

As Katherine made some final adjustments to the charcuterie board, she felt that everything was well in the world. The slices of Jamón ibérico ham, thinner than wet paper, took her right back to that semester she spent in Barcelona, to don Soto's apartment in El Born where she and her fellow students were free to help themselves to the cured Iberian leg purchased for their enjoyment alone. Hard and sweet Manchego, halved artichokes, Kalamata olives, eggs, fruits, crackers—it was divinity, spread across a board; a luxury ill-afforded by even emperors in ancient times.

"Hope you're hungry," she said.

Her boyfriend, Kevin, looked up from his phone. He was wearing a t-shirt that read WICKED BALLS in some sort of crazy graffiti font. "All this for breakfast? Jesus, Kath. Jesus."

It was already an hour past what most people would consider lunchtime. Katherine chirped and said, "Couldn't help myself! Let's eat and let's talk."

"Talk?" asked Kevin. "So all this food, it's like compensation or something? If I want to eat I have to talk about stuff I'd rather not?"

She picked up a green grape and popped it into her mouth. "Mmm! Not at all! Let's talk about anything. I just think we ought to do this, to eat good food and talk about whatever comes to mind."

As a response, Kevin let out a faint groan.

"Okay, how about this? Hans Christian Andersen—the guy who wrote *The Ugly Duckling* and stuff—was a huge Charles Dickens fanboy and one time he came over to his house for a surprise visit and it took him five weeks to leave. Dickens was all weirded out when Andersen wept on the lawn after receiving a bad review, when he demanded that Dickens' son shave him each morning, and especially when Dickens held out an arm for a woman at a dinner and Andersen pounced and grabbed it like an overly-attached girlfriend. He was nuts!" Katherine laughed. "A big crybaby *creep*."

"Oh. Kinda like your brother."

"What? Jamie? How's Jamie anything like Andersen?"

He cracked a hard-boiled egg against the kitchen table. "I mean ... overstaying his welcome and all that I guess."

From across the table, Jamie cleared his throat. "That's, well, you know, I don't like it when you talk to me like that, Kevster. If you guys wanted me to leave you should've said so."

Katherine grabbed her brother's arm. "We are happy to have you here. We are family. Isn't that right, Kevin?"

Kevin shrugged. "I'd be happier if a certain someone didn't eat mayonnaise straight from the jar with his fingers."

"Kevster! Come on. Don't be like that! What have I ever done to you?"

Kevin cast a mean glance at his girlfriend's brother. "You ate my mayonnaise. With your fingers. I saw you. You licked them and you put them back in there. Double-dipping, triple-dipping—there was no end to the madness."

Back in El Born, don Soto would at times abruptly stop what he was doing and cite Lorca. *To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves. To see you naked is to recall the Earth.* These moments were among Katherine's fondest memories. Don Soto—Hernán—stroking his dark beard softly as if he were petting a parakeet, his amber eyes ablaze with passion, his baritone voice with a slight lisp pulsating like ripples across a mountain lake. *I've often lost myself, in order to find the burn that keeps everything awake.* Ah, how she longed for that burn.

"You didn't see right. I eat peanut butter like that sometimes, but never mayonnaise. You've got to believe me. I'd never eat mayonnaise like that." Jamie looked up at his sister for support. She avoided his stare.

Kevin's face morphed into an expression of pure disgust. "I know what I saw. Lay off the mayo, you big crybaby creep."

"Kevster," said Jamie, seated pale-faced in his kitchen chair. "I don't know what's gotten into you. Kathy, he might be having a stroke. It happens, people suddenly get all angry for no reason. Kev, try moving your arms. People's sides go all limp when they're having strokes, you know. Try moving your arm, Kevster, and we'll see—"

It was a sound like the crack of a whip.

His head fell hard, like an 18-lb ham, right onto the charcuterie board placed squarely in the center of the kitchen table. His nose grazed the Manchego, his tongue licked unwillingly at least seven olives, and a single tear dripped from his comatose left eye onto a dusty-pink piece of artichoke.

"Kevin! What the actual fuck. Jamie, are you okay? Jamie!"

Kevin wiped his hands across his WICKED BALLS and stood up. "When he wakes up, tell him to pack up his shit and leave. I'm going out for a walk."

Although she never quite made it as an architect—she landed a part-time gig as an architectural technician for a small firm in the city before getting laid off, before moonlighting as a secretary at Bob's Driving School, before waitressing at Olive Garden for five years, before chancing upon an orange-spined Penguin collection of Federico García Lorca's poems in a second-hand bookshop and turning it over in her hands for fifteen minutes and holding back tears that came from someplace she could scarcely remember—as Katherine's brother came to, slightly confused, she embraced him in an enormous hug and she felt that everything was well in the world.