

Pete took the chair at the head of the table. It was the last remaining seat, the one with wide, gaping arms built for a man much broader than himself. As he did so his Aunt Adeline flinched—this was where his late Uncle Arthur had always sat—and so Pete shifted his chair a bit, half a foot to the right, so that he wasn't quite at the head of the long oval table but rather close to his sister Martha's husband, Steve. Immediately, he regretted this decision. Steve happened to be left-handed. They brushed forearms as they each buttered their dinner rolls.

For as long as he could remember, the Collins and the Leonards had gathered at Aunt Adeline and Uncle Arthur's for Thanksgiving. Aunt Adeline was a Leonard, of Pete's mother's side of the family, a self-proclaimed matriarch and definitely the best cook (though that didn't say much, for she was merely the one that chose to cook with the most wine). Still, she'd like to think that her Thanksgiving meals were often celebrated, even cherished, save for the year when Pete's mother Flora spilled the tub of gravy on her way from the kitchen to the dining room. They never mentioned that year. Pete thought it may have been 1993, the year he went off to college at Michigan State. It was also the year that his father passed.

For Pete, Thanksgiving had always been a puzzling day. A day when he had to put his blurred vision of family into focus, if not to almost immediately defocus with the help of alcohol and heaps of food that left the lower portion of his body numb. In the years before he was of age, he achieved this defocus through childish ways, playing silly games with the table settings and sneaking dusty malt balls from Aunt Adeline's secret stash before dinner. Anything to get his mind off conversation.

Anything to make him feel as though he was somewhere else, at some other party with some other name. It wasn't that Pete didn't enjoy his family, but that he simply didn't know how to interact. From an early age, he thought of them as just people. He didn't understand blood. He didn't understand lineage. In school, he approached family tree exercises as if they were elaborate puzzles, and lessons in the birds and the bees made him feel as though his connection to his parents was all that much more microscopic. He ceased calling his mother *mom* at age nine.

Pete looked to his mother, to the bony, large knuckles that clung to her glass. Perhaps his hands looked like hers, perhaps they did not. The glint of her wedding band caught his attention. She still wore it, though her husband had been dead for nearly twenty years. The stone was small, and Pete wouldn't have even noticed it if it weren't for the low sun that came through the window at the early dinner hour, pouring through their wine glasses and sending ruby reflections onto the thick, white table cloth.

It was time for dinner. Aunt Adeline cleared her throat. She tapped her glass. Pete stopped buttering his roll and awaited the customary grace while Steve continued to stab at the butter dish with his fat, dull knife. Pete made a mental note to address this with Martha—though he wasn't quite sure which issue was more pressing: Steve's impoliteness, or his excessive consumption of butter. Heart disease apparently ran in the family, at least in theirs.

"*Ahem,*" said Aunt Adeline. "I'd like to start with some good news and some bad news."

*Not grace,* Pete thought.

“Well, actually some might rather call it *bittersweet* news, for it’s actually just one bit of news, or whatchamackallit.”

Aunt Adeline always said *watchamackallit*, Pete thought.

“You see, I’ve just found out that I’ve beat the cancer. Well, actually, it was a false positive, so I didn’t—“

“Oh that’s *wonderful!*” Martha said. She wore her relieved look, the one where she let out a sweated breath. It was the same face Martha made after she used the bathroom.

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

“So what’s the bad news?” Steve said, pushing a wad of butter and breadcrumbs to the side of his cheek so that he could talk with his mouth agape. Perhaps he’d eaten so much saturated fat that it was already clogging up his ears.

“Well, that’s just it,” Aunt Adeline said. “That *is* the bad news. Now, you see, I’m just that much further from being back with Art. It’s *bad* news, I tell you. I would have let that cancer eat me alive, as fast as it could, and then—“

“I’m so sorry,” Steve said.

“I’m so sorry,” Martha said.

“I’m *so* sorry,” Flora said.

Pete felt thirsty.

“To Aunt Adeline’s health, may it be—whichever way you wish it sways,” Pete raised his glass. He took a gulp of red wine and wondered if his throat was already stained from the two glasses he’d had before dinner. The other glasses rose, met lips.

Pete eyed the meal on the table. There were all the usual suspects: the string beans, canned cranberry that was still much in the shape of the can, corn muffins and gravy, glazed carrots and turnips, brussels sprouts with too much salt, and of course the mashed potatoes—though he certainly didn't think they qualified as "mashed" (Aunt Adeline wasn't much of a detailist). It was all there, save for the one, the emblematic dish: the bird. Pete's mother had explained on the drive over that it had always been Uncle Arthur's responsibility to pick, roast, and carve the turkey, and, therefore, it was the honorable thing to exclude this piece of the meal this year. *Besides*, she'd said, it's not as if one of them quite knew how to roast a turkey. Pete hadn't considered the turkey a "piece" of the meal, but rather the meal in it of itself, and so he'd wondered momentarily where he'd get his protein from, and made a mental note to spend considerable time with the cheese platter during cocktail hour.

