

## FLOURISH

OBSERVE THE RED-HOODED GIRL with the Diet Coke. In southern summer zenith, the wetness between her legs equals the humidity in the air, not the liquid in the glass. See how she reaches for her soft drink? Elbow and wrist—a couple—relax. Chin lifts, eyes focus. Her outstretched arm resembles a spoonbill's throat. You conclude that she was a dancer once, and you are right. She closes her hand around the glass, lifts it toward her lips. No—*lifts* does not convey the authority of her motion, the demand between royalty and subject. *Pulls* is closer; it invokes ebb and flow. Her position directs, others comply. This is information you'll want to consider later.

She rocks her head back, fills her mouth with soda, and returns the glass to the dew-bright ring on the table. Note the splashes of caramel color along her collar. She smiles, flicks her tongue across the back of her hand. You think you hear her laugh. —Every time I wear white, she says, I spill something on myself.

Let's go back a little.

You check your rearview mirror. There. She turns hard, harder than any lady should. She thinks—knows—she's a goddess behind the wheel. Notice how she drives with the windows and the radio down. She wants to hear everything going on around her, and she wants you to hear her hearing everything. A diesel truck rumbles like a wood chipper beside her. She imagines shoving the tank full of logs cut down somewhere bigger than here, ferried through black veins connecting Northwest to Southeast. She bets that, when covered with tarps and hazard-flagged, those logs look like dragons with flame glued to their jaws. She is always right.

On the right side of the road, a nun silhouetted white-on-blue—a reverse snow angel—invites her to turn. Next to this sacred lady is Her name: Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center. You notice her tilt in her seat as she rotates the wheel. She enters the visitor's lot, laughs, says to no one in particular, —They've got nothing on me. I'm the real deal. Here, she is the *real* Lady of Lake – no fake robed in bad habits and clinging to her articles. The real Lady of Lake practices midwifery, never houses Christian doctors; the real Lady of Lake parks illegally because only she has the right and the right-of-way.

Outside the electronic doors, a short brown-haired man props a stucco wall with his shoulder. His name is Vincent; you barely know him. He smokes, glances at the nurse next to him, tries to angle a look at her watch. In the reflection, Vincent sees red. Dye, followed by head, mouth, coat.

—Lake, thank God. Are you all right? The man moves to toss the cigarette away, pushes back from Our Lady of the Lake, and embraces the Lady of Lake. You see her intercept his arm, snake it around her back while taking Vincent's cigarette from between his fingers.

—There's no God, she says, when driving's involved. Traffic was shit. She smiles, takes a long drag. The burning cherry seems to float in front of her; you imagine it as a harvest moon framed in blood-cloud nimbus.

—Traffic's always shit. All that work expanding the interstate was a waste of money. Vincent tucks a hand in his side pocket, fishes around for something.

—But we're not here to talk about roads. How is he?

Vincent shrugs as he pulls out his Marlboros. —He's got a broken nose, dislocated jaw, and a cut on his forehead that needs seven stitches.

—Shit. White-gray smoke leaks from the wet wound of her mouth. The Lady of Lake tips her eyes in the direction of Our Lady of the Lake's mechanical eye. She senses, rather than sees, the infrared sensor that triggers Her sliding door. They move; you move with them.

—What did you expect? he asks, shrugging his shoulders. These things happen when your drunken boyfriend attacks your boss.

Lake sighs. —Are you trying to pin this on me? It's not like I told Aaron to beat Sean up.

Back again. Stare at the table, the cheap vase with plastic daisies. It's also sitting on a table somewhere else. Behind that vase is a brown, hairy shape, perhaps a coyote or wild dog. It could easily be a man. No, don't squint; pretend he's over someone else's shoulder – not worth your attention. Follow him in your peripherals. Watch him climb into the bed-shape at the back of the room. Not the same room you're in now, of course. Don't worry about place. Just lock your eyes. You have to spot that vase, as a ballerina would, so you don't get dizzy when the world begins to spin. Remember, those flowers are the only constant.

Oh, that sigh – who knows? It could be the man walking circles, turning over the sheets before a nap. Perhaps the wolf knocking his penis against a pillow. Or maybe it's you, if that's not too hard to believe. Quiet. See how the quilt shifts as the door

opens, and a second shape, curved like a nautilus, enters? That is a girl folding in on herself, out of her clothes. Note the similarities – blood halo, confident lift of the arm, etc. Maybe not the same girl, but they're related. Alike. Kissing cousins, though not the way you'd like.

