

Touch

“We want a small wedding,” Bert Vorhees says to his family. “Maybe up here at the lake.”

The three grandchildren continue eating, but his sons and their wives stare at him. It’s the middle of Sunday dinner. Corn on the cob and fried chicken. Sunlight casts across the interior of the somewhat-gloomy wood-paneled room. Light ripples against one wall from the lake outside. His family’s faces strike him as unfamiliar.

“You’re getting married?” his son Paul says. “Congratulations!”

“Why?” Alex says. He sets down his fork. Finishes chewing. “Seriously, Dad. Why bother?”

“The same reason anyone does.”

“Jesus,” Alex says. “We should have seen it coming.”

“Thank you,” his father tells him.

“I don’t mean that,” Alex says. His wife Miranda says, “That’s wonderful, Dad.” Her face, like the faces of everyone on that side of the table, is underwater. As if they are standing in front of a projector, Bert thinks. Dissolving. Blue and green. And here they are, and I’ve said it. “Thank you, Miranda. That’s grace under fire.”

“Good wishes,” Paul says. “When’s the happy occasion?”

“August thirteenth,” he says.

“Great,” Alex stands, with his wine glass. At first Bert thinks Alex is going to toast him, but Alex sits back down. “We would be the last to offend.”

“Oh, stop,” Miranda tells him. The announcement was not well timed, Bert thinks. But there it is. The table will be cleared, the dishes washed, the small children go outside to play in the water with the sailboats. Their pails. His older granddaughter to talk to her friends back in Connecticut on her cell phone. She’ll tell the news, he thinks, or possibly not. He has a sense of himself as a crayfish that has shed its shell. He has no power over them. They pick at his heart.

He has a table full of scientific papers and two laptops open and on, calling him from the other room. “I have work to do,” he says. “If you’ll excuse me.”

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At night when they are all asleep, Bert sits in front of the fire. The stones of the fireplace came up from the bottom of this lake. He brought them up one afternoon fifty years ago, diving and diving, digging in the mud, the greenish water near the pilings of the dock. A fresh water lake, its algae soft, and he was careful not to tear at his fingers. Between internship and residency. On the dock, two women in bathing suits. White thighs, and the black edges of the suits that cut into the flesh. One was his wife, and the other will be his wife, now.

He jerks awake, because a log has settled in the fireplace. For a moment, he doesn’t recognize the room around him. It could be his study at home. It could be a hotel.

*

When he was sleeping two hours a night in Bellevue on a cot, waiting for his next shift, he pushed through a stupor of exhaustion. “Why do you make my husband work so hard?” Betsy teased his senior resident. “It separates the men from the boys,” the resident said. “We’ve been married one month, and the whole time, I’ve seen him for fifteen minutes,” Betsy said. The inside of the hospital was a jewel, Bert told Betsy. You got the interesting cases there. Tropical fevers. Advanced cirrhosis. He didn’t tell her about the traumas. The Jamaican woman with the

hand lacerated in a knife fight, he'd sutured so beautifully. How he had fallen in love with that first hand. Swollen and unconscious.

*

His grandson Tommy brings a collection of wet stones in from the waterfront, and sets them one by one on the window sill. His fingers are small and perfect. Sunlight makes shadows on the white sill, and Tommy rotates the rocks carefully, so their shadows touch each other. He will be a scientist, Bert thinks. This beautiful child. The rocks leave puddles, but they will dry.

*

Months ago, in the early spring, he delivered a lecture on hand surgery to a packed lecture hall at the medical school. Standing room only. He had computerized scans of hands and joints. "This is miraculous," he told the sea of young men and women in front of him. "I have no way to tell you how miraculous these images are." He explained a procedure for syndactyly, separating the fingers of babies, restructuring bones that had curved around each other in the womb. He explained so they could do it. He gave them the numbers, the dangers. The best ages, all couched in statistical rhetoric, to make it sound less like his intuition. At the end, he flashed up two images of the joints of his right hand. "This may be familiar to you," he said. "It's the beginning stage of rheumatoid arthritis." A rustling through the room. An expectation. "If any of you come up with a procedure for this, in the near future, you have my email." A pause. A single random, aggressive clapping. The applause thunderous. Stamping, cheering, like a deluge in the air-conditioned hall. His talk would be summarized in the medical school's monthly newsletter, along with a photograph. But no mention of this last part.

