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Silk Road

a literary crossroads

Pacific University

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Summerhouse

Ellen Winter

It was springtime when that old traitor, hope, pulled into the yard like a smooth-riding sedan. The driver stared straight ahead and he was wearing sunglasses. He patted the seat beside him. Annabel chose not to look at him as she climbed in, smoothing her skirt beneath her. The vinyl seat was warm against her back. That the car was not a sedan but a beat-up Subaru wagon made little difference to Annabel. Nor did it matter much that the man at the wheel was her estranged husband, Paul. Petals from the old crabapple fluttered down on the windshield. Paul put the car in gear.

The suspension creaked as the wagon moved down the deeply rutted drive. Winter's snowmelt had muddied its surface, an earlier warmth providing just the right medium for the scars they traversed now. Grass sprouting between the tracks brushed at the car's undercarriage. That delicate swishing put Annabel in mind of water sweeping a sailboat's hull.

All at once, Paul's hand was closing around her thigh, and a perfect arrow of desire had her pinioned. She would wind up saying yes. Maybe the vehicle was not hope at all, but his bosom buddy, lust. Often enough the two had conspired against her, taking her places she knew better than to go.

Still and all, the man was her husband. And since she'd given up hope (so quickly!) of fending him off, she glanced over. He'd gone a couple of days without shaving. Other than that, it seemed

Summerhouse

he'd been taking care of himself. His hair, as always, was a perfect gleaming brown, worn on the long side so he could toss it out of his eyes. That quick jerk of the head was how she recognized him from a distance. And his long legs, in Levis loose enough to require a belt. Paul wasn't a show-off—but then again, he didn't need to be. His face was interesting. A wide brow and high cheekbones hinted at Native blood. Deep brown eyes turned down at the corners—bedroom eyes, but for their relentless appraisal. A bad bout of acne had scarred his cheeks as a teenager. Forgetting to shave was his way of covering that up.

He turned her way, eyes moving from the toes poking out of her sandals to a knot of coppery curls gathered at the back of her head. Paul never was shy about looking. He was a photographer, and that justified—as far as he was concerned—taking everything in.

“I like that skirt,” he said, as if she'd worn it just for him. The skirt, flounced in multiple tiers, was on the filmy side. In full sunlight, you could see right through it. She'd worn it to town that morning because it was spring, and the fabric—apple green scattered with tiny blossoms—had seemed to match the day. When she got home at noon she left it on, wandering through the winter-wrecked flowerbeds pulling weeds. The wind was still for once, the air heavy with the scent of lilacs. A car downshifted at the end of the drive. Then Paul was pulling into the yard—unannounced, which was how he operated. He liked to catch with her guard down.

“There's a picnic basket in back,” Paul said now, “plus a bottle of red and a bottle of white. You decide.”

That choice, she knew, would imply that any other decisions arrived upon that day had been hers to make as well.

“I know this spot,” he added. “Birdsong, babbling brook, the whole nine yards. Best part is, it's on private property. Nobody'll come looking for us.” His eyes were alight with suggestion.

“The red sounds good,” Annabel said helplessly.

Paul pulled onto Highway 89, leaving the marshy willows of Annabel’s neighborhood behind. The area was known as the Five Acre Tracts, though most of the parcels had been subdivided. Modest homes mingled with small businesses; folks kept gardens and chickens and horses. There was an RV park smack dab in the middle, and visitors unfamiliar with the narrow lanes maneuvered their rigs around tight bends. The air sang with the sweep of branch on metal. The place had a country feel, though Albertson’s filled its northeastern corner.

Paul and Annabel had bought a little rancher there when they were newly married. They’d chosen the property for its seclusion. An irrigation ditch ran along one side, and previous owners had used those waters to coax vegetation to startling heights. Annabel still remembers the way the realtor presented the yard, proudly pointing to the lilacs edging the roadside, the willows sheltering the ditch. Towering spruces separated it from the house next door.

Paul had looked at Annabel, eyebrows raised. “You could sunbathe in a spot like this, sweetie,” he’d said. She could get away with going topless, was what he meant. Paul liked the peachy freckles that clustered on her skin, saying she was like cinnamon toast, delectable. The realtor didn’t know what he was getting at, but she picked up the vibe. “I’ll let the two of you poke around,” she said, the tops of her ears the same red as poppies.

These days, Annabel was making the house payments, and she was the one who kept the flowers in bloom. Paul’s name was still on the deed, but his closet was nearing empty.