Now lift your foot, point your toes. Think: if you were upside down, you would be the Hanged Man. Number 12. Major Arcana, not a position – it's all archetype. Turn once. On the first rotation, you notice a fey prince in the window. You can't tell from here, but he's standing in a bush. His eyes look like blueberries. Mouth is the same color as wood, set just as hard. Stay with the flowers. The girl – naked, except for that red hood – walks over to the bed. She doesn't smile like that for just anyone, especially not her grandmother.

Twice. The changeling presses his hand to the glass, asks for his father. Under the blankets the man stirs; a wolf bares its teeth. The girl yanks up the man's nightdress, grabs the wolf's hindquarters. She climbs on top, riding them, moaning, —How big how big how big how big. As the wolf bites down and cracks the shell between the girl's legs, the man lifts an eyebrow at the window.

You hear him say, —I don't believe in fairies.

The boy falls over.

This is where you start to lose count of the turns, the path of needles, the number of petals on each sunny face. There is just too much to see.

Returning.

Why does she wear a hood in heat that stuffs cattails in the throat? Because underneath, two dime-sized wet spots spread across her silk shirt. This happens every month just before she ovulates; you can set a clock by her tits. You remember she just had that shirt dry-cleaned. Shouldn't she know better? But you also know she has to wear soft fabrics, and her nipples are too sensitive for a bra.

Curtis, shift manager at the café where she works, gives her hell about it. —Way to spotlight a crowd, Little-Miss-Red, he says. This is a Christian establishment.

—Afraid I'll hex the God coffee? That's so cute! Next thing you know, I'll put pins in your tea bags.

Then Sean, the shop owner, steps out of his office. —That's enough out of you two. Either shape up or go home.

She does go home, wet breasts and all, to wait for her bedroom-window man. Aware that she's with someone else – don't know who – you drink. The sun sets; you drink more. Somewhere in the semidark, you hear her voice speaking to him:

—In the beginning there was the letter.

No, you say, you've got it all wrong. It was the word.

—It was the letter first that made the word, the flourish of text, and the L that changed that word into the worLd. She stresses that L, brushes her finger along her outstretched tongue, curls inside his bellybutton.

—The beginning of the letter was L, which filled the womb of the worLd. L rode the placenta like strikethrough as it entered the worLd, and they filled one another. World and El alike.

You start to ask what esoteric shit she's been smoking, but she steals your voice as she yanks his pants down.

God, that mouth. Apple-red with paler creases – a tricky, hot Gala. As if by instinct, your hand reaches into your jeans; you're already hard and can feel a small damp circle on the flap of your boxers.

—So then you've got a world set in two types: serif and sans serif. You know them, have always known them, but don't pay attention.

She slides beneath himyou, traces her tongue along the edge of hisyour ear. You think she says to fuck her, but it might be “fuck you” for any number of good reasons.

—Serifs are all edges and pointy bits. Stay away from serifs, or they'll shred you.

Legs spread in the air, feet flexed. Hisyour hands cuff her ankles, and her arms reach above her head, grabbing the sheets. Her body makes a Y before heyoun grab her calves, hook her over hisyour shoulders, grind her hips against hisyours. She crushes percale between her knuckles, palms turned out like flowers facing the sky.

—The sans serifs are well-rounded but lack definition. They don't hurt and sort of fade into the background. That's why you don't see sans in business.

Clutch her knees, pull her in. Against. Through. She points her toes and her hips lift. Through a haze of breath, you see her lips move around something like words.

—Forget those pseudo- and semi-serifs. El knows how to set His own type.

You turn her over, almost sliding out. The line between him and you and her is something like three pixels – a slash, or maybe what goes between two strike tags.

—Well, I guess you could count symbols as a separate type.

You're fucking a graphic designer, you say.

—But they don't really count because you can't read them. Besides, who wants a wingding.

It's not a question. Neither is the semen slicking the palm of your hand.

Some mythology connects these events.

Perhaps the wolf. There is always a wolf.

You think she's sleeping with Sean, so you confront him behind the café. Later, when you meet Lake after her hospital visit, you remember "art and typography by curtis bentley-smith" in sexy lower-case at the menu bottom. She never left a trail, but she would have taken the flowers – not the pins, not the needles – if she had been cleverer.

—Curtis? Jesus, what an asshat.

So much for a straight answer. Nod, make small talk, dance away from the subject. Finally ask, —What's going to happen to your boss?

—He's not pressing charges, if that's what you're asking. I took care of it.

You say that she must have slept with him.

—I just cast a spell to change his mind. I am a witch, you know. Watch, I'll summon demons in your sugar.

Lake empties four blue packets onto the table, traces a pentagram. The waitress appears from the corner, coffee pot in hand. —Can I get you anything?

She doesn't even bat an eye. —You know, I'm going to write a fairytale about you.

What else can you do besides clap?