Homespun

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Homespun

Some people are trash and you can just tell. It doesn't matter how you dress them up or how far they've come. It's in their skin—skin raised on hot dogs, canned beans, spaghetti two nights a week and microwave dinners. I can see it right now looking in the mirror. I can see that yellow chicken-fat color that'll never go away. Facelifts, implants, jewelry; none of it matters. Once the youthfulness fades, the trash shines through.

Byron has tanned skin. Even the palms of his hands are tan. He grew up on tenderloins and fancy cheese, probably brought his lunch to school in a zipper cooler—one of those kids who had Tupperware with real food inside: crab salad, club sandwiches. Byron is definitely not trash—so much the opposite that he can't even recognize trash when he sees it. Like he's never seen it. Byron isn't trash, but he's stupid.

I told him my parents are dead. It's not exactly the truth. My father left when I was thirteen. He could very well be dead, but last I heard he was in Pittsburgh. My mother, as far as I know, lives in a dilapidated little house in eastern Pennsylvania. The house's name is painted on a piece of two-by-four and hangs above the front door: Madeline. It's always been Madeline. This is the house I grew up in, the house my father left, the house my mother was becoming.

Every house has a story. Some stories don't stick; they dissipate and disappear along with the generations. Other times the stories fester. They get in the walls, they find their way into every little crack and crevice like smoke. Sometimes a story is so thick in a house that the eggs in the refrigerator are black with it.
Madeline, apparently, was the name of the madam. The house was one in a cluster of small time whorehouses in the 1940's. The ladies catered to the black-fingered, thick-necked factory workers from Bethlehem Steel. *Burn all day and ball all night*, that's how they tell it. And apparently that's how it went down, because the other three houses were set on fire, one at a time, over the years.

Madeline survived the fires, the religious zealots, the angry wives. They say the old madam was tall for a woman and could be seen every night standing on the porch with a shotgun full of rock salt for anybody who looked at her sideways. And that included The Law. All hours of the night. Standing, not sitting.

The house operated every day of the year including Christmas and was really quite a fixture of the community by the time Madeline died in 1968. The whole operation just blinked out after that.

By the time we moved in it was 1980 and the house had been through at least six families. There were crayons in every air duct, plastic doll parts in the flower boxes like little graveyards. Six families lived there, but I never heard a single story about any of them.

I wouldn't say that the house was haunted. Despite the stories about girls dying in the fires, I never saw ghost or even a wisp of suspicious fog. It was a house where men played and women worked. That was the spirit that haunted the place, that philosophy. It had a carpeted bathroom, a kitchen sink that faced a wall, a full-sized refrigerator and a full-sized freezer that took up most of the tiny kitchen. There was no yard, no grass. I grew up playing in the long gravel driveway, isolated by tree after tree after tree.

"Do you miss your parents?" Byron asks me out of nowhere. The dog is staring at him, he's staring at the television,
and I'm staring at myself in the mirror. All the staring makes the space between us feel vacuous. Words evaporate the minute they leave your mouth, so that we always seem to be shouting a little.

I've been thinking about my mother a lot lately, evocations that have come on completely out of the blue. It's been over ten years since I've seen or spoken with her. I tell myself if she had a telephone it would be different. I tell myself she's probably come around. I lie to myself about all this. I also lie when I tell myself I don't care and I don't wonder.

I remember how things were before I left. The day my father left, for example. I remember clear as a bell how my mother ripped the carpeting out of the bathroom with her hands and dragged his Lazyboy into the woods.

And then that was it.

As Madeline thinned and dry-rotted on the outside, as the white paint flaked off, my mother became the moist, fat, innards—pasty-pale like a grub, only the colored lights of the television flashing across her face and arms.

"Sometimes I miss them," I tell Byron. "I wish you could have met them."

Byron's parents are living in the Greek Isles. He's shown me dozens of pictures. The pictures are very glossy, taken with a good camera, and remind me of pastries to the point that I have to work to keep them out of my mouth.

His parents are dark, smiley people on the deck of a boat. On the greens of a golf course. On the back of a horse.

His mother enjoys hats as far as I can tell, and his father likes a good sweater vest. They have lots of sharp-looking teeth and for a year and a half I've managed to avoid them completely.

I come out of the bathroom and help Byron with his tie. "The stock market never sleeps," he says. The words disappear in the air and I'm too embarrassed that he would say such a thing to reply. He's always saying these kinds of corny things
that sound like B-movie dialog. Byron is very important. He’s a busy man. I tell myself he doesn’t have time to awe me with wit or even to formulate interesting sentences.

