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The Color of Wheat in Winter

It was one of those dirty brown days L.A. dishes out in August, thick with smog and heat, and Eddie's Place was dead for the sixth day running. Eddie was in back counting money and receipts and the cars that pulled up to the drive-through speaker. Frances was on the fryer, Becky at the register, and Johnny was cooking. They stood around and wiped the counters; they patted their foreheads with white rags that smelled of bleach. At two-thirty, Eddie came up front and told them he was going home, they should stay and close. He said it gruffly, leaning his elbow up against the meat cutter, his rough fat cheek in his hand. It was the first time he'd left before closing since Frances started working there in June, when she turned sixteen, and it made her nervous watching him, the evidence of failure collecting in his loose neck and his short, thick arms. It was the same way she'd felt when the Italian restaurant in town had shut down and moved to Bakersfield where rents were low. Sometimes she would peer in the windows when she passed, at the pink plastic carnations still standing in their vases, unaware it was time to die.

Eddie's car pulled away, and Becky grinned; her work was done for the day. Frances watched as Becky refilled her Coke, her thin red hair pulled tight against her head, the blue of her eyelids popping like a painted-on sky. Becky was careless and lazy, but there was something about her Frances liked—the way she careened through her day without examining it, how she fit so easily into her life. Becky headed out back for a smoke and Frances and Johnny were alone.

Frances dropped a half basket of fries and the grease flew up, messing her apron. Johnny flipped a patty and slapped the cheese. He was stocky, with a broad back and hearty, weathered skin. His movements were small and fluid so that sometimes it seemed he wasn't moving at all. Frances waited for him to speak.

He'd begun to talk to her when they were alone, little nuggets of his life falling from him like loose change. She knew he was thirty-five and married, with two teen-aged boys, and that before he'd come to California he'd driven long-hauls across Mexico. He was working at Eddie's waiting for a green card so he could send for his family. He wanted his sons to go to college.

He wrapped and bagged the burger and handed it to Frances. Then he leaned against the counter and watched her salt the fries and scoop them into bags.

"Let's run away together," he said.

"Hah-hah," Frances said. She was not used to the way he talked to her but she pretended she was. She put the fries in the bag, then the napkins and the salt and ketchup packets, and handed it out the drive-through window.

"I'm serious," he said, when she turned back toward him. His eyes were leveled on her face. Then he laughed and so did she. "Ah, chica," he said.

He gave her a ride home. There was a statue of the Virgin Mary on his dashboard, a rip in the upholstery beneath her bare thighs. He tapped his fingers on the console, and she felt a loosening in her, as if she were suddenly capable of a cheaper, riskier life. She told him about her father. How in June, he'd quit his job, bought a share in a hot air balloon and left her mother for another woman—Josephine—a sax player with an inheritance. The reason he'd given for leaving was that Josephine believed in his dreams. She wanted to be part of them.

Frances had met Josephine only once, when her father drove up from Santa Monica to take Frances out to lunch. She'd opened the door for her father and Josephine was there in the driveway, standing beside the car in boots and a white cowboy hat with a black wreck of hair down her back. Frances had known her mother was watching from the kitchen window, peering through the thickness of the lemon tree, and she'd known it was not possible to walk out there and get in that car. She told her father she was sick, she couldn't go, and the way he said *it's all right*, with his eyes on his shoes, made her feel as if she'd slapped him but he'd somehow been waiting for it, expecting it as his due.

Johnny listened to Frances talk and made a sound between his lips—something low and mournful, a kind of hum. When they reached the end of her block, she made him stop, and she got

out of the car and walked the rest of the way home alone, past the neighbors' yards, their tiny lawns like oversized carpet squares, until she reached her own—her father's idea—a tangle of green that loomed into the heat of the night. Lawns are for ordinary people, he'd said. Hidden among the rich growth was a secret path to a stone reading bench. Frances loved that bench, the idea of it, its valiant stab at some secret poetry.

Frances found her mother sorting laundry in her bedroom. Her long fingers moved quickly, fiercely, as she turned shirts and pants right-side out, checking pockets for tissues and pennies, hair clips and dollar bills. "Your father called," she said. "He wants to see you. There's a barbecue at Gram's house on Labor Day."

Frances said nothing.