Paul took a left on River Road and they crossed over Carter’s Bridge. The Yellowstone swept below them at a dizzying clip, its banks threatening to vanish behind rising waters. There was a forcefulness to spring in this part of the country. Trees surrendered to the river’s pull, grass covered beneath the wind’s strict hand. A protected spot was needed if you wanted to feel the sunlight on

Ottos

Glenn Shaheen

Hunting horns in the distance

yes, strange—
neighbors rushing up asking

for more than our part in their lives

we would be willing to lend sugar
or sallow words who can ask for

more we all want more

aristocrats barons counts

to love story is to be entrenched in our own narrative

when the beam of light hits the prism it is refracted
into an array of all the visible spectrum it is not

thought diminished

to hop the fence to ask for a little more

than usual can lead to a more flavorful pie can lead
to the erection of a more powerful

fence two houses are separated

by concepts of property if we think of them as houses unified
as a neighborhood as structures

in the late twentieth century

open up the hidden box of all the paraphernalia
of heartbreak and lay the objects before you

letters embarrassing and florid missteps or requests
that struck their mark like a baseball over

the fence and into the window

small trinkets and gifts of care

neural and chemical reactions led
us to believe these objects were

some kind of answer the letters in a jovial
and ovular script they're not

all by the same person written to the same

person—the box is an ice

wine box the box provides unity in body where there is no unity in idea

Vista Hills

Sarah Silberman

It was the summer they gathered at the bottom of the community pool, which had been drained the previous year after a little kid had drowned. It still smelled of chlorine, and a memorial with a plastic cross and a fading snapshot of the boy and a deflated yellow swimming wing remained at the deep end. They brought sweating cans of beer from their parents' refrigerators and beach towels and a pair of small wireless speakers. Marcus had decided that Fleetwood Mac was cool again, and because he would leave them the next day, bound for college on a lacrosse scholarship, it never occurred to them to disagree. Stevie Nicks's voice warbled across the concrete, clinging to their skin like damp air.

That night, the girls sat cross-legged in the middle of the pool, illuminated by automatic lights the county had neglected to disconnect. They wore bikini tops under their t-shirts, even though it was night, and even though they never took their t-shirts off. They sipped beer and debated whether or not to grow out their bangs and told Melanie that she looked like a young, dark-haired Stevie Nicks, with her brown eyes and gauzy skirts that swirled around her ankles. They asked what tattoo she would get once she turned eighteen, and she said anything except for a Bible passage or a four-leaf clover. What she really wanted, though, was a map of a made-up country tattooed somewhere on her left arm.

They discussed substantiated and unsubstantiated rumors.

Vista Hills

About Mr. Jensen, the American History teacher, spotted withdrawing cash outside the Lion’s Den Gentlemen’s Club. About Mr. Jensen’s daughter, a sophomore, who had been caught trimming her pubic hair in the locker room after field hockey practice. About Marcus’s younger brother, Daniel, who had allegedly snuck into the locker room, swept the hair into a Ziploc bag, and taken it home in his backpack.

Marcus and Jeff, armed with lacrosse sticks, whipped a ball back and forth over the girls’ heads. They paused at the mention of pubic hair. “What color was it?” Jeff said as Marcus lifted the front of his shirt, wiping the sweat from his face. It took some effort for Melanie not to stare.

“What color was what?” she said.

“There’s no way it was actually blonde, right?”

“You’re revolting.”

“Maybe Marcus knows,” Jeff said. “Marcus?”

“I have an idea,” Marcus said. “Let’s not talk about my brother.” People had already figured out that Daniel, a sophomore, was going to turn out nothing like Marcus. He resembled his brother without being good-looking and he was not good at sports. Also: he was not nice. Faggy was one of his favorite adjectives; he used it to describe boys who were even less popular than he was and Mr. Riddle, the Art teacher, and certain articles of clothing, such as corduroy pants. Last year he had worn a bunch of those colorful rubber wristbands, signifying strength in the face of disease and hardship, until someone had asked him—in front of his entire Earth Sciences class—if he had ball cancer. Everyone, including Daniel himself, seemed to know that things would only get harder for him.

The boys resumed the game of catch. Jeff misfired and yelled, “HEADS HEADS HEADS HEADS!” as the ball ricocheted off the sides of the pool. In lowered voices, the girls said, “Jeff or Marcus?”

