

❧ *The Great Wall* ❧

This street doesn't go straight to the theater, but I don't want to get there too soon. I dislike pre-curtain mingling with my actors, and tonight my father-in-law is with me. Since he last saw me, my public persona has evolved. A year ago, I could get away with nothing more than a leather coat and a sweater. I was expected to be strange but still sincere. Tonight, my directorial costume includes a long coat, stiff gloves I can't wear while driving, and a pair of sunglasses.

When we get there, I will speak in riddles.

My father-in-law seems to understand that in the two and a half years since Abby's death, my attendance itself has become a performance. Still, he hasn't seen me in a year, and, next to his sturdy presence — a thick neck and efficient tie — I am embarrassed.

If he knows I am taking a detour, he doesn't let on. As we pass grain elevators, a golf course, and the Winter Shows Building, he gestures with his head. He doesn't say anything, but I know what he's thinking. The first time he visited Thompson he said the town was built inside out.

"All the interesting is on the outside," he said.

He only says things once.

It's been snowing all day, harder for the last half-hour, but I can't tell if the road is slick. The flakes are small and constant, the

kind of snow that sticks. The side and rear windows glaze so that, in the streetlights, the air is bright and falling.

I'd like a cigarette, but I don't want him to know I started again.

"What's the last play you've been to?" I ask.

"Your last one."

He smiles and I know that he means to add that he likes theater but doesn't have time or anyone to go with back in Missouri. He means to say that he is excited, that I shouldn't worry, that he wouldn't miss the show for anything. I'm not sure if I believe him, but, because it never gets said, I don't have to decide.

He has come to North Dakota for Thanksgiving. It is eight hundred miles from Branson, where he is an administrator for a rehab clinic; he has made the trip every Thanksgiving since Abby and I took jobs here seven years ago.

Our first winter in Thompson, he asked me to direct so that the run overlapped his visit. I was able to talk my cast into a single performance the Tuesday before school let out. I have done it the same way every year though I suspect he hasn't enjoyed the tradition as much since my work started to become more unusual.

Of course he hasn't complained.

When Abby was alive, her father was just an audience member and his silence was just silence. Even the last two Thanksgivings — he and I alone — were easier than tonight; this show is the weirdest thing I've ever done, really theoretical, and I want to him have a *chance*. But there's something else, a dry-throated urgency that didn't set in until he was in the car.

I take another wrong turn, careful to stay where the plows have been.

"How much you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell," he says. "How much would you have told Abby?"

“Everything. Till her ear fell off,” I say. “Then some more. She’d have been borrowing ears by the time I was finished.”

He is laughing now, a deep shaking. He is bigger than I am, heavier every year, and the gravity of his laughter is good. “It’s an odd little show,” I say. I am on the verge of my practiced remarks when it occurs to me that I don’t know how much he wants to understand. “It’s an adaptation of a Kafka story,” I say.

“So I have to go somewhere else if I want singing.”

I laugh too loudly. When I stop, he stops. He sits perfectly still, his hands folded into his broad lap. I have no idea what he is thinking, but I know that if I don’t say anything he is done talking.

The silence is not terrible.

I drive the snowy streets until just a few minutes before curtain.

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I am rereading Sheridan when Abby opens the office door, a bowl of popcorn in hand.

“Let’s get this straight,” she says. “This may look like servitude but it’s not.”

“No?”

“Obviously not. It’s sabotage.”

“Obviously.”

“Can you avoid the greasy keyboard?”

“I hate a greasy keyboard.”

“I know.” She leaves the bowl within reach and pulls up a stool to watch the drama. We made a rule early on that we couldn’t complain about being observed: we will be busy forever and if privacy is the only way to be productive, we will never see each other. So she sits, a few feet from me, eating my popcorn.