"Don't you want to go?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Your cousins will all be there, hon. Don't pretend you don't care just to save my feelings. It doesn't help."

Frances remained silent.

"I don't know how you'll get there, though," her mother said.

"Maybe Dad can pick me up."

"The traffic will be awful coming up the five. I could drive you. We'd have the reverse commute. That would give me a chance to visit. I haven't seen Nana in months."

"Don't you have to be at the hospital?"

"I can switch with one of the other girls. There's always someone who needs the holiday pay."

"Are you sure it's a good idea, though, Mom? To go, I mean?"

Her mother paused to look at her. She tilted her head to the side in inquiry.

"What kind of comment is that, Frances? It's not like I'm not part of that family. For eighteen years I've been part of that family. I think I can go to a barbeque if I want to. I know you're trying to keep me from meeting her and seeing your father, but that's my problem, Frances. That has nothing to do with you." She sat down on the bed and pressed her thumbs into her temples. Her naked shoulders rolled inward toward her chest. Frances went quietly to her room to change, closing the door behind her.

Her mother followed, opening the door without knocking.

She was holding Frances' new pants—soft corduroy, the color of pearl. "What are these?" she said.

"They're new. I got them at the mall."

"How much were they?"

"Twenty-two, I think."

"It's a lot to spend, Frances. And they can't even go in the dryer."

"But it was my own money."

"You need to be saving for college. You know that. Although I can't imagine how we'll manage it now. We won't see anything from your father. Not unless he moves home and gets his job back."

Frances couldn't help it; she blew air out of her mouth and let her eyes roll to the ceiling. "Mom. He's not moving home." She let each word form its own sharp sentence.

Her mother let out a little gasp. She clutched the pants to her chest.

"Why are you speaking to me that way, Frances? Don't ever do that, Frances Lynn. Do not ever speak to me like that."

Inside Frances, fear bloomed but also something else—the possibility of her own power. She put her hands in her pockets. She could take this further. She could bust them out of the box they'd been in. But her mother didn't give her a chance. She thrust the pants at Frances. "They're stained," she said bitterly. "You'll have to use the stain remover and wash them in hot water."

Frances took the pants and threw them in the corner and kicked the door shut. She dropped onto the floor. She closed her eyes and imagined herself alone and strong, sweeping books off shelves, racing fast across an open field.

When she woke in the morning, the pants hung on her closet door in a kind of splendor—washed and ironed, with a note pinned to the pocket in her mother's slanted, loopy hand, "I got the stains out!" The o's were made into happy faces. Frances put the note in her bottom drawer. She had already decided, some time in the night, not to wear the pants again and to skip the barbeque altogether.

"Chica," Johnny said at work the next day, "it's good to see you." He put his hands on her shoulders, and she felt the heat and bigness of them like a thick quilt around her. She thought of

him, afterward, as she pushed her bike up the hill home. Then he was there, pulling up beside her in his truck. He lifted her bike into the back and offered her the keys. "Do you want to try?"

"My learner's permit's expired," she said. Her driving lessons had been abandoned during the difficult summer.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

She took the keys. She stalled on the hills, slipped back, burned rubber. Johnny laughed and gave her instructions. He worked the stick shift for her. Twice he touched her knee.

When they reached her street, she braked to a stop at the corner and turned off the ignition. They got out, and Johnny lifted her bike out and leaned it against the truck. He stood with his hands in his pockets. She could smell him, the smokiness of him, the charred butter and salt, and for a moment she thought she might let herself fall into the gentle curve of his belly, into the plain white cotton of his T-shirt. Instead she handed him the keys.

"Nice driving, chica."

"Thanks, Johnny." She walked her bike a little way and then got on it to ride the rest of the way home. She was aware of him watching her, and it made her conscious of the motion of her legs pumping the pedals. She tried to construct in her mind a picture of what it was he saw, how all the parts of her added up.

Frances' mother was painting the kitchen yellow. Not yellow—her mother explained—*the color of wheat in winter*. It was a designer color she'd seen in a magazine. Frances thought the paint seemed out of place against the cracked tiles, the faded linoleum. It was too lovely, too fresh and new. Her mother seemed out of place there, too, on her knees with a roller in her hand. Her face was flushed, her eyes were bright, there was paint on her wrists and her forehead, a thin stripe of it through her dark hair.

