

SWERVE
(A Novel Divergence)

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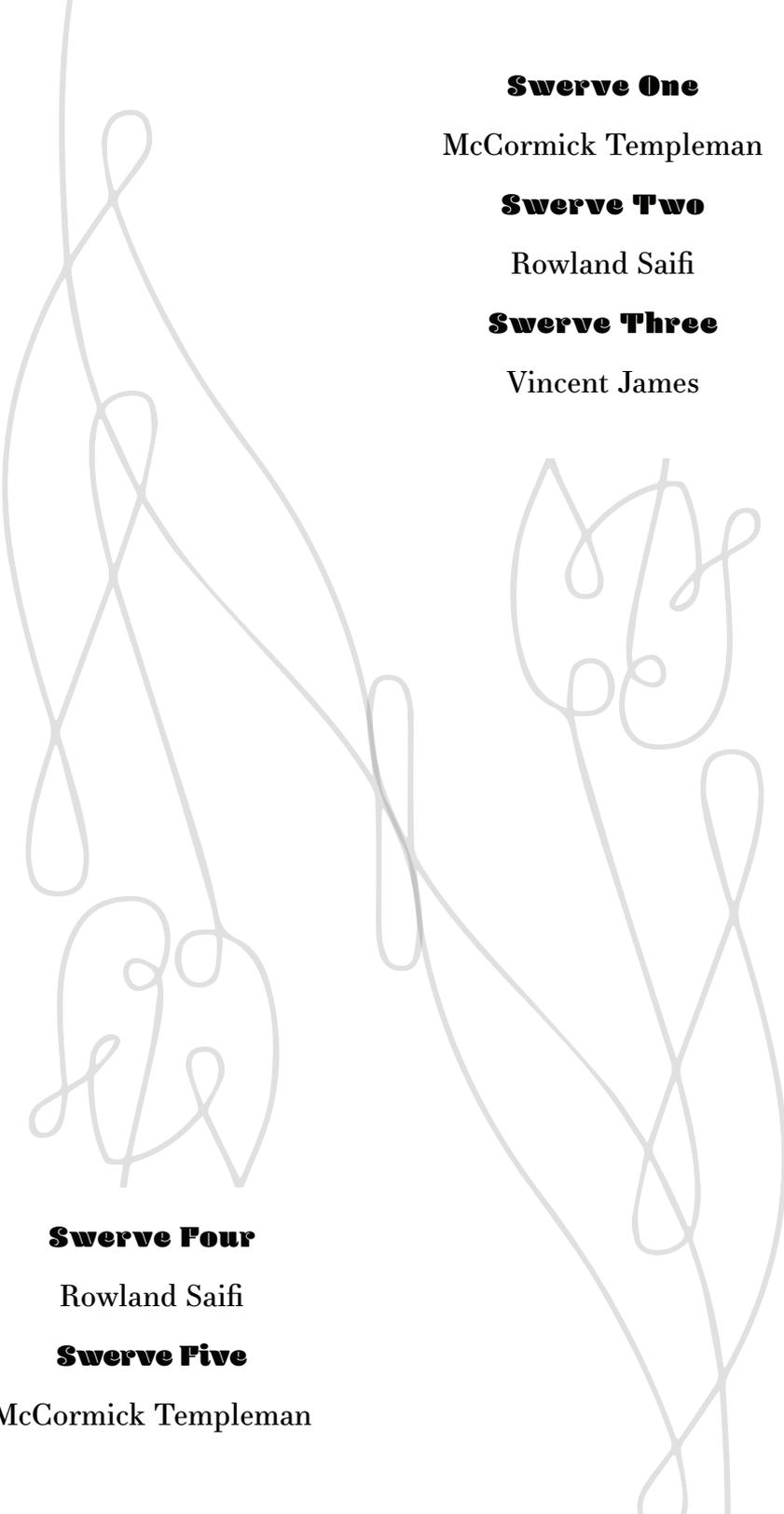
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Swerve One

McCormick Templeman

Swerve Two

Rowland Saifi

Swerve Three

Vincent James

Swerve Four

Rowland Saifi

Swerve Five

McCormick Templeman

SWERVE ONE

I

It's **SUNDAY NIGHT WHEN THELMA CALLS**. The Tower needs me in Philadelphia. A new case. They want me to head out tonight. Trouble is, out on the deck of my vacation rental I have a woman in a dress the color and shape of a spring tulip. She's looking for her sister, Fauve. I'm not sure what to make of her. Says this sister went missing or not missing, or might go missing at some point in the very near future. I tell Thelma to tell the higher-ups at The Tower that I'm in the middle of something too big to drop, but I'll take the train to Philly as soon as I'm finished here. Then I head back out and hand a beer to the tulip-dress girl.

