

## THE SOMM

2018 ~~Reisling~~ Riesling. Norheim. Herbal, stone fruit. Crisp and dry.

Another sniff, then down the drain. Next.

2009 Chardonnay. Napa. Vanilla and apricot. Creamy yet acidic.

I set my pencil down and stretched. *See, swirl, sniff, sip, savor.* I always have a little trouble with that last one. Not as much trouble, however, as I had with *i-before-e*. My jaw still ached from the Riesling, a vintage I had liked last year for a pairing with shrimp. I hoped to sell the rest of it from my inventory at a tasting, but so far no one had gone for it – Rieslings were usually sweeter, but this producer had been chasing the dry trend. I shut my notebook, enjoying the leather beneath my fingertips. Small pleasures.

“Tell me, dear, how *do* you stay sober in your line of work?”

Mrs. Hudson howled at her own cleverness, her unnaturally white teeth protruding audaciously. She patted at her blonde hair, which didn’t seem to move at all. I imagined her knocking on a neighbor’s door, asking to borrow this joke like a cup of sugar.

“Oh, leave her alone, Beverly,” said Mr. Hudson, draining his glass. He swished the liquid around in his mouth, then swallowed. “I quite enjoy this, Laura. Put us down for a case.”

“Of course,” I said. I took a meditative inhale, summoning the very last drops of my patience, taking in the different smells in my shop. *Oak*, from my decorative barrels. *Curry*, from the Indian restaurant next door. The Hudsons had been here for roughly 45 minutes.

“Tell me, dear,” Mrs. Hudson began again. This was how she always introduced a rhetorical question. “Do you make any of these wines yourself?”

“My god, Beverly!” said Mr. Hudson, scandalized. “Sommeliers don’t *make* the wines. They taste them.” He wiggled his empty glass at me, black eyebrows raised. He wanted another sample. It would be his ninth. I felt a pang of some emotion, deep in my gut. Humiliation? Hatred? I pushed it down and forced my lips into a thin smile.

“I evaluate many,” I said. “I import the finest. Which charity did you say this party is for?” I wished they would leave.

“Oh, Mexican something-or-other,” said Mr. Hudson. “Lil’ tacos in cages. It’s more Beverly’s thing,” he assured me. I promptly banged my knee on the solid oak counter.

“Sana, sana, colita de rana,” crooned Montserrat, pressing the Band-Aid softly on to Laura’s knee. Laura jerked away.

“That’s for babies, mama,” she said. She had been chasing the working cats and fell over a lump in the soil, right onto a jagged granite rock. Her mother had asked her to stop, and she had disobeyed, and why not? She was seven and nimble and bored. This felt like karma. No, it felt more like her mother had conjured the stone up from the soil to teach her a lesson. Though she didn’t actually believe Montserrat would do it, this thought disturbed her so she tried to think of something else. She honed in on the sprig of rosemary in the pocket of Montserrat’s dress. It had periwinkle blossoms and Laura could smell the woodiness.

“There you go!” said Montserrat, giving her good knee a squeeze. “What?” she said, to Laura’s sulky side-eye.

“I could’ve done that.”

Montserrat shrugged. She was stout with a clever face, bronze skin and brown eyes, though at night they looked black. Her long dark hair tickled Laura's skin.

"What were you doing in here?" Laura asked. They were in the tiny bungalow they shared together with Laura's father Oscar, on the edge of their family's vineyard in Santa Ynez, California. Montserrat was born there to immigrant parents and Oscar immigrated to the US from Ireland when he was twelve. Laura was born in this house. She stood to get a drink of water. Montserrat scooped up a book bound in brown leather, then put it on top of her head.

"Balancing," she said.

Laura paused gulping as her mother glided over to her, book barely wobbling. She pantomimed pouring the water onto Montserrat, who gasped and caught the book with both hands. This made Laura giggle.

"Sometimes I think you're a witch," said Laura. It was Montserrat's turn to giggle.

"Why?"

Laura shrugged. She limped over to the desk, where her mother did the accounting for their vineyard. This corner of the house was made into an office where Montserrat could work and, though they had little room to spare, keep her considerable collection of books. There were not just mass-market paperbacks and hardcovers, but also rarities, collectibles, leatherbound classics. Laura ran her fingers over the soft spine of one such volume. She breathed in the leather and paper from the books... *some kind of wood, or nut? Coffee. Rosemary.*

"You have a lot of books," said Laura. "And some of them have *got* to be spellbooks."

