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POINT OF IGNITION

THE FAMILY LIVED WITHOUT love; that much Lonnie could see. Through the fogged solarium window Howard was a far-away smudge of red in his down vest, chopping wood behind the wreckage of the vegetable garden. Lonnie counted four tomato cages, half toppled, their green metal footings frozen into the earth. They still held fruit, spotted with black rot she'd been trying to cut away. One fist was wrapped around her cut finger. Gail glanced at her. "It's all right?"

"I'll live," said Lonnie, uncurling her hand to see a fine line sprouting blood. She felt a sting as the Kleenex pulled away, leaving flakes of tissue stuck to the wound.

"It's over at 4:30?" Dan asked, entering the kitchen. He handed a Band-Aid to Lonnie. Gail was staring out the window above the sink, turning the handle of the salad spinner, her elbow lifted awkwardly, like an injured wing. There was nothing to see outside but the close wall of the garage.

"Mom," Dan said.

The spinning stopped. "That's what Tommy told me," she said.

There was a chill in the room. Dan's father often turned the furnace off. He wanted to heat the house entirely with wood, but there were too many rooms, most of them separated from each other by walls and narrow doorways. Lonnie would open it right up. Make the dining room and front living room one big area. Knock out the kitchen wall. If it was her house.

"Are you coming?" Dan asked her. The car keys hung from his fingers.

Lonnie threw out the stained Kleenex and the wrapper from the Band-Aid. It was the cheap kind and she could already feel the adhesive starting to slip. "I thought we were walking."

Dan looked at his mother. She'd set aside the lettuce and was washing the knife Lonnie had been using. The tomatoes sat, neatly wedged, their gluttonous innards clotted with yellow seeds, the black bits pushed to the side. "There's time," Gail said.

"I could use the walk," Lonnie said. "I mean, the fresh air."

Dan hung the keys on a brass pineapple fixed to the side of the cupboard.

The trees were full of leaves when the first snow had hit a week earlier. Most hadn't even had a chance to change. They froze and fell in icy green heaps on the front yards. The sun glinted off their crusts.

"My mom likes you," said Dan. Lonnie took his hand but then let it go. He was wearing gloves with puffy fingers and she had her thick pink mittens on. She didn't know how he could tell—the two women had barely spoken since she and Dan arrived a few hours earlier, just after lunch. Gail kept remembering things she had to do, settling on the couch and standing again, putting her rings in a bath of gold cleaner, jotting down a grocery list. Finally, Dan's father had simply left, drifting away so no-one noticed he was gone until Gail said she wanted a fire.

"She seems nice," Lonnie told Dan.

"She's been through a lot."

Lonnie met his eye and it was like a signal for him to look away. His shoes scraped on the sidewalk. He didn't lift his legs when he walked. It annoyed her, that steady shuffling sound like he was reluctant to get anywhere. She glanced away, at the neat houses sided with flagstone and brick. The day so bright it made her head ache. "I should have brought my sunglasses," she said.

The doors of the church opened and a slow crowd drifted out. Men, mostly. One in a blue business suit carrying a Styrofoam cup. A woman wearing jeans with red patches on the knees. She came out with her sunglasses already on and quickly lit a cigarette.

Dan and Lonnie stood on the other side of the road. Cars passed between them and the church. When a clear spot came, Lonnie moved to cross but Dan stopped her. He lifted his arm to wave and Lonnie followed her gaze and saw another Dan, standing on the cement steps. It was as if they were in a reflection, but there wasn't another Lonnie.

The other Dan ran across the busy street. His blue-grey eyes shone, similar but different from Dan's, Lonnie saw, as Tommy reached out both arms. Dan extended his hand instead and Lonnie thought that the corners of Dan's mouth were forced up or else he was trying not to smile.

"Lonnie," Dan said, "my brother, Tommy."

Lonnie took her mitten off and shook his warm, bare hand. He seemed like a slightly chubbier version of Dan. Fuller in the face, his head shaved. He also seemed happier, which surprised Lonnie. She had expected something else. A darker version of Dan: steely but battered, frozen over.

Tommy waved at the woman across the road then burrowed his fisted hands into the pockets of his leather jacket.

“Who’s that?” Dan asked, as the woman threw her butt into a sewer grate and walked in the opposite direction. Her long black hair seemed tangled at the ends.

“Nobody,” said Tommy, and then shook his head. “Lisa. We’ll see.” And he laughed, a single loud guffaw that startled Lonnie after the quiet afternoon.