Libations, she says, and we clink bottles.

You know, I say, if you look into the sunset at just the right moment, you'll see a green flash. Try it, I say. Her pupils, fixed and dilated, traverse the curves of a mountain descending to slope, masculine lines slipping quick-fingered over chaparral-smoked foothills. She shifts to see what I mean, but finds only thick shrubs and a tree-lined vista extending into the horizon. To the right, I say, and out toward the sea.

Beacons incandesce in the unflagging glimmer of Low-fi summer.

None of it is true, of course, but it gets me thinking, reminding me of a time when there really was an ocean there. When the sea, composed and purple, was a thing expecting to proceed unobstructed.

Green flashes? says the woman, her spider lashes fanning out from irises circumscribed by limbal gloom. What, she wants to know, does any of this have to do with her missing sister? She lights her cigarette and glares—a clean, steady kind of glare, like a cat's tail flicking in anger.

The phone rings again and I know it's Thelma calling me back. I let it go on ringing and focus my attention on my guest. Would you believe me, I say, if I told you this isn't the first I've heard of your sister? When she shakes her head no, I ask her if she's ever met The Woman of the Spring. Negative again. I light another cigarette.

You see, I say, The Woman of the Spring named her daughters after water: Aquifer, Bayou, Caspia, and Po. She'd gathered them up in early infancy from women who'd never meant to have them, these bright tufts of seafoam brought forth on an eager tide. And this was a long time ago, you gotta remember, when a woman's only other option was the nuns up on the hill with their baroque wimples and their sobriquets. (The Woman of the Spring did not care for the nuns on the hill, as one might presume.)

So the young mothers came to The Woman of the Spring, and they left their babes swaddled and mewling. Girls only, she'd requested, but a person would need a very hard heart indeed to turn away a helpless child because he didn't look right in a mermaid suit.

That's how they got Dale and Guy and Peter. There were two others as well, but their mothers came and collected them back one day. The Woman of the Spring didn't like to discuss that, though, and the girls knew better than to mention it. The same thing happened with little Shellby and Monsoon, the youngest, and most gifted of the mermaid sisters. The day Shellby left was the day The Woman of the Spring closed her doors. No new children. No new mermaids. The great red-blue spring of her heart had clamped shut. Valve sealed. Closed for business.

Danube was the new girl. Of course her name wasn't Danube at first. It was something else, something like Amy or Cecily or Jane. She wore a lilac dress that day when she sat in the parlor, the mermaid girls circling her like lions. They'd found her in there, and curious, they'd gone to inspect. Why are you here? demanded Aquifer who, at eighteen, was the oldest and most imperious. But Danube said nothing,

only clenched her hands tightly together. Are you feeling shy? asked Caspia, the most beautiful of the mermaids who suffered from secret intractable ailments.

But still Danube did not speak.

I think she doesn't know how, said Po who was secretly thinking about how pretty the girl's lips were and how much she would like to kiss them. And really she was hoping that this mystery girl wouldn't be inducted into the family because, with that figure and those lips, things might prove awkward.

Bayou said nothing. Her heart wasn't in the lion-stalking, and she only followed her sisters' practiced moves, the earthly version of the underwater ring they made each night in their review: *The Madri-Gals Underwater Extravaganza! See 'em before they swim away!* Bayou was thinking about how Po had told her she'd seen something in town the other day. Something she couldn't explain. It had to do with Aquifer.

No more mermaids! shouts Tulip-dress, interrupting my story before it can even get going. I'm tired of hearing about mermaids! It's time for you to listen to my story. She leans back in her deck chair and gazes out toward the eucalyptus trees that line the far edge of the property. Stubbing out her cigarette on the wooden railing, she flicks her chin toward that arboreal militia. Is there someone out there? Out there moving through the trees?

Oh yes. There often is. If she'd let me finish, she'd see how her sister figures in, but she's no longer interested.

She taps her foot lightly against the wood of the deck and begins her tale. Once there was a king and a queen. They were very much in love. Every day he would fetch her special bark from the woods, shaved into paper-fine strips of reddish-brown which he would decoct with cinnamon and dried orange peels for her tea. It was the only thing she desired, and he made sure she had it no matter the weather.

She stops and looks up at me, then flinches at the sound of a bird's call somewhere out in the trees. It's getting on night, she says, and I have to remind her about her story. Where did I leave off? she asks, twisting her cigarette so the cherry light expands and blooms, then dies away.

Around us, dusk sweeps in.

One day, she said, when the king was preoccupied with a rising war in the east, the bark slipped his mind. And that night, when he went to visit his lady in her chambers, when he held her close, when he kissed her lips, when he lifted her skirts, do you know what he found?

