

An excerpt from MY ABSOLUTE DARLING

One

The old house hunkers on its hill, all peeling white paint, bay windows, and spindled wooden railings overgrown with climbing roses and poison oak. Rose runners have prized off clapboards that now hang snarled in the canes. The gravel drive is littered with spent casings caked in verdigris. Martin Alveston gets out of the truck and does not look back at Turtle sitting in the cab but walks up the porch, his jungle boots sounding hollowly on the boards, a big man in flannel and Levi's opening the sliding glass doors. Turtle waits, listening to the engine's ticking, and then she follows him.

In the living room, one window is boarded over, sheet metal and half-inch plywood bolted to the frame and covered in rifle targets. The bullet clustering is so tight it looks like someone put a ten gauge right up to them and blew the centers out; the slugs glint in their ragged pits like water at the bottom of wells. Her daddy opens a can of Bush's beans on the old stove and strikes a match on his thumb to light the burner, which gutters and comes slowly to life, burning orange against the dark redwood walls, the unvarnished cabinets, the grease-stained rat traps.

The back door off the kitchen has no lock, only holes for the knob and deadlock, and Martin kicks it open and steps out onto the unfinished back deck, the unboarded joists alive with fence lizards and twined with blackberries through which rise horsetails and pig mint, soft with its strange peach fuzz and sour reek. Standing wide-legged on the joists, Martin takes the skillet from where he hung it on the sprung clapboards for the raccoons to lick clean. He cranks the spigot open with a rusted crescent wrench and blasts the cast iron with water, ripping up handfuls of horsetail to scrub at problem places. Then he comes in and sets it on the burner and the water hisses and spits. He opens the lightless olive-green refrigerator and takes out two steaks wrapped in brown butcher paper and draws his Daniel Winkler belt knife and wipes it across the thigh of his Levi's and sticks each steak with the point and flips them one by one onto the skillet.

Turtle hops onto the kitchen counter—grainy redwood boards, nails encircled by old hammer prints. She picks up a Sig Sauer from among the discarded cans and slivers back the slide to see the brass seated in the chamber. She levels the gun and turns around to see how he takes this, and he stands leaning one big hand against the cabinets and smiles in a tired way without looking up.

When she was six, he had her put on a life jacket for cushion, told her not to touch the hot ejected casings, and started her on a bolt-action Ruger .22, sitting at the kitchen table and bracing the gun on a rolled-up towel. Grandpa must've heard the shots on his way back from the liquor store because he came in wearing jeans and a terry-cloth bathrobe and leather slippers with little leather tassels, and he stood in the doorway and said, "Goddamn it, Marty." Daddy was sitting in a chair beside Turtle reading Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and he turned the book upside down on his thigh to keep his place and said, "Go to your room, kibble," and Turtle walked creakingly up the stairs, unrailed and without risers, plank treads cut from a redwood burl, old-growth stringers cracked and torqued with their poor curing, their twisting drawing the nails from the treads, exposed and strained almost to shearing, the men silent below her, Grandpa watching her, Martin touching the gilt lettering on the spine of his book with the pad of his forefinger. But even upstairs, lying on her plywood bed with the army surplus bag pulled over herself, she could hear them, Grandpa saying, "Goddamn it, Martin, this is no way to raise a little girl," and Daddy not saying anything for a long time and then saying, "This is my house, remember that, Daniel."

They eat the steaks in near silence, the tall glasses of water silting layers of sand to their bottoms. A deck

of cards sits on the table between them and the box shows a jester. One side of his face is twisted into a manic grin, the other sags away in a frown. When she is done, she pushes her plate forward and her father watches her.

She is tall for fourteen, coltishly built, with long legs and arms, wide but slender hips and shoulders, her neck long and corded. Her eyes are her most striking feature, blue, almond-shaped in a face that is too lean, with wide, sharp cheekbones, and her crooked, toothy mouth—an ugly face, she knows, and an unusual one. Her hair is thick and blond, bleached in streaks by the sun. Her skin is constellated with copper-brown freckles. Her palms, the undersides of her forearms, the insides of her thighs show tangles of blue veins.

