

TO
S L E E P
as
A N I M A L S

by

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AN EXCERPT FROM

CHAPTER 2

THE SUN IS JUST setting when Ben drops off El at her house. Everything is a black shape against the red and purple sky, each tree and roofline melting into everything else. Somewhere between Fernley and Sparks, El decided that she would cook dinner for him—“In celebration of your arrival and acceptance,” she said, “into America’s foremost bastion for pointless endeavors”—so Ben rushes back to the 777 and showers, shaves off

the patchy black scruff cropping up along his cheeks and under his chin.

He tries calling his friend in Boca. His friend in Boca never picks up the phone.

Wrapped in a towel and sitting on the corner of his bed, Ben writes for a while in his two notebooks—clinical details of the trip in his orange journal, more personal responses in the black—then tears open the envelope he'd found earlier waiting for him at the motel's front desk. Syracuse postmark concealing the stamp of a raven before a paling yellow hillscape. The slight weight of it in his hands makes him feel a little sick. The letter from his employers is brief. Just a quote from the *Agamemnon*—*the Helmsman lays it down as law...*—followed by a question about mercury in the water. Reading the letter over again, Ben feels certain: their query isn't seeking a response. They want his focus elsewhere.

In the letter's lower right-hand corner, he draws a rough sketch of the twin gaps in the rock face. The dead eyes of a cartoon skull. The open mouths of any gambling machine. Ben shakes the dust from his jacket and dresses, heads back to his Jeep.

On his way back to El's house, he stops at a Turkish café for an espresso and then a cognac, watches the men in their open-necked shirts, the women in their strappy dresses, everyone's expect-ant white teeth and eyes. All the world can be observed, he thinks, in

how two people are drawn together then fall apart. Each example is the same as every other. Two bodies collide in a close orbit and feel good, only later to draw away and feel bad. While they're together, each gazes at the other and smiles. But really, they're only seeing the mirror of the other's face. At a pharmacy next door, Ben buys two bottles of wine even though El told him to bring nothing but himself and his innate childlike sense of play. Ben doubts he has such a thing—hence the cognac, hence the wine—in many ways is terrified by this fact, that he lacks something crucial that everyone else does not. Yet he knows better than to challenge El on this account.

“You need to stop thinking so seriously,” she told him on the drive back from Ophir. “Because this version of adulthood you’ve adopted? It does *not* seem like much fun. I can tell by the way you walk. I’ve been studying you. You walk like a bull using its mind for horns. You need to stop leading with your head all the time, Ben, analyzing every step you take. Lead with your heart once in a while. Lead with your belly.”

He lets himself inside El’s house without knocking. Stringing through the rooms from unseen speakers, soft strange music quietly plays as if through a laudanum fog. A low voice made raw with whiskey and cigarettes. The smell of roast meat and dark fruit. The

warmth of golden light. Ben finds El in the kitchen.

“Hey, you’re here!” She’s working at something at the kitchen’s island counter, beaming warmly in a black dress that shows off her freckled shoulders. She sets down the bowl and spoon she’s been working in her hands and comes around the corner to greet him, to hug him and touch his hair and take the bottles from him. “You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s the least I could do.” But he’s trying to put something together. Between when she saw him and when she took the bottles from his hands, something happened—a flash, a feeling—some-thing happened and he cannot say what it was.

“No, I mean it.” She’s standing with her back to him, a bottle in each hand, between the counter and fridge. “I told you not to.” She glowers at him, one-eyed, over her shoulder. But her scolding is a joke, a form of play. Everything about her, Ben thinks, eventually becomes a form of play.

“One is a carménère,” he says, “from up on the south face of one of these mountains.” He almost has it figured out, this flashing mystery. “The other’s an almond wine from Modesto.” But it’s gone.

She puts one bottle in the refrigerator and the other on the counter. From an already-open bottle, she pours him a glass and refills her own.

“To the great black hole of the past,” she says, raising her glass—which seems to Ben like an odd thing to drink to—“where all our failures disappear.”

Meeting her eyes, Ben touches his glass to hers. “Amen.” And without looking away, they drink.

