

THE MERE WIFE

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“*Listen!*” Dylan’s playing “Chopsticks” with all his might.

Willa doesn’t want to listen. She’ll never want to listen to people learning to play the piano, and yet other mothers claim to enjoy things in this category.

Dil practices, slowly climbing the keys, and then a mistake, and he starts over. She wouldn’t allow him the clarinet. “Chopsticks” is his vengeance. He’s only seven. When *she* was only seven, she was perfect.

“*Listen!*” he demands again.

“Let’s go to the grocery store, Dilly!”

The piano lid slams shut, silencing the cries of ivory keys, probably made of elephants. Willa feels stabbed every time she hears it playing. Ebony too. Those trees make spears. The piano is an act of savage warfare disguised as culture. No one else seems to notice, but Willa’s always been sensitive.

She checks the menu she’s posted on the refrigerator.

Sunday: Pork Chops with Applesauce and Salad

Monday: Chicken à la King with Scalloped Potatoes

Tuesday: Clam Chowder with Cornbread (Homemade)

Wednesday: Green Pasta & Ravioli with Red Sauce

Thursday: Shrimp Cocktail, Fish Filet, Salad

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Friday: Flank Steak in Marinade

Saturday: Pizza Night—Choose Your Own Toppings!

Every Day: Vodka Martini

This week is irrelevant, though, because it's a holiday week. She should have the Christmas menu up. It's two days till goose, though that may have been a mistake. She's never done a goose before. Who has? She could have a cook come, or subscribe to a service, but she does the cooking herself. It's part of her claim to fame. Other wives look at her and wonder, and she wants it that way. She photographs and posts. She dresses for dinner. It is a competition, even though it pretends not to be.

At 4:30 every afternoon she's in the kitchen, looking at her reflection in the appliances. At 5:30 she's pouring a cocktail for Roger, and at 5:33 he's walking in the door, his hand outstretched for it, kissing her, not entirely chastely. There's always something of an event in this kiss, in the way her dress bunches against his belt. She likes it when he does it in front of guests.

She looks into the mirror she keeps on the kitchen wall and assesses herself, thinking about a pair of fishnet tights she once owned, worn with a tunic that scarcely covered her bottom. The tights were printed with peacock feathers. Now she'd never. She straightens her sweaterdress and gathers the bags. She can stretch a grocery trip out for an hour, two, maybe more. The miles of aisles at the Herot Hall grocery store are wide enough that you could drive a car down them if you wanted to.

Willa wants to. Every day she doesn't.

She has an outing there in the afternoons and comes home with dinner, plotted and planned. She brings Dylan with her and he skids through the aisles, treating them like ice. No one minds. He's perfect. Everyone thinks so, the checkers, the stock boys, the other customers. The car is white, and that's tempting fate, but Dil's never sticky. He knows better.

Children are monsters, but there are ways to work around

them. Six miles from Herot Hall there's a playground where Willa can, if she likes, pretend Dil isn't hers and she isn't his. She can sit on a bench smoking a cigarette—she's not actually a smoker, of course—while Dil monkeys his way along the jungle gym with the rest of the little lords of the flies.

At the Herot playground, she has to sit with other mothers, and watch as they bring snacks from their purses. She's expected to feed children who aren't her own. It's a *community*, emphasis on the commune. When Dil was only a few months old, she took him to a mommy group where a neighboring baby latched unexpectedly onto her breast. The baby tilted sideways, mouth agape, a triangle of shocking pink.

Viper! she thought, then redacted.

There was, however, a momentary escapade inside Willa's head, a bad adventure during which she broke the offending baby's neck and served the infant as a snack, surrounded by sippy yogurt and smashed peas.

Herot Hall is a toddler empire. Everyone with any power is between the ages of three and seven. All boys are born with Nobel Prize potential. It's the mothers who ruin it, by forcing the boys into gentleness. That's what one of the fathers told her at cocktail hour.

