

INSIDE

I've replaced people and been the one replaced, but in the past they were always gone when I got there or vice versa. At Immaculatus we have a four-week overlap with our predecessors not knowing what the deal is, then boom they get their surprise one month bye-bye. For some reason the place doesn't want the Cuthberts guessing what's going to happen to them. They want them stunned like a pair of tranquilized zoo bears, punched in the face, staggering forward, paws out, asking *why?* After they're booted out we cuckoo into their one-bedroom faculty bungalow.

None of this sits well with Nicole.

We taxi to a leafy semi-outdoor restaurant near the college, where Van Morrison is singing a song like trying to chisel all around the edges of something he can't quite get the shape of right. Nicole gives me the big eyes and a nudge: *isn't that them?* A couple sits at a swayback table over the patio drainage hole. They look like their Facebook photos. Him: tall and bald, *185 friends*, mostly of starchy professorial mien. Her: Linda Ronstadt, 1975, lipstick-topped, Bond girl. Half her *28 friends* had the same surname and were holding babies and/or barbecue equipment. As we slide past them to our table they start talking more pointedly, *you* this and that, familiar switchbacks on Coupledom Road leading to the Vista Point of a meaty argument. The wife says, I'm a simple country girl, you knew that. She's got the local accent, her voice small and precise.

Or is your thing like this table, he drawls. Does it have to have a certain balance, so the wrong balance ruins your fragile equilibrium if you follow me

sweetheart? Pretending to be polite at the salty end, the feint of a quick cruel man. I'm your wife, she says, screwing the paper sleeve from her straw into a worm then flicking a drop of water on it to watch it writhe. He bulls his head behind the menu, either food indecision or saying where's a precipice I can fling you off. A waitress kneels to wedge a matchbook under the table. Nicole, with her back to them, gives me wide eyes. I stroke her arm to say, long flight, long drive, let's just soak up what's left of the day.

Immaculatus insists faculty be married and that spouses *participate in campus affairs*. "It's what we prefer," administrator Jeanette told me on the phone. She hinted with a *we're-all-Christians-here* Southern intimacy that something about the Cuthbert wife, her appearance or language, had unsettled the Carolinian devout.

They found me teaching at UC Riverside in Southern California, a hot 45-minute commute from our Fullerton apartment. Plus tutoring at home, which Nicole hates. At Immaculatus we'll live on site, rent all-in. I heard that and right away felt I could breathe. Plus only one thesis student in the first semester, *bla-dow*. "The main thing is that everyone has an opportunity to *serve*," Jeanette said, italicizing the word with a telephone smile like a housebound woman stroking a trapped cat. I was so happy about the gig I didn't think about the discomfort of teaching for a month with the guy I'm bouncing.

Nicole, second-generation Los Angeleno, is baptized and has no criminal record, apparently the core *bona fides* for an Immaculatus faculty wife. She co-runs a poetry blog that hasn't run anything sodomistic in months and she helps out at some small presses. Except for teaching prisoners to write free verse about people

they've bludgeoned she can keep doing what she does on the east coast as easily as from California, plus visit the birthplaces of Dickinson, Whitman and others I've only heard of through her reading to me in bed about meadows and grosbeaks. She's not comfortable with me agreeing to these terms with the school, the not-telling, the sly dancing-around, the "treachery." She says it's not too late to formulate demands of my own referencing straightforwardness, decency. Maybe I can ask for a meadow I tell her.

