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Snow White

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I almost threw it away. Every week of my adult life, which has been going on for more than a decade now, my mother has clipped and mailed me news reports about the goings-on in South Point. As a kid, I spent my summers there, by the lake, in the little clapboard cabin my great-great-grand-somethings built way back when to escape the city heat. My mom's selections have no apparent rhyme or reason. No note explains their relevance to my day, my week, my life over here, in another state, across the lake. All she encloses, ever, is the single scrap of ink and paper with the same chirpy scrawl across the white space—Dad says Hi! I prosecute fraud, so I get lies lobbed at me every day. But this one could hollow me out, if I bore witness to it with any frequency. So these skimpy little offerings from where home used to be flutter almost weightlessly off my desk and into recycling, to take their place among the scores of other useless paper products I receive in a day.

But this time, her weekly contribution to my inbox vanishes within the camouflage of clutter that has accumulated on my workspace during the course of the day. My phone's blinking. I punch it and some jackass defense attorney starts thundering his objections to my objections to his motion to suppress, yammering on about how his client is the victim here. Wrong plea to make to me. My index finger tingles, but I suppress the urge to hit delete. He's growing breathless, speaking in fragments, throwing out threats with no incisors behind them. I haven't smiled since this morning, but I do now. Out of control on his end spells opportunity on mine. Soon, he'll let something slip that I can use to nail him down the line.

So I'm listening, and sorting, composing my responses, point by point. Through the blinds, scraps of sunset glint from rows of glass reflecting back at me from my building's twin across the street. Before I notice that what I've picked up is not official correspondence, I've run my index finger under the lip, broken the seal, and plucked out the folded piece of newsprint. After that, it's reflex to shake it open and glance quickly at both sides. One side advertises the Art Barn. The other side is the one meant for me. I spot the familiar message, way up top, with the inevitable exclamation point, aimed at my innards.

The headline is what I don't see coming and it hits me like a plank—Woman Drowned.

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“Jo-eeeeey!” It’s the weekend and I’m in South Point. I draw in a breath and pull up a grin as I make my grand entry into the annual Independence Week festivities. The gang’s all here, gathered in mock cozy company on the small wooden deck - Mom on the floorboards, Dad in his chair, and my Uncle Hugh, on his feet and striding toward me, his hands clasped at his lips, pumping the notes of my name into his trademark birdcall greeting.

“Hey!” my mom cries. She lifts a terra cotta pot from between her legs and whacks a trowel at Hugh’s shin as he shimmies past her. She’s planting today, judging by the minefield of supplies strewn around her legs. “Good morning, Joel,” she coos sweetly.

Hugh presses me into his great big bear body. Over Hugh’s shoulder, Dad’s lean frame seems to deflate and diminish into the Adirondack chair’s deep seat, as if he, too, were having the air squeezed out of him. Not by me. He did this to himself, what goes on between him and me.

“Bad drive?” Dad asks politely.

“Not so bad,” I reply.

“There’s nothing to eat!” Hugh’s daughter, Kyli, on loan from the ex-wife for the holiday, pushes through the screen door, leaving it to bang behind her. She’s mid-teens and mostly naked.

“There’s muffins, girlic.” Hugh points at the pink cardboard bakery box on the railing, licks his lips and rubs his belly.

Kyli saunters slowly over, lifts the lid and peers in. “No blueberries,” she says evenly.

“Not ready yet. Too cold this spring,” my mom chimes in helpfully.

I start to nod and stop myself. It’s my first visit this year, as far as these folks know.

“I’m hungry,” Kyli whines. Amusement tugs at Hugh’s ruddy cheeks. Kyli sees it, huffs her outrage, and stomps down the steps to the sand. Through the graceful arms of the big beech tree and over the decaying roof of the sad little structure I stuck up there as a kid, the lake spreads in a tranquil spectrum of greens and blues toward the hazy horizon. I drink it in, briefly.

