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Patrick Falconi
Bitlers Rut

ADDIE'S LASHES FLUTTERED AND FELT HEAVY before finally descending over her tired eyes like wisps of black lace. And as her cold, clear edge of sight began to soften, vignetting beneath a distorted iris of fantasy, illusion and reflection, she slipped into another reverie of late afternoon musing. About twenty paces away, behind a low compost pile that smelled like rotting apple cores, chipped cedar and wet pressboard, stood a mournful little elder sapling. Swaying and buckling in a muted breeze—its effeminate shape, thrown into animated relief against a fading horizon, formed a vague arrangement of symmetry, contour, color, and contrast. Suddenly, as if scraped off a stretched canvas and flicked onto the coarse fabric of Addie's lonely existence—the tiny sapling, whose veined leaves now shimmered like clusters of polished epaulets beneath the amber disk of a setting sun, evoked the bizarre but striking impression of a handsome cavalry officer. And with her own eyes, now ablaze with a paroxysm of desire and kindled by a sudden reawakening—a sort of renewed, bewitched immersion in love, life, imagination—she observed the young officer's delicate, decorated frame mysteriously amble between rows of privet hedges, a ledge of boxwoods, and a network of colorful dogwoods. He approached an ancient tree trunk and sat down.

Addie wasn't startled. In fact, she felt calm, comforted, at ease by a warm kiss of clairvoyance which suggested the young officer had dismounted several miles south of Crowley's Tavern where the Blue Ridge collides into the Massanutten, forming a smooth granite ledge overlooking Gath Valley. It would have been a long, arduous walk. And he looked thirsty. His dry, sunbaked lips were trembling, perhaps hesitating to pronounce her name he seemed reluctant to even whisper. And as Addie gazed at his youthful face, studying those latent lines of exhaustion drawn below his clean-shaven cheeks, she suddenly awoke. The heat from an early afternoon sunset, which bronzed and freckled her pale, delicate skin, now cooled as it dipped below the frowning horizon as if anchored to the weight of her dreams, desires, and longings. And so following another tethered evening to an anguished heart, trekking over wilted lucerne meadows edged by the stubble from last season's corn harvest, Addie tucked in her fringe-lined blouse and headed home. But rather than following the narrow oil-top into Bitlers Rut, perhaps still dazed, possibly still mesmerized by the veracity of her dream, Addie mistakenly headed west, crossing through town in a familiar direction toward her father's.

'Ol Barnaby Early—a bent, simple, rheumatic little man steeped beyond his seventies, lived in a shuttered, fractured, outwardly abandoned home beyond the outskirts of town. There, hidden in the misery of eternal peace and interminable solitude, which confined his life like some cold and clammy cellar, now wrenched his heart and chilled his soul between memories of his wife and the scarlet inflammation of her death. But moments before her passing, whose death rattle arrived behind a gruesome outburst of spite—at times cursing fate, at other moments denouncing life—wedged a spire of shame between 'ol Barnaby and his daughter.

A few months later, quietly recovering from his loss, experiencing a

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kind of renewed strength and restorative balance in the presence of young Addie, 'ol Barnaby again began feeling unnerved, unhinged, and unsettled, but this time by tangles of mortification brought on by disgraceful ideas, distorted thoughts, and ghastly impulses. Fortunately, Addie never caught on. In fact, the further 'ol Barnaby withdrew, the greater Addie's need for his affection increased. And like a sort of exhumed friendship, one that blossoms beyond the charcoal shadows of death, now encouraged Addie to feel strong, resilient, and resolute.

But still, how quickly one's daughter develops! And it couldn't be helped but to notice the uncanny resemblance she bore to her late mother. It was almost unreasonable. Unbearable. Obscene! Anyway, it was probably for this reason 'ol Barnaby finally whisked her away to live with an older sister across town in Bitlers Rut. And so, turning on her heel, Addie quickened her pace, arriving at Deidra's fifteen minutes before seven.

Plastic window blinds were drawn in the living room, an overhead florescent was turned on and burned yellow, and a pool of electric light —flickering above cheap wainscoting —gathered into shallow puddles over the floor like urine. Clay Eppling, Addie's brother-in-law, lying on a blue velured sofa and taking slow, measured pulls of Budweiser, said that Deidra was out walking off maternity cramps "somewhere 'round the countryside." Shaking his head behind a slackened frown, and dipping calloused fingers into a Styrofoam cooler, he offered Addie a beer. But behind her polite smile, one that expresses modesty for fear of betraying disgust, bashfully declined.

