

La Belle Dame

The dark never felt so cold and deafening as it did that first night Alice found herself gagged and bound to a stranger's bed. How she got there remains a mystery.

She had been driving east with her boyfriend on the Interstate 90 towards Minneapolis to visit the University of Minnesota. She and Dave had just been accepted, and even though they both planned on attending, the fresh warmth of spring seemed to merit a quiet weekend away. This past winter in Sioux Falls was especially frigid, with record-breaking snowfall, sometimes even up to 20 inches of snow in a single night. Alice remembered the leftover snow pockets clustered off the highway that day, and now she wondered if they were still there.

After two weeks, she has grown accustomed to his daily routine. Every morning he enters her room with the same breakfast tray: two eggs over easy, one slice of buttered wheat toast, a small cup of orange juice, and a ruby colored vase containing a single white daisy. For lunch, they share his tuna sandwich. For supper, the menu and conversation can alternate.

He is not a particularly threatening man. He looks to be in his early 70s, with many brown age spots on his face and arms, and also a few grays peaking through a full head of white hair. He is on the shorter side, maybe 5'8 at most, especially with how he crouches forward as he walks. Though not at all spry, he gives off the air of having once been fit. His time is spent almost entirely in the home, in her bedroom.

Alice is allowed to talk, but there are rules. She must never use her real name, or give any mention to her former life. He will instruct her how to act, what to wear, and what to say. If she plays her role right, he will let her go. She cried when she first heard this, feeling so powerless to prevent what was about to come. She mentally prepared her body for it all, but to her surprise, nothing of that nature ever came.

Her assigned wardrobe was a 1960s checkered green dress, 2-inch ivory pumps, and a thick white headband. He had given her an old framed photograph of a young

woman wearing the exact same dress and instructed her to achieve the same look. This woman bore an almost identical likeness to her – the same almond-shaped face, the same downward turned lips, the same dimples, and the same crooked smile. It was almost like looking in a mirror, except for a small mole perched atop the woman’s right cheekbone.

The bedroom was carpeted light pink, which matched the tulip pedals on the heavily outdated wallpaper, along with the flora curtains that hung over the side window. The closet was filled with wardrobe bearing a certain aged effect that had fashions spanning from multiple decades. An old mahogany jewelry box stood open on the dresser, and the attaching bathroom featured an array of cosmetics, everything she could ever need. Alice felt like she was invading her grandmother’s bedroom, a space so imbedded with worn femininity, it aided in her transformation. With brown eyeliner, she dotted her right cheekbone and stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. The emerald shade of her dress matched her eyes and brought out the rich color of her auburn hair. She was ready to be Martha again.

As it was all the previous evenings, the night began with a soft knock on her door. He entered carrying a pink rose and smiling at the sight of her, as though he were seeing her for the first time. “You look lovely my dear.”

She returned the smile while walking over to him. The 2-inch heels had brought her level to his height as she leaned in and kissed the side of his cheek. “Thank you. I’m happy to be with you this evening.”

She proceeded to set the dinner scene with the folding table and set of chairs that were stacked against the wall. Once she sat down in her seat opposite the door, he handed her the rose and left momentarily before returning with two dinner trays and locking the door. Tonight’s supper was eggplant parmesan with caesar salad and a small side of angel hair pasta.

“This looks delicious,” Alice admired. It did look delicious, but she was also starving. She had not yet gotten accustomed to the smaller meals during the day.

Pouring her a glass of red wine, he looked at her dotingly as he said, “Well, I had to make your favorite dish for your birthday. It’s the least I could do for the woman I love.” He rose his glass prompting a toast. “To you, Martha, my sweet darling. Happy Birthday.”

Alice slipped her wine and tasted an oaky dryness, likely a red blend. She was familiar with wine having been raised mostly by her father, a wine connoisseur with his own private collection. She wondered where he was that moment. Was he at home drinking wine with Stacy? Had he given up looking for her? She thought of Dave and hoped he was still alive. She wished she had told him she loved him.

“How was your day teaching?” he asked.

She had learned from previous conversations that Martha was an English professor at the University of Mankato and specialized in the Romantics. He would read her poems by Keats and Wordsworth, and left her books to read during the day. Though Alice had more of an affinity for the sciences, she found the literature rather inspiring and beautiful.

“It was wonderful,” Alice replied. “I gave a lecture on Keat’s *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. The students were fascinated that a woman’s beauty could enslave a man to the point of the death.” She had purposely selected the poem in preparation for the question.

“Ah yes, one of my favorites. It is how I feel when I look at you.”

Alice paused and looked down at her plate. Silence filled the room as she played with her food, which was pre-cut since no knives were allowed. She hated her oppressor, but had also grown to pity him. He was so unconsciously stuck in his past, so entranced by his lost love that he lived in a fantasy.

Questions were building inside her. She wanted to know Martha, to understand their love and his unrelenting obsession. Did she dare risk angering him? She thought

she should finish her food first, but it was too late. The words came pouring out. “When did I die?”

It broke his dreamy trance. She took a breath, fearful of his reaction, and prepared to apologize, but something about his eyes stopped her. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. By instinct, she slowly reached her hand across the table to touch his.

