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## Limn

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## LIMN

They wear the same size—this had come up in the interview, when Carly was shivering in the air conditioning and Alexis, without a word, picked up a cardigan from a chair and put it around her shoulders. Like a mother. Carly knew then she had the job. Two weeks later Carly was shepherding Tatum and Jack in the Range Rover to their Episcopal day school in Manhattan and planning the family vacation to Virgin Gorda. Brad, the husband, was relieved; he said she had saved their lives.

She wasn't in the house long before she understood about the weekly sessions with the marriage counselor: every Wednesday Brad home early from his law firm in the city so he and Alexis could drive off together at 3:00 and return at 4:30, Alexis red faced and puffy in the eyes, Brad going off to pour a Scotch, slamming the study doors. Divorce written all over.

Carly wanted the kids to come through it intact. She tried to motivate. She called her mom. You've got to bond, her mom said. What do you mean, Carly asked. Her mom said, Do things together. You used to babysit your nephew. You know about this. He was six months old, Carly said. He slept and he pooped. I held him sometimes.

She was halfway through the make-your-own-sock-puppet how-to from Alexis' *Child* magazine when she noticed Tatum and Jack were no longer at the kitchen table. They were huddling in the corner. "What's wrong with you guys?" "You're scaring us." This was from Tatum, who had once tried to microwave her hamster. "Can we watch TV?" "Get over here," Carly said. "And let's do crafts." Then Alexis emerged from her artist's studio, a bright white structure that had once been a carriage house, and strode across the lawn toward them in her canvas smock. Carly scrapped the whole idea and thrust a bag of chocolate chips into Tatum's waiting hands. "Cheer up," Carly said.

Brad comes home later and later each night. Alexis forms a book club. At meetings she serves finger sandwiches and coffee, and because the maid has weekends off, Carly has to come up from her subterranean living quarters at dawn to get started on the prep and scrub out the burr grinder.

"We need a caterer," Alexis remarks after six months of this. Carly is laboring over a chicken curry sandwich. "Really," Alexis says. "Not that you're not brilliant."

"I don't mind." Carly waves her hand.

"I just never know how many are going to turn up from one month to the next. I could never possibly give a caterer a head count. Half of the members cancel at the last minute for some random reason."

"Why do you always end up hosting?" Carly asks.

"I'm a pushover," Alexis says, and she smiles.

The group reads, always, a memoir or self-help on the topic of motherhood or anxiety or invigorating the marriage. In the book jacket author photos are women who look like they could be perched there on the ottoman next to Alexis' best friend, Stephanie Emmons, dropping fifty-cent words with that same kind of earnestness. The key term in all of these discussions, once they turn from the actual book, is balance: how to attain it, how to maintain it, how to defend it. "Really," Stephanie says. "We owe it to ourselves. We are the CEOs of the household. No one questions Josh's right to golf on a Saturday afternoon. Why should anyone question my trip to the city to hit Barney's?"

Alexis is quieter than the rest, more solicitous. She helps Carly bring out the sandwiches and the napkins. "Aly," Stephanie says. "Sit down. Relax. This is exactly the problem."

After the meeting Stephanie corners Carly and makes small talk. "You know, anytime you want to hang out with us in there you're welcome to. No one considers you the help. We're not

feudal lords." Periodically, the topic is ambition. "You're smart, Carly. How much longer are you planning to change diapers and run carpools?" Stephanie produces a key, wields it like a flag. "If you ever need a place to be alone, we have a guesthouse; it's hardly ever used."

Carly tries to smile. "Thanks," she says. She hopes she sounds like Stephanie. Bored. Dismissive.

Of the rotating fifteen who turn up for the meetings, only Alexis has what can be construed as a profession, but she never talks about it. Carly is willing to bet not one of the others, not even Stephanie, have been in the studio, much less know about Alexis' fellowships and M.F.A. Carly, who is in the habit of visiting the studio when the family is out, took Jack once while Alexis and Tatum were at a playdate for the afternoon. When she slipped the key in the deadbolt and turned she'd taken his small hand to help him with the high step up. He had been late to walk, nearly eighteen months, and even after all the physical therapy, wore shoe inserts and couldn't manage stairs, but in Alexis' studio he had nearly run from mirror to mirror, pressing his nose to the glass, leaving imprints in the shape of a snout. Don't, Carly said sharply, she'll know you've been here. Tiny handprints smudged the glass. Mirrors! he said, and then mommy and pointed, and Carly saw the shape of a woman sketched out in a corner of a huge stretch of canvas. The woman's face was bent away but she wore her hair tied low with a scarf, like Alexis. Over the next few weeks, when Carly returned, the abstracts gradually disappeared, replaced by studies. Shapes—not human exactly, but the beginnings of faces, and limbs—and the colors darkening to something murkier, like the color of the pond near the edge of the property when the water was filled with leaves. It was color that was the beginning of decay. "This is what she does," Carly said to Jack. "When I come to get you up from your nap and you ask for her