A roar of laughter from the doorway startled them both. Laura's dad was home. Oscar had blue eyes and a pink complexion and, though not a large man, he could have a large presence. Normally his arrival was announced by the sputtering of the old orange VW bus he

drove, which Laura called “The Tangerine,” but sometimes he would cut the engine early and coast up the dirt drive, hoping to surprise them. Montserrat began to scold him for sneaking up, but he held up a large brown bag in truce.

“Sorry, Monce,” he said. “Brought dinner!”

Montserrat took the paper bag from him and began emptying it on the chopping block – a bottle of red wine, a hunk of cheese, something wrapped in white paper.

“Steak?” Montserrat said. Oscar was opening the wine.

“We worked hard this week, didn’t we, love?” he said. “Little luxuries.” He winked at Laura, who was helping herself to the cheese. Montserrat didn’t respond, but pushed the steak away.

“I’ll grill it up,” said Oscar. He held out a glass with a small taste of the wine. When Montserrat accepted it, Oscar kissed her cheek and gave her a small, secretive pat on her belly. This exchange made Laura smile.

“Can I have some too?” she asked. Oscar plucked her cup and added a small portion of the wine. He slid it back to her.

“What do you smell?” he asked. He began to prepare the steak. Laura sniffed the wine.

“Berries?” she said. She was hesitant. She didn’t want to get the answer wrong.

“You can do better than that,” he said over his shoulder. The smells of the steak were reaching Laura now – sizzling fat, the iron tang of the blood – and she could still detect the nuttiness of the cheese.

“I can’t, there are too many smelly things in here. Can I take it outside?”

“The other smells are important too,” he said. “Give it a little swirl.”

Laura tried harder. She stuck her nose into the cup and inhaled.

“I definitely smell berries and fruit,” she said. Montserrat and Oscar exchanged an amused look. “Also dirt. And lavender. Daddy’s smells. And mama’s books.” Laura had closed her eyes, and she opened them now. Oscar sniffed loudly. Montserrat’s eyes were shining.

“Well done, there,” he said. Laura frowned. This response seemed muted – she had expected applause. Had she done it wrong again? She was about to ask when her mother let out a moan. Oscar removed the steak from the heat.

“Indigestion, love?” he asked. Montserrat shook her head. “The wine?”

“I didn’t drink any yet,” she said. She moaned again, louder, holding her abdomen. Laura wasn’t sure if this was another test, or a prank, so she stayed silent and watched. Oscar looked afraid.

“Let’s get you to the doc,” he said. “Best to be careful.”

Montserrat looked like she wanted to argue, but doubled over again. She was crying now. Laura didn’t think it was a test anymore. She sat frozen, cup of wine still undrunk in her grasp, as her father helped her mother outside into the night.

He rushed back in to retrieve Montserrat’s purse. He paused to address Laura.

“Gotta take mam to the physician,” he said. His voice was lilting Irish. This was Laura’s final signal that something scary was happening. “Why don’t you cut yourself a piece-a that steak? Eat up and we’ll be back shortly.”

Laura listened as the Tangerine briefly chortled, then buzzed off into the night. She looked around. The bungalow seemed vast now that she was alone in it. She was sure an hour had passed before she got up from her chair, but the steak was still warm when she cut into it. At first she tried with a butter knife, the only one she was allowed to touch, but then cautiously took up a steak knife and cut herself exactly one-third of the meat. Her parents still hadn’t returned

when she finished. Finding herself again at the cutting board, she sawed the remainder of the steak in half and ate it. Then ate the third portion. She went outside to check for the bus and was greeted with a crushing darkness; no streetlamps or stars lit the world outside. She vomited in the dirt and returned inside. Feeling strange and missing her mother, she took the glass of wine from the table and smelled it. Though faint, the scents she had picked up earlier were still there. *Coffee and earth, lavender and leather.* She put the cup to her lips and drained it.

When Oscar and Montserrat returned several hours later they found Laura asleep in their bed. Laura woke when he lifted her. “Mama’s okay?” she asked. Oscar stiffened.

“I’m here,” came Montserrat’s voice. The house was dark but Laura could tell her mother was in their room. Oscar lowered Laura gently to her bed, and she fell asleep almost immediately. After all, everything was fine now.

She didn’t wake until the next morning, so she didn’t see Montserrat crawl to her bed, didn’t feel her curl up around her and hug her from behind. She didn’t hear her mother whisper for the last time, “I love you.” Laura slept the rest of that night, dreaming of chasing cats.

I pressed my swelling knee on the cold glass of the small refrigerator under the bar. *Mexican something-or-other*, his voice echoed.

“If you *could* make your own wine, what kind would you make?” Mrs. Hudson asked, ignoring us both and fluffing her blonde coif with long pink fingernails.