When I look back, Hugh’s got a twenty laced between his fingers and his salesman’s glimmer honed in on me. “Take her to the public beach, huh, Joey? Buy her something to eat?”

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It’s not hard to spot a cop on a beach. The sporty duds and casual stance can’t hide the vigilance beneath the wraparound shades and the Tigers cap. Too junior for the desk and too senior for the beat, my old friend Bob’s pulled lakeshore duty for the last few years. I knew I’d find him here, but I want him to find me.

I slow my pace. Kids dodge me with their plastic buckets. Toddlers shriek as the mild waves whoosh through their knees. Wafts of grease stench and AM tunes drift down from the Dog House, where they sell the food. Up there, in the cement lot, is where the teens have always hung out, leaning on the car hoods and clustered around the umbrellaed tables. As I watch, Kyli stops, squares her shoulders, shakes her mane, and with determination evident in her step, walks smack into the heart of it. And I decide she's got more to her than I'd thought.

"Dude!" Bob finally spots me. He slaps my back when I reach him. "When did you get in?"

"Last night, late," I say. I'd like to be just plain glad to see him, but I can't be with the bright red stripe that marks the pier's starboard side throbbing through the glare. That's where she went in.

Bob asks about my job. I ask about his wife and kids. He's a local, shotgun-married out of high school. I met him in a sailing class. As teens, we washed dishes in one of South Point's tony tourist eateries. We'd eat scraps of steak and lobster left on the plates before we'd stack them in the trays and push them through the steam machine. After work, we'd buy beer.

"Soooo," I ask slowly. Kyli's leaning over the Dog House counter, into the window. "You getting enough action around here?" There's history to the question. I argued hard he should aim higher than South Point law enforcement. But today, I cock my brows and adjust my tone to teasing. He's my key witness. I want to make him want to tell me what I want to know.

Bob shrugs and glances north. As we watch, a tall two-masted schooner clears the channel, lifts its mainsail, luffs, and with a slight turn of the prow, catches a breath of wind that sends it out to sea. "It's been a while since we lost one," he says quietly.

I nod, recalling the ominous arrival of the red Coast Guard chopper along the wave line, and at night, the searchlight, back and forth.

Bob turns at me with a look I can't read. "I'm going to tell you something," he says quickly, as if worried he'll change his mind if he waits. "She walked straight off the pier."

The paper had said a wave took her. I should have known. I spend my days calling in corrections to press reports.

"Early in the morning," Bob continues. "One of the Mexicans out there fishing watched her go in. But he couldn't swim."

Snow White. That's what the locals named her, the witchy recluse who would appear suddenly and unexpectedly wandering the dunes, bleached by day and luminescent in the moonlight. An image flashes, of her pale form, crumpled on the damp sand, her long hair and those odd flowing garments she liked to wear soaked and clinging, like the broken wings of the seagulls that wash up after a storm. And by her own hand? Shit.

"We're not putting this info up on a billboard," Bob adds softly. "Her kid's in high school. It's a rough age. He'll catch the scuttlebutt. But there's no need to throw it in his face."

A teenager? I'd seen no sign of one. I hadn't thought it was a possibility. I do the math—a baby, maybe, at Kyli's age?—and the sudden impact of all I've let get past me, takes my breath away.

I must have let my face show something, because when I turn back, Bob's looking at me funny. "What? You thought "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall" is what got her kicked out of the house?"

Why did she live alone in that shack in the woods? I hadn't thought about it, really. She was just a rural legend to me, glimpsed only occasionally and from far away, until this spring. Now, I see how an unwed teenage pregnancy, in this town where stores still close on Sundays, could have gotten her disowned.

"The boy's around here somewhere." Bob's head swivels. "Over there." I follow Bob's gaze to where a scrawny scrap of a kid slouches into the sand, a big black plastic bag, mostly empty, draped across his knees. The only hint of a resemblance I can see is the white-blond hair. "He picks up trash," Bob explains. "And they give him a few hours in the Dog House when it gets busy."

