

A Pilgrim and a Stranger

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— ❧ —

Catherine stood at the kitchen sink looking out at the summer garden and breaking ice cubes apart with her thick fingers. She didn't own an ice machine so she froze them in trays and put them in a green plastic Tupperware bowl. That way, there would always be plenty. She opened the three liter of ginger ale, happy to hear the carbon hiss, and poured it in her glass on top of the iced whiskey.

Like Elizabethtown, Tennessee where she grew up, Cocheta, Oregon was a small town. With her secondary teaching license in hand, she considered the big cities with jobs aplenty, but large class sizes, poor grades, and poor pay put her off. In the end she opted for the dreamy idea of living in a west coast town. Small, walky, maybe even a little hickey. Like home, only with new people. And there was a college in Cocheta. Nothing big—religious studies, theology. Jesus-y stuff.

In the spring of her first year, she bought this house and decided to stay. It was a small stucco on a hunk of land up in the coastal hills with a garden already dug out and several rose trellis'.

The knock at the door surprised her. Aside from school picnics and her Thursday night book club, she stayed to herself. With the neighbors she thought she established the no drop-in rule, and she kept a no soliciting sign on her door to keep the evangelicals at bay. She set her drink down and stomped to the door.

“Yes?” Catherine asked the stranger.

His teeth were pushed in, front two twisted at each other, coffee and smoke stained. He wasn't white, not black or brown, either, but his skin had a muddled in between somewhere that poverty makes—wrinkled into his hard, pained expression. He was farmer dressed: jeans and buttoned up flannel, hat crushed in his right hand. His black hair thinned, slicked-up against the gray scalp.

“May I have a glass of water?” He said.

“Water?” Catherine said.

He looked up at the house, above the door to the upstairs windows. “I knew Walter,” he said, “the old man that lived here.”

“Oh, Walter,” Catherine said, “I thought you said water. Walter died a few years back. I'm sorry.”

His expression didn't change. No gasp or exclamation like Lordy, how the time passes, or God rest his soul or anything. He kept looking behind Catherine into the house.

“I did say water,” he said and looked back at Catherine. He stopped at her eyes. Everyone did at first. Gray eyes, not even a suggestion of blue. Flat out gray. It made people uneasy and kept Catherine in a caul of mystery and isolation. Eyes are passageways to the soul, people said to Catherine's dad and then later to Catherine when they learned her dad was an optometrist. They are passageways to prolapses, cataracts, astigmatism, blindness. Breeding grounds for pink eye, misinterpretations, misleading information, misunderstanding.

“I said water and Walter both,” he said, “so you heard it right.”

Catherine's palm moistened the doorknob. She didn't want him in the house. He was bad news looking. The type she had seen back home kicking their dog in the ass, slapping their kids on the back of the head. Calm and quiet. Dumb looking until they got mean, yelling. She didn't want him to see her good whiskey and go asking for that, either. He looked like he could take a good pull straight from the bottle. He kept his stare on her, on the gray eyes flicking like nickels in the smooth pink dough of her face. Inside those eyes she watched a little movie reel: innocent girl slashed by stranger. And next: the minister and white-headed congregates at First Baptist shaking their heads at how low we've come as a society when we can't even give a poor soul in need a drink of water. The movie reel said, how judgmental you have become, Catherine. Your people were born poor, too.

"Hold on," she told him, started to close the door, but left it. He noticed that, though. That wanting to close him out. When she returned with the glass of tap water, he was no longer on the porch. Or anywhere she could see.

Catherine's vision was perfect. Beyond 20/20. Dense and crisp the world came to her, giving her all its leaf veins and fingerprints. As she stood on her front porch holding a glass of water and wondering where the man had gone, her eyes went fuzzy. Like moist toilet paper from pockets circling the lenses of glasses, smearing and smearing.

She walked around to the back where the garden gate stood open. "That my water?" There he stood, hand out. "Put the patio down back here. All those stones."

Catherine watched him drink. "It's a lovely patio," she said.

"You can't just erase a person."

"No."

"Person folds into a place where they've lived, worked. Got more water? Or anything else? Something harder?" He winked.

"I have work to do. I need to go now."