Willa's own husband is the heir to Herot Hall. Roger's last name, in fact, *is* Herot. He's of noble family. Willa says that only in her head, but it's the truth. Roger's family built Herot Hall according to their own specifications, the buildings high and gabled, the entirety of the community self-sustaining, with its own grocery and pharmacy, each house with a fireplace, and each fireplace burning gas, a clean blue flame flicked on with a switch, lapping at logs made of stone. Central heat and air-conditioning. Finished basements. Landscaping to look as though wildflowers had seeded themselves in neat rows. It replaced the town that was here before, falling down since the railroad stopped running this line. Old Victorian monstrosities became condemned messes,

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full of a bunch of people who didn't belong in such a beautiful place. It took years to get them out. Willa didn't know Roger then, but if she had, she thinks she would have enjoyed the demolition. She always enjoys improvements.

She thinks of the Willa that existed before Herot, a Willa in an acting class wearing a striped sweater, a boy across from her looking into her eyes. A wineglass full of cheap white wine, an exposed brick wall, her body smashed against it, his tongue in her mouth—

Sometimes, admittedly, she misses living in the city. She isn't that person anymore, though, who called herself an actor, instead of actress. Here, that'd make the neighbors laugh. Lots of the neighbors are former city dwellers. They all moved out to where it was better, owning rather than renting, who'd want to suffer the subways with a child? And the guns, and the knives, and the lack of human compassion?

Roger and Willa have the loveliest house of all, the showpiece. Once a month, for the fun of it, they go out to dinner in the city, pretend they're on their honeymoon and get a free crême brulee. They don't need it to be free, of course. They can afford whatever they want. Willa wouldn't have married another man like her first husband. That one was annulled. He doesn't even count. She woke up the morning after that wedding with her mother standing over her wedding bed. Willa's mother knows how to get a job done. Diane will never forgive Willa for that heroic rescue. Nor for the fact that she then had to take Willa to the doctor, urgently spilling secrets and lies, and the doctor, old man, family practice, did what was necessary.

"No need to speak of any of this to your father," Willa's mother said. "It'll only disgust him. For heaven's sake, Willa."

In this section of the fairy tale, Willa drifted flat in the backseat of the car with an ice pack on her belly and another on her back, and what felt like an entire roll of paper towels in her panties, which were plastic, because leather upholstery. Once, Willa

was in a production of Julius Caesar, and the blood in that show? It came, it saw, it overcame. She bowed deep at the end, feeling like a living tampon. After the annulment, she felt like a—

Like a Jell-O mold, full of unset, tilting dangerously in the refrigerator.

Richie, Willa never saw again. He was a musician, was it any wonder? Willa had one tattoo by the time her mother found her, and it was Richie's name. After the abortion, her mother took her to the dermatologist, who turned the tattoo into a scar in the shape of someone Willa used to know. She went to bed in her childhood room for six months. Richie didn't try to find her. Instead, he got famous. Sometimes now she hears him on the radio, singing about hunger.

After the requisite recovery, Willa's mother handed her Roger's phone number, procured from Roger's mother.

"You're lucky," she said to Willa. "You're still pretty enough. You can get a doctor. There's a new community going up near the mountain. You won't go back to the city, Willa. You'll get married and have a child with Roger. I can see it. He'll want to be carried, and your knees'll give out on you. You'll never be able to wear heels again."

Their first date: cocktail bar, medium exclusive. Both of them laughed about their mothers meddling, while silently agreeing they looked good together. She checked his wallet while he was in the bathroom, to see if he was lying about anything. His plastic was platinum, and his driver's license listed his height accurately.

"To us, and people like us," Roger said, and raised his glass of champagne.

Willa looked at him, uncertain, but then she clinked. Everyone else could toast to themselves too, if they felt inclined. It wasn't as though she was stealing their luck.

They were married within the year. Now Willa's thirty-two. Her hair's blond of its own volition. Her face has high cheekbones, perfectly arched eyebrows, a mouth like rose-colored wax

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sealing something official. When there's anything that looks like a wrinkle or spot, her mother notices before she does.

"You can't let yourself go, Willa," Willa's mother says. "You have a man to keep."

She does. Willa's keep is this glass castle at Herot, and Roger's in private practice in the city, plastic surgery. He's done some work on Willa, just a little in the eyelids and the chin.

