

DEAD OWLS

MONA SUSAN POWER

Every summer, my parents put me on a Greyhound bus from Chicago to Bismarck, North Dakota, so I can stay with Aunt Phyllis for two weeks. Mama clammers on the bus to get me settled, trying to find a nice Amish person to look out for me. There's always one who agrees to be my guardian, at least through Minnesota. Mama says she would like to go, too, but we need a break from each other. I agree silently in my head. Agreeing out loud would be disrespectful. In my world older folks can say any damn thing that takes you apart, but a kid has to swallow the truth until you grow up.

Aunt Phyllis and I get along easy. She can be stern in the way of her job as a school nurse for United Tribes Technical College—dispensing aspirin for headaches, VapoRub for a chest cold. But with me she smiles and listens, goes along with my modest proposals—a dip in the school swimming pool, catching a movie at the new Kirkwood Mall. (Well, it's been there for at least ten years now, but locals are still excited enough to call it “new.”)

Aunt Phyllis even agrees to take me to see *The Shining* with

Jack Nicholson, which is just out, though she doesn't like horror. I like anything spooky and have read all of Stephen King's books. I already know what'll happen in *The Shining*, but don't care. I want to *see* it.

It's ninety degrees here today, so I don't understand why Aunt Phyllis brings a blanket into the theater. We've got our hands full with popcorn and Coke, and now this heavy green blanket. Embarrassed, I look around at people in other seats to catch if they've noticed. I'm what Mama calls a "super sensitive preteen," at that age where you think you're the center of attention, with everyone monitoring your every move like they care. Which Mama says they don't. She could be right, but I sneak glances around us anyway. No one seems to notice. I like that the audience is overwhelmingly Native—probably mostly my own tribe, Dakota, or members of the Three Affiliated Tribes. In Chicago, we're always outnumbered, like a million to one. When the lights go down and Coming Attractions begin to roll, Aunt Phyllis spreads the blanket across her shoulders. She tells me I can have a wing if I get cold. I shake my head, no.

I have to let go of the book version to like the movie; there's a lot of changes. But creepy is creepy, and Jack Nicholson does "crazy" really well. I'm gonna be popping out at folks with my "Heeeeere's Johnny!" imitation for days. At the movie's end when the camera does a close-up of Jack's dead face, frozen like an ice man, I realize Aunt Phyllis is shivering. She clutches the blanket in a death grip like it's field dressing to keep her innards from falling out. I put my hand on her arm and she looks at me. Her eyes are big with terror; they take a second to focus. When she recognizes me, she smiles. "I'm okay, Amy," she says. "That was *too* much!"

I've noticed that when you see a good horror film, your senses open up like you're a bug with a thousand feelers. You hear more noises, sense every breeze. That night when I'm settled into my

aunt's apartment on the United Tribes campus, a creaky old building that's been here since the place was a military fort, I can't shake the feeling someone's watching me. I'm reading one of Phyllis's fat romance novels where the bad guy becomes the good guy though I don't forgive him for an early rape the way the heroine does, but I'm distracted by the chilling sensation of an observer studying my every move. I keep looking from my makeshift bed on the couch to the living room's grand staircase, which is chopped halfway up, a wall built over it to make the second floor into another apartment. I swear there's an invisible man hunkered down on the useless steps, not just watching me, but absorbing. Taking something away. When I get tired enough, I fall asleep, though I'm glad I have Phyllis's green blanket across me now.

I wake up to the stares of owls. Phyllis lives with what she calls "a plague of owls." Someone gave her an owl clock for her birthday, then a friend made her a macramé plant hanger featuring an owl, and now she's got a menagerie but is too tenderhearted to give them away. Most mornings they look like they're grinning, but it's raining today, so every stinking owl, whether ceramic or painted or woven of string, glares at me like I'm stealing something. I stick out my tongue at them and make the bed.

I ask Aunt Phyllis about ghosts, if she thinks there might be another presence in the building. I know United Tribes used to be Fort Lincoln, an internment camp for "enemy aliens" during World War II. Hell, *we* were considered "enemy aliens" in our own territory not long ago, so I have some sympathy for the ones locked up here back in the day. Maybe a few of them are still angry, wandering around nursing grudges?

It's like Aunt Phyllis doesn't hear me; she asks if I want waffles for breakfast. But once we're eating that golden food sweet with syrup, Phyllis launches into a story about her first love.

"This is back when I was a nursing student, serious, no time for something floofy, like romance." Phyllis has a dark moon face that features a sensible mole at the side of her mouth. It's large as a chocolate chip and seems to affirm everything she says. Somehow, I can't imagine it allowing any kissing. "At least, that's how I was until I met Hiro."

Phyllis and the mole keep talking. "From my looks, he thought I was one of his people, and I figured he'd be disappointed to learn I was Dakota. But that made him even more excited, and he jumped around in that horrible imitation of how we *never* really danced, hitting his mouth with his hand. Woo woo woo . . ."

Ugh! I roll my eyes, and Hiro has definitely lost some appeal at this point.

"I was volunteering here all those years ago, getting on-the-job training looking after German seamen we'd hauled from their ships, and later fellow Americans of Japanese descent that white people thought might be spies."

Yeah, what *is* it about white folks? I think. So paranoid about anyone who looks different. Phyllis tells me that Hiro was from California, didn't even speak Japanese much, though he could understand it when his grandparents were talking. They were dragged out of their American lives because Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. He talked to Phyllis whenever he could, told her she was beautiful, made her tiny cranes out of paper scraps he said were meant to bring abundance. He asked if she'd consider dating him when the war was over.

Phyllis's moon face goes sad. "I never gave him a straight answer, though I *did* dream of dating him. No one *ever* gave me attention like that before. I was always 'Buffalo Woman' to everyone, even as a girl. Which I realize now is an honorable Dakota name, but when I was young just made me feel like Old Reliable."

She tells me Hiro was handsome, his black hair falling in a wave over one eye. "Like a sweet rogue," she says. The mole looks astonished.

"I should've gotten over my shyness," Phyllis scolds. "We don't remember that others can't read our minds, that what we think must be obvious *isn't* always clear to them. The rest of his family were in an Arizona camp. Not sure why they were separated. He was alone here. I could've made the difference instead of sopping up all his compliments and love, taking all his luck one crane at a time."