"You can't ever totally make a body go away from a place. Molecules: that's what they're called. Molecules remain." He handed back the glass, only spit and bubbles left at the bottom, brown crust on the rim.

There was a note on her door the next afternoon.

Dear Catherine, the note read, it was cleanly taped to her door with scotch tape, *please tell your handy man not to roam about in our garden during the days while you are at work. The dogs are very upset.* Very underlined in two equal lines. A lot. Very much upset, she meant. She'd signed it VM with a little flutter behind the M. Casual. Not pissed off yet.

Catherine drove her key in the lock and let the door smack the coat rack. Reverberate. She stuck the note on the entry table and headed to the kitchen. The bottle of Old Granddad was a gracious half full, and she poured a warm shot before the ice and ginger to relax the scream constricting her throat. To get the looseness back in her elbows. While she stirred the drink, the real drink, her first drink, really, she rolled her head left and right, left and right, ear to shoulder. The ginger hummed on the back of her tongue. Fizzled high near her nose. The whiskey rode low underneath the bubbles and smoothed out her chest, brought one calm breath back.

So he'd come back. Looking around. A thief? Not her fault. She'd head over to the Mason's right now, right after this drink, and tell the story about yesterday. Veronica would sympathize with a woman alone and some transient comes knocking then comes

back the next day. Finn would get agitated, say he was going to talk to the police. He'd offer to walk her home, have a look around.

But she felt defeated already. She was an outsider here, trying to dig in, grow her roots deeper than the seasonal squash. She brought him somehow. Pulled him here to her. Something didn't fit about either of them.

She didn't see him until Sunday morning. She roamed from room to room with a cup of sweet coffee, a dust pan, good intentions. Mostly she thought about what needed to change. Husband stuff: the molding in the bedroom needed to be redone, the mop board in the bathroom, the floor needed replacing first. Tiles, something natural. When she looked up from her musings at the front hall closet (could it be redone to fit more coats and shoes? Save room in the bedroom closet?) she saw him looking from across the street at her. She retreated to the kitchen and braced herself for the sound of his heavy feet on the front stoop, the knock. It didn't come.

What came was the whine of the screen door opening and a knock on the back door. He'd come up the drive, then, and through the garden gate. When she approached the door, she saw his head through the glass, sweat-stained hat pushed back. He was scratching the wispy hair underneath and looking sideways, at the tomatoes and the second wave of collards and the tiny apple tree proud with fruit.

"Can I help you?" Catherine said. She put her hand on the doorknob, but spoke through the glass.

He looked down at the knob, watching for the turn. He looked up at her, "get a glass of water?" Touched his throat with broken-nailed fingers.

A long slow whine filled her ears, and then an audio reel: be nice, be safe, be Christian, be smart, be humane. Be careful. Be understanding. What would the town expect? They don't want the riff-raff, that's clear. Goddamn them—easy with welcoming smiles but hard to get inside those pre-established friendships. Maybe she was closed. Closed door, tight lipped, frozen eyes. Stranger.

She turned the knob and pulled the door. "Come in," she said.

He nodded at her and looked around the kitchen, stepped in and left the door standing open behind him.

Catherine took a large glass and turned on the tap, her wide, thick back to him. Trust, show trust. She passed the glass over. He took a long gulping drink. A thirsty drink.

"Good," he said, "So goddamn dry this summer."

Catherine nodded. He put the glass on the counter but kept his hand nearby. He'd grab it back if she tried to take it away, make the visit end.

"You live around here?"

"Used to. Not anymore. Did odd jobs for Walter and Josie. Josie was his wife. Walter owned this house."

"Yes."

"Did odd jobs over at the church some. Cut grass at the school. That sort of thing."

"Then you moved." Catherine finished it for him.

"No, they run me out. Not Walter, he let me stay as long as he could, but old Josie pushed him into firing. Said the neighbors worried. Said I wasn't safe for this community."

Catherine felt a tightening in her low back. Tensing. She put both hands at her hips and used her first two fingers to dig in along the bone.

He said, "Money at the church gone missing and none of these rich bitches would have taken it so it must be that ugly sombitch does the yard work and cleans the Sunday morning shit off the insides of the toilets." The man leaned forward, bent at the waist with his eyes hooked on Catherine. He raised his voice, said, "*He* must of done it!"

