

***Dinner at the Twicketts***

It was time for the Twicketts to move again. Tiffany struggled to cram the last hastily packed grocery sacks into the red vintage Mustang as her landlord screamed himself purple and her husband Gregory smiled cavalierly, hands in pockets, leaning against the grand entry of the furnished Tudor revival that had been home for seven months. She kept her head down as she slammed the trunk shut and slinked around to the passenger seat.

Gregory peeled his athletic frame from the archway and breezed by the landlord's be-spittled face, pausing to bend down and sniff a tulip as he sauntered to the car, a move that Tiffany knew was a calculated effort to appear nonchalant. Those tulips had no more odor than a glass of tap water. She busied herself, fixing her thin, black hair into a bun and wrapping a silk scarf around her head. She removed her sunglasses and began to clean smudges with the hem of her white linen sundress. The sun lasered through her bare eyes to the back folds of her brain, amplifying the throb in her head. She put her sunglasses back on. It was too bright a day for the circumstances. Gregory paused to stretch at the car, gave his swoop of sandy hair a tousle and settled into the driver's seat.

As they sailed down the driveway, Gregory waved at the landlord, who chased the car, shaking his fist.

They headed out of Westchester, driving several minutes in silence beneath the spring-green canopy of trees before Tiffany decided to broach the obvious.

"What happened with the landlord?"

"I cancelled the rent check," Gregory said. "He was playing games, trying to raise the rent and not addressing the mold issue."

"But I heard him say something about a bounced check. And eviction."

“That is utterly absurd,” Gregory snorted. “He’s a con artist trying to hustle me for money because of my family name.”

Tiffany nodded, and brought the tips of her thin, manicured fingers to her temples. She was feeling fragile and did not have the energy to argue. Gregory was a direct descendant of steel magnate Gregory Landon Twickett, the patriarch of a dynasty that had once claimed great wealth and status. But while the name still graced history books, the fortune had dwindled, diverted into bad investments and diminished by familial infighting. Gregory had his trust – a considerable sum for the average couple - doled out in quarterly installments. But there never seemed to be enough. Gregory could not conceive of life of price tags and due dates, or of the idea that there was a lifestyle beyond his reach. He spent as he pleased, when he pleased with no regard to his creditors. Anyone that accused or challenged him was labeled jealous or a scammer. When things went sideways, he blamed the other guy, and the Twicketts moved on.

In their five years of marriage, they had crisscrossed the East Coast – a villa in Palm Beach, a colonial in Charleston, a horse farm in Kentucky, a D.C. brownstone. More recently they had been circling New York, staying at a friend’s Upper East Side apartment, then Greenwich, then Westchester.

In the early years, Tiffany had embraced the gypsy lifestyle, thumbing her nose at the angry men chasing them with unpaid invoices and cancelled checks. It felt rebellious and free. Now she was beginning to dread days like today, when her whole life had to be shoved into the trunk of a car at a moment’s notice. She had considered confronting Gregory about his finances. But she knew he considered money his sole domain, and would rebuff her efforts. And she had her own faults that she would prefer that he not point out. They had constructed a world that relied on keeping certain things unsaid.

And life wasn't so bad. In fact, most of the time it worked well for her. Maybe things were the way they should be.

Each time they decamped, Gregory had a plan. And the current escape hatch had given Tiffany new hope. They were headed to the Twickett family's lakeside cottage, which Gregory had managed to wrest away from his cousins months earlier in a transaction at his Uncle Lester's deathbed that ended with the deed in Gregory's name, and a slew of angry Twicketts alleging chicanery.

Tiffany turned her thoughts to the house.

"So where are we going?" she asked, as Gregory careened around the snarls of highway traffic, eliciting honks and obscene hand gestures.

"Newell, Maine," Gregory said exuberantly. "Population one thousand." He reached over to pat her knee. "You're going to love it. The house is on a glacial lake with mountain views. The other summer people are our kind of folk. We'll fit right in. And the locals are old-fashioned. Honest. Hardworking. Good country people! Not the scammers you get in a big city."

"When's the last time you were there?" Tiffany asked.

