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SHUTTER

A Short Story in Four Parts

com•po•si•tion: the selection and positioning of the subject to effectively evoke and stimulate. Subjective and often arbitrary.

fo•cus: the point at which perspective is crisp. Where details are clear and definition is explicit.

| COMPOSITION & FOCUS

'Hold,' I said from behind the lens. The bride pressed herself into the chest of her new husband and poised a wine flute between manicured nails, toasting to the sky. Squeeze-click-blink, the camera captured and she retreated. A white stiletto slipped into a soft patch of earth.

'Shit,' the bride said as the stem jumped from her clasp and tipped. The red wine didn't splatter or spill; it dripped thick, like blood, staining down the bridal white in heavy flow from breasts to soil. It was beautiful. One of the most beautiful tragedies I've ever documented, and it was even more riveting for me because recently, I had started to suspect that my life was not beautiful. Not at all. So my index pasted itself to the button and preserved every fragment of that ruined moment. I couldn't stop myself.

The bride's pooling eyes looked first to her husband's face and then to my lens in a silent plea to reverse time. I surfaced from behind the camera, reluctantly letting go of that evocative foreground. I lifted my eyebrows in sympathy and wished I could reach out and feel how the lace of her dress soaked up the tears and the red.

'Shit,' I muttered to myself as the husband tucked her into his biceps, knowing I'd just lost a paycheck. I hate it when women cry. Can't stand it. And this one looked like she was about to cry herself into free wedding photos. She wouldn't even have to ask, I would just offer. And so I found myself driving home, burdened with an empty pocket, several rolls of nuptial film, and a new brand of fault called failure to provide. Caroline, a writer and my wife, in that order, would have a field day over this one.

I am not a man of words. I don't trust them. Words are fickle creatures, so I stick with the visual material of the world. Ironic then that I married a woman of my wife's profession I suppose. There used to be a reason.

Caroline and I believed we were perfect for each other, that we would complete the lacking half of the other. She would be words and I would be illustration and the book of our life would become a masterpiece. It was all just miscommunication. We never shared the same speech. We were two lines with no intersection in view, no point of real contact, just parallel existences who said they were in love but didn't know how to prove it to the other.

In the autumn of our third anniversary we moved to number twenty-four Curtis Avenue from where we met at Vanderbilt down south in Tennessee. We were both transplanted Yankees and decided to return to the Northeast to live in a tiny town in Connecticut that was smack dab between Boston and the City, which was convenient for my freelance business. The town joke in Durham was that there were more cows than people. It could have been true too, I never counted. Hills littered with nature trails surrounded the town green, which was lined with colonials, all within walking distance of our little neck of the woods. We purchased the house on Curtis for two reasons: the insulated barn that I converted into my darkroom/studio and the room at the front of the house with the most spacious bay window we'd ever seen that became Caroline's office, looking out over what the realtor stressed as 'a nice piece of land.'

As I walked up the path to the side door and passed our plants that sucked on free Starbucks leftovers, I debated whether I should confess my lack of backbone in the matter of the missing paycheck. I didn't want to tell Caroline about the bleeding bride. I knew she would ask too many questions. So I decided not to tell her at all, which was something I found myself deciding more and more lately. I nodded to myself to confirm my little decision and keyed the door.

The downstairs of our house smelled of mocha and reams of stacked paper and Mexican tile and busy-ness because Caroline was never still. Never in focus. That was her domain, the downstairs, but my darkroom, out back in the barn, smelled of me. Bath after bath of solutions made to suspend picture on paper created an airborne reaction—one chemical bond away from vinegar. Acidic in the nose, pricking the most sensitive part at the top of the nostril cavity, and yet mellow, soothing. The smell of coolness and control, concentrated, calm, and a whole bunch of other adjectives starting with 'c' I'm sure.

The phone was blinking at me when I walked in the door. I punched the button and listened as I dumped my equipment on the kitchen table.

'Hi, I'm calling for Daniel Williams. This is Tracy at the Herald,' the voice was chirpy and made the back of my neck tingle in irritation. Tracy had called me once a week for four years and still referred to me by my full name. 'I have a message for you from Mr. Stevens about next Saturday's issue. Miss Winterstein of 3 Toddmore Crescent won the blue ribbon for the best apple pie and we'll need material for a full front spread. If there are any problems please feel free to call me back. Thank you.' In the year we had lived in Durham I had done a little work every week for the Herald. It was a nice steady check on the side of my independent work and introduced me to the locals faster than any other job in town.

