

## Feathers

She has feather tattoos on the backs of her legs. He watched as the pair of gangly legs disappeared through the swinging wooden doors that led to the bathroom. He knew it was her. He knew no one else with tattoos like that on their calves.

The bar had been designed to look like an old saloon. Everything had been made of wood and the effect gave the place a crude appearance. Furnishings were sparse and void of any real decoration. An old wood burning stove sat in the corner and the entryway showcased a set of batwing doors. The place had a smell of old wood and aged whiskey.

Samuel leaned back in his barseat and glanced at the bartender, a balding man probably in his mid thirties.

He held up a finger to indicate that he wanted another drink.

The bartender nodded and turned toward the wall of glass bottles facing Samuel.

Samuel caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the large mirrors behind the shelves of alcohol. His dark curls were pretty sedate that day and his round tortoise shell glasses created a nice contrast to his brown button up. He had his sleeves rolled to his elbows. He was feeling pretty good about himself which was nice considering the circumstances.

He hadn't seen Mathilda since their daughter's birthday party. Things had been cordial but he would be lying to himself if he were to say that it hadn't been hard.

Mathilda's newest boyfriend, Ricky, had also been present, long and lean in a pair of Levi's. He was a musician in a band that was successful. His arm had been around Mathilda's waist almost nonstop. Samuel had looked away, especially when he saw Ricky's hand descending down Mathilda's dress, resting upon her ass.

Samuel accepted the single malt whiskey the bartender now scooted his way.

"Thank you," he said, peeling fresh green dollars from his wallet and placing them upon the bar.

He took a large sip immediately, preparing himself for the moment Mathilda returned from the bathroom.

The alcohol went straight to his insides and simmered with the whiskey that was already there.

"Samuel," came a voice into his thoughts. He turned and there she stood.

Her voice was a breath as it always had been. It was funny to him, really, that she had always

loved feathers so much for that was exactly what she reminded him of. Her voice, so airy, her body so thin. Even her personality was somehow thin and light. There was something about her that just blew in the wind, which was how she had always lived her life.

He took her in then from head to toe, her long straight brown hair, her light grey eyes, the freckles that dotted the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. She was wearing a dress that stopped near her knees. It was sheer and white, the color of eggshells and she wore a brown fur shawl across her shoulders with a foxtail hanging off the end. She had on her old brown cowboy boots. He couldn't believe she still had them.

"Mathilda," he was finally able to say.

"What are you doing here?" She asked now, clutching her bottle of beer closer to her chest almost as if using it for protection, something to console her.

"Well, having a drink," he made an attempt at a smile.

"I can see that," she said dismissively, shaking her hair. "I mean I've never seen you here before."

He shrugged, "I come here sometimes."

"It just doesn't seem to be in your neighborhood," she said, she moved closer to the bar, leaning against it. He knew that when she wanted to gain leverage in a situation, she would move her body at different angles, self aware enough to know how to use her looks. Her shawl had somehow begun to fall from its perch over her chest, exposing her ample cleavage. He wished it didn't still turn him on.

He looked up.

"Where's Chloe?" She asked now, her breathy voice even lighter.

"She's with a babysitter."

"Oh, that's nice," she looked away now, fidgeted, kicked her boot softly to the left. "Do you think, do you think maybe I can see her again soon, sometime?"

When she looked at him now, she appeared like a little girl, vulnerable, asking for something she knew she didn't deserve.

"I don't know if it's a good idea," he took a sip of his drink.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry about before." She said. "I'm different now. Things are different now."

"I'm sure they are," he said but he looked down at his hands.

“They are!” Her eyes had grown wide, her voice became thicker and less translucent.

He looked at her, his hand on his chin, his fingers cupping his mouth.

“How’s work?” He asked her.

“Work?” She looked confused. “Well I just got a new job.”

He smirked, “what happened to the railroad job?”

“I didn’t like it,” she looked away.

“You didn’t like it,” he repeated. It was the same old story. “And how’s Ricky?” He asked now, his eyes direct upon her.

“Ricky?” She looked lost.