I’ve told him that I’m part owner of Le Caravelle, a French restaurant downtown. I’m actually the floor manager there, but Byron doesn’t know the difference. He doesn’t question the late hours so long as his shirts are starched and his suits are laid out for him. Byron is a creature of routine. These are the easiest kind to fool.

“My mother is going to love you,” he says in the kitchen, legs crossed and between bites of buttered toast. He says it very nonchalantly and I wonder how someone like him didn’t learn not to talk with his mouth full. I have a flash where I picture Byron as a boy, wearing short pants and shooting the nanny with a slingshot.

“What do you mean your mother is going to love me?”

He doesn’t answer. I blink my eyes a lot and look right at him, but he’s picked up the newspaper and is pretending not to notice me. I can tell by the way he’s holding his head that he’s pretending, and I stare, willing my eyes to burn holes through the paper, through his head, and set fire to the drapes behind him.

“I told you. They’re flying in Thursday.” This is typical Byron. He’s manipulative in such a dumb way that I’m not even sure it can be called manipulation; it’s more like bad acting. It’s like we’re suddenly characters on a soap opera. This is the third time in two months his parents are “flying in.” I’m fast running out of excuses.

I cannot possibly meet Byron’s parents. What if they’re smart? That’s all I need is some clever mother tracing my steps and whispering disapproval into the simple ear of her only son. I mean, Byron may be dumb, but he’s a good catch. Even I recognize that.

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“Thursday? As in the day after tomorrow? Jesus, Byron. I won’t be here Thursday. I told you.” My brain is fighting like a gladiator, spinning webs and building whole cities. Sometimes the most difficult part of all this is closing the floodgate of my mouth; people think you’re lying when you say too many sentences in a row. Byron looks very serious, folds the paper and lifts his briefcase to his lap. The latches snap open and he looks at me, waiting.

“Food show in Virginia.” I say. “The restaurant booked the reservations months ago. You need to get your head out of your ass, Byron.”

“It has to be you? You can’t send someone else?” He already sounds defeated and I don’t want to give him a chance to recover.

“Byron. No. No. I can’t send someone else. I don’t ask you to send someone else to all of your millions of weekend conferences, do I? I hate it when you do this.” It’s a made-up argument and I know Byron doesn’t have the time or energy for it. He never remembers specifics. He sips his coffee and stares at me. I stare right back at him. It’s a battle of endurance.

“Well, I guess they’ll be disappointed. Yet again.” He folds the newspaper and breaks the stare.

He leaves early without saying goodbye. I spend the day making our apartment as clean, cold, and sparse as a museum. At least his mother will have the impression that I’m neat. Exhibit A: good housekeeping.

I can remember how my mother battled with the black mildew at the edges of the shower. The blackness grew from under the moist bathroom carpet, from the perpetual sogginess there. She fought with chemicals and brute force, eventually tearing the carpet out, only to expose that the slimy-rot had gotten deep into the floorboards. That was the start of it— that bathroom floor.
She decided that the bathroom should be “let go.” “Forget about it,” she told me. “Just don’t worry about it.” I was a teenager at the time and I worried about it. I worried about falling through the bathroom floor every time I had to pee. I could see the ground underneath, the plumbing, the spiders and dead leaves.

I once walked in on a squirrel in the middle of the night. He fell into the toilet bowl. I peed outside for two weeks after that episode. I stopped inviting friends over after school and started smoking. And as soon as I graduated from high school, I mean, that very day, I left for good.

At work two girls don’t show up so I have to get out my apron and take a few tables. I try to imagine waiting on Byron’s parents. I’d call his father sir:

“What can I get you to drink, sir?”
“A dirty martini with a twist.”
“Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir! I’ll be right back with it.”

I’ll call any schmuck sir. I don’t care if you have three teeth and have forgotten to brush them, I’ll call you sir. If you’re old, I might call you folks, or fellas, but if you’re old and drunk I’ll call you gentlemen and smile a lot. Young men in casual clothes are called guys, but if they’re in suits, I usually stick to sir. You can’t go wrong with sir.

I’m not sure what I would call Byron’s mother. Women are tricky. Middle-aged and old ones that are drinking beer or liquor get called ladies, but if they’re drinking wine, then you go with yes ma’am and no ma’am.