"You know, Frances," her mother said, as if they'd been in the middle of a conversation, "when you were little, he had a girlfriend and he came back." Frances said nothing. This was news to her but she didn't want to hear it. She didn't want hope breaking in. What she wanted was for her mother to clear a path forward so she could follow.

In September, when the girls' school she attended on scholarship was about to begin, Frances told Eddie she couldn't work

during the week. She would have too much homework. Eddie put her on Saturdays, and she looked forward to that, because Eddie didn't work weekends and she would be alone with Johnny. The idea of him was with her—a shiny stone in her pocket, a powerful secret—as she started back to school, climbing the stone steps those first mornings with a sense that her position would shift. She would move toward the center of things. She had lost weight over the summer, she had grown taller, but it wasn't clear how these things came together until she saw her friends again. "You look so good," Dawn whispered, leaning in close. "You're, like, totally skinny. Now you can wear my clothes."

After school on Friday, she went to Dawn's house with three other girls. That night they drove in Dawn's car to a club in Hollywood. They did bong hits on the way there and listened to Queen and The Cars and the Go-Go's. In the parking lot they drank Southern Comfort out of a thermos, and later, on the dance floor, Frances got caught up in the crush of hot bodies and the loud, raking music. She didn't want to leave.

The next morning she was sick, her mouth dry, her stomach unsteady. But there was a reason to get up. She was on the lunch shift and Johnny would be there. She imagined standing beside him, brushing against him. But his truck wasn't in the lot, and he wasn't at the grill when she clocked in. Instead Eddie, himself, was cooking, burning the patties and forgetting to put new ones on. Business was not what it had been, he explained. To save on wages, he was giving Johnny Saturdays off and taking the shift himself.

Frances' father called. He wanted to see her. He wanted her to get to know Josephine. She agreed to have dinner with them on a night she knew her mother would be at the hospital. She left her mother a note in case she arrived home first. "Having dinner with Dad," was all she could think of to write.

Josephine wore a green velvet vest and a paisley skirt that fell to her ankles. She had her hair pinned up, a few long strands loose around her face and a few more falling down her back. She wore bracelets inlaid with stones that jingled when she walked.

They went to the Mexican restaurant in town. Frances' father seemed to be growing his hair out. It was pulled behind him in a

stringy ponytail. He slid into the booth next to Frances and put his arm around her. Josephine sat across from them. She wore no make-up and her face was an earthy gray, splotched brown around her ears. She ordered herself a margarita in Spanish, flirting with the dark-eyed waiter. She wanted it frozen, she told him, with extra salt on the rim. When the drinks came, she nibbled the edge of her glass with her thin, unpainted lips and talked about Frances' father—*Your dad this, your dad that*—as if he weren't there at all. They were planning to take the hot air balloon to Bakersfield for its inaugural flight. Hundreds of yellow umbrellas had been planted in the hills there—an exhibit by the Bulgarian-born artist Christo. It was going to be fabulous, Josephine said, and Frances should come along. The three of them would have such fun. It was going to be good publicity, to help her father launch his record label. They planned to have *SkipTown Records* painted on the side of the balloon in red letters.

"Well that was just something we talked about," her father said, embarrassed.

Josephine gave him an indulgent smile and reached across the table to take his freckled hand in hers. Her bracelets raked against the tabletop like handcuffs.

What Frances hated—more than Josephine, more than how beaten down her father seemed, how awkward and unlike himself, more than not being able to sit alone with him and talk and have him listen the way he did, as if she had something important to teach him—was the way she herself was nodding and smiling and accepting sips of Josephine's margarita, the way she was acting as if she were happy to fit right into Josephine's plans.

At home her mother sat on the front porch waiting for her. The sun had dropped below the line of smog over the Valley and the sky was wild with color.

"Sit down with me, sweetie," her mother said quietly.

As her father's car pulled away, Frances sat down, and they watched the sky in silence.

"Did they hold hands?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

"What was she wearing?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"What is it about that woman he can't live without? Is it because she's musical? I've never heard of a woman playing the saxophone."

There was another silence. Frances was aware of the concrete, cold and hard beneath her.

"She's barely even pretty," her mother said.