I went upstairs to change out of my work clothes and climb back into my casual skin. Our bedroom was the only place in the house that didn't try to marry mocha and vinegar, and the only place where we still married each other. It was a neutral territory where our odors were replaced by the soft pull of lavender that Caroline sprinkled everywhere.

I loved our four-poster bed and how it sat tall and plump, cuddled by a duvet. And I loved sleeping with Caroline, euphemistically and literally. Our bodies knew how to speak to each other when nothing else did, but my favorite times were when she dropped to sleep afterwards and I could listen to her stillness. It was the sound of complete peace and constancy in a woman who otherwise never stopped moving. She slept on her stomach, like a child, resting her palms down on the sheet on either side of her head in symmetrical composition. Her only movement was the tide of breath in her chest and the stirring of her eyes beneath the lids just before she awoke and broke that beautiful inertia. Back in my jeans and a t-shirt, I followed the soft clicks of the keyboard back down the stairs.

Caroline's office was a portrait of the creative mind. Well, her creative mind at least. The shelves were packed solid, full of dusted alphabetized spines, while the floor was strewn with the carcass of mundane life. My existence lay discarded somewhere between the crumpled Post-its, stained receipts, and blueberry muffin crumbles. My wife loved me, she thought she did at least, but hers was a cerebral love. 'Come here Danny,' she'd say, 'We can talk this out,' when all I wanted was to feel without the words. She didn't hear me when I came in and I stood in the door for a few moments just watching her.

The color black clung to Caroline like skin, gripping her yoga-toned limbs with organic fibers. And it didn't show any stains. Cross-calved, perched on her chair and covered in fabric wrinkles, she was in her most natural state. Her hands were poised above the keyboard, quivering in expectation as her thoughts made their way down into the mechanics of her body. I often asked myself whether my wife was beautiful even when I knew the answer. My perception was warped.

My mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. To me. Every kid thinks that. But one day, on my way home from school, I passed the blonde knockout known as Norman Macalester's mother. What business a kid named Norman Macalester had belonging to a woman like that I'll never know, but that day she became real to me. Her hips beckoned the eyes of every boy in our class to ogle the curves pressing against the seams of her baby blue dress as she walked down the street. The others worshipped her right side, the side with breasts gleaming in sun oil and legs tapering to flawless fragile ankles, but that afternoon I watched her from the left. She smiled and I saw something I had never seen before. The third tooth from center was chipped, and maybe even a little crooked. I found out later that her two year-old son had accidentally whacked her in the mouth with a plastic tea kettle as she tried to lift him from the tub a few days before. She had it fixed soon after, but in that brief moment she was more beautiful than she'd ever been before. She disappeared around a corner and I was left to brood my way down the sidewalk. A few minutes later I found myself sitting at the kitchen counter as my mother chopped carrots and threw them into a bowl. Each dull ring of beta carotene hitting ceramic tolled the end of an era. I felt a membrane slipping further and further from my eyes and doubt forming somewhere in my gut. My mother turned and slid the bowl to me with a smile, and I knew. But Caroline. Caroline with all her little neuroses really was beautiful.

The first time I met her she was sitting out on the main quad at Vanderbilt with someone I knew. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail but the breeze tugged at the wisps and made them coil and weave around her face. I don't remember what I said, but I remember that she looked up at me as she pulled a strand away from her eyes. And she saw me—really saw me. In the next few moments I would learn that every time Caroline laughed it made me want to make her laugh again. I would also learn that the way she nibbled on one side of her bottom lip that day was something she always did when she was turned on. Whether it was me or her writing that aroused her didn't seem to matter, her lip would always be tucked up in a soft bite.

'Don't hover baby,' she said and woke me from my muse. 'So how many clicks today?' she teased in a distracted kind of way, 'Is your finger tired?'

'A thousand words, Caroline.' I put my hands up in mock defeat to ward off what I knew would come next. Provoking was the only way I could get her attention anymore, I couldn't even remember the last time I had made her laugh, so I often found myself diving head first into stale battles. It worked too. She pushed herself from the desk and swiveled to face me.

'Danny, you know I think your work is brilliant but you can't honestly believe that's true when just a few supple words, in succinct economy can—'

'Why do books have a cover picture Caroline? Because that's what draws people in, connects with them.'