The warm touch of her hand triggered a surge of emotion. They sat like that for some time, and Alice remained silent until he was ready to share. She had never seen a man cry like this before, and could feel his the pain of the memory she had evoked.

His breathing calmed as he rubbed away his tears. Finally he looked at her straight on, and this time really seeing her. “I think you know who Martha is.”

Alice took a breath and nodded, encouraging him to continue.

He lifted his eyes to the ceiling as he recalled the memory. “We had met in our teens, and she was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. I didn’t think she’d ever be interested in going out with someone like me. I mean, she could have had anyone,” he paused, “but she chose me.”

“We got married the day after she graduated. She was year behind me. And we had 50 amazing years together. She was my best friend, my greatest life treasure. She was so warm. She always had a smile on her face, so happy, so cheerful. So when the cancer came...” He choked on his words and tears returned. “I lost her last year, and I’ve realized I don’t want to live without her. I can’t do it.”

Alice leaned towards him. “And that’s why you need me?”

He looked down as he nodded. “She wore that dress on our first date. I never let her get rid of it. It looks just as nice on you.”

Alice smiled weakly. She fought the urge to question him further. Listening was a better tactic. There was more he needed to say.

“I’m sorry to put you through this,” he continued. “But I think you’ve helped me realize that I’m ready.”

Alice sat hopeful. “Ready for what?”

“To be with her.”

Her fear rose. She imagined herself years into the future still held captive in this room. Her patience was about to burst. “But, I can’t be her!” she exclaimed. “I’m me.” She grasped her heart as she affirmed, “Alice, *not Martha*.”

He did not seem phased by her outburst. He rose from his chair, unlocked the door, and fixed it open to emit the darkness of hall. Slowly, he stepped away and extended his hand.

She rose from her chair and walked toward the door. She could see the front of the house through the hall. His concession stunned her. He was letting her go, but she could not bring herself to leave. She did not even know his name. “How can you be with her if you let me go?”

He looked solemnly at her, but there was a sense of peace in his presence. She knew what he meant, and she woefully nodded. She looked down at her shoes and realized she was still wearing the dress. He seemed to read her mind. “Keep it. She would have wanted you to have it. Wear it for your future husband – he’ll be a lucky man.” He reached into his back pocket and took out an envelope, which he placed tenderly in her hands. Enclosed was a stack of bills, a set of car keys, and the title to his car. “Car is out front. You get yourself home, Alice.”

She leaned in, tearfully kissed the side of his cheek, and walked out.

Little Pierogi

Not an inch of snow had fallen during the weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday, but it was still just as a frigid, with “record low temperatures in the single digits!” said the KARE 11 Weather Reporter. Grandma liked to listen to the weather every morning while she cooked her “everything omelets,” which were basically eggs with whatever leftovers she could find. The latest was leftover cabbage and mushrooms from her famous Christmas pierogi filling, which had been brewing in a giant pot on the stove for days, but she also added anchovies and old velveeta cheese to the eggs. “Yuck,” I mouthed to my younger brother Jarrod. He returned a similar expression as he picked through his eggs with a fork. Any complaints were met with a stream of dialogue about how lucky we were because “when I was a little girl,” as she often said, “we couldn’t afford a luxury like food. We ate whatever we could get.”

Surprisingly, the eggs went down okay with a glass of milk. I peered out the kitchen window at the backyard. Mom had just let our Golden Retriever Jessie out, who waddled around the frosty grounds in search of a good spot to pee with her very pregnant belly teetering back and forth as she attempted to trot.

“Mom?” I asked. “How many did you say she’d have?” Mom was sitting to the left of the dining room in Jessie’s whelping box. I could feel the heat radiating from the lamps that were clamped to the sidewalls. This was one of many litters of puppies our family would have this year, but the first ever to take place over Christmas Eve.

“I said ten. Dad thinks nine. Jarrod, how many did you say?”

“Twenty.”

I snickered. “Ha, that’ll be the day. Did you guess Grandma?”

She was now kneading dough over the kitchen counter, with fresh flour filling the air and caking her arms the same ghostly color as her hair. She did not have a lot of it, but what she had was always tied in a small ponytail at the top of her head. “Twelve. She’s got a few in there.”

Jessie had just returned to the outside door, letting in a fresh winter chill through the house. "I'm going with thirteen," I said. Part of this was employing *The Price Is Right* strategy, whose theme song had just started playing it's Christmas special on the small kitchen television. Always bid one higher than the highest bid. Jarrod's did not count.

Jessie had already started contracting. Mom always sat in the box with her to ensure safe delivery, and I would stand nearby the weighing station ready with my choice of ribbon, which we used to tell the puppies apart. I had seen hundreds of puppies delivered, but it still amazed me every time the green amniotic sac emerged. Jessie was a pro at giving birth.

"Mom," called Jarrod. "Why is it green?" The puppy had just been born, and Jessie immediately started to open the sac and clean off the fluid.

"That's just the way God made it." A typical response from Mom, who had now placed the puppy on the scale. "10 ounces, Cas."

I marked the weight, time of birth, and ribbon color (Red) on the litter's chart. "One down, 12 to go."

"You mean 19?" laughed Jarrod.

Bob Barker had just introduced the cliffhanger game, so we all leaned in hoping the contestant overbid so the little wooden cliffhanger would fall off the mountain. It did.

