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Katherine Meehan

Thin Women and the Dead

At the grocery store I wanted to buy some Swiss Cake Rolls because when I was a child my mother would not allow me to have them, and she is dead now and can't say anything about it. Elissa Warren, who hates gays, brought Little Debbie Swiss Cake Rolls to lunch every day in elementary school, and I would watch with greed as she peeled back the waxy chocolate skin from the spongy cake, and lapped up the white sugary cream hidden within.

The Little Debbie Swiss Cake Rolls were on the same aisle as the single-serve liquid center microwave cakes. In the commercials for these cakes, single women indulge themselves in bed or in their solitary kitchens by spooning warm mouthfuls of gooey chocolate cake. I looked at these cakes. They looked delicious. I took one off the shelf and read the ingredients, then reshelfed it; I would not salve my misery by spooning warm mouthfuls of chocolate tinted chemicals alone in bed. I would not become fat like that.

That was when I ran into my old boyfriend. His shopping cart was filled with egg noodles and packages of sandwich meat. He looked hale and lusty, as like an Alpine dairymaid as ever.

"Is that Miss Therin C. Musterground?" he said.

"Well!" I said. I looked at him again. He'd had a mustache once, which I had liked, but no longer. I asked him how he'd been.

He said he was well. Then he narrowed his eyes and said, "You're looking thin."

"Thanks," I said.

"No, I mean, you're looking awfully *thin*." His nostrils flared, slightly. He appeared disturbed. The snack cakes behind him seemed to echo this.

"I've been working out," I said. "You know, gaining muscle, toning up. Yoga. I've also been doing yoga. My posture? You see this? It's probably my posture that you're noticing. You can look miles thinner just by standing up straight."

"Yeah, but that wouldn't do *that*."

"I gained a lot of weight while we were dating. I've only lost seven pounds. That's not so much." I took the Swiss Cake rolls from the shelf and placed them in my basket to demonstrate my healthy attitude towards weight loss.

"No, I guess not," he said and tilted his head to the right. "How long have you been back?"

"A few months," I said. "I haven't been going out as much."

"Are you sure you're okay?" he said. "You look worn out. Are you eating okay?"

"I'm eating poor food – you know how it is," I said. "I need to start looking for a job."

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After he'd moved on I covertly nudged the Rolls back into place between the Zebra Cakes and the Oatmeal Pies.

Elissa Warren is soon to be married to a man who works in an office. They met in Chicago, where she lives because she hated North Carolina because her parents had moved here from New York and hated it. On the carpeted floor of her lacy bedroom, bent over her thin plastic dolls, she would affect the astringent New Yorker, and when in excitement I forgot my Standard American and lapsed into drawl, she would make fun of me and say I sounded stupid. Her fiancé wears a suit on weekdays, but sweatpants on the weekend, and his neck is as wide as his face. She was svelte in elementary school, when she would call me "plump," but now, I am thin, and she has gotten fat from drinking beer at tailgates and lying in bed with her fat-necked affianced. They have a fat puppy together.

Elissa Warren was my very best friend, and she was, obviously, all kinds of awesome things that I was not. She was tall and blonde and could run really fast. Her parents had money, and this I *knew*, because they always kept a box of pink wine on the kitchen counter that her enormous, womanly mother would tap on long afternoons. I thought this very glamorous, very unlike my little, dowdy mother, whose wine turned her teeth dark. Elissa received much better grades than I did, could do math in her head, her kilt was always pressed, her blouses starched, and her braces shone with a virginal light. Once, during mass, I looked over to where she knelt. At the altar the priest, in green vestments, whispered prayer to the cruets of water and wine. Beside me, Elissa whispered something also, and I felt embarrassed for her. I poked her in the ribs and said, "What are you doing?"

She closed her eyes, screwed up her mouth, and ignored me.

