

women hot & moist of complexion

2008-2015

1. growth

I developed like most little girls at first, soft babyish peach fuzz giving way to eager, smelly tufts of darkness under my arms. Then the fur on my limbs grew longer, sharper, nastier, pricklier. Development began to take on a foreboding character. One day my hips appeared directly underneath my ribs. I would stand in front of the mirror with an iron grip on my hipbones and use all the force in my body to push them back down, to no avail. I grew rounder in places I had not yet become round. I wrapped long socks around my midsection every day to contain this unceasing growth. While I was distracted by my hips, things got worse. The thicket on my face appeared the same time the one between my legs did: it grew invisibly, right underneath my nose, until one day it became too enormous to ignore. I had a full beard by my eleventh birthday.

I remember this portion of my life not in concrete chronological scenes, but in a dreamlike series of images. My mother pulled me out of school and took me to doctors. One of them put me on antidepressants, which probably contributed to this abstraction of memory. When we exhausted every MD in New York, we floated our way down the coast to Baltimore, where we lived for a year in a beautiful Bolton Hill rowhouse.

432 Linden Street was built with red brick and white mortar like a cartoon and had a stained glass window above the entry. In that place, at that tender age, I held court for every endocrinologist and dermatologist in the tri-state area. One by one I allowed them to examine me and poke me and press gently on my soft parts and press harder on the hard parts. Nobody learned anything the original endocrinologist at Mt Sinai didn't. There was nothing especially abnormal about me. I did not otherwise suffer from hirsutism in any meaningful way, and certainly not as the result of any error, failure, or anomaly in my body. I was not intersex, or in possession of a dysfunctional endocrine system. I was not ill, I did not have cancer or lupus or anything else concerning. I was nothing but a healthy little girl with a beard, which was distressing in other ways.

The first thing my mother did after giving up was sit shiva for my normal girlhood. The second thing she did was try to teach me to shave, but women aren't learned in

the art of shaving the delicate, complex planes of a face. I bled enough times to abandon the pursuit until I started homeschooling. Max ended up being the one who taught me.

Max was one of my two homeschool classmates. He lived two doors down. He was, at the time, nonverbal, and obsessed with bicycles. He'd take them apart on his front stoop and put them back together again, over and over and over. In the spring and summer his hands were always black. Unlike Jeannie, our other classmate, he didn't seem to notice the beard. If he did, he was far beyond caring about it. He had loftier pursuits, more interesting things to think about. What's a girl with a beard when there's Schwinn catalogues to peruse?

He and I communicated through choreography only we had practiced. We didn't speak or touch. I had learned by then that using my mouth meant drawing attention to the hair that surrounded it, and I found a certain comfort in knowing a person that never asked me to use my mouth at all. The only time I'm sure he really saw the beard was the day in his bathroom when he taught me to shave. We stared at each other in the mirror. Max demonstrated a downstroke. I repeated the motion. I know he watched how I removed my hair, which at this point was far thicker than his. I saw how his pupils drifted down as the razor did. To his credit his gaze seemed entirely devoid of commentary. If anything, what judgment he had was for my technique.

Max and I did not have a harmonious relationship. I have always been a rather self-obsessed, selfishly interior kind of woman. I do things without thinking about the ways they may affect others. I hurt him often. Max, on the other hand, was hypervigilant— always ready to identify the wound and react accordingly. His meltdowns were a thing to behold. Magnificent explosions of feeling that called attention to themselves with the feverish desperation of a dying infant. I marveled at them. Envied them, envied him. Envied the liberty of it.

Towards the end of our time together, I began cruelly manipulating Max into these episodes, possessed by a sick need to bear witness to them again and again. I think he picked up on this, because the week before we moved away he refused to see me. And when I went back to New York I didn't hear from him or think about him again.

2. exposure

My adolescence was a painful and repetitive slog. Be seen with one-day stubble, be insulted, cut self, cut beard, bleed, rinse, repeat. In college I anticipated much of the same. But I went to art school. I did not anticipate the generosity of artists, their loose identification of beautiful things. The ease with which they reject what the public calls beauty to rebel and find it in the ugliest things.

On day one I sat my roommates down and went about explaining my sorry situation.

“So, I don’t want you guys to think this is like, contagious, or that I’m some kind of, like, crossdresser or whatever. I’m a normal girl and there’s nothing wrong with me, I just. Have a beard. I shave it. But it grows real fast is the thing. And I’m guessing eventually you guys are going to see the stubble and I just would rather get it out in the open now so you’re not, like, wondering amongst yourselves later.”

Michelle from Atlanta asked, “A beard? Like, a *beard* beard?”

“As opposed to what, Michelle?” Kaya from Hawaii asked.

“I don’t know, like, a couple chin hairs? Lord knows I got plenty of those, it’s what happens when you get old.” Michelle was two years older than the rest of us and had been acting a bit like a crone since she arrived.

“No, it’s a beard. I haven’t let it grow all the way for years but yeah.”

“Why don’t you?” Kaya had a gentle look in her eyes. It was a sincere question, I could tell. Stupid, but sincere. Kaya was very beautiful. Of course it didn’t occur to her why I’d rather shave.

Mia from Baltimore finally piped up: “Yo, you can’t just ask why she shaves her beard. That’s her business.”

“Okay, fair.” Kaya huffed and leaned backwards in her beanbag, staring up at the ceiling. Then she sighed, a big heaving noise, before saying, “I think you’d probably be the coolest person here if you grew it out. Put, like, flowers in there. Glitter. The world’s your oyster. I wish I had a beard.” Kaya sat up suddenly, her eyes bright and shiny, “You ever seen the world beard competitions?”

Mia said, “The what now?”

I told Kaya, “No.”

For the rest of the afternoon Kaya, Mia, and I gathered around a MacBook open to a Pinterest page full of winning beards. Some were simple, well-groomed looks. Others involved fanciful work with a clipper. The really impressive ones, those blue ribbon winners, were sculpted. They were art. 2004’s winner replicated the Brandenburg Gate down to the smallest detail. 2010’s winner turned his beard into a frame from *Space Odyssey*. Each champion smiled so bright it hurt my feelings. The crinkles in their eyes, the gleeful teeth. It infuriated me. I pulled at my sideburns. I always feel the beard coming, its constant growth the movement of the timepiece that is me. When I hate myself, I use my hands to help.

Kaya said, “if you did some shit like this I think you’d win art school, dude.”

Mia hummed in agreement. She shoved her phone in my face to show me a YouTube video of a man using what looked to be several potions and pastes to form his mustache into the shape of a hammerhead shark.

Mia said, “I’d be down to help you out on this, for real. My sister’s in beauty school and she gets a wholesale deal at that huge place by Mondawmin.”

“I don’t know...” My body moved backwards.

Kaya smiled like she meant it. “Listen, I say just think about it. You have a very unique opportunity here.”

“For real.” Mia nodded. For a few seconds they were both smiling and nodding in unison and it scared the shit out of me.

3. *liberty*

When I went to class with stubble, no one said anything. I think Tumblr had done just enough to everyone in my cohort that even if someone had words they'd be swarmed upon like a crumb of bread in a koi pond.