By 5pm, Jessie had delivered nine healthy puppies that were all nursing. Jarrod and I had started helping Grandma with the pierogies by pressing the dough and laying it flat so we could stencil small circles with an old tin can. Next came the filling, which we would use with a small spoon so as not to overstuff them before folding them in half and ribbing the sides together with the prongs of a fork.

Just then, Dad walked through the front door, newspaper and handheld cooler in hand. "Hi Dad," we all resounded.

“What are we at?” he asked.

“Nine,” said Mom. “But soon to be 10. She’s got at least another two or three more.”

“Wow. That’s her biggest litter yet. How are the pierogies coming? By the way, Anne,” he turned back toward Mom, “I got a call from Sis today – looks like she’s going to make it tomorrow for dinner with the kids after all. 5pm right?”

She met his gaze and gave a look of mild crossness. “I thought it was just going to be us. The house hasn’t even been cleaned. Do you really want people over like this?”

“She doesn’t care. She’s not my mother. Besides, the kids can help.”

Jarrod and I looked up from our dough circles. “What?” I objected. “It’s Christmas Eve! There’s no time to put on the fake house. Honestly, it looks fine Mom.”

Dad smiled. “What color is next Cas?”

“Turquoise. I already cut the ribbon.”

Dad leaned over the whelping box and picked up Orange, who started to squeal. “Hey little guy. It’s alright.” He gently stroked the top of the pup’s head with his finger. Orange was number eight and still had a leftover green tint to his coat. “Looks like little Turquoise is coming.” At this point, Jarrod and I barely lifted our heads. It had lost its excitement at about birth number four (Magenta). Also, evening cartoons had started, and it was a really great episode of *Gargoyles*.

Grandma had just begun frying the pierogies for dinner. She often did this the night before Christmas with all the imperfect pieces. The crackling oil from her pan filled the kitchen. It had been a family custom to prepare pierogies every Christmas, and Grandma’s cabbage recipe was definitely one to remember. She used a black pepper corn that she had shipped in from Chicago along with the finest Polish sausage. Warm memories filled my mind with the first bite, a buttery salty taste with fresh spice. It may have been a process to make them, but well worth it, especially since we made so many to the point where we had leftovers for months!

By 10pm, Jessie had given birth to Turquoise, Violet, and Navy Blue. Grandma had taken Jarrod off to bed after cleaning the kitchen. I leaned over the railing peering down at the 12 brown pups nursing over the tired mama.

“I think she’s done,” Mom whispered.

Dad leaned in and pressed gently on her belly. “I’m not feeling anything. Hmm... I don’t know. She’s still breathing pretty heavy. I’d give it another few hours.”

“She’s got one more,” I nodded confidently.

Dad looked at me. “You should get some sleep.”

“But it’s not a school night.”

“Yeah, but we got church in the morning.”

“Yeah, but Mom needs me! Come on Dad, I guessed 13. I gotta know. And I already know you fill the stockings, so we can stop pretending.”

Dad smirked. “Fine, but you better be in bed by midnight. We got a busy day tomorrow, and Mom’s going to need some help getting the house ready.”

I groaned. “Can’t you just tell Aunt Cindy to come next year? More pierogies for us.”

“Nope,” he chuckled, “and I’m serious – by midnight, your butt better be in bed.”

Mom and I waited for another hour, but still no puppy.

“Cas, I think Grandma won this one. She’s not breathing as heavy.”

“But she’s still pushing.”

Mom sighed. “She looks so exhausted.” She knelt down to pet Jessie’s head, who was sweating under the heat lamps. “I know the feeling. Wish I could feed you ice chips.”

“Mom,” I began. “Was I an easy baby?”

“Easy? You were a difficult pregnancy because I carried you so low that it hurt my back, but a pretty light labor – much better than your brother.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes,” she smiled, “but so worth it.”

I watched Mom move the puppies closer to the nipples. They would not open their eyes for another few weeks, so sometimes they needed a little help finding their way. The brown spots on Mom’s arms were especially vivid in the light, which made me think of Grandma, whose spots were bigger, and all over, practically moles. I started getting a few spots myself no bigger than a freckle.

Jessie had just taken a deep breath, pressing her abs toward the ground. “That was a big one,” I said. “Look!! Lucky number 13!” The vaginal wall was preparing to open, but instead of the usual green sac, we saw tiniest paw. “What’s happening Mom?”

Her expression fell and she leaned in to pull the baby out. “The puppy is breach. Cas, go get Dad NOW.”

I ran up the stairs, across the hall and pushed through the bedroom door. Dad laid up in bed working on his daily crossword puzzle. “Dad! Mom says to come now.”

Dad flew out of bed and hurried down the steps towards Mom, who was holding the blue-grey puppy in a blanket. It was nearly half the size of the others.

“He’s not breathing, born breach without a sac.”

Dad took the lifeless pup in his hands, and began rubbing it, before turning it on its back in his palm, securing the grasp, and leaning its head towards the ground before rapidly swinging his arms back and forth like a ketchup bottle. Every 30 seconds he would pull the puppy up and rub the back. Fluid had started to eek through the mouth. This went on for another five minutes. Mom had started to pray while I watched hopefully, the yellow ribbon ready in my hands. I could see the look on Dad’s face grow more somber with each passing second.