'Yes, but show me a photograph that lets me taste the air and feel the rawness of the moment. A picture can, by definition, only be visual, one dimensional and—'

'But a truly brilliant photograph stimulates all the senses. It can evoke a reaction, it can—'

'It's static.' She spoke with finality that said the game was over. I stared back at her, trying to remember what I was supposed to say next, but my mind was blank.

'Why do you want me Caroline?' I asked. And she looked at me, but I don't think she really saw me.

'A picture never varies,' she said and I looked down at the floor, remembering how this always ended.

'And neither do you,' I said low and slunk away down the hall. I wondered if I believed anything I said anymore. I am not a man of words.

ex•po•sure: a measurement of variable light quantity, determined by speed and aperture.

| EXPOSURE 

'What do you want?' she asked me from the other side of the screen door. I was standing on the stoop of 3 Toddmore Crescent and I knew she was my subject from the flour and dough pasted under her nails and smeared up the cracks of her hands. Her stiff collar clamped a sinewy throat in a starched white circle. Floating above was a face full of bones, slathered in thick skin. Clydesdale quads strained at threadbare cotton as she stooped to squash an ant on the linoleum below her that could just as well have been me.

'I'm the photographer,' I answered as I offered up the substantial camera snaked round my neck as proof.

'Stuff-in-nonsense, the whole thing,' she grunted, 'Come in then.'

I was admitted across the threshold and the screen door snapped back on its spring behind me. Eldone Winterstein didn't seem up for a chat. She turned her back to me and walked down the dim hallway; I just assumed I was supposed to follow. I found myself very conscious of every dirt molecule the soles of my shoes were depositing on the spotless floor, and very relieved that I was only responsible for a few photos and not an interview with this austere woman.

The winner of the Durham Fair's blue ribbon for the best All-American Apple Pie always had her picture on the cover of the Herald. Every year, the Betty Crockers in polka dot aprons eyed each other over golden lattice-worked dishes, plumped full with home raised temptation, as the critics suckled on forkfuls. Apple pie was ambrosia in the small towns of New England, and the winner became Durham's crowned queen until next October when new blood rose to challenge her flavors.

Eldone Winterstein had never won the Durham Fair's blue ribbon before and she probably never would again. The word on local lips was that the whole thing was a fluke. All I really knew about Eldone was that she was no picnic. It was a truth universally acknowledged as Caroline liked to quote. My wife took great pride in her intertextual life and associated herself with The Greats via incessant reference. Hearsay was also one of her hobbies. She claimed it provided an endless source of material, but I became deaf to the gossip within a year or two of being in Durham. The Wintersteins were a frequent topic in the local babble.

Joseph Winterstein and his two sisters lived up on the old farm at the end of town. Joseph was a timid soul and while all the mail was delivered in his name, everyone knew better than to think he ran the place. He hardly ever came into town except to attend church and hardly spoke a word when he did. Eldone Winterstein was the true head of the house. 'She's a lone soul,' they said in town, 'And it's no wonder with a name like that.' She had no interest in romance, even when she was young. The 'L' word was lobbed around whenever rumors were scarce but no one really believed it. Eldone was just a hard woman who knew herself well enough not to dream of a life she knew she wouldn't have. And then of course there was Thea. Eldone was nineteen when her sister Thea was born, blind from the day she entered the world. Folks were always shocked by those eyes. Two yawning windows, wide and clear, tinted green. Form over function I suppose.

Trailing behind Eldone, I entered the pleasant warmth of the kitchen. Joe Winterstein was hunched over a bowl of chow at the table, throating softly like a sow at her slops. He peered up with a ruddy face that looked definitively alcoholic. He nodded at me and teetered on his stool in the effort, confirming my suspicions. I could tell he was a lonely drunk, the kind that relapses to mushiness after a bottle or two.

The first time I was ever drunk was with Norman Macalester, who became my friend for reasons other than his delicious mom. We went camping, just the two of us and a bottle of Jack. We drank it fast and smooth, boys of sixteen and men of the world now, and talked crap into the evening. At some point we decided to find out which way was north. It wasn't the best idea. Somewhere out in the summer dark, lost, but really just a few feet from the tent, Norm hit in vino veritas. He told me he had slept with a girl. Looking back, it was no wonder with a mother like that. The pinnacle of my sexual experience at that point was when my Sunday school crush reached for my hand at the movie theater during a scary part of *The Sixth Sense*. I started yelling at Norm with a teenage temper and told him he should stop, that he was ruining his life or something. I can't remember if I was jealous or not, more shocked than anything I think. The next morning Norm lay moaning with one hell of a headache and I felt wonderful. I didn't drink often, not even at Vanderbilt, but when I did I found clarity somewhere in the insanity, and that was how it was with Caroline.