"I haven't been since high school. But Uncle Lester had a caretaker. We might have a few raccoons to chase out, but we'll have everything ship-shape in no time."

Tiffany relaxed a bit, and allowed herself to have a little hope. A slower pace and the stability of homeownership may be what they needed. They zoomed northward, through Connecticut and Massachusetts only stopping for gas. As usual, around five o'clock Tiffany's head began to clear, and the last of her pessimism drained away. They crossed the New Hampshire border and Gregory took an exit.

"State liquor store," he announced, pointing to a large sign above the treeline. "We can load up. There's no sales tax in New Hampshire."

Tiffany brightened, laughed and hurried into the store. As she swung open the large plate glass door, long fingers of cool air pulled her inside. She grabbed a buggy, her bony knuckles in a white-clench against the blue plastic handle, and paused a moment to take in the rows and rows of bottles - amber, green, blue, clear, each one neck-full with liquids as varied the shimmering spectrum of the rainbow. She thought of bottles stacked vertically top-to-bottom – an impossibly fragile measure of time, from college to marriage to now. She thought of bottles laid horizontally - a measure of distance, tracing their path from Florida, to Westchester and beyond. Each bottle contained sips of happiness and catharsis, friends made and lost, times remembered and forgotten.

She strode confident and unknown. No worries about running into an old friend or new acquaintance. She could shop at ease and buy in bulk. No need to make excuses about having a party or preparing coq au vin for seventy-five. She soon found the deal she wanted, seven dollars for a magnum bottle of Chilean plonk. She could only go so low in terms of quality – no boxes, no jugs – but there was no need to spend more than necessary. She had little regard for appearance, aroma and taste.

She loaded a dozen bottles of wine into her cart and went to find Gregory.

“Great deals,” she said.

Gregory smiled.

“I thought you’d like it.”

They checked out, put the boxes in the Mustang, and continued. Soon they were on a state highway that curved through forests and farmland dotted with quaint inns and campgrounds. Tiffany began to sing along with the radio. She tossed her sunglasses off, threw her bare feet on the dashboard and massaged Gregory’s neck with her left hand. She was over this morning’s unpleasantness. Gregory

always managed to come out on top. She had yet to see them get into trouble that he could not get them out of.

Newell was a two hour ride from the Interstate, and greeted all-comers with a sign outside a rickety old farmhouse with a herd of broken tractors in the side yard.

“Welcome to Newell! Flatlanders included!” the sign said.

“You gotta love the local color,” Gregory said with a laugh.

“What’s a flatlander?” Tiffany asked.

“People from away. Like us.”

Tiffany nodded and took in the scenery. The roads were pocked with potholes, and glittered with mica in the fading sunlight. The houses were either pristine and landscaped, or ramshackle and unkempt. Newell had nothing resembling a suburb or an apartment complex. But there was a golf course, a country store, a church and a small diner.

“Hard to be anonymous here,” Tiffany remarked.

“Why would we want to be?” Gregory said. “We’ve got nothing to hide. I want to whole town to know the Twicketts have arrived!”

Tiffany said nothing. True, they had a clean slate in this town, but she was used to a larger pool of people. In their past communities, if they scandalized one set, if a few other people saw a little too much, the Twicketts had easily slipped into another circle. Newell appeared to be too small for that. They turned down a side road. Tiffany began to see the glimmer of water through the trees. Finally, they pulled up to a large wrought iron gate with “Loon’s Nest” spelled across it.

“Oh, yeah, did I tell you the name of the place? We can always change it if you want.”

“Nope, it seems about right,” Tiffany said.

Gregory jumped out, unlocked the gate and propped it open

The driveway was long and shaded, leading up to a two-story lodge made of thick hewn logs, and flanked by a large garage and a small guest cabin. Twenty yards in front of the house was a long dock that extended out into the rippling crystal of Lake Newell, a breath-taking stretch of water that reflected both the mountainous background and the blazing streaks of sunset. A kayak and a canoe lay, upside down, at the edge of the lake.

Gregory parked the car and looked over at Tiffany with a self-satisfied smile.