Jessie's tired eyes wandered over to Dad. She tried to get up, but Mom secured her back with the pups that were still nursing. "It's okay Mama. You did so great."

I noticed it was a little after midnight, but kept silent. My eyes darted from Dad to the door window. Snowflakes had started to fall along the glass. I walked over to switch on the outdoor porch light, revealing the land covered with an inch of snow.

But that very second, a small hiccup of breath filled the room. "Dad!" We all turned. The lifeless puppy was now moving its head.

Mom raised her hands to the ceiling, thanking Jesus for the "miracle" and celebrating with Jessie. "He's alright mama." Jessie blinked her eyes slowly as if to say thank you.

Dad lifted the pup up in full view before putting him on the scale. "Six ounces. No bigger than a pierogi. What color Cas?"

"Yellow. I knew it was 13."

Mom returned the pup to Jessie, who began cleaning it while it nursed. My eyes returned to the lit backyard and the snow still falling. "Did you see Dad?"

Dad beamed. "We got ourselves a white Christmas for a Christmas litter – and little periogi born at midnight."

"Just like Jesus," I chimed.

"Who would tell you its time to go to bed."

I bowed my head slightly while making my way toward the stairs, and with a grin I turned back, "Okay, but don't forget to fill the stockings Santa!"

Mahjong Tiles

The navy paint from the *Winston Plumbing* logo had started to fade on the cold white metal of the Chevy van parked outside the Ottness house. Dave had just finished installing a new water heater for his friends Ottie and Rita. An icy blast of Minnesota wind hit his face as he left the house, loading his bucket of tools and rusty dolly into the van.

It was nearly 7pm and even though it had been his fourth job that day, he hesitantly made his way out of Minneapolis towards his suburban home – a house that was too expensive, with two young children who barely noticed him when he entered a room, and a wife who had recently been unfaithful. He had thought about leaving her, but he told himself that he need to stay for the kids. It had been a year since they last had sex.

And she could not cook. He expected spaghetti and meatballs, the pasta overdone. But she was beautiful, “a babe in the woods,” as he often said.

Work had become a necessary escape, but the other truth was that he had to work 12-hour days to make ends meet. They had just refinanced the house for the third time. Fortunately, he enjoyed plumbing, and had been working alongside his dad years before inheriting the business.

He flipped on the radio to hear the score of the Gopher Basketball game: 65-59. They were behind, but it was early in the season. The buzzy sportscaster’s voice faded as Dave’s thoughts lingered on Ottie and Rita – how content they seemed in their marriage, perhaps because they never had any children? He reached for his chewing tobacco, taking out a pinch and driving it into his gums before flicking the remnants on the floor.

Upon arriving home, he heard the familiar barking from Skipper, his old border collie who was excitedly pawing the wire fence. Dave had gotten Skipper just before meeting Jane – before marriage, before the kids. At times, he wished he could go back to that period where life was just about him and his dog.

He spit the tobacco on the frozen grass lawn before walking into the sound of *Dancing with the Stars* beaming from the television and his family spread out across the living room – his wife Jane filing her long nails, Annie laying flat on her stomach with grade 3 school books sprawled across the floor, and little Luke glued to an old Gameboy Color with his bowl of spaghetti on his lap.

“Hi, honey,” said Jane lazily, not looking up from her nails. Annie and Luke followed with an unmoved “Hi, Dad” – a rather typical response on a Thursday evening.

Dave briefly paused before them, placing his portable cooler on the tile floor, almost as if he hoped they would ask him about his day, but then resigned himself to the kitchen, grabbing a bowl of overcooked pasta and the two remaining meatballs.

He descended down the basement stairs to his office, where he would spend most of his time playing mahjong on his desktop computer. His mother had introduced him to the game. To date, he had won over 2,800 games, a perfect record that he maintained scrupulously, to the point where he would shut the entire computer down rather than concede to a loss. He enjoyed the familiar swooping sound of matching tiles, which would start slow, but eventually quicken as he reached the end of the puzzle, ultimately leading to the flashing yellow “You Win” icon and his record still 100%.

But to his incensed disbelief, the percentage dropped to 99%. How? He had not lost a game in ten years. His eyes drifted upward towards the footsteps creaking from the floor above, and the sound of pots hitting the metal kitchen sink. *Dancing with the Stars* must be over.

Dave could feel his face hot as he stormed up the stairs. This time, Jane noticed him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked alarmingly while placing a soapy dish in the dishwasher.

“Were you on my computer at all today?” His nostrils flared.

“I ordered some throw pillows on Amazon earlier. Why?”

“You didn’t accidentally go into my mahjong and exit out?”

“No. Why?”

“Somebody did.” His eyes moved over the living room, catching the frightened expressions of Annie and Luke. “Well?” he continued. “Which of you did it?”

Annie and Luke glanced at each other before looking down.

Jane dried her hands with a towel as she walked over to Dave. “What’s the big deal? It’s just a computer game.”

Dave glared, his mouth seething as if he were an engine about to explode. “I have one goddamn rule in this fucking shithole of a house, Jane, and it’s stay off my fucking computer. That’s all I ask, but no – even that’s just too much.” He grew angrier at the sight of her, and could feel his fists balling as he tried to contain his temper in his palms. He turned back toward the kids and lowered his voice to a dangerously ominous tone.