Now Pete thought he might have overdone it on the toasted brie.

"Please pass the potatoes," a voice said. It was Elinor. Elinor sat at the edge of the table, in the seat she always took. She had her hand pressed forward in a gesture he figured was supposed to signal her desire for those starchy clumps of unmashed potatoes, though he wasn't quite sure that hand was going to actually be useful in obtaining them. The potatoes were in front of Pete, but Pete made no move to pass them; Steve could pass the potatoes. Instead, Pete fixated on Elinor. Elinor had this way in which she acted as though she was alone, but that she was also being watched. Each gesture was deliberate, though not self-conscious. It was as if she was the star in her own film. Elinor was beautiful. Pete took to watching her a lot,

and he often imagined her simple lick of the lips, twist of her hair—the things she did as though they were written for her, for her as the character of Elinor. He often felt uncomfortable with the way he watched her at these gatherings, and then the way he later thought about her. Yes, Elinor was beautiful. Elinor was his cousin.

Martha coughed. Pete blinked. Steve passed the potatoes.

“Thank you,” Elinor said. “Here you go, dear,” Elinor said.

Pete looked to ‘dear’: a woman named Tibby, Elinor’s friend. Tibby had a long nose and long fingers. Elinor had never brought a friend before. In fact, for as long as Pete remembered, friends were not allowed at the Leonard Family Thanksgiving. *Only family and significant others, we’re not a soup kitchen!* Uncle Arthur had always said. Perhaps the rules had changed.

Elinor spooned a generous helping of unmashed potatoes onto Tibby’s plate. Tibby frowned (she must have noticed their lack of mash) and Pete suddenly felt protective of Aunt Adeline’s Famous Mashed Potatoes.

“Enough, babe,” Tibby said. She put her hand on Elinor’s hand. Pete felt a pang of jealousy and quickly took another gulp of wine. It dissipated.

“Tibby’s a vegetarian,” Elinor said.

“I don’t miss the turkey,” Tibby said.

“Ooh,” Flora said.

“Isn’t that lovely?” Martha said.

“Where do you get your protein?” Pete said.

Elinor glared at Pete.

“That’s right, nuts and legumes and things,” Pete said, answering his own question. Pete looked at Elinor. Elinor smiled at Tibby. Elinor and Tibby’s chairs seemed awfully close. Aunt Adeline must have had to seat them close together, in order to accommodate an extra guest.

“Yes, nuts and legumes. In fact, she’s actually inspired me to become a vegetarian myself, though I’ve only been at it for—what?”

“Eighteen days.”

“Yes, eighteen days.” Elinor said.

“It’s sweet, really,” Tibby said, “She says she’s doing it for the animals, but I really know she’s doing it for me,” Tibby smiled. Pete thought her smile was crooked. He remembered Elinor sucking on a turkey leg just last year. She seemed to rather have enjoyed it. Elinor must really be devoted to this friendship, he thought. Yes, Elinor would be like that, a good friend.

“So, Tibby, what brings you here?” Pete asked.

“What brings me here?” Tibby said. “Elinor brings me here.”

Pete thought this an odd answer. He didn’t much appreciate when others were coy with him, especially girls he didn’t know, girls with crooked smiles. Of course Elinor had brought her there; they had taken one car; Aunt Adeline only had a three car driveway. Pete took yet another sip of wine, emptying his glass. He let the slight spice of it calm him down. He adjusted his thoughts. There is no need to get worked up, he told himself. Perhaps Tibby had no family, he thought. Perhaps Elinor was doing her a favor. Perhaps she was extending her kindness. Yes, that was so like Elinor, to be kind. Kind Elinor, he thought. *Sweet Elinor.*

“This one’s sweet,” a voice said. Pete jolted, realizing he had been staring at his empty, purple stained glass. He looked up. Had he somehow spoken his thoughts aloud? “Well, sweeter than the cabernet,” the voice continued. It was Tibby. She began to pour a thick, syrupy wine into his glass. On instinct, Pete grabbed at it, pulling the glass away mid-pour, so that a stream of purple spilled onto Aunt Adeline’s fine linen tablecloth, splashing into the mashed potatoes.

“Pete!” Elinor said. “What are you *doing*? Have you no manners?”

“I’m so sorry,” Tibby said. “I’m *so* sorry.”

“Jesus!” Martha said.

“My potatoes!” Aunt Adeline said.

“*Dude*,” Steve said. Steve had a splash of wine on his dominant left hand.

“What did I tell you about saying that?” Martha said. Martha hated slang.