When I went to class with a week's worth of beard, only the professor said something.

He said, "You sure don't see that every day. I love my job. I love this place."

It didn't do anything to me, so I left the 100-pack of disposable razors unopened in my toilet caddy.

By the time my beard was long enough to sculpt, I had made Mia my collaborator. One morning before our sculpture critique we locked ourselves in the bathroom with a plastic bag of gels, mousses, molding pastes, sprays, and fine-toothed combs. We were going for a Venus of Willendorf, some zeitgeist-y statement about femininity, but it ended up just looking like a pair of tits. Which we both supposed did more or less the same thing.

My critique was not as glowing as I hoped. Most of my classmates thought using my own beard was a lazy attempt at controversy. One of the boys said, "Like, does a beard really count as a 'found object'? What's stopping me from doing that too?"

Mia snapped, "your imagination," but no one else really agreed with her. I could see their point, but from a personal standpoint this was a very big move for me. I learned then that being subversive requires being subversive both inside and outside of your own context. If you must be a bearded lady at least be original.

I carried on with my beard-sculpting. I graduated to decorating it, dyeing the ends of my mustache, painting the beard with glitter. I took this year to experiment in a way I never had. I started matching my beard to my outfits. Kaya made me an Ikea bag's worth of plastic flowers to put in my facial hair, and Mia sculpted ceramic beads and worked on metal adornments for my sideburns, which were now long enough to start resembling peyos.

Word got around, and our dorm started to receive donations. Some anonymous, some not. One Friday I received six separate containers of assorted rhinestones, possibly all from the same clique of textile majors. A sophomore dropped off a backpack full of glass beads shaped like babies. A senior left me strips of 8mm film and a pack of unadorned barrettes with a note that read, "I had a dream you wore strips of my film in your beard and I thought you might want to try that out. Call me xx Andy" and his phone number on the back. I didn't call him for two weeks, but when I did he seemed upset that I hadn't worn the film strips yet.

"I'll get around to it, I just don't have any glue. GD major, y'know."

"Have you looked at them?"

"What?"

"The film strips!"

"Well, yeah."

"No, I mean *really* looked."

At this point I had already gone into the bag he left me to do what he asked. I brought the eight millimeter film as close to my face as I could before it went out of focus. A full frame of bare male pelvis. Soft, not hard. Long, but not like a pornstar, not all unwieldy and ridiculous-looking. Everything about it was very reasonable, and obviously worthy of filming. My stomach leapt into my throat.

"Is that a dick? Is that your dick?"

"No."

"No, that's not your dick, or no, that's not a dick?"

"It's obviously a dick, but it's not mine."

"Whose dick is it?"

“I won’t tell until you wear the film.”

“Is this some kind of fetish thing?”

“No, it’s performance art. You want in?”

“If I say no?”

“Nothing.”

“Can I think about it?”

“No.”

“Fine, but only because I want to know if I should call the cops on you.”

“For what!”

“Nonconsensual... dick filming.”

“Does that look like the work of a peeping tom to you?”

I peered at the film strip in my hand. The white sheet behind the pelvis did indicate some kind of closed-set situation.

“No, I guess not.”

“So will you do it?”

“Fine.”

“Let’s meet for lunch tomorrow at McGrady?”

“Fine.”

“Looking forward to working with you, babe. I think this is the beginning of something beautiful.”

Mia and I had come up with a sort of tentative beard styling calendar that lived in our shared kitchen. We had covered all the tentpole holidays in one adderall-fueled all-nighter: a sparkly pink cupid for valentine's day, a field of clovers with leprechaun figurines and tiny ceramic beads shaped like Lucky Charms marshmallows for St. Patrick's, and so on. Half-baked ideas and the stuff we came up with while we were smoking went in the days in between. Tomorrow's square read *Kandinsky w/ construction paper*. I circled it, drew an arrow moving it to next Thursday, and wrote *dick film* in the space that remained.

4. *performance*

My lunch with Andy was a proposition. It came off a bit like a Hollywood-flavored con, but maybe that's just because he was from Los Angeles and contained that sort of inherent criminality that all West Coast Jews seem to. I imagine British people feel similarly about Australians.

"I love this on you, babe. It's shinier IRL than in the dream." Andy leaned forward. It was still seventy degrees outside, so all he wore was a tie-dye Stussy tank top and red shorts that looked more like swim trunks. He was tiny and hairy everywhere but his face. Bright golden-brown curls all over his back, his neck, his arms, his knees. Like a halo, like he was always glowing a little. His face, though still tormented with acne, was otherwise smooth as a peach and just as pink. His aquiline nose kept him from looking too boyish, and it suited him well. His hairy hand reached out to touch the film, to touch me. I pressed my body deeper into the squeaky vinyl seat but he was unrelenting, nothing but a serene smile and an outstretched hand. He broke eye contact with me to stare lovingly at the strip he was flipping between his fingers. It tickled.

He looked back at me to say, "You think this dick is perfect, right?"

I took a moment to decide I would lie, "Well, I don't know if I'd say perfect..." but then after a half-second of deliberation I added a dose of sincerity. "I don't think I've seen enough to judge."

"Trust me, babe, it's perfect," Andy cleared his throat. His posture stiffened. "I made sure."

I finally took a bite of my egg salad sandwich. It was just as edible and yet oddly disgusting as college food always was, which didn't settle me at all. The film scratched my beard as I shifted and made an ugly, high-pitched squeal. I had been wondering all morning whether that torture was part of the performance.

"How'd you make sure?" I asked between bites.

"Last summer I put out an ad on LA Craigslist: 'Seeking perfect dick: not for fucking, for photographing'. Got a shit-ton of duds and creeps and freaks and plenty of desperate actors-cum-pornstars, all of them dirty rotten liars, and by August I was just

about ready to give up. Not a single dick in Southern California even close to perfect. But if there's one thing you'll learn about me is that I am resilient. I don't take no for an answer. I thought maybe I was looking for dicks in all the wrong places." He got louder the more he spoke.

The girl sitting behind him whipped her head around to stare at us with a nasty look in her eyes. But then she saw me, and it was obvious she assumed I'd be the one to take it as an insult, so her face went all loose and apologetic as she turned back to her spaghetti.

"I put out that very same ad on Baltimore Craigslist, and, yes, as you might imagine, we had a lot of duds and creeps and freaks and liars, but come Halloween I have a dick pic in my inbox that is..." Andy pauses for effect, eyes going wide, "earth-shattering. The genuine article. And the email just says, 'I hope this is what you're looking for.' And get this—" he slams his hairy hands on the table, "He lives down the street from us. He's this super quiet metalhead guy, so gorgeous, so straight, but... beautiful dick. Just the best. And so perfect on camera. He's been my muse for months."

Andy seemed undisturbed by my lack of commentary. I sensed my passively interested gaze was more than sufficient.

"So this is where you come in." Andy's palms met. I flicked a crumb away from his elbow. I thought it might do something to diffuse the tension, but it didn't. He said, "I'd like to have you two together. Nude, of course, and only if you're comfortable."

