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The Fifth Season

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"Do you remember when all the neighborhood kids had ringworm?" he asked me from his hospital bed, inviting me to imagine, I suppose, that the lesions corrupting his brain were a similar phenomenon. I said yes, but really only one kid in the neighborhood had had ringworm, and it wasn't even ringworm—it was impetigo. Or so I remember.

"Come lie in the bed with me," he said. He said it every time I went to visit him. There was a large window near his bed. Out the window I see gray—perhaps the roof of another building or it could be that the sky was gray every time I went there. The room was on the fourth floor. It was winter. In the beginning it was winter, and then at the end it was spring. But all I see is gray, very continuous, something to count on. I think there was another man in the room, near the door. There was another man, and then later there was not another man. He is gray as well, but shadowy, off to the side.

Marc pulled back the sheet and blanket and patted the space beside him. The bed was narrow, like all hospital beds, but I climbed into that space and lay on my back with my legs straight ahead of me, my arms pressed to my sides—it was what I could do. We would pretend we were still children; or we would slip into that late-eighties, early-nineties script that had enamored Hollywood and the American public: Philadelphia, Early Frost, Long Time Companion—gay man dying, loyal friends hold his hand to the dirty end. I felt under the sheets for his hand. There. Warm and muscular, surprisingly life driven. He was dying from the neck up, the rest of his body uncorrupted, muscled, blood fed. I looked ahead of me at the wall—there was something on the wall, a card or a painting, blue—and I held his hand.

His left eyelid was collapsing. An inelegant drooping into the corner as if gravity were exerting unfair pressure. At first the drooping had given him a lazy, sexy look, but now the skin cloaked more and more of his eye each time I went. His eyes were brown. I
didn't go often enough. The small bones inside both his ears were
closing in tightly to his eardrums. Nerves shut off, the auditory
system smothered. By the time he was admitted into San Francisco
General he was stone deaf, but he could read lips and we had a
clipboard we passed back and forth. Yellow paper with blue lines.

"Do you want some hot chocolate?" he whispered to me. We
had often on winter days as kids, after destroying the snow in our
backyards, sipped hot chocolate on stools in his mother's kitchen:
dark green cupboards, a photograph of an Oaxacan market on the
wall. But the whispering annoyed me, and I was embarrassed that
it annoyed me. It was desperate, not childlike but childish—
though I don't remember him talking like that as a child.

"Take some money from my bag and go downstairs and get
yourself hot chocolate."

"I don't want any hot chocolate," I said.

"You don't want any?" he asked, turning further on his side to
see my lips and watch my face.

"No."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just don't need any hot chocolate." I had taken money
from his bag the week earlier and had returned with two
cardboard cups of hot chocolate from a machine in the basement
cafeteria. Instant, watery, sweet. A distraction.

A nurse came in with a blood pressure hose over his neck. He
had red hair, diluted by sun or bleach. "Don't get up," he said,
gently, "I'll come back." I'd watched him take Marc's pulse the
week before; how did he keep his fingernails so clean?

"No, it's all right, I've got to go," I said. I'd been there for over
an hour; he slept and then woke; we talked with the yellow pad
about the lesions and the possibility of cutting them out with laser
technology. But the lesions would just grow back, like thistles.

"What?" Marc asked. He put his hand on my arm and looked up
into my face.

"I've got to go," I repeated, slowly, more slowly than necessary.
"The nurse is here."

The nurse stepped to the foot of the bed and turned his head
politely—or to spare himself the awkward deceit.

Marc moved his hand up my arm and sat forward, bringing his
eyes to me, pulling me down toward him until our foreheads were
an inch apart. I couldn't recall being this physically close since first
grade, yet something seemed familiar. A violence. I could see the
clear mucus gathering in the corner of the drooping eyelid and the
completely unmasked plea in the other. Dark brown. Lighter now
than when he was a kid. I could have been there only thirty
minutes. Fear and fearlessness. Nothing to lose. Emptiness and
grasping. A golden ring around the pupil.

"Hot chocolate?" he asked, his lips not closing around the words
as they came from the back of his throat and rode out on his breath.
They sounded like "ha chohtlate." He pointed down, toward the
cafeteria. I covered my mouth to suppress a nervous laugh and
looked away.