I know where this is headed. The only question is, how bad? Turns out, pretty bad. Phyllis's moon face is crying when she tells me Hiro hanged himself in one of the dorms. She gestures with her hand, pointing up, when of course what happened to him was an awful dropping down. I wonder if this apartment is one of those dorms. I know enough not to ask. Aunt Phyllis never does say whether she thinks United Tribes is haunted. Her story is her answer. Tragic things happened here.

A week into my visit, I wake up shivering. My teeth are chattering. The green blanket is up around my shoulders but can't make a dent in the cold. The owls look wary, even though bright sunlight streams through the windows and across their wings. I'm shaking so hard I lose coordination, can't stand up. "Auntie!" I bellow, and she comes running in her bathrobe, which I notice for the first time is a silk kimono—the jazziest item she's ever worn.

Aunt Phyllis rubs warmth into my skin, hugs me close until her heart pumps life into my core.

"Why's it so cold in here?" she asks, opening the windows. Warm air smelling of cut grass floats through the window, cheering both me and the owls. The clutch of ice is gone. Still, she makes me drink warm cocoa with an extra Vitamin C tablet, just in case. Takes my temperature.

“Normal,” she says, then laughs, as if it’s ridiculous to attach that word to *anyone* in our family. I laugh, too, and cross my eyes at her, stick out my tongue. For Aunt Phyllis, I’ll be a kid again instead of a near grown-up, poised to be thirteen.

Every night now I feel watched, though I can’t see anyone else in the living room except the owls. I’m reading a more high-quality romance novel, set in the times of Arthur and Merlin, wishing I had magic in my hands right about now, or at least a sword. I’d make visible whatever is stalking me, run it through. I wonder why *this* visit is different—why of all the times I’ve stayed here it’s *this* year that feels haunted, like I can’t be alone with myself? The useless stairs always gave me the creeps at night, but not to where I felt studied, judged. Is it my fault, this spookiness? Did I bring something that isn’t appreciated? All I’m doing most nights is reading. Aunt Phyllis goes to bed early and her television doesn’t get good reception.

Mama phones me the next morning like she can read my thoughts. We don’t talk for very long—it’s so expensive—but when Aunt Phyllis pops in the shower, I ask Mama about ghosts at United Tribes.

“Don’t you remember?” She sounds irritated. According to Mama, I’m at that age where everything I’m told goes in one ear and out the other, and items worth remembering are displaced by utter nonsense she doesn’t know *where* I pick up! “We saw one on the campus road that time,” she says.

A prickle of cold runs across my scalp. I’m staring at my aunt’s owl calendar pinned to the wall beside the kitchen phone, where a Great Horned Owl, dignified as Merlin, watches me back like he can see beyond tooth and brain into my very soul. I close my eyes. “Tell me again,” I say to Mama. My voice sounds young and pleading.

“Well, I guess you were little,” Mama concedes. She has

gentled—something you can never count on, but when it happens, you're grateful. "You must've just been out of kindergarten." As Mama talks, I can envision the penny loafers I wore back then with such pride, what I thought of as my first grown-up shoes. Mama tells me how we stayed with Aunt Phyllis but drove down to Cannon Ball one day to visit her brother. Didn't return until after supper. "It was twilight when we reached the entrance to United Tribes and as soon as we crossed over to the main trail, we saw the man in the blanket."

Yes, I can see him now; he was shuffling by the side of the road, a gray blanket pulled close around him, covering his head and body. The way he walked made him look old. Mama reached across me to roll down the window, prepared to ask if he needed a ride. I remember her gasp, how she rolled the window shut faster than I thought was possible, and then the car leapt forward. Mama was never one to shelter me, so when I asked her what was wrong, she'd said: "That thing isn't a man. He doesn't have any legs or feet. He's floating, not walking."

"An unhappy ghost," I'd chirped, mimicking something I'd heard. Always wanting to sound so smart. And Mama just said: "Is there any other kind?"

Now she says she hasn't a clue what kind of ghost he was. A Mandan warrior, his entire village wiped out by smallpox? A camp internee, missing his relatives? "There are layers of loss in most places," Mama says cheerfully, probably mollified by having my complete attention for once. I thank her, and we get off the phone.

I have only two nights left here in North Dakota. I'm already missing Aunt Phyllis and maybe even her owls. I stay up late to savor the last drop of this visit and fall asleep reading the book about King Arthur. Someone wakes me by shaking me rudely—so hard I'm nearly knocked off the couch. But there is no couch, only tall grass and the Missouri River only a half mile in the distance,

sunrise painting it a sludgy red that looks like blood. At first, I think I'm alone, sitting on the ground with my legs poked out in front of me as if I'm a wooden doll. But I hear a polite clearing of the throat on my left and note a young woman collapsed onto the grass in a puff of old-fashioned dress. She's pretty, though. Her eyes are cold gray, like the blade of a steel knife. The part in her hair is severe, so perfectly straight I again think of sharpness, of slices and cutting. The rest of her hair is wound up in a fancy swirl of braids—it must take some time to craft that particular look. I can tell she doesn't like me from the way she holds her mouth. *Her lips are tight as a trap*, is what I'm thinking, which doesn't even make sense, but I trust the thought like a warning. I look down at myself, still wearing the pajamas I wore to bed. Maybe she doesn't like me because of how messy I am—my long hair in tangles down my back, my pajamas rumpled. *No, she doesn't like you because you're Dakota*, that savvy voice in me says, the one that feels like it can read minds. I want to get away, to find the trapdoor that leads back into United Tribes and Aunt Phyllis's owl-infested apartment, but the cold knives of the woman's glare keep me in place. I can't move beyond wiggling my toes.

Like a bird flying up from a hidden nest, she rises suddenly in the most graceful motion. She reaches down and grabs my arm with icy fingers, yanks me to my feet. She's impossibly strong even though we're the same height. She keeps hold of my arm and drags me a little behind her, so I stumble through the grass as we march toward the river. *A forced march* echoes in my head. She takes me to higher ground so we can look across the river in the direction of Mandan. Though nothing appears the way it should. The streets and highway are gone, and there's a fort in the distance. She gives me a shake with her cold little hand, and that snap adjusts my vision; it's like I'm looking through binoculars or a fancy telescope, though it's only my eyes blinking in morning light. I see

the fort up close, see a column of men on horseback, their guidons whipped by prairie winds. The woman points, has me follow her finger, which singles out a figure I immediately recognize, someone I even wrote a paper about in fourth grade: General George Armstrong Custer. In my paper, he was a reckless egomaniac, an ignorant fool hungry for gold and glory—nothing more than a vanquished enemy, a squashed bug. But here I am facing Libby, his widow, which complicates everything.

