# PAT AND THE PORHYROBLASTS

The first time Pat stripped Jack she gagged, but she was too far gone to go back.

His body was covered in tumours. When he was dressed, they hid under the carefully tailored lines of his clothing, tweed and starched shirts buttoned to the throat; undressed, they blurred the edges of his silhouette everywhere but hands and face. There were dozens of them, clustered at random like the eggs of a large, fecund amphibian.

"Is anything the matter?" he said. His voice, six feet above her, sounded small. Pat wondered how many other women had excused themselves at this moment, like John Ruskin running at the sight of his wife's pubic hair. How Ruskin's wife must have felt — abandoned on her wedding night, small, alone and hairy.

One tumour hung halfway over the waistband of Jack's pants like decolletage over a bustier. Pat grazed it tentatively with the tips of her fingers; smooth and hairless, it seemed to tense at her touch. There was something hard, a pebble-like composite, beneath the blanketing layer of fat. She found she could move it half a centimetre from its hidden tethers under his skin.

Pat lowered the waistband just enough to reveal the full tumour, round and taut. In rearranging the pants she brushed her hands against the shapes beneath the cotton, the soft mounds of the tumours and his hardening penis at their centre. Desire rose in her throat like bile.

She pulled Jack's pants to his ankles and he stepped out of them, stood before her glorious as the many-breasted Lady of Ephesus, nourishing mother of all. His broad chest, undulating with tumours, was downed in pale hair like moss on the hilly lava fields of the south. "I will not forget this," Pat promised herself, and kissed the tumours on his thighs, the tumours on his pelvis, the tumescent genitals wreathed among them.

She never wanted to forget anyone. It just happened. She forgot names, dates, addresses; even the faces of people she'd worked with for years. In the Intro to Geology course she taught at a small university in Indiana, she would call it a conflict of time scale. She was used to the pace of the earth, even the breakneck pace on Iceland, the rocky afterbirth of the earth's womb. Here above the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the ground

splits to bleed new molten crust, geologic time moves on a relatively human scale: Pat had seen volcanoes that erupted as cyclically as she bled, an entire offshore island younger than her father.

Pat could keep up with all of this, but people were faster still. Their faces were a swirl, with none of the distinctive markers she could read in the thin layers of basalt. She was occasionally approached on the street by strangers who knew her name. She saw nothing in their faces but their own insistent recognition.

On her trips from her research station to the city, where she compared her measurements to the ones recorded at the university, she stared at the faces of strangers to find the small differences between them — an especially difficult exercise on this genetic bottleneck of an island. She had used a similar technique to train herself to tell apart similar minerals: pyroxene from hornblende, olivine from serpentinite. She was exercising at the Hlemmur bus terminal, waiting for the driver to finish his smoke break and let her onto the bus, when she first saw Jack.

"Farðu í Strætó" said an ad on the side of the bus, above a photograph of a bearded man in tweed leaning against a stanchion. In front of the bus, a bearded man in tweed read a small book. Pat looked from bearded man to bearded man. The man in the photograph was slightly thinner, maybe; and younger, with the lines smoothed out.

"Yes, that's me," said the man in front of the bus, who had looked up from his small book. "No need to stare."

"I'm sorry," said Pat. "Are you a model?" He was old for a model, but maybe his face was enough, all line and shadow.

He laughed, one beard-muffled puff. "No," he said. "A friend of mine at the ad company needed someone in a pinch. Elegant professorial type."

"Oh, you're a professor as well?" Pat was technically only a lecturer, and would continue to be at least until she finished her eternal Iceland project, but she thought of this as a matter of semantics.

"I'm a poet, among other things. I'm having a reading at seven tonight at Rauða Húsið." He took a card from inside the cover of his small book and handed it to her. "You can come if you'd like."

She looked at the card. Jack Tweddles: poet and critic. It was not an Icelandic name, so he was a foreigner, too.

The driver finished his break and turned the destination display back on. Pat was disappointed to find that it was not the bus that went to the university after all. It was Jack's bus, though. "Hope to see you there," he called before boarding. He chose a seat that placed him directly above his own photographed face. Behind the salt-smeared glass he looked almost as young and smooth as the airbrushed version of himself.

Pat walked the two miles to the university instead of waiting for the next bus. Her strike and dips were all in order this time. She would be able to return to Indiana on Monday as planned. There was no reason not to attend the reading.

Rauða Húsið was a cafe on a side street near Hallgrímskirkja that Pat had noticed but never visited; it was usually closed when she walked by in the evenings. On the night of the reading, though, it was full to brimming, red light from the stage leaking onto the street. Most of the tables had been pushed against the walls to make room for rows of folding chairs, but a few two-tops at the back of the room were still accessible. Pat found a seat at one of them. There was a beer bottle on the table with a hoppy scum at the bottom. She wrapped the fingers of one hand around it to look more like she belonged there.