*

At the lake in the afternoon, Paul carries his little daughter on his shoulders, down to the water. They are so much easier with their children, Bert thinks. Paul lifts the child up, legs dangling, and ducks his head out from between her bare feet. Sets her down on the sand. She runs toward the water. Has he ever lifted one of his children that way? He can't remember if he has. That weight of child is no stress, he thinks, on the clavicle.

*

It was four-thirty in the morning. He was driving from Westchester down to the City, down to the hospital. Betsy was home in bed. The streets were dark, only a few cars, the huge trees of Pelham had become the clustered homes of the Bronx. He drove under the shadow of the George Washington Bridge, down into the bowels of the parking garage. The attendant took his keys, smiling. He had two surgeries that day. One a Saudi with a trigger finger that prevented him from playing golf. The Jamaican attendant wanted to park Bert's car for him. He called him "Doctor." Smiling. Because he was grateful. Because Bert made a point, once, when he heard about it from a junior doctor, to perform a repair on the attendant's six-year-old daughter, whose hand was syndactylic from birth.

"Doctor," the attendant said. Smiling.

*

Alex was born prematurely. Bert had been surprised at the pink reality of this new person. The little hands, limp in the air. The baby, the first time Betsy held him, filled Bert with unexpected rage. The baby was an extension of her. A twin. A little lover. She spoke baby talk to him to make him answer her. To chain the baby to her. The delivery had frightened her. She talked about it for years. "When I almost lost Alex," she said. "I almost lost him."

It was both of us, Bert thought. But Alex was the king of Betsy's heart from the moment she saw him.

*

Bert was coming home from work late, as usual. Approaching the kitchen, through the dark hall, he heard his younger son Paul talking to his girlfriend. "Daddy hates Alex," Paul said. "He always has, ever since he was born."

Bert stopped, because he didn't want to embarrass Paul by letting him know he was there.

"Mother said she saved Daddy," Paul said. "He was a mess when he met her."

Bert waited in the dim hall, holding his briefcase, until they'd left the room.

*

When Alex was growing up, he was a soft child. He had to be roused out of bed. He had no fire in his belly. He'd been thrown out of his prep school for underage drinking. "He's depressed," Betsy said. Alex stayed in his room listening to Bob Dylan. He played the guitar badly, and had friends like himself. They went skiing in Gstaad because Betsy said it would be good for him. One night Bert got home from the hospital early, at seven, after he'd finished second rounds. Alex was playing the guitar on his bed, and Paul, who must have been ten, was sitting across on the other twin bed, listening to him. Alex looked up at his father in the doorway, and sang, in a perfect nasal baritone: "Weaker than a rich man's son." The sound like chaos. Tortured cats. Alex singing right to him.

*

Time is not my friend, Bert thinks now. He is trying to read *Das Kapital*, because Eleanor says it's a historical document. His thumbs hurt when he turns the pages. He thinks to walk over to see Eleanor in the morning, when she comes; he will wait on the porch for her. Alex or Paul

has built a fire in the fireplace, for him. He realizes that Marx is distressed. Even through the translation, Bert can sense how upset he is at the poverty around him. Bert is surprised it's such a short book. That most of it is commentary. "It's what starts a revolution," Eleanor had emailed him. He thinks he will bring her flowers.

*

He was at an art gallery in Philadelphia with Betsy. They were looking at Eleanor's paintings. Watercolors of Europe, from when she was in her twenties. He didn't understand them. The buildings had been painted thousands of times, what was the point? The recent paintings were thirty years later, strident, some kind of acrylic and thickened paint, with bright colors. They repelled him slightly in their violence. The name of the exhibit was "Sooner and Later," which he thought was arch. Betsy bought him an acrylic, and he asked to hang it in his study, which he rarely used. It continued to make him uneasy, as if Eleanor had been in dangerous places. "She's too restless," he told Betsy.

*

The logs in the fireplace clunk into a new arrangement, and he startles. It is late. He goes to the door and looks out on the lake, which he will walk around tomorrow. The mist rises off patches of the water. The trees around the edge are black. The boys and their families are sleeping in the big house, which is dark. He himself prefers to rough it down here by the water, with his laptops and his notes for a new journal article for which he's senior author. In a few years, he won't be there, he thinks. He won't be getting his hands dirty. The juniors will have it.

