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Waterfall

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A rectangle of silky yellow light stretches along the hardwood floor: a dividing line between Ester and Dempsey. He lies on the bed, half covered by the floral orange coverlet, his head resting on his right bicep. She sits opposite him on the chaise lounge, her legs and arms crossed, with her bony knee cap exposed by the parting of her pink beige robe. They're both drinking brandy from short stemmed balloon glasses, pilfered from their father's drinks cabinet. For the last half an hour they haven't spoken to each other, not even a thank you passed from Dempsey to Ester when she brought up the drinks. Dempsey had just stared at the glass in confusion when she had handed it to him: he isn't supposed to drink and Ester isn't old enough to. For another half an hour she will sit in the room until ten o'clock when she can leave, making it a full hour since she had given her brother his medicine. He takes his medicine daily and always at nine o'clock in the morning. He had on occasion started seizing after taking it, so now as a precaution, his younger sister watches over him for an hour.

Dempsey rolls onto his side to face the wall with the window, he had always thought that the curtains in his room were the very same shade of blue as the colour of sadness. His mother's interior design had never made any logical sense to him. She had long ago decorated the room to be his nursery and since she didn't see the other side of his birth he didn't have the heart to change anything in there. Absently, he rubs his eyes and then rolls over, turning away from the window so as to stop staring at the gap in the curtains where the sun barges its way into his room. Ester swallows the final dregs of brandy from her glass and places it on the floor.

'Won't that leave a ring mark?' Dempsey asks as he hears the clink of glass against the wood.

With careful ease, Ester sweeps her hand down and scoops up the glass, her sigh ringing with contempt as she does so. He bites his tongue and lets his body drift into a morning snooze making his hand's grip on the glass loosen. The next half an hour passes about as quickly as paint dries for Ester, who regularly checks her phone for the time. Eventually, when the hands on the clock above her head point to ten o'clock, she gathers the glasses and empty bag from the bedside table and leaves the room. She slams the door shut behind her which slams Dempsey out of his semi-conscious sleep. He listens to the heavy sounds of her stomping down the long hallway, past the paintings of their mothers and their childhood portraits. The creak of her ornate brass handle reaches his ears as she pulls it down and flings the door open before sealing herself inside.

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The long hallway between the siblings' rooms holds no other doors or windows: the walls were decorated a long time ago by Dempsey's mother. The walls are plastered with eggshell blue wallpaper patterned with sage green vines and flowers of teal and gold. A portrait of each family member is hung on every other space of the wall: there are five of them in total. The portrait of Sarah, Ester's mother, is hung on the wall closest to her door, and the portrait of Dempsey's mother Mary is next to the door of his room. Opposite the wall is the wide staircase leading down to the main foyer of the house. Later when their father, Silas, returns from work he will not wonder at the silence of his house nor at the absence of his two children in the communal living rooms. He will sigh as he watches, from his seat at the dinner table, as food is taken up the stairs under heat-preserving domes. At ten o'clock in the evening, he will retire alone to his bedroom and stay there until he leaves again for work at seven in the morning.

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Ever since Dempsey had been taken out of school his father had been setting him daily homework and after a morning of this work, he leaves his room. He never leaves later than two-thirty and by the time Ester is done with her online classes, it is late afternoon and at that point, he is safely in his room and out of her way. They do not have a spoken arrangement but they both keep strictly to this schedule. Away from their house and its large bay windows and old oak doors there is a church which used to be frequented by the village locals and the original owners of the estate. His mother and Ester's mother are both buried in the church graveyard alongside the previous owner's deceased relatives. On the short walk from the house to the church he picks flowers; he then lays them at the headstones of the two women who had both at one point been his mother. Visiting the church is not his everyday afternoon activity but it is his favourite. It is where he gets away from the house and the memories and his sister. Fortunately for him, there is little chance that Ester would ever enter such a derelict building. It is not the silent solitude of the church that he seeks: he has enough silence in the house where he lives. He goes there for the wall in the basement. Apart from the exposed brick walls and decaying newspapers there is nothing much down in the basement. No modern light fixtures have been fixed to the walls or ceiling: the village's interest in Christianity cut off too suddenly for anyone to bother wiring the church with electricity.