“Did I do alright?” he asked.

“My God, Gregory! I love it.”

Tiffany sprang out of the car, and charged up to the entrance. The grounds were untended, littered with fallen branches and unruly overgrowth. But the dishevelment could not conceal the quiet grandeur of the place. Gregory unlocked the door, and they found themselves in a great room, anchored by a massive fieldstone fireplace with a moose head mounted above it. A chandelier made of deer antlers was suspended from the ceiling.

Tiffany flicked the light switch.

“No electricity yet,” Gregory explained. “Tonight it’s flashlights and candles.”

“Sounds fun! Like camping!” Tiffany trilled. Nothing could dampen her spirits. They explored the rest of the house, four bedrooms, a modern kitchen, and a screened-in porch with a lake view.

As twilight slipped into to darkness, they grabbed the essentials out of the car, toiletries, food and a couple bottles of wine. They sat on the porch dreaming and plotting. Tiffany pulled a corkscrew

out of her makeup bag and opened a bottle with a thwack that resonated in the stillness. The wine glugged into a coffee mug.

“To Maine, the way life should be,” she toasted, recalling the state motto.

She brought the cup to her lips and swallowed. Every neuron in her brain began to crackle with happiness. Visions of a prosperous future swirled. Ideas formed in her brain and came to her lips with rapidity.

“You know, Gregory, we can really fix this place up. It just needs some cleaning and landscaping and a few personal touches and it’s gonna be a showpiece! I’ve always wanted to try gardening!”

“And we’ll have a dinner party,” Gregory said. “At the end of the season, we’ll invite all our new friends. The whole town will be talking about dinner at the Twicketts.”

Tiffany snuggled into the crook of Gregory’s arm. The last she remembered, all was well.

She awoke her first morning in Newell, alone in an unfamiliar bed with a familiar ache in her head, and the same unmoored feeling that followed her nights of drinking. She tried to remember how much she had had. She couldn’t. She would have to check the empty bottles later.

Gregory shuffled into the room in his boxers, cradling his right arm.

“You were something last night,” he said, shaking his head.

Something good or bad, she wondered? She scrutinized his face for any tells, and stayed silent.

“Those fingernails of yours are sharp. Look what you did.”

He shoved his right arm in front of her. Four parallel scratches screamed red down Gregory’s muscular forearm. Tiffany ransacked her memory. She flashed on a fragmented moment – darkness,

confusion, the cool of the crisp sheets, a seemingly disembodied arm coming toward her, a clench in her stomach.

“I just wasn’t in the mood,” she said, primly.

“You seemed into it to me. Then all of the sudden...this.” He gestured to his scabbed arm.

“I wasn’t in the mood last night,” she purred. “But I am now.”

Gregory collapsed into bed, and she began to caress him. In these mornings, with her mind a soupy haze, her heart bleeding with confused repentance, and her body a great grey singular ache, she loved him most. She was a well of need, her rough edges rounded out, her nerves unraveled into a simple single string.

Afterwards, Gregory turned to her, and brushed her hair away from her face.

“You smell like a barroom floor. Maybe dial it back a bit.”

It was as close as he would come to broaching the topic. It was as close as she would let him come.

“I’ve just been stressed with having to leave Westchester so unexpectedly,” she said, trying to direct her breath away from him and the blame away from herself. “I’m feeling more relaxed now.”

Gregory rested for a few minutes and got out of bed. He was an early riser, extremely active for a guy with no job. There were always people to call, projects to direct, bills to contest.

Tiffany lay naked in bed, twisting her wedding ring and trying to will her pain to a level that would allow sleep. After a restless hour, she succeeded. When she awoke, it was lunchtime and the power was on. She put on yesterday’s clothes, shielded her eyes with her sunglasses and padded down the stairs. Gregory was outside talking to a tall, grizzled man in dirty jeans and a plaid shirt. The man had



a sharp nose beaking out of a long face, which was fringed by a wild mass of gray hair. He chain-smoked out of the side of his mouth. The two men shook hands and Gregory came inside.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” he said. His forearm was covered in a gauze square. “I was talking to Alan. He worked for Uncle Lester. I made a deal with him. He can live in our guest house and work in exchange for rent.”