A blue print on the wall, blue and yellow and some milky white
and I want to say the image was a horse, a print of that famous
yellow horse, and that his mother, who had flown in from
Minnesota the week before and was staying with his sister Lynn in
Richmond, taped the poster there, but I don't think that's true. I
don't know how that print got on that wall, though it is true that
Marc loved paintings and prints and when he lived in London and
New York visited the galleries regularly and when he came back
talked about the art incessantly. But Marc had nothing for horses; I
am the one who in shorts and T-shirt rode a Shetland around our
backyard and into the cornfield behind our houses one summer,
until the horse bucked me off and my forearm snapped in two
places, and then for the rest of the summer into the school year
Marc carried things around for me. A biology book. My coronet on
band days. An empty black plastic purse.

The nurse was wearing a white T-shirt and white pants—of
course he was. I smiled. Marc could see my lips—I wore lipstick all
the time then. "Yes," I said. "Hot chocolate in the cafeteria."

And then I'd be gone, walking quickly past the other man in the
bed by the door and turning into the brightness and anonymity of
the hallway.

Marc Randolf Nesserich, later known as Marc Wendell Britain. I
think I was the only person in San Francisco who knew he wasn't
upper-class Protestant: his grandmother was Mexican, his mother
and Aunt Zola vacationed with Mexican cardinals and priests. His
father, German-American Catholic like the rest of the town, had
been a low-level manager at the Melrose Electrical Cooperative. He
would have earned little more than the other men in the
neighborhood, who labored at the Kraft and Jenny-O Turkey Plants, if he hadn't over twenty years embezzled more than a hundred grand of community profit.

The day the embezzlement news broke in the Melrose Daily, Marc wasn't on the bus or in school. He wasn't on the bus the next day, or the next, or the next. I spied him one late afternoon through the evergreens in our backyard; he was wandering around shirtless in a light snowfall, his ill-defined, hairless golden chest flecked with snow. He might have been my first conscious experience of human beauty. Another day I heard him singing Spanish songs and knocking around a golf ball, though he hated golf. And then one day the Nesseriches' house was empty, driveway and backyard barren. Marc visited the neighborhood only once during my high school years, and I was at swim practice.

"What an odd boy," women in the neighborhood often said.

"He's even weirder than you," said my brothers.

But that was later, wasn't it? Wasn't he first just a really sweet kid with dark gold skin, a large head and narrow shoulders?

I can see him out our bathroom window sitting on the swing set in our back yard. He was five, or maybe six. He sat there and waited for me to come out and play with him: barefoot, one toe pushing the swing off from the ground just enough to make motion. He wasn't swinging as much as swaying. The swing swayed and wobbled and he looped one arm around the chain and with his free hand picked at his mosquito bites or the hem of his shorts. He could wait a long time, sometimes until his mother hollered out their back door, and then she'd holler again and he'd look up at the bathroom window as if he knew I was there or had been there. He'd push himself off the swing and slowly make his way across our yard, careful to step around my father's carrot and onion garden, and through the shadows of the evergreens, where he'd disappear.

"Marc!" I called out to him through the window screen. It was June and I could feel the heat from outside move through the tiny screen holes onto my face. He looked up from his swing and waved—his eyes were rounder than other people's eyes.

"Are you coming outside?"

"Maybe. I ate lunch."

"Come out and play."

"Maybe. It's hot."

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"The hose," he said and pointed.

My father's garden hose snaked around behind the house and we had on occasion pelted ourselves with water. The water came directly from a ground well that my father dug in our backyard; it was cold, a wild cold, the kind that moves through the skin to the veins immediately and confuses the blood. Spanking cold, my father would say. I stepped down from my stool by the window and a minute later appeared at our back garage door and then ran at him on the swing as if I were going to tackle him. But he didn't scare; he grinned and lifted his shoulders and stuck his chin out in delight. I captured him and pulled him to his feet. I dragged him a yard or two, marveling at his limpness and lightness, how he could allow his body to be taken over, how he would give it to me.

"Stand up," I said, and then he did that too. He was a few inches shorter than I was, though later half a foot taller, and he was scrawnier, less muscled, less self-possessed. I loved him. Once I squeezed his forearm so fiercely that a bright indigo bruise rose up the length of it—like a miracle—and I told him to run home and tell his mother he fell from the swing. Another time, in the middle of a ground blizzard, I made him walk behind me through the town and around the S-curve to home. No talking, no touching my shadow on the snow.

Some things he wouldn't do: he refused to eat our dog's poop. Another time I dug a hole in the garden—before my father had planted—and put Marc in the hole. But he wouldn't let me bury him. I got as far as covering his legs, arms and torso to his upper chest—not even to his neck—and he popped up suddenly, shaking the half-frozen black loamy dirt off his shirt and pants, and wiping off his knees and elbows.