Pete looked at the sickly bowl of winey potatoes. He had never heard Elinor raise her voice before.

“I...she...it wasn’t a clean glass,” he said. “It’s not right to mix.”

“Oh for Chrissake,” Elinor said. “Since when are you such a snob?” Elinor turned to Tibby. “I’m sorry, babe.” She said. She put her hands on Tibby’s shoulders. “He’s being an ass. I told you, he gets like this.”

Pete stared blankly at the two girls.

“Excuse me,” Pete said. He excused himself.

Pete took his time making his way down the hall, past the framed newspaper clippings and dusty glass figurines that lined the walls. Uncle Arthur had liked to collect articles on his favorite sports matches. Aunt Adeline disliked photographs.

The glass figurines were mostly birds, frozen in flight. At the end of the hall there was a coyote, nose pointing to the front door. Once, when Pete was a child, he took a chip out of the coyote's tail and Aunt Adeline had scolded him with her cold hands.

In the washroom, Pete held his wobbly dick in his hands for what seemed like hours, trying to piss. He thought of the incident at the table. Of Elinor's face, her beautiful face breaking with the splash of wine as Pete absently shamed Tibby. His dick grew a little hard as he thought of that face, those strands of freckles dancing on her cheeks and her licking lips. He began to stroke himself, for a moment, imagining that face in front of his, until he was startled by the sound of merrymaking coming from the dining room. Pete felt ashamed, drawing himself back into the moment. It occurred to him that he may be a bit transparent, that his feelings toward Elinor weren't as private as he thought they might be. He washed his hands, bladder still full, resolving to make amends.

When Pete returned to the table he had considerably calmed, so much so that he felt compelled to make another toast.

"I've been thinking," Pete said, "And I'd like to make a toast." Pete reached for the stem of his glass, only to realize that it was sticky with spilt wine. He took the moment to survey the table: most everyone's plates were cleaned or at rest, the gravy and glazes congealed so that whatever was left was no longer edible. Steve held another roll, swathed in butter. Tibby picked at Elinor's plate. Martha sat, close to comatose, and Flora and Aunt Adeline anxiously held their glasses high, waiting.

"I'm terribly sorry for my behavior before, you see. I think I was just thrown off by seeing a new face," Pete cleared his throat. "So I'd like to toast Elinor. You



seem happy as ever. Thank you for sharing your friend with us. We welcome anyone you bring to our table with love.”

“Oh that was lovely!” Flora said.

“To Elinor’s happiness!” Steve said.

“To love!” Martha said.

“To Elinor and Tibby!” Aunt Adeline said.

“To us, dear,” Elinor said. She tipped her glass to Tibby.

Pete hadn’t expected such a resounding response, but he felt relieved that the attention was off of him. He wasn’t quite sure why the toast had shifted from Elinor, to Elinor and Tibby—he had purposefully chosen his words wisely, for he still didn’t much enjoy Tibby, and didn’t necessarily want to directly include her. Regardless, he felt it went over fairly well. He thought that in the grand scheme of things, this could make up for his private moment in the washroom. Surely he could be forgiven for that.

Later, after the pies had been sliced and then sufficiently picked and prodded, Pete found himself alone in the kitchen, washing up. He was forearms deep in a basin of greasy sink water, fishing for a spoon that had slipped down the disposal, when Elinor entered through the swinging door.

“You know, it’s cool if you’re not cool with it,” she said. She folded her arms beneath her breasts. Pete tried to focus his fingers on the spoon.

“Cool with what?” Pete said.

“You know, Tibby,” Elinor said.

“I told you, the more the merrier. It was nice to have Tibby. It took the focus off Uncle Art’s—”

Elinor snorted. She took a step closer to Pete. “That’s not what I mean,” she said. “God, sometimes it’s so—”

“So what?” Pete said. He watched Elinor tighten her grip on her arms, pushing up her breasts.

“Babe,” a voice said from the door. It was Tibby. She held a deep red wine glass, which she had filled three-quarters full with white wine. Pete looked to the drying rack where the clusters of dishes dripped. He counted the glasses. He was certain he had cleaned them all.

“Where did you get that glass?” he asked. “Did you go into the pantry?” His fingers were still wedged in the mouth of the disposal.

“Babe.” Tibby said again. She walked to Elinor, placing her long hands on her shoulder. “Give it a rest with him, huh?” She took a deep swig of her wine. “Why does it even matter what he thinks?”

“Because,” Elinor said.

“Where did you get that?” Pete said again.

“Because, *why?*” Tibby said into Elinor’s ear. “I thought you said he didn’t really get these sorts of things.”

“Because he’s my *cousin*,” Elinor said, turning to Tibby. Their noses were almost touching.