I can't believe I didn't figure out sooner who she was. I'm a little afraid of the next thought: *What's she want with me?* The obvious answer follows straight away: *It can't be anything good.* Libby looks capable of strangling me with her dainty white hands. I think she suspects that if I'd had ringside seats at the General's final battle, I wouldn't exactly be cheering him on, rather helping my people dispatch the crazy soldier and his men.

I want *out* of this dream. It's a small comfort to realize I must be asleep, wandering through tall grass with the dead widow of a General my people ended. I've never dreamed something so real before. I can feel the cool earth beneath my toes, feel snapping winds, smell grass and the light floral scent of Libby's perfume. I take a step backward, away from Libby and the view of her husband leading his men on their last campaign. Then another step. Libby doesn't notice. She's too busy watching the Seventh Cavalry head out for Montana Territory, their final destination. I turn to run and that's when Libby realizes she's losing her hostage. She jumps on my back, knocks me down. I'm embarrassed by how weak I am compared to her, but she has the strength of death. She lifts my head only to smash it on the ground, pounding it against a flat rock. My face is warm with blood. My thoughts no longer have anything intelligent to say. I'm on the lip of a vast darkness, about to lose consciousness, when I hear a screech.

Libby's weight is off my back. Gentle hands reach for me and set

me upright. Libby is gone, as is the view. I'm standing alone on a useless set of stairs that leads to a blank wall and never the second floor. There's blood dripping on my toes. But I was wrong; I'm not alone. A young man is beside me, his arm around my waist like he's afraid I'll crumple if he lets me go. Which I just might. It's hard to see past the blood in my eyes, but I notice the young man's thick black hair, how it covers one eye in a rogue wave.

When I wake in the morning, poor Aunt Phyllis discovers me mysteriously battered, my blood spattering the couch and floor. Her menagerie of owls has been destroyed—the ceramics broken, the macramé hanger slashed to pieces. We should be frightened and sad, but there's an air of sweetness in the room that covers the mess. Aunt Phyllis gently leads me into the bathroom where she washes me, inspects my injuries. She insists we check for concussion since I have a nasty lump above one eye. She doesn't ask for explanations yet. Sometimes it's convenient being Native—we've got a pretty high tolerance for weirdness.

Aunt Phyllis is checking me over again before we have breakfast. She asks me questions about the month and date, my address. She moves her finger around for me to follow, which reminds me of Libby, pointing out her lost General. Phyllis notices my right hand, how it's still balled up in a fist like I expect a fight. She covers it with her own hand, squeezing gently as if to say, it's okay, you're safe, you can let down your guard. So I allow my hand to open. Aunt Phyllis notices what's hidden there before I do. I can tell because she gasps and covers her heart. The paper is pretty well squashed, but as it sits on my open palm, it begins to unwrinkle itself and once more takes the shape of an origami crane.

Aunt Phyllis is crying. Big wet tears that skirt her sensible mole. She reaches for the crane, then hesitates.

"It's okay," I tell her, and I lift the bird higher as if encouraging it to fly from my hand to hers. "I was in danger and he saved me."

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NIGHT MOVES

ANDREA L. ROGERS

Germany, Spring 1968

In a dark corner of the Das Geschlachtete Lamm tavern, Walter Rock stared at the painting of a snarling beast cornering a lamb while he thought about the letters he'd stopped getting from Janie King, a girl he'd met just before he shipped out. Across the room, three other servicemen were at the bar. Beer steins clunked loudly on tables and the various conversations, all in German, were white noise to Walt. He had come into town with three other soldiers: JohnBoy and Christ were both white boys, their Christian names forgotten the way a nickname will remake a man, and Carl was a Black man from Chicago, born to a German mother, a war bride. Somehow, after stationing Carl in Germany, the Army had forgotten Carl spoke German. Now, it was a closely kept secret between Walt and Carl.

Walt was reaching for the pencil and small notebook he kept in his pocket when Carl interrupted, hissing, "Los geht's, Chief."

JohnBoy had been told to leave, but a knot of people had

formed around him at the front door. Christ was nowhere in sight. Being arrested would cause all kinds of problems back on base for the four servicemen, all kinds of problems the two undrunk men weren't interested in. A large black-haired man had JohnBoy by the sleeve, his finger bouncing off his chest like a sewing machine. JohnBoy spoke no German, unless he was drunk, but even sober and speaking English, JohnBoy managed to make more enemies than friends.

Carl was trying to make peace between the angry, dark-haired German and the drunk farm boy. He handed Walt some money. "Go buy some beers for our hosts," Carl said loudly. JohnBoy had finally shut up, and the German had gone back to stand with his friends. He was still angry, but quietly so. When the barmaid delivered the steins of beer to the men, they only glared at the servicemen. Not so much as a "danke," let alone a "danke schoen."

Beers gifted, Walt followed Carl's lead and helped hustle JohnBoy out the door.

Christ was waiting for them at the train station. There was no train in sight.

"The trains run on time in Germany, boys."

"Looks like we're using the Fuß-mobile," Carl said.

An older, bearded German sat on a bench in the waiting area. His eyes appraised them skeptically as they left the station platform. The road stretched into the dark before them, curving away from the lights of the station, a light gray rip in the darkness. As the men reached the curve of the road that would hide the station from them, the German man stood and yelled, "Vorsicht vor dem Wolf, Jungs!"

The hairs under Walt's collar prickled, but only Carl stopped for a moment. The Germans rarely taunted the American soldiers, but it happened enough that the men had learned to ignore it. When Carl turned back to Walt, he looked perplexed.

It was a five-mile walk back to base. Having missed the last train, the men's next best chance of getting some sleep before daylight was a farmer driving home into the valley and offering them a ride in the back of his truck. Stranger things had happened. Overhead, clouds heavy with rain hid the moon as they walked into the wind. Occasionally, lightning brightened the distant sky beyond the clouds.

