PORTERHOUSE, TEXAS
ONE

Are you sure you want it?

The light turns red, and all the walls look like blood being sprayed off the sidewalk. The thing about this car is I bought it off my best friend’s dad. It was her car. Two springs ago, Alex vanished. There was a flat tire and a cracked headlight, but it runs fine. Her dad said he didn’t want it anymore, couldn’t stand being reminded. He looked at me with this fatherly volatility like he might lecture me or cry violently. Instead, he took my 800 dollars and walked off without another word. Because yes, I did. I wanted it. What matters today: the car wash.

I hated the auto shop. Going there. All these thick-necked guys who spoke softly to me, and smirked when they thought I couldn’t see. Also, I’d just been to the polls, and I was wearing a sticker that said, “I Voted,” and felt they could tell how I’d voted, and it wasn’t how they’d voted. The world felt dangerous.

There’s a mechanical car wash behind the auto shop. I’m afraid of it. To be honest, I’m afraid of everything, even the car. What happens is this: the guys at the auto shop give you a code for a free wash. They think, maybe, they’ll have a better chance with you. They give it like a punch-line or a euphemism. They wink. They say, “Did you give her the code?” Obviously, that scares the shit out of me. They say, “It’s on us, sweetheart.”

The car wash gathers itself in jolts. A brick little box, painted white, but the paint is chipped, the conveyor rusted, and looks completely unsafe. A green light goes on and you enter. I pull the car into the shitty box, put the car in neutral.

I had a running gag with Alex. We’d pretend a guy named Edwin was after us. We’d be anywhere, at the mall, a movie theater, at school, and one of us would scream, “He’s behind you!” or “Run!” We’d feign being horrified. Back then we were basically children so everyone would stop to look. Two girls being followed is important, worthy of attention. Of course, there’d be no one. We would fall all over each other laughing.
Typically, the light goes from green to red. There’s nothing reassuring about it. It unsettles me particularly because I’m bad with machines. If a can opener could kill you, I’d probably figure out how and not because I want to know. It’s exhausting to keep imagining the different ways all I do wrong might someday kill me. Today the lights were taking an abnormally long time to change color. I got scared.

I left my driver’s side window down, and I couldn’t get it up again. The light turns red. The roller brush hits the windshield with a thump. You imagine the metal arm won’t ascend. You imagine it won’t roll over the roof gently. It always does. This time, it doesn’t. It hits the windshield with a crack, glass splinters. The lights in the car wash go out. Some water sprays the side of my face. The taste is soapy. I spit the suds in my palm, and I wonder why I spit. I’m holding my spit in my fist. The car moves in a crashing way.

The lights start strobing, and I see her. She’s there. Sitting in the passenger seat. Her yellow raincoat drips. Here’s the strangest thing. I’m thinking: Oh, right. That’s what Alex looks like. The truth is I never could remember what she looked like. Even when she was alive. Even when my bedroom walls were plastered with photographs of her, my phone filled with videos of us together. Instead I remembered a feeling. It kept me from seeing right. I had no idea, really, what she looked like to other people. I hoped she was not beautiful. Later, it became clear in the way people behaved when she was near that she must’ve been. The way my older brother lingered in my doorway when she would come over. My older brother Jason, a thirty-year-old Flat Earther who still lived at home. My older brother, who was obsessed with her. Such betrayal. I can’t explain. None of it matters, anyway. What matters is this: how her face is so familiar and vague. The car thrusts. She touches the base of my skull. “Nina,” she says, “It’s Edwin.” She looks straight ahead. “He’s behind you. Run.” Her smile seems too toothy and unreal. I am not convinced she ever existed at all.

Then, she’s gone. The lights come back on. I tell myself: It was a joke. It was always a joke.
Later on, my dog nudges an old piece of shit with her nose. I let her out, but it's raining so she won't go. I coax her with treats and kisses. She stands flat foot in the rain.

