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Unger the Aegis

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Normally, whatever'd jar this iceberg house would be just divine. Tornado sirens at three a.m. Grease fire in the kitchen. Scandal. But a hawk hitting the bay window a breath away. Full speed and my heart clucked. The window, which might have been shot into my skin, a rubbery wubba-wubba, reverberating through the room in dangerous waves, still threatening to fall apart, release into seams. And Tom's dad, out of his study with the response time of a Cabrini-Green ambulance and just as accusatory — "What the hell was that? What the hell was that?" No. I did not throw something at your bay window out of sanity, something dropped from the sky and I screamed.

It was weird and cloudless outside. Weird — because Tom left me alone in the house with his dad while his mother and he went to his sister's house. They were going to pour over some estate figures and practice being taciturn. Tom's dad, meanwhile, was going to drink Black Velvet at home in crystal glasses like he didn't have a problem and work on another novel about men trouble. I sat in the living room and listened to the dust settle and read a magazine with the quiz torn out. I had stopped to sniff at Casmir when the bird hit, and now that fragrance and the event are the same to me.

As we stepped outside a hot, dirty gust of wind took my hair and tied it in knots. I'd almost quit wearing make-up one day into our trip and my Western look was now complete. The hawk lay on its back, its beautiful saffron-yellow feet clutching at nothing and releasing noth-
ing back again. Each eye rolled about like a child under a sheet, and its mouth ticked like chickens do. Hawk-
speak. "What happened? What hit me? What the hell hap-
pened?" "What do you usually do when this happens?"

"This never happens," Tom's dad said, certain, and
then paused, recalling something. "With hawks anyway.
Shook you out of your little Athenaeum did it?"
Something came to him with the word 'Athenaeum.'
"Did I ever tell you about the time Tom tried to catch a
goose?"

Jesus. "No."

"When he was about twelve, a goose, a Canadian
goose, landed in our front yard on a foggy Sunday morn-
ing. Tom never did take to a gun until he was in high
school, but he wanted to corral that goose, under the
aegis of my watching him from the window. The kid
thought it might be injured and he could save it — make
it a pet, I think. I let him go to it."

It gave me the chills to hear him call Tom a 'kid.'

"What about rabies?" I asked. In Chicago we
didn't touch anything because it had rabies. Tom's dad
looked at me. His way, Tom says. Pretentious, I say. Tom's
dad has a pedigree of such mannerisms that genetically
damned Tom's sister Deb, but are fortunately, at worst,
latent in Tom.

"He stalked that goose, sneaking around by the
fence and then —" He crouched and crimped his fingers
like he might get me, "— jumped it from behind!"

I hated Tom's dad's stories because he told them
with all the fervor and insincerity of a crackerjack. He
was so accustomed to being listened to and heard that he
knew he could project whatever he wanted onto his sto-
ries and that they would stand up as conscientious even
if they were as subjective and suspect as everyone else's
stories. I suppose I admired that in him as much as I
I worked as a storyteller only once in my life, right out of high school, selling light bulbs over the phone. When I applied for the job, the woman interviewing me asked me if I were handicapped and I said No, of course not, I didn’t know I had to be, and she laughed at which point I should have run out the door. She produced a long checklist of questions: Have you ever had allergies? No. Ever had asthma? No — is this, like an AIDS test? Have you ever had fainting spells? No. Have you ever broken any bones? Well, my foot once when I was twelve. Did it require a cast? Yes. Okay, you were handicapped then, sign here. Loose interpretation and I was employable. I was too young to feel properly disgusted.

The grift was that we were supposed to be handicapped people selling bulbs over the phone to help provide for people like ourselves. I think about one penny of each bulb went to the handicapped. And one penny to whomever sold the light bulb. It wasn’t terribly lucrative unless you could put the guilt off of you and onto the management.

There was a guy there named Lou who sat next to me and asked me out about every hour-and-a-half: We could hit that new movie, hit that new club, hit this party I know about. And he liked to look down my blouse. Lou was gross that way, but he treated me nice, and five minutes of flirting with him meant five minutes away from the phone.

