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Prettyboy

By Zach Levinson

Her ears were above the water when she heard her name called out from the shore.

“Hannah?” her mother’s voice asked from a short distance. She pretended not to hear it, and continued to feel the murky brown water glide across her face while strands of her hair and the ends of her dress were gently pushed downstream. The pressure against her lungs was building, but she maintained her position until she heard her name called again.

“Hannah?” This time a bit louder, and on the verge of sounding disciplinary. She tightened her eyelids and allowed her head to shoot up from underneath the surface of the water. Now upright and with the remnants of the river pouring down her face, she involuntarily took a

deep and loud inhale. She hadn't been keeping track of how long she was down there, but it was long enough to warrant a gasp that sounded nearly like an asthma attack.

After wiping the water from her eyes with the back of her hands, she looked up at her mother, who was sitting on a rotting log on the shore. Rather, she was practically hovering above it. Her black dress matched Hannah's, though she kept her velvet gloves on, which were faintly smudged with dirt. Hannah's uncle and cousin were there too, who startled her with their presence. She had almost forgotten that they were there. They were both sitting in the dirt in their suits, ties loosened, and staring at the ground without so much as blinking. You'd have to put your finger under one of their noses to be sure that they were alive.

"...Yeah?" Hannah asked in a tone that caught her off guard. It was a "yeah" that could've come out of the mouth of an angsty high schooler, though Hannah was nearly 25. She had felt herself slowly regressing over the course of the week that she had been staying with her mother, and now winced at the sound of her own voice.

"Are you opening your eyes under there?" her mother asked.

"What?" Hannah responded, "No. No, I'm not."

"Good," her mother said matter-of-factly, breaking eye contact to pick at a burr that was caught on one of her gloves, "that water is disgusting." She was right. This part of the Prettyboy Watershed was close enough to civilization that the river water had to have been infused with decades worth of fumes from cars, trucks, and god knows what else. "I wish you would get out of there," she said, still picking at her gloves.

"Ok," Hannah responded, and dunked her head under the water once more. Her mother sighed and placed her hands firmly in her lap. She wiped some small twigs off of her dress, and the log she sat on gently crinkled under her weight. She looked over at Hannah's uncle (her

former brother-in-law) and cleared her throat in his direction. He looked up at her for a moment, then back down at the ground. Hannah's mother rolled her eyes. After a long time listening to nothing but moving water, he finally chimed in.

"We should be at the shiva," he grumbled at his shoes.

"Just give her a second," the mother argued, though she knew he was right.

"I just don't understand why we're out here. We should be with the rest of our family."

"You saw the fit she threw in the car. She said she needed to come here. I think Isaac took her here when she was young."

Hannah sprang up from the water.

"You can go to the shiva if you want," she said, and moved her bangs out of her eyes. "I can stay here."

"Hannah, we can't just leave you here," said her mother. "We drove you."

"Well. You can just pick me up on your way back."

"No."

Hannah sighed, then took a deep breath in and plunged her face back into the water.

"I don't get what she's trying to do," her uncle said.

"I think it's something Isaac and her used to do together," sighed her mother.

"What, dunk their heads underwater?"

"...I don't fucking know."

Hannah's cousin, who had been nearly catatonic up until this point, pulled out a rusty flask from the pocket of his blazer. He discreetly took a swig of whatever was inside it and shuddered. Hannah's uncle saw this and tapped him on the shoulder, gesturing for him to hand over the flask. As soon as it was in his hand, he leaned his head back like a pelican and downed

what was left of it. Hannah's mother watched him do this in disgust, and threw a small rock at his torso which made him sputter out a few droplets of alcohol.

"Are you fucking kidding?" she demanded.

"What?" Hannah's uncle asked defensively, "Give me a break. I'm mourning."

"We're all mourning."

"If she's allowed to fucking drown herself then why can't I have a little booze?"

Hannah's head popped up from the water.

"I'm not drowning myself," she said, somewhat lightheartedly.

"Well then what *are* you doing?" her uncle asked.

"Just leaving reality for a sec," she said, still catching her breath, "It's nice under here.

The insides of your eyelids turn into fractals and take you somewhere else, and the water feels like it's melting you."

No one responded. Her mother snapped a twig under her foot. Her uncle let out a faint yawn.

"That does sound nice," her cousin said quietly. It was the first thing he had said since getting there.

"You can join me if you want," she said, "I'm going back now. Bye." Once again, her head went under the water. Her cousin looked at her uncle, who shrugged his shoulders as if to say: "I don't give a shit. Do whatever you want."

Her cousin loosened his tie until it fell off of his neck, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. After kicking off his shoes he stood up, stumbling slightly, and made his way over to the water.

“Should he be doing that if he’s been drinking?” Hannah’s mother asked, but the uncle was distracted, drunk now too, and staring into the empty spout of the flask. Hannah and her cousin were both face down in the river.

“We’re never gonna get to that fucking shiva,” said the uncle.

“I know,” said Hannah’s mom, sounding defeated, “there’ll be one tomorrow. It’s fine.”

“Today’s the only one.”

Hannah’s mom stared at him.

“I forgot how reformed you people are,” she said, as if she was scolding a child. She stared at her daughter and nephew with their curved spines reflecting in the water, creating ouroboros loops. With an unnerving stillness, they stayed under the water for nearly a minute before coming up for air together.

“Well?” Hannah asked her cousin.

“I get it,” he said, pulling his shirt away from his torso like a suction cup. “That is really nice.”

“Ok,” Hannah’s uncle slurred, “Time to get out.”

Hannah and her cousin looked at him with a questioning glare.

“I’m serious,” he said, “Get out. We’re leaving.”

“Dad, you should just try it,” Hannah’s cousin said, “I promise you’ll like it.”

“I’m not trying anything. I’m in mourning and you’re splashing around in the water like children. It’s not right. I want to be with my family right now.”

“He’s right,” Hannah’s mother chimed in. “Hannah, we humored you, now please just get out of the water.”

“You should get in here too, mom,” said Hannah. “It feels like you’re with him when you do it.”

Hannah’s uncle put his face in his hands. His ankles sank into the dirt, and he curled into himself. He let out a long, guttural sigh, as if something within him was trying to escape.

“I’m gonna do it,” he said with his face still in his palms.

“What?” Hannah’s mother asked.

He stood up in a stupor, and waddled over to the water with his shoes and jacket still on.

“You can’t be serious.” Hannah’s mother beckoned.

He shrugged. “She said it feels like you’re with him. That’s all I really want.”

Hannah and her cousin gave him a gentle smile and the three of them, taking as deep an inhale as possible, put their heads in the river.

Hannah’s mother looked at them blankly. She was alone on the shore, except for the ants and termites that had been eating away at the log beneath her. She still had them.

Through an aggravated sigh, she took off her earrings. Then her velvet gloves. Then her flats.

“Fine,” she said under her breath, and waded her way into the murky brown water. She looked at her family with their disappeared heads. Begrudgingly, she joined them. It made sense to her immediately.