“He's behind you,” I say, “Run.” I bring her back inside. She shakes out in the hallway. I think nothing of it. Scrolling through my phone, Harrison texted. Some friends are going to Bidwell Ridge. They're holding a vigil. It's an anniversary of Alex. He wanted to know if I was going. I wasn't going to Bidwell Ridge, not ever. Besides, Alex's windshield got cracked at the carwash. I wasn't going anywhere, ever again, I guess.

I feel something itchy on my wet skin where the dog had shaken out her coat. In the bathroom, I lift my shirt, but nothing. The door is open, and my brother walks by. “Gross,” he says, “Put your shirt down.” His eyes hold on to my body too long. I want to kill him. I feel it again, his eyes and the itch. He disappears from the mirror. I shut the door. I take off my shirt, my bra. Take off my shorts, my underwear. Nothing. Naked, and my sternum bones jut the way I like. The dog starts whining somewhere in the house, far away.

I turn my back to the mirror. Even though my sternum bones jut, I have small rolls of back fat on either side of my body, below my shoulder blades. I contort around so the rolls are more pronounced. I grab the rolls with both hands. The itch intensifies. I can't see anything. Alex complained about something similar. An itch. An orb under her skin. I turn around and face the mirror. The dog is nearer to the bathroom now, starting to cry louder.

The itch starts in one place on my body and lands in another. I can't pinpoint it. I frantically take my left arm in my hand, smooshing my flesh, lifting my elbow, examining my armpit in the mirror. The dog is barking outside of the bathroom door.

“Hush,” I say. I take my right arm in my hand, lift the elbow, my armpit smooth and glistening with sweat. The dog is pacing outside the
door, barking, pawing, pushing her weight against it, wanting in.

“Be a good girl.” I lift my belly, there is my vagina in the mirror. I open my labia and nothing. The dog slams her body into the door, growling. “Knock it off!”

I pull my phone from my shorts pocket on the floor and search “What kind of itch poisons the skin?” The face of my phone bulges and pops. Out crawl hundreds of miniscule dots I recognize as blind, baby rats. In the mirror, my reflection is smiling at me, but I am not smiling. My reflection is dribbling gasoline out of the sides of her mouth. The knob of the bathroom shakes. The dog is silent.
THREE

No one living had known the dead. The cemetery was so old, it was empty. When we were sixteen-years-old, we’d skip school on Fridays and smoke weed under the giant oak tree. Alex and me.

Alex liked the cracked headstones and the warped bars on the wrought iron fence. She liked the stretch of green and giant trees between the access road and the feeder road. There wasn’t much else. Just a Dollar General on the corner. Mostly, Alex and I lay in the grass, passed a spliff back and forth, and made up stories about the dead.

Angela Bryan was our favorite. An orphan girl found in 1872, her headstone said, on Bidwell Ridge. The word “found” was fucking chilling. She was sixteen-years-old. Same as us. Her headstone seemed cheap, compared to the others, but there was an etching of a dog on it. Sometimes we’d leave weird objects propped against it: Cigarettes, snacks, wildflowers. Once Alex left her yellow raincoat by accident. When we returned, the items invariably vanished.

Edwin Grey’s plot was on the ridge, under an oak: Prime real estate. His marker was monumental. It had wings, and a really irate creature, perched on a square of stone. He and Linnea, a sister maybe, lived around the time Angela died.

“Not a sister,” Alex said. “A creature.”

Linnea’s stone said “Taken By The Beast.” It sat in the shadow of Edwin’s. She had no birthdate. Edwin’s inscription said: “And the Earth shall give birth to the dead.”

“Who was the beast?” Alex asked.

This was our game, and it was my turn to play. Alex sat next to the winged headstone and caressed it while I told my story.

“Edwin built the beast out of dead people,” I said. Like in *Frankenstein* because Alex thought that quote came from *Frankenstein*. She was wrong, but I played along. “Edwin tried to make a woman. He made
Linnea. She was his creature, not his sister. She was the beast. Linnea killed herself, in a way.