Monday night we meet everyone at a get-together in the Cocoa-Puff-yellow staff room: crackers and cheese and soft jazz on a boom box held together with flaking brown tape. Jeanette, who looks like the banker's secretary on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, introduces me to my soon-to-be-predecessor. Mikkel Cuthbert, pronounced Michael, is tall and round-headed with a tan that goes all the way up his nose and an unfortunate skull cleft off to starboard that looks like when he was born they were out of forceps and had to use a melon baller. He wears a blond silk jacket he tells my admiring wife came from Hong Kong. He's smiling but I can picture him looming down creaking stairs with a shovel to brain whoever dared enter his sticky subterranean domain. Perhaps this is projection on my part. Terri Cuthbert in her nice-smelling white top makes me think of a bird. Not her posture or face so much as a beady-eyed blankness. A willingness to please, implying something pent. When she speaks about how sweet she finds it at the college her opinions feel ladled from a well of nothing. Her page-cut hair is a red that hair doesn't come in. Nicole's is long and honey-brown and swings like Barbie's naughty playmate Midge. In my dreams she has three freckles on each side of her nose – six, the hard way. I drew

them on her once, with a red felt-tip, in a Fullerton motel when our apartment building was being gassed for termites and we had sex on a balcony above a poolful of frolicking Midwesterners.

Mikkel and I talk east coast blahblah and 20th century European Philosophy. “Hume, Kant, Locke,” he says. “They aren’t crazy about the existentialists, the Vienna Circle, they’ll steer you around that.” He tells us we ought to come by their place Friday and see how they’ve got themselves fixed. Nicole brims. Sure, I say, sounds great. With obvious budget cuts like the cafeteria A/C turned off I don’t know how he doesn’t see it coming. Offhand I’d guess they’re saving six, seven grand a year by replacing him with me. Them with us.

I teach his students for five days, dicking around with a coyly auxiliary Phil 101 curriculum. Immaculatus has six-hundred-and-something friendly if creepily deferential students. *As we learned last term, sir*, that kind of thing. LEGO haircuts and iPhones glued to their arms. Would it be cruel to say they have little to think about, and little to think it with? No, they’re all right. One night I dream Cuthbert’s chasing me through the maze from *The Shining* with a glue gun. Nicole says a couple more weeks and they’ll be gone, then you’ll be king of the roost, Mister Rooster.

Friday night we try our luck at some Scratcher tickets, argue lightly about this and that, pick the lint off each other and walk over. I don’t want to do this but here it is. There are fake Colonial lights on fluted verdigris poles about the campus, with red Rape Alert buttons. Nicole swings my hand and asks, “What do you suppose is wrong with her?” Maybe, I say, we’ll find out when she comes out of the bedroom in a big wooden rabbit mask. Anything with creepy rituals unplugs

something in Nicole. When she's fretful she becomes sixteen, I want to chase her across a playground. Don't, she says, girl-punching my arm, or I'll tell them about you-know-what, you bet your dick I will.

Their section of faculty housing is west of campus, eight duplex huts shaded by wisteria and bragging catalpa, with a gravel walkway between. Low-volt lights on fake pagodas, moisture-retaining cedar chips. Nicer than I pictured. From outside their screen door I hear Mikkel say, "As if that's part of my job." *The Cuthberts*, it says on a piece of heraldic plastic.

He takes our wine, she does the tour. When the women are both in the bathroom my cell rings. It's Kiley, Jeanette's little assistant. According to our next-unit neighbor in the place they've put us, our smoke detector's bleeping. Kiley talks in halty questions as if upsetting me might get her fired by Jesus. If we're not there, she says, she has orders to call the fire department? Don't, I say, it's always the battery. The battery, I tell her, Kiley, go pull the battery. I say we'll be out till at least ten and I give her permission to enter. I picture her in the dark with her boyfriend, both of them testing our bed with nervous knees.

I squeeze in the bathroom with Terri and Nicole. Their big enamel tub has each foot in a Tupperware thing of skanky liquid. Palmetto beetles, Terri sniffs, I thought I left them in Florida. Nicole ruffles a lip and peers in one of the cups. Terri's shorter than Nicole but feels more present, more here-in-the-room. Pretending to look around, I study her glossy head, the white canoes of her calves. Mikkel makes kitchen noises. Shelves line their hallway, oak built-ins. I'm a sucker for a dark hall full of books. In the main room someone's hung a wide African batik

thing in a frame: a lamb and a lion getting along. It looks like Watchtower covers from the nineties; the crayon-rainbow view of heaven. And the tenured shall lie down with the adjunct.