"How's that play with your dick project?"

"Oh, it doesn't. I abandoned that garbage weeks ago. That's why it's all chopped up and adorning that beautiful face of yours."

I wasn't sure if I was meant to take that as a compliment.

"So what's this project?"

"I'm not sure yet. I just have the distinct feeling that the two of you will help me make magic."

5. magic

Andy told me to come to his studio for an introduction to the muse with the perfect dick. He said there'd be no modeling yet, just a vibe check. Drinks and weed

and, “Maybe some molly if we’re feeling it, who knows. You know your boy stays stocked.”

I got there first, and was already drunk, having inhaled my first soju bottle of the four I purchased for the occasion. I had taken to drinking soju because the only liquor store that neither carded me nor made note of the beard was owned by Koreans, and soju was the cheapest thing they sold cold.

Andy buzzed me into his building, a living beast of an artist’s warehouse with a labyrinthine interior and a stupid name. His apartment was one of the nicer ones I’d seen, with a proper kitchen and a bathroom with four walls and a functioning toilet.

I dropped onto his couch without saying a word. He’d asked me not to do anything to my beard and I’d acquiesced, but its scragginess was now turning me self-conscious. I felt like a child again, smelly and hairy and malformed. Andy poured me a glass of red wine, and it hit me like a refutation from God. You’re a grown woman, start acting like it.

I swallowed the wine, spilling it over the edges into my beard, and it did not blend well with the soju I was exhaling. I wiped the droplets of Merlot off my mustache using my middle and index fingers. I noticed Andy was watching me when I brushed my thumb under my lip to swipe off the rest.

“I know I said we weren’t filming today, but oh my god, girl.” He groaned and threw his head back.

“What?” My face grew tingly, warm, and my vision blurred slightly.

“You move so femininely when you handle it, you know.”

“How do you mean?”

He leaned into his chair a little, then replicated the movement, his fingers dancing over his mouth. I didn’t initially agree with his assessment, but the more I thought about it the less sure I became.

“You get the idea. Just a lot of grace in the way you move. Surprising.”

I wanted to say what I was thinking, which was, “Oh, you expected me to behave like an ogre? Like a beast? Like some kind of barnyard animal because I’m a hulking hideous woman with a beard?” But I kept my mouth shut and my chin pressed against my neck so I could hide in the thicket of my own facial hair.

“Where the fuck is he, man? He’s so bad about appointments, I swear.” Andy hopped out of his seat to gaze out the windows at the street below. He seemed to find what he was looking for, because he smiled. I stared down at my knees and only understood what happened next in sounds. Andy buzzed the muse in. The muse trudged up the stairs, his volume increasing with the approach. The muse skipped a step twice. The muse knocked on the door, but his third knock was cut short when the metal door squeaked open. Andy said, “Max!”

I looked up at the muse, and the muse looked familiar. He looked back at me, and it was clear he thought the same. I said something first.

“You’re not...?”

Max blinked several times and said, “You?”

His voice was all sorts of strange and unexpected.

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I nervously smoothed out my beard and repeated myself.

“You’re not...?”

“I’m pretty sure I am.”

“Oh.” An uncomfortable amount of time passed before I managed to say, “How have you been?”

“Uh. Good.” His facial expression was illegible. But that had always been true.

“Awesome! Awesome.” I made panicky eye contact with Andy, who could do nothing and gave me a look that said as much. I cleared my throat, “And your parents? Good?”

I muted myself with the last of my wine while he replied, “Uh. Yeah, they’re good.”

Andy finally asked what the hell was going on, and I did a shitty job of summarizing it.

“She tormented me for a year.” Max corrected me.

I sunk into my seat, fingers reaching for my next bottle of soju in the absence of Andy’s Barefoot.

Andy tutted at me, but followed it up with, “Cut her some slack. She probably got fucked with enough that she gets a free pass. It was only a year of torment, after all!” He tapped Max’s boot with his own, “besides, I think you handled it just fine, big boy.”

“I have asked you not to call me that before, Andy.” His face said nothing of essential importance, though his cheeks had a distinct ruddiness to them that he didn’t walk in with.

“I know, but I just love how pink it makes you!”

“Right. Whatever. I have stuff to do at Ottobar at like, eleven. So please just get on with it.”

“There’s no ‘it’ to get on with, Max. I just wanted to introduce you two. But I guess that’s unnecessary.”

Nobody said anything. I opened my next bottle of soju and the small snap of the metal seal breaking prompted Andy to carry on speaking. Not that he struck me as a person who needed the invitation.

“Is it going to be a problem for you?”

“Is what going to be a problem?”

“Her.”

“Oh.” Max studied me like I was a contract. “Yeah, no. Won’t be a problem.”

Max drank one glass of wine and listened to Andy talk. Then when Andy left us to take a piss he asked me, “Why don’t you shave anymore?”

“I’m experimenting.”

Max frowned and stared at the wall until Andy came back. Then he excused himself and left.

Our first shoot was on Andy's roof. We all hoped it would be warmer. Andy used his oversized parka as a sort of mobile darkroom while Max and I smoked menthols in bathrobes and flip-flops. Neither of us seemed capable of discussing anything more serious than the weather, so our conversation stayed chaste and meteorological.

Max was fast and clinical in removing his clothes. I was slower, all youthful and wide-eyed and nervous because it felt like the right thing to do, but nobody seemed interested in that performance. Max and Andy knew this as work. I only considered it titillating because I insisted upon it. Once this dawned on me I was able to be as clinical as Max was, or at least pretend to. It was when we were asked to touch that I returned to this fawning, feminine role.

Max reached up to wrap his arms around my shoulders, and his elbow bounced against my tit as he did. I could have said nothing but instead I giggled and said something like, "woah, watch out, buddy." I think only pretty girls can pull that kind of thing off, because no one reacted.

"Can you give me, like, Pietà? Max, you lean back, yeah, just like that. And you just, like, hold him. One hand under the head and the other across his belly?" I did what was asked of me and Andy shouted, "Hold it!"

He fiddled inscrutably with the old camera, it made a satisfying click, and a handle popped out of the side. Andy began to crank, and it made a delicious clattering sound I've only heard in old movies.

"And... action. Give me misery. Yes, Max, perfect. More sadness in the eyes. Look down at him! Slowly."

Max appeared as if he was making eye contact with me. Enough that it would look fine on camera, but there was a void in his gaze. He wasn't quite looking at me, but beyond me. Through me. I'd never felt so invisible, not at this distance and not this nude. It was an incredible skill he had, this capacity to make me feel utterly mundane.

Andy's direction thinned out to a dull hum and my movements became fluid, languid, and responsive to every imperative, every sharp "Yes!" Or "No!"

Then Andy ran out of film and it was over. Max detached himself from me with little ceremony and disappeared downstairs to change. Andy told me, “I think you need to warm up a little, but we found a groove there in the end. I think we’re off to a great start, for real. Thank you.”

I couldn’t find it in me to say anything other than “You’re welcome,” and I scurried downstairs knowing I was only rushing in the hopes I’d catch Max before he left.