Tiffany twitched inside. Gregory was always striking barter-deals that went south. More often than not, they involved him trying to a man Friday on staff, much like his family had had in his youth. Somehow, in ways she never fully understood, the terms would always get twisted, and rancor would ensue. But she couldn't express disapproval. Not after what happened last night. And Gregory looked so gleeful, like a little boy.

“Mmmm,” she said, as she went through a bag of groceries until she found a diet soda. Soda and tea were her daytime diet, her stomach not usually ready for food until the evening hours.

Over the next weeks, Gregory dove into fixing up the property and networking with the locals and summer people. Each day Alan would arise at seven o'clock and work until three, pausing only for puffs on a pot pipe, which he insisted was medicinal and related to injuries he suffered in Vietnam.

Tiffany largely avoided Alan, never feeling up to interaction in during his working hours. She would peek out the window to see Gregory sitting in an Adirondack chair, coffee in hand, newspaper in lap, barking orders. Sometimes Alan would see her in the window, and pause to stare directly at her. She would turn away. If she passed him on the property, she would wave hurriedly and keep moving. She didn't feel comfortable having a stranger so closely in their orbit.

She began to garden on the property. Late afternoon, just as her aches and nausea began to ebb, she would go outside to weed and plant. One day, having found a small, flowering herb called

Pennyroyal, she was knees down, butt-up in the dirt when she inhaled the smoke of Marlboro Reds. She lifted her head to see Alan towering above her.

“You know, you should wear gloves with Pennyroyal,” he said. It was the first full sentence he had ever uttered to her.

“Why?” she said, leaping up and brushing the dirt off her knees. Up close, his face looked dry and cracked like a drought-stricken creek-bed.

“It’s poisonous. Especially if you’re pregnant. Women used to use it to take care of accidents.”

“No worries, no baby here,” Tiffany said, patting her flat stomach.

“You never know when the stork is gonna drop by,” Alan said.

“No storks here,” Tiffany said. “I’m not a kid-type of person.”

Tiffany panicked. She was revealing too much, for no reason, to a wrong person. She was never good at social interaction without a drink in her hand. She was either too aloof, or too forward. Too self-conscious, or completely lacking awareness to her own appearance. She held herself at the elbows and giggled awkwardly.

“A young gal like you?” Alan said. “Seems a waste. A kid is a good thing. Keeps your eye on the future.”

Tiffany unclasped her elbows, and tried to affect a careless, adult posture.

“Thanks for the tips,” she said. “I will be sure to come to you with all my herb-related questions from here on out.”

“Anytime,” Alan said. “And be careful with that pennyroyal. Kids, or no kids, I hate to see a nice lady like you poisoning herself.” He tipped his worn baseball cap in her direction and turned to leave.

From then on, Alan seemed to pop up with only the scent of his Marlboros as warning whenever Tiffany was working around the yard, never failing to advise her on her gardening. She would brush him off as politely as possible, but began to ask Gregory about him, learning that his was one of seven children, a local who only left courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps to go to Paris Island, then Vietnam. He enjoyed smoking weed, fishing and hunting. He was never married, with two grown children by two women. He was the county horseshoe champion and could field dress a moose in record time.

“Remarkable man,” Gregory would say. “You just don’t get good, salt-of-the-earth like him in this day and age.”

Tiffany agreed, and her fascination with Alan deepened. When ventured into public, she scanned the recurring faces for who might be his children and lovers. She would ask Gregory about the comfort of his mattress, his health, and his nutrition. Each sunset, she would worry that if he was lonely out there in the guest cottage by himself. She would wonder what his life would be like if he had been born in other circumstances. If he were a Twickett, who would he be? Maybe they crossed paths for a reason. Maybe she could help him.