*

Alex had flunked out of a second-tier law school. He came home for the summer and played golf and drank at the country club. He dated Miranda, whom he would later marry. Bert met her once or twice over the summer, when he came to the lake. She called him “Dad.”

Betsy didn’t like her because she wore bright red fingernail polish. Bert didn’t mind that, he told Betsy. Miranda sunbathed herself chestnut colored on the dock. She chatted with Paul’s wife, Nancy, who was already pregnant. These things seemed to have occurred mysteriously while he was at the hospital.

*

A child with a hand torn by a dog. A boy who burned his thumb almost off with cherry bombs that went off unexpectedly. A stress fracture on the metacarpal of a tennis player. A violinist with a finger shut in a limo door. A man with a hand cut in a snow blower. A lawnmower. The combat reconstruction. The safety device disabled on a table saw. A child with syndactylic fingers. One with webs. The gypsies who won’t take their child back afterwards. The amputation of fingers off a seventeen-year-old girl, from infection. The conveyor belt in a supermarket checkout. The fingers brought in in a picnic cooler, after the fireworks went off prematurely. A finger brought in clenched in frozen peas. An old man with gangrene from an infected palm. What you saved, what you saved.

*

Alex is having a Bloody Mary for breakfast.

*

Last night when Bert was going to bed, he passed into the small back bedroom, with the single cot, and realized that the small pile of guts in the middle of his bedspread was actually a bat. It struck him as resembling genitalia. The raw bones of the wings, the pink skin and fur. He

opened the window overlooking the lake, and the bat, after circling the ceiling a couple of times, flew out. Bert wonders if the bat could see. If he heard the lake. Or perhaps it was female.

The bones of the bat's wings, he thinks today, as he stares out at his son with the Bloody Mary, sitting on the dock telling his twelve-year-old daughter to go help her mother make breakfast, those wings resemble the bones of the human hand. The sun dazzles around Alex's head, making him look beautiful.

*

Paul resembles Betsy. Both blond, with thick rather clunky ankles. Pale eyelashes. Both optimists. Paul and his wife and son Tommy are gearing up the sailboat to go out on the lake. His wife says, "Tommy, show Grampa how you can tie the bowline. Come on, show him."

Tommy doesn't want to.

His mother insists.

"That's it, Tommy," Paul says. "Come on, let's perform. Maybe you can make a noise like a seal at a circus." He's perfectly friendly as he says it. Bert thinks that his son is wiser than he, Bert, thinks. Once he'd overheard Paul and his wife having an argument. "I love you," she'd said. "You don't love me," he answered. "You just love the way you feel about me."

Wiser than he sounds, Bert thinks. Why does he hide that, like some kind of Roman emperor who's afraid he's going to be assassinated?

*

Tumor in the bone of the hand. Difficult surgery. A bleeder. Bert stayed late, waiting for lab results to come back. He called Betsy at home, and Alex answered the phone.

"Put your mother on," Bert said.

Alex, who was sixteen, had covered the phone, and called out, “Mom! For you! It’s God!”

*

At the gas station near town, Bert has filled up his gas tank for forty years, in a variety of Oldsmobiles, Cadillacs, Buicks, Lincoln Town Cars, Mercedes, Saabs and Jeeps. This morning he drives his Jeep into the station and the attendant is someone new. A thin, sullen boy with tattoos, and stringy blond hair caught in a pony tail held with a woman’s fat black elastic. Bert guesses the kid is hung over. He fills the tank of the Jeep reluctantly, and cranks the cap unnecessarily hard. When Bert hands him his credit card, the kid says, “We don’t take credit no more.”

Bert has sixty dollars in cash he doesn’t want to use. “Put it on my tab,” he says.

“We don’t do that no more.”

“Ralph knows me.”

“Look, pops,” the kid says, “Ralph ain’t here, is he.” The boy’s eyes are bright, china blue. His hands are deeply creased with grease, black even under his fingernails. Bert wonders how such beautiful light can be reflected in the kid’s angry eyes.

“You tell Ralph that Bert Vorhees got his weekly tank of gas.”

The kid lays one hand across the steering wheel, awkwardly smearing his way across the horn. “You ain’t leavin without payin.”