Martin says, “Go get your vocabulary list, kibble.”

She retrieves her blue notebook from her backpack and opens the page to this week’s vocabulary exercises, carefully copied from the blackboard. He places his hand on the notebook, draws it across the table toward himself. He begins to read through the list. “ ‘Conspicuous,’ ” he says, and looks at her. “ ‘Castigate.’ ” In this way he goes down the list. Then he says, “Here it is. Number one. ‘The blank enjoyed working with children.’ ” He turns the book around and slides it across the table toward her. She reads:

1. The _____ enjoyed working with children.

She reads through the list, cracking the knuckles of her toes against the floorboards. Daddy looks at her, but she doesn’t know the answer. She says, “ ‘Suspect,’ maybe it’s ‘suspect.’ ” Daddy raises his eyebrows and she pencils in,

1. The suspect enjoyed working with children.

He drags the book across the table and looks at it. “Well, now,” he says, “look here at number two.” He slides the book back to her. She looks at number two.

2. I _____ we will arrive late to the party.

She listens to him breathing through his broken nose, his every breath unbearable to her because she loves him. She attends to his face, its every detail, thinking, you bitch, you can do this, you bitch.

“Look,” he says, “look,” and he takes her pencil and with two deft strokes strikes out suspect and writes in pediatrician. Then he slides the book over to her and he says, “Kibble, what’s number two? We just went over this. It’s right there.”

She looks at the page, which is the thing of absolute least importance in that room, her mind filled with his impatience. He breaks the pencil in two, sets both pieces in front of the notebook. She stoops over the page, thinking, stupid, stupid, stupid, and shitty at everything. He rakes his fingernails across his stubble. “Okay.” Stooped in exhaustion and drawing a finger through the scum of blood on his plate. “Okay, all right,” he says, and throws the notebook backhanded across the living room. “Okay, all right, that’s enough for tonight, that’s enough—what’s wrong with you?” Then, shaking his head: “No, that’s all right, no, that’s enough.” Turtle sits silently, her hair straggled around her face, and he cocks his jaw open and off to the left like he’s testing the joint.

He reaches out and places the Sig Sauer in front of her. Then he draws the deck of cards across the table, drops it into his other hand. He walks to the blocked window, stands in front of the bullet-riddled targets,

shucks off the deck's case, draws the jack of spades, and holds it beside his eye, showing her the front, the back, the card in profile. Turtle sits with her hands flat on the table looking at the gun. He says, "Don't be a little bitch, kibble." He stands perfectly still. "You're being a little bitch. Are you trying to be a little bitch, kibble?"

Turtle rises, squares her stance, levels the front sight with her right eye. She knows the sight is level when the edge appears as thin as a razor—if the gun tips up, she gets a telltale sheen off the sight's top surface. She revises that edge into a thin, bare line, thinking, careful, careful, girl. In profile, the card makes a target as thick as a thumbnail. She eases the play out of the 4.4-pound trigger, inhales, exhales to the natural slackening of her breath, and rolls on those 4.4 pounds. She fires. The top half of the card flutters down in a maple-seed spiral. Turtle stands unmoving except for quivers that chase themselves down her arms. He shakes his head, smiling a little and trying to hide it, touching his lips dryly with his thumb. Then he draws another card and holds it up for her.

"Don't be a little bitch, kibble," he says, and waits. When she doesn't move, he says, "Goddamn it, kibble."

She checks the hammer with her thumb. There is a way it feels to hold the gun right and Turtle dredges through that feeling for any wrongness, the edge of her notch sight covering his face, the sight's glowing green tritium bead of a size with his eye. For a suspended moment, her aim following her attention, his blue eye crests the thin, flat horizon of the front sight. Her guts lurch and drop like a hooked fish going to weeds and she does not move, all the slack out of the trigger, thinking, shit, shit, thinking, do not look at him, do not look at him. If he sees her across those sights, he makes no expression. Deliberately, she matches the sights to the quaking, unfocused card. She exhales to the natural slackening of her breath and fires. The card doesn't move. She's missed. She can see the mark on the target board, a handsbreadth from him. She decocks the hammer and lowers the gun. Sweat is lacy and bright in her eyelashes.