instead and you cry, I want you to remember next time, instead of crying—all of these paintings and her painting them.” He looked at her solemnly. “All right?” she said, and he said yes.

Saturday nights in the summer, when her friends are home from college, she does the round of parties at the lake, and it is just like senior year. One night she ends up on the dock with Aerin and Chelsea and a boy she’s never seen before. The house pulsates with music, screaming, laughter. Beneath them the lake murmurs at the pilings. Carly lays down on her back and puts her feet in the water, and Aerin says, “Shitty much?” She and Chelsea laugh. “This is what you feel like,” Carly says, “after working eight hours.” As soon as she says it she regrets it. The other three are silent. “I had an internship this fall,” Chelsea says. “Fucking grueling. Accounting. If it wasn’t my uncle’s firm I would have quit the first day.” “You have no idea what you sound like,” Aerin says. “And by the way, I have worked eight hours. In a row.” The boy is lightly rubbing Aerin’s shoulders, working outward in the shape of wings. Her head drops forward, lolling slightly. “Amazing.”

Chelsea looks down at Carly. “What kind of work are you doing anyway?” she asks.

“Phone sex,” Carly says.

People are emerging from the house, scattering over the lawn, and as the first few reach the water’s edge, Aerin and Chelsea stand, strip down to their bikinis, and dive together off the edge of the dock.

“Go in,” Carly tells the boy.

“I don’t know how to swim,” he says. He looks at the bodies, silvery as dolphins in the moonlight, plunging around them. He looks at her. “I’m Radames,” he says. “Who are you?”

“Are you Aerin’s boyfriend?” she says.

"Something like that."

"I'm Carly," she says. "Let's go inside."

The house is quiet and dim, strewn with trash, abandoned shoes. She takes Radames' hand. In the light from the great room she sees that he has the face of a Botticelli. Beautiful, passive, benign.

They head down the hallway from the kitchen. She opens doors as she goes, but all the bedrooms are occupied. Radames' presence behind her, docile and quiet, reminds her of Jack, and as they begin up the stairs to try the second floor, she feels her energy flag. Say something, she wants to say to him. Nothing is right.

They end up in the trophy room. Three walls of antlers and glass eyes, and a picture window swathed in taupe velvet drapes. Radames kneels at the fireplace, arranging kindling, striking matches.

"They're all the same," he is saying. "These occasions. Get drunk, jump in the lake."

"It's a sound ritual," Carly says. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he says. "Are you angry with me?"

"No," she says. "Why would I be angry?"

The fire bursts heartily to life, snapping at the crown of tinder and newspaper before settling into a steady burn. As she leans toward it, Carly feels as if she has been divided in two: the heat vivid in her face and hands, the cold like a wall at her back.

"How come you're not in school?" he says.

"I don't know," she says. "I have no life plan. Obviously."

He says, "You are angry with me."

"Why would I be angry with you?"

She goes to the window, ties back the drapes with their silky cords. Below the lake stretches, broad and black. A misting rain is setting in. People are scurrying in circles, gathering their

clothes, their beer bottles from the narrow crescent of beach. They shiver, shoulders pulled up around their ears. The glare of the fire behind Carly swells, filling the lower panes of the window with orange light. She puts her palm to the glass, almost expecting to feel warmth. Downstairs someone puts on the music again, the reverberation of the bass like a tremor in the floor. In the window's reflection she sees Radames feeding the fire, stirring it with a kind of hook, and her own arm illuminated from wrist to shoulder, the rest of her body dark inside a weak silhouette. "All right," Radames says. "Let's start over, yes?" Beneath her fingers the beach is empty. Someone opens the door of the trophy room, says oh there you are. Radames laughs, a narrow little loop of a laugh, edged with irritation. Come in, come in. She lifts her hand from the glass.

By the time she gets home the sky is fading to grey, a strata of golden pink rising from the east. No one is up except for Tatum, in the kitchen in her Supergirl costume, whistling something that sounds like Beethoven, twisting the legs of her Barbie.

