

Shapeshifter

We vacationed to a small island in the South of France for our one-year anniversary. I'd asked Mark if we could try somewhere closer to home in Austin but the idea tanked because – and this was not a source of pride – I deferred most every decision in our relationship.

So we flew into Charles de Gaulle and rented a car. Red tail-lamps wound along the highway's asphalt smooth from an afternoon shower. Eventually traffic let up and the road opened. Hills bounced between a landscape of barns. Grain silos looked like rocket ships stuck in the dirt. Mark loosened his tie while Frank Ocean played on low, the cord between iPhone and speaker frayed but persevering.

We went as far as the Mediterranean would allow and then ferried to the island. The hotel had a pink front door and no air conditioning. Reception told us a heatwave had been setting forest fires along the coast, but the island was safe so far. Hell's inferno burned colder than our room, that much was clear.

On our first night, we ate at a restaurant by the docks and Mark brought up children. The ideal was two from a practical way of thinking, he said, but we would be able to afford as many as we wanted once his startup IPO'd. I'd never thought about the number of kids I would have since it had always been zero in my mind, a fact Mark was unaware of. And so it surprised me when he cleaned his glasses as profiteroles were brought to our table for dessert. The wiping of glasses was always a sign he was going to ask for something, as if the act necessitated greater clarity of vision.

"I'd like to upskill," he said. "Can you teach me how to swim?"

Mark grew up private-jet-rich but ignored, raised in Dallas by a revolving door of au pairs and housekeepers. It wasn't uncommon for him to share routine skills were out of range: riding a bike, cracking an egg, even tying laces. He wore Velcro shoes that ran a car payment and didn't seem embarrassed when undoing them to the tune of a rice-Krispies crackle.

"Sure," I said.

My earliest memory was crossing the United States in the back of a Winnebago. My parents would stop at Cracker Barrel and rest stations as if they were monuments, taking pictures in open-mouthed fascination. Homeschool was fluid. Being constantly on the move made it hard to commit to much but counting exit signs. Textbooks went missing and stayed that way.

Mom and Dad finally got jobs and we holed up in East Texas. Gone were the nights on I-90, curled in an upper-deck bunk too short for my growth spurt, lulled to sleep by potholes and radio static. Instead, I learned to swim in my hometown's quarry. It was a dangerous cut of water and limestone where teens came together for a distraction from whatever else was going on, usually nothing pleasant.

At first no one talked to me, being the resident outsider. To fit in, I personality mirrored. All everyone saw was a version of themselves – the fast-talkers, the too-cool-for-school kids, the sarcastics and academics and quiet. It was easy, taking what I got and giving it back. Plus it helped make the anxiety of being new go away. From then on, the quarry was a refuge. But there were times I would wonder who I was – who I actually was – with no obvious answer coming to mind.

“It’s all about execution,” Mark said. He ashed a cigarette between every few words in the unpracticed manner of a non-smoker. The box sat on the table with the words *Gauloises Blonde* written across the front. I reached for it but he pulled the pack away. “Who needs ten-thousand hours? I’ll be Phelps by the end of the week.”

“Let’s try floating first.”

“You’ll be my teacher,” he said with theater. “And I, your faithful student.”

Lately, I hadn’t been much of a social chameleon. Trying to fit Mark’s mold felt like lifting weights, each pose a strain, each gesture a test of endurance.

“You always do that,” I said. “You’re always assigning me roles.”

“Do I?”

“You do,” I said. “Like last week when I drove you to work after the car fried, you called me your chauffeur. Or last time I cooked—”

“Stop it, you’re practically allergic to the kitchen.”

“Last time I cooked,” I continued, “you called me your chef. When you’re sick, I’m the nurse. Lost? I’m the navigator. You do it for everything.”

He pressed the ends of his fingers into the table so hard they turned white, his tell when repressing anger in public. “I like to give you purpose,” he said, “since you don’t have a real

job.” He was tipsy but not drunk, a lowered-guard version of himself where thoughts leaked without filter. “Nothing grinds me worse than a woman without purpose.”