Kyli's left the line, I see, and is heading this way, a big cup in one hand and a bag of something in the other.

"The little gun she kept went missing," Bob says, speaking in that low growl the cops in my office use to signal something juicy. "So I'm keeping an eye out."

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Shoot me in the head.

I'm not some casual weekender. I've lived this place for real. I've woken day after relentless day to the dull bare branches poking through the gray, the bone cold that whistles through the warped window frames, the snow drifts freeze-dried in wave shape out into the lake. I know how one wrong move, one misplaced confidence can flip this place from sunny skies and frolicking to solitude and shame. My dad got scammed. He lost the bank. We lost the house. I lost my friends, my school, my future as the captain of the sixth grade football team. The cabin wasn't made for winter, but this is where we came. As my father grimly yanked at the boarded windows, my mother gamely unstacked the plastic chairs, set up a propane grill and chirruped brightly about "foraging for fuel" and "living off the land." I huddled by the wood fire, the hood of my old PE sweatshirt pulled up to warm my ears, penciling long division worksheets and reading about Indian mounds.

It was only one year that we lived here. My father owns another bank now. It's doing well, apparently, judging by the branches popping up even on my side of the lake. But, for me, the edgy undercurrent of this place, the sinister

possibility of losing everything, remains, ready to pull me under, like her phantom wave. I knew all this, but still, I returned this spring.

I'd lost a case. I should have done the cross-examination myself, but I got convinced to delegate. I came here as to dry dock—sand the hull, seal the seams.

I walked the lonely beach for days, bent into the stiff north wind, my jacket ballooning to propel me when I turned south again. I glimpsed her once or twice in the distance, but she vanished when I got near. Then, one day, I walked toward her and she waited for me, and I let myself believe it was a fairy tale.

I returned each weekend through May and into June. The snow melted. The buds bloomed. The shore was ours alone. It's true: I saw some injuries—welts and bruises. I didn't wonder much, chalked them up to minor mishaps that might befall an intrepid outdoorswoman like the one I thought I'd met.

Then one night I discovered the burns. Not just one, but many dime-sized scars, one of them still pink and raw. Someone had pressed cigarette to skin, not just once, but many times, in that place she'd kept hidden from my eyes.

I recoiled from the intimacy. She winced. Her body braced. But then, the whole of her went limp. Her expression drained. And I realized, to my horror, that she expected me to strike her. Worse still, she didn't plan to fight the inevitability. And instantly, irretrievably, all the awe I'd allowed myself to experience evaporated. I'd let myself be fooled. She was just another victim.

I covered her with a sheet and walked away.

*

And now the hint of her is stalking me. Like a new word learned, the kid is everywhere—paying for a coke in the convenience store, pedaling a rusty one-speed along the lakeshore road, leaning against the lamppost at the base of our driveway, looking away even as I can see he's watching me.

I complain to Bob. "You want me to pull him in for trespassing?" he asks tonelessly.

"You said he had a gun."

"I said the gun was gone." Bob's looking at me funny again and I know I need to bite my tongue, walk away. Already, I've seemed too curious about a kid who should be a nothing to me.

"OK, here's the deal—" Bob glances up the beach, locates where the kid is with his black bag, lowers his voice. "Your mom feeds him sometimes."

I snort my disbelief.

Bob shrugs. "She's done it since he got left out on the lake."

I wait. Bob sighs. "The so-called father's a boater. He comes here in the summers, docks his sixty-footer in town, drops bill bills at the bars. That's how they got hooked up. She was waiting tables. He's never fessed up to the boy being his, but we all know he is. One day he snatched the boy, rowed him

out deep and swam away. Payback for the 911 call she'd made the night before. She was the one getting roughed up, but that's when social services took the boy away. He's been in foster homes since that. She'd get to see him from time to time."