April has become too warm to wear a coat outside but Dempsey wears his waterproof jacket anyway. He doesn't carry a mobile phone in his back pocket like most people his age, he isn't even aware that they come with built-in torches these days. His father thought it best to prohibit the use of mobile phones for his son, claiming that he didn't want to risk upsetting Dempsey's temperament. So Dempsey carries his heavy aluminium torch, which his father gave to him at a young age. He takes himself and his torch to the basement where there is nothing of interest except the painting that hangs on the west wall. The west wall is the longest wall down the in the basement, making the painting the main feature in there. For just a second he places his fingertips on the painting. Then he lowers himself to the floor at the left end of the painting, sitting cross-legged on the cold stone and layer of dust that has settled since he last visited.

Beneath the distorted rainbow that somehow glints, even with the dismal light, is a gushing, rushing waterfall that is right in front of him and far away across the gap. The gushing looks so loud, loud enough so you can scream and scream and never be heard. Dempsey stands where no one can stand, on the edge of the waterfall and doing only one thing: screaming. His heart beats so hard that he can feel it but he cannot hear it over the scream raging in his head. He tumbles down the gushing white wall to the bottom onto the rocks that peak out of the shallow water. He tumbles from each ledge: the one closest to him and the one furthest away.

His seated body sways as he draws himself back in and shuffles slowly to the right to pay witness to the other end of the painting where clouds loom over his head. The looming clouds are purple, like bruises, and they taint the sky, they draw in closer and closer to the dense woodland that is brown and green. The green of the woodland is not the same green of the water that glimmers gemstone green and tumbles into the white, gushing rush. Dempsey is lost in that colour green that contains a thousand shades of green, greens

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almost as white as the rushing gush and greens that are nearly as black as the wall behind him. He holds his breath and only breathes when his body forces him to remember.

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On the way back to his room Dempsey, still wearing his waterproof jacket, stops in front of the portrait of his mother that hangs on the wall at the top of the staircase. Down the hall is the portrait of Ester's mother, which Ester had forbidden him from going near, much to his chagrin. Their father often remarks on how similar Dempsey looks to his mother and that it's a miracle that he inherited her black curls and not his father's wispy white strands and premature balding. He glances quickly down the hallway and sees his childhood portrait from which a blond-haired boy looks back at him. Growing up, this portrait was Dempsey's only way of getting to know his late mother: he said good morning to her every morning and goodnight to her every night.

Now Dempsey puts his free hand behind his back and his other hand tightens on the handle of his torch as he leans his face towards his mother's. He is careful not to let his skin touch the paint. Her grey eyes stare into his grey eyes. The corner of his mouth uplifts into a half smile and a second later a feminine laugh rings around his ears. With animal-like speed, he pulls away from the portrait and swipes at his nose with the back of his hand. Relief cools his heart a moment later when the laugh sounds again: this time rattling down the landing from Ester's bedroom. He wipes his brow with his sleeve then rushes to the door and into his bedroom, promptly locking it behind him. His room is the only one in the house with unadorned walls: no pieces of artwork nor murals decorate the pale terracotta walls.

That night when his food is brought upstairs he waits until he hears Ester's door open and shut before he retrieves it. Under a metal dome is a yellow-rimmed ceramic plate where his usual mutton, potatoes and green beans are arranged. His father had read that setting routine was an efficient method to balance one's emotions, so he ensures that his son eats the same thing for every meal. Once Dempsey clears his plate and places it outside the door with the dome secured onto top he draws his curtains open and retires to bed. Dempsey rests his head on the feather pillow and makes his slow descent into sleep.