That evening, as Addie lay awake gazing into a dimly lit hallway, sighing heavily behind pangs of agitation and remorse, she observed two stuffed squirrels set into awkward, unnatural positions dangling beneath a pitted drop ceiling. A warm fragranced breeze, pushing off lavender meadows somewhere beyond a pig farm, hissed through an opened window upon reaching the little vermin. Tufts of gray fur, now tangled behind a scented draft, flashed and flickered like gilded pelts tethered to the end of a hobo's pole. The dull, resounding click of these two hollow animals colliding reminded her of those sharp, plastic-toothed gears attached to a child's wind-up toy. Their happy, manufactured expressions, which disguised mortal fear and ghastly terror provoked by some loathsome hunter, seemed cruel, ironic, and revolting. Flitting about behind this warm breeze, harnessed between an eternal dream or some perverted nightmare, obliged Addie to acknowledge them every night before going to bed. And so, behind a solemn whisper, one that resembled a plea or perhaps even a useless prayer, she wished the two mangy creatures a warm, pleasant, and peaceful evening.

The following morning, sitting behind a plate of eggs and toast, sipping cold beer instead of warm, rejuvenating coffee —Clay Eppling, licking the back of a yolk-stained fork, felt deeply offended regarding his wife's sudden, and unsightly, weight gain. Incidentally, she'd been a much prettier woman before pregnancy "flogged her into a shapeless mass." Voicing this observation to friends one afternoon, he mentioned that Deidra's chin had all but receded " 'tween a dimpled neck and a pair of thinning lips." Evidently, this forced her fat, vacant gaze to resemble the engorged and pitted profile of a Louisiana swamp frog. And finally,

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to make matters worse, as if buried beneath a heap of insults and resurrected with shame still intact, whenever she smoked her Marlboros, sucking down lighted tobacco as if drawing in bursts of fresh air, she'd boom behind fits of coughing followed by a spasm of loud hiccups. Batting her wide, bleary, irritated eyes while intercepting vexed and offended glances, she'd spew out a chain of apologies between swells of burps and scathing excuses: "It's the baby, it's the baby..."

And so, persevering against this humiliating life, feeling horribly dissatisfied and further cheated by the callous indifference of fate, Clay went out for a drive that morning speeding off toward Gath Valley. In the distance, riding her bicycle over a gravel shoulder flanked by a line of *Coreopsis* flowers, he'd caught sight of Addie pedaling her way to work. Hopping off her ten-speed, and turning slightly to the right, she paused to catch her breath beside the foot of a steep hill. Clay pulled up, lifted her Schwinn onto the bed of his pickup, and drove Addie the remaining half mile to the arboretum. He mentioned, though nearly in passing, that he admired her character, adored her temperament, and respected her attitude. He added that everyone ought to embrace life, love, nature, and beauty the way she did, even if it involved protecting animals that he, "as a sportsman," often enjoyed eliminating. But this volley, this outpour of unexpected confessions seemed forced, misplaced, and annoying. As a result, Addie's soft, silent gaze turned inward. Clay noticed. He swallowed another short pull from his flask, and hoping to prove himself more reliable, dependable or trustworthy, said that he'd like to help her at work. "What a drag!" she thought. But he insisted. And so out of pity, beyond a thin, but palpable sigh, she reluctantly agreed.

They reached the arboretum several minutes later. After a brief summary of the job, a breakdown of what was needed to do, Addie prioritized a checklist of tasks and asked Clay if he understood. He did. There were fifty Bluebird boxes scattered along a remote footpath. Each one needed to be checked, cleaned, and adjusted.

"Got it," he said, rubbing his thick orange mustache gripping his dopey, Dixie face like a tumescent leech. He fancied that his mouth, puckered just below a thick bar of hair, looked striking, dapper, distinguished. That it conjured up some mythical impression of Southern aristocracy, but to Addie it described something cheap, corrupt, pornographic... Anyway, she pulled out two plastic feed buckets from a tractor shed, dumped a half-dozen cleaning products into each of them, and after finding a stack of Audubon monitoring forms beneath a heap of old oilcloth, handed Clay his bucket.

"Gonna be one hell of a mornin'," he said, pulling off his cap and wiping sweat off his brow. "I mean..." he stammered, "havin' to check all 'em nest boxes alone." And he suddenly felt the need to crack a joke, to ease some tension resulting from his lack of enthusiasm for conservancy. Clay suggested they ought to manage the Bluebird trail together. And so behind an inappropriate wink and a thin, lascivious smile, added: "just like a pair of committed naturalists." It was off-putting, vulgar, and indecent, feeling more like a sexagenarian grope than a smile. Addie backed onto the pebbled footpath, draped a strip of coarse muslin over her delicate shoulders, and reminded Clay to meet her at Braithwaite's Mill when fin-

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ished. She turned around and quickly walked north to nest marker twenty-five, less than a mile up the trail. But once her silhouette disappeared beneath an avenue of pin oaks, now plunging behind the rise of a small hill beyond an ancient Confederate belfry, Clay tossed his useless bucket back into the tractor shed and immediately sped off toward the gristmill.

