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Shining

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JESSICA MARTINI

SHINING

EVERYTHING STARTS IN the mountains. It's a bright day, the river shines cerulean, the road north is desolate save one determined Volkswagen shouldering the curves above a rocky vertical ledge. The music is somber: a dirge split by dissonant plucks and the sounds of remote wild. Leaves are turning yellow, we're peering through lens flare on the screen and a tacky teal font. The family is rising into the peaks where the snow is already on the burial grounds.

I say I like it: the dissonance, the warning, the inevitability that the car will arrive someplace with a dark message for them, for us. I'm eager to be frightened by the film. You seem to think I will be.

The camera enters the Colorado hotel yielding a set that defies dimension, a palace with M.C. Escher optics and Native American art on the walls. It's one-of-a-kind, secluded, eerie, and baroque. Not like the hotel they built in my Arizona mountain town a couple years ago: a corporate, cookie-cut brick building striking its shadow on the older hotels downtown—the ones known to be haunted—obscuring the view of the San Francisco Peaks, the

burial grounds where people ski.

On the screen we see Jack wearing a green tie. He's interviewing for a job that he cannot be denied. A superfan of the film has made a meme that zooms in on the tie, and I will find it later on and think he's right: the green pattern *does* resemble the hedge maze—the trap where Jack's wife and child are laughing, lost, where he looks over them like the hotel's giant, sovereign god. The interviewer glibly warns Jack that a caretaker once went crazy at the hotel in the winter, snapped from the isolation, and turned on his family and himself. Jack is unfazed. You can rest assured. *That's not gonna happen with me*—Jack is a man who knows his limits. The kind of guy who thinks it's unfortunate when a child is harmed, but if the kid takes a blow, he should have been standing further back. He smiles. Is this a story about cabin fever? No, this is a story about men, you say.

You think the dead blond girls are the scariest part of the film. Artifacts of the unconscious. *Come play with us*, they invite. I laugh—this doesn't frighten me. The cherry Kool-Aid splashing all over the walls, flooding the hallways, doesn't either. The first time Jack raises his voice at his wife, I flinch—this isn't the kind of frightened I was hoping for. She has stepped into his typewriter trance, his hard and important work, offering to bring him sandwiches. He puts her in her place—anywhere but his domain.

I'm watching you with the same eyes I'm watching Jack advance on his

wife, *light of his life*, his whole form stalking her, possessing her. *I'm not gonna hurt ya*, he says, *I'm just gonna...* I say I don't like it. We shut off the movie before she strikes him with the bat, something I'll find out tomorrow, when I watch the film the whole way through, after I decide I'm not afraid anymore.

• • •

YOU APOLOGIZE FOR choosing a movie that could be triggering. You know that men raising their voices can be triggering for women. You understand. Your father's temper always frightened you, that wild track of violence, but this film's a favorite. You don't ask me where my fear comes from.

Instead, you ask me to listen to your story, so I stay longer than I intended. You confess to me that you raised your voice with your ex-girlfriends. You know it's scary when a man gets angry like that, but the thing is, they provoked you. They taunted you. Laughed at you. One cheated on you. So, of course you raised your voice. I don't get a chance to ask how loud because now you're crying, and I'm reassuring you, saying, "It's okay, I'm not afraid of you."

• • •

I'M DOWNTOWN, WALKING home beneath the shadow of the big hotel, past

the spot where I saw a police officer looking over a man struggling to get up, a Native man. I remember seeing the man's backpack leaned up against the wall, seeing him asked to leave and not come back.

Now, the windows are lighting up with the televisions in the lobby, each one flashing bold black letters beneath serious faces: *Kavanaugh Hearing*. I hurry toward the intersection, wondering how long I can avoid the news. Hearing a man raise his voice is triggering, even when he says, *I'm innocent*.