It's risky but I have to ask. "What happened to the guy?"

Bob looks pained. "His word against the boy's about what happened that day. And you know how that goes. Now, he's still around."

I take my time to ask, adjust my tone to the throwaway disinterest I use for the most important questions in court. "He ever hurt her again?"

"We didn't hear from her."

"You're the law and you did nothing?" I snap.

Bob stares out at the waves. "As I said, she didn't call."

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She had to call the law.

Through the week, the conviction festered and firmed and messed with my mind. I missed a typo in a pleading that got filed with my signature. I almost lost it at a sentencing when a judge defied me and granted a repeat offender a downward departure from the sentencing guidelines. It wasn't just about her anymore. She'd infected me. I'd fucked up, and I was going to stay fucked until she stopped letting herself get burned.

I went back there. A protection order from the court is easy to get, I explained. I showed her the form I'd downloaded off the Internet, checked the boxes for her when she shook her head and looked away. I left cab fare, for transport to and from the courthouse, on the scrappy wooden table beside her bed.

Deadlines are what get things done in my business. I gave her three weeks. I said I'd call the court, and if there was no order on file by then, I'd call Bob. Her bruiser boyfriend would be locked up in a day. Of course, I was bluffing. No way was I going to ring up my old bonfire buddy to tell him what I found when I went down on Snow White. God! My gut clenches at the shame of it. But she didn't know that. And the deadline ran out the day she walked into the lake.

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Nature calls and I can't wait. I've been back from my run for an hour and still, the door shows no sign of opening. I could pound my way in, but the thought of the effort it would take, the protests and the whines, the wadded towels and blast of steam and hairspray that would greet me, sends me out the door. Between where the dune drops off and the house begins, the leafy canopy of the big beech and the scrappy saplings gives a guy some privacy.

I've just found my spot when I hear the scrape of wood-on-wood above me. I see a flash of skin between the rotted boards of my old tree-house when I look up.

"What the fuck?" I scramble to stuff myself back in my shorts, slam my fist into the jagged bark of the tree. It hurts like hell. I scan the ground for something that can do some damage. All I find is a crushed beer can that pings off the floorboards, impotently, which makes me even madder.

"You goddamn punk!" I know I look ridiculous, but I scabble up there somehow, grabbing at the thin, bendy branches that crack, and break, and scrape into my palms as I grasp around to keep momentum. A sand-caked rubber sole kicks at my jaw as I lunge through the opening. I grab the high top at the ankle, and yank myself to where he's braced against the far corner. He shifts his body, fists flailing. I grab his wrists and slam him back into what's left of the wall.

I never built the place to take this kind of weight. The boards groan, teeter, and break as the nails I hammered in so painstakingly lever out of the tree. We fall down in a jumble of body parts and broken lumber. He squirms and kicks, but quickly I've got him pinned, sweat dripping from my chin into the angry crimson clumps of acne between his eyes and along where the stubs of facial hair should be.

"What the hell are you doing?" I bark. He stiffens his limbs, bucks once to test me and swivels his head to avoid my gaze. "Why are you following me?" Something softens along the kid's ugly mottled jaw line. His bony body seems to release, just a whisper, beneath me. I read it like he's thinking up a lie.

"Tell me!" I bellow and squeeze my knees hard into his ribs. He narrows his eyes to the slits he threw at me when I caught him hanging around our driveway.

"Tell me!" I repeat. Badgering the witness is what it's called in a courtroom. But there's no judge around to stop me. I tighten my grip on his wrists, lean down to scowl, inches from his pale blue eyes that blink and squint into the shards of filtered morning light just like hers did, which provokes me.

"I'm not the one who left you floating." His chapped lips quiver, but it's not enough. I need to prove something. "I'm not why she decided to die."

