

Ribbons

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almost too perfect to part with. He gazed at it, a perfect moon in the middle of his palm.

Hey, the smaller boy had risen, still sniffing. I'll trade you. He hefted a large, dark stone, ringed with pale strata. His brother laughed in delight, recognizing the twin of his pocketed pebble. It's too big, he said turning away.

The smaller boy glowered. His fingers whitened around the rock. It served his purpose. Perfectly.

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"Let us go now, you and I" The remainder of the line disappeared beneath the soft, pale flesh of Attila's belly. Jacob sighed and prodded him gently with the tip of his pencil. After a lazy blink, a mere flicker of translucent eyelid, and a measured twist of the head, Attila continued his slow pilgrimage across the page. His toe nails made whispery, scrabbling sounds on the yellowed parchment. Behind him, in a languid whorl, trailed the train and silky ribbons of Barbie's wedding dress.

"Ja-cob! Have you set the table?"

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Open. Shut. Open. He admired the way that the dusk rose of the dress offset the milky sheen of Attila's skin. "It looks much better on you than it does on her. She doesn't have the figure."

"Jacob."

. . .

"I asked you to do something."

"Did she?" Eyes wide. Innocent. Jacob rested his cheek on the desk, nose brushing Attila's. He blinked. Jacob placed a forefinger on the page, looped it through the loose ribbons.

"Jacob. For Christ's sake. Now." (Jacob. Jesus. Now.)

"Let us go now, you and I?" But as Jacob wrapped his fingers beneath Attila's ribs, he began to pedal his legs spasmodically. He twitched his tail in agitation, the gesture amplified by the billow of his skirts. Wordlessly, Jacob placed him back on

the page. Standing abruptly, he almost upended the straight-backed chair. He moved towards the doorway. Half in the hall, he looked back to where Attila sat, still perched upon the desk.

“Jacob!” Twitching his head, as if to dislodge a cobweb, he continued into the hall, pulling the door firmly shut behind him.

A pea skittered across the plate, fleeing the tyranny of Jacob’s fork. “If you are done, put your plate in the dishwasher.” Jacob slowly pressed the pea against the pale blue ceramic. Blips of green burst up between the prongs.

“. . . like a patient, etherized upon a table.” Attila was nowhere in sight. Apart from the slender, yellow-paged paperback and teeth-worn pencil, the desk was empty (bare). These two items, Jacob slid into the drawer. He scanned the chair, the dark hardwood beneath the desk, the bed with its taught shroud and the dark hardwood beneath it, the bureau (bare), the meticulously-ordered oaken bookshelves, the narrow windowsill, the dark hardwood at his feet . . . He glanced once more at the desk, but it remained obstinately bare. Desk, chair, floor, bed, floor, bureau, bookshelf, sill, floor. “Attila?” Jacob hated the childish pitch of his own voice. Desk, chair, floor, bed, floor, bureau, bookshelf, sill, floor. Turning, he peered out into the hallway. Crossing the hall, he knocked softly at the door, and entered (after a pause), without waiting for a response. “Have you seen Attila?” Clara shook her head mutely. Her dark eyes met Jacob’s own, widening in sympathy. He looked away. “Thanks,” he muttered as he eased the door shut, not quickly enough to avoid the sight of the swollen blankets, the silicon tube. Back in the hall, Jacob looked left and then right. He peered along the landing, swept the top of the staircase, and then turned back into his own doorway. Stopped. Desk, chair, floor, bed, floor, bureau, bookshelf, sill, floor. Narrowing his eyes, Jacob made out a tendril of pale pink ribbon, flickering at the edge of the radiator. “Attila,” he sighed. Stopped dead. A waft of acrid smoke crept into his nostrils.