Imagine the hearing they'd hold for Jack. Someone tips off the Washington Post, says they know Jack is the one who built the hotel on sacred burial grounds, he is the one who decorated the ballroom gold, he is the one who designed the maze and trimmed the hedges, and he is the one who whacked his loved ones with an axe: the caretaker. Picture a man wearing a green tie on all of the lobby televisions, saying he has never hurt a woman or a child in his life. Picture the president chiming in to say, *my good man is incapable of a violation*.

There is the scene where Jack vents to the glassy-eyed bartender in the Gold Room, and it sounds like something I've heard before. *Women. Am I right?* Jacks takes a pull from his drink and says, *That bitch. As long as I live, she'll never let me forget what happened. Coulda happened to anybody*.

Well, did you do it? the bartender asks.

I like beer, he replies, *don't you?*

• • •

YOU'RE A TEACHER, TOO, and in one of our first conversations you say you teach your students about bodies, about consent, about the right of a body to be respected. In my class, I teach the story about the woman who goes home with the man she barely knows, the one who, in the end, sends her a one-word text: *whore*. A student raises his hand and points out that the woman in the story never gave clear consent. The room is silent for a moment. The lesson of the day is that sticking one's tongue down another's throat is an act, not an accident. It's unfortunate that we all seem to agree that dating is like a job interview, and sometimes a man shows up in a green tie and expects not to be denied.

You say yours is a progressive classroom, you don't shy away from tough topics, either. No means no.

One night we go to the swing set, play like children under the stars and share what it was like to actually *be* children. You say you never knew how being a child was supposed to feel, but you hope, as an adult, that you can find out. I say I'm beginning to, laughing upside down in the swing, my

boots linked into the chains. We hear the noise of movement around us in the forest's shadows, but I feel safe with you.

On another night, we sit on the floor under the flicker of Christmas lights until late, talking about all the wounds we share and how the past keeps haunting us, and I wonder how it is that we seem to know each other so well, so quickly. I tell you about the ones who used the language of love as camouflage for control. You say you know that experience well, that you're sorry they hurt me. We look into one another's eyes for a long time without flinching. I think you can see gold shining in me.

• • •

STORIES AND NAMES AND soundbites continue to pulse around me like persistent spirits I can't shut out, so I finally give in and turn on C-SPAN. It's the first time in my life that I have sat in front of cable news for hours. Being told stories this way can feel practically oppressive, but I can't stop watching this one play out. There is a hero on the screen glowing with a bravery not often seen in the spotlight.

She was gentle and young and smart. She was swimming that day. She was itching in her bathing suit. She was going to an acquaintance's house. She was being friendly, she was being the quiet one as usual. She was being

pushed into a room where there was music playing and a bed. She was underneath him. He was laughing with his friend. The two boys were the only people in the room. A hand was over her mouth. *Here's Johnny!* She thought she would die under that boy. But she didn't die. She went on, terrified. Two front doors. Other side of the country. He went on, rising, ascending to the place where his honor would be known. She tells her story after so many years, ready for someone to notice there is a woman in the room—there is another person in the room.

Between the testimonies and after, the news anchor takes phone calls from people watching around the country. Democrat line: *I have been assaulted, too.* Republican line: *I have been assaulted, too.* Independent line: *I have reason to think that our country is in the toilet.*

If it's a hearing, this might be the time to listen, America.

I say you should always listen to a woman's pain-story.

You tell me that, for you, pain is being told *no*.

• • •

ALTHOUGH I SAY I'm not afraid of you, you believe I am because I'm quiet. The movie has piqued a kind of horror I didn't expect. Not the surrealism—the realism. Not the Kool-Aid blood—the violence, the all-American dad losing it on his child, the husband preying on his wife, the boy burdened by the demons of the world. A fast reel of made-up scenes runs through my head, scenes in which a man snaps and takes it out on the person closest to him, in some of the scenes that man looks like you, but, it's not real, I think. I don't know whether or not I am afraid of you. You interpret my silence as an accusation. You say it's not fair. It's not fair for me to feel scared.

You explain that sometimes rage is warranted, that you feel justified for all the times you fought back, for breaking the screen on your phone in a moment of anger, for raising your voice, for correcting your exes' stories. But no, you haven't harmed anyone. You would never.