Walt dropped behind the other three, ignoring their conversation, his adrenaline still up from the encounter in the tavern. Carl fell back next to him when Christ and JohnBoy loped ahead, drunk fools gambling on a drunken race. Like Walt, Carl had enlisted to avoid Vietnam.

"What did that guy say?" Walt asked.

Carl shrugged. "Beware the wolf."

"They have wolves here?"

"Supposed to have been hunted out. There are stories, though."

"Yeah. In Oklahoma, too."

The darkness the men were walking into was deeper than the blackness around them. The army base sat in a valley covered with old-growth forests. It was different from the woods in Northeastern Oklahoma. Taller, darker, covered with thick beds of moss that sucked at your boots. Walt wondered if the girl back home, whose letters he'd been missing, had applied to Haskell Indian School like she'd told him. Was he just a boy she met in a diner? Had Janie King only given him her address so he'd get up and leave her a decent tip after four hours of coffee and pie and conversation? A girl like that probably had better things to think about than Walt, plans that didn't include a boy whose best life choice was enlisting in the army to avoid being forced to fight in Vietnam. His older brother had died in the Tet Offensive. Most of his older friends had been drafted as soon as they got out of high school. Walt wasn't going to college and voluntarily enlisting gave him

the best chance of not getting killed in a war started by France's colonization.

Carl gestured toward a dark ruin off the road ahead of them and patted the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. He hollered at Christ and JohnBoy, who were still racing each other, too drunk to be concerned that they were going to be worn out by the time they reached home, possibly because one of them had a blue bottle of sweet German wine.

The ruin they took shelter in was a house that had no roof to speak of, but it provided a decent windbreak. Carl handed Walt a cigarette and a lighter. The clouds parted. For a moment the men who were just barely men saw the unbroken circle of the full moon.

"Did you ever see that Lon Chaney movie? *The Werewolf?*"

Walt felt as if spiders were crawling up the back of his neck, the raw and recently shaved area at the base of his skull. He hunched his shoulders up to make the feeling go away.

"You mean *The Wolf Man?*"

"Yeah. Isn't this kind of like that?"

"Carl, man, you need to cut that out."

Carl laughed.

Back on the road, there was the sound of an approaching motor, a truck leaving the village and driving down into the valley. They saw it stop where Christ and JohnBoy were standing at the edge of the road. Walt took one last long drag on his cigarette, then put it out. Carl reached out to stop him from walking up to the road, listening to raised voices. He pulled Walt back behind the wall of the ruins when he heard the passenger side door screech open.

"I don't think this is a ride we want to take, my friend," Carl said.

Christ had already turned and was running toward the woods when they heard the wine bottle smashing into the side of the

truck. JohnBoy was wielding it and backing toward the edge of the road, keeping the large German from the bar from swinging at him as he backed away. Carl and Walt ducked low and watched from the safety of the ruined house until, of course, JohnBoy made a beeline to them.

When he reached them, he was out of breath, still carrying the jagged neck of the blue wine bottle. They watched the driver of the truck step out and stand at the edge of the road with the black-haired man. The two German men argued briefly, then the driver returned to the truck. From the road's edge, the dark-haired man yelled, "Hütet euch vor dem Wolf, Jungs!" Both men laughed, and the dark-haired man returned to the idling truck. They sat there for several minutes before driving slowly down into the valley.

"Looks like we're going for a walk in the woods," Carl suggested. He and Walt walked together ahead of JohnBoy.

"Again with the wolf warning?" Walt asked quietly.

"Yes. This time it was to protect yourself from the wolf."

"Great," Walt said.

Behind them, they heard JohnBoy holler.

"At least we got an Indian chief to lead us."

Walt stopped.

"He's drunk, man. He won't even remember this tomorrow," Carl said.

Walt waited for JohnBoy, anyway. If someone asked him why Carl could call him Chief, but a drunken white farm boy couldn't, Walt couldn't have explained it. When Carl said it, it was filled with an admiration for the American Indian that he had learned from his German mother and Walt could forgive that. When JohnBoy said it, it was full of the mockery of a man whose family had stolen your land.

And Walt had told JohnBoy the last time he'd said it that there better not be a next one. There were some things a man had to

keep his word on. JohnBoy was still carrying the broken neck from the wine bottle, though. From his pocket, Walt pulled out a knife he'd bought in a German market, a bone-handled silver Indian head knife about three inches long. He opened it and stepped into JohnBoy's path.

"What was that?"

JohnBoy stepped back, surprised. His face was confused, a reflection of the drunken blackout brain he was probably experiencing. He looked as if he had no idea what he'd done or said.

"What the hell, man?" JohnBoy managed, before he stepped back drunkenly, then suddenly clutching at his belly vomited on his own boots. From the edge of the woods, Christ watched them and shook his head. Walt pressed the silver blade back into the bone handle, the small silver circle embossed with a Plains-style warrior profile complete with headdress, reflecting the full moon's light. He slipped it back into his pocket. He and Carl didn't wait for their sick companion. They left the stink of sweet wine and stomach acid behind them.

JohnBoy's puking shifted into dry heaves, a sound like a miserable animal rolling across the grassy field, barely audible once they were in the trees. Once JohnBoy stopped, he whined for a few minutes about being left behind. The guys didn't slow down, and he didn't speed up. He was still in the field when they heard the wolf howl.

Those prickly spiders under Walt's collar were back and the three men quickly turned toward a crashing behind them.

"Run!" JohnBoy screamed as he came loping toward them, dropping the broken bottle. He had almost reached them when a large, dark creature hit him from behind and knocked him off his feet.

"Scheiße!" yelled Carl.

"What the hell is that?" screamed Christ.

The snarl was doglike, *big dog*-like. Walt had seen packs of dogs take down cattle in a similar fashion back home. It was hard to get away when there were two-inch teeth sunk in the back of your neck. If there were a pack of these big dogs, they were goners.