And now she is getting married. She is fat. And she hates gay people. I know these things not because I ever talk to her – we haven't spoken in six years – I know these things because of Facebook. Last year there was a rash of friendings on account of the "People You May Know" feature, which appeared suddenly one day, on the sidebar to the right of ones newsfeed. Within the course of a week, my entire high school class was reunited in this terrible, shallow way, and we all exchanged pleasantries on one another's walls, because it was so good to be back in touch. Then one day, "Elissa Warren was tagged in an album: Halloween 2008."

I clicked and looked to see what fun they were all having, and there she was in a mullet wig, a flannel shirt tied round her waist, her sexual preferences sartorially displayed across her bosom. Fork plus cat equals rainbow. And below the picture, a caption, "I made one hell of a dyke! LOL!" I was also excited to read a negative review she had written for a popular film about a transgendered individual: "OMG gross!" she said, "It was soooo messed up. I might never watch a movie ever again."

Anyway, after looking at these things, I cackled for a while, and then I called up a mutual friend. "Guess what?" I said. "Elissa Warren hates gays! And transgender individuals."

"That's not exactly a shocker," he said.

It kind of was, though. She tried out feminism in the girl scouts. When

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asked, "What can girls grow up to be?" we all said such liberal things as, "Astronaut!" "Lawyer!" "President!"

I said, "Farmer!" Elissa scowled at me, but I didn't care. We had a farm then, where my mother grew vegetables. We rented the farmhouse to four handsome Oaxacans.

And then Elissa spoke. "When I grow up, I want to be Pope!" she said. I gaped at her in horror. Pope?! Why would anybody want to be the pope? The pope can't go on dates with strong, handsome Oaxacans. The blunt haired leader of our troop, a woman of pointelle sweaters and dry skin, said sternly, "No, Elissa, women can't be the pope."

Elissa began to cry. The leader shushed her. A week later an elderly nun was called in to explain to us the state of things in the Vatican, and why none of us would ever be pope, or even priests on account of our condition, being women. Afterwards, we were each given an individually wrapped packet of Swiss Cake Rolls as a snack, and I was glad my mother wasn't there.

I left the grocery store with one brown paper bag containing sardines, peanut butter, bread, milk, pasta, bananas, and a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I couldn't find a job, and I was living off what I'd inherited from my mother, who had died the previous July. The money was running out because I'd spent some time in Croatia (also, Italy and France, but primarily the Dalmatian Coast) and I was having to take up some work when I could find it. Usually I did psychology studies at the university. I wouldn't do medical studies because I thought it was gross, but I had no problem spending an hour in an MRI scanner. For \$40 it wasn't bad. Substitute teaching was much worse for \$70 a day. Once I proctored the PSAT, which paid \$150 for three hours, but that kind of thing was rare. Elissa Warren, I knew from her profile, was working in pharmaceuticals. I had no right to judge her, but I did it anyway; she works for the man selling drugs that poison people like my mother who were dying in their bodies long before doctors filled their veins with orange goo and other people's blood. But then, we're all dying in our bodies. That's part of the reason why I didn't want to look for a job.

I drove home from the grocery store and put my groceries away and saw that I had missed a call from the guy who my mother used to live with. They were also lovers. My father denies this, but he is an alcoholic. When I told John, my brother, about all of this, he looked personally slighted, but he knew it was true. My grandmother said my mother was too sick to be fooling around, and that she was just using him because he took care of her so well, but that doesn't take into account the years before the divorce, and the temporal proximity of their divorces, *and* the fact that my mother told me that he wouldn't stop pursuing her. He was ill when they met. He believed she had healed him.

I called him back. I was standing in the front yard because we don't get reception in the house. It was nearly seven, and it was starting to get dark. This was in April and the days were getting long again, and the light at near dusk had already taken on that green and purple quality that it has in the summertime. I sat on the roots of the oak tree by the curb, and the

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phone rang for a while, and then he answered. I asked him how he was. He said fine, but he sounded mopey. Then he said, "Did you go out to the grave today?"

"No," I said. "I have a lot to do this week." And then I lied. "I have some job interviews."

"That's good," he said. "I saw your father down there. Have you talked to him?"

"Not really. Not today."

"Hey, look, Therin, I want to tell you something."