"Do you know Jack?" said a woman at the next table, with blond bangs the color and needlike texture of acicular gypsum.

The man sitting next to her, his face cleaved as square as galena, answered before Pat could. "Of course she knows Jack," he said. "Everyone knows Jack."

She would not have known Jack, though, when he walked onto the small stage minutes later. In the light his hair looked oxidized-red instead of the indeterminate brown it had been at the bus stop. He had also swapped his tweed for a floor-length cloak, like something a Gogol character would have longed for, but fringed in purple feathers instead of fur. She would not have known him except that it wouldn't have made sense for anyone else to be on stage. It helped, too, that the audience cheered in recognition; after the claps, someone called, "On with it, Jack!"

So Jack got on with it. Pat had studied some literature and art history in school along with rocks, but she didn't know what to make of Jack's poetry. She wasn't sure if it was any good, and much of it was in Icelandic — poorly-pronounced, she surmised from the crowd's heckling.

They were trying to teach him how to pronounce Eyjafjallajökull, a well-known volcano he mentioned in a poem that might have been about puberty. Dozens of voices yelled the syllables out of time, blending into something like a Viking chant in perpetual canon. Pat was familiar with the volcano; she had been there to read the traces of past eruptions, one every century as if set off by a slowly-swinging pendulum.

"You, there," he said. "Madame Professor."

Pat had been thinking about the ash of the volcano's 1821 eruption, which she had seen spread inches below the dark soil of Reykjanes like the apricot jam in a Sachertorte. It took her a moment to realise he was speaking to her. She was amazed that he could remember

her face and her professor fib, much less recognise her in the dark and crowded room.

"How would you say it?"

In the stage light the crowd's pale eyes looked as red as lab rabbits'. Pat knew they could tell that she was not Icelandic; her face was the brownest in the room. "Eyjafjallajökull," she said, the way she had heard the geologists at the university say it.

The audience cheered. "That's it," said someone, though she knew her colour had given her some shades of leeway. A few others repeated the word correctly. Jack went on with his poems.

After the reading, half the audience trickled out the door and the rest gathered around Jack with the easy intimacy of people who are used to touching, who perhaps have sexual partners in common. When the last had paid their homage, Jack took off the feather stole and stood on the cafe floor in his shirtsleeves. He had left his tweed coat on a rack near Pat's corner.

"Hello," Jack said to Pat when he noticed her. "Sorry for calling you out like that." The red stage lights had been turned off; without them, he had the dull lustre of clay that has been pressed in a damp hand, his hair flat and colourless. He smiled with a shyness she hadn't noticed at the bus stop. "I get very nervous up there. I do silly things."

"You didn't seem nervous," said Pat. There was something beguiling about the way he struggled to make eye contact, flashing glances at her only at the ends of phrases. It made her want to look at him.

"That's what the feathers are for," said Jack. "It covers up all the jitters. Like a stage persona I can take on and off."

"Is that coat a persona, too?" said Pat, pointing to the tweed on the rack.

Jack looked down at his starched shirt and started, like a girl who has been made aware of her bra strap. He collected his tweed, which was so perfectly cut that it seemed to snap into place as he pulled it over his body. Fully dressed, even his hair looked more voluminous; maybe it was the static in the wool. "Well, then," he said, adjusting his collar, "shall we go?"

They stood outside on the street. The audience had all gone. Pat waited for him to ask her out for drinks, or for dinner. She would do it if he didn't, but then she'd have to think of somewhere to lead him in this unfamiliar city.

"If you're not doing anything, you could come home with me," he said at last. "My flat is nearby."

This was much better. She could only really manage people who were straightforward.

Jack lived in a small flat, one of three in a yellow rowhouse in the shadow of Hallgrímskirkja. He betrayed his foreignness in his choice of decorations: his home looked like a storybook picture of Iceland. Bobbin-lace flounces hung above the summer blackout shades on his windows, and rows of troll dolls lined the sills underneath. Many fussy wool things — embroidered throw pillows, a granny-square quilt, an Àlafoss blanket printed with fat ponies — covered the bed that they fell into after she recovered from the first shock of his nakedness. As Jack wrapped himself around her his tumours yielded like down in pillows, adapting themselves to her shape. She found a warm soft place beneath all the layers.

In the intervals that separated the cycles of climax and fall they spoke of themselves. If they had had this conversation over drinks, more posturing would have been necessary, more fiddling with napkins and glasses. She learned that he was born in Manchester, then spent a childhood longing to be anywhere else. That his posh accent was mostly a pose. She learned it was advertising copy, not poetry, that paid the rent of this lace-hung house. She shared enough of herself, long stories and small unpleasant details, that she felt justified in asking about the tumours.