“I don’t know,” I said. I really didn’t want to share any information about myself with these people. The doorbell jingled and a customer walked in; Pilar, from the Italian restaurant down the street, waved sheepishly. She was tall and tattooed, muscled from CrossFit and restaurant work and from carrying crates of my wine. I liked her. I retrieved a crate for her.

“It’s right here, Pilar,” I said. The bottles clinked together as I re-checked them.

“Thanks Laura!” Pilar looked guilty. “Is it cool if we maybe leave a couple bottles out this week? Sorry,” she said quickly, and I knew I must look disappointed.

“No worries,” I said. I glanced at the squabbling Hudsons. I was not eager to go back to them. “Let’s adjust it however you need to.” We chatted and finished quickly. Pilar left with her crate and I felt my smile dissolve into bitterness.

“Come on, you’ve got to have a favorite,” Mrs. Hudson persisted.

I had tasted thousands, and many of them were fantastic, but did I *love* them? At some point my passion, obsession even, had turned into a search for defects. I had vague memories of my mother’s affection, my father’s indifference.

“I do occasionally experiment with blends,” I said. I was feeling short of breath. I was also lying. “Sometimes if I taste a wine I’m not fond of, I’ll try to blend it with another wine to make something... palatable.” I had never done this.

“Fascinating,” said Mr. Hudson. He was scratching at a mole on the back of his hand. Mrs. Hudson was reapplying lipstick. It was unclear if either of them had even heard my weird false confession. Suddenly I had a memory of warmth, of deep red fruit and spice.

“Blends can be lovely,” I said, feeling detached from my voice. “There was a red blend, Australian maybe? I remember my – ”

“I would choose champagne,” said Mrs. Hudson. “In fact,” she continued, leaning forward in confidence, “I would gladly accept a glass right now.” I could feel her breath.

*Lavender, coffee, hint of grapefruit.*

“Of course,” I said automatically, relieved at the excuse to move away from her. I felt shaky and strange. What the hell was wrong with me? I bent down and scanned the cooler for a

bottle. No champagne bottles were already open, which meant that I would have to open a new one to serve Mrs. Hudson one glass, on the house, or else risk insult and loss of patronage. It occurred to me that she hadn't actually cared how I answered her question.

"I'll just have to *pop* to the back to grab a new bottle," I said. *Don't trouble yourself*, I hoped she would say.

"Splendid," drawled Mrs. Hudson.

"I'll take one of those as well," said Mr. Hudson.

I retrieved my corkscrew from under the bar and slouched to the storeroom cooler. While studying wine I had often dreamt of working with wealthy clients, becoming a renowned sommelier. This was before I had actually known any wealthy people, and now each interaction left its own uniquely sour taste in my mouth. My shop had been struggling.

"Let's do this one," Mr. Hudson breathed into my ear. I froze. He reached over me to grab a bottle. Prosecco. His thigh brushed against my hip. I regained my senses and moved sharply away.

"That isn't champagne," I said.

"No need to tell Mrs. Hudson," he said, winking. "She won't know the difference."

He sauntered through the door as I stood shaking with a mix of rage and revulsion. I wasn't sure how he could know that I was struggling, but I took it as a very bad sign. Desperation is a sign of weakness, and he had thought me weak enough to make a pass at me by saving me money on free samples for his wife?

I wanted to kick them out but I suddenly felt so drained, and... my shop. My shop was my love, tucked among other odd shops in the Mission district of San Francisco. Bay Area landlords were not forgiving, and I needed to keep clients, not lose them, if I wanted to make



rent. For a moment, I thought I might be sick. *I'll do this and never see them again*, I vowed. I'm not sure who I hated more in that moment, Mr. Hudson or myself.

"Tell her to do a case of red!" Mrs. Hudson called from the bar. Mr. Hudson paused, turning.

"Oh yes, Laura? Let's add a case of red along with the other, whatever it was. Whatever kind of red you recommend." He winked again, and disappeared.

I could still smell Mr. Hudson's cologne, mixed with... *tobacco, leather, orange marmalade*? I shuddered. I returned to the bar just as Mr. Hudson was popping the cork off the bottle of prosecco, spilling a significant amount on the floor. They both laughed as they poured substantial glasses and ignored my presence for the rest of their visit, for which I was both thankful and resentful. I felt like a ghost.

I glanced at their tasting flights and noted which glass Mr. Hudson had "quite enjoyed." The 2018 Riesling.