The first time I kissed Caroline I was drunk. Very drunk. It was the only way I could find the nerve. She was dating a philosophy major, who I'm sure deserved her more than I did, but she wasn't happy with him for one reason or another. She never really said why. We were at the same party, sitting on a twenty-something couch, inching closer but pretending not to. She left to go to the bathroom and for once in my life I had perfect timing. I heard the door open and I took off down the hallway.

'Can I use that?' I mumbled.

'Sure. I'm done,' she said. My hands slid along the walls, balancing my swerve, and in a moment beyond my control they fell to her approaching hips and wrapped us into *No Turning Back*. After a moment, pressed into a wall, the knot of heat in my abdomen throbbing outward, hips and torsos pulling at each other, she broke away from me. I'll never lose the memory of those eyes. Searching and hunted and starving. And I couldn't tell whether it was desire or hate that stared back at me.

'Will this do?' Eldone asked me. I assumed she meant the location. I had to assume everything with her since her bluntness didn't lend much.

'Yes of course. The kitchen works best since it's the environment you bake in. Do you have a pie we can use?' Eldone opened

the oven to a steaming pan and practically threw it onto a hot plate. It succeeded in startling Joe from his chewing, which I think was the intended effect.

'I'm not doing this alone,' Eldone said to Joe but it was meant for me as well.

'Pardon?' I asked as Joe squinted at his sister.

'I said I'm not doing this alone. They're Joe's apples. He picked and peeled. It's Thea's crust, and she's the only one who can roll it. I just put the dough together and threw the sugar stuff in there and baked it. So I'm not having any picture of just me sitting prim as you please in the paper thank you very much.'

'Oh, I see,' I said, wondering how long that outburst had been stewing inside her, 'Well let's have the three of you doing each step here in the kitchen then. We can have Joe seated—'

'Well he never lifts a finger anyway,' she added.

'—and Thea can be rolling on this side of him while you have the finished pie standing on the other side of him and—'

'I do too lift a finger Eldone. Don't be all right-ee-ous cause we've got company,' Joe interrupted. The word 'righteous' sounded like a big deal to him and every syllable received special attention.

'Fine.' Eldone spoke at me, paying no heed to her brother's comment. 'Get on with it then.' Eldone picked up the pie pan with only a thin tea towel to shield her hands from the heat.

'Ehrrm, aren't we waiting for one more?' I asked, trying not to be intimidated by the Amazon.

'Thea? She's behind you.'

I turned round to see the woman standing silent in the doorway. Everything they said about her was true. Thea Winterstein was a creature of myth in Durham, a mysterious nymph skirting our lives but never really a part of our world. She was pale and dark at once, a portrait of contrast, with black hair, white skin, sepia lips and only her eyes for color.

'Mr. Williams?' she lifted her arm out to me, 'Nice to meet you.' Her hand was chilled as I took it in mine, and I felt like my shake was bruising her little bones.

'Nice to meet you too, Thea. Call me Dan.'

'I really love your work. Eldone reads me all your photographs from the Herald and Yankee Magazine.' I wondered what Caroline would think of someone 'reading' a photograph.

'He wants you to stand over here Thea,' Eldone ordered. Thea walked over to the table, her torso floating through the air as if separate from the mechanics of her legs. She knew exactly where she was headed and stood next to her brother who placed a rolling pin and a bowl full of floury paste in front of her. Her hands crawled along the table and found her subjects.

I took three hundred photos of the Wintersteins that afternoon. The rule of thumb for professionals is that for every ninety to a hundred pictures taken, one is up to par. So for a front spread that needed two or three shots I took three hundred. They posed patiently the whole time. Eldone in a soiled apron, sternly holding out her pie and staring at the camera with a fierce pride you'd expect to see on a prairie homestead; Joe with flannel shoulders hunched over his work, shaving an apple with a Swiss army knife and timidly peeking up at me with cow eyes; and Thea, her face to the table but a smile settled on her mouth, knuckles deep in a knead with the occasional reach of an elbow up to brush the strands of hair from her forehead.

