

THE WHITE DRESS

In the last photo she posted, the happy couple stand under a massive flowering black ash tree, its feathery leaves punctuated by pungent bunches of cream-coloured blooms, some of whose petals are already crispy and tipped in brown only three days after bursting their buds. This ash, a relative of the olive tree, shares its name with the Old English ‘aesc,’ or Æ, used to describe the vowel sound uttered in *back*, *grapple*, *wrath*. The Æ/aesc (pronounced *ash*) had been transliterated from an older Futhorc rune, a rune that looks like one half a split arrow whose feathers had been put on backward. One vertical line, two short lines falling diagonally to the right from its apex. Dripping in heaving, sweet perfume. Falling like snow in the sun. This rune is one of three descendants of the a-rune Ansuz, so called after a pagan Germanic deity. Ansuz, over time, became three runes, discrete: *aesc*, *ac*, *os*. Ash, oak, godⁱ. I know that I hung on a windy tree / nine long nights, / wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin, / myself to myself, / on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run.ⁱⁱ He squints at the person taking the picture, a pair of purple plastic sunglasses hangs from his top button. She’s not looking at the camera, she’s looking at him, who is slightly behind her, her chin tipped up, her hair messily tied falls down onto her right shoulder. She’s holding the stem of a wine glass, its orange overexposed—a mimosa—and it’s tipped toward him as well, so the angles of her being surrender joyfully to his presence. Their creased eyes hide in the noon sun’s shadow. Her white cocktail dress is creased also, it’s slightly too big in the chest, and you can tell she’s bare underneath, but she looks comfortable in spaghetti straps, with the sun hitting, and maybe the mimosa too. Her left hand is just outside the frame, but she would have woken wearing both rings—engagement and wedding—for the first time that day. You can barely see the sky for the tree.

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The newlyweds arrived in Cuba early in the evening, a week after the wedding. The air smelled sulfuric and oddly cleansing as they exited the airport with their luggage. An attendant guided them onto a bus headed for the resort in Cayo Santa Maria along with several other tourists. While the bus grumbled through the city, a local guide entertained the tourists with jokes and history, and the passengers peered out trying to catch a look into houses’ lit windows. After a short while, abruptly, the light of streetlights and residences cut out. Loamy darkness cloaked the bus. The guide explained they were now on a causeway flanked by ocean on both sides—the only route to their destination, an hour and a half’s worth of driving. She gasped and his eyebrows popped up—they clasped hands. Several passengers pressed their faces to the open windows to get a better look, but nothing revealed itself. You could hear it, though. The ocean. Other passengers leaned into the aisle to see out the front windshield and saw two triangles of light over gravel, then grass that looked blue in the encroaching dark, then, only just illuminated by the headlights, the white pursed lips of the waves.

The couple were met by the hotel manager, who took them into his office through the pillars of the airy lobby. He was a handsome man with pockmarked skin and a silver flash of hair. Each one of his teeth competed with its neighbour for his listeners’ attention.

“How old are you guys, thirty?”

“Twenty-six,” she said. “Same age.”

“Oh, well, you look good, you got a pretty... Girlfriend? Wife? This your honeymoon?”

They nodded. The new husband stifled a yawn. It had been a short flight but a long day.

“My wife’s fat now, she doesn’t look like yours, oh no, but I love that woman and she still makes me so hard, and I love my kid, and she’s a great mom. Look at this kid, she made that for me—” and they admired the photos on his iPhone together with as much enthusiasm as they could muster while he explained the personal history behind each one—“Tell you something, I’m going to get you guys a real nice room, we’ll send you up a special treat. She’s going to love it. By the end of this stay, you’re not going to be able to stand up and she won’t be able to sit down. Ha!”

After a beat, the newlyweds laughed.