I bet she’d examine the silverware, hold the water glasses up to the light and frown. I bet she’d look at me with some kind of suspicion—like I might drop the food, or give her cold coffee, or somehow ruin her entire meal—which is the most important thing in her whole week.
When I get home at 2 a.m., Byron is still not there. It’s not uncommon, in fact it’s likely, that he fell asleep on his leather sofa at the office and he’ll roll in early in the morning to exchange his wrinkled clothes for fresh ones. He’s such a hard worker. I’m impressed by his dumb power, his diligence. He’s a bull.

I take a picture of his parents into the bathroom with me and lay it out on the cold tile floor as I sit to pee. I try to look into his mother’s flat photo eyes, but they’re black and dead like a shark’s. I tell myself it’s because it’s a picture. I’m always lying to myself.

I pretend to pack for the pretend food show. I know I won’t need any of the clothes, but it’s good to keep up appearances. That’s what it’s all about. That’s what I tell myself. I even kiss Byron before I go and we joke about me eating too many sample éclairs.

Usually when Byron’s parents visit, I just drive. I find myself at casinos, at bars. I wake up stretched out in the back of my car in gravel parking lots or rest stops on the side of the highway. I don’t usually have a set destination, but today, after three hours of driving, I become suddenly aware of where I’m going.

My mother’s house is in the middle of Pennsylvania Dutch farm country. It’s all single-lane roads through dense forest, no shoulder. It’s like being in the earth—navigating the nooks and crannies, and then all of a sudden you’re on top of it, spilled out onto striped fields as far as the eye can see.

I smoke about a hundred cigarettes and whisper made-up conversations, freaking myself out imagining what condition I’ll find her in: A six-hundred pound, whiskey guzzling, shotgun-wielding, maniac. A skeleton.

The driveway is almost a half a mile with no good place to turn around. I notice how overgrown things have become; everything seems thicker and darker than I remember. The road has gone from uniform dusty stone, to wet, messy, dirt. It isn’t
long before I recognize this as a wasted effort. It doesn't look like there's been another car down this road in a very long time.

I actually stop halfway and consider backing out. I tell myself: let sleeping dogs lie. But instead of going back, and for no real reason, I put the car in park and call Byron on the cell phone. I get his voice mail and leave a message saying that I just checked in to the hotel and I'll call again later. I seriously don't know why he has a cell phone if he doesn't carry it with him. Every time I go out of town he forgets to take his phone with him to work. I swear he's like a little kid. Getting Byron ready for work is like getting a six-year-old ready to go sledding.

I find myself inching slowly forward down the driveway, negotiating around fallen branches and potholes, telling myself it'll be easier to turn around at the house than to try to back out. Lie.

At first sight, the house makes my stomach jump. Madeline. There is something warm deep down in the anxiety that I'm feeling. Some kind of nostalgia, I guess. It catches me off guard and I initially mistake it for nausea, rolling down my window to let in some air. The air smells like moss and rotted acorns, like an old woodpile—which is essentially what it is. The roof over the porch has collapsed and the windows are all broken out. The forest has taken most of the foundation, including the porch steps, which seem to have completely disappeared.

Guessing that I should have a look around as long as I came all this way, I get out of the car and cautiously approach the door. I have to pull myself up into the doorway by grabbing at some pretty precarious-looking trim, but with the windows broken out, it's actually brighter inside than it used to be. The carpet in the living room is growing grass and the whole place smells like mushrooms. The furniture is gone. The bathroom floor is completely caved in. Looking down into the hole, I can see the broken shards of mossy green porcelain down below. I'm afraid to pull the tattered shower curtain open. Afraid of raccoons or what, I'm not sure, but I leave it alone.
I know I could go to town and dig up some information, ask around. But I feel like the house is a sign. What I had here is dead, long gone. I don't want to talk to my mother. What was I thinking? At least she got out, I tell myself. My mother must have pulled herself out, detached, amputated. She must have turned off the television at some point and dislodged from the house. Maybe somebody came and got her. Maybe she dried out, melted down, combusted. Who knows?

It's getting dark and I figure I'll sleep in the car for a few hours and then drive back the way I came. I'll stop and have breakfast, maybe do some yard-sale shopping in the morning. I'll invent my mother a new history. Make her a bank-teller or a dancer or something. I might just be able to believe it, if it's good enough. Some stories stick.