“I’m going to ask this one more time. Which of you was on my computer?”

Annie’s eyes started to well before she burst into long sobs. “Daddy, I’m sorry! I thought I could beat it. It was open on your computer and I accidentally hit the Start button.”

“Why were you even on my computer? This’s why you have your own upstairs.”

“Luke was using it, and I needed to look up terms on Google for my science homework.”

“I told her she could use it,” Jane interjected.

Dave released his fists, feeling an intense need to escape back downstairs. Just then, the house phone rang.

Jane walked over to read the caller ID box: *Ted Winston*. “What’s your dad calling for at this hour?” She looked over at Dave as she pressed the talk button. “Hello? Oh hi Barb, how’s Phoenix? Yes, he’s here. Hang on a sec.” She cupped the phone as she handed it to Dave. “It’s your mom – sounds important.”

Dave sighed as he gripped it, feeling the icy touch of his wife's hand. He turned back to Annie. "We're not done talking about this." Silence filled the room with everyone frozen in place, and all eyes on Dave as he exited down the stairs with the phone to his head.

"Hi," he began. It had been months since he last talked with his mother, and rarely did she ever call this late. "What's up?"

Her voice seemed less assertive than normal – weak, but also tense, as if words were causing her physical pain. She engaged in small conversation, which was what most conversations often were.

"Everything okay with Dad?" Dave asked. Ted had been in and out of hospitals the last few months for lung cancer. Sixty years of chain smoking had finally taken its toll.

"He's doing alright," she mumbled absentmindedly. "Doctors say he's actually improving now that he's quit." The conversation drew a long silence, which was not unusual. Most of the time, they simply ran out of things to say. She sighed deeply. "Dave," she paused for a moment, clearly intending to choose her words carefully. "I've got a bomb to lay on you."

"Oh?"

"And I'm not sure how you're going to take it, but it's been a long time coming, and it's actually about your dad."

"What did he do? He's not drinking again, is he?"

"No, nothing like that. But Dave, that's just it." Her voice trailed off.

"Mom, what is it? Just tell me."

"You were only two at the time." She'd begun to cry. "Dave," she sighed. "Ted's not really your biological father. He adopted you when we got married."

Dave wasn't sure he registered her words. "What? Why?" He felt like the weight of his body in his throat, as though gravity were pulling him to the floor. He sank into his

desk chair, feeling a sense of airy disbelief, but also relief. All his life, he felt he was different from his younger siblings. He bore no resemblance to anyone, and often joked that the milkman was his real father, which now seemed more true than anything else. His mind raced over their wedding photos, anniversary dates, and even Annie's latest school ancestry project. *I'm not even Hungarian now. Who am I?* He felt as though a part of him was missing, like he only knew a few chapters of his own autobiography, which now needed to be entirely rewritten.

“Dave?” It had been nearly a minute of silence. “I’m so sorry.”

He could not answer. He did not want to talk to her, and he was not sure if he wanted to know why. Would he even bother to tell Jane? Would she care? Probably not. He would tell the dog. “I have to go. Jane is calling for me.”

He pressed the end call button, sat back, and stared at the shifting shape of his screensaver, which just then reverted back to the yellow “You Win” icon that now showed a 99% record. He moved his mouse over to “Start” and began playing, leaving the swooping sound of mahjong tiles to drown out the voices upstairs and all the thoughts in his head.

The Mourning After

The storm from last night left a salty staleness in the air of Block Island. It was as though the sea had vomited all its deadened waste, like a putrid mist engulfing all other scents. During April, storms of this severity were rare, but certainly possible, for surely all can recollect ten years to the day when Caroline Murray was lost at sea...

It had been a beautiful day, and she and her husband Tim were out sailing. Both loved the water, especially Tim. They had met in Providence just after college, and instantly connected over their mutual love for art – she the writer, who was captivated by his mysterious character, and he the painter, enchanted by her beauty. They became each other's inspiration, with a passion so unmatched, that they married just three months after dating, and later honeymooned on Block Island, a place they both felt most at home. Not long after, they bought a simple cottage on the island, which was walled with ocean views, and was just enough removed from town to feel like they had their own private space.

Tim had sailed his entire life, and after inheriting his father's boat, he and Caroline spent many happy afternoons out at sea. The ocean waves on that particular day were more choppy than usual, yet certainly manageable. Caroline often sat portside, with her long chestnut locks flowing with the wind. She was a vision in red, but her sparkling blue eyes reflected the sea.

Soon after sunset, just as they were about to head back inland, a storm approached rather suddenly and violently, twisting the tide with wide waves, some as high as the mainsail, and constantly shifting, like a mad dance with no way of anticipating its next move. Over the sound of crashing waters and hallowing wind, Tim shouted instructions for Caroline to adjust the sail while he attempted to steer. The sea was burying the hull and slowly consuming them, with Caroline being its first victim. Tim felt her absence like a deadly silence sounding through his cold sea-soaked body. He ran towards her ghostly disappearance, keeling over the boat and desperately calling her name, barely

hearing his own voice amidst the screaming in his head. She was gone, and the ship soon followed, leaving Tim on a small raft drifting slowly away from her, away from everything he loved.