I did catch him with his body halfway out the door, and cried, “wait!” before I had any good reason to have asked that of him.

He stopped moving. He asked, “yeah?”

“Do you, uh.” I raked my fingers through my beard, “do you want to get a drink? I know The Crown starts serving right about now.”

Max moved his arm like he was going to check his watch, but he wasn’t wearing one. He looked left and right. Then he looked at me. Well, in my direction. Then he said, “Fine.”

I wondered on the quiet walk from Andy's place what sort of drink Max might order. I guessed a number of things based on a number of variables. If he had ended up playing sports as a teenager, he'd order a Natty Boh. If he had done Model UN or debate club or something equally performative, he'd be a gin guy. If he played too many videogames, he'd be ordering a vodka Red Bull. He surprised me by ordering a rum and Coke. I had no theories about that.

The Crown wasn't busy. It was a Wednesday. Five Hours of Funk was tomorrow, and you could feel that buzz in the air, of incoming money. We ordered our drinks and sat in silence at a corner table by the karaoke stage.

"Did you want to talk about something." He asked eventually. It didn't come out with the cadence of a question or the facial expression of one.

"Not anything specific," I said. There was a Green Day song playing. Someone laughed and it sounded like a goose honk. I got loud to add, "It's weird, like. Talking to you."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to go to school in Baltimore?"

"Oh." I sipped my margarita. I used the condensation on my fingers to try once more to smooth my beard. Then I said, "I guess I thought you wouldn't care."

Max didn't say anything for a moment. Then he tapped two fingers on the table.

"I started talking right after you left."

"Oh!"

"Yeah. I had a good speech therapist."

"Nice." I looked out the dirty window at the blurry nothing it revealed. "I'm sorry, you know. For being such an evil, fucked-up little kid."

"It's okay. Andy was right."

I made an affirmative noise with my lips smashed together.

“I’m glad life is weird like this,” he said, his right hand a fist in his lap.

I made the same noise again, my mouth inside my margarita.

“When I asked about shaving...” Max gritted his teeth and took an emphatic sip, steeling himself to say, “I didn’t mean, like, that it was bad. I—”

“No, man, you’re good, really,” I said, breezily, flapping my hand back and forth, and I was going to open my mouth to puke out more of the same *whatever whatever* I’m known to give when faced with insensitivity, but Max interrupted me.

“No, listen to me.”

I dropped my drink and although there was only an inch between it and the table, the glass clattered noisily enough to draw attention from a handful of people. I held both hands up in apology, “Okay, go ahead.”

“What I meant to say was that... I was worried you were being exploited for it.”

“Big talk from the guy being filmed for having the ‘perfect dick,’” I sneered. It came out of me before I considered any of the implications, the impact of saying such a thing. I expected a meltdown, somehow. I asked myself if I had done this on purpose. Repeated a nasty pattern without even thinking about it, like it was second nature.

Max chuckled instead, and it sounded honest enough to redeem me, at least briefly. He shook out his hair, which had darkened from the reddish blonde of his youth into a sort of cool-toned mahogany. He said, “I think I’m one of very few people capable of being objective about the aesthetic values of their genitals.”

And then I laughed, because it was both the last thing I expected him to say and the most profoundly in-character thing he’d said so far. And I was enjoying myself again.

But then he followed it up with, “I’d thought about it a lot, actually. As I grew up. How fucked up people would be with you. My mom talked about it all the time.”

I could feel my eyebrows tilting into angry little parabolas. He didn't notice or care. He had picked up momentum and wasn't going to let it go anytime soon.

"Like, there's freaks out there. And I guess I thought shaving was like, a defense mechanism for you. And I was proud that I taught you that. Like it was my responsibility. So finding out you weren't doing it anymore, I don't know. I was concerned. But it didn't come out right the other day."

"It's not coming out right today, either."

Max gazed at me with question marks in his eyes. I crossed my arms before continuing.

"I'm sorry, what exactly are you trying to say?" There was an edge in my tone that I could have tempered. But I didn't. I asked myself again if I was doing it on purpose. But this time I was the one finding an insult, so I convinced myself I was being very reasonable.

"Well... you know... you've been online... people are freaks about... about..." He was beginning to stammer, his posture visibly tensing as he dug himself deeper. His muscles all seemed to contract at once, pulsing themselves tinier and tighter with every breath he took.

"I can take care of myself," I told him. I believed this to be true, but had nothing to prove its veracity. I had only been openly bearded for a few months, only really been seen in and around school, which was not a real place. But this did not mean I was especially sheltered or ignorant. I had indeed been online. I knew eventually the day would come when someone would want to be filthy with me not in spite of the beard but because of it. Frankly, I looked forward to that day. I believed others when they described fetishization as something unpleasant, undesirable, exploitative... but I couldn't help wanting to know what it felt like anyway, even if I knew it would be disappointing. While I was no virgin, I'd never had a boyfriend. I never wanted one, never wanted a man to get close enough that I'd need to explain the den of razors in my bathroom. The only times I ever got fucked were because I shaved, and each of those experiences was staid and inorganic as a result. I got the impression being fetishized might at least feel more corporeal than any of these other trysts had.

Max finally said, "Okay. I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

I said, "You don't have to worry about me. It's not like we're friends."

He said, "Oh. I see." He pushed the pads of his fingers into the rim of his empty glass, and I watched how the colors of his flesh changed with the pressure, followed the line of his arm up to his face to see how something very small pulsed on the left side of his jaw. Then he stood up.

"I hope this doesn't make you want to stop working with Andy. He's a lot but he's pretty good."

"Don't leave, dude!" I cried, picking my ass up off the seat in an attempt to chase him back down into his.

"No, I'm sorry, I should go, I have. I have stuff." He shrugged his leather jacket on and corrected himself, "stuff to do, I mean."

"Max, please don't leave on account of me, I'm just sensitive."

"No, but like, that's fair is the thing. I'm the one being weird."

"Can you please just not run off? I am actually, like. Happy to reconnect, or whatever."

He took a big breath, then, and surveyed the room like he was worried he'd see a familiar face. Then he sat back down without taking his jacket off.

"Can I get us another round and we pretend the first one didn't happen?" I offered, tapping the belly of my empty glass. Max nodded. In one smooth movement I gathered both our glasses in one clawed hand and stood at the bar.

The Crown was a de facto extension of the art school and therefore of Andy's building, its sister warehouse across the street, Ottobar, The Mount Royal Tavern, the Bell Foundry... Baltimore's art scene functioned like some kind of fungal network stretching underneath the city. All these buildings were just mushrooms, really. Outgrowths of a much larger thing teeming in the soil, consuming waste, producing

something we hope is of value. In these places they all knew the bearded lady, and here I could roam unscathed. Most outsiders picked up on the fact that I wasn't something meant for commentary, and the few times they didn't all ended fairly amicably when I went home without saying anything. Today was too quiet for any of that, and even if it wasn't, Chuck was tending bar and would stand up for me. Chuck was nearly seven feet tall, weighed four hundred pounds, and mixed a wonderful \$2 margarita.

When I returned to our table Max had taken his jacket off again, and it felt like victory.