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On this night, Dempsey dreams of the past and of a speed and sharp sense of smell and eyes that could see through the darkness. His breath was hot and appeared like smoke in the cold air. Under his paws, he could not feel the chilling touch of snow that had fallen and was still falling from the clouds gathered in the moonlit sky. Through the wood, he had run, leaping and bounding and jumping over any and all obstructions in his path. With his new ears, he heard as he had never heard before: the screeching of owls and screaming of foxes struck his ears with a jolting clarity. He heard even the clattering of claws scuttling up trees and along branches. For the first time, he could smell the damp scent of decaying wood that wafted from felled and fallen trees. All night he ran, even though he could not remember the words to describe the sudden overwhelming of his senses. All night he ran and preyed and marked his territory. He ran from the Churchyard where his mother was buried to the edge of the wood that marked the end of the family's estate. Every time he heard human voices too near where he'd been resting he scampered away, managing to avoid them for most of the day and into the night. He stayed away from the human voices until eventually, unfortunately, regretfully one human got too close.

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When the sun rises in the morning it wakes Dempsey from his sleep: he remembers his dream from the night as clearly as if it had occurred moments ago in his waking life. But it is a dream he has often and so it is a dream he knows well. With his curtains drawn the dawn wakes him with enough time to have a clear head before his sister knocks on his door. His clear head will be swallowed not long after she arrives. At this time every morning, enough of his medicine is out of his system that he can get a glimpse into his life without it. His mind works faster and his thoughts are sharper and more focused. He uses this time to assess his life, despite knowing that he will inevitably stop caring about it once the medicine is consumed. He pulls back the coverlet draped over his body and draws his curtains almost closed, leaving a small gap so some sunlight can shine its dividing line into the room. It is during this time that he is at his most restless, the building anticipation leading up to the dulling of his mind and his senses. He could finish all the homework his father sets for him in the hour and a bit he has before he takes his medicine. He paces the room and becomes hotter with every step; he rotates his neck and shoulders and stretches his arms and legs as he walks from one wall to another. He remembers his dream and wishes he could be away from the house and its wooded grounds and its paintings who watch him and wait. He wishes that he lives in a hut so small that he can see all four walls from his bed and outside the walls he is surrounded by wonders of nature. The more he thinks about it the more he longs to be there and the more furious he becomes that he is not there already.

He paces, breathing heavily until the clock on the wall above the chaise lounge reads nine o'clock and there is a light knock on the door, a knock so light that he barely hears it. He waits a moment before sulking back into bed and telling her to come in. He sits up and uses his pillows to prop his back up. He bounces his fingertips on the back of his hand as he takes in a deep breath. The door creaks as Ester opens it and enters the room, in one hand she holds a small brown paper bag pinched between her fingers and in her other hand she holds a tall glass of water. Today she wears a cerulean silk robe that flows down to mid-calf length and her blonde hair is swept away from her face with a pale blue claw clip. She looks at him impassively before walking around the side of his bed and handing him the water and brown bag.

'Thank you,' he says as he takes them from her hands. She doesn't say anything in return; she turns around, slinks over to the chaise lounge and sits down. There she will remain for the next hour until she retreats to her bedroom for her online classes and phone chats with her friends from the village. Dempsey shrugs and chews his cheek then places his glass of water on the bedside table. The paper bag rustles as he opens it: a smell rises up from inside, although he should be used to the stench of sulphur in the mornings he still grimaces. He reaches his fingers inside the bag and takes out its contents. It resembles seaweed in the same way that a moth resembles a butterfly. It is black and dry and leaves a soot like residue on his fingers. His father had been transparent about the fact that he acquired this medicine from the black market. Dempsey looks at it with a soft crease between his brows and then tentatively brings it to his lips, the smell becoming more pungent as it nears his face. Nausea rises up in his throat but he resists gagging. He swallows the saliva building up in his mouth, hoping to rid himself of the sudden queasiness, but it does him no good. He quickly glances up at his sister who is cleaning out her nails and

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not paying any sort of attention to him. He gently slides the medicine back into the paper bag and tucks it under his pillow.