I shake my head, and keep my eye trained on those trees all lined up like soldiers. Movement, she says. Torsion. Millions of spindly little legs. And as he tore the garments aside, he found that was all she was: swollen sickness and infiltration. Bot flies and worms. That's all she was. She was never anything else.

I don't understand, I say, and she looks at me like I'm an idiot. Don't you see? She tilts her head. Don't you see? She was never anything else. Under all that silk and tulle, beneath the artifice, there was only ever rot. There was only ever decay. He'd kept it at bay all those years with the cinnamon bark because he didn't want to see. He'd covered it up with baubles and jewels, but one slip, one distraction, one little old war to the east, and the truth reared up and kicked him in the face.

She exhales a wobbly ring of smoke. Beneath it all, she says, sometimes there's nothing but worms.

I shake my head. I'm sorry, but does this story have a point?

It has a point, she says. The point is find my fucking sister.

II

I'M STILL OUTSIDE WITH THE SPIDER-LASHED TULIP woman when the phone rings. Thelma again. It's time to go. I leave Tulip-dress sitting on the deck and head to a bar at the center of town.

Inside the bar, a dog's footprints constellate the dusty floor, but there is no dog in sight. My contact sits on a stool nursing a Guinness. His name is Ermine like the fur, or the animal from which it sprouts. He has with him a leather-bound case, the kind that should contain money, but which instead holds a number of silver bells.

This wasn't what we agreed upon, these bells, but I'm concerned that if I point that out, I will offend him, and Ermine is not the kind of man one wants to offend. Contrarily, a conglomeration of tumescent muscles writhing beneath a cotton tee shirt in vaguely rodent-shaped formations, he is the type of man one wants on one's side or, at the very least, absent from the scene.

Thelma said you needed one of these, he says. Which would you like? Which prosthesis?

I nod along trying to quickly sketch out a hypothesis of this presumed nomenclature. Prosthesis, yes, I think, my mind forming a quick, though admittedly tenuous link from the Greek *pros* and *tithenal*: adding and placing, respectively, through to the idea of the bell which, perhaps (pictographically) one could imagine as a kind of lengthening of the arm through which one might eventually attain the potential to reach the divine. I sip my whiskey and nod, the philological connection fading almost as quickly as it formed.

When I ask about price, he shakes his head. On the house.

I find myself curiously drawn to the bell in the exact center of the case. Its aura is distinctly divergent, possessing a pinkness that I can

only describe as primordial. When I reach out to touch it, Ermine flinches. The tendons in his arm extend and contract, slipping willy-nilly up toward those undulating biceps.

The mark is in SF, says Ermine. You're to meet him at Café Trieste. That's where you'll do the hand-off. No later than Saturday.

I nod. I have business in Philly, but I can get to SF by Saturday no problem, I say. He trusts me already. Thinks I'm a lawyer. Thinks I'm his friend.

Ermine nods and slams the case shut before I can touch any more of the bells.

III

THELMA GETS ME A BUSINESS CLASS TRAIN TICKET to Philly and I arrive mid-morning in a daze. The Tower has business for me there, and when the Tower says jump, I say go fuck yourselves. Then I do whatever they ask because they're the Tower. Usually I only work one case at a time, but right now I'm staring down the barrel of three. I've got the Tower gig in Philly, the Café Trieste job in San Fran, and now the freelance number finding Tulip-dress's sister. I'm a sucker for doe eyes and a sob story. After this batch I'm going to need a vacation.

As I exit the train, I notice I've spilled some mystery liquid all down the front of my shirt, and though I don't remember doing it, I do remember the family across the aisle from me giving me odd looks, a parent's protective arm shooting out to stop a little one from approaching me.

In the station, a gaggle of kids in black knit bonnets sits lined up on a bench. I stop to talk to one of them, but when he opens his mouth to speak, it forms a little circle, and the words come out in an impossible hiss. The girl beside him puts a hand on his knee and looking up at me, she shakes her head.

That's not a good idea, she says, and then with a flick of her wrist in the direction of the exit sign, she says run along now. That's a good boy.

I notice she has a beauty mark in the shape of a heart at the center of her palm. Beside it, a finely demarcated X. Overcome by a strange compulsion like a chorus of whispering angels pulling me onward, I nearly reach out to touch that X. But then a woman in a wimple arrives and gives me a look.

I'm sorry, I say, taking a step away from the child. Are they your students? Are they orphans?