"Go for it," I said.

"Your mother. She loved your brother and you more than anything." He said it like it was an accusation.

"I know," I said. When the doctor told her that the gig was up --- because the gig was up, those terrible proteins never, never diminished in number, and for him and for the guy it was always about numbers, it was about quantifying her illness, it was about how many blood cells, always how many, because it really mattered how many. When the doctor called her in to discuss her options, whether to continue treatments or proceed onward into "end-of-life care," she brought the guy and John. She told them that she did not want to continue treatment, and the doctor agreed that it would only prolong her suffering. (Isn't it funny how when we talk about suffering, it always seems to be of its duration? Always quantities.) The guy turned to her, then, and said, "I love you more than anything in the world." My mother said, "I love Therin and John more than anything in the world." The guy never forgave us. After she died, he told us she had sold him her piano. It was a 1928 Steinway. She had willed it to John.

The guy continued, "I want to tell you something else - she's still with us. When I went down to the grave today, I looked down at the ground and I saw this red thing. I don't know, I thought it was just a scrap of a rag or a something but red was her color and I just had this feeling she wanted me to have it. So I took it with me and put it on the dashboard in my car and didn't think much about it. I just went on to choir practice. When I got back in the car I remembered the cloth and I took it down and looked at it again, and her face was on it."

Across the street the neighbors had the TV on and I could see that they were watching *Law and Order*. The streetlights came on, but they were few and the street was otherwise increasing in darkness. Isn't it funny how darkness increases always? The same way gloom encroaches; always quantities, rarely kind, because we are afraid. I would hate to know what the increasing darkness *is*. "Just like the rocks," I said.

"Just like the rocks," he went on. "I've decided I'm not going to sell the house. She's here, she's with us, she's doing these things every day."

"That's pretty great," I said. I wondered if he ever felt embarrassed.

"You know, I used to fold the towels for her so they looked like they were smiling. We called them 'happy towels.' No one else folded them like I did. I folded them that way for her. Anyway, I rented a house down near Buxton last month - I went down to paint and I had a good time, and I knew that she was there with me. And when I came home, you won't

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believe this, all of the towels had been folded the way I used to fold them. They were all happy towels. I didn't do that."

"I'm happy for you." The right side of my face felt clammy. The phone was too warm.

"She hasn't left us at all."

"Sounds like it." *But she has left us. I don't see her anywhere.*

He told me to take care and to go to mass, and I said I would, and then I hung up the phone. I doubted that the Vatican would recognize the rocks, the towels, or the rags, but there you have the three miracles of my mother. My father and the guy may yet apply for an investigation into her virtues. You know, the visitation was going to be open-casket, until we saw her. The expression on her face was one that John and I agreed she had never made – her mouth was flat and tight. She looked angry. In her hands a wooden rosary, and in her ears my great-grandmother's diamonds, which were given to me when it was all over, and which I will never wear. Who could wear such a thing? A few months before she died, her belly became huge and swollen – the doctors couldn't say why – and she joked like she might be pregnant again. It wasn't funny! She was pregnant with her own death. And when she was lying there dead, that swollen mass was gone, her body emptied of her organs, and drained. She reminded me so much of the incorrupt bodies of saints one finds in churches across Europe, entombed in glass coffins, their waxen skin in perpetual bloom. That was why I went over, in part. To see them. But, they *are* mostly made of wax, and they never tell you what you want to know.

Here is what happens. You go and track them down. One by one you spy on them in those holy, quiet places with ceilings vaulted to make room for the numinous air. The saints are all sleeping beneath moldings painted up like their faces, or else sitting upright, desiccated, horrific. The Odor of Sanctity is only incense, or the lavender from the markets wafting in through an open door. And the saints - you have to pay to view, but what you see is only a cast – the real saint festers in the dark earth beneath the display. It would be easy to believe that Saint Bernadette really does look that hot. I'd like to believe that. But Bernadette they've coated in wax because of her discolored face, the mildew on her cheeks, and her naked, lipless teeth. This is what is happening to my mother. The ones that don't have wax masks look like shit.