Dan had told Lonnie about his brother on their second date. Over dessert, key lime pie and milky sweet coffee, at the fancy restaurant in the Water’s Edge Hotel. He described that hitting-bottom moment when Tommy visited Dan for Bacchus. On the way up to the music festival Tommy said he saw camels and spent the rest of the afternoon hiding in a clutch of cedars on the riverbank. He was high on acid. Eventually Dan just walked away. Every time he tells the story Dan adds new details about Tommy’s behaviour. How he screamed at the female bus driver. Kicked mud in Dan’s face. But Lonnie always found herself thinking about Tommy, too. Ending up alone. Trying to find shelter in the cold night. She never says anything. Nods her head like it’s on a spring. Strokes Dan’s hair as he talks, his voice a squeaky gear.

On the way home Dan took off his glove and held her hand. They didn’t talk until they reached the convenience store and Tommy said he wanted to go inside.

“It’ll be supper when we get home,” Dan said.

Tommy stood, counting his money, and Lonnie felt a crackle coming off him. Dan stared at his brother’s down-turned face and said, “Mom’s been cooking half the day.”

Tommy looked up from the pile of silver change.

“It’s lasagna,” Lonnie said. Dan’s hand in hers was like a weight.

Tommy’s eyes floated over to her, but didn’t connect. He dropped the coins into his pocket. “Yeah,” he said, as if he’d already known and they continued down the street.

When they got back, Gail was setting the table. They came through the side door into the kitchen and heard her through the wall—china clunking, the clatter of silverware against the hardwood. Howard appeared at the top of the basement stairs, his hair slicked back, wet from the basement shower, and stopped when he saw them.

“Tommy,” he said, like a statement of fact, and Tommy reached out his hand even though he was staying with them.

As the two men shook, Lonnie felt the air shift, like a belt slightly loosened. Howard went into the back room, the den, and soon they heard the crackle of a fire. “Supper,” Gail shouted, and Lonnie realized she knew they were back.

Wine wasn’t served at dinner. Gail put Tommy at the head of the table, in the only chair with arms. His leg jumped. Lonnie sat to his left and felt it through most of the meal, the steady rattling lurch. In the kitchen Gail dished lasagna onto plates and Lonnie helped carry them in as the men sat back, waiting. She thought of saying something, but decided not to. Nobody was noticing, not even Dan, who always offered to help at her mother’s house. It seemed the four of them were elsewhere, gazing into separate patches of the glossy mahogany table, focused intently on their own details. Howard cleaned his fingernails with a pocket knife until he saw Lonnie looking and folded the blade back into its red body. Tommy tapped his fingers against the table’s edge. Dan spun his napkin ring in the empty space where his plate would go. They were like a band, a musical duo, working towards a new sound. When she slipped his meal in front of him, he turned his face to her and said, “You’re the best.”

“Your mother made it,” Lonnie said, as she and Gail sat down.

Tommy lifted his wine glass, filled with cloudy water, just poured from the tap. A few drops ran down the side. “Cheers.”

“Tommy,” said Howard.

“What?” said Tommy, but Howard just shook his head, his eyes settled on something in the centre of the table. The dried roses in a cut-glass bowl.

Gail picked up the salad and handed it to Tommy. It hovered there, near his face. He didn’t move and she said, “You need greens.”

“I’m fine.”

She put the bowl down and her fingers crawled across the table towards him, but Tommy pulled his hand away as if touched by a spider. “Well, pass it then,” Gail said.

“What about grace?”

Gail looked at Howard. He had already picked up his fork, but he put it down again. He curled his fingers over the edge of the table like he was ready to stand up. Tommy bowed his head. “Higher power,” he said, and paused. In the sudden absence of sound, Lonnie heard the family breathing. A low wheeze from Gail, recovering from a cold, and Howard who let out a long even exhale. Dan was silent, like he was holding his breath. “Thank you for this opportunity,” Tommy said. “This meal, this stranger” His voice faded away like he was telling a story he’d grown tired of. Lonnie felt her eyelids jumping. “Amen,” he said, and Gail repeated the word and laid a napkin on her lap. Tommy lifted his fork and started eating, shoveling the next bite into his mouth before he even swallowed.

“She isn’t a stranger,” Dan said.

“Dan,” said Howard. Lonnie could hear the strain in his voice, as if he wasn’t used to talking, although when she’d first arrived he asked her what her major was, what classes she was taking. Dan turned to his father. “Well, she isn’t.”