On a Friday in October, Frances rode home with Dawn in the front seat of the convertible, winding through the Hollywood Hills like a celebrity. It had rained that morning, and the city below was washed clean, an immaculate version of itself. Dawn's house was huge and new, a white island bursting into a shock of blue sky. Frances loved that house and its pristine acre of grass, sloping beneath the bright clear pool. It was a place where curfews went un-enforced, where parents were harmless and invisible behind the closed doors of the master suite.

Frances pulled on Dawn's Levi's, worn through in the butt and the knees. They glided over her hips and thighs in clean, spare lines. The party was a dark blur—the music and the beer and the pot taking over and remaking her—and after that night she got a boyfriend, a boy named Fred Blue. Frances thought his name full of mystery and contradiction, the opposite, it turned out, of Fred himself. He was selected for her in a complicated rite, like an Indian marriage. He was tall and thin with pink smears—remnants of acne—on his cheeks. Otherwise his paleness was startling, his hair almost white, his skin translucent and blue-veined. He watched her across the pool table, and she gave him a bold, drunken smile. The following week, word came from Dawn's boyfriend's cousin that he liked her. "He plays the drums in a band," Dawn said, and it was decided. Friday night at the football game they held hands. His was bony and damp—an alien thing—and the fact of it made her long for Johnny's sturdiness, his thick waist and easy words. The next day she called in sick to Eddie's. She couldn't bear to be there all day when Johnny was not.

On Monday, Fred picked Frances up at school in his brother's car and gave her a ride home. They drove around and then parked down the street from her house and stood by the car. He put his hands on her waist, and she craned her neck up toward him—and suddenly his tongue was in her mouth. She tried to

extend her own tongue, but his mouth seemed filled up. Finally she pulled away and giggled. "I'd better go. My mom will be wondering." She ran a few steps then turned back to wave and smile, the way a girl in a movie might, a girl glowing for the camera in the copper light and painting on her face the fullness of new love.

Fred claimed her Friday nights, from eight until midnight. Each time he took it a little further, working doggedly toward the next milestone. His ministrations were awkward but precise, as if he'd consulted some thick, well-illustrated manual of adolescent sex. First kissing, with tongue, then tongue in ear, on back of neck, under shirt, around tummy and then upward, toward protrusion, left followed by right. Then hands downward toward button of jeans. Frances prayed for wetness, for something loose in her, something slippery and willing. But she couldn't overcome the mechanics, the awareness of every place he put his hands. Her mind fixated on body parts—his hand, her breast, *his thing*. These parts seemed to her remote, cut off from their source. She would guess at what was required—some moan or wiggle—and deliver it up like a sacrifice. She knew the rest would be coming soon—there were unspoken rules about the timing of these things, the intervals—and she began to dread Fridays.

He called every night. If her mother was at work at the hospital, Frances didn't answer. But on nights her mother was home, she wasn't given a choice. "Hello Fred, I'll just go and get her," her mother would say. She would cover the receiver with her palm and whisper with finality, "You will speak with this poor boy when he calls."

On the phone, their timing was off. Silence would overcome them, then they would leap to speak at the same time. The cycle repeated—gap of silence, rush of words—until she couldn't bear it and some excuse would form and burst forth into the receiver: her mother's purse needed finding! the hall needed vacuuming! the Periodic Table of Elements needed memorizing!

"Okay," he'd say. "I'll call you tomorrow."

The first Saturday in December, Frances woke with a jug wine hangover and the smell of Fred still on her. She took a shower and went to make herself a piece of toast. Her mother had

worked the night shift and was still sleeping. There was a quietness of sunlight in the lemon tree at the kitchen window that brought back a memory of how Saturdays had been when she was younger, when she and her father cooked together while her mother slept in. There would be the smell of dark roast coffee and baked sugar and the kitchen taken over by some delicate, perfect thing—corn crepes with mango mint salsa or French toast with figs and lavender honey. The three of them would eat at the old oak table with the morning sun pouring in through the window. After brunch, her mother would take over the kitchen. She would clean and sing, transforming their simple house into a place of polished sinks and lemon-waxed floors.

That was before her father rented the studio in Santa Monica. Before he started coming home only on weekends. Before he met Josephine and moved out altogether. Now Saturday mornings were erratic. Sometimes her mother slept; sometimes she cried. Once, in the middle of breakfast, she'd left the house without saying goodbye. Frances thought it meant an end would arrive, some drama that would decide everything. But after an hour her mother returned with a small shopping bag hanging from her wrist. In it was a gift for Frances, wrapped in tissues held together with a gold seal. It was a new pair of socks.