Carl ran back and picked up the blue bottle JohnBoy had dropped. Walt took his knife back out of his pocket. Christ turned and ran away in the direction of the road. The creature had torn into JohnBoy's thick neck, remaking his screams into bubbly gurgles. JohnBoy's limbs thrashed. Carl ran and kicked the creature from behind and it turned and snarled at him, teeth snapping. Walt grabbed JohnBoy's legs and tried to pull him away from the beast. The giant dog swiveled on Walt. It lunged and sank its teeth into Walt's right shoulder, knocking him backward. Before Walt could thrust his elbow between his face and the muzzle of the wolf, the wolf's teeth came down biting into the bridge of Walt's nose. Walt rammed his left elbow into the wolf's right ear and the creature turned his teeth into the blocking arm. Blood filled Walt's eyes, the saltiness burning. Walt's right hand swung the still-open blade wildly while Carl kicked the wolf. As the wolf growled and turned to snap at Carl, Walt found purchase in the creature's throat and he plunged in deep. When he felt the point hit, he twisted and shoved harder, not stopping until he felt the creature collapse.

Walt's face and arms throbbed. He struggled to keep his eyes open. Carl ordered him to sit still as he rushed to tend to JohnBoy. Walt was kneeling, but struggling to stay upright, terrified as he felt the skin around his eyes swelling, making it hard to see. Still, he was in better shape than JohnBoy, who had stopped crying. Now the only sounds coming from his torn throat were wheezing. The ground beneath the men had turned to mud from the blood and the struggle. It stank of old death and new sacrifice, the viscera of a man whose insides knew he was a goner before he was gone.

JohnBoy was dead before they heard the car's horn from the road, long and mournful. Too late, Christ had waved down a late-night driver, but the man wouldn't step out of the car.

Carl turned his attention to Walt, tightly wrapping the worst gash in Walt's arm. He worked quickly and efficiently in the dark. Walt felt weak and somewhat nauseated. He wondered if he might get to go home now and marry Janie before he lost her to some college boy who wouldn't be drafted or even have to enlist. Janie would run her soft hands over his scars and braid his hair when he grew it out, maybe. They'd have kids who'd go to college just like their mom and not die in some foreign country playing warrior.

For a moment, the moon came out from behind the clouds again. The steady rain drops washed the blood from Walt's eyes, allowing him to see a little as it washed away the briny blood. Carl handed him a torn piece of cloth to use as a rag, to wipe his damaged face, to stanch the blood rapidly flowing from his punctured nose. His arms and shoulder stung in the cold rain, and he began to shake.

He turned to look at the body of the creature in the moonlight as a flash of lightning threw the world into contrast, like a black-and-white film. Walt stumbled to his feet, aghast at what he saw in the lightning's flash. Thunder rolled across the fields and through him. Where the rain should have been falling on a wolf, it instead washed blood off the naked body of the dark-haired German.

What they had killed had morphed into a man, the first man they had ever killed. They had trained for that, stabbed, fought, and shot sawdust dummies, but this man was real. No, he was a real man now. But he had definitely been all hair and teeth and blood moments earlier, a wolf that had bitten deep into Walt's flesh. You never forget your first kill, they say. Walt knew then that his first kill would curse the rest of his life.

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COLLECTIONS

AMBER BLAESER-WARDZALA

Death being mounted on walls was nothing new to me. Deer heads and fish bodies had adorned the walls of my relatives' homes. Trophies. I had never questioned their presence there. I had even listened to the stories—because there was always a story.

“That fucker fought so hard that I thought I had hooked Mishibizhii himself,” my favorite uncle had told me once, motioning to the northern directly above his couch. “Bent my rod, he did. He was so set on escape, on not being caught. But I lived through Indian Boarding Schools. Ain't no fucker more strong-willed than me. I got him in the boat eventually. Weighed thirty pounds, the old bastard did. Can you believe it?”

With each telling, the fish weighed more.

I liked those stories. Liked the way my relatives' faces lit up as they retold the capture of their prize. And I grew used to the glassy eyes that watched my every move. Death lived in those houses like an old friend, like she was one of us, a member of the Cloud family.

In Anishinaabe tradition, hunting was not just a way to pass

time. It was part of the cycle; it was a way to survive. Those animals gave their lives so that we might continue ours.

But when I walked into Professor Smith's suburban house for a party to celebrate the end of the semester and our class together, I was more than taken aback by the heads on her walls.

I was the last to arrive, having come from my job at the restaurant. I had recently been promoted from hostess to server. Or they told me it was a promotion. I suppose they thought making tips on top of my hourly pay was enough to persuade me that having to see to someone's every need was a good job, was better than organizing and arranging the seating. But I hated it, was bad at it. I left every night near tears, swearing I would never go back. That I had had it. That I would start looking for a new job the very next day.

I never did. I always went back.

That night was no different. In fact, that night was worse. I'd dropped a tray of food in the middle of the restaurant, pieces of the ceramic plates flying everywhere. I'd stood there frozen, everyone staring at me. My boss, without saying a word, handed me a dustpan and a broom. Instinct kicked in and I began to clean, my hands trembling. My coworkers didn't offer to help and instead walked around my mess, giving one another knowing looks.

After I had finished cleaning, my boss screamed at me in the kitchen for five whole minutes, loud enough that the whole restaurant could hear. I knew they heard because one of my customers, an older white man, patted my back when I came to ask him and his wife if they wanted dessert. He looked at me with pity in his eyes and said, "Don't worry, sweetheart. No boss can stay mad at a girl as pretty as you."

The last thing I wanted to do after work was go to a party, but I needed a letter of recommendation from Professor Smith for an internship so I wouldn't have to spend the summer at the restaurant. So I had to go, had to be gracious, had to make small talk

and make sure she liked me. Make sure I ended the night with her thinking to herself, "Huh, that girl has a lot of promise."

But as I let myself into the house and saw the glassy eyes on her walls, I knew coming had been a mistake.

I stood there, frozen, one arm out of my coat, trying to believe what I was seeing, trying to conflate it with the image of the seemingly sweet professor I had known for the past semester. Sure, she was one of those straight, white, ally women who centered themselves in topics of race and sexuality, but most were well-meaning, in the end. At least, I had thought they were until I found myself staring into the dark eyes of a bodiless human.

"Meg! We've been waiting for you!" I heard Professor Smith say.

In my numbness, I didn't realize she was talking to me, because she used the stupid nickname a different professor had given me in my freshman year because my real name, Megis, even with the Americanized spelling, was too hard for him to pronounce. Everyone at the university called me Meg now.

I realized she was speaking to me when she took off my puffy coat, hung it on an acorn hook on the wall, looped her arm with mine, and led me into the living room where the other students had gathered. I didn't even fight it, my body not remembering how to make choices of its own. My brain stuck on the male head with the deep-set, dark eyes, like my brain was a DVD with a scratch on it.