“Ricky. The guy you brought to Chloe’s birthday party.”

“He’s...he’s...,” her voice trailed off. She pulled her beer bottle even closer now.

“Why do these things matter? I just want to see my daughter,” her voice had grown an octave.

He laughed at this, “but when you left, when you left us,” his voice came out in a seething tone, his teeth were clenched, “you said you weren’t cut out for the motherhood thing. You said you didn’t want her.” He delivered a punch as he spoke the last four words.

Her eyes had begun to well with tears.

Music sounded in the bar at that moment. It was the opening to the Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter.”

“Fuck you,” she spat out at him now, her eyes brimming with tears.

The bartender looked over at them, his eyebrow raised.

Samuel mustered a smile, although it was very forced. He was sure it wasn’t convincing.

Mathilda sent him a scathing look and turned on the heel of her boot.

He listened to her walk away and looked up once just to catch those feathered legs walk out the swinging front door.

Chloe was absolutely the best part of Samuel’s life, he couldn’t wait to see her ever day. On this day in particular, he wanted to hurry home, but the drink had been a precursor to some after

hours work he had to finish up at the office. He had paid his tab, smiled again at the bartender who gave him a consoling look.

“Women,” Samuel said, trying to pull off a self-assured grin. He had gotten good over the years at the self-assured look. It helped him often when he was in court. He took one last sip of his whiskey, the bartender was bent over the sinks, washing glasses. “Good luck with that one,” he offered to Samuel. Samuel stopped himself from replying and merely waved, a grim smile on his face. There was no luck with that one, he thought to himself.

He left through the same swinging doors Mathilda had and walked out into the sunny day, a jarring greeting after the time he had just spent in the dark bar. His insides were alive with whiskey and the heated encounter with Mathilda. The woman was infuriating, didn't she even realize how lucky she was he had allowed her to come to the birthday party? He didn't want to have anything to do with her if he could help it and he knew it was confusing as hell for Chloe.

He reached his office building, a tall gray building in the center of a bustling part of town. He went through the large glass doors and into the lobby, set foot in the elevator and pushed the button for the fifth floor.

His office was large and it had a view. It had taken him time to get to where he was in life, but not as much time as it would maybe take a lot of other people. He prided himself on this fact. He was smart, always had been and he knew what he wanted. How he had ever fallen for a girl like Mathilda was still beyond him. Sometimes, he thought it was the wildness that drew him to her. She lived life so freely and he had never really been that way. Everything he did was thought out, even getting that drink had been planned in his mind, time had been accounted for. Another part of him sometimes thought that what drew him most to Mathilda was the mystery of her, her ability to live without any real attachments to anything. She had promised her life to him and then abandoned him. She had even abandoned her own daughter.

He sat, his pencil in his mouth, trying to redirect his thoughts to work and away from her. It never ceased to amaze him the strange hold she had on him. She was the one thing in his life that he had never been able to understand or classify or put into a box. He imagined trying to, folding her limbs upon themselves. First her legs would be tucked up and then her arms so that

she herself would form a perfect cube and then he could safely put her in a box. Then perhaps he would duct tape the top, label it fragile, and find some relief for a moment. Knowing she was out there in the world, living life, breathing, left an unease inside him at all times.

He sat for awhile in his office that evening, even after he had finished work. He looked out at the city, the reflection of glimmering lights dancing in the Hudson like fireflies.

When he got home, Chloe was asleep. he paid the babysitter and bid her adieu. He climbed up the staircase and could see the nightlight from her room casting a shadow on the carpeted hallway. He came to the door and looked in at her. She was fast asleep, her brown curls sweeping the expanse of the pillow. He stood in the doorway a long moment and watched her sleep, watched the rise and fall of her young body as she took breath after breath. He still marvelled at the wonder of life and how she had grown all her functioning body parts from inside her mother. He moved closer into her room and kissed her forehead. How could anyone walk away from something so beautiful? he mused to himself. He planted one more kiss upon her and retreated to his own room.