Spit gathered at the corner of his mouth. Yellow, unhealthy spit.

"You know what I think?"

Catherine nodded, no. No she did not.

"I think them fuckers' smoking all their fancy weed side of the baseball diamond took it. That's what I think."

Catherine thought of the kids in her class. Yeah, she could see that alright. John Freeman. Dylan Hartman for sure. Rich kids who went off to private colleges and didn't come back to Cocheta for jobs. There were no real jobs here.

"Did you tell about the kids?"

He laughed hard with his head back, hat slipping, spit wanting to loosen and fly out. He coughed and wiped at his mouth with his sleeve. When he took another drink of the water, Catherine said, "tell you what, I could really use some help. I could use some help in the yard. I can pay you."

The man looked out the open door into the yard. Considering. "Could use a mow," he said stepping out onto the patio. Catherine followed. He pointed to the flower garden on the left, "you got to cut them roses back to make them grow. The trellis' are falling down." Catherine said yes. "Need some drought resistant plants, too." Catherine walked along the beds with him. "Not all these cutsie things." He pushed at some Star of Bethlehem with his boot. "Probably should aerate the lawn, too. Front and back," he said scratching. This time Catherine saw it was a patch of something he clawed at. A patch of red like psoriasis. He caught her looking and pulled the hat back straight, squinted and said, "I'll do the whole thing for a hundred. You buy the plants."

"Sounds okay," said Catherine. She thought of extending her hand to shake and remembered the deep cough, the patch on the head. "What's your name?"

"Mike."

"I'm Catherine."

"Yeah, I know." He didn't look at her when he said it but there is was for her to chew on.

"When do you want to start?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll start now," Mike said. "See what tools you have, look at the mower and tell you what else I'll need when I get to it."

Gloom fogged in. Her private Sunday invaded. She wouldn't be calm to go about her business, eat her lunch, start her dinner and have her drinks with Mike here asking questions, needing water. Would she have to offer him lunch too? How long would it take? How many days after school would she come home to him, how many more odd jobs would he do for her. How much longer until she felt she'd done right by him, by some guilt-driven Christianity lingering still, even here, thousands of miles away from where her parents sat in the living room after church: mother stitching something or mending something, pious in her ability to save and conserve. Father has printed out the day's sermon and is underlining, reading bits aloud to mother both nodding in

agreement. The endlessness of it panicked her, filled her chest. She nodded to Mike and smiled. “Fine,” she said, walked back inside and shut the door.

She noticed it the second week on the side of the shed where she used to keep her recycling bins—Mike had moved them over to the fence and cleverly hid them behind two full (and expensive) camellias. To erect it, he used some old bricks as the base and a large rock dug up from God knows where. A circle of pebbles and leaves created a nest on top, and in the middle, a clump of golden hair. Her hair. It was in a frazzled oval shape—he must have tugged it from her hairbrush. He'd found it in the bathroom obviously.

She'd left the back door open in case he had to go. She'd set out the French press with fresh coffee and also a water jug and cup on the patio table. That seemed to encourage him to fill his bladder. And really, she could care less if he pissed on the bushes, but that wasn't ethical, was it. Or even legal. Make his piss and shit outdoors like an animal.

So she'd left the back door unlocked and told him so. “Lock up if you leave before I get home,” she said everyday. Hopefully. But everyday, there he was. She walked in the front door, but he never gave her a minute. Not one god damned minute alone to take off her shoes, to take her contacts out and switch to glasses, to wash her face, and fix herself a drink. He'd be there in the kitchen, back door dangling open, telling her what he'd done, what needed to be done still.

Mike finished the yard and moved on to the garage. It needed a new roof and yeah, okay, she said, it could be stuccoed to match the house. Goddamn. This wasn't what she'd planned in her first year of home ownership. How long would she stay in Cocheta anyway.

She thought about how to let him go. After the garage. Stucco the walls, re-roof, and that's it. Another two weeks. She could handle two more weeks. Nothing to do with the hair, though. No, it would be, “On my teacher's salary, I've pretty much spent my home improvement budget for the next five years.” And also, “But thanks for giving me such a deal.” And then, “And thanks for the beautiful work, Mike, I'm so grateful.” Maybe even, “I'll definitely pass your name and number along to the neighbors.”

