fun." They fucked like they had in the first weeks they'd met; in both front seats of the car, against the kitchen door, on a towel on the floor of the garage, in their cherried bedroom. He bent her over the trunk late one night—in an unlit spot behind a city park where they'd been riding the swings and drinking vodka from a flask—and put one hand over her mouth and the other over her cunt and fucked her for forty minutes; didn't stop fucking her when headlights threatened their dark or when she spasm'd first and tried to twist free (and then again) or even after he'd finished. He kept rocking her, just like that, bent over that smooth, sleek metal; bent over his gift to her.

She didn't let him drive it. After the first week her energy started to wane again. Three days in a row she was too sick to get out of bed. He stayed with her. He lost his job but didn't tell her. She was in bed a fourth and fifth day and never asked about his work. Still, she wanted to go out driving at night. He made lists while she slept, ways he could come up with the next car payment. Cash-in the savings bonds from his high school graduation. Pawn the watch his dad gave him at college graduation. Take a part-time job at Starbuck's. Sometimes, sitting at the four-chair dining room table, he heard her talking to herself in the bedroom, talking low. He wondered if it was in sleep or fever dreams. She never seemed to actually have a fever. He turned on his computer and searched combinations like "sleep talking" "disease" and "near death?". He sometimes thought she was telling

a story. He frequently heard her mumbling about barracks. He heard his name often and that made him happy. Always returning to his lists, he reconciled over and over again that he would probably have to sell his own car.

"What're you doing?" she said, coming out sleepy-eyed, eight days into the new round of fatigue. He crumpled the list.

"Nothing," he said. "I have to pee. I haven't wanted to disturb you."

"That's ridiculous," she said, and he remembered a story he once read for a literature class where a guy who's fighting with his wife takes to peeing in the kitchen sink.

She sat at the table, put her head down on it, and he made his way through the bedroom, noting that there were no piles of dirty clothes to navigate on the way to the toilet.

"Feeling better?" he called, but she said nothing. He imagined he heard her shrug.

He sat down—he'd been sitting down to pee since Aubyn moved in and he became embarrassed about what she might have to clean up, although save for a few intense bursts she never did much cleaning—and noticed her cell phone on the edge of the bathroom counter.

"You shouldn't—" he called, but then stopped as he picked it up and felt its heat.

He held it like that for a minute, dick pushed under the bowl with one hand, her phone in the other, thinking it would turn cool and he'd put it down and the fear would go away.

"Did you say something?" Aubyn called back.

He didn't answer. The phone wasn't cooling in his hands. It was hot as the spot on the kettle handle where the rubber had worn thin; he had a mark on his right hand from all the cups of tea he poured for Aubyn. Now he felt its twin forming on his left hand; his palm was damp. He'd always hated snooping. He'd done some once, freshman year of college, though he hadn't felt good about it. He'd gone through the drawers of a seventeen-year-old girl he was fucking. He'd been sure, despite her acne and middling hygiene and lack of interest in basically everything (or perhaps because of her lack of interest in, say, him), that she was sleeping with someone else behind his back. He checked for underwear he'd never seen, phone numbers, notes, mix CDs for other boys. Nothing. Just the same spin-cycle ratted thongs. No notes or phone numbers, not so much as a cigarette hidden with the socks or a lucky penny or a shirt put away dirty. He'd found and read her diary. Not only was there no evidence of another boy, there was no evidence of any life of note lived at all. "Drank three Mountain Dews today." "Penguins are sorta neat, I guess." "I hate my alarm clock." "Jim and I have done it plenty." It was more boring than reading an appliance manual. These results were far worse than if he'd found evidence of cheating; unimaginably worse.

Still, on impulse he pushed a button on Aubyn's phone to bring it to life. It required a code to get to the main screen. James had no idea that cell phones could

lock or how to go about unlocking them. He punched in Aubyn's birthday, then his birthday, then the alarm code and the password for their shared computer. Nothing happened.

Aubyn was still drooped over the table when he came out, holding the phone far in front of him like something poison.

"You didn't wash your hands," she said.

"What?"

"You were in there long enough. I didn't hear water run. You need to wash your hands after taking a shit. Didn't your mother make you?"

He set the phone on the table in front of her, hoping it would make some sort of identifying, accusatory clunk. It did not.