Bert reaches into the glove compartment for his wallet, and gives the boy forty dollars. It’s seven dollars over his tab. “You keep the rest,” he says. “You go out and have a beer after work. Take someone out for burgers.”

The boy has a faint prison tattoo between two knuckles of his left hand. Bert sees him holding the bills, in the rearview mirror. The soiled hair. It strikes him that none of that money will get to the cash drawer.

When he is in town, Bert stops at the old First National store, now a modern chain, and buys everything on the list his daughter-in-law gave him. He adds in marshmallow cookies for the children. He remembers the town when most of the store fronts had shops in them. Now many of them are empty, with For Lease signs taped up in the plate glass windows. Phone numbers of realtors. All along the street. Empty eyes.

*

On the drive home, he follows a car with a Christian fish stuck on the back. Battered green Chevy. The bumper sticker says, "Before you were in your mother's womb, I loved you. Jeremiah 1:5." Bert finds he is in tears. Maybe it's Betsy, he thinks. This could be the progress of simple mourning. It's normal. The person driving the car has frizzy hair.

*

His mother had come to help Betsy with the second baby, Paul. Paul had been born solid and late, a sturdy child who would become a sturdy man. *Four-plus healthy*, Bert called him. Bert's mother arrived from Wisconsin with heavy clothes and blankets she'd knitted, that Betsy didn't care for. The colors weren't right. One night when Betsy was sleeping, Bert's mother told him she was proud of his family. "And she's a good mother," his mother said. "At least that, for you."

Bert was appalled. His mother had been drinking sherry. He thought it was the sherry.

*

The telegram about his father was sent to his dormitory at Harvard. An accident. A tractor. A lingering couple of hours, at the local hospital. He left before his finals, to go back to Wisconsin. The model of tractor was unstable. It tended to flip on a hill. *But he knew that*, Bert thought on the train ride back. *He knew*. The train snaked through snowy country, the first snow. Upstate New York, and the hills of Pennsylvania, where he would come in the summers for the rest of his life.

*

Paul and Alex are out on the lake in canoes, digging up water lilies. The cove has become choked, Paul's wife tells Bert. *They're so thick you can practically walk on them*. The lake is choking itself, Bert thinks. Alex's voice carries across the choppy water, as the wind comes up. Bert thinks he detects the slurring of beer. The boys dredge the lilies up and lug them on a green tarp to the compost heap at the other end of the property, behind the big house. The lilies have yellow flowers, whose keen yellow reminds Bert of the buttercups of his childhood, and Miranda puts four in a glass bowl, where they float on the fluid like eyes during dinner.

*

His first semester at Harvard, he was voted the most gauche student in his house. He thinks now he's never gotten over it. His early photos, that he sent to his mother—who was missing him, by the kitchen stove—emphasized his big skull and thick glasses, and the bulb of his nose. In the library, he studied formulae that stuck in his brain. The safe, beautiful world of the books. The body, later. He had professors who surrounded him with their interest like the wings of angels.

He was an outsider, he thought. Without the easy lives of others. The names and the prep school manners. He kept to his books and his room. His children went to prep schools. He

himself trained hundreds of residents to do important repairs on human hands. He wrote papers and books. At the Harvard Club, years later, he was told by another surgeon that a procedure was going to be named after him. His mother told him she wanted to stay in the small, shabby house in Wisconsin.

*

After he and Betsy were married, she and the boys spent the summers at the lake. He came on the weekends.

One Saturday, Eleanor came in the rain to return a book she borrowed from Betsy's brother. Bert was alone in the main house, reading about a new procedure with lasers that a German company had just published. He didn't hear her on the porch, until the door let in the sound of rain.

Rain had pulled her red hair into chestnut-colored ropes that snaked down her shoulders. She shook her head, and pulled the book out of the breast of her raincoat, a black oiled sou'wester so old it must have been her grandfather's. "They've gone to town," Bert said.

"What are you doing?"

She lit up the room. She stood beside him, reading over his shoulder. "Is that what you do? Those diagrams?"

"That's what I do."

"The rest of us are such slackers," she said. She wiped the wet sides of her face with her palms. "You work more than the rest of us."