Waves lapped the stone portwall where we sat. The sky was cloudy. Everything sounded low and calm, the lazy chatter, the boats bumping against the docks. A seagull broke flight on the restaurant’s awning and watched as I laughed. And then we sat in silence, me and the bird, scratching our heads in perfect symmetry while the sun fell to a purple night.

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“Can I offer feedback?” Mark asked after swallowing a fistful of sea salt.

We had flailed in waist-high water all day. He complained as if I was one of his software engineers who’d just written a bad line of code, everything expressed in patterns of jargon. Talking that way anchored him. He dressed in a suit and leather shoes without exception, even to the beach, hiding his swim shorts underneath as if embarrassed by wearing them. To Mark, it was more than forced pageantry. He did it to feel in control. And because he had forgotten how not to.

“It doesn’t feel like you know how to explain the motions,” he said. “If you could be a little more systematic, I would be at the rock by now.”

He was aiming to reach a small outcrop of boulders a few minutes swim off-shore. They leaned like rimrocks in the shape of a platform. Mark took its existence as a personal challenge.

“Kick,” I said. “And keep your arms going.”

I pantomimed the action in a way that was, in fairness, not the best demonstration. But what could I really remember from my own sink-or-swim experience in the quarry? No one taught me how to blow bubbles. There was no instructor with binoculars and a whistle. Or at least there

wasn't for me. Some of the other kids got lessons but my parents were more focused on drinking than child-rearing, so I was on my own.

"I'm hitting more roadblocks than anticipated," he said. The waves were louder than his shouting, smashing against the shore in the distance. "A.R. Ammons said, 'To swim is to become a part of the vast, indifferent sea.' Have you read *Garbage*?"

As a tech startup founder, Mark ignored the usual vices of his world in pursuit of what he called "high art." Main reason for coming to France in the first place. And while he would speak from a place of authority, never shy to correct someone's opinion at dinner, I'd caught a fair few eyes rolling when he launched into why Godard was better than Truffaut, or what made *Las Meninas* overrated.

I was out of my depth on it all, but Mark never seemed concerned. It gave him license to hold court, me listening without much say so, and Mark exercising the need to prove something to someone. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get into any of it. Since I couldn't be a mirror for him, I tried a chair instead.

We visited the island's museum later that afternoon. Nestled at the top of a hill, its modern design was a striking contrast against the ancient landscape. Long windows offered views of vineyards and gardens where lavender, cacti, bamboo, orchids, olive trees, and jacarandas sprawled along the steppes. The whole place was unreal, a fever dream of Eden where nature had tossed every rule out the window.

We had to go barefoot before going in. Mark looked at the floor with suspicion, his shoes just inside the door, terrified his precious cargo might get stolen by some Velcro-bandit.

Inside, the cool air was a relief from the heat outside. Mark asked me to translate the blurbs on the wall written in French even though I understood next to nothing. My little docent, he called me. My little Rosetta Stone.

We paused at a statue titled *Dark Water* by Kiki Smith. It looked like a ghost-woman, suspended in the air all wrapped in strings and shadows, made up of old copper with a tinge of blue. Her hair was a bunch of vines hung down hiding her face. It was scary, but beautiful too. Like something in a dream.

Mark's brow wrinkled into long, intersecting lines. "This is unusual," he said. "I don't get it. It lacks structure."

I glanced at the blurbs, struggling to piece together their meaning. "Doesn't seem like it's trying to be structured. Maybe it's about chaos and beauty."

Mark scoffed. "Chaos and beauty? This is just a mess."

My first thought was to agree. To say how right he was, the whole thing being obviously sloppy and this Kiki Smith lady a total fraud. But the comment from dinner the other night came back to me: *woman without purpose*. The words bounced between my ears, making my chest tight.

"It's about how women have been depicted throughout history," I said. "Objectified, controlled. Reduced to stereotypes and whatnot."

Mark laughed. "Things aren't like that anymore."

"Really?" I shot back. "Seems to me we're still judged on how we look and who we date, plus plenty more. It's not some bygone relic. It's very much alive."

Mark's gaze shifted. "I don't see it that way."

“It’s easier for you to ignore,” I said. “Believing in a world where everyone exists on square footing is convenient. It lets you off the hook from having to accept deeper truths.”

Mark turned away. “That’s the world in your head, not the one we live in.”