At the beginning of that summer, Marc had knocked at our side door: "Do you want to come to my birthday party?" he asked. I said sure and then he took me by the hand and walked me through the neighbor's backyard and to the back of his house. His backyard was browning, needed water, a large expanse of browning grass that led up to the two concrete steps that led into his garage that led into his one-story house. Charcoal gray, the darkest house in the eight-house neighborhood. And dark inside as well. A palpable thickness shrouded his house, as though his father's embezzling had been spinning an aura, a murky tension the color of river water. Marc's mother and father stood ahead of
us in the dark hallway, two faceless unformed blobs. No one else was home.

"Who is this sweet little girl?" his father bent at the knees, his belly hanging down between them like a full sac. I was supposed to move forward. I stood still. Marc took my hand—so small. Slightly sweaty but clean feeling. There we are in the dark hallway, the top of his large head at my cheekbone, my fine white hair chopped off under my ears, or above my ears.

"Is this your girlfriend?" his father asked. His mother laughed. "She's his wife," she said. "Lorrie, you're going to marry Marc, aren't you? You're going to be Marc's wife, huh?"

On the table, red party hats and a blazing eight-inch double-layered chocolate cake—yet I was the only guest at the party. Was I the only one invited? Would no one else come? I strapped a hat on Marc's large head, and then one on mine, but the emptiness kept coming and made me pull him closer—his wrist bones settling next to mine. A delicate sharpness. The hat string cut into the baby fat on my neck.

Husband. Wife. One dark, one light. One graduating from Melrose High School and then flailing around the country in slips and hiking boots until landing in the Western Addition in San Francisco. One fag, one dyke. Post cards. Telephone calls. Two visits. One disappearing for five years, traveling to Mexico, London, New York, answering phones in Soho and memorizing museum plaques. And then suddenly reappearing on a Sunday afternoon on his old friend's Page Street painted-black doorstep, a nickel-sized Kaposi's lesion passing as a nothing, a birthmark on the tender side of his elbow inside his sleeve.

*Toxoplasma gondii*. Marc taught me this word. A common parasite in cats, crescent shaped, ghostly. This was just months before protease inhibitors. On a post-mortem photograph, the parasites looked like fingernail clippings with an eye. Or like sperm without a tail. Floaty, harmless-looking debris that infiltrates the immunologically hijacked blood, travels to the brain, destroys the neuron insulation and instigates the over-production of mysterious white matter. A cross section of Marc's left hemisphere showed a dense network of delicate, wavy branches webbed with snow.

He wrote "help me" on the blue-lined pad.
"What do you mean help me?" I asked.
He wrote the words bigger.
HELP ME.
Marc took hold of my wrist and brought his eyes to mine. That
eye. Immaculate, manipulative, fading into gold now, the pupils
shot through with fear and a low, continuous dose of morphine in
his saline. His white hospital gown tangled at his waist, exposing a
bare hip. Marc's energy, his eyes, his skin, his gestures were
returning to the beauty and barbarism of nature. A wilderness
radiated from him. Sometimes I felt as if a freshly killed deer were
splayed in the middle of the room, its spirit loosened, bragging,
obscene, its neck thrown back in morbid ecstasy.
"Do you need to say something to me?" he asked. He asked me
this almost every time I visited, as if it were another part of our
script. Sometimes I told him a story; once I asked him to sing me a
ballad in Spanish, and he looked at me puzzled. What did he
expect?—he was blown open, but I had to keep on going, didn't I?
Death waiting around, posing as a fifth season.
"No," I said, staring blankly back at him.
"Please, stop looking," I said, and he obediently turned his gaze
to the wall.
The yellow horse was galloping across the blue. Not galloping,
flyinig, its muscles shot-through with flight. The possibility—that's
what the painter was after. The exuberance of the yellow, the
defiance of a flying horse, the imagination hurling past reason. On
that same wall was something else—a crucifix? Yes, there must
have been a crucifix in that room, but not on that wall. Above the
bed: a black crucifix with a white figure nailed to the wood; his
mother would have put that there as well. I can see the folds of
Jesus' skirt, his sorrowful European neck, the resigned, released
posture. I can see the long slim fingers hanging over the edge of the
wood, beautifully carved, translucent.
I looked down at the pad. HELP ME. He could never stay in
the lines.
"But I want you to help me," I wrote, and handed it to him.
He looked excited with one eye. "How?" he said. "How can I
help you?"
"I need advice," I said. "This woman has been following me
around in her truck. Last week on my walk home from the hospital
she rolled down the window and asked me for a date. It would just
be sex," I said. Was already sex, every night in the front seat of her truck, parked outside my apartment building, her tattooed carpenter's hand teasing my underwear, pulling the lip down and playfully slapping my bottom.