A scene from the movie flashes into my thoughts, the one where the wife and the son are playing outside, aglow with innocence, and Jack is watching from inside the hotel, looking over them through the window, his face darkened and fixated, like a predator. I think of you, minutes ago, offhandedly saying, "Imagine someone you love looking at you like that." My mind goes gray.

We could still finish the movie. You say, "What if I promise you that the

wife and the child escape in the end?” That the predator freezes in the hedge maze? I say not tonight. At the time I don’t know it, but tomorrow, I will be ready. Tomorrow, I will be compelled, even, to watch the movie through to the end, and over again.

We’re all good, right? No hard feelings. It’s late, and I say I’m tired. You invite me to sleep over, and I’m relieved not to have to drive home drowsy.

Everything ends with confusion: confusion about why once I close my eyes you are touching me, why I say nothing then, why I don’t know if this feels good or bad, why soon you are on top of me, why this feels like I’m giving you something you expected from me, why when you finally speak you mention that you have a condom, and when I say no, let’s not go any further, why we fall mile markers apart in the bed, and after I say I feel bad and you say that you don’t, why you ask me to leave.

• • •

YESTERDAY I WAS scared of the movie and its real horror, but today I’m watching the rest of the film in my apartment where I’m alone and the Christmas lights strung on my wall are gold though it isn’t winter yet. I need to know that I can look the predator in the eye without flinching.

The soundtrack crackles under 1934 jazz, mockingly jovial and spirited,

the camera moves in on a black and white photo hanging on the wall, a wide-smiling man in the center of a splendid party. Looks like a page from a yearbook. The iciness of consequence and the wild of violence both twist a smile, don't they? The gramophone in the ballroom perpetuates a gilded layer of merrymaking over the place where a man's rage has been born and reborn and will be reborn.

The credits roll as the song jingles, *midnight with the stars and you, midnight and a rendezvous*. I return to the beginning, the contrast of the brilliant landscape and the macabre omens on the drive north, the bright light that would give anyone confidence that they could survive the coming cold. I'm watching again because I think this message you told me I would find here, the message about men, is a message about you, about America, a message that has been incarnating and reincarnating in ways that I can no longer avoid, or fear.

I watch anger explode from an isolated mind, and I wish you weren't so angry. Knowing the ending now, I stop again before the bat lands on Jack's skull, this time a feeling of bravery in me.

I switch to CNN—a clip of two women stopping the senator in an elevator. I expect to watch this without flinching, too. But I hear the woman cry out, *Look at me when I'm talking to you. You're telling me that my assault doesn't*

matter! That what happened to me doesn't matter! and something breaks in me. Something that feels ancestral, not just mine. *What are you doing, sir?*

• • •

WHO WANTS TO testify to the ghosts of the past? Even when they are living, present, impossible to ignore?

I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified. These words ping around the internet to the response of thousands of *me too's* and too many wishes that she would just keep silent, keep her pain-story far from the important work of the men in Washington. Brave truth-telling beside anonymous artifacts of rage. Something about the woman sharing her story has stretched a nation out the extremes of empathy and hate, threatening some sort of snap. The anger being released has me wondering what figure lurking nearby might be thinking: if another woman speaks into this wilderness, we'll all have hell to pay.

There was a time I felt terrified with a man, didn't speak because I was afraid of what would happen if I did. This time, I want to say something, I feel compelled even.

In a message, I begin by saying last night felt bad.

You say you know you messed up.

I say the word *violation*.

You deny it.

You believe you are incapable of it.

I remind you that once you said that consent mattered, but last night, you seemed to forget that I was another person in the room.

Setting my phone aside, I decide to go downtown with friends, to a bar in a hotel where I can dance and forget the stories that are haunting me.