1884

1. lucia la barbada

Cyril was in a city bar waiting to hear back about a horse. He was reading *A Manual of Rare Diseases and Unusual Afflictions*, a book he'd found looting a homestead belonging to a Dr. Morris Page. He was halfway through a glass of opaque whiskey, and enjoying himself tremendously. Cyril didn't often come by new books to read, let alone for free, and while he didn't yet know how or if this book would prove useful to him, he'd finish and do his best to commit it to memory anyway. Who was he to determine the utility of all this information? He didn't trust himself with those kinds of executive decisions: what's useful, what's valuable, what's worthy. Finer men with fewer sins get that luxury. If these were the kind of decisions everyone was meant to make for themselves, he reasoned, there'd be no need for leaders.

The bartender, one of those French Canadians, offered him a bowl of stew. His accent was strong, musical, and unfamiliar, so it took a bit of back-and-forth for the two to fully understand each other. Once Cyril gathered what was being asked of him he said, *yes please, thank you sir*, and placed a five cent coin on the table. He returned to his book, to the end of chapter six. He congratulated himself on how much faster he'd become at reading. Growing up he was forced to read in bites. Snapshots on horseback, before falling asleep, while on guard at dusk. This way one book might take him a year or more to really digest in its entirety. But if he had learned one true thing about getting older, it was that there is no skill that can't be honed. These last idle months in hiding offered him entire days where all he could do was read. Long, quiet, unbroken stretches of time with no interruption but the rain or a swarm of gnats. In this time he learned how to devour a book in a matter of hours. This one, in spite of its density, was no different than any of the others. Cyril had managed to read six of its twenty-seven chapters in only fifteen minutes.

This section was about skin diseases, leprosy and the like, but the last three pages were in a subsection titled *Hirsutism, et cetera*. It described several very rare hair-related afflictions. Some had long, inscrutable Latin names, and others went by no name at all. Most entries cited a particular Medieval text from some monastery in Bulgaria, apparently because 1432 was the last time anyone studied hirsutism, et cetera. There were woodcut prints of each disease: little round portraits of what were once called wolf-men, men with beards growing out of their foreheads, scenes of an Amazonian tribe of pygmies covered in fur, illustrations of hair growing inside the mouth and on the fingernails, ladies with beards. Cyril thought to himself, *My goodness, there are some strange folk to be had in this world*, and was once again reminded that despite all his travels and feigned worldliness he was no more worldly than a mouse.

The tin bell above the door made its music, the Acadian tending bar said *bienvenue*, and Cyril turned to his comrade in the doorway.

Buckshot Turner, née Hugh Richard Turner, was twenty. He was in possession of a hundred-dollar revolver, a mop of strawberry blonde hair, a charming nose, cheeks so pink it

looked like he wore rouge, and a spoilt attitude. Born in Cleveland, made his way West after a girl. She died of fever in Oklahoma, he did not. His grief found the Joaquin Booth gang, and that was that. He was here to see Cyril back home from his year in the Keys. Both were to ride West through Texas to meet the rest of the gang outside the stock shipping point in Abilene. It would take at least a month depending on the horses and the weather, and Cyril never really trusted Buckshot's judgment where horses were concerned. His adolescent habit of prioritizing speed over hardiness had made a mess of more than one getaway. The appearance of a bowl of stew interrupted this train of thought, and Buckshot's announcement killed it dead.

Change of plan, Buckshot made a face at the bartender and started moving his hands in the universal language of get me a drink. *We have a bounty to chase, an easy one.*

Is this the plan or just a plan? Cyril had a mouth full of sausage, the only piece floating in his bowl.

Nothing's changed, she's just a day's ride ahead. Got us some fast horses to catch up.

Cyril rolled his eyes. Chewed on a turnip, let it melt all hot and thick over his tongue. He swallowed. Spooned another chunk of turnip into his mouth.

Buckshot tapped on the bar, evidently waiting for something. Cyril tipped the bowl of broth into his mouth, slurping loudly.

She? Buckshot said expectantly.

Cyril wiped his mouth, belched. *This ain't my first woman bounty, if that's what you're askin'. More'n enough handsy husbands around to make murderesses with.*

This one's different, Cy, look. Buckshot went digging in his satchel, pulled out an envelope full of other envelopes and folded letters. Buckshot's lips parted all gentle like a horse does when you hand her a slice of fruit and he bit his own gloves off. Flipped through all the pieces of paper until he found the one he'd been searching for, and invited Cyril to take it.

Unfolding it revealed Lucia La Barbada, a Mexican national raised out East. She used poison-tipped arrows and bullets full of snake venom. She'd killed at least seventy people with her bare hands. She had access to dynamite, hundreds of men, and money acquired unscrupulously. She reportedly rode a ten-foot-tall grullo dun stallion. People said she wore a Viking helmet with ram horns on it, painted her face with blood, lived with the Indians, did black magic, bedded the devil. She had a beard, but that was the least interesting thing about her. That

this was the first he was hearing of her was terribly embarrassing. Cyril felt out of the loop, like his year in the strange wet tropics had ruined his social life.

Sounds like a demon more 'n a bounty, Buck. Cyril chuckled, downed the last of his whiskey. He wiped his mustache. Buckshot made a juvenile face, like this was an accusation of cowardice more than a statement of fact.

But good money. We're going to need it on the way.

And what happens if we don't catch her?

I mean, we always find our way. But it's between featherbeds and dirt. Up to you.

Cyril was initially pleased to see the 'fast horses' Buckshot had acquired had a bit more body than the lean speedsters the kid was usually drawn to, but Cyril was forced to abandon his congratulations when Buckshot complained, *these were the smallest ones they had, can you believe that? But I ran 'em up and down the hill and they're not bad. Good endurance.*

Cyril offered the larger of the two horses a piece of oat cracker, a silent selection. He patted the horse's nose and said, *Well, that's what we need 'em for.*

The way out of the city involved answering Buck's many questions about tropical animals Cyril had seen, people he'd shot, homes he'd robbed. None of the things Cyril thought might impress Buck (Alligators, swamp witches, Cubans) impressed him, and all of the details Cyril found boring (Sea cows, pork sandwiches, Spanish-owned brothels) made Buck's eyes go shiny and excited. His voice would even crack once or twice from the sheer exhilaration.

Once the roads lost their paving and the sun dipped behind the hills Cyril lit a cigar and used the dim red light at the end to illuminate the medical book he'd been reading. He used a falling ash to underline the title of the Medieval book cited on the last page of chapter six, hoping he'd one day come across it, and then praying it'd be for free.

When it was good and dark and there were no lights as far as either of them could see, Cyril and Buckshot hitched their horses by a creek and set up camp. Buck went to take a shit over the hill on the opposite side of the creek, so Cyril carried on reading by the fire with his back against the leather jacket he'd draped over the root system of a large gnarled oak. He fell asleep with his hat over his eyes, and woke up when the birds did with his neck aching something fierce.

Buckshot laughed when he woke up and saw the sorry scene. Cyril massaged his spine and said *I'm gettin' fucking old, ain't I?* which elicited another one of Buckshot's youthful chuckles and an offer to dismantle the camp in the interest of allowing Cyril to bathe in the creek. Cyril said *thanks, kid* even though the offer came with a joke about how he stank of bad oysters.