I shot in black and white. It seemed appropriate. Mostly I captured the three of them at work but I went for detail as well. I took dozens of the wrinkles and time frosting Eldone's lone soul, the rusted buckle on Joe's overalls, and probably too many of Thea's hands. They were haunting me and I couldn't stop myself. My mind became stuck and tortured me; like tickertape running through my brain, saying over and over that I was a terrible person.

I am always guilty, even when I shouldn't be, but I think I deserve most of it. I am guilty for the moment I realized that my mother wasn't beautiful and I am guilty for her not being my real mother and I am guilty for living at all.

I remember how I watched the words swimming across clean sheets of paper, preserved for eighteen years in a bureaucratic folder at the adoption agency, but they were just words. The Times New Roman sentences told me that I was my birth mother's third unwanted fetus by a man who was not her husband. So she did what she always did and stabbed poison into her womb. A needle to the head. When I wasn't flushed from her system she apparently took it as an omen that I was supposed to live. And I did, with only an absence of feeling in the last three fingers of my left hand to show for it. Numb to life, that was my punishment. I doubt she ever saw me, ever looked up as the nurse carried me away. And I never forgave her. The one person who was supposed to love me didn't so I never forgave myself either. I wanted to leave her there, punish her to the page, but I couldn't escape the words.

Caroline loved to probe that part of me. To strip me open and expose the stuff underneath. My psyche was an untapped source for character, but she also thought she was helping somehow. She told me some literary theory about life. 'Life is the story you tell yourself,' she said. She told me I deserved the life I wasn't supposed to live. I don't know if I did. I don't know if I

deserved her either. It was all very blurry.

It was three o'clock by the time I finished. Joe was at the end of his rope and the moment I wound the last roll he was out the door. I wondered if he had a secret stash of spiritual lubricant stored up in a barn somewhere. I didn't think Eldone would let him drink in the house.

'Mr. Williams?' Thea murmured and I felt a throb somewhere deep below my stomach.

'Please, it's Dan—'

'Well, Dan, would you do something for me?' I couldn't imagine what I could possibly do that would be worth anything to her.

'Of course.'

'Will you come with me to my favorite place? I'd—' she paused, insecure about what she was about to ask, 'I'd like to hear an artist, someone who really sees, read it to me.' She smiled nervously and fumbled her hands deep between her knees.

'Oh for pity's sake Thea, don't be stupid,' Eldone snipped as she cleared the table.

'I'm not being stupid, I just wanted—'

'Mr. Williams has far better things to do with his time and so do you.' Thea's eyes clouded and dripped.

'This is still my life,' she whispered and really started to cry. And I hate it when women cry.

Caroline never cried. Not even when she chopped onions. It was one of the reasons I was attracted to her in the first place. That and the way her cheeks flushed at the drop of a hat. Alcohol blush, anger, embarrassment, and laughter all brushed her face to pink. She hated it. I loved it. 'It's okay,' I used to tease, 'It means you have a soul.'

Caroline's face didn't flush when she was sad. It was worse. It went very white, almost ash. And true to form she didn't cry, not even when we lost the baby. My antithesis. A child who was wanted so bad but would not paste itself to the uterus. A child who refused to hold onto life instead of stubbornly taking it as I had.

I knew she needed to cry, so that her empty body could release something other than blood, but she refused. I cornered her in the 'family room' of all ironic places, the morning after it happened. She sat there, biting on a pen and bouncing a leg.

'Caroline, will you please be still.' She looked up at me in that insolent way she had that I found adorable. 'Stop moving. I want to talk to you.'

'No Danny. You want to speak at me.'

'Caroline, I—'

'No,' she said. 'I won't talk. I can't. I don't have any words. Look at this.' She held up the empty pad of paper in her lap. 'I've lost all my words.'

'You don't have to talk Caroline, I just want to know that you feel something—anything. That you're not locking this away somewhere. Do you hear me?'

'Yes, I hear you Danny,' her tone was barely audible, 'but nothing in me will listen.'

I looked up from my reflections and was met with Eldone's back at the sink as she sussed up the dirty dishes. I didn't know whether to stay or leave. I watched as Thea smeared her hands clean of yeast and pulled the tears off her cheeks with the towel her sister had tossed into her lap. She pushed her chair back from the table.

'Is it heavy?' Thea asked. 'The camera?'