Nicole and I go around the glass coffee table and perch on the couch, bus-style. Terri takes the chair facing us, sitting straight down like placing a pawn. There's something kabuki about her. I feel glum and guarded so I grin like an idiot. Any time two faculty couples get together to drink I'm reminded of the Albee play. Terri and Nicole start right off chatting while Mikkel butlers a tray of something. He's ten years older than the three of us, call it forty-four. I picture his long frame diagonalizing the door a month from now, cradling one elbow with a Joan Didion scowl, watching me carry in our bedding, saying well I guess you know where *that* goes, professor.

Holding my wine I spill a few chocolate peanut things and they roll towards Terri's knees. She gets a frowny look and twists towards the hubby. Mikkel says, "Wayne, no, leave it, let me get it." He sets down his martini, corrals the candy and drops it in the bowl. "Terri has a thing," he says. "An uh inability we have to kinda work around." Here it is, I think: rabbit mask. Nicole shows me her I love you *but* face. Terri scoops her shrimp across a battlefield of red sauce. "In fact," Mikkel says, "I'd be interested to know what you two think about it." He puts a hand on his wife's shoulder and Terri looks up at him like, here we go. I picture the four of us out on the path in twenty minutes, grassy-kneed, brawling like Project Runway.

"She has an agnosia," he says, gentling it into the air like a just-opened Cabernet. The *she* under discussion blows on her bloody shrimp, her small face

neutral under the red bangs, knees together. “Or if you like a phobia. She calls it her *difficulty*. She’s unable to put things inside other things.”

I stare him in one eye and swallow. Their fridge cycles on.

“Basically, Terri can’t make her hands put an object inside another object. Tube, box, hole.” He gives her a look, like staring at your used car that was a great deal when you bought it but summer comes and you find out it’s got no A/C. “She can take things *out* or put them *beside*, but she can’t put a thing in another thing.” I look boldly at her face and she upshifts to an elevator smile. *Well, here we all are.* When he swings back and forth to see what we think – Wayne? Nicole? Wayne? – his skull cleft catches the light from a gastric orange globe chained to the ceiling.

Nicole does the thing where you pretend your mouth’s full. “Oh,” I say. I don’t know what I imagined when Jeanette said the wife makes folks around campus uncomfortable. Tourette’s maybe? I had a dean who fired his head of HR for obsessing on 9/11. Who knows what a person will decide one day itches his stump.

“Some uncharitably imagine it as willfulness,” Terri says, looking at Nicole. “But we don’t consider stutterers willful!” She pats her husband’s hand where he’s clamped it on her scapula.

“I didn’t notice it on our first date.” Mikkell works his big tongue around his mouth. “Even on the second date there was just a, say an *awkwardness* when it came time to put Terri’s leftovers in the Styrofoam takeaway thing.”

“Clamshell,” she says.

“She pointed and said, *Would you mind?* I scooped it in for her.” I hear Jeanette’s voice in my ear, each Carolina syllable stretched over a drying rack. *Some*

folks fit in, others don't. Ah'm sure you have this where you teach. Nicole does a jaw-grip smiley like she has hold of a Frisbee with her lips.

"She can get her arms into sleeves or her foot in a sock so long as she doesn't look. Obviously she can put food in her mouth. Just not a letter in a postbox, a fork in a drawer, groceries in a bag." There's a gentlemen-of-the-jury quality to this. "At least she can't stick a knife in me."

"Dear, I could always pull a wire around your neck."

