

WHAT LIES BENEATH WHITE GLOVES

Siobhan Cooney fiction

It's a Saturday night in early December, and New York City is wet, windy, and cold. It's six in the evening, and the sun has long since set in the sky, weary from a day's work, jaded with its cyclical and inescapable progression. The snow refuses to cease; they say it's one of our worst winters yet. I crank up the speed of the windshield wipers, and my headlights part the seas of white as I carefully maneuver through the backroads. How I wish I could be back at my apartment right now, under my favorite fleece blanket and marathoning the *Harry Potter* movies while Kevin and I stuff our faces with pizza and wings. That's how I'd really like to spend my birthday, in the arms of my fiancée.

"But that's why you're here, Beth, driving alone on black ice." I say to the steering wheel. It's been a month already since our engagement, and I still haven't worked up the courage to tell my family. Kevin doesn't blame me, though. He knows they aren't his biggest fans, especially Mother. All she wants is for me to land a man whose pockets are deeper than his personality. He could even

have a nose the size of Texas and Mother wouldn't care, so long as his last name was Vanderbilt and his bank account matched ours. And don't even get me started on my siblings. Michael never misses an opportunity to crack a "broke college literature professor" joke about Kevin. That way Michael is too busy laughing to swig down yet another beer. Portia, our darling baby sister, is always quick to criticize Kevin's manhood just because he's sweet and sensitive, and not a rich, pretentious jerk. She would know a lot about those; she's slept with enough of them to write a manual, if only she could string two intelligent words together. But of course, all Mother sees in them is the successful stock broker and dazzling debutante that she can parade like show ponies at all of her events.

My fists clench the wheel. I take a deep breath.

This never bothers Kevin, or if it does, he never lets his frustration show. He does not, however, understand why I keep tripping over myself running in circles around my family, desperately trying to get on the

inside. It's true; I've never been Mother's perfect socialite heiress, or the perfect middle sibling that my brother and sister want standing between them. But there was always Dad. He would follow me in the garden, watching as I got lost in the beauty and the science of the flowers. Shoulder to shoulder on the shaggy carpet of the study, we would sit together for hours pouring over books about botany and poetry that he knew only I would read. Dad, with a strong hand on my shoulder, made me feel like I had a place in all of the upper-class chaos, telling me to be an orchid in a rose bush. But after he died three years ago, I started slipping into the shadows once again. I guess I feel like I owe it to him to somehow find my own way back into the family.

It's a long and winding road.

Before I know it, I'm parked outside after entering the gate code. I know Dad's birthday like the back of my hand. I sigh.

"Let's get this over with. You can do this." Correction. "You don't really have a choice."

I grab the handle about to open the door when my engagement ring catches my eye: A simple, sterling band with a small, star-shaped diamond no bigger than a dime. That's what Kevin likes to call me, his North Star. I think he was more nervous about giving me the ring than asking the actual question. He was afraid that it wouldn't live up to the countless

tennis bracelets, emerald pendants, or whatever that I have in my collection. I smile softly, gazing at the ring as it rests on my finger, rotating it under the map lights. It's modest and clouded, straining to catch the light on a starless night. It's shy to sparkle, as if it doesn't know how beautiful it really is. But I know.

I can't bear to take it off, but I decide to conceal the ring so that I'm not bombarded with questions and judgement. My family may be clueless, but they aren't stupid. And if I'm finally going to put myself on the line, I want it to be on my own terms and in my own words.

I text Kevin quickly letting him know that I made it over safely.

One more look at the ring, and then I slip on my white silk gloves that Mother gave me on my 21st birthday. Five years later, and still as white as the powder pillowing on the ground. Just to be safe, I also put on a pair of thick fleece gloves I wear when I shovel snow out of my parking space.

Every time I come here the house seems bigger, less familiar, and it takes longer to climb the steps. The front door keeps moving farther from my reach. *Tonight's the night. It's my birthday. I mean, they have to be nice to me on my birthday... Don't they?* Before I have the chance to talk myself out of it the door flies open, and I'm ushered inside.

I'm startled when I'm greeted not by Albert, our lifelong butler with rosy cheeks and short

white whiskers, but a young man with long hair gelled back and a smug mouth to match.

“Good evening, Miss. Your mother will see you shortly.”

I can see her from the front hallway standing in the study right off the dining room. She’s sipping a martini in her right hand while smoothing her jet-black hair that’s pulled in a taught bun with her left hand. Michael and Portia are on either side, drinks in hand as well. Michael nervously tugs on his tie, his top lip quivering. Portia keeps twirling a blond curl in her tiny finger. After a moment of awkward silence, the mystery man loudly clears his throat, hoping to catch Mother’s attention.