“She is to us,” Tommy said, through the food in his mouth. “Fuck, you are, too.”

Gail cringed, but didn’t speak. Howard’s fork hit his plate and he glared down the table at Tommy, who didn’t seem to notice and kept eating. Lonnie thought he had an invisible shield around him that only allowed things out. His food was already half gone while the others had barely started, including Lonnie, whose cut finger rubbed painfully against the silver handle of her fork. “She’s my girlfriend,” Dan said, and Lonnie wanted to leave, but Dan’s hand held her knee, rubbing the skin over the hard disc of bone. She asked about salad dressing. Gail wiped her mouth and stood.

“I can get it,” Lonnie said, but Gail had already gone into the kitchen. A log shifted in the fireplace. Lonnie ate the green leaves of the salad and the sweet tomato chunks, the taste of rot an ugly flavour she could still discern.

Lonnie was in crisis when she met Dan. That’s what her counsellor called it. Midway through first year she’d gone to the bar where they sold aluminum trays of twenty half-pints for fifteen bucks and gotten drunk with her roommate. Other people were there. People they knew from classes, from school. A blurry face over her when she rose into consciousness. Body fuck-

ing hers. She sank, fell back into a sticky, dragging darkness that went on and on, like getting lost in a swamp. In the morning even the light seemed different, a tenuous watery grey, when she exited his apartment, tried to figure out where she was.

Ten months later, Dan asked her out after their class on modern Europe. Reluctantly, she agreed, hesitant because of how she'd changed and how he seemed so nice.

After dinner, Gail put a pot of coffee on. Howard went downstairs to watch television in the room Lonnie was to sleep in and Gail followed, hastily, because their show had already started. Tommy, Dan and Lonnie took their coffee into the den.

"Still a stick up his ass," Tommy said. He pinched the couch cushion's rounded edge. Lonnie had her bare feet stretched towards the fire, socks piled beside her.

"He's doing the best he can," Dan said, but Tommy ignored him.

"You're in school?" he asked Lonnie. She twisted around to face him, sat cross-legged.

"Yeah," said Dan, sitting in a brown leather recliner, a cross-hatching of white on the worn arms.

"Poli-Sci," she said. "Same as Dan."

"So you'll be prime minister someday."

"I'd rather join the foreign service."

"What's that?"

"You get government posts around the world," she said. "Live in different countries." She was about to say more, about the exam they'd have to write, the difficulty of it, but Tommy cut her off. "Is that what you want to do?" he asked his brother.

Dan didn't answer. He went to the fire and prodded the end of a log. With the iron poker he pushed it deeper into the flames. It was what he wanted to do. They talked about it all the time.

"First I heard of it," Tommy said. His leg stopped shaking as he leaned forward to lift the mug to his face. Some of the coffee spilled down his chin. He jabbed at his face with the back of his hand to wipe it away. "Drinking problem," he joked. Dan knocked bits of black charcoal into the flames.

"Dad was here he'd stop you doing that," Tommy said.

"Dad's not here."

Lonnie drank her coffee.

“How’d you guys meet?” Tommy asked.

They looked at each other. Lonnie felt a prickle in the corners of her mouth, but Dan’s face was serious.

“In class,” he said. And to Lonnie: “We should go.”

“Where are you going?” Tommy asked.

“To see a band,” Dan said, replacing the poker.

Tommy took another drink, a gulp. Lonnie saw him swallow, the bob of his Adam’s apple under the stubbled skin of his throat. She poked her toes into the bulb of a sock.

“We’re going to be late,” said Dan.

“You’d just fuck off like that,” Tommy said. “Just ditch your family.”

Lonnie thought he was talking about the band but Dan said, “That decision’s a long way away.”

“Still,” Tommy said. His eyes flickered orange, reflecting the fire, but Dan shut the doors.

“We’re only in second year,” said Lonnie.

“We’re going to be late,” Dan said again.

“Can I come?” Tommy said, and laughed.

“Sure,” said Lonnie. She didn’t look at Dan. Tommy blinked, sat upright, guzzled down the rest of his coffee. They both stood at the same time.

On their first date Dan brought her flowers. She wasn’t used to that. When she yelled for him to come in he stepped inside the small space at the bottom of the stairs that led up to her second-floor apartment. She saw his black Doc Martins and a giant bouquet of yellow and white daisies before he reached the top of the steps and she saw all of him. He was grinning. She felt sick, scared, as he kissed her on the cheek, a dry courteous press of his lips like nothing she was used to. Since that night in first year she’d been on only a few dates, if you could call them that. She didn’t have a vase so she filled the kitchen sink half-way and leaned the flowers against the tap.