Marc took the pad from me. "Don't see her," he wrote.

"Why?" I asked. "You've had plenty of sex dates."

He took the pad again. "Look where I am," he wrote. And then he wrote, "You don't know the difference between sex and love."

I read the note and laughed, but he was wrong. I did know the difference, but for now it didn't matter.

"You promised me you wouldn't die for another year," I had written the week before.

"You think I'm dying? I'm not dying," he said, suddenly straight and indignant. He made an extraordinary face, considering the drooping eyelid: he pressed his nose into the air toward the yellow horse, as if he were pressing into a new reality, and then he lay back down, curled on his side, and fell asleep.

"Don't see her," he whispered again now. I promised him I wouldn't, but was already sprawled across her big lap, sex a kind of temporary transcendence. His drooping eyelid collapsed completely, dragging the other lid down with it. He lay on his back and held up his hand. I was supposed to take it; he hated falling asleep alone. He had always hated being alone.

I set the pad on the hospital table at the head of the bed and stood looking at him for a while. He still wore one ring on his middle finger—it reminded me of a bishop's ring, though I've never seen one. I took his hand. A shadow behind me. His sister. Usually when I was there, she would go to the cafeteria, or hang in the hallway just outside the door. Death duty.

She looked sad. Did I look sad? He was supposed to die weeks ago. Her eyes were round and brown like his. Long eyelashes, thick wavy black hair trailing down to chubby hips. She was a nurse, an RN somewhere in Richmond.

"I wish he would just let go." Lines delivered to me two weeks earlier—and only now do I forgive her.

I pictured Marc on a rope in mid-air. He had swung on a gymnastics rope through the gymnasium in the middle of a school lecture. About a month before his father was indicted. Mr. Ricklick pulled him down, dragged him up the aisles by his thick dark hair.
He's a twenty-nine-year-old man, I thought. Why should he let go?
"Except for the eye, he looks good, doesn't he," she said now.
"He would like to look good when he dies."
"Yes," I said. "He looks like a healthy young man."

What is there to say, what can sisters, mothers, lovers, friends say? He was alive and then he was dead, like so many others. Narration only makes him more dead—as we march up and down Market Street in our orange lace bustiers and leather chaps. As we swallow our cocktails and eat tuna sandwiches on the steps of City Hall in tuxedos and wedding gowns. But I have photographs. Age four on his clean-cut front lawn, shrouded in the black and white dress of a Franciscan nun, his sweet round eyes and pudgy face in the habit, devout, beseeching. Age ten on the school bus, thick wavy brown hair eclipsing his ears, his wool poncho—a prize from Mexico city—swinging around his knees. In his mid-twenties, cross-legged on my black-painted steps, imitating (for me?) the bored look of Elvis Presley, whom he didn't respect, paging through an Encyclopedia Britannica, a text he did respect.

There. On the telephone. Three months before the hospital, the late-autumn sun falling onto my bare feet through the bay windows of my small living room, a finger over my free ear so I can hear him.

"Marc? Marc is this you?"
He was weeping.
"I don't know where I am," he said.
He was in Minneapolis for Thanksgiving, visiting his mother and sisters. He'd had an ear infection for six weeks before he left.
"What do you mean, you don't know where you are? Where is your mother?"
I can hear him breathing into the phone, and I can hear the static sound of a public space.
"I don't know. We're in a mall. I'm dizzy, I lose my balance."
"You're in a mall," I repeated. "They took you to a mall and now where are they?"
"I think they're trying on dresses."
"They're trying on dresses. And they left you alone?"
He got suddenly very quiet. "Yes," he whispered dramatically. This was when the whispering began. "Lorrie, I'm alone."
“No, you’re not alone,” I said. “Forget that. We’ll just stay on the phone until you see them again. Now, get a bench and sit down.”

I heard him moving and the shifting of the telephone cord.

“I’m sitting,” he said. “A lady wants to use the phone.”

“She can’t. Now tell me about your trip, are they being nice to you?”

He and Bernie, his mother, had visited the old neighborhood, he told me. It was snowing; the kind of light, November snow that floats down like pieces of white ash. The snow was three inches deep on the backyard, undestroyed. “Where are the children?” he kept asking me. “We are the children,” I told him. Bernie had taken him for a walk through the yards, but he became frightened of the ice under the snow and he kept falling and she yelled at him.

