

BROKEN RULES

My mother threw her last party while I was still in primary school, during the summer of my turning ten. My memories of her from those days are blood-red and fragrant: flashes of lipstick, the whiff of lightly perfumed hair, her drink in one hand and cigarette in the other. Her parties were never big or particularly fancy. She used to tell my father, who didn't care much for parties, that she was just having a few friends over for drinks in the evening. Low-key, she'd call it.

She kept a number of large tumblers stored at the back of a kitchen cupboard, and she liked to polish them in the afternoon before a party. I'd help her as soon as I arrived home from school. We'd place the tumblers into rows on the kitchen counter, and she'd boil a kettle on the cooker, and keep it boiling while we held the glasses inside the clouds of steam, before drying them to a polish with clean cotton tea towels. She told me it mattered how drinks were served, and that the glasses should look and smell

spotless. She held a polished tumbler towards my face, and the scent of the laundered fabric of the tea towel came to me from the surface of the warm glass.

Afterwards, she'd fix herself a swift afternoon cocktail, and a smaller version for me. This was always vodka-based, usually paired with a sweetish mixer such as lemonade or orange juice. The first time she did this, she didn't put any liquor in mine; she pretended, but I'd been watching, and I told her I wanted the same drink she was having, and from then on she would always stir a splash of vodka into my drink. I became fond of the way the charged liquid warmed my chest and lent the surfaces of my teeth a rough unfamiliar texture.

The evening of the final party, I'd been throwing a ball outside; catching it, enjoying the thump as it hit the wall over and over. When the light had begun to turn soggy and grey, I went back inside. My mother and her friends were in the room adjacent to the living room. My mother called this room the parlour. She was perched on an arm at one end of the couch, laughing gently, her head thrown back exposing her throat and beads, and thick hair coiling recklessly over those stone-pale shoulders. Beside her were Otto and James, the two welded so you couldn't fathom where one ended and the other began. A woman I recognised from another occasion but whose name I couldn't recall was at the

radiogram behind them, reading the liner notes on a record sleeve and moving her head out of time to the music. My mother noticed me. She touched Otto's arm. He shifted, and they indicated the space between them. I joined them on the couch.

Otto smiled and brought his head to mine. 'He gets more handsome every time,' he said, winking at my mother. 'A heartbreaker,' he said. 'Mine's splintering already.' He lifted a glass from the coffee table and offered some of his wine. I took the glass, said thanks, and they laughed. I smiled uncertainly, wary of their amusement. Otto put his arm over my shoulder, in the same way his other arm was around James. 'My two favourites,' he said. 'What a lucky man I am.'

'You're like a cat with the cream,' said my mother.

'Well I'm not sure of that,' he said. He turned to James and removed the cigarette from the corner of his mouth.

'Hey!' said James.

He placed his finger to James's lips, but James shook his head away. Undeterred, Otto took James's chin and manoeuvred the face to kiss its mouth, and in so doing he twisted his body round and withdrew his arm from my shoulders, allowing his hand to fall onto my leg. I watched the men, the subtle movements beneath the skin of their jaws. I was nervous and thrilled, as if caught inside a rolling storm cloud; uncaring of anything else in that

room. And when I look back, I still wonder how it was possible that life progressed elsewhere for the duration of that exquisite event.

The men pulled apart. Otto sat back. James exhaled through lips that were lazy and damp. Otto turned to me. ‘Well now, Steven,’ he said, ‘how about you?’ His hand was gone from my leg. I could smell the wine on his breath. The beard of light stubble, skin the shade of jarred honey, and mouth bruised with vigour. His lips, so recently attached to James, were parted slightly, offering a glimpse of a dark interior glisten. He narrowed his eyes, as if by concentration alone he might be able to read me. I caught my breath. Time and the music paused. Only Otto and I existed.

I couldn’t hold his stare, and I blinked and looked down. And when I met his eyes again he was smiling faintly. He laughed. ‘Don’t look so alarmed!’ he said.

My mother shifted at my side. She had crossed her legs and was arranging the folds of her dress around the upper knee.

‘What troubles could possibly touch a boy like you?’ said Otto. He removed a fresh cigarette from the packet. He took his time with the lighting, inhaled deliberately and with satisfaction, then sat back again, watching me through the folds of smoke. Then he held the cigarette out towards me. He nodded.

I turned to my mother for guidance. But she said nothing, searched my face, smiled. She seemed engrossed, as if in a stage performance.

I gingerly took the cigarette from Otto's fingers. It jumped and flicked to life in my own.

He took it back from me. 'Watch,' he said. He held it carefully between two fingers, pouted and then brought it to his lips and pulled his breath through the filter. 'It's easy,' he said, exhaling smoke, passing the cigarette back.

I sized up the cigarette, then tried to copy him, but I wasn't able to contain the smoke inside my mouth for long. I spluttered, and the adults laughed, even usually surly James. This time my mother put an arm round me, her face next to mine. Small blisters of sweat beaded at her upper lip, and her lipstick was patchy close up. She asked if I was okay. Her hair, violet-black and with the delicate scent of newly fallen apples, tickled at my cheek.

I told her I was fine, because I wanted to be fine. But the smoke in the room was stinging my eyes, and I said this in a whisper so the men wouldn't hear. She pushed loose strands of hair from my forehead. She offered her drink, but I shook my head.

I slid off the couch and stood at the doorway. I walked down the hall to visit my father in his study. He opened his arms when I came in, and I went over and leaned into his thigh. He put down his pen and took off his glasses

and grabbed the sides of my face in his dry warm hands, and kissed the top of my hair.