Her living room was large and imposing with a giant marble chess set near the arched windows, a stone hearth (the mantel of which was covered in tourist souvenirs from holidays abroad), a Persian-style rug, and vintage-looking sofas and chairs that didn't seem at all comfortable. And there were heads. Heads of every shape, every color, every hairstyle. Male heads, female heads, non-binary heads. It looked like every college pamphlet sent to prospective students, to show the "diversity" of their institution.

But even more noticeable than the heads was the empty space above that fireplace. There was no break in the watching eyes except for this one location, the only white wall. It felt naked and incomplete, and I couldn't look at that vacant space without feeling a sense of shame, like Professor Smith had come to the party without any pants and I was gawking at her bare legs and underwear.

"Look, everyone! Meg's here. We're all together at last," my professor said.

The other students, thirteen total, smiled and waved at me, said various greetings and then returned to whatever conversation they were currently involved in. One of my classmates, the only other BIPOC student, was missing. Where was she? We didn't know each other that well, but I could at least count on her to have my back.

I was not close with anyone else at the party. I was a Native scholarship student who spent all her free time working or doing homework. They were all white students born into privilege. None of them was rude or racist or anything like that, but any time I spoke to them, we were both uncomfortable, trying to find things we had in common besides classes and our majors. They always wanted to talk about pop culture or classic white, American writers. I knew little pop culture and had only read Emerson and Melville and Fitzgerald when it was a course assignment. And they had never read Silko or King or Momaday, had only heard of Erdrich but never read her, and knew one or two Harjo poems. Our conversations would move to the weather within the first five minutes.

Professor Smith looked at me, eyebrows raised, her lips still set in that perfect little smile. She was waiting for something from me. What did she want? My brain moved slowly, processing, trying to move past that initial shock. But I still could not remember how normal conversations were supposed to go, what she could

possibly be expecting me to say when her home was a diversity graveyard. My eyes flitted away from her and back to the fireplace and that empty wall.

"You must be in high demand," Professor Smith prompted me, squeezing my arm tighter in hers. "I'm so glad you were finally able to grace us with your presence."

An apology. The most basic of human interactions. That's what she wanted.

"So sorry for being late, Professor," I said. I could barely even feel the words forming on my robotic lips. My eyes were locked on the head to the left of the fireplace. A Black woman with a full afro. Her eyes were wide, unnaturally wide, as if in terror, but someone had smoothed the rest of the expression off her face, tried to make her look serene. Only her eyes revealed the truth. "I had a shift tonight."

"Ah, that's right! Apart from being an excellent student and writer, you're also a dedicated member of the working class! How are you liking your job, dear?"

She walked over to the built-in bar and poured a drink.

"Fine, yeah. Just got promoted to waitress," I said. I couldn't move my gaze from the Black woman, as if we were in a staring contest.

Professor Smith walked back over to me, two drinks in hand. "Well, that's excellent news, dear! Congratulations. At what establishment do you work again?"

She pressed a glass of white wine into my grip. She didn't ask if I was of age. And I wasn't. But still, on instinct, I brought the glass to my lips. It was so full and my hands so shaky that I nearly spilled it on me.

"Alfonso's on Main and Milwaukee," I said.

"Oh, Alfonso's! I haven't been there in years. My husband and

I will have to go there again sometime soon. Maybe we'll even get you as our server. What days do you work?"

My gaze moved to the head only a few feet from the Black woman's. A smiling woman with tons of freckles. By smiling, I mean the lips were, showing off her perfectly straight teeth. The smile had no effect on her empty eyes.

"Almost every night, really," I said. I was surprised, surprised how ingrained small talk was in me. My mind still broken, still reeling, but my words able to act almost normal.

"Well, I applaud you, my dear," my professor said.

At that moment, a middle-aged man came over, wrapping his arm around her waist and murmuring something in her ear. She said something back and then turned to me and said, "Do excuse me, Meg. My husband needs my help with the hors d'oeuvres, but I'll be back in one moment so we can continue our chat."

I nodded, not saying anything. I was too busy silently counting the number of heads on her walls: twenty-three in total—that I could see, of course. Who knew how many lay behind closed doors or up the stairs. Was there one directly across from her bed, watching over her and her husband as they slept, like some demented crucifix you would find in Catholic bedrooms? I took a long, deep drink of my wine.

I should leave. This was my chance to escape, to run. I looked at the other students clustered in the living room, trying to see if anyone else was going to make a break for it too. They were all laughing and smiling. No one was looking at the heads. No one seemed bothered or on edge. All of them acted like they did in class. Was it in my imagination? Why was no one else upset? Did they know something I didn't? Had Professor Smith explained the heads before I got there? Maybe they were leftover Halloween decorations—even though we were well into December. She was

a busy woman. I'm sure her husband was busy too. Maybe they just never got around to taking them down. They looked too real to be decorations, but I guess if they lived in a house like this, she could splurge on Halloween décor.

One of my classmates, a boy named Trevor, filled the space next to me that Professor Smith had vacated. Trevor and I were both sophomores with the same major—English. We had all the same classes, and he always sat next to me. I was starting to suspect that Trevor saw me as more than just a friend and classmate. He was a nice enough guy and pretty smart too, but I wasn't looking for a relationship. And even if I were, Trevor wasn't the one I would go for. How to put this nicely . . . while handsome in a conventional way, Trevor lacked original thought. He could quote any scholar and almost every novel ever written, but the moment you asked him to think something or say something that hadn't been handed to him, Trevor looked like he was going to have an aneurysm, his entire face bone white and his eyes flicking back and forth rapidly.

"Hey, Meg, how's it going? Great house, right?" he said now.

"Yeah, sure," I said, then leaned closer so no one could overhear and dropped my voice. "Um hey, don't you think some of the decorations are a bit . . . odd?"

He looked around the living room, his bushy brows raised. "What are you talking about?"

"The heads, Trevor, the heads."

"Oh, those. One of a kind, aren't they? Some of the seniors told me about them at that English major party. I guess you weren't there, were you? You never hang out with us, but I bet you're pretty busy with work and all. Well, apparently, she's been collecting them ever since she started teaching. Crazy, right? I was never good at collecting. Do you remember those collect all fifty state quarter things from when we were kids? I would get like ten, and

then I would end up spending them on candy or something. It's amazing she's been able to keep this up for like what—twenty-five, thirty years? I could never."