Linnea’s stone, like Angela’s, was crude and cheap. She died before Edwin. He must’ve spent all their money only on his own.

Alex nodded, “Edwin was a dick.” She leaned down and kissed the tip of the wing.

I told her about his shack, a charnel house, on Bidwell Ridge. Of course, he had a house house, too, where he lived like a good Christian, but he also had this shack, and that’s where he was one night in December of 1872, the night of a terrible snowstorm.

“In Southeast Texas?” Alex asked.

“It was otherworldly.”

Angela and her dog were looking for a place to sleep, while Edwin was finishing his first creature. Everything was violently white. Then there was a flickering in the distance. Deep in the woods, outside his shack, Edwin hurled human scraps into a bonfire. A log sparked and cracked. A girl stood on the far side of the fire. He liked her eyes. He stepped closer and said, “Child, you’ll die out here. Come inside.”

Alex sat with her back to the headstone. She hit the spliff. She looked worried. “Child,” she repeated. “What a creep.” She kept looking across the access road. I ignored her and started picking at my scalp. I got so nervous, I didn’t know what to do with my hands.

“Edwin had a knife,” I said. “He kept it in his waistband. He took two long strides and suddenly he’s standing at Angela’s side. He places his hand on her shoulder. She pulls back. He grabs her wrist. The dog barks. He had not noticed the dog. The dog paws at the air. It’s black lip curled up, teeth showing. Leaping, the dog’s teeth rip through his stockings and—”

Sometimes I threw shit like that in. Stockings. To see if Alex was listening. She wasn’t. She was lost across the street now on the feeder road. She didn’t even see the blood on my fingertips from picking my scalp.

“The dog basically tore the stockings off his legs,” I took a drag off the spliff. “And Edwin drove his knife into the dog’s neck and Angela ran off.” I said it to fuck with Alex. She hated it when dogs died. She hated it even more when their owners let them die. “Are you even listening, Alex?”
She nodded, yes, but I knew she was lying. Her face was pale, and her mouth hadn’t closed yet from her exhale.

“Alex, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, “keep going.”

I shrugged. I went on and on. The synopsis: Edwin made a mistake. His creature needed eyes. The corpses didn’t have eyes anymore. When you die, you know, the eyes are the first thing to go. Edwin took the dog inside. Here’s what matters: He gave Linnea the dog’s eyes. So, when Linnea came to life, she didn’t want to see Edwin, at all, she only wanted to see Angela.

“What does Edwin look like?” Alex asked.

“Dangerous,” I said, “in the most unoriginal way. Like Jason.”

I waited for Alex’s response, but instead she got out her phone and put it up to her face like she was taking a selfie, but she was actually taking a picture of the access road. She didn’t respond. Jason was not funny, and Alex laughed at his dumbass anyway. He wears cargo pants and Hawaiian print button-ups because he thinks the style is quirky. He writes the worst poetry because he read *The Count of Monte Cristo* one time and claims it “changed his language forever.” Don’t forget, I constantly remind Alex, his nickname from high school is Butt because his face looks like a pinched asshole when he smiles.

“There’s a man standing under the oak trees,” Alex said. “He’s grinning. He’s watching us and grinning.” She lowers her phone. Starts frantically scrolling through her pictures, examining the screen with intent.

Now she was fucking with me.

But I wasn’t going to play. I was annoyed. It was my turn, and she was trying to hijack my story. She hadn’t even listened, really. I stayed on my back. I watched the murmuration in the sky change direction. I re-lit the spliff and then changed my mind, squashing it out into the dirt, flicking it away from us. I said, “Oh, right. There he is,” and draped my arm dramatically over my eyes, letting out an even more dramatic cloud of smoke. I loved the drama of it all. It was getting a little dark and overcast. I propped myself up on an elbow.

She said, “You’re looking the wrong way entirely!” She cupped my face in her hands and turned my head. “Look, It’s Edwin.”

Her bit was strange, not funny. She and my brother deserved each other. Her delivery was poor, her vision unclear. This was unlike her.