Cyril preferred the way his body responded to cold water, but to his dismay this creek was so warm it was nearly bathwater. It was shaping up to be an especially balmy June. He used the last two shards of tallow soap he had in his satchel and made a mental note to add it to his shopping list. Above beans but below salt meat and salt cod. He threw his head underwater, blew bubbles with his nose. When he'd had enough he sat himself on a sun-drenched boulder to dry off. He picked a twig out of his hair, flicked some leaf off his shin. Then he heard Buckshot shout for him, and he redressed.

2. shreveport

Shreveport was a nice town—Cyril had been there twice before, and was charmed by its shopkeepers and barmen and ladies of the night. They were all well-mannered and friendly,

exhibiting a sort of civilized kindness Cyril had grown up entirely unaccustomed to. If he were to fault the people of Shreveport for one thing, it'd be the way they could make a man feel stupid without even realizing. These people were educated far beyond Cyril's capacities as a common criminal, and it weren't their fault, honestly, but he felt compelled to keep conversations short to avoid this inevitability.

The shopkeeper said *Welcome, sir! Is there anything in particular you're looking for?*

You got tallow soap?

I'll do you one better. We have a new shipment from New Orleans— olive oil soap.

Olive oil? Why would I want to smell like olives?

I suppose a better question would be why you'd want to smell like a cow.

That's not at all the same thing.

Sir, I can assure you it is. Smell for yourself.

The shopkeeper unwrapped a cube of greenish soap and presented it to Cyril as if it were a small mammal. Cyril sniffed it, and the shopkeeper said, with some reverence, *from Marseille*. The soap didn't smell like much but it didn't smell bad.

Cyril asked, *That France?*

The shopkeeper paused, a bemused look in his eye as he closed the wrapper and tied the string back up. Then he said, *Yes, sir*.

Fine, how much.

Twenty-five cents.

Twenty-five cents!?

Yes, sir.

Christ. I'll give you fifteen.

Twenty.

Fine.

Cyril bought his soap and his salt beef and his salt cod and his beans, not without grumbling, and slammed the door on his way out to meet Buck at the hotel further down the main street.

Got word from the sheriff's office— Buck was smoking a cigarette that looked too long for his fingers, and with every drag Cyril became more convinced the kid wasn't really inhaling anything. Buck coughed anyway, and said, *La Barbada was spotted two days ago heading out on the road from Longview to Tyler. I think if we leave come daybreak and ride hard, we can catch her.*

What's past Tyler? Cyril looked out in that direction, spat on the ground.

Whole lotta nothing.

Exactly. Cyril sniffed, and turned around towards the station hotel. *We stay here two nights.*

What the hell for?

Let the horses rest, for one, 'cause it'll be a long time before we can do this again, Cyril took his hat off, smacking it once or twice across his knee before putting it back on. He leaned on the stair railing to say, *and she'll be stopping for awhile outside Tyler.*

How the hell you figure that, Cy?

With one eye squinted at the setting sun, Cyril said, *I'm thinking what I would do if I was headed someplace I didn't want to be found on that particular stretch of road, and I'm thinkin' where I'd stop along the way.* Buck scrambled in his satchel for an East Texas map, and once he pulled it out Cyril drew a thirty-mile circle right in the middle with his index finger, *There's an overlook south of Tyler. It's the only place I'd go, and it's the only place she'd go. Only place she can go within a hundred miles, I reckon. She's gonna lay low there, and she will get comfortable. She knows the law won't find her there. And it ain't the law lookin' for her.*

We are the law.

No, Buck, we ain't. You know that.

3. longview

Cyril turned thirty-one in the Keys, and had been feeling tremendously old as a result, but he had a cyst behind his ear like he was seventeen again anyway. It hurt in two terrible ways: a

persistent dull throb all over the affected area, and waves of sharp, angry, stabbing pain that appeared once every few minutes. Buck made it known in the morning that it was hideous: a dark yellow scab, dry and flaky on the outside, moist and foreboding on the inside, wearing a bright red halo. It'd been driving Cyril insane all day.

The sun was beating hot in the sky, there were neither clouds nor trees, and he'd done everything but rip his own shirt off to keep from sweating any more. He hadn't encountered a single chance to use his exorbitant purchase from Shreveport, not for miles. Every body of water he had found thus far was coated in pond scum or petroleum or human shit. Cyril felt filthy, and that the filth and the sweat was making this whole affair behind his ear more of a problem than it needed to be. He'd been desperate for something cold to soothe the angry spot but had to satisfy himself with a rag soaked in sun-warmed water from his saddlebag held against it instead.

The cyst exploded and began to bleed viciously right as they were about to turn off the road to avoid Longview. Cyril, with an uncharacteristic but (to him) warranted gruffness announced, *We're stopping here for the night. I need a bath.*

But the bounty?

To hell with the bounty!

Oh, for God's sake, Cy.

They did stop for the night at a small inn where Cyril, rag still pressed against his neck, demanded a room and a cold bath. When the man at the desk gave him the key and asked *So when will you be needing that bath sir* Cyril became incensed and shouted *Right the fuck now mister.*

His bath was cold, as requested. The man even offered ice, an unusual luxury this far west. Cyril said *Yes thank you I'm sorry about that sir it's been a long ride from Shreveport* and the man said *Ah yes of course.*

In the tub Cyril submerged his entire body and gritted his teeth. The pain from the cyst disappeared, the soreness in his arms and legs seemed to flare up and fade away, and he finally had a good reason to use the stupid European soap he'd lost twenty cents on. He pressed a chunk of ice against his cyst and willed them both to dissolve.

When he'd finished and dressed and his rage had dulled into nothing, Cyril considered their proposed plan to go around Longview overnight, but even a few hours sleeping on the dirt and undoing all the fine work this bath had done struck him as foolish, if not outright wasteful. He'd

already paid for the featherbed. He'd already taken the bath. He'd make the money back with this funny old bounty in the end. It would be fine. Everything, in the end, went fine for Cyril. He knew she'd be at that overlook south of Tyler. He was sure of that. He might not know women, bearded or otherwise, but he knew criminals. No real difference between men and women in that regard. In his experience crimes were crimes no matter who did them. The affliction touches all types but changes them in the exact same way. *Our instincts are all the same*, he told himself.

The next morning Buck grumbled about the unnecessary luxury, but the invader on Cyril's neck had dried up almost completely and he was perfectly content to ride his horse all the way to Tyler and back again in this condition, so he smiled and told Buck, *we'll be fine*.

4. the overlook south of tyler

The confidence Cyril had as he left Longview was nowhere to be found now. It had been three days and he needed to bathe once again. He'd have to admit it now. If not to himself, to God. He'd become obsessive about bathing over the last year, and was learning on this ride that

it was not something he was capable of hiding anymore. Long stretches without washing would turn him prickly, sensitive to sounds and smells and sights that ordinarily did nothing to his body or his soul. The longer he went, the worse he became. He'd always liked bathing, even as a youngster, but now the habit had become something darker. What had once been a charming quirk, the thing that garnered him the moniker Clean Cy... it had now become an essential, unmovable facet of his character and a compulsion he couldn't ignore.