At that moment the door jingled. I felt a pain shoot through my left armpit and wondered if I was experiencing a heart attack. Caused by the Hudsons? Or the specter hovering just outside my door? Blue eyes nestled in a ruddy face, peering in through the window. I recognized him immediately.

I realized I still had my corkscrew clenched tightly in my fist and I released it, letting it clatter on the oak countertop. Hard, dark lines imprinted on my palm.

Laura lay on top of the Tangerine in the warm spring sun, reading one of her mother's old books, *Locas mujeres* by Gabriela Mistral. Oscar sold nearly all of Montserrat's collection a few years back during a bad patch, and Laura only had a few left. A friend had dropped her off an hour

ago, and the VW bus was parked with her father nowhere to be found. She had finished her chores before leaving that morning, so there wasn't much else for her to do.

A short while later she glimpsed him walking toward her, on the dirt path that led to the vineyard where they both worked.

"You're back?" he said upon reaching her. She marked her spot in the book.

"Yep."

"How'd it go?"

"Fine."

Oscar narrowed his eyes at her, and she smirked.

"I passed," she said, with relish, "every section."

Oscar whooped and kicked the dirt. "Better get down here, wee wretch!"

Delighted with the reaction, Laura rolled off the van and embraced her father. Her joy was short-lived though, as Oscar gave her a few brief pats on the shoulder and then headed into the cabin. Shortly after Montserrat died they had lost their vineyard and home, and had since been taking work at other farms and wineries around northern California. Because they moved so frequently, Laura hadn't attended school traditionally. That morning she had passed the GED test.

"Where'd you go?" she asked, trailing him inside. He pulled a bottle out of his bag. She took it and examined the label.

"Brought you a present," he said. "Knew we'd be celebrating."

"Yeah right," she said, but she was pleased. "Wow, this is a great vintage! Freebie?" The owners of the vineyard where they were working offered Oscar the perk of choosing one bottle to bring home every week.

“Bought it,” he corrected. “No cheap stuff today!”

“I’m sure if you asked, they’d have let you pick whatever you want,” said Laura. “They take advantage of you.”

“I don’t ask for more than I’m owed. It’s desperate.”

“So?” Laura rummaged for a corkscrew. “What do you care what they think of you? Would’ve saved us some money, anyway.”

“Ta! You sound like your mother,” he said. He took the corkscrew from her hand. She took her time getting glasses from a cupboard.

“Desperation is a sign of weakness,” he said finally. “Never let others see your weakness. They’ll own you.” He opened the bottle and poured them each a glass. “What do you reckon?”

Laura inhaled deeply from the glass. *Cinnamon. Soil. Peach or plum? And leather, though maybe that was the book.* She considered which to share with her father.

“Reminds me of mama,” she said instead. Oscar nodded, then seemed to remember something. He drained his glass, patted around his coat, then took up his bag again.

“Gotta get back,” he said. “Be home late.” Laura followed him outside. He kissed her hair and said, “Congratulations, love,” and set off walking. It wasn’t strange that he left the Tangerine; the cabin was cramped, and lately Laura had been claiming the bus as a bedroom.

Laura allowed herself a leisurely afternoon of reading. She didn’t wait up for Oscar, who often worked late at the winery. A knock on the door woke her the next morning.

“When was the last time you saw him?” asked the man in the doorway. He was from the winery, said that her father had been due there the day before yesterday and had never shown.

“Yesterday,” she said. She felt numb. The man left her alone but was soon followed by another, a cop this time. His questions were more specific. *What time did you see him last? What*

*did you talk about? Was he acting differently?* Laura answered honestly. *Two in the afternoon. Small talk. No.*

Oscar didn't return. The owners asked Laura to vacate, as they needed the cabin for the next person to fill Oscar's position. She packed what little she owned into the Tangerine and left too.

*2013 Shiraz/Cab sauv blend. Barossa Valley. Blackcurrant, plum, baking spice and earth – a hint of leather just developing. Full bodied and complex.*

Making a mental note of the year and region, I closed my notebook and walked to the section of Australian wines. I had told him to come back in a few hours and when he appeared again at my door, I was as ready as anyone could be.

"This is lovely," he said, sipping the Aussie blend I had selected.

"I want to know about mama," I said. He choked.

"Jumping right in, then?" he said.

"I know it's lovely, I picked it," I said. "I'm a fucking sommelier."

"You know, don't you?" he asked, addressing the former statement. "You were there."

I asked The Question, the one that haunted me. "Why did she die in my bed?"

"We went to the damned hospital," he said. "We went and they said there was nothing to do, and they sent her home. Somethin went wrong, or they were wrong, and..."

