



## COVER UP

KASIE WHITENER

I'VE NEVER KNOWN ANYONE named Adam. Of that I am certain. But I recognize him.

"Have you always been Adam?"

He laughs.

I shrug. "People change."

"True. You became Doctor."

"I did." And wife. And mom. And professor. And runner.

There's something familiar about his posture, the careless coolness of it. Like he's got some advantage over me, and I guess he does in this place. My shoulders had curled inward as I climbed the narrow stairs, my sandals made the wood floor creak. Laminated drawings cover the walls and magazines softened by fingers, bent and dog-eared, lay abandoned on the massive coffee table framed by sunken couches.

Adam's gaze is patient, as if he's watching an animal sniff its surroundings.

I sit, tucking my skirt beneath me. Glance toward voices in the hall. Find my own.

"It's to cover up the, um, the—" I push a hand through my hair, pull out my phone and slide pictures nervously across the screen. "Well...you know."

Fading ink stretches up Adam's neck like a collar and down his arms like sleeves. He wears a newsboy cap and hipster glasses and smiles a crooked smile.

The apprentice leaves for Starbucks, offers to bring me a drink. I decline.

Adam's watching my face and says, "That smile. Wow."

I show him the picture of the palmetto tree I've found and he's pensive. When I move to sit next to him, he slides up to the edge of the couch. I feel the warmth of his body near mine. It feels like we've been here before.

Maybe it's just nostalgia. Nineteen years ago. The original ink. I'd been so proud of my clever choice of cartoon tigers, of the crew oar Hobbes held in one hand. In the years since then, I've refused to fully regret it even though I only rowed a couple of years. I didn't get a butterfly or a dolphin or a Chinese character. Even so, the cover-up replaces the oar with a palmetto tree and poor Hobbes could use some brightening. This repair is overdue.

I wait in the room with the couches while Adam is gone. He left me my phone so I close out the pictures app and read my mail, then the news, then a blog about missed opportunities. I pick up one of the magazines and then lay it back down again.

When Adam returns, he's holding a rendering of the palmetto tree. He kneels in front of me and extends it toward my leg. I shift my weight to halfway off the edge of the couch and show him my Achilles tendon.

"Should do it," he murmurs. "If you like it."

"Sure," I say, because honestly I wouldn't know how or why to disagree. It's as if I'm nineteen again, incapable of rejecting anyone that shows interest.

Standing on a chair while the apprentice affixes the stencil to my leg, I remember what it felt like to want that rowing tiger. To want something permanent. Meaningful. I barely remember the where or the how, only that it was evening, dark out. And it hurt like hell. The oar drawing was awkward because the artist had never really seen one. It resembled an orange and blue lollipop. We stopped after the outlining so I could smoke. And when it was over, I felt ownership, selfness in a way I never had before.

I look down at Adam. He's removed the lid from his Starbucks cup and is blowing gently on the purple liquid and stirring sugar into it. Something about him reminds me of one-night-stands and recklessness. The latex gloves smell like condoms and the black and white tiled floor resembles one found inside a bar.

I feel a surge of desire and realize this is not a fix. This is a renewal. I've been buried far too long. Someone I should have forgotten wants to be exhumed. And I knew it would be this way. I came here alone because I wanted to emerge alone.

I am alone. With Adam.

He glances up, catches me watching him. I twist my fingers into the fabric of my skirt. "There are shorts under."

"Oh, I don't care about that."

I blush. Of course not. He would be surgical about it. Other girls lay here in their panties and bra all the time. But not me. I don't do this all the time so I turn my face hoping he can't see my confidence failing. Gazing down at the apprentice, I wonder how to get my bravado back. I step down.



Adam opens packages of sterile tools, the plastic stretching and tearing, the latex peeling apart. Then he says, "Here we go," and leans into the table like a gravedigger against a shovel.

I unfold onto my stomach across the padded table, offer him my bare feet.

The needle starts buzzing and I lose all vocabulary. There's the first cut which is as bad as expected. Taking deep breaths, I shift and dig my fingertips into the edges of the table. The apprentice starts asking me questions and my words return. When it gets really bad, I chatter more to try to ignore what's happening below. When we're in it, deep in, cutting, pushing, soaking in, I cuss.

Adam apologizes.

"You're not sorry," I accuse him. "You said before you'd built an immunity to the pain you cause others."

"Yes." His voice is low and it reminds me of my OBGYN speaking so calmly all through childbirth that I had to shut-the-fuck-up to hear him say "push."

But this is sexier so instead I think of vampires and how at that exquisite moment, the ridiculously gorgeous predator plunges his fangs into his prey's warm, tender, exposed flesh.

I think this could be like that if there'd been more foreplay.

Then he says, "You should let me tattoo the bottom of your foot."

"Why would I allow that?"

"Just because."

"Maybe next time."

The needle is quiet and I think I can hear him smile when he echoes, "Next time."

The shift of air around my foot tingles all the way up to my fingers and I relax them for a second and point my toes, tightening the muscles in my leg. I consider the offer. His hand holds my foot firmly, his palm cupping my heel.

I try to remember if I even made eye contact with him before laying down.

The pain is just as I remember it. Digging. Grating. Like the persistence of the placenta that cradled my daughter for nine months. The doctor scraped it out from inside of me on her birthday. I cuss again and clench my jaw against the pain.