Only then does she notice me standing in the foyer. She straightens her silk white gloves, adjusts the pearls that hang pointedly on her porcelain neck, and approaches me, striding past the Golden Boy and Girl.

“Elizabeth, dear.” She brushes back wind-blown strands of my brown hair and kisses me on both cheeks, though I can barely feel the touch of her cold red lips. “I can see you’ve met James, our new butler,” she says, gesturing to the statue of a man behind me.

“But what happened to Albert?” I gasp. “Please tell me he’s not sick.”

“No, no silly. I just fired him. He was getting too old, couldn’t keep up with my schedule, dead weight really.”

Dead. It still cuts through my ear like a knife.

“Anyways. Your brother and sister have already arrived. We’re just having some drinks in the study.” She starts making her way down the hall, then turns around, clearly an afterthought. “Oh, and happy birthday, darling.”

I’m surprised you all know where the study is. The rest of my family was never the literary type like Dad and I.

After leaving my coat with James, and demanding that I keep my gloves on, I join the group in the other room. I politely sip the martini, but it tastes like vinegar. I try to join the conversation, but stock jargon and tea-time gossip helplessly slips through my gloved-fingers.

Sighing and succumbing to muscle memory, I recline gently into the loveseat closest to the bookshelf. A quick scan of the shelves and my favorite book appears. Even through two pairs of gloves, my fingers fit into the familiar folds of the warm leather cover. Hues of gold, purple, and red from the Tiffany lamp dance over my hand as I fondly trace the velvet seat cushion. The words float off the page and into the flooded light.

All of a sudden, I can see Mother’s bony fingers snapping in front of my face. She would always do that to me as I child when she would catch me daydreaming. I still hate it.

“Come along, Elizabeth,

James says that dinner is ready. And take off those ghastly glasses. I'd like to look at two of your pretty gray eyes, not four of them."

There must be a compliment buried in there somewhere.

The dining room is just as cold as ever. The embers in the fireplace are dying; someone needs to put in more timber, a spark or something before we all freeze. As we take our seats, my eyes are drawn to the large centerpiece. It's Dad's golfing trophy from decades ago. The pewter chalice is starting to show its age in the handles and around the rim. And it's filled with orchids, but they look like they are wilting. I can see my siblings through the stems and petals. We share the same light smile as we think of Dad.

Mother calls James in from the kitchen. "What is the meaning of this, James? I specifically ordered roses for the table, not these limp weeds!"

Tiny beads of sweat start to form on his brow. "My apologies, Madam, but these were all that the florist had on such short notice." Sensing his excuse isn't cutting it, he quickly adds, "But I can trim the stems so that they can absorb the water better! That should give them a little more life."

"Yes, yes, fine. Just go, do whatever." Mother takes a quick breath and settles into her chair. "Well, before we eat why don't we give Elizabeth her birthday presents," Mother says to Michael

and Portia. Then she looks at me. "Aren't your hands hot, dear?" Her mouth spouts the question, but the arch in her eyebrow barks the order.

"Yes, Mother." It takes every effort to carefully remove them without simultaneously removing the white gloves underneath. They are my last line of defense, the last things that stand between Mother and my announcement. I'm not ready, not yet. I keep my white-gloved hands under the napkin on my lap.

"I gave you the gift of life, of course," says Mother, "but since that doesn't seem to be enough for you people anymore, I got you these." Bead by bead, a string of shimmering pearls emerge from a small purple box. They look identical to the one's on Mother's neck. Like a pendulum, they swing back and forth from her neatly manicured fingertips.

"They're, they're gorgeous. Thank you, Mother." I absolutely detest pearls, but I wouldn't expect her to know that.

Michael speaks next. "Well, Elizabeth, I had my gift delivered to your apartment, because well, it simply wouldn't fit in the car."

"Wow, thanks, Michael," I say through a painted smile. "I'll be sure to keep an eye out for it."

"I, on the other hand," says Portia, "got you something that you can actually hold in your hand on your birthday." She puts a small perfume bottle in front of me. "Ta da!"

Cautiously, and with my right hand, I open the lid and take a whiff, pleasantly surprised. “Lavender and vanilla! You remembered my favorite scent?”

“Yeah. And I figured Kevin would get a kick out of it too.” She clicks her tongue and winks at me.

Michael scoffs and grabs his temples. “How classy of you, Portia.”

My cheeks burn with enough heat to light three fireplaces.

“Where is he anyways?” Mother cavalierly twirls the wine in her glass. “How nice of him not to show up to his own girlfriend’s birthday dinner. I would have thought he’d come for the free meal if nothing else.” Her retort is quickly followed by, “Of course I am only joking, darling.”

I grit my teeth. “Yes, Mother. I told you this on the phone last week that Kevin would be late because he has to take the later train after his department meeting.”