As we moved on, the next exhibit, a Picasso, did nothing to change the mood. Suddenly Mark’s phone rang, the Marimba bouncing off the ceiling. He answered with a smile and took the call off to the side.

“We’re approved,” he announced when he came back, his voice carrying through the gallery. People turned to look.

“For what?” I asked, trying to match his enthusiasm.

“For paternity leave,” he said. “I’ve been working with HR to arrange the timeline.”

I stopped in my tracks. “But I’m not pregnant.”

“Not yet,” he said. “If we conceive in the next few months though, I can start paternity leave around Q3 of next year. The timing is perfect.”

I blinked, trying to take it all in. “You’ve been talking to your office about when to start trying?”

“It’s all worked out,” he said. “We got the green light!”

“Mark,” I said. “I’ve got to tell you something.”

But he was already moving toward the exit, practically bouncing on his toes, his head craned upward like a lizard aiming to tongue flies.

Later, we walked the narrow, cobble street back to our hotel. I trailed behind as dying light leaked along the alleyway, the beat of our steps click-clacking arrhythmically. The rooftops sagged. I stopped to watch a cat jump from one ledge to the other. The gap was short enough to scale. A teen with freckles served drinks at the café. I was a waitress myself growing up, bussing

diner booths with condiment caddies of salt, ketchup, and mustard. Worked with my mom but quit once she got fired.

The hotel's green-gray shutters came into view. There was a shaded terrace and the familiar smell of lavender. The entry was tagged by moss and lichen, vines and terracotta pots hanging off the window ledge. The island's beauty made my bones heavy, whispering promises of stability, of an unchanging world. I knew it was an illusion. At least for me.

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I got woken by machinery and the clang of metal. Next door to the hotel was a gaping maw. A pit had been carved into the ground with the skeletal remains of girders and pillars. It was a prehistoric monster. The look of it reminded me of the quarry if someone had sucked out the water.

Two doors down from the excavation was a church, faded white against the blue sky. Above, its bell tower stretched tall as a chimney. I couldn't help but imagine a wind sending the whole thing toppling over, emptying into the pit to the tune of a clanging bell.

"Who tore it down?" I asked reception.

"I don't know," she said. "It used to be a boulangerie. There for fifty-years and now – poof. It's hard to keep businesses alive these days."

After high school and a year of looking for something steady, I lied my way into an Austin company with a ping pong table and keg, a place where they promised to work-hard/play-hard instead of paying well.

The manager teed up the role as an opportunity: "you're so lucky to have something" and "it's tough out there right now." I remember the looped cursive of my name signed on the offer letter in black ink. Or blue. The memory's elasticity makes it hard to know for sure.

The place was a nightmare from day one. No one could get ahead without putting in extra hours, so everybody stayed late. Even when there was nothing to do, I'd sit in front of my computer, scanning the open-floor plan, waiting to see who would stand first. 8 p.m. 9 p.m. 10 p.m. Professional posturing won out nightly.

Things blew up once they figured out my resume took creative liberties. Whatever four-year college I'd manufactured a B.A. from had clarified to HR I wasn't in their system. My manager at the time made a point to say how wrong what I did was, but that I was a good worker and he'd keep me if his hands weren't tied. He held his hands up to the fluorescent light, wrists pressed together with that long-faced look folks put on when pretending to feel bad.

I hitched a ride back to my parents' house. Found a foreclosure sign out front next to an empty driveway. The Winnebago was long gone other than a skid mark ripped against the concrete, the exact spot where I dropped my bag to check if a window might be unlocked so I'd have somewhere to sleep.

Next up was the motel, which turned out to be twenty-five dollars too expensive for someone who only had fifteen to their name. I hadn't gotten paid for my last month of work. Danger of living paycheck to paycheck, I suppose. Left me with no other option than the local quarry.

I collapsed when I got there. With no intention of going for a swim, I was so exhausted that I fell asleep near the ledge and rolled in. An unexpected cold plunge in the dead of night is the worst kind of alarm clock, and I'd had a few bad ones. I was shot to hell when I pulled myself out. Drenched and freezing, I looked up to the stars and screamed out the noise of a wounded animal.