"Ha! That's true!" He touches her wine. "Since we told them, would you *prefer -- ?*" She nods like, of course I would, Dimbo. I don't get the significance of this at first. Female voices walk by the window. Nothing can make me feel I'm inside so powerfully as young women outside. I only now notice the curtains are drawn, blocking the view of catalpa pods, hobbit path. I rub the back of Nicole's hand with my thumb and fill her in on Kylie's smoke alarm call as Mikkell lumps to the kitchen and returns with an aluminum shaker and a martini glass. "Terri can't load the dishwasher, or re-box shoes in the mall. She can't put a credit card back in her wallet." Absent, but there by implication: *you see how crazy that is? Do you see why I have no hair to cover my unsightly skull dent?* He puts the martini-makings on the table, pivots a heavy red club chair on one leg and swings it to Nicole's side of the couch, facing us. My wife says, "I had an aunt who couldn't turn left. She had to do car trips as all right turns. She also pulled her hair out in clumps. She had to wear a do-rag thing." I never heard about this.

He inverts the tumbler over a glass with a toothpick and olives. "Years ago I wrote to Oliver Sacks at Columbia. He said it was new to him. There's no name for it even."

"Mikkel sometimes thinks I'm faking."

"*Well.*" His eyebrows up to a God in the rafters.

"But I ask you, why would I? I mean, what would it get me?"

"My dear, you might think it makes you more mysteriously alluring." Swinging his glass like a Bond villain.

Nicole asks, "If you don't mind me asking, when did it start?" Terri swivels her neck, trying to get her head into the diving helmet of a recollection. I eye the batik lion and its trusting lamby pal.

"So far as I can remember I've always been this way." She takes toothpick-plus-olives from her glass, licks the vodka off with a pointy tongue and hands Mikkel the plastic sword. He holds it at waist level like a leash. She sips, then holds out her drink. He drops the olives back in her glass and falls into the club chair. "Her parents weren't very observant is all I can say. They thought she was either messy or forgetful."

Nicole asks, "How long have you two been together?" If she met the Queen of England she'd ask this.

Six years, he says. "We met on a cruise ship. Singles Dance Night, drinks *o'erlooking the ocean*. We were married at my parents' house in Florida, then I got this offer and up we came. We're both from around here originally."

“Wayne and I met five years ago,” Nicole tells them. It’s more like four and a half. The fact of it is, we’re not actually technically married, but Immaculatus doesn’t check. As she starts on that story, changing The Viper Room to “a small concert hall in L.A.,” I excuse myself and pad to the hallway, passing the bedroom’s open door. There we are on the King-sized, me on the right, Nicole on the left and this evening just a squirmy memory. We’ll need a second reading lamp. His speech just now seems to me like a recap not of his wife’s handicap but of the nobility of his own suffering. On the other hand, they’re firing them for this? I picture a staff meeting, the squeamish trying to justify their hostility with reference to Christian attributes found lacking. *If that Samaritan thing happens again, she can’t put the guy in an ambulance.* What about tampons, I wonder crudely. What about ATM cards? Is croquet *in* or *through*?

The bathroom mirror reminds me I have a reddish beard. Nicole says it makes me look like the banjo player in a jug band. What is it, I wonder, about the people we work with? Arbitrary and picky, isolated and over-friendly, distorted like lumps of cheap glass. Two people, I decide, toeing one of the bathtub feet, need the space of more like three. That’s why we hook up with other couples, looking for new territory to colonize. Perhaps, I think, this explains poetry and long sea voyages.

That must be her toothbrush lying on the sink. I flush and look quickly in their cabinet. Blade razor, cotton puffs. I don’t know what I’m looking for. A prescription bottle labeled *AntiAbnormalol*?

When I come back Terri's at the kitchen getting something and he's leaning over my wife, talking low. I lower myself onto the couch. "Even the word *in* is hard for her. She'll say, Honey'd'ya put my purse *to* the trunk? If I talk about something getting inside something else, it can upset her. Bringing the *intromission* to her attention."

Terri returns with a fist of paper napkins. Someone's spilled vodka, dab dab. "Wayne, look at this." Nicole lofts a flat disc of stiff orange plastic. "Terri's trash can."

"My trash hoop." She sips defiantly.

"She puts her garbage on here and Mikkel throws it out. Isn't that clever?"

"My Galahad!"

"Your garbage stooge." He brushes his maw with the napkin wad.