The woman glares at me and the light changes, cloud cover shifting through the train station windows, and in this new light, I see that she is no more wearing a wimple than I am, but rather a ruffled white turtleneck. When I look back there are only two children, neither of whom wears a bonnet. The whispering boy plays with a hand-held game system, and the girl wears a shirt depicting an anthropomorphic waterfall wearing sunglasses. *Too Cool*, the waterfall says. The girl grins big enough that I see her incisors, and then calmly, coolly, she gives me the middle finger.

On Market Street, I dip into an alley, taking the back way to the apartment in question. An old school chum of someone high up at the Tower has gone missing.

Halfway down a side alley, I locate the back door. It's ajar. I climb three dimly-lit flights of concrete steps up to the apartment, which I find unlocked. Inside, there is no furniture. Only books stacked throughout the living room in neat rows like biblio-skyscrapers. When I step into the room, I notice that the wood is slick, a thin layer of water flowing between the books. A kind of Venice. I walk the linoleum canals, touching the top of a stack now and then. The presence of such an astounding quantity of expertly arranged books intrigues me. In the kitchen, I notice that the cupboards are bare. In the bathroom there is neither toilet paper, nor medicine in the cabinet, though the dossier paints him as an enthusiastic, if ill-considering taker of both the benzodiazepines and the opioids.

In the closet hangs a piece of notepaper stuck through with the curved tip of a metal hanger. It reads:

DG: Went West.

After unhooking the note, I make my way back to the living room and stare at the rows of books. Starting at the near end I count four rows down (D being the fourth letter in the alphabet), and seven over (G being the seventh). I run a finger down along the

spines of the books in the pile until I locate Nathaniel West's *The Day of The Locust*. When I pull it from the stack and flip it open to the first page, I find a torn photograph. Taken at some kind of aquatic amusement park, it's a grainy snap of a bride and groom. On the back, in loopy pencil is written: Sal Giancana and Aquifer? Taken 1954?

I slip it into my pocket and make my way out of the apartment, and down the cracked and tilted tenement steps. Outside, I see a figure rounding the corner at the end of the alley.

Intent on following, I start down the alley but soon find myself distracted by a particularly spindly-legged spider. Determining him, perhaps ill-advisedly, to be a possible informant, I pace him as he skitters up over a drain pipe and then back down again, along the pock-marked wall and around a corner I'd not realized was a corner (due to an optical illusion, which I ought to describe in great detail at some later point), and into another, even smaller alley into which, because of my broad shoulders, I can only fit if I turned to my side. Deep into that crevasse, I kick-ball-change after Marvin the spider, whose name I, by this point, have intuited, until he comes to rest at the center of a graffiti symbol that in the darkness looks almost like blood spatter. I take out my phone and am trying to encourage it to act like a flashlight when I remember that the thing no longer works in most capacities, and hasn't since an unfortunate incident concerning a violently amorous squirrel and an uncovered pool in winter.

Fishing in my back pocket I locate the flashlight I keep for just such emergencies, and when I shine it on the symbol, I see a spiraling flower design drawn as if by a small child. In its center is written: for-keeps. After thanking Marvin for the hot tip, I squeeze myself back out onto the main alleyway only to find the man I've been following is now waiting for me. He stands with his arms out to the side as if waiting to be struck down by some act of God. When nothing happens, he looks at me with curiosity.

Up close, I see he wears a bent clerical collar, overly worn and grayish from careless washing. He's holding a coffee cup with lipstick marks around the rim.

Aquifer left, you know, says the priest. Left in the middle of the night. I'll be looking out West, he says. Taking the Greyhound. When he turns to go, I notice a long white thread trailing behind him. Upon closer inspection, I see it's a line of albino fire ants.

I call Thelma and tell her I'll be taking the bus instead of the train out to SF. I've got a priest to follow. The next morning, after eating a ham sandwich slopped with mayonnaise thick as glue, I buy a ticket and board the bus, careful to position myself some distance away from the priest. Beside me sits a man in a silver hat and Dickey's coveralls. He eats Slim Jims slowly, but with great alacrity. I think about asking him if I can have one, but instead I busy myself with a game of mental solitaire (I never let myself win), and stare out the window at the passing clouds, the sinking sun, the reds, the greens, the fields blipping past like rows of shotgun shells.

Exactly when we reach the halfway point of our journey, the man in the silver hat leans over and whispers: There are people watching you.

I know, I reply.

He nods and takes a bite of a Slim Jim. He says, I know about the Woman of the Spring too.

This surprises me so I pull out a notepad and pen. He extends his hand and I shake it. Name's Ros, he tells me. He sucks on his Slim Jim for a while and then nods, finally ready to begin.

I found her down among the rocks and the cedars, he says, his voice growing deeper, more resonant, almost like he's channeling some unseen orator. I found the curve of her breast illuminated by a swollen,