As I focused on my reflection in the water, all I could see was a shadow washing away into the void. I kept looking all the same, praying to become what I was seeing. Knew it wouldn't do any good but tried anyway.

“What about the church?” I asked the receptionist.

“It needs repairs,” she said. “Over two-hundred years old, but still beautiful. You should go see for yourself.”

Mark and I visited after breakfast. Candles were lit beneath a cross. Frankincense and myrrh smoked from a bowl on the lectern, light filtering through the stained-glass windows giving the kaleidoscopic effect of a bad trip. Mark prayed standing. I watched.

We went back every morning for the rest of the week. On our way, I stopped by the pit to toss something in: rubble cleared from the excavation, a loose filtration shard, the blade of a broken trowel. Then I prayed. The mechanics were unclear. No one ever taught me what to do, so I steered my thoughts to our unborn child. I said how sorry I was that it might never exist since I was “as close to infertile as you can get” according to my ever-tactful doctor.

I imagined saying, “You’ll be ok though, don’t you worry. If you do come around, you’ll be just fine.”

And then it would say, “How do you know?”

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“I can’t believe it’s been a year since our wedding,” Mark said.

We were deeper than ever before, he and I, the tide above his shoulders. I said sorry reflexively, the way someone would say “yes” at a party when they couldn’t hear the other person. That was what got us together in the first place, a guess. I figured Mark might be warm and kind and funny, or at least one of the three. Who can really know at first?

I met Mark not long after going back to Austin. On our first date, he brought me to a steakhouse. It was an old school been-around-forever kind of place where the smell of Marlboros and spilled whiskey refused to clean out the barstools. Said it was his favorite spot. For a long time the owners didn't allow women until eventually forced by virtue of the law saying so. It was big news at the time. Everyone in Texas had an opinion, some arguing the right to preserve spaces for men was basically sacrosanct, and others, women, saying they'd sure like to have a nice steak.

Plenty of time had passed since the overhaul but when I entered, the pictures of mustached men on a horse or battlefield or, most commonly, behind a large desk – all the pictures looked at me as if to say, “you don't belong here.”

First thing Mark said when the menus came out was, “I'll help you choose.” Why he thought I couldn't order for myself, I'll never know. That moment stuck with me as the official beginning of our relationship.

Once we started up there was no stopping. I'd been working at a coil factory 6 days a week with a boss who felt like feeling no matter what I told HR, a living hell on earth, all to collect enough for half of rent split with a roommate I got off Craigslist. There were no fun nights out. No savings. Whatever bootstraps I was meant to pull myself up by were hidden behind a paywall, because everywhere I turned, self-help came with a fee.

“I can't believe it's been a year,” Mark repeated as the tide started to fall back. “It feels like yesterday.”

“It was in February,” I said.

“The weather was beautiful,” he said. “Do you remember how nice out it was?”

“It was warm,” I said, “for February.”

Mark offered a safety net. There was no need to have a job anymore since he had plenty for me to do, always delegating roles to provide purpose, as he liked to put it. He was the best card I'd pulled from the deck in a while, maybe ever, so I let it be. I'd been shapeshifting all my life. No sense in stopping once it put a roof over my head.

We moved in together almost immediately. Engaged after three months and married in five.

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It was the morning of our last day. I stepped into the cool wilderness of the sea and watched dust blow loose from the hills, gravel splitting the meridian between shore and sun. My shoes and socks were soaked but I didn't mind. Instead, I listened to the wind cross the water while sunflowers danced their heads in acknowledgment of something greater than myself.

Impermanence was a hard truth, undeniable but otherwise not so bad, even, and perhaps especially, in relation to life and love.

There was an estuary not far from the main beach where channels ran in different directions, one back towards the road, and the other, near a bluff. I rolled a cigarette and grabbed at what looked to be a handhold on the cliffside, but it broke. A black kite flew rings above in search of dinner. It showed interest in me for a minute before flapping its wings toward the sun. What I would have given to swap places. For me to be in the sky and the bird walking the sand.

The water pitched downward, obscured from view by thick brambles that clung to me. I waded where the germinal center of every stream on the island seemed to meet, a canvas ceiling of branches twisted in the shape of a spider web. My legs were too weak to stay in for long, the pain a side-effect from my myomectomy done a few months back. Not a hard secret to keep with a husband like mine. The man only saw what he wanted.