'No,' I said. She reached both hands out towards my voice; her fingers keying the air in expectation. I walked to her, took hold of the outside of her hands and placed them around the body. Eldone peered over her shoulder at me but kept her pale mouth clamped shut. Thea lifted the camera down to her lap, the joints of her hands fluttering over the metal and plastic and glass that could see what she never would. After she had turned it over and over and over, she pulled it close to her stomach and lifted her face to the coolness of my shadow.

'Am I beautiful?' Thea asked me with lips that trembled.

stop•bath: a chemical that suspends development, without which an image would progress to a solid blank page, void of meaning.

STOP BATH 

I purchased my first camera the day the doctors told my mother she had cancer for the second time. I was fifteen and scared because I knew ghosts that returned weren't likely to leave. I rode my bike down to the corner store and plunked \$15.74 on the counter for a Polaroid and extra film. That day I took forty pictures. I photographed the new couch and the band on my father's left hand and my sister's bra dripping out of a drawer and the cat with its face full of food; I took a picture of everything except my mother. For Christmas that year I was given a real camera with real film canisters and that was when I started a lifetime of portraits, beginning with her.

In the hundreds of pictures I took in those last three years of my mother's life, she didn't wane or wax the way you'd expect. It was something that lay in the space between bone and flesh that ebbed. She was still there, the soft petals of skin that drooped from her arms still there to flick with a tease, but something was in exodus.

My father the preacher took the philosophical route. 'We must accept and trust what He intends for her Daniel,' was all he could say when I tried to summon a reaction from him, to prove to myself that he felt what I felt. I think he tried, with all of his will he tried, to believe and keep faith, but watching her slowly suffer in pain out of the world dented something in him. Towards the end he went on long walks everyday. We never knew where. As if he could hit the road and leave this world, or at least his life, and follow her to someplace completely separate. Somewhere he could unremember.

I too found myself walking along an unknown path, reaching out for pause and unremembering. That day at the Winterstein's, as I walked the lane along the pastures, led by the blind. Thea's pace was sure, steps that knew the earth she walked and did not need to test its contour, as she took me to the place she wanted me to read to her. We climbed a steep hill and approached a warped barn, crooked and warm from the animal and dung crowded inside. Thea walked up the ramp and down a corridor of rumps, lean and cocked tall in the air. I was heralded by a chorus of bays and bleats and baby hooves clattering on the whitewashed boards as I wandered down the aisle.

At the end of the row was a staircase with no railing. Thea ascended, her hand tracing the wall beside her to keep her balance. I followed her into the loft, my buzzing mind making up for the lack of conversation. At the top of the steps was a pair of chairs sitting in the dark, facing the wall. Thea felt for the back of one and sat down.

'Can you open the door?' she asked.

I looked at the wall in front of her and realized it was a sliding hayloft door. I found the latch, braced my shoulder on it and forced it to open along the rusty track. Thea took a deep breath of the fresh air as it hit her skin. I sat in the chair beside her and reached for my camera. But as I looked out at her favorite place I wondered what it would be like without the looking and closed my eyes. Even without the use of my vision it was a beautiful place. There was a strange percussion to it. The clip clop rhythm of the calves below was out of synch and yet was somehow pulsing against the sound of the brook that flowed in the woods just beyond the barn. And it was all punctuated by smells. Hickory smoke and burning leaves and the smell of Connecticut, which I couldn't describe.

'Eldone comes here with me,' Thea said and I looked up. 'She's not as stern as she seems. That's just because she doesn't know you. She tries to speak what she sees to me but she's literal. I don't think her mind is made for it. She doesn't see what I would see if I could.' She tilted her head down to her lap, bracing herself for concentration. 'Tell me. Please.'

I am not a man of words. And the vista before me was all color. And I didn't know how to describe color to someone who had seen nothing but darkness.

'Well umm—,' I started lamely, 'It's a valley—'

'She doesn't know what a valley looks like you idiot,' my mind scoffed at me.

'—a valley. Like if you took a quilt and pressed your hand into it and made a depression, a hollowness that sort of dips in a placid way. And it's leaves. All leaves. But they haven't become crunchy yet, they're still supple, leathery with little veins running down them. And the color, well the color is—' I stopped, finally understanding what Caroline meant when she said she was trying to tease out a word.

'Go on,' Thea said, her breath quick in her throat. My heart started to race, knowing that I was somehow reaching her.