I wear a blue dress and hide my key in my left boot. I dance to tracks mixed with the music of Aretha, who asked only for a little respect, and I forget best I can. You appear in the doorway of the bar. I think the girl who is your friend, the one who tapped me on the shoulder, must have told you I was here. Maybe you are here to apologize in person. You follow the blond girls downstairs to get beers, and I wait for you to come back, to make things right. I keep glancing back to the doorway, not seeing you, the songs keep turning and I'm dancing with strangers after my friends have gone, until the

DJ announces that the night is ending. You're not here. I leave before the last song fades out.

• • •

When I don't contact you, you send a message to say that a woman's silence is triggering to you.

I say I was disrespected, that I am disappointed, that even when you could have been present with me in my pain, you chose not to be. I say this is not how I want to be treated.

You send me texts attacking me, everything short of *whore*. You leave me voicemails, your voice flat and deriding. You forget to say my name. You twist my story into something new, a plot in which you have become a victim. You rage; you bring back the accusation that I had been afraid of you—fear was not something I was allowed to feel. Even as I listen, I wonder if I am paranoid to lock my door, my windows.

Though I have shared only my experience and my feelings, you understand my truth as your character assassination. You say you're ashamed you got to know someone like me. Someone unsafe—a threat.

I ask my therapist, do I respond?

She says it would be like arguing with Trump. Or one of his friends.

• • •

EVERYTHING STARTS OVER in the mountains. I'm on the road in my Honda, heading south, the sky is slow-migrating silver; it's been storming for a while. The pine trees are a silent audience along the aisle of slick blacktop, their austere watch welcome. Red and yellow flags of autumn split through the still-wild glistening of mute green. I'm leaving town, briefly, to remember a larger world, one absent of human fights and hostile politics.

The music is resonant, acoustic, the beginning of a celebration that happens softly in a time of distress. I'm thinking about a man who mistakes his loved ones for obstacles to be bulldozed. He meets innocence, the land, the truth, all as what's standing in the way of what he could own and possess. He wants nothing to threaten his honor, or his version of history. Familiar track of violence, I picture my own father raising his voice and his power over whoever was standing closest.

My mind switches tracks to an image of truth-telling playing out on every hotel lobby television. I think I sense the spirits of witnesses who believe

her story, my story.

Arriving beneath the mountains, I pull over and slip between the junipers. I sit on the red earth where the sun has just offered a soft presence, revealing itself shyly in the after-storm. I can pretend the world is as peaceful as this hiding place, but I know I will have to return to the storyline and to the soundtrack of bitter rage.

I make a confession, one only the earth can hear: I have been unsafe and may again be unsafe. I am powerless, after all.

Still, could I choose not to be won by fear?

The air's chilling. Quiet now, the peaks look over the copper valley, ancient land that has witnessed years of conquest and human-erasure, waiting for the coming cold, knowing it will be layered, soon, with a desolate white.

This winter may drive a few men crazy, if they don't know their limits.

• • •

I AM ON THE swing set after midnight, blocks from the bar, alone in a blue

dress in this place where you recently told me the secrets of your isolation. I think now that when I was here last, laughing and upside-down, I had been in the middle of a maze under your darkened watch.

But this time I don't feel naïve for it. Don't feel ashamed of myself for being unsafe. I am swinging like a child, higher, until I am horizontal under the stream of stars, aware of the veiled peaks over my shoulder in the dark.

By now, I have watched the woman and the child escape, watched them survive. I've seen the survivor on the Senate floor, bold and broken but not silent. She says she is haunted, but even haunted, she is strong.

It's you who tells me this is a story about men, and I am listening, trying to understand what compels some men to erase a woman's experience, what leads some men to erase a woman. Last time a man twisted my story into a tale of his own, changed the words to confirm himself innocent, I felt powerless. I feared that any chance I had to ever know the freedom of childlike joy was taken from me. Like Stephen King wrote, "Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside of us, and sometimes, they win." And sometimes they don't. There are effects that linger long after violation, but even knowing that, now, I am swinging, like a child, I feel the night in my body like a power of my own, and now I am laughing, because I *know* I am not afraid of you, now I am shining.