The band wasn’t very good. Tommy, Dan and Lonnie spent more time driving there and back and finding parking than in the bar. The brothers hardly talked. It was her banter that filled the silence and her judgment of the music that made them leave, Dan downing the last of his beer and Tommy pushing aside his Ginger Ale. Dan said he was tired, anyway. He’d gotten up

at six that morning for lacrosse practice before they drove the three hours to his parents’.

Almost all the lights were out. Gail had set out four boxes of cereal and three bowls on the kitchen table. Lonnie stared at it, confused, before Dan told her, “It’s for the morning.” It was something that would have never happened at her house. Tommy opened the fridge and pulled out a plastic-wrapped plate of lasagna. “That might be for lunch,” Dan said, but Tommy lifted a corner and took a large bite and left it on the counter when he went upstairs.

Lonnie wasn’t tired. She had a lot of reading to catch up on and an assignment due on Wednesday. Dan filled a glass of water at the tap. He was supposed to sleep upstairs, in his own room, but they weren’t bothering with that. “I’ll be down in a minute,” she said.

“Don’t be long.” It sounded like an order. She was about to speak, to tell him in a joking way that he wasn’t the boss of her, but she noticed the strain on his face. All the lines that would emerge when he was old, already sketched in. She kissed him on the mouth. His lips were wet from the water.

“I won’t,” she said. And again: “I won’t.”

There were red coals in the fireplace. Lonnie added a log and sat on the hard edge of the hearth, waiting for the fire to re-ignite. She yawned, pressing her fingers against her wide mouth. Tommy was standing in the doorway when she opened her eyes, a glass of amber liquid in one hand, the lasagna in the other. He came into the room.

“Bedtime reading?” he said, nodding down at the textbook on the floor beside her: *The Balance of Power*.

“Yeah,” she said, and gestured to the fire, sluggish but beginning slowly to burn. “I love this.”

The tumbler knocked on the coffee table as Tommy set it down.

“Apple juice,” he said.

After that night, Lonnie spent months sleeping with anything that walked. Usually while drunk. One-night-stands that started at the bar and continued through the blast of light that followed last call. When Paul asked her out, Lonnie went to the bar and downed three shots of vodka before going to his apartment, as they’d arranged. He was in Environmental Studies, third year, and he showed her his vermiculture composting system, worms

in a box of dirt in the basement, before they left for dinner. Nicely dressed, he opened the car door for her and set his fingers on the small of her back as they followed the hostess to their table. She was wearing her dirty denim jacket and needed to comb her hair. Too much red wine and by the time he got her home she was sobbing, her nose running snot, and she ran to the toilet. The second date was with Mario. Similar but worse. A black-out. Waking, thank God her clothes still on, alone on his living-room floor.

Tommy lit a cigarette. "Don't tell," he said, and she hesitated but then reached for a drag. She wanted a drink, could feel the slither of need in her. He got up and opened the glass door to the patio and when he came back he lifted the poker, pushed the wood around. Flames wove up from the middle, their roots blue. "You have to let it breathe," he said, and she shifted away to give him access to the hearth. Lonnie moved to the chair Dan had been in earlier and swung her legs over the wide arm, trying to look relaxed. She kept glancing over at the dark patch that was the door into the dining room, where Dan had shown her the collection of family photos on the wall: his high-school graduation, Tommy as a baby, the black-and-white snapshot of his parents' wedding day. Her own parents were divorced; she hardly ever saw her dad. Tommy set his smoke on a seam of mortar and shoved a huge, fat log on the fire, too big so at first she thought it wouldn't fit. "Dan tell you about me?"

At first she thought she should lie. "Yeah."

Tommy snorted. He tried to shut the stove door, but a corner of the log kept it open.

"Well, Bacchus wasn't the fucking bottom," he said and she looked down at the cigarette, its orange ember hovering over carpet, growing ash.

Tommy was already drunk when the guy in Dan's residence slipped him a hit of acid. He'd never done it before. He rode the bus with Dan and his friends until he saw the camels, and then someone pulled the cord and Tommy stumbled off when he saw his chance. Dan followed, because he thought he had to, Tommy said. It was a zoo. Tommy wandered the fence like a hyena. Found his way down to the river, went swimming. Dan, pissed off, shouting at him, the words electric, burning spirals. "So I hid in the cedars," he said. The rocks in the river turned to skulls. Eventually I left, found a bar. In the morning, I hitched home, stole Gail's credit card, bought a ticket to Thunder Bay.