She couldn't resist peeking at the nest again. The next night with cigarette and whiskey, she walked out to the shed. Two pinpricks glistened from the ground in the moonlight. Close up, squatting down and staring into it, Catherine saw the earrings. Two tiny eggs in the nest of hair. The pearl earrings her mother gave her when she graduated college, set in a circle of little diamonds. The pearl earrings Catherine kept in the velvet green box. The velvet green box that sat inside a hat box filled with old post cards and letters on the top shelf of the closet in her bedroom.

Her hands shook. Ash from the cigarette fell onto the nest with a pffft and a spark and the ripe burnt smell of the hair strung up into the cool evening air. Catherine pocketed the pearls then put the cherry of her cigarette to the nest. She sat on her heels, covered her nose while it burned and dowsed it with the whiskey before it climbed too high.

Mike wasn't there the next morning when Catherine left for work. She debated locking the door saying she thought maybe he'd stayed away sick, but she left it open after all. There was no focusing in class. By 3rd period, she abandoned her lesson and

cooperative learning groups for in-class silent reading. *In her bedroom. In her closet.* What else had he touched?

No Mike after school, either. But he'd been there. The stucco was blown into the south side of the garage and large plastic rolls hung on the East, silver chicken wire blinking beneath it. Maybe only one week more. Maybe she'd say forget the roof, she'd run out of money. She knew he'd say again about moisture in the rainy winter and something about flashing and stucco notorious for mold. She didn't want an argument. An argument is just slow mounting anger driven inside where it can be studied and calculated. Catherine needed a clean exit.

Before returning to the house, she checked where the nest had been. The bricks and rocks removed, just a fluffed piece of dirt remained, waiting for planting. Lamb's ear. Bleeding heart.

The second shrine pushed up from her vanity top like strange magma: silk scarves, knee high stocking and ripped ivy twisted and cascading down. Babylon, thought Catherine. Belt and underpants, crudely braided, sandwiched between bricks and rocks. Meatball round mud patties with post cards and letters mashed into places in-between. Cemented together. On it's side, with mud pushed up around it's neck lay a bottle of old Granddad. The sour-stomach whiskey smell loomed from the carpet where it had poured in a mean, wet circle.

"Mother of God," said the first officer.

"Who's this guy now?" the second one said, "Boyfriend?" He poked his pen into the muck and pulled out a braid of soiled polka dot panties, little torn bits of cotton ball stuck on where the hardened mud fastened them.

"No, the handyman," Catherine said. Disgusted. "The man fixing the garage."

"Broke in and did this, huh?" said the second officer. He turned the pen down and let the braid fall back in a wet thwack.

"Yes. I mean, not broke in. I left the back door unlocked so he could use the bathroom or get water." They looked at her, remained quiet. Waited. "But this is crazy, right? I mean there was another one outside with my pearl earrings and hair, and I just thought he'd be done soon. Get the hell out."

"Say he stole your earrings?" said the first.

"No," said Catherine, "just put them on top of the nest. The shrine. I took them back."

"The shrine," the second officer repeated.

In the end it was a restraining order. Mike would be arrested if he came back on the property. When he came to work the next day, instead of coffee and banana bread, Catherine would have to phone the cops.

The next morning instead of Mike, there was a new shrine in the back yard. She called the cops. They found him in Anne's Cafe sipping a coffee and served him with the restraining order. When Catherine came home from school, fixed herself a drink, took it to the dining room and pulled the curtains aside, there stood Mike across the street picking at his teeth and staring right back. All week. In the morning, in the evening, Mike stood around the house, but never on the property. Tapping a stick on the neighbor's fence. Sitting down on the curb scrapping at the underside of his boot. He was always gone when the cops came. But there again sometime in the night. Building.

The shrines were bigger now, and although void of Catherine's intimate things, they were more violent: he sliced the roses to add to the tops, tore the trellised clematis and wound it around the uprooted brass sculpture of a lamb. Finally a thorny crown pinched the floating head of Catherine's fish pond Buddha. Two air-drowned goldfish rested in the open palms.

"Goddamn you!" Catherine shouted in the night off her back porch. This was Friday, it was her fourth drink. She put up with this all week. "Goddamn you, Mike!" she hollered.