"What are these?" she said, running her finger over a tumour on his chest. Now that she was used to them, they reminded her of porphyroblasts, fat crystals that erupt in mud as it transforms over eons into rock.

"Lipomatous tissue," he recited.

"What's inside," she said, thinking through vaguely-remembered biology terms that lacked the alchemic poetry of her chosen science. "Fat?"

"I can show you," he said. He took down a mason jar from the shelf above the bed. Inside, an ovoid mass floated in amber fluid. In the light that leaked through the seams of the blackout shades, the mass glowed the colour of sunbeams through eyelids.

"This is the first one I ever got," he said fondly. "As soon as they cut it out all the rest started to grow. They were going to go after the rest, but I stopped them. They're benign, after all. They don't want to hurt me."

The tumour in its jar resembled nothing more than a raw egg she once soaked in vinegar, a school project to demonstrate a biology concept she couldn't remember. The shell dissolved, but the egg stayed intact, held together by some transparent membrane. It had looked so ethereal, so irresistibly fragile, that she had not been able to keep herself from prodding the membrane with a pencil until an orange cloud of yolk spilled into the glass.

Pat gave the jar one cautious jostle. The tumour bounced gently, delightfully, almost but not quite floating in the fluid. She felt a small synchronous bounce somewhere behind her pelvis. "Wow," she said, handing it back to him.

Jack reached up one long porphyroblastic arm to place the jar back on the shelf, the tumours bulging tightly against his skin. The bounce in Pat's abdomen had become the dull heavy thud of desire. She kissed a tumour near the crook of Jack's elbow and pulled him in again.

In the morning she watched Jack dress for work. Layer by layer, like a sedimentary structure, his soft bulbous body metamorphosed into the tweed man on the bus. "What will you do today?" he asked, after another kiss that had tugged them back into the warm rumpled blankets.

"Same as you," she said. "Work."

When she left his flat, though, she headed not for the university but for the beach behind it, where a concrete trough of geothermal water had been installed in the sand. A swim in the blood-slowing North Atlantic did not clear her head; nor did sitting in the sulfurous hot pot until she smelled like she had been boiled with old eggs. She was dreading the long budget-liner flight back to Indiana the next day. She was not the type to get attached to the places she studied, much less the humans scattered across the rock like leaf litter, but she sometimes found herself feeling melancholy when she left Iceland.

In the changing room she saw Jack had sent her some long messages. They were the usual things: a wonderful evening, would like to see you again. Pat put her phone into her bag without responding. There was no point; her flight was so early in the morning that even another night together would be impossible.

She occupied herself with busy work in the university until the sun reached the oblique angle that passes for night in the Icelandic summer, then said goodbye to the library staffers. She had already packed up the dorm room the university allowed her and sent everything but an overnight bag back to Indiana. There was nothing to do but sit on her hands and stare at the messages from Jack.

She decided to walk into town to buy some salt licorice for her department head, who had developed an addiction on her own visits. When she reached the downtown, though, she turned towards Hallgrímskirkja instead of the 24-hour supermarket. Jack had written his phone number in her contacts, but not his address; maybe he had underestimated her ability to forget.

She walked between the rows of colored houses that emanated from Hallgrímskirkja like spokes, trying to find an angle on the church that matched what she had seen leaving his flat that morning. Surely she

had looked at a door plate or a street sign at some point while she was there. She wound through her memories as precisely as she could, but it only made her feel worse. The images of his embroidered pillows, his rows of trolls, his soft lipomatous body would be gone in weeks, covered up by strike and dip measurements and stress and strain calculations and the mineral compositions of porphyroclasts.

"Hello there," said Jack.

Pat started so violently on the metal bench where she had paused that she banged one of her hands against the armrest. "Jack," she said. She knew right away that it was him.

"Don't be so surprised," he said cheerfully. "We've just had a 'Reykjavík Moment.' Happens all the time — you can't outrun your past in this town."

He had been heading to the bar on the corner to see some friends but messaged them an excuse. On the walk back to his flat with Pat, he told her stories of people who had to abandon their favourite cafes just to avoid their exes in this village of a city. Pat didn't tell him about the geometry she'd done to place herself in his path.

First nights, good or bad, are always a performance, an audition for the role of lover. Now that they had passed they could be less urgent. Jack wore many layers of undergarments, like an eighteenth-century gentleman: tight undershirts, long underwear and thermal vests that pushed his body into a less nebulous shape. Pat peeled them away gradually, watching his flesh rebound. He had an exaggerated, feminine response to her touch — moans and flinches — which she liked.