"I thought you'd been sleep talking," he said.

She looked up, saw the phone, grabbed for it and held it for a moment, then changed her mind, set it back on the table, spun it around on top of a placemat.

"Who was it?" he said.

Here he expected a lie that was easy for him to believe after which they'd argue lightly, she'd take the lock off the phone and maybe they'd go get a slice of pie.

"My husband," she said.

James let the words hang for a moment, imagined he could hear their echo.

And then:

"Take something seriously for once, Aubyn."

"We're estranged," she said.

Estranged? he thought. *Husband?* he thought.

"I don't believe you," he said.

"That's fair," she began, and spun the phone again. She seemed to be choosing her words. "I guess we're not that estranged."

"I don't believe you're married."

She sighed. "I guess you should meet him. I've put it off as long as I could."

"Put it off?"

James was still standing, hands at his side, and he felt dumb just being there. Like he should be doing something. Hit the table. Smash the phone. Leave and slam the door behind him. Instead Aubyn stood up. He noticed the color was back in her cheeks.

"We'll take Stravinsky," she said. "Erich will like that."

"I've never heard of Erich," he said, sputtering a bit and regretting that he was letting his confusion show. Aubyn didn't seem to think anything was confusing and she punched him on the shoulder. It was meant to be playful, but it hurt.

"Ergo he must not exist," she said.

They were in the car driving toward I-244 and James couldn't understand how he'd gotten in the car, only that he didn't want to be there. He didn't know why he was supposed to meet Erich, or how long Erich had been married to his fiancé, or what he was supposed to say. He remembered that, for the first time, Aubyn asked if he wanted to drive and he just shook his head, as if there was some

sort of conclusiveness to him driving the car. As if things were already fucked but if he compressed that gas pedal it would all come to a hissing halt.

Erich lived to the north and James did not like the idea of parking the car in that neighborhood, even though there was a carport off the curb. Erich was sitting on a metal lawn chair on the front porch when they pulled up, left arm down as if tapping ash off a cigarette, though he was not smoking. He stood when they cut the engine; he wasn't taller than James but was beefier, and somehow carried himself in a way that made it seem like James was looking up when he shook his hand and mumbled "S' nice to meet you." It was the wrong thing to say, but what would have been right?

Erich had a little ponytail gathered at the nape of his neck and clean fingernails and a dirty flannel shirt, at the wrists of which James could see that he had tattooed sleeves. Seeing the borders of ink under Erich's cuffs made James' ankle tingle where his only tattoo—the comedy and tragedy masks, a mistake his laughing friends had let him pursue one night—was almost always covered by a sock.

"I've heard a lot about you," Erich said, glancing at Aubyn, and just like that James knew that he was also fucking her, knew it all night as he clenched and unclenched his itchy fists inside his pockets, listened to Erich talk about his pet iguanas and his time in the Marines and why tequila was a superior alcohol because of the stimulant properties of agave, watched his vodka-drinking fiancé laugh and nod along. He didn't understand what the purpose of this meeting was, if this was Aubyn's house, if it would be again. And then something occurred to him.

"The laundry," he said, while Erich was filling a glass of water for Aubyn at the kitchen sink.

"Huh?" she said.

"All that laundry. It's because you come here every day. It's because you're fucking him. I'm washing your sweaty whore clothes."

"Don't call her a whore," Erich said, pointing at James. Then he turned on Aubyn. "Just how much does he not know?"

"He didn't know anything," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry to whom?" James heard the words coming out of his mouth and was a little surprised he could talk for how much he wanted to vomit.

"You are a liar," Erich said, and walked out of the kitchen towards a giant terrarium. Aubyn followed him. James stayed put.

"Don't say that," she said. Her voice was high-pitched and had a pleading quality James had never heard. He had a fleeting thought that she was a different person with Erich than she was with him, and it was comforting. "Please don't say that. I've never lied to you. I haven't told him anything yet. That's why I had to bring him here, see? I told you he's not going to his job. I don't even know if he has a job anymore. I couldn't take it."

Her voice got more muffled and then a door closed somewhere in the back and he could only hear that they were talking, not what they were saying. The faucet in the kitchen dripped and he could hear music from the house next door.