She heard movement, door clicks, murmuring from next door. "You, too, Veronica," Catherine said. Quiet, though, into her sippy whiskey. She knew the police had gone to her neighbor's, asked questions. "Hope he comes for all you next." But he wouldn't come for Veronica. Catherine was the outsider, like Mike. She'd resurrected him, and he'd chosen her. This Jesus-fed hick girl sneaking away from her upstanding community parents, trying on this new identity. He'd seen through it. Picked her out.

The principal at the high school, Mr. Hawkins, and Jan, chair of the math department, the whole math department, most kids in her class, all knew something was going on. Heard things. They never asked anything specific. Just said, "You doing okay?" or "You need anything, let me know."

By the weekend, there were gifts and notes. How the hell he snuck in and out of the back yard she didn't know. She'd simply taken to haunting her own house—never sat, just floated from room to room. There was whiskey in her coffee now.

The gifts were plainly stolen. The chalice from the church, a carved wooden box maybe from the folk art museum downtown, a tall thin vase swiped from some neighbor's porch. The notes were scribbled on ripped paper and cardboard from Catherine's recycle bin. They said, *I am Merlin the sorcerer and you are Guinevere, my dark bride*, and *You, great mother, planted the seed. I grew in the warmth of your womb* and *I am a pilgrim and a stranger traveling through this worried land*. Shit like that. There was more junk on Sunday, but Catherine didn't even phone the cops. Why bother? She found an old shoe box and dumped the notes in. She figured if anyone missed their lawn decorations or the blood of Christ, they could come looking.

When the weather turned wet and cold, the action died down. November came and went with only one lackluster gift: a bouquet of plastic fall-colored flowers, probably swiped from the dollar store, pinned with the note *and we grow and we grow in the dark of the winter*. Then nothing. And Mike was right: that old garage leaked something crazy: the undone stucco walls were a saturated mush. The whole thing would have to come down next spring.

It was the first of December on a Wednesday, Catherine sat at her dining room table with her books and her laptop making the midterm exam. The knock at the door was heavy, demanding.

"Catherine Minor?"

"Yes?"

"Ms. Minor, FBI. We need to talk."

Catherine opened the door on the three of them. A regular cop, and two men in plain clothes and shirt badges, sputtered identifications, saying may we come in, but they already were.

"Let's have a seat," said the one named Captain Hubbard.

"Okay." They all sat at the table, Catherine tidied up her clutter. Closed the laptop with a soft click.

Hubbard said, "we have a Mike Bealm in custody."

"Dear God!" Catherine slide down in her chair, she cocked her head back and stared at the light fixture. "Thank God." She sat up and reached for her drink. Took the best sip she'd had since summer.

"We have a few questions," said Hubbard.

"Sure," said Catherine, "I'll answer whatever." She shook her drink toward the uniformed officer, "I recognize you. You've been here before about all this."

"Officer Mitchell," he said, "I was here several times, yes."

"What a complete freak. A total crazy." Catherine was feeling the alcohol a little: like all the whiskey she'd poured down her throat the past two months just now grabbed hold.

"You say he's crazy," said Hubbard. He took out a notebook and let the pen hover above the page.

Catherine looked at Officer Mitchell and laughed. A snorting laugh, through the nose. "Well, yeah, didn't he tell you? All the shrines he built, the weird notes. The stuff he stole."

"You told the police he didn't steel the earrings."

"Not then, not at first, but later, the gifts."

"Gifts?"

"Well, I called them that. I don't know."

"And you didn't report these gifts?"

Something didn't feel right. The alcohol moved along the top of Catherine's scalp like slow rubbing fingers, giving her chills. There was one more sip in her glass. "No," she said and took the sip.

"Ma'am," Hubbard said, "Mike went the Cocheta public library today around 3 o'clock with a briefcase attached to his arm by a pair of handcuffs."

The fingers on Catherine's head pushed, moved in tingling circles.

"He told the librarian that he had a bomb in the briefcase with enough explosives to kill everyone in the building."

Catherine's throat constricted.

"Said he wanted to teach everyone the laws of order and chaos. He said," Hubbard looked down and read from his notebook, "said he was a pilgrim and a stranger traveling through our town and only one had opened her door, opened her womb to him. Let him plant the seeds of chaos."