Abandoning his truck beside a dry creek bed and cutting through some rotting orchard, he backtracked for nearly ten minutes until finally reaching Throckmorton's Clearing. In the distance, possibly thirty paces from where he was standing, weaving through swells of myosotis like a black field snake, the narrow gravel footpath, pegged by a line of nest boxes, echoed the gait of Addie's footsteps in a chorus of imaginary provocation.

"I ought to just take 'er on the trail," he muttered, flattening his mustache between thumb and index finger. But thoughts of brutality and restraint seemed unpleasant, surprisingly far more undignified than any impulse to poach! So reconciling his amatory objective to a sort of "civilized hunt," Clay pursued his sister-in-law within the margins of a reasonable distance. And when she finally strolled by, rounding the corner before brushing against petals of purple columbine, he whispered a string of bizarre obscenities for the sake of silence and humor. And it was then, or perhaps a few moments later, walking behind the chaotic network of some disfigured post oak, whose gnarled branches locked together like a handful of extracted teeth, that Addie — swinging her plastic bucket — slowly faded from sight.

After cleaning out her first nest box, adjusting its dented hasp, and squashing an angry wasp weaving a dreadful hive inside it, she stepped off the footpath and followed the blue, fragrant edge of a cut lea meadow. About fifteen paces away, beside a pitted silo bordered by yards of bent chicken wire, lay a field of corn poppies partially dappled by a row of linden trees. Skeins of gossamer, tangled and stretched above soft, scarlet-colored petals, flickered cyan against a vault of brilliant sapphire, disappearing into the air like white columns of steam.

Already drowsy from her commute and nearly dehydrated from the hike, Addie reclined against a stump and rested. Breathing steadily and regularly, enjoying the gray, lambent shade caressing her arms, legs, neck, and head, a cool velveteen tingle — pushing through plumes of soft lucerne — plunged her into another deep, halcyon-like stupor. And so balling up her strip of muslin into a sort of pillow, she stretched out alongside the poppies, gazed somewhere beyond the bucolic distance, and fell asleep. But a thin crease of sunlight, seeping through her clasped lashes like a persistent leak, and which formed strange daguerreotype impressions under her eyelids like a slide show, conjured up a host of colorful images that slowly took form. Vague wisps of red began merging with heavy smudges of cyan. And several meters beyond, receding into a black, vacuous distance between celestial shapes and trapezoidal corners, green ribbons of air floated above warm vibrations of magenta. And over there, looming above this whirling arrangement, converging into bright parallel lines before bursting into sprinkles of iridescent pixie-dust, electric tones of yellow, crooning down some fugitive path, absorbed — like a sponge — a cold, frigid swatch of blue. But now, in the foreground, flesh

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tone appeared. A face had suddenly formed. But the eyes, nose, lips and ears —all of which were impossible to distinguish —somehow resembled black, abysmal holes like those formed in colossal blocks of cheese. The stench was repugnant! And as drips of color, now melting, now falling from this massless expression, splashing onto her face like ghastly blasts of saliva, a severe impulse to vomit, lunging Addie forward with a series of violent gags, awakened her.

Later that evening, sobbing into a checkered dishtowel, wiping off her mouth, neck, and cheeks where Clay had kissed, licked, and bit her, Addie lay listening to her father's reproaches on a nylon cot inside his cramped hallway.

"You and Deidra ought to get along," he said, clearing his throat and spitting into an oily shop towel. "Ain't nothin' more distractin' for a man," he added, "than bein' pulled 'tween a wife and her younger sister." And as he moralized over various points of tolerance and forgiveness, exhausting a host of unnecessary examples from the creases of an embittered past, 'ol Barnaby followed his daughter's gaze into the gloom of an adjoining room. There, beyond the gray threshold, thick ribbons of smoke harnessed the stench of boiled eggs, fried pon haus, and raw onions. It burned Addie's eyes and made her hair stink. The concrete walls, pockmarked by mildew and splashed with coffee grounds, resembled black retinary traces of ancient congested sneezes. Above a splintered shelf, brimming with curios and heaps of musty lace and linen, wheezed an old dormer. Rows of missing panes, now replaced by stretched bandanas, flickered thin slopes of variegated light into a dark corner flanked by two shotguns and a pair of mink-oiled gaiters. And it felt just as miserable now, convalescing at home, beside a cold and calcified father as it did back there, with a pregnant and irrelevant sister, beneath the deep and over-reaching furrows of Bitlers Rut.