I hung my head over a wood rail. The kite swooped at me with claws outstretched but stopped at the last second, landing on the banister. It watched as I dry-heaved with eyes boring like the high beams of a prison spotlight.

When I got back to the hotel, they were clearing people out.

“There’s a fire spreading,” the receptionist said. “It started at the island’s western end but is getting closer. Everyone has to evacuate.”

I went upstairs to find Mark already packing, voice raised as he tried to move up our flight. “No,” he said. “No, no, no, we need to get out tonight. No, I said tonight.” He waved a hand at me in some vague effort to elicit support. “Here, talk to my wife. She speaks French.”

He handed me the phone. On the other end was a man speaking too fast for me to understand, the words syncopating with a siren louder than a foghorn. Outside the cobblestone street filled with tourists lugging suitcases. The smell of burning wood drifted through the window.

“Say something,” Mark said.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’ve told you a thousand times I don’t speak French.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve been my translator the entire trip and suddenly, you’re done? I know unemployment is your thing but this really isn’t the time to quit.”

“I’m trying to be what you want,” I said.

“And what is it that I want, in your mind?”

“Someone else.”

“Are you accusing me of cheating?” Mark asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m telling you I can’t be myself, so I have to change. Every day I become a different woman to meet the expectations you set.” A tablecloth flapped wildly on the rotary clothesline across the street, its edges frayed. “Because when I’m me, it’s not enough.”

“Who are you, then?” he asked. “If you aren’t my wife, then who?”

We carried our bags to the docks but the ferry was gone. Hundreds milled at the water’s edge, dangling their feet as if worried the flames might lick their heels. Babies cried. Two men had to be separated for shouted reasons. All the while the smoke was getting thicker, flames becoming visible for the first time in the distance.

“The ferry isn’t coming back in time,” Mark said. “We can’t wait this out here.”

“I have an idea,” I said.

We went to the beach. It was empty but for a few forgotten towels and some woodfall. Without saying much, we left our bags in the sand and swam out to the rock. I got there first and watched as Mark made his way.

“I have to stop being something I’m not,” I said as he pulled himself onto one of the smaller boulders. “Otherwise we’re just two strangers in a room.”

“Maybe we are,” he said. He waited a long time before speaking again. “I thought I was dreaming the first time you said you loved me. It was good back then. But now the feeling deep down isn’t the same.”

It was strange to hear him speak without corporate buzzwords. For a second, I felt bad for him, crouched in his boxers, breathless, looking like the weight of the world had come crashing down on his shoulders.

“Something’s changed,” I said.

“All I know is you’re not the person I married,” he said. “I just want things to go back to how they were.”

“I can’t have children,” I told him. “I don’t know why it feels – why that feels like I should tell you now. But I want you to know that I’m still going to have a family. We’re going to buy a

Winnebago but never go to Cracker Barrel. We'll live near the water and won't move around if it can be helped."

A rip blew salt and white spume on us. We were soaked, far from the black and orange island succumbing to a fire we should have always known was coming.

"The biggest thing is," I said, "I'll be whatever I need to be for my kid. Nurse, teacher, firefighter. Anything. I don't have much to go off based on my own parents, but I think that's what raising children is all about. They can be who they are. I'll try to be what they need."

Two birds were dueling overhead. Feathers flew, wings flapping sharp as an edge. No way to make them out in the dark, everything the same shade in the reflection of the moon. It was being someone else that got me where I was. Wanting to trade places with every bird in the sky, every person with a way about them.

The island was burning. That's why we swam out to the rock. For safety from the danger, sure, but also to see it from a distance, our lonely figures mixed with the flames shining in the surf as we watched the destruction. I touched my face, feeling the familiar ridges of my nose and the fine hairs on my cheeks.

Amid the chaos of fire and sea, I found myself emerging from a molten core. The woman from the sculpture was with me, raw and exposed at the edge of the world. In that moment, I no longer needed to be anything. The island fell away in the background and the ocean stretched endlessly ahead. I stood, a figure forged from the dark water, finally realizing my true form.