More quickly than I can see it coming, the wad of phlegm is through his teeth, stinking like sewage and oozing down my cheek. I swab at the slime with my shoulder. My fingers clench to a fist as I draw my arm back. I glance down to aim and, instead of snarling defiance, I see the same flat-faced resignation I saw on hers, a few weeks back. And my strength saps away.

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My shins and arms are scraped and bloody. My shoulder's throbbing and the rest of my body aches everywhere. I shake at my shirt so the dirt and leaves fall out and pick at the pebbles stuck into the raw flesh on my knee.

“Snap Chat!” Kyli’s hanging over the deck railing, phone between her fingers, framing an instant image of my humiliation. I grimace, draw a breath, but before I can register even a word of protest, she’s thumbed at the screen and I’m out there, somewhere, bad ink shooting through the teen-o-sphere. She smirks, waggles her hips and vanishes as quickly as the kid did.

I plant my forearms on my knees and survey the wreckage of my childhood masterpiece. I was so goddamn earnest, back in the day, carefully drawing up the plans, reducing them to scale, scavenging the wood pile and the cellar tool chest for boards and nails. Hugh didn’t help, but, at least, he planted his heels on the railing, leaned back in a chair, and tossed down the occasional encouraging word as he sipped his coffee or beer. We’d lost the house that winter and my dad was mostly MIA. But he was there that Sunday.

I’d just hammered in the last nail. I walked up to where the two of them sat, looked at Hugh and asked, “Want to come see?”

“Don’t you want to ask Dad?” Mom was down by the birdbath, pulling weeds, but somehow she’d heard me.

My father shifted in his chair. I folded my arms, firmed my stance and snuck a glimpse toward where he sat. I’d been hurt, humiliated, ostracized, forced to hole up in a tree. All because he’d let his guard down. I needed him to stand tall, defend himself, show me he wasn’t the witless weakling I suspected him to be. But instead of that kind of big move, what did I receive? A feeble smile, backlit with a sad, sad flicker of something—hope, I read it to be—that despite how he’d allowed himself to be deceived, despite his colossal mistake and all the bad things that had happened to me because of it, I wouldn’t judge him harshly. Instead of energy and insistence, which might have instilled some confidence, I saw acceptance, resignation, defeat. He wasn’t going to fight my verdict, not going to try to persuade me. He was going to allow himself to be his own child’s victim. He put me in the driver’s seat. And when a kid gets offered an opportunity like that, he’s got to grab it, right?

“No,” I called out. I didn’t meet my dad’s eye that day. Now, he’s the one to look away.

*

Crack! The wind’s up, gusting from the northwest, blowing blasts of sand and lifting swells that rise, break and foam around my feet. Random pops and sputters from the bottle rockets and strings of drugstore firecrackers kids just can’t resist igniting before tonight break though the steady beat of the flag my mom’s pulled up the pole for today’s celebration. She’s at the annual parade down Main Street, along with most of the rest of the household, I surmise, since the cabin was empty when I came down to the beach. The wind’s strong enough to slam a window or break a branch. Still, I wonder about the metallic edge to the crack I just heard.

From the deck, I spot the flash of neon spandex through the natural hues of the leaves. I'm downwind and, if I strain, I can decipher snatches of what they're saying.

"Fucking lying bitch!" This comes through loud and clear, followed by Kyli's slow, high keen. In a few seconds, I'm down the steps, on the cement below the deck, pressed into the shadow of the overhang. They could spot me if they looked over, but they're preoccupied.

The kid speaks again, lower this time. "You said you were into me!" He pulls a plastic bag of something from his jeans and chucks it at her belly. Kyli fake shrieks at the impact and hugs herself, glaring at the thing that has dropped into the dirt and leaves between them. It's a bag of weed.

"Go away!" She chokes and gasps and stamps her feet, peeking up to gauge the kid's reaction. But still, something's keeping her there. And that's what worries me.

The kid's hand flies up from his side. Of course, he's got the gun.