Nicole rubs her own shoulders, arms crossed at the elbows. She says, "Does watching other people do it, put things inside things, make you uncomfortable?"

"A little."

"So, porn is right out," I say. I'm sorry but I can't help it.

"We've never tried watching pornography," Mikkel says. "Together."

"Oh you've got to!" Nicole laughs.

I say, "They don't have to if they don't want to." I picture him rushing out for a projector and a bedsheet. They're way too anxious to share all of this.

"Someone called you," Terri says and points to my phone. *1 message*. I'm picking it up when my wife announces, "Wayne always wants to do it in a moving elevator, or through the chain-link fence behind a carnival." I feel cold metal on my

groin in the wind. I say, "Honey? Are you feeling all right?" Nicole's laugh batters the walls. "Oh yeah, he's a major perv." She stares over my head and holds one lank of her hair like a toilet pull-chain as Mikkell re-fills a martini glass in front of her. When did she switch from wine to vodka?

"Have you ever forced Terri," she asks.

"Honey..."

"I don't mean sexually. Well, not necessarily." She snuffles a blurty laugh and covers her mouth. "I mean taken her hand and guided, like, pointed, a slice of peach on a fork back into the peach can or whatever to see if she freaks out, if her wrist wobbles, or what exactly - ?"

I cough. The Cuthberts regard each other and he turns to me. I'm pretty sure sooner or later he's going to sock me.

"Let's try it," Nicole says. "Terri, do you mind?"

"Umm," I say.

Mikkell stands. He lumbers to the kitchen. I look at Nicole. "You're kidding," I say. "Let's not do this. I mean, do we need to do this?"

Terri turns upon me a look that's half demure and half I don't know what. Pushed to the brink of something but glad to finally be there? I feel drifty. I go back to the hallway for my glass. In with their art books I spot a volume with the spine turned to the wall. KINBAKU. Photos of erotic Japanese rope bondage. I push it back exactly where I found it. Still in the hall, I ask, "Are you comfortable with this? Terri?" By way of answering, she says, "You looked in our medicine cabinet, right?"

Where did that come from? Why ask me that? The book, the slippery red hair, the putting-inside fetish. *Oh no Mister Man, please don't.* I can't answer her. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I cough as though I didn't hear.

Mikkel calls from the kitchen, "So you two were never caught, in an elevator or behind a carnival?" Nicole laughs at my expression poking out from the hall. We don't know these people. For God's sake we're replacing these people.

"Not yet," Nicole boasts. "Maybe next time!" Terri laughs a glass-chipping sound and toasts the air. "Nicole," I say, walking back.

"Here we are!" He has something in each hand. "Not peaches but close. Tinned mandarins in syrup." Terri puts both hands over her face and does peek-a-boo. I feel like I need a minute behind something heavy, like an X-ray apron. My wife finishes her martini and nods in a loop. She's kicked her toe-strappy shoes under the table. She does a face of being very interested in what Terri has to say, fish mouth, wide eyes. "So go on, about Jeanette? Oh, who is it she looks like? Wayne? Who did you say Jeanette looks like?" Mikkel grinds the toothed wheel around the can. Here we go, he says. I grasp the warming wine bottle by the neck. There's no way out, only further in like an arrow that has to be pushed past screaming bone. Terri perches her hands on her skirt-brim, going up on sittty-tippy-toe. I see her red panties. She lifts the olives from her glass and tenders them to me. Mikkel grinds at the can like he's milling wheat. These are old, he says. Were these here when we moved in? I take Terri's toothpick, my face reddening. She sips twice and holds the glass out to me, *if you please, sir?* I plop her olives back in the polar liquid and she does that French kissing-the-air thing, then lifts them out, sucks both

olives off the stick with a fire-eater's flourish, laughs, pimienta blobs like doll navels in her little mouth, and drops the stick on the table.

Nicole shivers. "Don't cut yourself, Mikkel. Wayne, our apartment's on fire. I can feel it. Can't you feel it burning?"

"Our apartment's fine," I tell her.