"Try aiming," he says.

She stands perfectly still.

"Are you going to try again or what is this?"

Turtle locks back the hammer and brings the gun from hip to dominant eye, the sights level, coequal slots of light between the front sight and the notch, the tip so steady you could balance a coin upright on the front post. The card in contrast moves ever so slightly up and down. A bare tremor answers to his heartbeat. She thinks, do not look at him, do not look at his face. Look at your front sight, look at the top edge of your front sight. In the silence after the gunshot, Turtle relaxes the trigger until it clicks. Martin turns the unharmed card over in his hand and makes a show of inspecting it. He says, "That's just exactly what I thought," and tosses the card to the floorboards, walks back to the table, sits down opposite her, picks up a book he'd set open and facedown on the table, and leans over it. On the boarded-up window behind him, the bullet holes make a cluster you could cover with a quarter.

She stands watching him for three heartbeats. She pops the magazine, ejects the round from the chamber, and catches it in her hand, locks the slide back, and sets the gun, magazine, and shell on the table beside her dirty plate. The shell rolls a broad arc with a marbly sound. He wets a finger and turns the page. She stands waiting for him to look up at her, but he does not look up, and she thinks, is this all? She goes upstairs to her room, dark with unvarnished wood paneling, the creepers of poison oak reaching through the sashes and the frame of the western window.

That night Turtle waits on her plywood platform, under the green military sleeping bag and wool

blankets, listening to the rats gnawing on the dirty dishes in the kitchen. Sometimes she can hear the clack clack clack of a rat squatting on a stack of plates and scratching its neck. She can hear Martin pace from room to room. On wall pegs, her Lewis Machine & Tool AR-10, her Noveske AR-15, and her Remington 870 twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun. Each answers a different philosophy of use. Her clothes are folded carefully on her shelves, her socks stowed in a steamer trunk at the foot of the bed. Once, she left a blanket unfolded and he burned it in the yard, saying, “Only animals ruin their homes, kibble, only animals ruin their fucking homes.”

In the morning, Martin comes out of his room belting on his Levi’s, and Turtle opens the fridge and takes out a carton of eggs and a beer. She throws him the beer. He seats the cap on the counter’s edge, bangs it off, stands drinking. His flannel hangs open around his chest. His abdominal muscles move with his drinking. Turtle knocks the eggs against the countertop, and holding them aloft in her fist, purses open the crack and drops the contents into her mouth, discarding shells into the five-gallon compost bucket.

“You don’t have to walk me,” she says, cuffing at her mouth.

“I know it,” he says.

“You don’t have to,” she says.

“I know I don’t have to,” he says.

He walks her down to the bus, father and daughter following ruts beside the rattlesnake-grass median. On either side, the thorny, unblooming rosettes of bull thistles. Martin holds the beer to his chest, buttoning his flannel with his other hand. They wait together at the gravel pullout lined with devil’s pokers and the dormant bulbs of naked lady lilies. California poppies nest in the gravel. Turtle can smell the rotting seaweed on the beach below them and the fertile stink of the estuary twenty yards away. In Buckhorn Bay, the water is pale green with white scrimms around the sea stacks. The ocean shades to pale blue farther out, and the color matches the sky exactly, no horizon line and no clouds.

“Look at that, kibble,” Martin says.

“You don’t have to wait,” she says.

“Looking at something like that, good for your soul. You look and you think, goddamn. To study it is to approach truth. You’re living at the edge of the world and you think that teaches you something about life, to look out at it. And years go by, with you thinking that. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Years go by, with you thinking that it’s a kind of important existential work you’re doing, to hold back the darkness in the act of beholding. Then one day, you realize that you don’t know what the hell you’re looking at. It’s irreducibly strange and it is unlike anything except itself and all that brooding was nothing but vanity, every thought you ever had missed the inexplicableness of the thing, its vastness and its uncaring. You’ve been looking at the ocean for years and you thought it meant something, but it meant nothing.”

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