I poured myself some wine but didn't drink it.

"And your baby brother along with her," he continued. "I reckon she knew what was happenin' and she wanted to hold you one last time."

He looked as shocked as I felt.

“You left me,” I said. “Why are you here now?”

He sniffed his wine. Then, “This reminds me of your mother.” He stood abruptly, patting my shoulder as he moved toward the door.

“Dad,” I called, and he paused.

“Yeah, love.”

“Is this real?”

I cursed after every step I took up the Hudsons’ driveway. Their assistant had only picked up the case of red wine and left the other, in a hurry. I would be damned if I got stuck with this case of Riesling, so I assured Mrs. Hudson that I would bring it over myself. Which is why I was fumbling with a forty-pound box (“Do be sure to bring it to the *service* entrance, dear”) as a raucous party blared from inside their eight-bedroom, twelve-bathroom monster of a house. I was determined to be as quick as a thief, leaving instead of taking, and to avoid any further conversation with the Hudsons.

“Wine,” I muttered, heaving the crate at the employee who answered.

“Do I have to sign?” he asked, struggling with it. I shook my head no and turned to leave.

“Is that Laura?” Mr. Hudson’s voice cut through the cacophony. I winced.

“You absolutely *must* come in!” His speech was slightly slurred. I remembered his breath on my ear. *A hint of leather, just developing.* “For a moment, at least. Hey-o, maybe you could do a wine tasting with the guests!” He barked a laugh. My voice felt severed from me, as it had during Mrs. Hudson’s angling for free champagne. Saying nothing, I turned to leave.

“I’ll walk you,” said Mr. Hudson, skipping to keep up with me. Fury rose up in my chest. I felt indigestion from swallowing so much anger. I felt wetness on my cheek and brushed it

away hastily. Tears. I thought about tears of wine. The Gibbs-Marangoni effect – small droplets of wine form on the inside of the glass as the alcohol evaporates. *Viscosity, density*. More tears around the glass means higher alcohol content in the wine.

“Listen, Laura,” Mr. Hudson began, interrupting my meditation. I hurried my pace. “I just want to express how much Mrs. Hudson and I value you.”

“Thank you,” I said through gritted teeth. “I... same.” We reached my wine shop van. Oxblood trimmed in silver. The name of my shop flourished across the side – *Antigone Wine*. Mr. Hudson took my hand and I shuddered. *Patchouli, vanilla, bacon*.

“I have a proposition I want to make to you, Laura,” he said, trying to make eye contact. I stared at his necktie. “We... would love to get to know you better,” he continued. “Possibly expand... the nature of your employment.”

“Mr. Hudson, I value your *business*,” I interrupted. He was about to offer me a job, or money, so why did this feel like a shakedown? I twisted out of his grasp and turned to open the back of the van. My eyes were drawn to a livid scratch on the side of it – something had scraped against it, revealing the original fiery orange.

“Laura, I agree, sincerely,” he said. “I would hate to lose you as our supplier.” He grasped me by the shoulder and placed himself in between me and the van. Wine sloshed in his glass, and I felt it land on my cheek. Or was it more tears? “You really should hear us out. We know the... *position* you’re in, and we’d like to help you.”

He took a slurp from his glass and I felt his breath in my hair. *Tobacco, shellfish, brandy*. I brought out my hand from my pocket. His hand reached for my shoulder again, and his eyes bulged and he made a choking sound. The glass of red wine shattered on the ground. I felt numb. Blood flooded around my shoes, mixing with the spilled wine. *Slow, viscous tears*.

*2018 Red Blend™. USA. Red and black fruit, oak, licorice. Rich and smooth.*

I stood behind a dark brown leather chair in a corner of Mr. Hudson's study, clutching a glass of the red with my good hand. I had squeezed my corkscrew like a stress ball, leaving a sizeable gash on my palm. Thinking Mr. Hudson was having a heart attack, I ran to get help and was promptly invited in.

The study opened up to a large gallery and both were filled with murmuring guests munching themed hors d'oeuvres. Chorizo and cheddar flan bites. Mexican "wontons" with chipotle sesame sauce. Crispy puff pastry with ceviche. (This one went well with the damned Riesling.)

"This cause is so very dear to us," said Mrs. Hudson. Mr. Hudson stood by her side, a glass of Riesling in his hand. Luckily, his attack of angina had passed before her speech. She beamed up at him like a Catholic saint. "Thank you so much for your generosity this evening, and every day. I thank you, my husband thanks you, and most of all... the *children* thank you."

Eighty pairs of bejeweled hands applauded the Hudsons. My best clients. My new employers.