They were a day away from the overlook, maybe less, and Cyril swore he could feel the familiar foreboding itch of another cyst growing on his shoulderblade. He also knew they were less than a mile away from a delightful stream he'd bathed in on the way to New Orleans last year, when bathing was only a luxury he stole while nobody was watching him.

Let's stop for a few hours, til the sun's lower in the sky, he announced all of a sudden, and Buckshot groaned.

Not again, Cy.

Yes, again. We'll be fine.

The stream was further south than he remembered, but just as clear and cold even after hours under the oppressive sun, a fact he confirmed by throwing a handful of water in his face. The lush canopy of trees kept the heat from truly penetrating, and it was as perfect a spot to bathe on the road as he recalled. Cyril had written about it in his journal, reread that entry over and over as a way to remember what it felt like to be cold when he was being eaten alive by mosquitos. He was glad his own testimony held up to scrutiny.

Go hitch the horses somewhere and leave me be, will you. Sick of lookin' at ya.

Fine, you grumpy bastard.

The stream was just what Cyril needed. It was at a frigid, goosebump-inducing temperature and completely clear. He reached a hand behind him to inspect the thing he surmised was a cyst, and was disappointed to find he was right. He twisted himself around to try and scratch it open despite the sharp pain this produced, and in doing so completely ignored the snapping twigs, the vague rush of wind. By the time he gathered what was happening it had happened. He was arched with his back against a stone, a knife at his neck, and a soft, plush beard pressing into his shoulder.

Move and the stream flows red.

Ma'am, I mean you no harm. He meant it, and he hoped she was the type wise enough to know truisms when she heard them.

Your little friend made it abundantly clear that you do.

Is he—

He's fine, just knocked out and tied up on the back of my horse. Fumbled his revolver, if you were curious. She breathed a few times in rapid succession, like her soul was laughing but her body wasn't joining in.

Goddamn boy.

Now, she pressed the knife deeper into his clavicle, who're you with?

Cyril said nothing. He wasn't sure what to say. He'd never been caught quite so well, never really been put in such a vulnerable position before.

This not enough incentive?

Before he could make heads or tails of the movement, Lucia La Barbada's left hand appeared holding another knife, this one poised to castrate him.

I read somewhere that in China the royal wives keep eunuchs around to serve them. Could you be of use to me that way, maybe?

Just relax, lady, I ain't the threat. That boy's my best shooter, he lied.

Sure he is. And I'm the Queen of China. Cyril swore he heard her smile. *Or am I? Wanna find out?*

She made a false start, jolting her left hand forward, and Cyril flinched. He tried to tilt his head up to look at her. *Poster didn't say you were funny.*

Her beard brushed back and forth against his shoulder, and he understood she was shaking her head. Perhaps in dismay, perhaps with a satisfied smirk. He couldn't tell, not even from the sound of her voice when she said, *Ah, bounty hunters. I should've known from the look of your horses. Cheap fools looking for easy money. I'm not easy money.*

I didn't think you were. I said you sounded like a demon more'n a bounty.

She huffed, but Cyril couldn't tell if it sounded more like a laugh or a sigh. *Flattery won't get you anywhere, you know.*

No, I've been around long enough to know it don't work on serious people.

And I'm serious?

Cyril wondered what her face looked like when she said that. Her tone was inscrutable. Even, careful, measured, sure. But because of that it was impossible to read. His nudity made none of it less strange and unpleasant. Perhaps it was exciting, too. Once that thought floated through his head he knew he needed to ask for his clothes.

You mind if we have this conversation when I'm dressed?

I do, actually. Both knives seemed to inch closer to Cyril's body.

Listen, my clothes are on that rock, Cyril tilted his head west, *my pistol's there, so's my knife. You saw my rifle's with my horse, so.* She said nothing, so he clarified, *I just want my clothes is all.*

Lucia tied him to a stone so she could clamber over to where he'd folded up his clothes, and he took her in while she wasn't looking. She was tall. Unusually so for a woman, but not gangly or thin. She was built a bit like those endurance horses he liked, even-proportioned with thick legs and a wide chest. When she faced him to hand over his pants and then his shirt he looked her in the eyes. She did not return the favor, choosing instead to stare somewhere behind Cyril's head. It gave the appearance of eye contact but none of the usual electricity. Her beard obscured most of the lower half of her face but her nose, crooked and picturesque, stuck out past her hat. She had long, dark eyebrows and thick lashes. Her hair was curly and tied back in a braid. Cyril fixated on her nose, studying it while he could, knowing he'd have to draw it sometime. If he ever got the chance to do that sort of thing again.

He asked her to turn around while he dressed, but she refused. She pointed her revolver at him, but with her gaze turned down at the leaves between them, and said *It's for my safety, I'm not a lech.*

Cyril's wrists were tied, and he did not fight back. Lucia wrapped the same rope around her waist twice and slung it over her shoulder until there was no more than a few feet of distance between them. And then she led him away. Cyril didn't ask where they were going or how long it would take, but it didn't take long. Lucia had long legs and walked quickly, taking wide

meaningful strides that were more careful than they seemed at first glance. They followed the creek southwest for a dozen-or-so minutes until it spilled out into a pond cloistered by tree-lined hills. Whole place smelled murky, every surface a bit slippery with moss and moisture. Buckshot, who had a clementine-sized lump on the back of his head, was slung over the back of an enormous horse. It almost resembled the beast in the poster, though had a sweeter face, a shinier mane, a fairly relaxed demeanor.

Everyone says she's a stallion, which we find so funny. She's a big girl but she's my big girl. Lucia stroked the end of her beard. She kissed the mare's nose and said *This one is Rusalka*, and made a soft clicking sound with her teeth. She unwrapped the rope twice without untying it. Enough slack to put four feet between Cyril and Rusalka, who might not have been ten feet tall but was still at least a foot taller than him, certainly large and strong enough to intimidate. Lucia mounted and when he didn't say anything she announced *You're walking, sir.*

This time, he asked where they'd be going.

Lucia said, *We're going to meet the Joaquin Booth gang.*

5. the joaquin booth gang

It took about ten minutes and repeating the question three times for Lucia to finally answer him.

What, exactly, makes you think you're meeting the Joaquin Booth gang?

She didn't say anything for a moment, and he readied himself to ask again. But she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, an unfamiliar move. With a cigarette crushed between her gritted teeth, she lit a match on the end of her boot and said *I got an invitation.*

Oh, did you now? Cyril grinned, *Who signed the letter?* His tone was goading, juvenile.

I didn't say anything about a letter. She waved her hand in front of her face, dissipating the smoke.

Well you must have gotten a letter! A gang of outlaws that famous? I bet those invitations come sealed in wax 'n' all! Cyril howled at his own joke, doubling over as he walked.

You shut up, she said, tipping her hat over her face. She kept smoking and didn't say anything else. Cyril couldn't have that. He refused to obey silence.