As the hour draws to a close he down the glass of water and places it loudly on his bedside table. Ester's head lifts up at the sound of glass hitting wood, she sighs heavily before standing up and walking over to him. She picks up the glass nonchalantly and scans the table and floor around it. Frowning she asks, 'where is it?'

Despite hurriedly drinking an excessive amount of water Dempsey feels his mouth run dry. 'Where's what?' He asks back.

She stares at him, her entire frame stiff and statuesque. 'The bag, *wolf*. Dad says I need to take the bag too, you know this. Give it to me.'

He sniffs and twists his body so he can reach behind his pillow, with deft fingers he pulls the bag out from under it, making sure that it's upside down so the contents fall out and remain hidden. He passes the empty bag to her. 'Here.'

Her face twists into a grimace and a frown but she takes the bag along with the glass and leaves the room. Once she has left Dempsey scrambles up and grabs the black market medicine from underneath his pillow: it crumbles slightly in his grasp. He turns around to put it into the bedside drawer but doesn't have time. Ester flings open the door, the bag and glass still in her hands, and sees him holding the medicine to his chest. She fires a baleful look at him, her eyes growing wide. 'What are you doing, Dempsey?'

His lips begin to quiver. 'I-I didn't want it,' he stammers, holding it so tightly in his fist that it fragments into more pieces.

'Eat it,' she commands, her eyes hard and unmerciful.

He tightens his fist and his breathing becomes shallow. 'No.'

'Eat it,' she repeats, balling her own hands into fists. 'Eat it, *wolf*.' Dempsey's lip curls at the name and he throws the medicine to the ground at her feet where it shatters into what seems like thousands of tiny pieces. Ester leaps backwards and at the same time, she drops the bag and glass which shatters into sharp shards at her feet. She pulls at her robe, checking the hem for stray crumbs. 'What would your mother say?' She snaps.

He can't help but snarl in retort and ask, 'what would yours say?'

She gasps and her eyes become glassy with unspent tears. 'There's nothing I wouldn't give to know that.'

Dempsey flinches and turns his face away from his sister's stare. With her hands on her hips, Ester leans her body forward and speaks so scathingly that it's almost a hiss. 'Because of you, we'll never know what either of our mothers would make of us. And that's a shame only because they'll never know what a pitiful thing you are.'

His face twists into an unnatural grimace before he whips out of his bed and yells a long single note, it is a low sound that vibrates through the house. Ester recoils into herself and covers her gaping mouth with a shaking hand. Panting heavily with his teeth bared he looks up at her through his dark brows. Then without another word, he storms past her into the hallway: her entire body clenches as he passes her. Once he has thundered down the stairs Ester remembers to breathe and runs to her room where she locks the door and bars it with her desk.

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Dempsey knows where he is going. He strides across the foyer and through a closed set of double doors opposite the dining room. In the games room he passes the pool table and his father's drinks cabinet until he reaches the door to the left of the cushioned bay window.

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Momentarily he stops before it with his hand hovering over the handle but he pulls it down all the same and enters the adjoining room. Inside is the family's private gallery every space on the walls is covered by paintings, landscapes and portraits alike. While other galleries are long and narrow this gallery is tall and box-like. It was originally intended to be a library, the shelves were torn down and replaced with dark veneer wood but an elephant ladder remains so they can see the paintings in the top half of the room.

His breaths rattle as he walks on quick feet to a painting in the back left corner of the room, avoiding looking at any artwork hanging on the east wall. The left corner painting depicts four figures sleeping in various positions in a grand parlour, with powder blue settees and dove-white chaise lounges arranged around short tables. Dempsey doesn't use this painting frequently but when he does it is only due to necessity. Two women with blonde hair rest in front of an unlit fireplace with a red-haired man to the left side of them sleeping on his fist. To the right of them is a pale man with dark hair lying comfortably on a settee: his face is serene and his body is loose. Dempsey smooths his dark brown curls out of the sweat on his brow before surveying the room to make sure that he is alone. His fingers twist as he raises a hand up and draws it closer to the depiction of the dark-haired man. As he raises his hand he chews his bottom lip which makes it crack and almost bleed. With a deep breath, he focuses on the serenity on the man's face then touches his fingers lightly to him.