“Is there a WiFi password here?” she asked. The hotel manager wrote it for her on his business card and explained the reception wasn’t the best. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, try it in the lobby, that’s where the signal comes in. The manager, with mischief in his eye, asked if he could borrow her husband for a minute and so she stepped out and closed the door behind her and admired the lobby, its vaulted ceilings, its divinely tall palms in gigantic ceramic planters, glossy green fronds wide as beds. She noted the lone bartender at the bar that wrapped around one end of the interior, and beyond the bar the mouths of pathways that led away under electric globes, likely to chlorinated pools, or hotel rooms, the ocean, likely all three. The men had been in there long enough, she thought; she opened the door and they were hunched over the manager’s phone, and the manager was scrolling wildly, his eyes big, the husband bent close toward him with his hands clasped in his lap. She strode over to see what they were looking at. A gallery of naked, large-breasted women, areolas, piqued nipples, hairy pussies, a mosaic of skin. The manager clapped his phone face down on the table.

“Hey! You weren’t supposed to see that!” The manager’s arms sprang up in the air like he thought she might shoot him.

“I’ve seen porn before,” she said. The edges of her lips curled as though she were in on the fun. Her new husband looked up at her wordlessly, with an expression that said *WTF*, but it was mixed with another expression, one of polite suggestibility, and it was this gesture of his features that bore out most strongly.

They dropped their luggage off in the room, had sex, freshened up—she put on her freshly laundered white spaghetti-strap cocktail dress, then one she’d worn at her post-wedding brunch—then headed to the bar for a drink.

“So, the manager full-on kicked me out so he could show you his personal jerk-off gallery?” She moved her arm so it wasn’t touching his, so she could look at him face-on.

“He said he had sex with all those women.”

“Bullshit. He pulled those pics off Instagram, one hundred per cent. Maybe if he was paying them. But seriously, bullshit. I think I saw Charley Chase on there.”

“Who?”

“Never mind,” she said.

“He definitely slept with some of them. I saw a lot, and they weren’t all...” He slurped his daiquiri and watched the bartender shuffle to the other end of the bar while another couple waited for their drinks.

“It’s not very professional,” she said.

“He was helping me set up a surprise for you before that.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“That’s convenient.”

They waited for the bartender to finish making the other couple’s drinks and ordered another round of *bebidas de mujeres*. The husband’s eyelids fell mid-slurp and she smacked him on the shoulder. His head jolted and blue slush fell in his lap. She wiped it off for him. He wanted to go back to the room, and she didn’t. He lay his head in his arms while the seats filled up around them, guests speaking Spanish, English, Mandarin, French. The bartender didn’t speed up her pace. The wife talked to the group of friends sitting next to them while she finished her cocktail, then looked over at her spouse, either asleep or frustrated beyond recognition. She put her arms around him. He was asleep. One of the Spanish guys next to her husband asked her about their tattoos, which were still slick and inky. They’d gotten them two days following the wedding: an ampersand on her wrist, a matching duplicate on his forearm. Each person marked to celebrate the union. *Him & her*. Each one on the cusp of the other. The tattoo artist had told them it was a common design for newlyweds: a ligature, like the aesc, formed by two letters repeatedly appearing together, colliding. Joined in perpetuity. The Latin translation for “and” is “*et*.” In the ampersand you can make out the jaunty foot of the *t*, the round posterior of the *e*, the *t*’s cross-stroke

tipsily leaning down to embrace its partner. She whispered in his ear, *Do you want to go back?* and pried him off the chair and together they found their way to the room after getting lost in the maze-like pathways.