Well, if you ain't got a letter, how're you so sure you got invited? Cyril stopped walking and yanked his tied hands backwards. Rusalka was large, but the sudden jolt was enough to make her stop short and give Lucia the tiniest bit of whiplash when the rope Cyril was attached to tugged hard at her midsection.

Lucia groaned and tugged back, willing Rusalka to carry on walking with a sharp whistle. *What did I just say?*

I'm just askin' fair questions. You say you're takin' me to the Joaquin Booth gang, I wanna be sure you know where you're going. He pulled hard on the rope again. She pulled back.

She laughed, *Trust me, I know where I'm going.*

Enlighten me, would you?

Lucia made a low, rumbling noise giving away her frustration. *Been tracking them for weeks. I had my girls with me but they got caught up tryin' to rob a stage in Huntsville. So I'm going it alone.* She took a drag of her cigarette like it would amplify the drama of it all. *But I know where I'm going.*

Cyril couldn't help but let it work on him. Even if none of it really answered his question.

So you know exactly where the JB gang is right this second.

Sure do! Her tone was sharper now, and Rusalka seemed to speed up in response. Cyril accelerated in turn and looked at the setting sun.

Listen, lady, I don't mean to be rude or nothin', but you're going the wrong way.

Lucia yanked on the reins and Rusalka whinnied in protest.

I am begging you to shut up.

I'm telling you the truth.

And I'm just supposed to take your word for it? I don't even know your name! She threw a hand in Cyril's direction to indicate he didn't look remotely trustworthy from where she sat.

Well, it's about time. You never asked. My name's Cyril Gordon Zapato. But the posters call me Clean Cy. He bowed and allowed for a moment of silence. To amplify the drama like Lucia had.

She scoffed, *You're not Clean Cy. Clean Cy disappeared, presumed dead. You're not him.* She scoffed again, and repeated, *You're not Clean Cy.*

Well, I don't go by any other name, so if you won't call me Clean Cy you'll have to call me Cyril.

You might be Cyril, but you sure as shit aren't Clean Cy. She didn't look his way to say this. She hadn't looked his way since he told her his name.

Well, Clean Cy would know where the JB gang is. I know where the JB gang is.

Sure you do. She imitated his accent to say, *Just ride thirty-five miles north, take a right, take a left, walk right into the Tyler sheriff's office, and you just about made it.* She returned to her typical, distinctly Northeastern accent to say, *Not a chance in hell, 'Cyril'. Or whatever your real name is.*

Well, they ain't in the Tyler sheriff's office, you're right. Where they are at is about twenty miles southwest of Abilene. Still not the direction you're riding.

You just made that up. She got Rusalka moving again, and Cyril followed.

I'll bet you don't know no Joaquin Booth, Cyril teased, tugging the rope West. I'll bet you never got no invitation.

Lucia didn't reply. Cyril opened his mouth to tease her again but she made a noise like she meant to silence him, and then she said, *Fine, let me show you since you want to be a pain in my ass. I have a letter from the man himself.*

Do you now? Cyril raised his eyebrows, incredulous. *Do you really?*

Lucia smirked. Her gloved hand reached into a saddlebag and dug out a worn letter. She unfolded it and held it aloft, inviting Cyril to approach and read it. All it said was: Join us. We like your work. Sincerely, your friend Joaquin Booth.

Joaquin Booth sent me this letter. Will you shut up now?

He can't have done. Cyril was trying very hard not to laugh, not to be too cruel.

Why the hell not? It's written right there! Can't you read? Joaquin Booth! Right there in black and white!

I'm not saying someone didn't sign this letter as Joaquin Booth, but Joaquin Booth didn't do it. And this, for some reason, made him splutter out a half-laugh that he swallowed just as quick as it came to him.

And why's that, genius? Lucia crossed her arms, defiant. The crooked way she held her mouth made her beard boot-shaped, and this didn't help Cyril's situation. Why that was so funny to him was a mystery. He tried to look away, to at least try to contain the laughter inside of his body, but when he took a second glance at her boot-shaped beard he realized it looked even more like Louisiana. And that was no good either. He dug his nails into his own palms and bit his tongue for several seconds before trying to speak again.

Well— and he squawked out another laugh here, which he didn't as successfully stifle, *Joaquin Booth doesn't exist.*

Of course he exists.

Cyril snorted and slammed his lips together to silence himself, but laughed inside his own mouth anyway. *He does not exist, I promise you.* Opening his mouth again was a mistake. Cyril was really losing it now, completely unable to keep himself together. Between cackles and heaving breaths he managed to say, *He's an invention!*

While Cyril descended into convulsions Lucia cried, in a legibly defensive tone, *Who names a gang after a man who doesn't exist?*

Cyril was doubled over and drooling into the dirt when he wheezed, *Joaquin Zapato and Horatio Booth might!* And then he more or less lost himself in his own hysterics.

Lucia stared at the letter in her hand, her mouth open. She said, *Oh*. And sat frozen there for a horrendously long time. Cyril was still catching his breath. When Cyril finally shut up and looked up at her, her blank face erupted into a strange insincere smile. Then she crumpled up the letter in a leather-bound fist and stuffed it in her pocket. She rode Rusalka in a lazy circle and sighed.

Okay, fine, you got me. I wrote this letter. I didn't get an invitation! So what? I'm still lookin' for 'em.

Cyril tried to make eye contact, unsuccessfully, but still asked, *Do you want one?*

What?

An invitation. I can take you to 'em.

Why would you do that?

He thought about it for a moment, eyes turned up at the bluish sky.

Well, I don't know why you want to meet the boys, and I ain't gonna ask. Whether you believe me or not, I'm not in the JB gang to make decisions. I don't like being put in that position, and ain't nobody expect me to put myself there, hear? He waited for her to nod to continue. She did, almost imperceptibly. But she did.

I'm not an accounting man. Never have been. It's not up to me to decide whether you're more valuable as a bounty or otherwise. I figure that decision is something the boys would be better suited to. He held his tied hands up to demonstrate, I lost the upper hand far as bounty acquisition's concerned, anyway, so it looks like I take you to 'em or I let you ride us somewhere we get good and lost and dead in. Cyril spat on the ground, not because he meant anything by it but because he had accumulated an unpleasant volume of saliva while he spoke.

I ain't leavin' the boy, neither. I'm tied up with you now. I lead you astray, I lead us astray. Either I'm lying and nothing changes for you—by which I mean whatever information you

presently have on their whereabouts is almost guaranteed to be the same garbage you think I'm goin' to feed you, and you will get lost, and almost certainly kill all three of us— or I'm telling the truth and you get to where you were headed in the first place. Where we was both headed.

I see. Lucia stared ahead, and Cyril could tell there was a sour look blooming in her face.

It's looking like that's the only way we both get what we want.

Suppose it does.

Well, all right then. Cyril pointed into a wooded area and said, *Head west but keeping on a southwesterly bearing. We don't want to run into any of the big railroad towns, not together. And I will be needing my horse some point soon. We gotta be able to run.* Lucia looked confused when he said this, but Cyril just shrugged and said *You and I, we're worth a fortune.*

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