'Okay. The color. The soil that the trees stand on is brown. Brown is the color of—of something suede, stroking your skin. It's smooth and deep. And then the leaves, they're yellow and carrot orange and a red so rich you can hardly believe its real.' I was starting to find my footing now and the words were coming faster. 'Let's see. The yellow? Yellow is the smell of fresh laundry, when it comes out of the dryer. It's calm and pure and doesn't like to be dirty. The auburn, carrot color, is the taste of berries. It's sharp and fast and a little bitter. I don't like that color. But red. Red is the best color. It's the feeling of heat, wait no, that's cliché. It's the feeling of—well, like when someone you don't know brushes by you and your skin shivers. Like your body somehow knows them and the little hairs on your arms reach out to them and your skin is hot but your spine is cold and something feels wrong and dangerous but the best kind of dangerous. That's red. Something like that.'

I fell silent, knowing I had somehow crossed a line. I couldn't think of anything else to say. There was so much more, the landscape stretching out in front of me just itching for description, but I knew I was playing with fire. I took my eyes away from the scene and looked over at Thea. I intended just a momentary pause, to see her reaction, but my eyes couldn't leave her face. The sun was setting over to the left, filtering something warm onto her skin and catching in the hard crystal of her eyes. She must have felt my stare.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Thea?' I said on impulse.

'Yes?'

'Will you do me a favor now?'

'Of course.'

'Will you let me photograph you?' Thea adjusted herself to sit taller in her chair.

'If you like.'

I stood and walked to the corner, where the door ended, and put my back to the sun. I lifted my camera from its place around my shoulder, feeling in control again, and knelt down to focus.

'Where should I look?' she asked me.

'Let's try one just out in front of you.'

'Like this?'

'Yes.'

I adjusted the lens, framing her with her hips on the chair and the beams above her. The shadow cast behind her slanted in contrast to my illuminated subject. She folded her hands in her lap and I clicked.

'Can we do one more?'

'A different one?'

'Yes.' I pulled my chair out of the way and stood behind hers. 'Can I move the chair? I'd like to have you standing.' She stood and I slid her seat across the floor. 'Now. I need you to face where you feel the most warmth from the sun.' Thea pivoted on her spot.

'Is that okay?'

'That's perfect.' I moved in front of her and stood as close as I could without creating a shadow on her with my shoulder. I raised my camera and what I saw scared me. The eyes—I swear they saw me. The shutter blinked and I lowered the lens in silence.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing. You just—were very still.'

'Oh.' She smiled, and I think it was forced.

Thea turned to the frame of the open door and absentmindedly traced a grain of the wood. I walked to her and followed the trail of her hand with mine.

'Do you want your picture?' Thea asked, soft and timid. 'I could take it.'

'Oh no,' I rejected immediately, 'I hate my picture. I don't even look in the mirror.' And that was true.

'Why?' My chest brushed against her back and my breath jumped in my throat. My voice became low and I could feel red.

'Because I only take pictures of what is beautiful. And nothing about me or my life is beautiful, it's just—I don't know.'

'But you have seen all the things you photograph so they've been a part of your life.'

'No. They're just borrowed. Stolen.'

'But you try to pause them?'

My mind wandered to my wife, stewing in a haze of espresso and words. Her hair would be tucked up round a chewed pencil, with baby curls dusting her neck. I knew I should head home and listen to the way she wouldn't hear me. I knew I should take in the mail and boil water for ravioli and watch the way she wouldn't see me. For years I had tried to photograph Caroline, to

capture her, pause her in a moment—but she always blinked.

As she turned to me I looked down at Thea, whose buttery skin was so close I could smell the aloe soap in her pores. The adorable place, where the petite trunk of her nose flowered into eyebrow, skimmed along my lips. She lifted her face, mouth parted, and threaded the bones of her hands around my neck and into my hair. My mouth met hers, desperate for a taste of something I was not numb to. I couldn't stop myself.

I could smell chlorine, the sharp scent of copper—the metal of life—mixing with something sweet, like nectar. It sickened me. As if I was a contamination as I spilled my gut and my guilt into her belly. It was a mistake. I knew it. But in those brief moments I knew I was alive. She had me by the eyes as they sunk back in my sockets and blurred, the shutter vibrating in the pulse.

dodg•ing: the act of making pale; preventing pigment.

burn•ing: the act of darkening; removing light.

| DODGING AND BURNING

Caroline was always wrong about me. Every day I waited for the moment she would see beyond me. When we first met I was this wonderful person who could hand her a portrait of her life. I matted and framed her and she believed that was real. I knew better. It was all just a mirror, reflecting Caroline back to Caroline, because I surrendered no part of myself. Even in the moment she fell in love with me I knew better than to believe myself.