Time freezes, just like on TV. My mind flashes to the phone plugged in and charging on my bureau and to the land line up in the kitchen.

"No!" He spits it like what he spat at me. The volume screams a reckless, who-cares intensity, which scares me even more than the weapon.

"I'll do you like I did before," Kyli pleads. I'm appalled. The desperate upswing of her whine, the wrinkled nose, the wince that's scrawled through her pained stance betrays that she, too, is revolted, at least now, at the thought of it.

The kid can't help but see. His gun hand moves.

"Don't!" is all I can think to say as I step forward. The kid's head snaps at me. Kyli skitters behind the nearest tree.

The stringy sinews in the kid's arm vibrate as he holds the gun on me. Kyli has dropped to her ass, knees up, where the wide trunk provides the greatest coverage. She's thumbing something into her phone. Hope prickles as I quickly calculate how fast a South Point emergency response could be.

I sputter something stupid and keep on talking. The kid's not really listening, anyway. He's got both hands on the gun, as if it has grown heavy, but his grip seems to be loosening, and his features shift and morph, as if something liquid were moving beneath them.

I study the movements, as my words keep spilling, and I identify in the wrinkles and undulations...frustration, anguish, humiliation. I find these in an adverse witness and I sniff victory. They're gold now, too, I realize. All I need to do is to stand firm, impermeable, and laser focus his own killer rays right back at him. I can, and so I do it. And poof! He incinerates.

His arm drops, but, before I can grab the gun, he moves it to his temple.

The kid's ravaged cheeks tremble beneath the familiar white-blond hair, pasted in haphazard brushstrokes around the pistol's blunt muzzle. I

glance to where his disaster date huddles over her screen—branded leggings, straightened teeth, three-figure hair streaks. What a chump he was to let her play him! I hate him for that, and for every other pathetic dumbass move that's brought him here.

He's shaking like a junkie, through his arms and into the finger that's on the trigger. No one's coming, damn it! The law's on my side. I could walk away. Nothing says I have to risk anything to help him when he walked right into this place, on his own and by himself.

I hesitate. Then I think of my mistake, thinking he was here for me. And that other one, that maybe I made. The ultimatum. I can't look at that one, directly. Then I think about how I've iced my father all these years, because he didn't man up and confront me, like I thought I wanted back then. And I glimpse, briefly, that maybe I've walked myself in here, too.

And suddenly, walking away seems like the bigger threat to me. I look at him, and at me, and at me through him, all big and buffed and menacing, and I feel myself start to shrivel and shrink beneath my own withering gaze, until I'm just about the right size to say something he'll be able to hear. I pause, as the kid jitters and the leaves blow and the wind whistles through the small space we occupy. I don't know what I'm waiting for, but then, without warning, it arrives, bubbles up from somewhere I can't see.

I unlock my fists, loosen my stance and move my eyes across his sorry little caved-in physique appraisingly. "What kind of arm you got?" I thumb at the whitecaps that frost the lake. "Show me."

He won't give me the Hail Mary. But his hand drops, and, without a word, he saunters down to where the waves swell and strike. He makes me wait, but then, the foam rushes once again past his ankles, and as the lake sucks it away, he tosses the weapon, underhand, and with a fuck-you shoulder shift, walks away.

Kyli steps from behind the tree, presses her phone to my ear. "Hi, this is Greg from KXSP. Is it right you just stopped a suicide?"

She grins, and I realize: she didn't call the law, she sent a tweet.

As the radio guy yaps into my ear, I hear the tale she's told, in 140 characters or less. No drugs for sex, no promises of love. Just a local loser about to blow himself away.

And, as I listen, I can see how the story will read, in the headline that my mom will clip and send to me. *Man Saves Boy.*

I balk at first and draw a breath, ready to correct it, right now, before more misinformation pollutes the airwaves. And then I realize: who cares about the viral version the world will read and throw away? My version is the keeper. I know who got saved today.