I went back inside. My roommates both sat at their computers on the couch. The TV was on, but they weren't watching it. I sat down with them.

"For the love of God," I said, "I hope the afterlife isn't so tawdry that we spend it folding towels." I told them what had happened. How the guy was losing his mind. "It's been nearly a year," I said. "This isn't healthy."

"I don't know," said Laurel. She was in psychology. "They were close. I really don't think it's that unusual. He isn't hurting anyone. He's functional. People deal with death in different ways."

"He's hurting me calling like this. You know, he called my dad last week and said all this stuff to him like how he, the guy, was there for us while mom was sick, basically implying that he'd been more of a father

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than dad had been, when frankly, I could tell that he didn't like me at all, and he was downright cruel to John. He usurped his piano! I should block his number."

They agreed that the guy was ridiculous, and that I should block his number, but that maybe it would be better to leave it unblocked, because it was really kind of funny, and a good story besides. Nothing that interesting ever happened in Moth Mound, NC.

"Fair enough," I said, "Do I look too thin?"

"No," they said. "You look healthy."

"I saw my old boyfriend and he said I looked too thin."

They laughed and said that he was a jerk. But then they turned back to the TV and to their computers, tired of hearing me talk about myself. I was tired of hearing me talk about myself. I was tired of talking about myself, and thinking about myself, and all the hate I felt, and the anger at Elissa Warren and her large-breasted mother who will watch her walk down the aisle beside her tall strong father, who is absolutely nothing like my short alcoholic father. And I can't even find anyone I like enough to have sex with. So I shut up, and took my computer from the coffee table so that all three of us sat in a line like the Fates with our laptops open, unspeaking in front of the television. We liked to watch *Wife Swap*.

I got on Facebook, and lurked and saw that Elissa Warren had updated her status. "Elissa Warren is praying for McCorkle and his family." McCorkle being Matthew McCorkle, a boy from our school who had grown up and gone on to law school to become a drinker. Elissa and Matthew had been very cool together in high school, and he was always smiling, and his smile was halfway cruel. They'd gone to parties together, where they drank hard lemonade and snuck away to upstairs bedrooms. Once he *spilled his seed* on her red pants. She couldn't blot it out sufficiently, so when they went back downstairs, everyone could see what they had been doing.

And now he was dead and Elissa was sad about it on the Internet, as were a number of our classmates who had posted condolences upon his wall. We'll miss you, man. Drink one for us up in heaven.

I excused myself and took a beer from the fridge and went outside again to sit on the stoop overlooking our dark yard where nothing would grow save for the two great oaks, which were probably dying and would certainly fall onto the house one day. I called up the mutual friend, and he answered and I said, "What's all this about McCorkle?"

"He died," he said.

"Well, yeah. Teh interwebs are abuzz. This is very disturbing to me. What happened?"

"Melissa told me it was a suicide. He got a room at the Sheraton and shot himself."

I took twig from the ground and snapped in it half, and then into quarters. "That's terrible," I said. "That's so lame."

"She said there was a note."

"I should hope there was a note."

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"I also heard he'd holed up there all week and wouldn't answer his phone. Apparently he was checking his voicemails though. His emails, too."

"I don't like suicide," I said. "I really don't know what to say."

"Me neither," he said. "The service is Friday. We could go together."

I told him I had a job interview.

I put my phone down on the stoop and put my head on my knees. Elissa loved McCorkle, the guy loved my mother, my mother loved my brother and me, and I, like my father, loved a bitterness that disguises pain and the possibility of love. I could imagine them all weeping over one another in the darkness of the night. Elissa in Chicago goes home with red-rimmed eyes to her fat-necked fiancé who can't understand, and tonight she'll try to dissolve herself in love making, thinking only of Matthew's cruel white teeth when her fiancé comes inside of her. The guy is watching a Western. He has the hood of his robe pulled up over his head to block the pacing of my mother's ghost from his peripheral vision. My father, on his own sofa, has passed out with a glass of white wine. His fluffy cat is sitting on his lap, and a cigarette burns down in the black ashtray beside him. John, in Tallahassee, is practicing the piano and thinking of mom because today is her birthday and he loved her more than I did. And she loved us more than anything. But now she only appears to the guy.