A hotel lobby back in Nashville. The Sheraton I think. I smirked over my shoulder at her because I assumed she was thinking it was some kind of seduction. And it was, but in a different way. Looking back, I think she already knew where I was taking her. She knew how to read me. We took the elevator, a clear one that looked over the whole lobby, all the way to the thirty-second floor. I glanced left down the hall then led her up the escape stairs. My credit card toyed the DANGER: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL door. Click and we were in. I took her hand and stepped into the dark to an iron ladder that we climbed up and onto the roof. The skyline opened before us, the lazy river winding its way under a couple of overpasses and the BellSouth building, which looked like it belonged in a Batman film, looming above. The arteries pumping cars into the city center blazed neon for miles, pulsing their way to the crux on which we stood. The center of the world was there below us, and we were suspended, removed and beyond it all. I handed the whole city to Caroline in that surreal moment, but she was still wrong about me.

We crawled down the staircase, forcing ourselves to be born back into the world. Thea steadied herself on my shoulder, following me in my descent. In the shadow of dusk outside, the air was laced with the smell of frost, and I felt my senses stopping up as the warmth ebbed from my body. We walked to the part of the lane that forked between the house and the driveway and I stopped, not having anything to say but feeling like something should be said. She did it for me.

'Daniel?' she laced her hand into mine. 'Can you do me one more favor?'

'What?' my voice was husky and I self-consciously attempted to clear it.

'Don't regret me.' She squeezed my hand and then released me.

'Don't regret,' my mother said to me, shrouded in sterilized sheets, 'It's a waste of time.' She wasn't one for tidbits of wisdom, unlike my father who lectured us daily, so when she produced them I listened. She lay pasty and trembling, her body bloated and chewed by the cancer, and watching her there I realized that she was more beautiful in her patience than Norman Macal-ester's mother who fixed her flaws could ever be. I always blamed my camera for running out of film that early, early morning, for not being able to halt that moment. By the time dawn came she had drifted away.

I stood alone for a moment, watching Thea return to her life and savoring it all for one last second before I turned to return to mine. I felt pathetic, standing there and wishing it was somehow cathartic. Driving home in the dark I did my best to shrug it off.

Caroline was just where I knew she'd be. She rotated her chair to face me as I arrived at the doorway. I think she felt something. She always knew how to read me. I walked to her, put my hand on her cheek and bent to kiss her on the mouth, but there were no words. It was not an easy silence. Not the kind where it's just an absence of words. The silence that day knew the words were missing and formed a vacuum where they should have resonated. It pulled at us, the shadows of those verbs and nouns and punctuation, deafening us in sentences stripped naked of noise.

After my mother's death we felt like that, the family that had a big chunk bitten out of it felt like that. I think we reveled in it too, relishing in the negative, the space and absence, because it was as close as we could come to feeling her. We became voyeurs of memories, watching shadows of ourselves play out the old scenes; we were spectators of our own lives, sitting in spaces spilling over in recollection, but always aware that the present self sat alone.

In my darkroom out back I stared numb at paper swimming in abrasive chemicals. The coarse texture of Joseph's denim and the pillared flannel of his shirt rose bold behind the crisp lip of his knife. Wood and cotton and wrinkles and the moist flesh of the apples fixed to the sheet with ease. Beside my previous day's work, I hung the prints up to dry, and turned to my final can-ister. From her quivering page behind me, I felt the gaze of yesterday's bride. The bride who had been stained with the stuff of life. The stuff that drives us from the womb into the mess of the world and out again. The stuff that makes us human.

I paced my studio, willing the paper to speak to me. And it did. Thea's eyes came into focus, captured in milky ink and locked in fiber. The red glow of the darkroom threw shadow on the face that looked back at me—preserved and finite—a beautiful moment captured in my life. I stared for long minutes at that picture, suspended in solution. The window to the kitchen was jammed open and I could hear Caroline rattling pots on the stove and chopping vegetables. She called out to me.

'What do you want?'

I closed my eyes, and was still.

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