Nothing worked in their hotel room: the hot water didn't turn on, there was no alcohol in the mini-bar, and the patio door required both hands to open and great strength to close. The level of awareness required to navigate the path system had given them a second wind, though her more than him. He was content to drink a *cerveza* in the room and smoke on the balcony, she wanted to go back out to socialize at the bar. He wanted to watch TV and she wanted to at least play cards or something. It was the first night of their honeymoon and all he wanted was some peace, and all she wanted was some excitement. As it happened, and as was usually the case in their relationship, she got what she wanted. He was trying to watch Cuban music videos, and she was trying to open the balcony door—*it's freaking freezing with this AC—Turn it off, then—I did, nothing happened*—it was catching, catching, catching, catching, catching, she gave a rasping cry that never left her throat, swung her leg back and kicked the glass door in exasperation, and the glass sundered with a violent crack followed by the tingling of shards to the floor. She froze. Her husband sat up, clicked the TV off, yelled, *What the fuck, babe!* and walked over barefoot to survey the damage.

“What are we going to tell them?” he asked.

“We can say it was an accident.”

“I saw you drop-kick their property. This is a four-star hotel.”

“That's like two stars back home.” She shifted uneasily, would only look him in the face with one eye. “The door wasn't working anyway, it probably took a hundred guests shoving this thing before it finally cracked.”

“It didn't *finally* crack, *you* cracked it.”

“So, you're saying you want to pay for it?”

“No.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Why do I have to figure it out, it's your problem,” he said.

“No, sweetheart, it's *our* problem, remember?” She wagged her ring finger at him.

“Fine, we'll say it was an accident.”

The husband explained to the manager over the room phone that the door was sticky and had broken when they closed it too hard. The manager let them know he'd send a custodian to clean up the glass, but wouldn't be able to move them to a different room until later that week. *That's fine, thank you so much, we're so sorry*, the husband said. The custodian seemed sceptical when he saw the glass, “You just closed the door and it broke?” and, feeling guilty, the couple gave him space to work and went back to the lobby bar, bickering over the incident as they weaved through the property. Why must there always be drama? he said. If he could have been engaged in the moment and done something fun instead of hiding in the room, she said, it wouldn't have happened. At least I wasn't flirting with people at the bar earlier. At least I wasn't cruising porn with the locals like a fucking weirdo. They sat down, ordered their cocktails, and the energy zipped and zapped from one to the other like an eel eating its own lightning bolt. They chatted with the other guests at the bar, including the Spanish guy who didn't speak much English who'd asked about their tattoos. The undercurrent of unrest was too strong for the couple, though. While the episode was punctuated by moments of levity thanks to the presence of strangers, the talk between them degenerated with every fresh round to the point of her calling him a milquetoast pervert and him calling her a slut. He put cash down for drinks and trundled into the maze. She stayed at the bar and ordered another.

She was gesticulating in animated conversation with the friend of the guy who'd pointed out their tattoos, though she didn't speak Spanish and he didn't speak English. They knew maybe forty mutually understood words between the two of them. His friend, who could have translated, had left. When she

finally got up to leave, he offered to help her find her way through the maze, to bring her back to her room and her husband safely. She appreciated his help—she was drunk and those paths were impossible. The green shot up on both sides, the trajectories of the moths looped like string bows on the globes of light. His increasingly unwelcome attention like the orbit of dishwasher around a drain.

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Every pounding muscle in her legs screamed, *This is as fast as we can go*, reedy branches struck her face and arms, light, there's the light, there's the sound of her feet, and she didn't stumble until she reached the manager's office blasting light like a kingdom, or heaven.

The flat fronds towered over her where she sat sobbing in the lobby with the manager and a security guard he'd called in on his talkie. The men discussed the situation while her tears fell from her shiny face into her lap.

“Do you think she's telling the truth, though?” the manager asked in English.

“Look at her dress, it's ripped half off.” The guard had the tone of someone who must accept the obvious, though he did not want to. She had lost an earring, and a shoe. The guard brought her a mug of black coffee, she sipped, and someone showed up with a golf cart and the guard went with her to her hotel room, flying through the sulfuric night air in the maze. They opened the door. The husband was sleeping face down on the white sheets with his arms splayed out at his sides; she burst past the threshold, yelped his name, leaped onto his body and sobbed. The guard hung awkwardly by the doorway and eyed the duct-taped window. She told her husband about the grappling, about all of it, in general not in detail. He held her tight and she told the guard to go, she was tired, and she finished the coffee and fell asleep. She slept until late in the morning. He did not sleep at all afterward but for hours roamed the grounds and smoked cigarettes. He was there when she woke up.