He asked if I was having a good evening. There were fine lines of blood in the corners of his eyes. I said I'd come to write a story while he was working. He frowned, but quickly, so that I wasn't completely sure that he had. 'Tell me about your day,' he said.

I searched my mind for something unusual to entertain him. There was a pause in the music from the parlour. The track changed. There were raised excited voices, and I imagined the trio on the couch jumping up to dance. 'I've been playing outside,' I said.

'I heard you, earlier. But I was talking about school. What did you do today?'

I told him some more about the book we were reading in English. He'd already told me that he'd read it when he was a young boy, much the same age as me. But now he'd forgotten the details. He'd read many other books since then, and his head only had so much room. I asked him how many books he'd read. 'Oh I don't know,' he said. 'I stopped counting them a long time ago. I'd say it must be at least a million by now.' He asked how the music lessons were going. We'd had guitar practice that afternoon, and Mrs Mac had lost her temper because Rothwell kept coming into a song too soon. 'Which one's Rothwell?' he said. The swimmer, I said. Tall Rothwell. Skinny, hates the guitar. That Rothwell.

He smiled. He asked if I'd been smoking. I said yes I had, a few minutes ago, with Otto and James, my mother's friends. I sometimes had a small glass of wine with dinner, and he knew my mother allowed me to sip from her drinks occasionally, so I didn't think there were any rules.

He stood and lifted me into his chair, and told me to wait in the study. 'We can read a story when I return,' he said.

He paused at the door, his hand on the knob, then came back and opened one of the desk drawers, handed me a pencil, and slid the pages he'd been marking to one side. He placed a blank sheet of paper in front of me, and smiled.

When he was gone I began to write, becoming lost in a land of ghosts and fairies and monsters. Here, overgrown pathways snaked through cold lonely misty forests towards enchanted cottages that glimmered inviting and warm. You knock on the door and they've been expecting you, and you wonder how they knew you were coming, and the inside is filled with pretty lanterns and candles and the enticing aroma of a baking cake.

By the time my father returned, I'd almost filled a whole page, but the story wasn't finished. He lifted me out of the chair, then sat down and placed me into his lap. He smelled cold, as if he'd been walking through a damp twilit garden. 'What have you been writing?'

‘A story,’ I said.

He looked as if he had forgotten that he should be smiling. ‘What kind of a story?’

‘It’s a fairytale.’

‘I enjoy hearing those kinds of stories. Would you read it to me?’

‘But it’s not finished.’

‘It doesn’t have to be. You can read what you’ve written so far.’ This time he remembered to smile, but it was unconvincing, and I wasn’t fooled. ‘If you want to,’ he added.

I read slowly, to lend the piece some atmosphere, and he relaxed beneath me. At one point I turned to make sure he was still awake, and he looked as if I’d caught him in the middle of something private. ‘Carry on,’ he said.

I’d almost reached the end of the page when the door opened abruptly. A woman was standing there, framed by the light from the hall. The desk lamp wasn’t bright enough to reach her face. Behind her, the house was silent. At first I thought it was my mother’s friend looking for the bathroom, and I felt my father’s body stiffen, ready to direct her down the hall. But the woman spoke, and it was my mother.

‘They’ve gone,’ she said. ‘Everyone’s gone. Are you happy now?’

My father took me off his knee, and stood me on the

BROKEN RULES

floor like a giant chess piece. He walked over to my mother, and she raised a hand to her hair. ‘Leave me alone,’ she said, but he hadn’t done anything. He grabbed the top of her arm and led her from the room. Neither of them looked back, and my father closed the door behind them. I wondered if I should follow, but sensed I was expected to stay in the study.

After a considerable time, I became aware of my father’s woody cologne. I’d been resting my head on the desk, thinking about an ending for the story I’d begun, but I hadn’t written anything more. He put the page and the pencil into the drawer. Tomorrow was the start of the weekend and I would be able to finish the story in the morning, he said. I was drowsy with the imagined, and not quite of this world anymore, and he lifted and carried me upstairs to bed. I undressed clumsily while he sat on the edge of the bed, and when I was ready he pulled back the quilt and invited me to get in. He kissed me goodnight and left.

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I never asked about my mother’s final party, or about why her parties stopped so suddenly. My parents never talked about it, so neither did I. Except once, years later, when I was much older, and had started going to parties

myself. I was ready to go out one evening, and feeling restless, caught in that dead zone when it was still too early to leave the house. I asked my mother if she missed her parties. She was reading the evening paper in the armchair beneath the faded lampshade. ‘What parties?’ she said. She looked over the top of the paper, and I felt a momentary discomfort with her proximity to the self I’d chosen to exhibit for the evening.

‘When I was at primary school. You sometimes had people over,’ I said, withdrawing a little from the tightness of my jeans.

She looked away, as if to locate the memory in the corner of the room. ‘They weren’t really parties. A few friends occasionally, maybe.’ She returned to my face. ‘Why do you ask?’

I wasn’t sure. I started to move away, towards the door.

She let the paper drop to her knees. ‘I don’t know,’ she said, ‘if I miss them. I’ve never given it much thought.’ I told her I’d been recalling the last party. She became pensive, as if this might be the first time she’d considered the matter since that evening all those years ago. ‘I suppose I grew tired of them.’ She was old and detached in the glow of the lamp. She didn’t return my gaze. She was inside some distant contemplation, and after a while I turned to leave. I heard her shake the paper out, and when I glanced back inside the room she had begun to read again.