He wondered what Aubyn wanted. Did she want him to carry her out over the threshold? Did she want them to fight for her? On the fridge there was a magnet with a wedding picture, it said "Aubyn and Erich" and a date; six years ago. Aubyn had clear braces on her teeth and cheap costume jewelry. Usually James sweated when he was agitated, but his teeth chattered a little and he realized, massaging the goosebumps on his forearms, that he would not be carrying Aubyn over the threshold or fighting Eric-with-an-"h".

And it didn't come to that. Aubyn came back out by herself, motioned James to follow. He did.

"How long?" he said, once they were back in the car. Aubyn rolled her eyes. "How long?" he said again.

"I'm proud of the car you bought me."

"Bullshit."

"How long what?"

He didn't know what he was asking, so he didn't answer. The road hummed and the gear shift popped when she moved it.

"You fucked that bitch in the winter show last year," she said, finally. "You think I don't know about that? You think I couldn't smell her on you? That I didn't know it from the way you talked about her then stopped talking about her? How many were there besides the two I know about?"

"We're getting married," he shouted.

"You going to hit me again?"

"I ought to."

"You're disgusting," she said, and then they said nothing the rest of the way. She was right again.

At home she slammed the front door and turned on him.

"I've tried to work things out with Erich and can't. You're the one I want to love. But everything is so fucking boring."

"Is that what tonight was? A bit of fun for you? Shake things up?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Why'd you take me, then?" he said.

And she started to talk but she also started to cry and he couldn't understand anything and somehow then he was carrying her back to the bedroom, taking off her shoes, bringing her a washcloth. "I'm sorry," he was whispering, and she was kissing his forehead.

She stopped going to Erich and they didn't talk about it again, though James never wanted to talk about anything else. He cashed in bonds and made the next payment on the car. He took a job at the movie theatre, then regretted it; ticket-taking seemed a big step below even pulling espresso at Starbucks. He'd been tearing tickets for three weeks and two days when he came home to an empty house, his old sedan clumsy and alone in the garage.

He'd been the great magician in their relationship. He'd hoodwinked himself out of everything. She hadn't been the deceiver. He didn't agree to go to her doctor's appointments because he didn't want to hear the excuses she'd make for the appointments being cancelled. He didn't want evidence that there were no doctors, didn't want confirmation that before they'd sat reading all those medical sites together—his arms around her shoulders—she'd sat memorizing the same information on her own. He wanted to believe in the heat wave and the bloody diaphragm and the fire ants and the songs on the radio and the dead parents. He knew for a fact that cherry trees didn't thrive in Louisiana or fruit in the spring. He'd always known that a woman who wears a robe all day does not also create mountains of laundry.

And now, for my greatest trick, I will make a car disappear.

Even at nearly seventy miles an hour he could hear that the bells were chiming *In-a-gadda-da-vida* into the Saturday morning. It had been two weeks since she'd left but he'd only decided what to do the night before. He knew she wouldn't report it. He took a cab to Erich's house, even though they were sure to be home on a Saturday morning. It was better that way, bolder. He had the spare set of keys to the Z3. He would have the locks changed right away, even though he didn't think she'd come back for the car.

The cab had pulled up right in front of the dingy house and James had gone to the carport, started the car, which was loud. Just like that. After he backed out he tried to figure if he had actually seen the shape of Erich, ponytail silhouetted, come to the kitchen window or if it had been his imagination. He was surprised to see how many miles were on the odometer and heard the secret speed of them in his ears with an angry rush of blood, but then reminded himself it didn't matter, not anymore.

He turned out of the neighborhood and opted for city streets instead of the highway. He got it up to seventy between the lights. He laughed at the feel of the acceleration, the abandon of the thing. He laughed until tears formed at the corners of his eyes and slid down his face and across the back of his neck.

He kept thinking the windows were down because he was unused to being on the driver's side of a convertible; kept laughing out loud. It was as if he'd forgotten the word enjoy and was just now remembering it, in all its bold and yellow roundness. In the garden of Eden. He liked this song; liked the ridiculousness of it set to bells. It was hard to say when the laughing tears turned to crying. His phone rang and he answered it.

"Did you steal our car?" Aubyn said.

He set the phone to speaker and held it out the window, into the bells and into the wind.