Adam asks, "You okay up there?"

I say, "Worse than a Brazilian but not as bad as childbirth."

"I don't want to be on that spectrum."

"You know it hurts."

"Yes, but." Then he apologizes again.

"Stop fucking saying you're sorry. You're not fucking sorry."

He laughs.

The music changes and Smashing Pumpkins fills the room. Now the nostalgia is intoxicating and I want a cigarette. I want my tongue piercing back. I want a flannel shirt with a Zippo in the pocket. I want to be high. I want to be nineteen.

The needle keeps buzzing and digging and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Well, at least I was right," I say. Now I'm just babbling. "All these years I've said this is un-fucking-believably painful and all those other assholes would say, 'nah, it's easy' or 'barely feel it' and I would say." I take a deep breath and my knuckles whiten on the table as I grip it. "They. Were. Lying." Exhale. "And I was right."

I hear Adam laugh again and I wonder how it's soothing me and I add, "Or maybe I'm just a baby."

He doesn't respond, just keeps mopping up blood and ink while I grit my teeth. Only now he's pressing my skin with a little more tenderness. I wonder if it's sympathy like when my aesthetician Michelle rips a patch of pubic hair out and presses her palm against me to ease the pain.

"Do you want a little green on the bottom? Like grass near the tree?"

"I trust you," I say.

"Then we'll do that and then we'll be done."

We're in this thing together and when he touches me again I know I'll be thinking of that later. I remember how to tuck memories like this inside the box in my head where I only go when I'm alone.

"How long have you been married?"

"Fourteen years. Already tattooed when we met. And pierced. Tongue and belly." The words are staccato because of the pain.

"A bad girl."

"That's why he picked me."

"And now?"

"He keeps me respectable."

"Well, he didn't earn the doctorate."

"No," I say. "That's mine."

And this is my reward. Having Adam touch me is my reward for closing a specific chapter in my life. One totally unrelated to Hobbes, crew, or palmetto trees.

When it's over, I sit up and realize the table is soaked with my sweat. Now I apologize. He pretends it's not disgusting; has the class to not spray the table down and clean it with me still standing there.

I twist my leg to look at his work.

And he's watching my reaction.

It's gorgeous. The tree is green and leafy, the trunk brown and textured, the tiger orange and black; the whole thing bright and perfect.

When I meet his eyes, he says, "That smile. Wow."



I remember why I remember him. He resembles a lost version of me, the version I find when I write, the version I taste in a noon beer on Tuesday and see when I notice daylight's fading. He's reflecting my lost-self back at me. And I like what I see. I let her re-emerge and stand before him renewed.

Adam affixes a bandage to my leg. For a minute he's sitting and I'm standing. I'm grinning and he looks like he's staring at the sun. His face is warm. His eyes are full. I see more than he means to show. He looks away and I do, too, into the mirror beside me. I recognize myself but only just. I'm familiar in that Adam way. Then I'm paying him. Our hands touch but the intimacy is gone.

He reviews the care instructions and I repeat what he says. He writes his name on the page; his handwriting is all capital letters.

"You've always been Adam?"

He nods. I say thank you. He writes his cell phone number on the page. I over tip him.

"She's throwing money at me," he says to the apprentice. He's grinning.

"When you wait nineteen years, there's time to save up," I say.

We're parting and I don't want to leave. I glance at the mirror again and think I see an empty grave. The ink-sleeved hipster dug up a version of me I thought I'd lost. It's as if a sarcophagus has been cut open and that other me finally liberated. I'm suddenly afraid she'll only exist in this room.

I say, "I'll come back and have the other one touched up, too."

"What is it?"

I hike up my skirt and show him the moon and stars. We make eye contact. Found me is a little dangerous, a little damaged. I grab her by the arm and drag her down the stairs and out into the street with me.



## COME ON, SWEET BOY

JAYNE BOWERS

"THE DOCTOR'S probably going to do a C-section," Carrie said, and I knew my daughter was walking that thin line between courage and fear. Seth was in the breech position, and although the doctor had turned him once, the stubborn fellow soon eased his way back into what was comfy for him.

Sensing the apprehension in my oldest child's voice, I assured her that I would be there for the delivery. "Don't worry," I told her. "You still have a week until his due date, and a lot can happen by then."

*Do all mothers spout off such reassuring words of comfort that easily?* I wondered.

Despite the doctor's many assurances that everything was 'just fine,' I couldn't shake the edginess. This was my daughter's sixth child, and it had been nearly a decade since her perfectly formed, stillborn baby boy had briefly entered the family's life on a cold December night. Between then and now, there had been four live births.

The day of the scheduled section arrived, and my other daughter, Elizabeth, and I sped down I-95 on a sweltering July morning. Another scorcher! Neither of us knew what to expect or even how to think about the upcoming birth, so we rode mostly in silence, an unsettling sense of foreboding hovering between, above, and around us.

"Dad's coming, right?" Elizabeth asked.

"Said he'd be there. I sure hope so. Carrie needs all the support she can get."

"Mom, there's no use being so stressed out. It's not like my sis is an amateur at this. You're the one I'm worried about."

"Why? Just because I missed the first exit?"