They had not slept the night before, so she didn't blame Jack for starting to snore. She wormed herself from under his heavy limbs and kneeled to look at the shelf above his bed. Single men, Pat had noticed, tended to have what she thought of as a "taste shelf" somewhere in view of the bed: a curated selection of books and artifacts for overnight visitors to judge them by. Often they kept the things they actually read elsewhere. Jack's shelf was on-brand: there were slim poetry chapbooks, critically acclaimed Icelandic novels in translation, a peacock feather in an antique glass bottle. She wondered why he had put his preserved tumour there. In the jar, the tumour shook almost imperceptibly, perhaps from the residual vibrations of their lovemaking.

In one careful, noiseless movement, Pat lifted the jar from the shelf. It fit into her hands as if molded for them. The desire she felt for the thing behind the glass was like a desire for someone who has gone far away. Deep desire was always coloured with sadness for Pat. Before she could question herself, she picked up her thermal tights from the floor

and stuffed the jar into one of the legs, then hid the padded package in her bag.

Jack didn't stir until she nestled herself back into the ballpit of his body. "I've got to go," she said into his chest.

He sighed and brought his arms tighter around her. "Can't you stay?"

"It's already morning," Pat said. "I have to catch my flight."

"You didn't tell me you were leaving."

"I'm not from here. It's not like I'd stay." She was pulling on all the clothes she had scattered across his floor, everything but her tights. "Anyway, it was nice meeting you."

"Wait," he said, "let me walk you to the Flybus, at least."

In fact, her flight wouldn't be leaving for several hours, but because he put on all his layers for her she couldn't refuse his offer to walk the half mile to the bus terminal. They walked close enough that their fingers grazed occasionally, but they did not hold hands. Pat's other hand was clutched around her bag.

A Flybus to the airport was already waiting when they arrived. "Well, see you," said Pat.

"Don't forget about me, won't you?" said Jack. "Remember a little bit of me, at least."

"I won't," said Pat, and mounted the bus.

Pat spent most of the time before her flight in the airport food court, drinking citron-flavoured mineral water and stealing glances in her bag. The tumour looked safe and warm in its thermal sheath. She remembered stories of aunts and uncles who had smuggled mangoes through airports by wrapping them in dirty clothes; maybe this would work the same.

When she tried to send her bag through the x-ray machine, though, the formaldehyde in the jar set off the sensor. "Can't have liquids over one hundred milliliters," the agent said. "Rubbish is over there."

The rubbish bin was cluttered with juice bottles, toothpaste tubes, and unopened cans of cod roe. The thought of adding Jack's tumour to the pile made her sick. She unscrewed the lid and poured out the fluid in a smooth yellow stream.

The tumour had marinated so long that the gas that escaped from its jar smelled more of flesh than formaldehyde — the olfactory fingerprint of the body it came from. The bacterial strains that lived in his crevices had found room to multiply in the fluid despite its antiseptic qualities. Earth and onion, truffle and cream diffused into the security hall, like the sweat-thick air of their first lovemaking. There was another, more acidic note she associated with her own body, something like white

wine or rising dough. She was not sure if this came from the jar or if the scent of her former lover had set off a Pavlovian response in her own glands.

She was allowed to board her flight with the drained tumour. When they reached a certain altitude, she sensed a slight lightening in the jar. She pulled away the tights; in the dry pressurised air, the tumour was shrivelling like a scrotum in the cold. Heart quickening in protective panic, she flagged down the flight attendant.

"Ginger ale, please," she said, because it was closest in colour to the jar's original contents. "No ice."

The contents of the standard-issue cup, even without ice, barely reached halfway up the side of the tumour. She asked for another cup from another flight attendant, and a third from the third. By then the tumour was submerged, but she asked for one more cup from the first flight attendant to be safe. Visibly irritated, the attendant gave her an unopened, room-temperature can, which filled the jar nearly to the brim. The tumour's wrinkles smoothed away as it rehydrated. In the light turbulence it bounced with its old healthy heft.

She thought she was in the clear after the plane landed and she passed through passport control without incident. Perhaps she looked too eager, though; she was chosen for a random luggage search at the customs desk.

The customs officer removed her tights from the jar with methodological nonchalance. "Do you have a proof of origin for this preserved meat product?" he said, when the tumour revealed itself.

She considered how she would explain the tumour's origin to the officer. Should she start at the bus stop, or at the Rauða Húsið? Or should she tell him how old he was when the first tumour erupted on his body? Had he told her that? She couldn't remember. He had told her many things. The details were already dissolving from her mind like calcite in acid.

"The documents should be right here," she said, taking the jar from the officer's desk. Before he had time to react, she unscrewed the lid and drank the contents in three swift swallows. The tumour slid down her throat like an oyster, ginger-flavoured and faintly mineral.

The officer rolled his eyes at her. "Like the Filipinos and their mangoes," he said to his partner.

Pat was never very good at biology, but she thought there might be something contagious about lipomas. Maybe Jack's tumour would spread through her bloodstream until it burst from her skin all over, like garnets in schist deep below the surface. She would rub her smooth skin and wait.