After the accident, ten years blurred together like one drunken season. For the first time in his life, Tim hated the sea and did everything in his power to avoid it, all its sounds and smells. To him, they were the marks of death. She could not be dead. He confined himself to the island, locked away in his cottage with curtains drawn to shut out the blues. He longed to live where she once lived, to be surrounded by her image, his paintings of her.

Since that terrible night, Block Island had never been accosted with any storm like it, that is, until yesterday, which sent Tim springing from his bed, too scared to sleep, too afraid to relive the nightmare again.

The crashing waves clapped against the land with rain coming down in droves, so hard and angry that the sky seemed ignited in war against the ocean. Tim opened the curtains and fell to his knees, crippled by his last faded image of her and the hallowing winds singing her memory. He began to cry, cursing God and calling out her name, hoping she would come alive through the paintings across the room. They haunted him, reminding him every day that he failed to save her. Each thrashing wave heaved at his chest, making him so deliriously uncomfortable in his safe space. He looked out at the violent waves. It was just like before. She was calling out to him, and for the first time in ten years, he began to walk towards her.

The wind pulled at him, drawing him out while the rain weighed him down, and the cold wet sand beneath his bare feet sent chills up his spine. He engulfed the salty humidity, tasting it on his lips with eyes fixed on the sea, and each step feeling heavier than the last. "Caroline," he whispered. He will not fail her again.

The frigid waves rushed against his legs, and he began to quiver as though his body was rejecting every thought and movement. A large strand of seaweed caught on

his leg, and he now felt the seashells and rocks scraping his feet, which led him to fall hands first into the sea, gripping the floor while waves towered over him. She was pulling him in, and all he had to do was release. "Let go Tim," he thought he heard her say. The winds continued to howl, but for a brief moment, the waves subsided. He trembled while rising erect, staring out into the black blueness, and with a quick flash of lightning, he saw her, this beautiful red hue off in the distance, beckoning him on. He stepped forward, and the waves swallowed him, carrying him out to his long lost love...

The local residents of Block Island may feel the sound of the storm first, but the impact is truly found in the leftover scent of death in the morning after. Although rare, storms of this severity have been known to happen, as all remember Caroline Murray, but also how just yesterday her husband Tim disappeared into the same violent storm, leaving nothing behind but a collection of paintings, all of her, and never to be seen again.

Oysters and Clams

June's phone buzzed with a message from Katia: *Rick is running late picking me up so let's just meet at the restaurant.* June glanced up at Anthony, her boyfriend of two and a half years, who she would probably marry if nobody better came along.

"Let me guess, she's running late?"

"Yep, but not entirely her fault this time. I think she's a bit nervous for us to meet him." June ran her fingers through her short brown hair, and pulled down the car visor, sliding the mirror open to check her teeth. "I haven't flossed in like a week." She drew out a leftover popcorn kernel from the back of her mouth. "When did we go to the movies? Like a week ago? Gosh I'm gross."

Anthony laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

*

Katia emerged in a bright red dress with matching pumps along the arm of a tall pre-silver-executive type. She always looked ready to impress with her long blonde hair freshly curled, and after recently dropping twenty pounds living on protein shakes, she sought any opportunity to flaunt her new trim figure.

"Hiiiiii!!" She waved excitedly across the restaurant while Rick checked her coat.

"Damn," June remarked under her breath. "This one is really handsome."

"Definitely an upgrade from Jacques," Anthony whispered. "He was such a piece of shit. Amazing how she's able to find a new guy in a matter of weeks."

Katia flashed a big smile as she ran towards June, embracing her as if it had been months, but in reality, they had just seen each other a few hours ago at the salon. They had both gone through the same cosmetology school, and somehow managed to get stations at one of the most popular salons in the San Fernando Valley.

"Guys," Katia announced bouncily. "This is Rick." She looked proudly at him, weaving her arm playfully around his as if they'd been dating months.

Rick extended his hand with one of those cheeky debonair smiles that could have come straight from a 1990s Julia Roberts RomCom.

“Nice to meet you Rick. Katia’s had nothing but wonderful things to say.” June squeezed his hand, feeling his firm grip. This man was dripping in testosterone – and she had been privy to every detail of their wild sex life – his hanging swing, the anal beads (size large), the leather handcuffs (size small), and his very large large...

“So,” Anthony began. “How did you two meet?”

Oh great, June thought. Like I need to hear this again. She was having trouble placing the thought of their sex life out of her mind. *They probably did it in the car. That’s really why they’re late.* She regretted not masturbating earlier, and had just gotten a new vibrator online she was eager to try out. It would have been perfect, but Anthony came home early. *Ugh, he’s probably going to want to have sex tonight.* He was a tender lover, but unfortunately, he had a smaller than average penis – like a super size tampon. She had learned to accept it, telling herself that he was good man. *He was there for you when your mom died. And he’d never cheat on you.* Yep, that’s why she stayed – and he made good money as a salesman. *I’ll just wait for him to go to sleep and do it in the bathroom later.* After nearly a year of living together, he still hadn’t found her secret stash of toys in the secret drawer of her nightstand. Maybe because it was buried under a mess of self-help books, like *Get Motivated*, with a tagline, “Overcome Any Obstacle, Achieve Any Goal, and Accelerate Your Success with Motivational DNA.”