He offered her a beer because he couldn't think of what else to do, and she said she's stopped drinking altogether. He felt he'd committed a gaffe in offering. "Betsy's taken the boys?" she said.

“I’m not a good babysitter.”

“Oh.” She continued to read the diagrams on the paper. He wanted to wrap his arms around her thighs. He was glad his books cover his groin, right then.

The rain outside was letting up, slightly.

“You’re not like the boys I went to school with,” she said.

“That makes me sound freakish.”

“You know what I mean.”

He was aware of the rain growing quieter. She knelt down beside his chair, a wicker chair, ancient, that creaked as he moved. He reached over and put his hands on her skull, on her wet hair. Lightly. An immense fire and sadness swept through him. Her skull was small and delicate. He spread his fingers, feeling the bones.

She closed her eyes. “I suppose we know better,” she said finally.

He waited, feeling her breath on his arm. There was nothing in the world for him but that room, circled by rain. Her presence like a sun. He drew back as if he hadn’t heard her. Later, as he revisited this memory, for years and years, he wondered if the conversation should have ended differently. The precise colors of wet hair. Her chilled skin. The silence he’d chosen for an answer.

*

Betsy’s mother was serving dinner that Mary the cook had made. Bert remembers the pot roast and brown potatoes. It must have been at the lake, in the big dining room with the gas lamp chandelier. The summer Alex was five.

“Eleanor’s gone to study art in Paris,” Betsy’s mother said. “Her last finishing school certainly finished her.”

*

Eleanor married. She divorced. She married again and had a daughter. He followed these adventures. At the lake in the summers, he chatted with her at dinners, and enjoyed the jokes of her husband, a Norwegian businessman. They would separate and get back together, because, as Betsy said, Eleanor had too much restlessness. She should have married her father, Betsy said. He's the one who paid the most attention to her. The most attention to her painting. Eleanor had a show at a different gallery in Philadelphia. When he saw the brochure, he recognized the oil paintings as distorted and turbulent. Roiling and hysterical, he thought. A language he didn't speak. His boys were in college, and then out of college.

*

Years passed. He had two grandchildren. Three. Betsy didn't know what the thyroid metastasis meant, but he knew. He became familiar with hospice. The smell of morphine in his home. The last trip with Betsy to the lake, where she stayed in a hospital bed in the big house. It was not a successful visit. The hospice nurses got lost and didn't like the dirt roads. He took Betsy back to Westchester. He knew the sense of angels in his living room, there beside the fabric drapes. The presences Betsy talked to, that the nurses acknowledged, but he couldn't see.

*

"Alex, get me another glass of wine," Miranda says. "I don't want to get up. I'm too comfortable." Alex goes to the kitchen where the wine is.

Bert thinks, in that instant, that Miranda is pregnant with another child. The cabin is dark inside, with gathering twilight. She is reclining on a padded bench near the window. Her book is unread.

*

The children are asleep. The babies, Miranda calls them. Up in the big house. He asks Paul's wife if he can look at them, and she takes him up to the house. "You should see Tommy in school," she says. "He's the best in math."

The mosquitoes are buzzing around him, and he slaps at his neck. Wishes he could do something for Paul's wife, who doesn't seem to attract them.

*

Come for dinner, he writes to Eleanor in an e-mail. *The boys will cook*.

*

She comes with her daughter and a bouquet of flowers. Hydrangea from around her house, and something purple and trailing. Two bottles of Beaujolais. He hears her laughing when she and her daughter, who is forty, are making their way along the path around the lake. He follows their voices, but can't tell what they're saying. When they arrive, he studies the daughter to see signs of her father in her. The sandy hair, the pale eyebrows. Eleanor's hair is streaked with white, and he doesn't remember seeing it before as that color. Perhaps he has.

He drinks too much bourbon at dinner, and Alex picks a fight with Eleanor's daughter about the presidential election. "It's so much chewed newspaper," he says. "Isn't it." She tells him he's cocky.

"I wouldn't say that," Miranda says. "Right, Alex?"

They've all had too much to drink. Miranda tips over her water glass, and says, "Shit."

"Whoa," Paul says.

"Miranda, shut up," Alex says. "For God's sake."

In the middle of the meal, Eleanor reaches across the table and rests her hand on Bert's. "Are you all right?" she says.