“Why there?”

Tommy shrugged. “Somebody told me about it. Tree planting work.” He laughed, the same single burst as when they’d first met. At dinner she’d realized the difference between his eyes and Dan’s. Tommy’s were blue where Dan’s tended towards grey, like limestone.

She knew there were details that Tommy had left out. “How’s A.A.?” she asked.

Tommy shrugged. Lonnie realized she was sitting with her knees drawn up, her arms tightly crossed. She pulled her hands off each elbow, curled her feet under her, opened uneasily. Tommy watched her. “Dan’s had bad luck with women,” he said.

She didn’t speak.

“But there’s something different about you.”

His leg was jumping and she wanted to reach out, rest her fingertips on his knee, stop the constant quaking.

“I should go to bed,” Lonnie said. She got up and went into the kitchen, leaving her book by the fire. As she emptied her cup into the sink, she felt Tommy behind her. He came close, then closer and she stayed but didn’t turn around. In the black window she could see their reflections, double-layered, one shifted slightly off the other as if they each had two bodies. His hand lifted. She skittered sideways like a crab and climbed down the basement stairs.

“It’s like I’m testing them,” she said to her counsellor, a soggy wad of tissue clenched in her fist. All that ugly pain bubbling to the surface like swamp gas. “Just to see what they’ll do.” The third date, with Dan, followed the same pattern. They went to a movie and then she suggested drinks. A few hours after she passed out beside the toilet, wine-red vomit splattered up under the rim, she rose and found him on her couch. Her jacket stretched over his chest, his shoes still on. It was dawn by then, that fragile, blue light settling against the big bay window, and she made coffee and woke him. When she told him what had happened to her, the words combusted in the air and she cried and cried.

There was no mirror in the rec room. Lonnie had to go the bathroom to see how she looked. She hadn’t slept well. Lying in bed, she’d thought over and over again about the fire, if she should have put water on it or told Tommy to do that. In her dream, the black body of a stray cat had fought its

way out of her arms, scratching her. Dan's side of the bed was empty when she woke. Grey shadows stained the skin under her eyes. She sat on the toilet, picked at the Band-Aid on her finger, a second one, which had surprisingly stuck through the night.

In the kitchen Tommy was eating cereal while his mother unloaded the dishwasher.

"Good morning," Lonnie said.

"Morning," said Gail, and she poured her a cup of coffee from the thermos. "Milk's there," she said, pointing to a small yellow jug on the table. Lonnie took sugar as well, but there were only pink packets of sweetener. She didn't say anything.

The chair was freezing cold when she sat down. Dan was outside, chopping wood with his father. Tommy stared into his breakfast, fishing bits out of the bowl until he knocked the spoon on the table to show her. Cereal letters spelled out LONNY. After she saw it, he smiled and ate them one by one but she didn't look him in the eye.

Dan told his parents he'd forgotten about an essay that was due and they left later that morning. I can't stay any longer, he told Lonnie. Panic in his voice. Tommy was at a meeting.

A light snow drifted down as they drove east on the highway. They were out of the city, the crowded rows of shops and car dealerships behind them when he asked, "Did he get to you?"

Lonnie looked at him, laid a hand on the back of his neck. He thrust his body forward to knock it away.

"Did he tell you his sad stories?"

She didn't know what to say. Outside the lake was visible beyond the fields.

"Because he does that," Dan said. "He likes to do that."

"We just talked," she finally said.

He was quiet for a long time. It seemed like he was sifting through some sort of rubble, looking for a central point. His face was clenched and red and she wondered if he would start to cry.

"He's nearly destroyed my parents."

"They seem okay."

"What the fuck do you know?"

Spittle formed on his bottom lip as he told her again about the guy's teeth, broken on the railing in Thunder Bay. The fire Tommy set at the bar. Fifteen thousand dollars worth of property damage.

Lonnie said nothing. The windshield was fogged from the heat of Dan's breath so he cracked a window. Cold air gushed into the car and Dan adjusted the controls, blasting the fan, as Lonnie watched the passing landscape. Farms gave way to a wetland full of crisscrossed cedar trunks, toppled and silver, dry tinder as far as the eye could see.