“I am so unmotivated to eat anything green,” June said while flipping through the menu, sneaking glances up at Katia who was nibbling Rick’s neck. She felt the sweat building between her legs and her thoughts lingered on the bottle of castor oil she’d recently bought on Amazon to smooth out the stretch marks on her thighs. She had put on a few pounds since switching to a generic birth control. Pregnancy was not an option. Katia never had stretch marks, and was still just as beautiful even when she was heavier.

June missed those days when it was just the two of them staying up late with a bottle of wine.

“Wine for the table?” asked the waiter.

“Oh, we definitely want a bottle!” joked Katia.

“Or two!” June added, meeting her gaze with that tinge of mischief they often drew from one other.

Anthony and Rick began a lengthy conversation about law school. Rick had graduated from the University of Southern California, specializing in entertainment law, and now worked at NBC.

“I thought of going back for Law,” Anthony began, “but I just wanted to be done with school, and there was no way I was going to pass the Bar.”

Or maybe you're just unmotivated, June thought. She was annoyed that Rick was both handsome and successful, and also quite personable. Katia had caressed his hand like she often did to June, or anyone she loved. How perfectly seated they were – her being left handed and seated to his left so they could hold hands during the entire meal. June thought of Katia's delicate cursive signature, and how she always intended on keeping her last name, Bliss.

“What's your last name, Rick?” June blurted.

“Kuntz.”

June looked searchingly for Katia's eyes, which were staring ardently at Rick.

“I like it,” Katia smiled. “It has a nice ring to it.”

“I'm glad you like it, Babe.”

Babe? They're already using pet names? June hated Anthony's last name, Ho, but he would expect her to take it whenever they get married, and then people would call her Juno, or J-Ho. *Katia Bliss has a better ring to it... so did June Bliss.*

One disappointing salad later, Katia and Rick were cutting their meals in half to share with one another. Rick had ordered Mushroom Pappardelle, and she the Steelhead Salmon with summer squash and sweet corn pudding.

“You know there are oysters in the pasta, right?” June remarked.

“Yeah,” Katia smiled. “But that’s okay.”

“But you hate oysters.”

“I don’t hate them.”

“Just last week you called them giant boogers!”

At this, both Rick and Anthony burst out laughing. Katia joined them, but June remained perplexed at her friend.

“They do kind of look like that,” Rick remarked. “Can I interest anyone in a fresh booger?” he said while holding up his plate.

“I’ll take one!” Anthony chimed in, helping himself to a small noodle.

“June?”

“No, I’m good, thanks.”

June watched her friend indulge in her food (and her man), sneaking kisses in between bites. *They were definitely going to have hot sex tonight.* June had seen Katia naked before. They’d once gone to a Korean spa together back when she was heavier. She remembered how Katia had joked about refusing to get a wax because apparently, “a full bush showed more character.” June wondered if she still felt that way... if she still looked that way.

“God, I love clams,” Anthony proclaimed. “Want a clam, babe?”

“Yes, I would love a clam.” *I should have ordered clams instead of steak.*

Father Forgotten

Harry and Lavinia Wiggard lived in a canary-yellow colonial house, situated right across the street from Howard Lake High School, which lent itself as the ideal location when they decided to become foster parents. The town was small and quaint, just an hour outside Minneapolis, which had been all these high-school sweethearts ever knew, but quite the change for Sadie Mort who arrived at their doorstep only two months ago with a violet suitcase and her mother's old guitar.

By this point, the Wiggards had grown accustomed to fostering teenagers, many who came from single-parent households with situations of drug abuse or violence, but not Sadie.

It was a chilly November Saturday, with a wind-chill that prompted Lavinia to dig out her long fur coat from the back closet. Sadie's purple suede jacket had fallen to the floor. Lavinia pulled it up and noticed the faded name *Charlotte Mort* inked on the front lining. She turned her gaze towards the upper level, hearing the resonant boom of Sadie's music sounding through the ceiling. Lavinia sighed. *I wish she'd open up to me.*

Ring! The house phone rang so sparingly that it almost surprised Lavinia when she went to answer it. "Hello, Wiggard residence."

"Hi Lavinia, this is Vera Lane from Child Services. We met two months ago regarding Sadie Mort."

"Oh right, of course. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Is Sadie available? We just received a call from her father, and he seems to have had a change of heart."

"Oh really? That's wonderful. She's just upstairs. One moment."

Phone in hand, Lavinia quickly made her way up the carpeted stairs with every step feeling as though the volume dial were steadily raising the music now blasting behind Sadie's bedroom door. She knocked softly. "Sadie?" The music stopped, and the

door slowly creaked open, revealing a pale freckled face with a pair a dark gray eyes and a river of long black hair.

Sadie looked up at Lavinia, her face cool and impassive.

“Your social worker is on the phone,” Lavinia said while thrusting the phone towards her.

Sadie eyed the phone ominously before taking it, and slowly closed the door.

Lavinia stood in the silence of the hallway for maybe thirty seconds before Sadie ushered the door back open and handed the phone back. The door closed behind the silky wisp of her hair, prompting the return of music, and Lavinia to return downstairs.

