

No Small Thing

James pours another glass of wine and starts telling a story. This one's from back when he worked as a mover. He'd lift taped boxes full of tchotchkes and junk into the back of the company truck before a family's entire life was taken somewhere new.

It's James, Ruth, and Patrick there at the little table. Today is Patrick's birthday. He told me all he wanted tonight was a meal. I'm at the counter, cooking.

The food isn't special, just breaded chicken and salad in a big bowl. Ruth made mashed potatoes. James bought a small cake after work. But we're all together, and we're celebrating something, so it is special, really. It is.

James says, "And this is around the time when they started letting *me* drive the truck some days. Me! I thought maybe they shouldn't've trusted me. I was only nineteen, but hell, I didn't give a shit either way."

The story meanders. When he talks he throws his hands around haphazardly, gesturing at random. He devotes part of it to a long profile of the boss, who they called "The Smooch."

James goes, "He was the most unfortunate looking guy I ever saw. But he was the fuckin *man*."

He talks about the houses he's seen, the critters he's stumbled upon in the dirty ones. He tells us about nice couples who'd buy him lunches after a day's hard work. He got fired eventually, he says, which is a whole different story, but we know that one already. We've heard it a million times.

I look away from the counter and back at the table. They're packed in so close their elbows almost touch. The chairs don't match and the tablecloth is thin. Looking at them, I think sappy thoughts like *these are my people* or something like that.

I'm standing over at Mom's old cutting board. She had a lot of them, all for their own designated purposes. When she died last year I took all of them. I don't know why I wanted them so bad, but I did. Now they're all here in our Philadelphia apartment, stowed away under the oven.

This board is for chicken. I'm punching down chicken breasts hard to make them flat. The fatter part would come out raw if you missed this step. I'm giving this chicken hell.

Then James reaches his story's big twist, when he realizes this was a day that he was supposed to drive. He goes, "And this was an issue, right, because this was also a day I decided to get *high* before work."

They all laugh and Patrick does that thing I like where he covers his eyes when something is funny. They talk about when we used to like getting high.

"Too old for that now," Ruth says. "Now it just scares the hell out of me."

Then they talk about the things they're scared of. James never finishes his story.

For a moment they're silent. All you can hear is music playing softly through Ruth's Bluetooth and the sound of fists on raw chicken.

James goes, "And it looks like Sarah's afraid of knives, because seriously, why isn't she just cutting it? Can't you just cut it? The long way?"

Ruth goes, "Sarah's beating the shit out of our dinner."

I lift my elbow and tap it twice like a pro-wrestler and drop it down. When my elbow lands it slides off the chicken and hits the cutting board hard.

Patrick stands from his seat and grabs a knife from the drawer and puts it in my hand.

"Right," I say. "Much easier."

Patrick touches the low part of my back while I cut, and even though I only feel his hand I see it too: long-fingered, constantly in motion, dryskinned, and I remember now the first time I felt him touch me this way, a decade ago at Ruth's grandma's lakehouse, when he helped me with the sunscreen on my back.

He'd been watching me reach around awkwardly, trying to do it myself out on the dock, so he stood, and offered help. I let him. I liked this. I remember thinking *this is nice*. It was nice the way he wasn't rushing through it, and it was nice the way he wasn't being sensual. He didn't think of this as flirting, he was just giving a friend a hand. James and Ruth and Ruth's friend Emily started giggling and then Patrick and I giggled too. It was more silly than romantic, which to me felt romantic.

I was self-conscious about everything then. The red one-piece bathing suit I was wearing, how drunk I got the night before when we breached the liquor cabinet, the greasiness of my hair. But Patrick wasn't. He's a person forever unembarrassed. Late that very night, I told him I liked him. Really, really liked him.

I recall this to Patrick now. He smiles and touches my nose.

He says, "I think that was a different night. I think I told you first, actually."

For a while, it's just like this. Patrick sits on the counter while we talk, trying to remember. James and Ruth play cards idly, getting steadily drunker.

When we sit down to eat, it feels important, like maybe we should be dressed up, or maybe someone will make a toast. But we don't do this. We wouldn't be able to be serious.

Our glasses clink. "Happy birthday, Patrick," I say. "I love you." James and Ruth say, "Happy birthday." The steam from the food rises and I'm not thinking about my mother. We know James won't get so drunk that he gets angry like he used to. We're not thinking about

the time Ruth took those pills when she was seventeen and tried to die. Patrick looks at me with a look that says he forgives me for yesterday afternoon's fight. We're together tonight in our cramped kitchen, and everything seems to glow, and it's no small thing at all.