Michael leans in from his chair, looking at Portia and me across the centerpiece with a slight grin peaking at his dimples. “Remember when Dad used to take us downtown on the weekends? We’d just hop on the subway and ride all over the city, getting off at random stops and back on again.”

“Yeah,” Portia says, leaning over as well. “And then he’d take us to almost every hot dog cart and make us try a sample. I’m pretty sure we all got sick on the train rides home.”

I start giggling with my siblings, and try to glance at Mother through the drooping orchids. Her eyes are ashen.

“Yes, yes, all great fun running around like fools and eating fake meat from a street vendor,” she says. “But seriously, Elizabeth, when is Kevin going to get that poetry collection published? He’s already been turned down by what, two publishers already? And is a promotion on the horizon or is he going to stay associate professor forever?”

In a single breath she extinguishes our only source of light. My happy, smiling siblings slip back into their Golden skins. All four of their eyes turn on me. My palms begin to sweat.

“Well, Mother, I wouldn’t exactly say ‘turned down.’ The first two publishing companies wanted to make too many changes to Kevin’s work that would compromise his artistic integrity. And you know how it works at NYU. It’s a political game.”

Portia and Michael chime in with their usual quips about Kevin, but this time they seem almost forced, hesitant even. Their mockery and snickers echo off the empty walls and clog my head. My siblings disappear once again behind the centerpiece. The stems collapse, and the leaves are crumbling before my eyes.

This isn’t happening. This isn’t how it was supposed to go. I can’t see them. I can’t hear them. My head

and heart are pounding. There is a commotion at the window. Shaken branches shiver against the glass, pleading for an escape from the cold. Tap. Tap. Tap. They are wearing white gloves too. Or is that snow? Don't bother, you won't find any warmth here. Tap. Tap. Tap. The snow is up to the windowsill. *Elizabeth.* The voice is far away but right in my ear. *Kevin?* *Where is he?* I can't breathe. Tap. Tap. Tap. *Can't let the fire die. Need a spark, need a spark.* Snap. Snap. Snap. *ELIZABETH!*

"Please! Stop it! All of you!" I slam my fists onto the table. The centerpiece quakes in the aftershocks.

Mother opens her mouth, probably to rebuke me, but once those cat eyes catch a glimpse at the bump on my left hand, she instead clears her throat. A sly grin grows on her face, and she says, "I don't know who you think you are fooling here, Elizabeth, but I can see that ring under your white gloves, and I can tell you right now that it's not big enough."

It's all over now. There is no going back. "You know, Mother, I was actually hoping to avoid this conversation entirely, but the gloves are off now." I yank the white shields from my hands and throw them indignantly onto the table. I can feel Kevin rolling his eyes at my cliché.

"How could you possibly marry that man? Look at the life I've given you," she glares at Michael and Portia, "all of you!"

"Don't bring them into this, Mother. And yes, you did give me a life. A life filled with jewelry and tea parties and social events and money that I just don't care about. The one thing you never gave me was love."

Mother says, "Oh, and that's what Kevin gives you, huh? 'Love' won't pay your bills, sweetheart. All it can do is maintain a garden in the backyard and keep you up at night until you cry yourself to sleep." She stares long and hard at the centerpiece before speaking again. "I don't want you to make the same mistake I did."

Without missing a beat, I say, "Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love."

Mother's green eyes roll almost to the back of her head. "Oh, great, now she's quoting Romeo and Juliet. How appropriate."

"Kevin calls me every night, before I go to sleep, to tell me that. Not to sob drunken tears, or to complain about how this week's lover left before sunrise and without leaving a note." Michael and Portia share a despairing glance and then slouch in their chairs, not daring to look at either me or Mother.

"It's because he loves me. We spend days at the Met or Central Park, talking about what makes life worth living. I sit up with him for hours while he grades papers. We listen to each other's hopes and dreams, and he tells

me how beautiful I look when I wear my glasses.” I unsheathe them from their case, Excalibur from the stone, and put them on with every accentuated muscle I can muster in my hands. “On the contrary, Mother. I see everything clearly now, and believe me, the only mistake I could make is letting myself suffocate in those pearls and prioritize money over the man I love.”

James returns from the kitchen with a pair of scissors.

“It’s useless,” I say to him. Then I look Mother straight in the eyes. “You can’t cut the stems of a flower that’s already wilted.” I grab my purse and make way for the front door.

Now it’s Mother’s turn to get up from her chair. “Get back here, Elizabeth, and sit down right now.”

“No! I’m tired of doing what you say. I’m sorry if it upsets you, but I’m going to marry him.”

Mother makes one more attempt to rope me back in. “If you leave now, I swear to God, you lose everything.”

As I grasp the doorknob, Kevin’s ring presses firmly into my palm. The star shines the brightest I’ve ever seen it. “No, Mother. I already have everything I need.”