August signaled the final days of summer. The night before the dinner party, the Loon’s Nest had been restored to its glory. Gregory had invited every prominent local and summer resident. Tiffany spent the day prepping food, shining silverware and dusting baseboards. Gregory had gone into town for last minute supplies. As the day inched toward twilight, she sat on the porch alone. She was limiting her wine intake; she needed her bearings for tomorrow. She admired how much the landscaping had improved. Some of it had been her own gardening, but mostly it was Alan’s hard work. She looked over at his cabin. He was home. She was struck with a thought. Alan should come to the dinner party. If anyone deserved a night of merriment, it was him.

She walked over to the guest house on the mulched path, admiring the rhododendrons she had planted along the way. Alan was sitting on the porch, his boots kicked up on the rail, smoking weed, fiddling with a fishing lure, drinking a can of Mountain Dew.

“Hey,” Tiffany said. “I wanted you to know you are welcome at our party tomorrow.”

Alan looked up, and gave her a tired stare. A light wind wisped by, dragging Tiffany’s thin curtain of hair in front of her face and waving the edges of her skirt.

“Thanks for the invitation,” Alan said, returning his attention to the fishing lure.

Tiffany was surprised at his shortness. But she could never read these taciturn New Englanders, they always seemed gruff to her. She wished him goodnight and made her way back home. When Gregory returned, she told him about her invitation.

“You meant well,” he said. “But that’s inappropriate. He’s a worker, I’m his employer. There are boundaries.”

“It’s not a normal employee relationship. He lives here. He’s put a lot of work into this place. It’s wrong not to invite him.”

“What is your deal with this guy?” Gregory asked. “You’re always asking me about him, talking about him, sending him food, more blankets, treating him like a goddamn child. Alan understands the situation here. He’s lucky to have a roof over his head, which I provide, and food to eat, which I also provide.”

Tiffany tamped down her anger, directed it inward. She hated it when Gregory acted as if he earned the position in life that he had inherited. Nothing separated him from Alan other than a long, thin bloodline. Who was he to talk about boundaries? He had the guy living there, working for free,

taking out the trash, scrubbing the toilets, jumping when he said jump. She'd rather cross boundaries in a nice way. Better treat him like a child than a slave.

"So what should I do?" she said. "Disinvite him?"

"No need. Alan won't come. He knows his place," Gregory said, changing the topic to who had RSVP-ed.

Tiffany continued to monitor her drinking, watching the clock, and her own level of intoxication. She had been doing better. Most nights she remembered going to bed. And the weekly bottle count seemed to be getting lower. She and Gregory went to bed early and happy, awaking in the same state in the morning.

A few hours before the dinner party, Tiffany attended to her appearance. She threw on a wrap dress— dark red in case of spills – and applied a light touch of makeup, the first cosmetics she had used since moving to Newell. One hour until the party, she had her first glass of wine from a bottle of cabernet, which she stashed in her bedroom, lest any of the party-goers keep count of her consumption.

At six o'clock guests began to arrive for dinner at the Twicketts. The crowd was mostly older, retirees from the Boston area, middle-aged couples with children back at their second homes being babysat by local teenagers. Newell business owners were there, as were the lake's most famous residents – a former Senator from Virginia and a filmmaker who summered in Newell. Tiffany relished her role as hostess. It was a built-in excuse to flit at the first sign of discomfort, there was always a drink to be freshened, a bottle to cork, more beer to retrieve from the refrigerator. Her cheeks took on color, and her spirits soared. Being with new people wasn't as bad as she remembered. It became easier to laugh, to engage with her guests.

“Your son is at Harvard? An econ major? Gregory, isn’t your cousin Trevor in the economics department?” she said, motioning Gregory over to the filmmaker.

“You went to Choate? So did Thomas,” she said pulling together the inn keeper and the former senator.

She had shifted from solid to liquid, a fluid rush hospitality, kindness and interconnection. Between her successful encounters she would reward herself with a trip to the bedroom for surreptitious swills of wine. On the outside, she was on her second glass. But including her bedroom stash it was up to five? Six? Seven? Who cared? She was on fire. She was doing her job. She was making her guests feel special and at home.