Lou sold more light bulbs than anybody else because Lou didn’t feel the slightest shame at acting retarded. “Hi. I’m Timmy and I’d like to be your friend,” he would say in a garbled, vulnerable and impotent voice.

I broke down and went out with him. He poured
me drinks and slid a hand down my pants, under my panties on his parents’ couch. I was drunk enough that I might have let him go on, but I kept hearing that voice from work: “Hi. I’m Timmy and I’d like to be your friend. Hi. I’m Timmy and I’d like to be your friend.”

“Were you watching all of this?”

“Oh yeah. From right in there,” he said and pointed to the window where I’d been sitting a few moments prior.

“Shouldn’t we call the vet or something? I don’t want to pick it up or anything.”

Again, Tom’s dad gave me a look that seemed to go beyond what I said and into something of myself. Something between Tom and I that he knew something about and was taking Tom’s side. Like I gave Tom crabs and Tom was at the clinic right now. Like I was pregnant with Tom’s best friend’s baby.

My best friend Sarah told me that Tom’s family would be this way. She saw something in Tom that I missed and that I’m still missing. But she and Tom never got along. I think Tom knows the trouble Sarah and I used to be into. But all things said and done, Tom and I wouldn’t be together if it weren’t for Sarah coming onto him at the bar.

Sarah had ended up too drunk and it was me who took Tom home that night. Even though — and here it gets sticky — I had another boyfriend at the time. David. A cute boy from near the Lake who I’d met the summer before: green eyes like a beautiful cat and he smoked and wrote poems. I went away, from Chicago to Wichita State every year, and came back in the summers to David. The third summer, I met Tom.

David transferred to Wichita State the year before
I broke up with him, so we could be together, and stayed and graduated ahead of me and with a real sense of where he was going with his life. Engineering. I went back to Chicago, to Tom.

David and I used to be able to talk about anything, even after. But as the months piled up, Tom became something between us that we couldn’t talk around. It wasn’t Tom’s fault — I don’t think he even knew — but that beautiful intimacy crushed itself. When we see each other now, at weddings and reunions, we’re lives apart.

“It'll be all right. It probably just saw the shadow of a bird across the glass. If its neck is broken, there’s nothing we can do anyway. Birds hit that window all the time. Most live.” He pushed the hawk with the toe of his sock, and it slid across the cement in quiet, awful sounds. “That goose bit Tom so hard on the ear it bled and then the goose smashed him against the house with its wings and ran down the road, honking, flapping its wings, and into the fog. You should ask him about it sometime. He hates geese. Did you know that? Did you know he hates geese?”

I faded about then. Like the goose into the fog, only without flapping. I felt like one of them. Tom’s family, which slips into some kind of collective minor epilepsy when things get uncomfortable. They don’t talk it out, talk it through, pull it apart. Nobody’s right, and they walk away from things happy about that.

I had a boyfriend like that once, who would let everything slide right off his back. I should have known. We met at a party in college and the first thing he told me was that his penis was two inches long and covered in scabs. That was his line. We smoked dope and made
out in someone’s bed. He called me three weeks later and told me I could come over and watch *Thirtysomething* at his place if I’d bring beer. It’s strange, the way things seem when you sound them out later, how I could have overlooked those matters to see a funny, sexy guy who played in a band. He played without passion. He was just bored.

Tom’s dad cut in on me: “Once when we were traveling back from a ski trip to Idaho, I came up over this hill and there was a hawk, like this one, feeding on the carcass of a rabbit. It struggled to take off and I slowed a bit, I suppose, thinking that it would, but THWACK!” He slapped his hands together for effect and I jumped.

“Could we go in, if we’re not going to do anything?” I asked. It was rude, and the fact that I cut into his story seemed to genuinely wound him. I felt guilty. “I’m sorry,” I said. “That was rude.” Rude but bootless.