He sets his own hours, and they go on vacations. Once a cruise, once Tahiti, where the huts gave Willa a dismal feeling. She felt the bottom drop out every time she looked at the glass floor. That'd been when she was unknowingly pregnant. She had one sip of a cocktail and vomited startlingly into the snorkelers.

Roger named Dylan after his own dead dad while Willa was passed out post-delivery. Now he's called Dil, because who can call a little kid Dylan? Shades of Bob and guitars, poets dead of drink in the snow, all of it. Besides, Dil and Willa, that implies a certain adorable familial quantity. It also implies pickles.

She would've named her son Theodore, had she been given the opportunity. It isn't Willa's fault that Roger's dad, Dilly the First, died in a car accident during the building of Herot and needed to be commemorated. She never even met him.

Four days after Willa gave birth, two of her mother's friends arrived with a clenching device for revising her vagina. She didn't say no, though she was startled at the implication she'd need help. The mothers acted as though she'd lost vigilance, as though she were about to wander half naked through the streets, her pubis patchily shaven from childbirth, her breasts leaking, loinclotted in receiving blankets, but she was already, exhausted and faintly tearful, beginning to Kegel.

Dil wasn't a sleeper. She wasn't a sleeper either. No one was a sleeper, except for Roger, who slept for two years straight, through cries, howls, bouts of vomiting, diapers, diarrhea, and utter desperation, with a faint and intensely frustrating smile on his face. If she woke him, he pretended he'd never heard anything.

“Now, Willa,” he’d say, and the baby would stop screaming, as if by magic. Then he’d go back to sleep, and the baby would screech like a bird of prey.

At least the baby years are done. Now Dylan’s in school, and Willa has her days free, to do what? She hasn’t found whatever it is. There must be a solution, but at present she does Pilates, and then sits in the kitchen, looking out over her domain, feeling faintly something.

The grocery store, at least, is cool and peaceful. It’s gated into the community with the rest of the perks of Herot: cageless chickens, free-range beef, vegetables untouched by progress.

Dilly dangles from the ice-cream freezer, his face pressed against the glass. Willa looks around to make sure no one’s watching, and then opens the door. Slowly, she prizes the lid from the top of a container of something artisanal, and offers it to him. He looks up, startled.

“You’re allowed,” she says. Little man.

She shows him with her own finger, and then he puts his into the ice cream too. Each of them eats their bite, and then she replaces the lid and puts the container back into the freezer surreptitiously, as though merely deciding on a second flavor. She thinks with dark pleasure about the person who will buy this pint of ice cream, take it home, and discover that someone else has been here first.

Dil has his whole hand in his mouth now, working it around, feeling his loose tooth. Willa has the sickly suspicion there’ll be blood. She hands him a Kleenex.

“Now,” she says, and waits.

He wipes his fingers with the tissue.

“That’s not for telling Daddy,” she says.

“Nothing is,” Dil says, giving her a jolt. It isn’t as though she has a secret life.

Back at home, Willa makes a marinade. She shakes steak in a plastic sack. She roasts tomatoes and roses radishes.

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Dadadada DAdadada DA DA DA DA, Dylan plays, pounding the keys. Willa takes the bottle of vodka out of the freezer, pours herself a glass cut with a drop of orange juice, drinks it quickly, and pours another.

From outside, she hears a howl. The back windows of the living room are open onto the mountain, of course, to get the night air and the natural beauty. *Your backyard IS the mountain*, that's what it says in the brochures, and it's true.

"Chopsticks." Dil hammers away, undistracted.

The howl begins again, and Willa cocks her ear, uneasy. She thinks of trying to record it for Roger to hear. If the neighborhood needs a notification, if there's some animal out there, it's her responsibility, but then it's gone, and it's 5:32, and the sun is down, and there's no cocktail poured, and Roger's car is in the driveway.

Willa clicks into the living room, presses play, and raises the volume on something smooth but not too sultry, not likely to provoke despair. Ella Fitzgerald dueting with another of the dead, an electronic combination of voices, two singers who never met, singing separately together.

The ghastly piano drowns in it.

One more howl, and this time she thinks it's definitely human, a boy? But no, of course it's not.

It's coming from the mountain. There's nothing up there but trees.