"How do *you* know? Hey, Terri, could you – what is it Jews have? Wayne, what's it, a *goy*? Could you have one of those follow you around and put your lipstick in your purse and whatever?"

"I'm her Shabbos goy," Mikkel says, working the slick lid up and down.

"No, but, though, wouldn't a person who did that for you, wouldn't they be, and isn't Mikkel really, an extension of your arm?" Nicole tops-up her martini. "Isn't that a moral problem then, cos your will is creating a result the same how it would if you were making it move your hand? Has anyone asked the Jews that? Wayne, isn't that a philosophical problem? He hates when I ask him about philosophy."

"You might have something there," Mikkel says, the sharp discus between his finger and thumb.

"We've never done it on a roller-coaster," Nicole announces. "We wouldn't want Wayne flying off a corner. Into the bumper cars." Her laugh-spit hits my face. I give her careful-eyes.

She says, "They know, Wayne."

"Know." I pretend to be stupid but here it is.

"That we're being replaced." Terri rests her fingers on her knees. "That you're here to replace us, in all our naughty wickedness." Mikkel holds the sharp

can lid like a stopwatch and licks it from bottom to top. Something in my cervical vertebrae asks for more wine but I left my glass in the hall beside the book with the Japanese girls, their labia parted with red rope. I make my face a cartoon of apology. Mikkel drops the lid on the napkin wad, leaning forward in the shiny club chair, the sides dull where his arms have sweated them. The mandarins splay in their juice like apartment fish. "Do you know why? Did they tell you?"

What am I going to say, the college thinks his wife's a freak? Nicole digs one finger in her mouth and probes her cheek. Terri's hair lies straight like fiber-optics. The wine is hitting me, and the idea of a college wanting something suddenly strikes me as absurd. A college is buildings and lawns.

"I'm sorry," I say. "They asked me, us, not to tell you. It was a condition." I look at Nicole. "We both feel really bad about it."

Nicole kicks one of her shoes around with her toe until it points at me. "Oh! Terri! I'd love to see you golf!" she says. "Are there golf courses in South Carolina? There must be *something* here."

"How can they judge us," Terri asks.

Mikkel says, "They're the employers, dear. They judge you, me, Nicole." But I'm the only one he looks at.

"They can't judge me," she says. "I'm just the secret second wife. Oops!" She stands, puts her hands on her hips and turns once around, holding her head, her shoulders, her elbows perfectly level. She reminds me of a pie carousel beside a cash register. Not something a person would want to do. Nicole tugs at her chest string. Mikkel leans to dump the fruit in a white cereal bowl, where the slices slither

like prematurely born things. My wife picks up the silver fork and stabs it in the bowl bar-fight style. It comes up holding a dripping orange lune. She holds it out to me.

“Wayne,” she says.

Doesn’t Terri hold it, I ask her. My lips click. “Isn’t that your idea? Wasn’t that the clever plan?”

“I want to see you do it,” she says. “Prove to me you can do it, Wayne. Put the fruit cleverly in the can for all of us to learn from.” She lowers her head to look up at me through her eyelashes and unties her chest string, letting the ends drop. They all three stare at me. “I didn’t want to come here,” Nicole says. “South Carolina wasn’t my idea.”

I hold the fork and look at the can. It’s the easiest thing in the world to put a mandarin slice in a can. Who couldn’t do that? But my arm won’t move.

I feel a sky-wide sense of dislocation. The curtains, the batik, the rank smell of catalpa. I don’t betray people. It isn’t me who wanted this, who wrote that clause. I’m just going along, doing what people asked me to do.

I stand, my stomach heavy, and walk to the dark of their hall, our hall, and drop the fork on the bookshelf. I check my voice message. It’s young Kiley. “You were right,” she says. Another girl giggles in the background. The three people in the room behind me laugh. “It’s some off-brand battery, Power-Lux, Power-Sux? We’ll replace it tomorrow. Your apartment’s fine. Temporary apartment, I mean, cos hey! I guess you two are family now!”