“It went right through the headlight into the engine block. The only thing sticking out was its feet. We had to drive all the way home with those yellow hawk feet sticking out of the grill like we were feeling our way across Idaho.” He opened the door for me. “If that hawk had hit the windshield, we all would have died.”

We sat together in the front room; the reverberations of the window had stopped, and everything was as silent and unconcerned as before. The couch, the carpet and the sporadic curios returned to their brooding, the lot under the exacting quietude of the study. An unwritten rule of Tom’s house seemed to be that Tom’s dad told the stories, anecdotes, jokes, and news of the world; there was no competition of expression. And if he wasn’t speaking, Tom’s mom, Tom and Deb fell into stasis until the next time.
I can’t live like that.

“That scared me to death,” I said. Sincerely. I had the hideous feeling of veins throbbing in my throat.

“I’m surprised the window didn’t break. That’s an awfully big bird.” He offered me a cigarette. I decided to indulge.

“I heard somewhere that between every bit of conversation there averages thirty seconds of silence.” That thought popped into my head whenever people stopped talking, and I thought Tom’s dad deserved the same curse of information.

“Is that all?” he laughed to himself. “I’ll bet you’re not used to silence. Being from an Italian Catholic family.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just that I always picture Italian Catholic families rousting it up. Not much use for counting past five or six.” He flicked his ash into the ashtray.

I nearly screamed. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one.

“Jesus,” he said, “now I’m doing it. Counting betweens. That was a dirty trick.”

“I thought you’d appreciate that. Being from an agnostic family.”

He laughed again, to himself. “I understand what Tom sees in you.” Read: He could have done much worse. “That hawk’s up now.”

It wasn’t flying, or even walking around, but it was standing and looking through us with one of its eyes. Two distant, blurry and shadowy objects behind the nothing from nowhere that knocked it flat. Indubitable but illegible people. I worried it might feel we were mocking it, and I stepped back from the window.

Sometimes I thought — I thought and Tom worried — that Tom’s dad saw Tom and me skinny dipping one time. Tom was in the water and I was standing by the
edge, the cool of the night holding me from the safety of the water for just a second longer, a heightening dare. I saw myself, reflected in the window of Tom’s parents’ room and I whispered, “Oh-my-God-somebody-just-saw-us.” It wouldn’t have been so dreadful to me. My naked body in front of my husband late at night, and someone knew. But the alleged silhouette of Tom’s dad was too little to be vexing and too much to go away. And I couldn’t ever just bring it up — “Did you or did you not see me naked at the side of the pool?” Anyway, if the worst that Tom’s dad ever knew about me was that I took my clothes off and swam, furtively, in his own backyard, so what then? So what?

Ever since, though, Tom has been funny about my nudity. Even when I walk around the house — our own fucking house. What is the point of owning a house if you can’t walk around naked, picking your nose and singing to yourself? I think Tom feels violated, even though we’ve talked about it and I’ve told him that I feel violated by his feeling violated.

The hawk flew away, over the roof, so we couldn’t see it soar like I thought we ought to, under the circumstances.

“Well it’s gone,” Tom’s dad said and walked to the kitchen to pour himself another Black Velvet.

I lit another cigarette and stared out the window. There was a grease spot where the hawk had hit, or maybe just a smeared place where somebody rested their sweaty head against the cool glass. I couldn’t tell if it was inside or out and I didn’t want to touch it either way.

Tom’s dad came back to the living room and looked at me. “I’m going to get back to work.” And he was gone, back to the study. I could hear the slow, reluctant click of the lock on the door. I wondered when Tom would get home.
I sat back in the chair I had been sitting in when the hawk hit the window. People in the west have the spacious luxury of putting their kitchens in the east, their living rooms in the glow of the sunset. The sun was beginning to set and would be in my face in a few moments. The shadows of the trees, still leafless this time of year, across the street were creeping towards my feet. I felt as though something inside of me was pulling the shadows of the empty branches underneath me, and I was too ruffled and warmed-over to resist.