Getting into the car, I notice that my side mirrors are gone. Not the whole casings, just the glass. After a short deliberation, I conclude that they must have fallen out, strange as that seems, somewhere on the way here. I sleep lightly with my doors power-locked and my hand on a heavy metal mag-lite.

During that part of the morning when the sky looks electric blue and everything is steaming just a little, I step out of the car and squat near the back bumper to pee. After the trickle stops, I continue to hear something that sounds like running water. There's no stream or creek near here, or at least there didn't used to be. The sound seems to be coming from Madeline.

As I'm pulling myself into the doorway, there is some kind of noisy clamor. It spooks me (the squirrel in the toilet bowl) and I fall backwards off the porch, a piece of the door molding coming off in my hand. I'm just about to try again, when I catch a glimpse of a figure running into the woods. It's through a broken window, obscured by vegetation, and its fast; so I don't really get a good look at it. But I swear it looks like it's running on two legs.
I surprise myself by following it. I’m jumping from the porch, yelling like an idiot, probably giving it a heart attack. Then I’m just running, whatever I thought I was chasing is gone, and branches are flashing by me, twigs ripping through my pantyhose. I curse the cigarettes. “Hey! Hello?” I start coughing.

The sounds barely make it out of my mouth and hardly make a dent in the air. The quiet of the forest is so powerful and heavy that it makes me feel instantly ashamed to be out in the woods, yelling to nothing at all.

Turning to go back the way I came, I’m suddenly blinded by the low glaring sun, which seems to be pelting me from every direction. It’s overwhelming and I almost lose my balance again because it’s all coming at me like strong wind or fire hoses or something.

It probably takes me a full minute to realize that it’s mirrors. Hundreds of them. Some have been stuck in the knots of trees and the trees have gobbled them up, breathed them in, scarred up around the jagged edges and healed flush with the trunk. Others are wedged in the crooks of branches, or dangling from vines high up out of reach. Looking into the trunk of one tree, I see a thousand trees, like this tree has its own interior forest. And then looking into the branches of another tree, I see myself floating up high, looking back down at me. It’s obviously years of work. It’s mesmerizing.

As I’m marveling, spinning, I stumble over something behind me. I recognize it immediately: my father’s Lazyboy. The bottom is engulfed—its rusted springs intertwined and anchored with weeds and vines, and the arms are worn down to smooth, bare, wood.

I sit myself in the chair for at least an hour, listening. The small noises are like sparks in the snow, quick and bright and instantly so long gone that you wonder if they were ever there at all. Every time a branch snaps or a bird takes off, I’m on it. I’m a living, breathing, antennae. A human motion detector.
When I look down at the exposed wooden carcass of the chair, in my mind, I can see her arms: my mother’s. I can see that they are no longer the puffy pale chicken wings that hung over the sofa all those years ago. They’re nut brown now and they’re old.

Pared down to sinewy muscle and thick, weathered skin, those arms are out here somewhere. This is something I know like I know my own name.

My mother’s name is Beatrice. Bea. I guess she doesn’t want to see me, I don’t know what else to think. I picture her in a showdown with Madeline, my mother becoming less inhibited, the house less inhabited with every passing day. Turning loose, growing wild. I think of my own complicated life, the intricate webs, the careful articulation, and the lengths I go to keep it all under my hat. A person has to be aware, sharp, perceptive, or the world might just overcome them. I think of myself as the deep-pocketed mountainous terrain, protected, and my mother as the flat open fields, exposed.

When it finally occurs to me to call Byron again, it’s late afternoon. I try his cell phone: no answer. I call his office and his secretary says he’s gone for the day. I call our house: “Hellooo.”

It’s a woman’s voice. It must be his mother. She sounds chipper, musical. She sounds British. I wonder where she picked that up. I swear, people with money!

I thought his parents would be gone by now, I thought he said they were just going to be in town for one night. I hang up the phone immediately, call the cell phone back, and leave another voice mail message. “Hi By, it’s me. Just checking in, wanted to say hi to your folks. Tell them I said hi. See you tomorrow.”

I go through a mental checklist. It’s all wrapped up tight. My mother is gone. She’s gone out of bounds, undetectable. Queen of the Woodland Critters.
I pick up a piece of the porch wreckage, the molding I accidentally ripped from the door. I open my suitcase for the first time and dig out some dark red nail polish. On the hood of my car, in the dying sunlight and holding my car keys in my teeth, I write my mother’s name: Bea. I wedge it up over the door, next to the sign that says Madeline.