“Hello? Vera? What did she say?”

“She’s not willing to meet him – won’t even consider it. Shame. He seemed sincere.”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Uh,” Robert looked distractedly at his phone. A text message just came in from Vera Lane: *She said no. I’m so sorry to hear about your health. Let’s reapproach this in 6 months and see if she’ll reconsider.*

“Robert?” exclaimed Dr. Ferguson.

“Yes, sorry Doctor. Is it possible I’ll have more than a year?”

“As I said before, you always have the option of surgery, but in your case, the cancer is terminal, so you’ll be risking the time you have. The meds will help with the headaches, but expect the seizures to continue. I wish I had better news for you.”

Robert stared at his phone. He had lived in Chicago the last fifteen years, co-founded one of the top advertising firms in the Midwest, and lived an enviable bachelor life with the best condo on Walton Street, but at this very moment, he wanted nothing more than to leave.

“Have you told your family?”

Robert shook his head.

“Best to tell them now before your condition worsens. Maybe take some time off and visit with them? Where do they live?”

Robert paused. He had no family, at least nobody who would care. He shut out those people a long time ago just like his father did to him. *It was for the best*, he often thought. He could not blame her for being angry. She would be sixteen now.

“Minnesota,” he said finally. “I have a daughter in Minnesota.” That night, he took the last flight to Minneapolis.

Tuesday. Headphones blared Sadie’s favorite folk mix as she walked the same path from school that led straight to the Wiggard house, but since last week, she had been walking another few blocks up the road to fulfill her community service hours at the local nursing home. The Wiggards were not Sadie’s first foster home, and even though authorities were understanding of her loss, grand theft auto and destruction of public property warranted some time.

She dug her cold hands into the pockets of her mother’s purple suede jacket. The warmth of heat hit her hard as she entered the sliding doors.

“Good afternoon,” said a cheery voice from behind the front desk. It was Pauline Simms, the head nurse. “We got a new patient in room 11 that I’d like you to see first before handing out the trays.”

Sadie nodded as she turned into the nurse’s station to change into her scrubs. It was her responsibility to serve patients their evening meals. She did not mind the work, and often kept to herself for the most part.

Room 11 had been empty for the past week since the unfortunate passing of Arnold ‘Arnie’ Jacobs. The room was apparently cursed – no patient ever stayed more than a couple months. Sadie entered the room expecting to find another elderly patient,

but to her surprise, the man looked no older than 50. His salt and pepper hair was starting to recede, and his gray eyes seemed tired, as though he had not slept in weeks.

Robert looked up at his daughter, seeing his nose and eyes reflected back at him, fearing her gaze, and anticipating the worst. *She looks like me.* “Hi – you must be Sadie.”

She nodded. “Do you prefer a vegetarian option for your meal?”

She doesn't recognize me. His eyes continued scanning her, noticing the black glitter nail polish on her small fingernails. “Is it any good?”

The question surprised her. “Um, can't say I've tried it, but I'd go with the chicken if I were you.”

Robert could see the pain on her face, and a pang of regret flooded over him. She had begun to take out her headphones. *I need to talk to her.*

“What are you listening to?”

“Bob Dylan.”

Charlotte's favorite, he remembered. “One of my favorites – actually saw him in concert a few times.” *We were pregnant with you last time we saw him. You kicked when you heard this song.* “You know, he's originally from Duluth.” Silenced filled the room. “Which song?”

“Subterranean Homesick Blues,” Sadie smiled.

Robert could feel her guard coming down, but sensed her desire to leave. “Do you play?”

“Not well, but yes.” Sadi gazed back at him, almost as if seeing him for the first time.

Robert pointed to the far corner. “Miss Simms put my guitar in the closet. Would you mind fetching it for me?”

Sadie felt the hardened leather from the guitar case as she flipped open the latches, revealing a vintage 1977 Martin D-35 guitar in prime condition, a clone of her

own, her most prized possession. She handed it to him, hearing its warmth echo with the motion.

“Thank you. Back in the day, I was in a band.”

He began strumming the chords for “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” which beckoned many forgotten memories of Charlotte – the way she smiled, how fast they had fallen in love, the surprise of the pregnancy, and the birth. He remembered staring into the crib not able to breath, not recognizing himself as a father. *I could not be the man she needed me to be.* He had set out to become that man – responsible, successful, and more than just a musician.

“My mother loved that song. She was in a band too.”

Robert stopped playing. The memory of it all hit him. “I’m sorry Sadie,” he said tenderly. *She was so beautiful.* Just looking at Sadie reminded him of Charlotte. Recovering, he adjusted his voice. “Miss Simms had mentioned that you recently lost your mother.”

Sadie met his gaze for a moment before thumbing for her headphones.

“I’m sure she’d be very proud of you,” Robert continued. *Don’t leave.* “I’m sure your father would be proud of you too.”

At this, the light in Sadie’s eyes left, and a dark energy swept through the room.

“I don’t have a father.”

“I’m sorry.” *I love you.*

She looked down at her white sneakers. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry for.”

Robert’s heart sank.

The image of his daughter began to fade as his body started convulsing. It would be his worst seizure to date, but he never woke up to tell her the truth.