"You're in trouble," Tatum says.

Carly opens a coke and drinks it down without stopping. Her head throbs.

"You were supposed to watch us last night."

"It was my night off." She thinks. "Wasn't it?"

Tatum shrugs. "She won't say anything." She fills an eye dropper with purple food coloring and begins applying it to the head of the Barbie. "Did you get drunk?"

"Of course not."

"Let's go to the park today, after you sleep it off."

Carly thinks of pushing Jack on the swing, the creak of the chains, the pointy little screams of children darting over the playground. The pain in her skull tightens. There is a faint rus-

ting upstairs, the beginning of movement. The sun arcs through the French doors in a broad blade of light.

"Fantastic," she says. "Yes."

Brad goes to L.A. for a deposition and Alexis says she isn't sure when he'll be back; these things could go for a day or for weeks. It is a serious case—a collapsed playard, a strangled infant. There were at least a dozen cases brought to the company's attention before this one, she says. We've pretty much got them cornered. Carly thinks, we? Alexis' face is taut the way it always is when Brad travels on business. She is talking too fast. She is banging cupboards.

The house seems quieter than usual with Brad gone. Alexis and Tatum and Jack head into the city for their Sunday morning ritual of scones and clotted cream at the Plaza.

When Carly opens the door to the master bedroom she finds it, as ever, dustless, spotless, the bed perfectly made: a virtual museum. The closet door is slightly ajar and the track lighting is on, and as Carly moves closer she sees the shopping bags.

Her first thought when she pulls out the clothes is that there has been some kind of mistake. Alexis of the baby cable knit sweaters, the peacoats, does not belong to the bags that, Carly sees, have been stuffed, and seemingly at random, with python T-strap Manolo Blahnik sandals, a pleat skirt in hot pink shantung, a sheer silk chiffon babydoll with matching panties, a pheasant feather cape. Here, a pinafore dress with baby blue satin sash, as if she would be Alice in Wonderland; slouchy suede boots with a kitten heel, a Balenciaga bolero jacket, leather cigarette pants in a mirror finish. Carly lays out the clothes on the Ralph Lauren bedspread: they seem to posture, as if they have taken on a life of their own.

Carly finds herself in her underwear, her own shorts and



tank top ditched on the floor, buttoning herself into a tulle-tiered dress that billows out behind in a fabulous train, bride-like. When she drags the whole ensemble over to the mirror it is as if she has never seen herself before, not really. The overpowering silence is like a second presence over her shoulder, evaluating her plainness. What she has to work with, she admits now to herself, is not much, even if she does have more color than Alexis on account of those afternoons chasing Tatum around the pool while Alexis holes up inside claiming she is allergic to sun; Alexis is all long legs and razor-blade cheekbones. At best Carly is in the league of that Dirty Coeds porn she caught Brad checking out online once when she walked into his study to ask about her paycheck. But as she abandons the tulle and climbs into the leather dirndl, she begins to come around, rather as she had in sophomore biology lab, dissecting that sad-eyed toad she had selected from the batch that had come in dry ice in Styrofoam coolers in the spring. She had come to lab straight from A.P. English, where in the last weeks of the semester they would spend the hour reading and re-reading the last pages of *The Bell Jar* and she had had the sense of something always on the verge of naming itself in her mind, the teacher's voice getting in the way, all those hands going up, arms waving, that kind of overeager me me me as if it were fifth grade. And then there was the shrill sound of the bell and it was all lost somehow. Standing over the pinned toad, the polished lab table, surrounded by rows of jars of piglet fetuses floating in formaldehyde, she had wielded her blade for the incision, and it had nulled that frustration, assuaged that namelessness, and she had felt order again in the universe.

Her eyes now feel heavy, her fingers fatigued by so much buttoning, unbuttoning, zipping, dismantling. She looks at the clothes cast across the floor. In her skull there is a faint humming, not

altogether ominous.

She decides to spend the rest of the afternoon on the pool chaise with a hard lemonade and work on her tan. The master bedroom had been left immaculate, she is sure, but as she inflates the chaise, she can't help looking back at the window as if to check her work. But the drapes are drawn, as always.