There is no proven etymological connection between the powdery remains of fire and the tree known for its resilient wood, ideal for fashioning spears. Though they bear the same name, though the flowering black ash tree may be set alight, its heavy white blooms consumed by jumping flame and converted to charcoal and dust, the words' histories are separate. The ash of fire finds its origins in the Proto-Indo-European **as-*: to burn, glow. As in the Spanish *ascua*, ember. The other ash retains its original meaning: that tree of close-grained wood, striated skin, fluid sex, spinning keys, and feathered leavesⁱⁱⁱ. A sixth I know: when some thane would harm me / in runes on a moist tree's root, / on his head alone shall light the ills / of the curse that he called upon mine^{iv}.

They talked about it that day as they walked the paths in sunlight. *He didn't achieve his goal*, she said, and again, *He didn't achieve what he wanted to do*. They decided it would be best to enjoy their trip and forget, as much as possible, the events of the night before. She had no interest in pressing charges—*Waste of time*, she said, *even if they find him*—but if she saw him she would be violent, and he said he would be too, and they discussed tenderly the things they would do to him if he turned up.

After dinner that evening, during which the couple drank wine and shots of golden rum, they went to a different bar in the hotel than the night before and met a group of German tourists. The wife, in a conversation with one of the men, held her ear close to the man's mouth to better understand him through his accent. The husband glanced over, his stomach flipped and fell, he tried to glance away but felt the wrath rise into his throat where it hung, a glowing knot, and then walked over to the man, shoved him and shouted, “Get away from my wife!” The German was quick to act, both threw punches, then the German wrapped his thick arm around the husband's neck in a chokehold, where the husband's face turned red. The wife ran to the men, jumped on the German's back, linked her legs around his waist, and rained a powerful barrage of closed-fisted strikes on his skull. The German let go of the husband, the wife let go of

the German, and the couple went back to their hotel to cool down. While they were out, someone had delivered an elaborate floral bouquet. The surprise. The manager called their room phone.

“I heard about what happened with the other guests today.”

“And we are so, so sorry about that. My husband’s still very concerned and protective after what happened.”

“I know, I know, and that’s what I told the other guest, because I know why you’re angry, and he said he won’t press charges...but first the window, then the fighting...sadly we have to ask you to leave immediately.”

“And go where?” Her husband was sitting on the bed with his eyes trained on her.

“I don’t know, miss, we’ll give you two hours to pack. Sadly, you can’t stay here.”

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They set their luggage in the dirt beside them, outside the gates of the hotel. According to the woman on the hotel phone, a cab was forthcoming, though they couldn’t be sure. Neither had Internet service. He squinted into the darkness down the road, hoping for signs of an approaching vehicle, but the only lights were the stars, the bottlecap moon, and the ember of his cigarette. She set her head on his shoulder.

“We’ll be okay,” she said. “We’ll make it work.”

He was silent.

“I love you,” she said.

He flicked his cigarette onto the road and hugged her. His chin on the top of her head.

“I love you, too.”

ⁱ “Ansuz,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ansuz_\(rune\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ansuz_(rune)), January 2020.

ⁱⁱ D.L. Ashliman, “Odin’s Quest After the Runes,” *Hávámál: The Words of Odin the High One*, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/havamal.html#runes>, January 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Why do ash (trees) and ash (burnt residue) have the same name?” English Language and Usage Stack Exchange, <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/475444/why-do-ash-trees-and-ash-burnt-residue-have-the-same-name>, January 2020.

^{iv} D.L. Ashliman, “The Song of Spells,” *Hávámál: The Words of Odin the High One*, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/havamal.html#runes>, January 2020.