Almost immediately, a rush of calm tingles from his fingers, up his arm and spreads to the rest of his body. His mind goes blank and forgets the argument with his sister; his morning drowsiness returns to his eyelids, making them heavy, soothing them closed. He sighs and sways, a light smile plays on his lips so he turns around to leave. As he does so his gaze drifts to the east wall and he sees what avoided looking at when he came into the gallery. On a snowy plain underneath an overcast sky is a tawny brown wolf, standing on all fours and looking at a lone, leafless tree. Dempsey's heart rate picks up despite the painting behind him. He looks at the wolf that he'd once stroked, with youthful innocence, admiring the artistry of the wolf. Taking in a deep breath he turns back around, touches the man again and leaves the gallery with his eyes closed, heading straight back to his bed.

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Once again Dempsey was in the gallery, he had spent hours of his childhood and early teenage years in the square room with its high faraway ceiling. On this Saturday morning, while her husband was working, Sarah was alone in the house with Ester and Dempsey. She hung back in the dining room as they went off together. While Dempsey had chosen to go to the gallery to observe his favourite paintings Ester had decided to read her current Jacqueline Wilson novel in the games room. Dempsey had always loved the painting of the tawny brown wolf and had always thought that it looked so very intelligent and so very lonely. When he was in the gallery with his father Dempsey was warned not to touch the paintings, because the paint was old and delicate. But on this Saturday morning, something had called upon him to lift his fingers to the wolf and stroke its back as he would stroke a dog. He wasn't aware of the change because it happened so quickly and so unexpectedly. One moment he was stroking the wolf and in the next moment he was on all fours and every one of his senses was heightened.

He found himself trapped in a box and only a distant human part of him could remember about doorways, he pawed at the door handle so the door would swing open; then he ran through it. Ester, who was still sitting in the bay window with her book, screamed

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at the sight of the wolf. Her scream was harsh on his newly sensitive ears making him cower and run into the foyer. At the behest of her daughter's shrill screams, Sarah ran, with a newspaper in hand, from the dining room to the foyer. She saw the wolf and stopped on the spot in an instant, the only movement came from her dressing robe swaying at her ankles. He hadn't looked at her for very long before he slammed his furry body into the front door in an attempt to get out. But this door proved more difficult to open than the one in the gallery. To either side of the front door were two long panes of antique stained glass that cast hues of red, green and blue over the foyer. He ran at the tall pane of glass to the left of the door which didn't break from the force he applied. Several large skeleton cracks erupted out from the point that the bulk of his body hit. So he ran at it again until it splintered and all the pieces of glass cracked and exploded outward. He whimpered pathetically and leapt out of the hole in the wall, running across the drive and into the woods surrounding the house.

Hours later, when evening had come around and Dempsey had not been seen since the morning, his father and Sarah went out looking for him with torches in hand. Ester insisted to them that he had been in the gallery when the wolf came into the games room. She had further insisted that the wolf that had been in the house was the same one that was in a painting in the gallery. She hadn't voiced her third theory that the wolf and Dempsey were one and the same, not then anyway.

It was winter during this time and in winter the nights are long and dark. Sarah was caught between feeling the biting cold of the winter night and her fiery desperation to find her stepson. Unfortunately for her, he saw her first. For a while humans had been encroaching on his territory, drawing in closer and closer and his anger kept building and building. A feral anger gripped him when one got too close and her scent was strong in his nose. He watched her as he crouched out of sight, even though he had regained the ability to stand on two human legs he remained on all fours. She called out into the night as she had been doing for the last few hours, 'Dempsey. Dempsey.'