The chaise drifts past the row of zero-gravity recliners and into the range of the oscillating misting fan, and she closes her eyes, nearly asleep when distantly, a car door slams. She considers getting out of the pool but this will involve either slipping from the chaise into the deep end where she is now cast adrift, or else, humiliatingly, lowering herself onto her stomach on the chaise and paddling to the edge where she might edge off onto the stairs and climb to the deck. At some point in working this all out in her head she realizes Alexis is standing at the gutter staring at her from behind her Wayfarers. Carly squints into the sun. The house looms behind Alexis, a vast Gothic abomination of architecture.

"Come in the studio," Alexis says, her voice very small. "Let's talk."

Carly slips, feet first, into the blue. The cold swallows her, tendrils of hair sucking toward the surface as she sinks. Bubbles ripple past her nose. She curls her toes against the gritty concrete floor of the pool, her lungs, empty now, beginning to strain. When she breaks the surface, her mouth makes a hollow whistle; she pulls down air, treads, breathes again, and sees that Alexis is smiling. Carly folds into the first stroke, a stitch in her side, disturbed by that glimpse, realizing that Alexis' face in a smile looks unnatural, more like an animal, a dog, baring its teeth in nervousness, an attempt at placation. Carly's technique is poor; water swirls between her fingers. She slogs finally to the side of the pool and grips the gutter, gasping, pushing her hair out of her

eyes with her wrist.

"Where are the kids?" Carly asks.

"At a friend's," Alexis says.

The studio smells strongly, nearly chemical, as if Alexis has been burning something, and when she hits the lights Carly can see she's changed the fixtures around so that the lamps are trained entirely on the far west wall, where a massive canvas leans, her biggest yet. Its place in the lights conveys the impression of a stage. It seems blank until Carly walks to it and sees the penciled silhouettes, the vague floating forms that appear to be drowning in this whiteness, arms outstretched, fingers dangling weightlessly as if buoyed. Headless. The sketches are so light it is as if they have been not drawn but traced.

Alexis removes her sunglasses, drops them on a draft table. She stares at her palette, the stand of brushes soaking in turpentine, all around her, as if she's never seen any of it.

"None of them have faces," Carly says.

Alexis picks up a pencil. "I'm going to have to let you go," she says. She begins to sketch, casually, with the air of jotting a note. But Carly can see the slightest quiver in the arc of the line that is a shoulder on the page. "I'm sure you understand," Alexis says. "You were careful enough putting the room back together but I could see that you'd been through the clothes. You were trying them on, weren't you?"

Carly says nothing, tightens the beach towel around herself. She is standing, by now, in a small puddle of pool water that has dripped from her bathing suit onto the floor.

"Not to mention," Alexis says, "that you've been in here, many times. Jack tells me. Not that I would have minded," she says. "Except you never asked. And so I have to wonder, what else you're capable of." Now Carly can see that she is almost fully formed on the page. Just a few brief strokes and she is there, per-

fectly recognizable. Genius, she thinks, despite herself. Alexis sets down the pad.

"You're right."

"You must not think much of us," Alexis says. "But even so why would you bother? Did you think I'd never notice?"

"I don't know," Carly says. She wonders if Alexis will cry, like she did when Tatum called her a bitch. But Alexis only stares at her, as if Carly must be lying, as if she's had reasons all along. Carly starts to feel her skin puckering in the cold. She realizes she's freezing.

"Go ahead and change," Alexis says, "before you catch your death."

A year later, after Carly gets off her shift at the daycare, she and Radames will drive past the Webers' on their way to smoke pot in Stephanie Emmons' guesthouse while the family summers in Maine. He drives and she rides shotgun, and they argue over what station to play on the radio. Sometimes she looks right at the Webers' house and sometimes she doesn't, and either way it passes more quickly than she expects. Sometimes the kids have been careless, left out a hula hoop or a bicycle overturned on the lawn, and there has been a different car in the drive for many months in place of Brad's Mercedes.

Inevitably she will say to Radames—who has never thought to ask how she got the key to the Emmons' guesthouse, who drives steady and slow as a grandmother—to get on with it already, and they will find their way through the woods to the dank guesthouse and make out. In the dimness he is all grasping hands, a weight on her chest. But afterward, she feels gentleness. He offers her the mouth of the pipe, pushes the lighter into the bowl, nursing the flame until she is done. She wonders what became of that sketch, if it ever evolved to something more: a

portrait that an acquaintance might look at in a gallery and say of it, Carly, or if her body drifts on in that page, half finished, in limbo like Alexis' body on the mural. He asks what she is thinking about. She looks at him, searching the darkness for some recognizable line of his face, and cannot think what to answer.