But what about Alan? Two hours into the party and still no Alan. She sat on her bed, stared at the lipstick print on the rim of her glass, her angular knees a near blur behind the object of her focus. Why had he not come? She began to feel the burn of offense. How impolite. He could have just said no. He could have come to the door at any time today with any excuse. How could he ignore her like this? Maybe something was wrong. Maybe he was sick. Or embarrassed to come to their hoity-toity affair. She would go over, and let him know he was welcome.

Clutching her wine, she slipped through the party. Everyone was lost in drinks and conversation. A group stood on the front porch, listening for the wide-ranging notes of the loons’ cry. She slapped together a small plate of appetizers. Dinner was coming soon. Alan still had time to make the main event.

She exited the back door and made her way down the path to Alan’s cabin. His lights were on. She stepped through the yard, sipping her wine, marveling at her ability to walk so straight. An outsider would never guess how much she had to drink. Between her impeccable diction and her surefootedness, she felt as good as sober.

She got to Alan's and saw him on the porch, smoking weed, fiddling with a fishing lure, his feet propped on the railing and a crushed Mountain Dew can beneath his chair.

"I brought you some food," she said.

"Sorry, what? I can't understand you."

"I got you food, silly." She held up the plate. A cocktail shrimp fell off onto the path, becoming encrusted with dirt.

"Oh, thanks," Alan said. He didn't lift his gaze from the lure.

"Do you want to come over? We are about to serve dinner."

"Thank you. But I've already eaten."

"Why? I invited you yesterday. You should have waited." Tiffany was crestfallen. "Is it something Gregory said? Did he tell you not to come? He can be such a snob."

Alan laid aside the fishing lure. He looked at her.

"I am not coming tonight for the same reason I never come when you invite me. Not because of Gregory."

"What do you mean?" Tiffany said. "I've never invited you before."

"Ever since I've moved in here you've been coming over, drunk as a skunk, asking me to dinner, to sit on the dock and listen the loons together, to watch shows on cable with you. I am saying no tonight like I always say no. I appreciate the gesture, but I am staying here."

Shame welled up for a moment, only to be quashed by disbelief. She ransacked her memory and could not find a fragment to support what Alan was saying. Last night had been the first time she set foot near his place. Anger burned in her chest, crept up her esophagus.

“You ingrate. You liar. I will tell my husband to fire you in the morning.”

“No you won’t,” said Alan. “You won’t remember any of this in the morning. You never do. You seem like a real sweet lady. But you got a real bad drinking problem.”

Tiffany bristled. How could this uneducated, pot-smoking hillbilly pity her? He was the one to be pitied. Her worst day was far and above the best moment of his miserable life.

“You are the one who needs help! You’re a fucking loser,” she hissed.

Tiffany threw the food on the porch and ran with her sloshing glass of wine toward the house. She veered off the path, tripped on a root and came crashing down into a clump of rhododendron. Branches snapped and scratched her arms as wine splashed across her dress. And she wondered what the truth was. Could Alan be right? How could she not remember? Where had those words and actions gone? Was life happening in front of her only to slip through her brain like liquid through a sieve?

Pinpricks of shame stung Tiffany like a swarm of insects. Maybe Alan was right. Probably it was time to stop drinking. She would remind herself to quit tomorrow. Somehow, she would hang on to this feeling of being lost to herself, of being separated from her own action by a thick black fog. Her humiliation felt hot enough to burn till morning.

In the home, laughter and glass tinkled. Dinner was being served. And she was not there. She was the hostess and she was not there, but rather smeared with dirt and wine, covered in mosquito bites and sitting beneath a mangled rhododendron. She pondered making the trek back. She would like another glass of wine, just one more to get through tonight. The food smelled so good. But it was such a long walk. And she was so tired that her mind could not make her body move. She would stay here. Gregory would know what to do. He always knew how to make the bad things better. He always had an escape hatch, another plan, a way to get out of one life, into another.



She curled up in fetal position under the bush and slid out of consciousness. As the loons shrieked the only notes they knew, as Gregory began to serve their new friends and neighbors, she had one last thought before the blackness fully embraced her. Everything was completely wrong. And everything was exactly as it should be.