Dempsey was close by but his mind was still at a point of not recognising human noises as the words they were. She had her back turned towards him and so she did not see her stepson, frothing at the mouth and slinking towards her, with a vicious intensity in his eyes. He slunk towards her with a predator's awareness and stealth until he pounced on her. With his human nails and teeth, he tore into the soft flesh at her neck, her body convulsed as she struggled to breathe. Minutes later, after writhing on the ground and choking on her own blood, Sarah was dead.

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Dempsey sleeps for the rest of the morning and when he wakes up his father is in his room, sitting at the end of his bed. Before he notices that his son is awake Silas looks solemnly at the bare walls of the room.

Dempsey sits up and glares at his father, a large part of him bristles at his presence. 'Why are you here?'

Silas jumps slightly. 'Oh,' he says then smacks his lips together. 'Ester called me, son. She said you scared her.'

'She deserved it,' Dempsey rasps, looking darkly at his father.

Silas ponders this then nods his head lightly. 'Hmm,' he says. 'I've heard enough from the both of you about who deserves what.' He inhales slowly then exhales. 'You need to take your medicine, Dempsey. All you need to do is look at what happened this morning to know that you must take it. It makes you better.'

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'It makes me feel worse, Father. I can't think when I take it.'

'And you can't control yourself when you don't.' He sighs and shakes his head. 'I thought keeping you away from everybody and everything would be enough.' He pauses. 'But perhaps it isn't. Perhaps I need to try something else.'

'Father. We told you what's wrong with me. It's the paintings...'

'Enough.' Silas raises his voice and slams his hand down on the bed. 'I won't hear that again. Not from you and certainly not from your sister.'

Dempsey breathes heavily and clutches the coverlet. 'Listen to me.'

'You do not make demands of me, son.'

'Then let me go. I'll get a job and live on my own.' Dempsey pleads.

'You know I can't let you do that. Not with the state of you. You need to get better before I can allow it. And that means you need to take your medicine.'

Dempsey hangs his head in resignation. 'I've been taking it for nearly a year and you still don't trust me.'

'I was beginning to.' Silas replies then wipes a tear from his cheek. 'I promised your Mother, as she lay dying, that I would raise you to be a good man. You're nearly a man now and I feel like I've broken that promise.' He looks at his son and says, 'be a good boy and help me fix what has been broken.' From his pocket, he pulls out a brown bag and places it on the bed. Dempsey keeps his head low as he picks it up, takes out the black market medicine and eats it silently. With no water to wash it down, it sticks to his teeth and gums so he uses his tongue to get it down. For an hour he and his father sit in silence, waiting to see if it has any negative consequences. By the time the hour is up, Dempsey feels calm and placated and wonders why he had put us such a fuss about taking it. He smiles at his father and says, 'I do feel better now. Thank you.'

Silas exhales and then laughs shortly. 'I'm glad, son. Maybe you should go on your afternoon walk so your routine isn't disrupted any further.'

Dempsey scratches behind his ear. 'I think that's a good idea.' He shuffles his body so that he is sitting up straighter, before asking, 'would you like to come with me, Father?'

Silas clears his throat. 'I have to get back to work. I've already missed enough coming back here.' With that, his father stands up and to leave the room. 'Why don't you eat with me in the dining room tonight?' He asks when he reaches for the door, his hand resting on the handle.

Dempsey's head perks up. 'Just us?' He asks.

'Just us.' Silas smiles, nods his head and then leaves.

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A few weeks later, at quarter past two on a Wednesday Dempsey leaves his room after his morning homework and strolls through the wood to the old abandoned church. This morning and every morning since his incident, as his father calls it, he had been taking his medicine in the presence of a lady named Moira. He didn't know anything about her or where she came from but he did not argue about her necessity. Now he guides himself with his torch into the church basement where a painting fills the west wall. With careful gentleness, he runs his fingers briefly over the painted surface. Following that he sits on the stone floor and the layer of dust and stares at the painting, transfixed. With bruise purple clouds over his head, the white gushing rush cascades over his shoulder as he tumbles down the waterfall to the rocky ground underneath. All the way down to the bottom he is screaming.