He thinks it's she who is not all right, who is recently widowed, by this nice, suitable man, her husband, and his rival. She has the long nights of remembering, the photographs that cut like knives. The furniture that still carries the smell of the person, the mattress, the favorite coffee pot that you might break accidentally in the kitchen. So that you would moan, standing over the sink, in frustration and rage. Looking out the window at the first buds of spring. He says to Eleanor, "It's taken us a long time to get here, hasn't it."

"It has," Eleanor says." He raises Eleanor's hand to his mouth, a dry, ridiculous, unfamiliar gesture his children will comment on later, he's sure. He doesn't remember doing this before, to anyone. Not even his wife.

Outside, the night is threatening rain.

*

Our children don't like each other, he tells her later. They don't like themselves.

He and Eleanor are sitting in the living room, while the rest have gone back to Eleanor's house to (he thinks) smoke pot. For some reason, the children feel the need to pretend they don't use it. He supposes it makes the use more fun.

The dishes are stacked messily in the sink, and he remembers that Betsy always left the dishes in the sink until tomorrow. She said it was shameful to break up the peace after a meal with dishwashing, and he wants to tell this to Eleanor, but isn't sure she'll understand why he says it. He knows that Betsy will be part of every conversation they have from this time on, just as Eleanor's husband will be with them.

"We can sail on the lake tomorrow," he says. "If you can go out with an old duffer."

"It's the old duffer's boat," she says. "The young duffers don't earn enough to even get it painted. All together."

He wonders if he'll need medication to make love to her. He thinks he will not, but he could write himself a prescription anyway. He wonders if there will ever be a sentence they utter that belongs to the two of them, without all the others. Eleanor sits by him on the sofa, and he kisses her shyly. She rests her head on his shoulder.

"I'm tired of sleeping alone," she says. "And it went on for years before he died, so don't think it's anything recent."

She's had other lovers, he thinks. They'll trade stories, but he doesn't want to hear it. He says they should maintain a scorched earth policy. Don't ask, don't tell.

"Why *should* we?" he says. "Because I don't want to hear about it." He wants to tell her that desire is not strong enough, now, to overwhelm his good sense. He doesn't have the same healthy body. He won't ask if she remembers that day in the rain, when he wanted her so badly. But he has always been a practical man. *We have reached the point where we are practical*, he says. *We don't want to be alone*. Now, he looks at her and sees her, really, without the impulses of his groin, the daze and ache of wanting. A woman with white lines in her hair, a fine laugh.

She says, "Are we playing Truth or Dare? Were you ever unfaithful?"

He shakes his head. Even with the nurturing, willing nurses, the staff, the long hours, sleeping in the resident's cot, in the hospital where a young patient could fool everyone and die, and send the staff into the sexuality of grief. The moments in the linen rooms, the empty patients' rooms.

"No," he says. "I didn't do that."

He is lying; he means he was unfaithful to her, Eleanor, beside him now. The afternoon in the rain, when he touched her head, and smelled her closeness and warmth. "I wasn't."

They go outside and sit on the dock, where the wind has come up. Thunderheads rise on the other side of the lake, and she comments that their children will get wet, or else stay over. She says her daughter is having problems with her ex-husband. Re-negotiating alimony. Thunderheads rumble to the south. He feels her shape next to him, warm and coherent. The rain has started, slashing the surface of the lake. It slaps the millions of leaves of the surrounding trees.

Bert and Eleanor run up to the big house to look in on the children, who sleep, all three of them, through the pounding in the sky above them. She is drenched, and so is he. They take off their shoes, wet clothes, and his watch, which has been ruined, so that she laughs at it. In the bathroom they find terry-cloth bathrobes, she says she thinks must belong to Miranda and Alex. He knows the woman's robe is Betsy's, but he doesn't say anything. In the living room, they watch the storm pass over, standing by the big window.

She touches his face with her fingers. Drawing, because she is an artist, the lines around his mouth, across his forehead, on and under his eyes. The hairline that has risen high onto his high forehead. His ears. She is tracing his life, he thinks, the years between then and now. The years remaining, if he's lucky. And he is. They will not be what he wanted—not at all—but they will surprise him. Her eyes and the warmth of her breath, he tells himself, have not changed. He tells himself that. She touches his neck and his thigh. She calls him a practical man.