What else had I expected from Trevor? It was a good thing he hadn't been born in Nazi Germany.

I looked around at my other classmates, sure one of them had to be more reasonable than Trevor, had to realize that we had all just stepped into the den of a serial killer and probably were not leaving here alive. But there was still no sign of mounting panic in their eyes. All of them were laughing, chatting, seeming to be having the time of their lives. What the fuck was the matter with them?

"Trevor," I said, "you're a . . . sensible guy, right? Doesn't it concern you where she got the heads?"

He gave me a look that clearly said that he thought *I* was the crazy one. "Why would it? Sam said—you know Sam, right? Junior, lots of curly red hair? Well, Sam said Professor Smith loves telling the story of each and every one of the heads. There are even little plaques under them that tell a bit about how Professor Smith knew them and acquired them. It's really fascinating stuff."

I set my wineglass down with a bang on an end table. Two of my classmates glanced over. Some of the white wine splashed onto the carpet, and for a brief moment, I was happy it was white and not red. Then I remembered that I was currently at risk of being murdered and there were more pressing things than me staining the carpet of my professor's white-picket-fenced home.

"Holy shit, Trevor! Did you not just hear yourself? 'Knew them?' 'Acquired them?'" Trevor, she murdered them!" I hissed.

He laughed. That was it. It was the last straw. I couldn't stay here. While everyone else might think this was normal or cool or whatever, I did not want to stand around talking about writers as dead people watched over us.

"No, she didn't, Meg," Trevor said. "You're starting to sound just like Tracee. She wasn't here more than five minutes before she dipped. The heads freaked her the fuck out."

So that's where Tracee was. At least I knew it wasn't just me. I wish I had had the sense to get the fuck out right when I got there. But it wasn't too late. I could ask Professor Smith for a recommendation another day—or I could ask a different professor who didn't have the body parts of humans on their walls. That was probably the better option.

"I feel bad for Tracee," Trevor continued. "Professor Smith really took her leaving personally. She's definitely going to be harder on Tracee's paper than she would have been had Tracee just stayed. There's really nothing to be freaked out about. There were contracts signed. It was all above board."

I had been staring at the front door, trying to think of a nice way to end my conversation with Trevor. My head whipped back toward him.

"Wait, she hasn't submitted our grades yet?" I asked.

Trevor didn't seem to hear me. "Really, you should learn about all this from Professor Smith. Oh, there she is. Hey, Professor Smith! Can you come over here a second?"

Professor Smith had just returned to the living room, carrying a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She set them down on the bar. Trevor waved at her, motioning her to come over to us. I smacked his hand out of the air, holding it down at his side. "Trevor, don't!" I said.

But it was too late. She was already walking in our direction and blocking the way to the front door.

"Yes, Trevor?" she asked.

"Yeah, Meg was wondering about the heads. Some of the seniors told me about it, but you know Meg. Always so many questions," Trevor said, pushing me toward our professor. "I thought it might be best if you told her all about it."

I gave her a tight smile, trying to look normal and calm, but I knew I looked more constipated than anything. "No, no, I'm fine. I don't know what Trevor is talking about. I was just saying you have a beautiful home and a . . . unique sense of décor, that's all. Nothing else."

Professor Smith smiled widely at me, her gray eyes glistening with excitement. She grabbed my forearm and pulled me to her, her wedding ring digging into my skin. "Oh, Meg, I'm so glad you asked! Yes, I would be happy to tell you all about my collection. Let's start from the first head, shall we?"

"No, no, it's fine," I said. "I'm sure you have more important things to do."

She laughed. "Don't get me started on that. I'm so behind on my grading, but that's not important right now. Nothing would make me happier than spending some time with you."

She started pulling me toward a pair of swinging double doors. I sent Trevor a terrified, pleading look, but he had already joined a conversation with two other sophomore English majors and wasn't paying attention to me anymore. For weeks now, I had been catching him staring at me, and the one time I wanted him to be looking he wasn't. I tried to make eye contact with some of the other students, but as usual, I couldn't get their notice. It was like I didn't even exist to them.

On the other side of the swinging double doors was a giant, completely white kitchen. Not a stain to be seen on the counters or the white tiled floors. The only color was the head directly above the table in the breakfast nook.

"That," Professor Smith said, pointing at the head, "is Ji-Yoo Baek. He's the first student I ever helped. He was an international student from South Korea. An excellent writer. Wrote some of the best stories I've ever read. His parents wanted him to pick a major that could help him make money—what parent ever wants their

child to major in English? However, through my encouragement and assistance, he chose to get his degree in Creative Writing, and before he had even graduated, I helped him sign with an agent."

I felt sick. I stared at the oak table instead of looking at the head. Knowing the story, knowing the man's promise made this worse. Made it harder to look into his dead eyes.

"He published two excellent collections before he ended up here. I have a few extra signed copies in my library, I believe, if you would like one," she said.

"No, I'm good," I said.

"Nonsense, I'll get you some copies before you leave. Such an excellent boy, he was. Shame he couldn't have produced more. But sometimes dying early helps. Gives your notoriety an extra boost."

At least he had accomplished something before he died. At least he had a legacy. That was better than dying as a no-name server. I squeezed my eyes, tried to force that horrible thought from my mind. I was no better than Professor Smith.

We stood there, her hand gripping my arm, for a few more minutes. She stared at the man's head, and I looked anywhere but at him. There was a suffocating blanket of silence pressing down around us like we were in a church. There was a soft, nearly loving look on her face—almost like how mothers look at their children. Almost. But the motherly look had fused with something warped and rapacious. Like Scrooge McDuck when he sees a pile of money. Or like a wiindigoo from my tribe's stories. And like the cannibals from our tales, she had grown a taste for taking human lives, and she wanted more. Hungered for it. Never to be satisfied.

After the prayerlike moment was done and that greedy look started to melt from her eyes—just a little bit—she took me back out into the living room where the rest of the students had gathered around to watch Trevor and another boy play a game of chess.

Only among a group of academics would a stupid game of chess get that much attention.

Professor Smith didn't pause by the students, didn't let me go to them. Instead, she pulled me from head to head, telling me their names and what it was she had done that led to her accessorizing her home with them—introductions, encouragements, mentoring, letters of rec, loans. There was nothing she hadn't done. And all of it ended the same way.