“Where did that glass come from, Tibby? I was supposed to have cleaned them all.” Pete said. He wrenched his arm from the sink. Greasy suds slid down his wrist.

“Pete, stop,” Elinor said.

“But it’s not even for white wine!” Pete said.

“Pete. She’s a guest.”

“I *know* she’s a guest which is why she shouldn’t be helping herself to—“

“Pete!” Elinor said. Her arms flew up, breasts bobbing. “Just stop it, okay? Not everything has to be so by the book.” Elinor turned toward Tibby. She quickly re-crossed her arms. “I’m sorry, Tib,” she said, softer.

“It’s fine,” Tibby said. “I get it. He’s not...” She rubbed Elinor’s back. “It’s fine,” she said again. Then, to Pete, “Your mother gave it to me. You want a sip?” She held the glass before his lips, so close that he could see his breath hit the lipsticked rim.

“No, thank you.” Pete said. He watched his breath fog the glass and recoil twice before he backed away.

“Alright then,” Tibby said. She held the glass forward in a silent cheers before she brought it back to her lips. Elinor sighed, relaxed her grip.

The kitchen was quiet, save for the hum of the fridge. Pete listened, began to hum, too, as Tibby sipped from her wine. The buzz on his lips soothed him.

“Dude,” a voice said. It was Steve at the door. “Adeline said it’s time to wrap up.”

Elinor released her arms from beneath her breasts and they fell a little, unsupported by a bra beneath her turtleneck. She put her hand on Pete's shoulder. "Tibby," Elinor said, though she looked Pete square in the eyes. "Why don't you give Pete your glass to clean so he can finish up, alright?" she said.

Tibby smiled, crooked.

"Of course," she said.

"I'm still hungry," Steve said, stuffing his hands in his sagging coat pockets. "Starved without the meat, you know? Gonna hit Popeye's on the way home."

"Yeah," Pete said.

"You too?" Steve said.

"No, I had a lot of cheese," Pete said.

"Oh," Steve said. "Well, Martha's already in the car. I'd shake your hand, but..." Steve looked at Pete's dangling hand, soap dripping from the tips of his fingers onto the floor. "Seeya," he said.

Pete watched the soap drip onto the checkered tiles of the kitchen floor. Many of them were chipped. He and Elinor had played hopscotch here each Tuesday for hours after school before his mother collected him for dinner. She had called it "her afternoon," and Pete remembered his mother and father sometimes arguing over whether they could afford her such luxuries, "atop all else." They always spoke in code. Later Pete discovered that afternoon was reserved for his mother's weekly sessions with Dr. Lambert. The same Dr. Lambert he saw each Wednesday and Friday for his routine therapies and exercises. The hopscotch had soothed him, given him a methodical rhythm he could feel, beat by beat. With Elinor

beating next to him, their feet thudding to the same hopscotch routine, he had felt he could control his connections to the outside world. It had been just the two of them, bouncing along parallel checked strips of black and white. Then Elinor began to grow breasts and didn't feel so much like hopping anymore.

Pete looked up to Tibby holding forth her large, empty glass.

"Make it sparkle, hon," she said. Pete took the bowl of the wine glass with his clean hand and Tibby headed for the door, her long fingers trailing behind her.

"Well, then." Elinor said, "Goodbye. I'll see you...soon." She smoothed her sweater. Pete reached his hand back into the sinkwater. "We've decided to go to Tibby's for Christmas. Her mother's a hippie. We'll share a bedroom there."

"I'm not sure what you—" Pete began, but Elinor had already started for the door.

"Goodbye, Pete," she said. "And Happy Thanksgiving." She gave Pete a saccharine smile. Pete couldn't help to notice that it was crooked, too, much like Tibby's. Had Elinor always had a crooked smile? Surely he would have noticed before. Then it occurred to Pete that perhaps he'd never really seen Elinor smile.

"Goodbye, Elinor," Pete said, but, with one hand in the sink and the other gripping Tibby's glass, he did not wave.

Pete watched from the kitchen window as Elinor and Tibby loped through the front lawn to the driveway, their festive long skirts brushing through the grass, heads held close as they watched the ground for small stones or roots they might trip upon. In the dark it appeared as though their two figures were one amorphous

blob, moving singularly toward their car, toward home. Pete wondered what Elinor had meant by their exchange in the kitchen, and felt self-conscious about her accusations, whatever they were. He continued to dig for the spoon in the drain. The more he thought about it, the more the two girls puzzled him. They seemed more alike than different, more one than two. He dug his hands deeper into the drain, the spoon slipping, and watched as Elinor and Tibby reached the edge of the grass. Their shadows, long and dark, stretched over the lawn, overlapping, interlocking, and Pete thought he saw the girls' hands linger together in the streetlight before they each climbed into the car. He pulled the spoon from the drain, arms covered in grease.