“I can’t hear out of my right ear,” he said to me.

“You can’t hear anything in one ear?”

Static again and then a new silence.

“Bernie doesn’t understand,” he said. “I’m dying.”

And I knew he needed to hear me say what I really thought. “Yes,” I said. “You are starting to die.”

A long breath, as though he were breathing the words in. And then another long silence that wasn’t really silence. I can barely hear the words when he says them.

“I haven’t done anything important yet, and now I’m going to degrade myself,” he says. “Oh, god, it makes me feel sick—Lorrie, you’re not going to write about it, are you?”

And the phone went dead.

This day isn’t gray. This day cracks open with some pale blue. Marc’s eyelids are closed, in each corner a crusted pool of blood. His face is like a placid lake. I reach under the covers and find his hand: amazingly cold. Spanking cold. Heavy the way a dead cat is heavy. I try to bend his fingers but they pop back up into straight position.

I wait for him to lift his hand. I wait for him to open his one eye and pat the windowless side of the bed. I hold up a photograph I brought with me that morning: he and I lying head to head on the gray carpet in my Dolores Street apartment, staring up directly into the camera. He is confident. Smiling. Legs crossed at the ankles.

An hour earlier, before his mother and sister had gone home for the afternoon to return in the evening, his sister had given me a
small brown bottle of liquid opium. “Just a drop or two on his tongue, just if he gets in too much pain,” she had said, her brown eyes wet, rims swollen. I sat in the plastic chair and stared at him. The other man in the room was already gone. The bed empty.

I turned the bottle over in my palm.

The day before, I had walked into the room with a cup of hot chocolate and Marc was urinating in the corner by the windows. The IV and oxygen tubing splayed across the floor, white sheets speckled beautifully with red. “Marc, go back to bed,” I ordered, but he flung his arms against the wall; he started pounding, howling, no sign of morphine in his eye. The red-haired nurse and two orderlies rushed in and pinned his arms to his sides, pushed him toward the floor, or maybe it was the bed. “Don’t do that to him,” I yelled, and began to cry, and then for the first time I couldn’t stop crying. The red-haired nurse turned to face me, and he said what he had to say: “visitors must leave the room.”

The night before Marc died, I lay on the floor of my small apartment and cranked up the volume on the stereo—but I could still hear the pounding of my angry sobs against my throat. I had turned the carpenter away. The sun went down and the room went black, and then suddenly I raised my feet and kicked the wall beneath the window; I kicked and kicked until the plaster gave way and a fine white dust powdered the floor. It was an exquisite feeling; I imagine even now the thudding in my feet and ankles like buffalo stampeding, and I wanted to break everything, to bellow fuck you, you don’t understand you stupid stupid people. Finally, the neighbors knocked on my door, and I stopped, and my breath calmed, and I heard through the open window the wild renegade parrots of San Francisco, escaped from their cages and living in the palm trees on Dolores Street, screeching at the tops of their lungs.

Husband. Wife. One dark, one light. One sitting in a sunny window on Steiner Street twelve years later, and one scattered into the Northern Hemisphere, dissipated molecules, the final diaspora.

And in the backyard, one turning on the hose and chasing the other with water. One screaming and throwing his chest forward, his ribs ecstatic and arching toward the sun and the skin of his round golden belly gleaming as his shorts and underwear slide down and catch on his hips. She swings the hose wildly around her
head, like a lasso, and he gallops in a narrow circle, until the end of the hose predictably smacks the back of his head. The water turns pink there—a sudden pink froth—and his screaming shifts tone as he runs to get away from whatever is hurting the back of his head: a darker C minor chord, a frightened painful bawling.

“Stop!” I shout. He stops.

“Sit down.” He sits on the grass in front of me. I can see the back of his head where I part his dark hair. A crooked pink gash. A slit in the back of his head, oozing red onto my fingertips. If I could open the gash and look inside I would see the human brain, a wormy timeless mass undulating thoughts, feelings, memories—and the infestation, our greed, our fear.

I would see a mass of gray. A rooftop. Wavy branches webbed with snow.

“There there,” I said, “it’s nothing.” I must have heard the phrase on television, or it was something my mother said. He calmed, and I patted the slightly sticky, wet hair into place, and leaned forward and kissed the back of his head.

“Am I going to be all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered confidently. “You’re going to be just fine.”