“Marcus,” Melanie said.

“Will Friedlander or Marcus?”

“Marcus.”

The girls nodded as if they had already known the answer. “If it’s going to happen with Marcus, it’ll happen tonight or not at all,” they said.

“I know,” Melanie said.

“Marcus’s brother or Wilson?”

Melanie bit the inside of her cheek, like someone forced to choose between a bad option and a worse one. She knew, as everyone did, that Marcus’s brother had a crush on her. “Wilson, I guess,” she said.

“Wilson can hear everything you’re saying,” Jeff called.

“Can’t you Wilson?”

Wilson did not appear to have heard Jeff or, for that matter, the girls. He sat on the edge of the diving board and mixed Old Milwaukee with Red Bull in a plastic cup. He was a strange and interior boy, and the girls were protective of him, and he had an authority that was different from Marcus’s: that of a teenager who did not wonder, incessantly, what other people thought of him. Melanie believed he had the disposition of an artist, and maybe he was an artist. Or maybe he was just Wilson. “You’re not supposed to mix caffeine and alcohol,” she said. “It could give you a heart attack.”

Wilson shrugged and took a drink. “It’s like water,” he said. “They cancel each other out.” He stood and paced back and forth along the diving board, then walked off the board, through the gate that surrounded the pool, and continued up the street into Vista Hills. He returned a half hour later with an empty cart from the Sip n’ Dip.

“Another one?” Jeff said.

“Leave him alone,” Marcus said. He had lived across the street from Wilson since he was nine. As a child, Wilson had

Chapter One

Two Wolves

Gretchen Jaeger

“Whichever wolf you feed.”

That is the final line of the Cherokee story that gave my family’s house, *Two Wolves*, its name. The story goes like this: an elder is speaking to his young grandson. “There is a terrible battle going on inside me,” he tells the boy. “The battle is between two wolves. One wolf is evil: greedy, cruel, manipulative, and dishonest. The other wolf is good: truthful, kind, generous, and compassionate. The same battle,” he tells the child, “is going on inside of you—and inside all people.”

After some thought the boy cries, “but grandfather, which wolf will win?”

Two Wolves. I haven’t set foot here for nearly two years. I had wondered if it might seem smaller—if absence and distance might have reduced it to human scale. On the contrary: four stories tall, a hundred feet long by seventy-five wide, stone on the ground floor and half-timbered above. Bay windows line the third floor and turrets round the corners. It looks best in old black and white photographs somehow, during construction and newly completed, dwarfing the immature landscaping.

The front door is unlocked, as always. The foyer is quiet, populated only by the alabaster busts of stern Hunt ancestors. The thick red and gold Aubusson runner held in place by brass rods against the main staircase risers muffles my steps. I’ve come at a lucky time of day. Sunbeams through the stained glass window

on the main staircase landing shatter into a thousand gem-toned shards. I loved the phenomena as a child and would wave my arms in slow motion through the multicolored air, not crossing the landing so much as swimming through a floating forest of ethereal jewels.

The upstairs hallway is deserted. My childhood bedroom looks just as it did. There would have been no reason to change it; I see that now, it never was a child's room. The huge antique armoire against the far wall, the mahogany writing desk, the silk damask chairs. The enormous bed enclosed by curtains. During sleepovers we made the bed into a fort, Madeleine Rosetti, Loni Watson and I.

The window nearest the bed probably hasn't been opened in years, but still it swings easily on its heavy brass hinges. The oak tree Mister used to climb in and out is gone. Mister was a baby raccoon I made into a pet when I was eight years old. The oak fell over one afternoon a few years later—no wind, no rain, the sky that afternoon was a China blue so clear and uniform it might have been brushed on straight from the tube. Mister was dead by then, as was Francis Hat, the head gardener. Without Mr. Hat nobody had noticed the tree had rotted from the inside, leaving nothing but a fragile shell of bark.

“Miss Daphne!”

I turn around. Trask is standing in the open doorway. Major domo. That's Trask's title. I suppose butler sounds pretentious and Trask doesn't like it; in any case he's always been called major domo. Poor man, faithful and impervious Hunt family retainer for two generations, even he leapt like a zapped cat at the sight of the prodigal daughter returned to her lair. The exclamation point in his tone is unprecedented in my experience.

“Hello, Trask.”

“I didn't expect you.” He has regained himself. He stands ramrod straight on the threshold. “I will tell Mrs. Brooks...”

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