He noticed something on his bed right away. It looked like a piece of paper. He walked over to the bed and there upon his down comforter, a sheet of white paper had been placed. It was folded long ways. On the outside had been written "Daddy."

It was a note from Chole, he smiled to himself. But, as he opened it, her realized it was much different than the mail he was used to expecting from her.

She had written one sentence in the middle of the page. The looseleaf was crinkled now in straight lines, a permanent memory from the folding.

The sence said , "there's a door in mommy's garden."

A slight chill ran along Samuel's spine as he read this. It seemed an odd coincidence that Chloe would bring up her mother on the very day he himself had run into her. Chloe didn't talk about

her mother often and Samuel typically didn't encourage it.

He remembered Mathilda's garden. One summer, she had taken up gardening and had seemed happier than he ever remembered seeing her. Despite her party girl antics and flights of fancy, Mathilda was often a sad person. She had long bouts of sadness and at times had become horribly depressed, not even leaving her bed. He had never known what to do for her in those moments, she seemed to want to be far, far away from him.

He stared at the piece of paper, he pondered what to do. He set it on his nightstand and went to sleep.

He awoke in the dead of night, the paper was staring at him from its perch, bright white blaring at him in the dark. He knew he wouldn't find sleep now. He sat up in bed, swung his legs over the edge and fished in the night for his slippers and his glasses. Once these items had been located, he found himself descending the stairwell. He looked around the house, all was quiet and still. He opened the backdoor and walked out into the black night. The backyard was huge, they had bought a house upstate because they had wanted a big yard. Samuel continued to walk until he reached the slope that dipped into the sideyard. Mathilda's garden no longer bore any fruit or vegetables or flowers but a lot of the setup was still intact. The stone walkway she had made still served as a good path. He followed it and he looked around but he saw no door. He searched at the point where the garden met the house but there was no door in the side of the house. He hopped off the stone path and looked in other nooks of the yard when his foot suddenly hit upon something metal. He looked down and saw what looked to be a door handle.

There it was. A door in the ground, a small door with a metal handle. Had she put this door here? he thought to himself. Had she dug a hole in the ground? He crouched down and got on all fours. He examined the little door and its metal handle. He tugged at the handle, it wouldn't open. HE noticed a small keyhole so he decided to peek in.

He immediately recognized Mathilda because she bore such a strong resemblance to Chloe. She was rail thin, her mouse brown hair was tangled and unkempt. She was wearing pants that weren't long enough, the tapered ends hitting above her ankles. Her shoes looked like boy's shoes and the laces hung loosely and looked as if they hadn't been tied at all. Her shirt was pink with fringe dangling over her slightly exposed belly. "Silver Dollar City" was written on the front in light purple. She looked nervous and hungry, her grey eyes darted in a multitude of

directions. She was walking in a school. Children were teasing her. They called her “rat.” She must have been only eight. A strong sensation bubbled in Samuel now, a deep desire to reach out and touch the child as she walked all alone through the hallway, clutching a small stuffed monkey. A boy went past and pulled her hair. Samuel felt a pain growing in his chest and it rolled over his entire body as he watched Mathilda drop her monkey and stare at the boy. The boy’s face was like a cartoon, exaggerated features taunting the small girl. She walked down the hall, sneakers squeaking, until he could no longer see her. She seemed to have disintegrated into thin air. He kept his eye pressed against the keyhole, still on all fours, holding his breath. Would there be more? He wondered. But nothing came. Chills ran all over Samuel’s 6 foot frame. He wasn’t sure what he had just seen, although it was clearly a memory. How he had seen it was what perplexed him. When it became clear that nothing else was going to appear, he sat back and rested his rear end upon his feet. The moon hung low up in the sky. It was three quarters full that night and was a chalky white. It seemed to be falling closer to the earth, as if whispering to him that it, too, had seen through the keyhole and perhaps felt the same strange chill Samuel now felt. He stared at the moon, feeling its desire to reach out and touch. They were linked in that moment, each with the wish to console and hold the small girl. Samuel returned to his bed but he never found sleep. Mathilda’s grey eyes stared at him from the places where dreams usually lived.