Officer Mitchell blew out a breath and shook his head.

Hubbard looked at Catherine. "Any of that sound familiar?"

Catherine opened her mouth and shut it. A fish.

"Well, he didn't blow up the library, we knocked him out and cut the suitcase off and the bomb squad took it. Four sticks of dynamite in there. Old and soggy. Lord knows where he got it." He cut Catherine another look. "Wouldn't have done much, blown up his own hand, maybe."

Mitchell laughed.

Hubbard didn't laugh. He leaned forward on his arm and looked at Catherine. "He said you opened your womb to him, Ms. Minor. That you two were lovers."

“Of course not. Gross.”

Hubbard went on, “He said you wanted him to keep an eye on some of the kids you thought were smoking pot. Said you asked him to do things. Steal things for you.”

“That's crazy. He's crazy.”

“I have a list here of the things he says you asked him to get for you. See if they sound familiar.”

They did. They were familiar. They were piled up in the leaky garage growing mold. “What's happening?” Catherine asked Hubbard. “What's happening?” she asked Mitchell. Their faces rubbed out of focus.

Of course they didn't arrest her—any real connection was simply ludicrous. But these are the stories that don't away. She brought this on herself. Why had she let him in her house? Added to it, woven in by Mitchell or Veronica or even Mike himself was the drinking. People wondered what they knew about her. Teach for America didn't know what type of person Cocheta needed, they said.

The town froze on her.

The teacher's lounge grew silent. Knowing she could hear, kids made boozier remarks. Even the ones she coached for the debate team. Tabatha Randolph, Johnna Taylor. Lost tournaments were questioned. Bad grades challenged. In March Mr. Hawkins called her in his office and asked point blank if she graded her papers in complete sobriety. If not, he wouldn't be able to stand beside her when finals came out. It was over, Catherine knew. There would be no contract to sign once she turned in her final grades.

Catherine refinanced her house and spent \$5,000 tearing down the garage and replacing it with a pre-fab shed and tarp-covered carport from the Walmart in Newport. The leftover money she spent tidying up the flower beds. The neighbors walked by and clucked their tongues. That shed and tarp. What was she thinking? It didn't match. Simply tacky. The house went on the market first of June and sold in July. Catherine didn't take a loss, it was the Oregon coast after all, but only a year's equity and the refinance pinched her profit margin pretty good.

Catherine found a duplex up in Portland, small but with a yard in back. It was on the east side, and she could walk to a grocery store, an Irish Pub and three coffee houses. Not so bad. On her third day there, the June rain cleared and sun streamed through the windows, punching up little flecks of dust from unpacked boxes.

The front door bell rang. It made a hurzzze sound, a low and guttural warning. A women stood on the stoop with a baby on her hip. Her deep-set eyes, dull, no true color, bumped around in the sockets. They didn't pause on Catherine's own wolf eyes. Druggie. The baby coiled her tangled hair in a wet fist. A thick crust circled his lips.

“Can I help you?” Catherine said.

“I'm Deidre,” the mother said, “before, we used to sleep in the shed back there. When Jenny lived here.”

Catherine felt the old tension in her head. The pressing at her temples. Thirst: the giggle of ginger ale under her tongue, the warm whiskey syrup on the back of her throat. “I don't own this place,” she said, “I'm just renting.”

“That's okay,” Deidre ran her tongue over chapped lips, “so was Jenny.”

“I have all my stuff in there.”

“You can put it in the basement. We don't need much room.”

“That basement will leak. I can't keep my stuff down there.”

“We won't be here long. Just until I get on my feet again.” The baby tugged at Deidre's hair and she squinted her eyes. She swatted his fat thigh with her free hand. “Quit it.” The baby hollered, squirmed and fumbled, testing the strength of Deidre's skinny arms.

Catherine thought of the little yard in back. Flowers planted along the fence, summer tomatoes in a barrel staked with bamboo, drinks and books until the light failed. Now this baby clawing around on the turf, his twitchy mother making insidious conversation from a broken wicker chair, asking for just one drink. Catherine stood on the porch and faced them, already crowding. Already choking.

“Okay,” she heard herself say. Quiet, defeated. “Alright.”