She asked me one night if I would read to her from *The Wind and the Willows*. She was standing in pink pajamas beside the Steinway, which she could no longer play, and she looked like a child, my small tragic mother in a cotton hat to hide her baldness. I told her that I couldn't, that I was afraid I was getting sick, that my throat hurt and I was afraid of making her ill. She looked so sad. She said, "Are you sure?" The guy entered the room and I don't remember what was said other than she'd be going to the hospital in the morning. Then she hugged me and she said, "I don't want to leave you."

Who would say such a horrible thing? I drag around with me now my mother's unwillingness to go to her grave coldly, or quietly, with resignation, like a saint. How could she leave me with *that*? I went to her the next day in the hospital – she was there for three days, and John stayed the entire time. I did not. I was directed into her room by some women from church who said to me, if you have anything to say, you better say it now. *You better say it now*. I sat beside her, and I took her hand, and I gagged at the stench in the room. She was unable to speak, and her eyes were closed. I said to her, "Mom, I promise that if I ever get anything published, I'll dedicate it to you." Just like that I said it, just as stiffly as one of Elissa's stupid, starched uniforms. No I love you's. No praise. No thank you's. John did better than I did because he was good at keeping himself out of conversations where he did not belong.

Again, who would say such a horrible thing? When that wasn't even what I'd meant at all. I wondered about the contents of Matthew's suicide note, and doubted that he'd been able to convey very precisely the despair he felt before taking his own life, when I couldn't even tell my mother, at the supreme moment, whatever it was that I should have said instead.

One of the neighbors passed with a husky that looked like the husky

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we'd had when I was a child, the one that had broken my mother's wrist. In the third grade Elissa Warren broke her arm. She wore a pink cast. At the end of a rainy day we'd waited in the gym for our mothers to pick us up, instead of in front of the school as we did on days when it was clear. The gymnasium was humid and the floor slick with leaves and water. We stood hand in hand, waiting for our mothers, our fingers intertwined below our clammy palms. Elissa raised her casted arm to wave down Matthew McCorkle, who had just entered, overburdened by an overlarge backpack. She released my hand to greet him, just as my mother arrived and led me away, my hand still damp with Elissa's sweat.

I stood up and went to sit on the trunk of my car, where I could see better into the neighbors' house. One of them took a bottle of soda from the refrigerator. In the other room, a man was talking to someone just out of sight. The night air was chilly and moist and smelled like melting snow the way that spring sometimes does, even though it never snows here anymore. I wished I'd stayed in Croatia, and I thought of what a better life it was when I had nothing better to do than entertain myself and watch the swollen light of southern regions move over the olive trees and over the sea. I wished that my money wasn't running out, and I thought I might like someone to sleep with the way that I used to before I became afraid. I looked at the time on my phone – now 8:15, and I thought about calling up my old boyfriend, or driving over to beg at his door for another night of *him*. He was so soft and warm when we used to be together. He loved cats, and his feet and hands were often cold. He didn't believe that I'd ever loved him. I'm not sure that I did. But, I wanted to.

In the dark, I could smell the wisteria that twined all over the trees across the street, and I couldn't believe that mother could actually be dead, and that meant that I was going to die, and that Matthew was now dead like mother. They were both dead, mostly my mother, though, she was considerably deader, and I would never, never see her again, not even in rags or bathroom towels, so I was only left with this image of her in pink pajamas, this image of her with her eyes closed, her jaw set with a wire, this image of her fighting to get up out of bed when her eyes could not see and where would she have gone when she was incoherent with the nearness of her death? This image of her as childlike, this image of her narrow arms, this image of her febrile hands, how I thought they should have been colder, this image of myself asking her to be proud of me when that was the last thing in the world that mattered, but I wanted it more than anything.