I could have made a break for it. Yanked my arm out of her grasp and ran, left all my stuff behind. I definitely could have outrun her in my black no-slip shoes. It probably would have been the smart thing to do. But I couldn't just leave. This wasn't about a maybe-internship anymore. She hadn't filed our grades yet. One bad grade could sink my GPA, could lose me my scholarship and place at the university, and then I would be stuck working at Alfonso's until I made one mistake too many, and they let me go. And then what would I do? Get a job at McDonald's? At Walmart? No, no, no. I couldn't do that. I was the first person in my family to go to college, and I was the only Native at the school. If I failed, if I screwed up, it would be like saying my people didn't belong in that environment, didn't deserve education and better jobs. So I couldn't leave. Instead, I had to stand there, plaster on a smile, and listen to her stories. My shaking right leg my only giveaway.

It was when she was telling me about the tenth head that I realized she never told me how they died. Never said who did it or how it was done. In my mind, I imagined them walking across a stage in cap and gown and kneeling down, resting their head in a guillotine. Professor Smith stood above them smiling, holding the guillotine's rope delicately in her dainty hands. I couldn't bring myself to imagine the rest.

When she had told me the story of each and every one of the twenty-three heads in her living room, all of them similar in age,

she led me to those uncomfortable looking sofas. The other students were still gathered around the chess board, chatting to one another as they watched Trevor come closer and closer to victory.

Professor Smith sat down, pulling me with her, since her hand still gripped my arm. Seated, she let go of me at last, and she leaned back. She sighed, a little smile playing across her lips. I perched on the edge of the sofa, my right leg jiggling up and down.

"Each and every one of these people was my protégé," she concluded. "I helped them in their careers. And in return, they kindly donated their heads. A museum of my goodwill, really. Do you know that I have a head of all the major religions? That girl there? The smiling one with the freckles? Jewish. That boy in the far left corner? Muslim. The Christian I have shoved away in the guest bathroom upstairs, because we see those all the time. In my entryway, I keep the Buddhist. The Hindu and the Sikh are right over there by the bar. I have all the sexualities too: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, straight. You know, all the mainstream ones. I also have almost all the races. Just missing one. I have a spot picked out for that lucky person."

She looked to the empty space above the mantel.

"A prime location," she said. "For my great white whale. Figure of speech, of course. The Christian upstairs is white. Plus a few others down here. I don't need any more of those."

Across the room, Trevor moved his queen, taking the other boy's only remaining bishop. Professor Smith was staring at me, waiting for me to ask what her great white whale was. She was trying to draw me closer, for me to take the bait, but I wouldn't be like my uncle's northern. I wasn't going to be pulled into her boat.

"Aren't you curious what I'm missing?" she asked.

"It's late," I said, standing up. "I should be going."

There was nothing wrong with making a polite exit. She couldn't downgrade me for that. I had stayed, listened to her stories, been

a good enough guest. She would have to understand that I was exhausted—work all day and then a party after? Anyone could see why I didn't want to stay.

But she stood with me, reaching out and resting a hand on my shoulder. "Nonsense, Meg. You only just got here forty minutes ago, and you haven't even had something to eat yet."

It couldn't have been only forty minutes. It felt like so much longer.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, but I'm exhausted. And not hungry," I said and tried to move toward the front door.

"I insist you eat," she replied, staring directly into my eyes. I looked away, down to her pointed-toe heels. "Charles!"

Her husband appeared at my side with a small plate covered in various hors d'oeuvres. He was standing between me and the exit, and his wife was standing between me and the windows. He smiled at me, that same sort of hungry look in his eyes that his wife had, and pushed the plate into my hands.

"Eat, eat," Professor Smith said and shoved me back down onto the sofa. The force of it caused me to spill several deviled eggs. "You must be famished, all that hard work at the restaurant. On your feet all day. It must be exhausting. A girl as intelligent as you, as talented as you, shouldn't have to do all that manual labor. You should be doing something more productive, more suited to your talents."

She sat down next to me again but much closer this time. Her knee pressing into my thigh. The armrest of the sofa shoved into my back. I felt like a leaf in fall, collected and pressed between pages to preserve it. Keeping it from continuing the life cycle: breaking down and fertilizing the soil so something new can grow from it.

"A girl like you," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "is rare, Meg. So hard to find. There's only one like you in the entire

university. Did you know, in my thirty years at this institute, I've seen only one other? They slipped right through my grasp then. I won't make that mistake again. This time it will be different. For us."

She looked back up, to that blank white space above the mantel. "Did you know my collection actually inspired some of my colleagues to start their own? Dr. Ludwig, you know him, correct? Well, he has an absolutely wonderful collection, but he has the full, stuffed bodies. You really get a good sense of who they were before when you have the whole body. Especially since Dr. Ludwig made sure the taxidermy modeled their poses off photos of them from when they were alive. Really excellent work. They feel almost like people."

She reached over and took a salmon puff off my plate. She rolled it between her fingers, still staring at the white space. Across the way, Trevor knocked over the other boy's king. The other students laughed and clapped, slapping Trevor on the back. Trevor beamed.

"He has all the races, Meg. Every single one. Bagged himself that great white whale."

Professor Smith looked at me with those gray eyes. A wiindigoo stared out.

"But enough about me and my ambitions. Let's talk about you, dear. You're such an amazing writer. With the right person on your side, I could see your name being among the greats. Can't you?"

My lips were pursed with another excuse, something about family visiting, about having to meet them at the airport. My body straining, squirming to escape the pin of her legs. I went still, and the half-formed excuse fizzled away as her words sunk in. I pictured it for a moment: Erdrich, Orange, Cloud. Megis Cloud, one of the three Native fiction writers that nearly anyone, even non-Natives, could name off the top of their heads. There was nothing more that I wanted in the world. I hadn't even realized I wanted it

until that moment, until she dared me to dream. Now I couldn't stop picturing it. I leaned back and bit into a tartlet.

"I know how difficult university life can be," she said, "for someone from a . . . diverse background. Is there anything I can do to help? So hard to get anywhere on your own these days. Life is always easier with a friend, isn't it?"

She popped that salmon puff into her mouth, chewed, and then smiled at me.

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