EL DECIDES HE NEEDS another tour of the house. It’s been too long since his last visit to Nevada, she claims, and when here the other day, all he did was sleep. So while dinner takes care of itself in the oven, she leads him through her home. The living room with its umber couch and chair, its oak coffee table and few pictures on the walls, mostly small paintings and framed photographs but on one wall a large photograph of a silhouette figure framed by a brightly lit door as if walking from a dark room into a bright one. The tiled bathroom like a clean, efficient Roman space. The bedroom with its black-spread bed and moss-green walls. The office choked with papers and open files all pouring off of and hiding what might have once been a desk and computer.

“This was the room you stayed in last time,” she says. “I traded your bed for a mess.”

“Makes sense.” On one wall is a poster of a bisected cow. “I often think I’ve done the same

thing.” But before he’s expected to explain: “What is this music, anyway?”

“It’s a record I found recently. About how Lewis Carroll fell in love with a young girl. It’s like Wonderland is where his heart went to die.”

“It sounds like it’s made,” he says, “by someone who has only heard descriptions of music but hasn’t ever heard songs before.”

“I think it’s beautiful.” But by her posture and by her tone, she seems to be agreeing with him. “I think it’s a heartbreakingly scenario.”

And Ben nods. “Me too.” But he doesn’t know what he’s agreeing to.

THEY DRINK BEN’S carménère with dinner. Wild rice and roasted asparagus and spiced pork wrapped in lime leaves, which Ben at first mistakes as edible but quickly learns are not. “They’re for flavor,” El explains, laughing as he spits a torn leaf back onto his plate. “They infuse the meat without coarsening it.” It had never occurred to Ben to cook with leaves.

After dinner, they open the almond wine, which is thick and sweet but ferocious in its intensity. Ben imagines a green dragon coiled at the bottom of the bottle and says so, feeling embarrassed at the stupidity of the words as he says them, but El nods, examining the bottle

and its label, not so much reading as simply seeing as she turns it in her hands.

“Yes, something with six legs and two tendrils like a mustache at the end of its snout.” And now it seems like she’s staring through the glass. “A thing that swims through the sky instead of flying. Like a demon and angel all at once.” Ben watches the slim green thing slither from the bottle’s mouth and into the kitchen’s gold air, and after a dreamy silence, El laughs. “Oh lord, I’m drunk.”

And Ben laughs too. “You are.”

“I am. Oh no!”

“It’s okay,” he assures her, grinning. “We’re in this together.”

Covering her mouth with one hand like that might contain her laughter, El excuses herself to use the bathroom. While she’s gone, Ben carries the dishes to the sink, takes his wine glass into the living room in a secret attempt to find where the music is coming from, but forgets his mission almost immediately and instead inspects the tiny pictures on the walls. The paintings are all details of small objects—the cracked grain of a walnut shell, the worm-eaten veins of a leaf, drops of oil like swimming eyes floating on a surface of water—rendered only in two or three colors and fixed to blocks of wood. The photographs are mostly old and faded yellow. Black-and-whites and sepia-tones. Long dead people and places that no longer exist.

When El returns, Ben is standing before the picture of the silhouette man in the door. “I hadn’t noticed this before,” Ben says when she comes to stand beside him, “but this guy in the picture, he’s looking out from the frame, straight ahead into this room. Before, I thought he was looking the other way, walking away from us, but no. You can tell by the thin bit of light shining on his shoulder and his hair and cheek. He’s looking out of the picture at us.” He pauses to sip his wine and think this over. El watches him, saying nothing. “But he’s also looking into a dark room. To us it looks like a dark figure standing before a door full of light, but he’s looking into a dark room where something—us, a camera, everything outside the picture—is looking back at him. We can see him, but he can’t see us. We’re the darkness in the room.” And he gestures in a way that takes in everything outside the picture frame. “Everything is the darkness of that room.”

In the following silence, he realizes that at some point when he wasn’t paying attention, the music around them has changed, has become something sparser but more dynamic, each instrument taking its turn to play just one note in the overall sequence, then waiting for its turn to come again. Yet above the sprawling jerkiness, the same ragged voice rises like a wave.

Finally, she says, “It’s a picture of you.”

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