She was wearing the socks now as she stood at the kitchen window. As she walked outside without shoes and picked lemons from the tree. As she cut sweet peas from the vines that climbed the rock wall out the back door and put them in a vase for her mother. She got on her bike and rode down the hill to Eddie's for the lunch shift. There was a heaviness in her chest and a dullness in her head that even the wind against her face did not clear away. Then Johnny's car was there in the parking lot, and Johnny himself stood at the grill in his apron, slapping special dressing on the buns lined up on the counter. Business had picked up heading into the holidays, Eddie said. Johnny was back on six days a week.

Frances was nervous and careful with him. She kept track of the distance between them. She monitored his smiles, his low easy words. Eddie barreled around, mumbling about specials. In black marker, in his squat irregular printing, he wrote: Tonights Special, BLT, Frys AND Lg coke—$7.95.

"Uh, sorry chief," Becky said. "That's more than the price of them on their own."

Eddie looked down at the sign as if he were just noticing it. "I know that," he said. "That's the trick of a special." He turned and went back to his office, folding the sign under his arm.

Frances took a rag into the walk-in and began to clean. She felt sorry for Eddie and angry with him, too, and with Becky. The walk-in door opened behind her and without looking she knew it was Johnny. From behind her he put his hand on her hip and his mouth next to her ear.

"Hello, Chica," he said.

She let his hand linger, feeling fluid and powerful under her skin.

He put his other hand around her waist and turned her toward him. Then slowly he smiled, and she could see the gold ridges of his teeth like cheap picture frames. The drive-through bell rang, and she slipped from his hands and went to answer it, letting the walk-in door close heavily behind her.

She took the order, then popped the drive-through window open as the car pulled up. It was Fred, grinning, in his brother's car. For what seemed like the first time, she looked at him—the rough cheeks, the pale, watery eyes, shallow and finite.

"Hi," she said, with a kind of bark like a small dog would make. "How *are* you?"

The memory of the night before seemed to enter the room at large. How he'd messed with the button of her jeans until it popped off. How he'd struggled to push them down over her hips until finally she'd stopped him. She couldn't make the leap to what would come next—his mouth *down there*, hand jobs, blowjobs, condoms—objects that seemed perverse and unwieldy, efforts she did not really believe would be rewarded with arousal or satisfaction.

The drive-through bell rang again. "I'm sorry, I have to get that, I can't talk."

"Oh, okay," he said. "I just wanted to know if you knew about the dance, the Christmas thing. Do you want to go?"

"Yeah, definitely. It's this Friday, right?" For a month she'd been expecting him to ask her.

"Yup. Cool. We're renting a limo," Fred said.

"Great. I'm psyched."

Becky leaned in close to get a look. Frances handed Fred his onion rings and chocolate shake, forgetting the straw, the napkins, the ketchup. "See you soon," she said with a miniature wave, just the tips of her fingers moving.

On Monday, Frances got home late from school. Her mother was in the kitchen, the phone tucked between her ear and her shoulder, taking an apricot cobbler out of the oven. The kitchen was heavy with the smell of fruit. Her mother set the cobbler to cool, slipped off her oven mitts, hung up the phone and smiled. She had news. She'd been promoted. She'd be working for the hospital administrator, developing training programs for the nursing staff. She would get a title, a raise, her own office. While she talked, she cleaned the dough from the counter with her long, white fingers. They were fingers that could make a plain dust rag dance over the top of a picture frame, the black keys of the piano, the tricky spot where the leg of a chair meets the seat. They could press warm and firm against your temples and take the pain away.

"Now," she said, "let's go get you a dress for the dance."

The dress they found was midnight blue silk, fitted at the waist with a full skirt to the floor. Frances felt warm and still as she stood before the mirror in the dressing room. Her mother adjusted the straps and smoothed the fabric at her hips and then stood back, finally, and smiled. "Perfect," she said. They bought the dress and then they bought a pair of high heels and ordered them dyed to match.

The day of the dance opened under a faint cold sky, and in the afternoon it began to rain, the first of the season, gray and unstopping. After school Frances watched the rain tap her bedroom window while she pinned her hair and put on lipstick and pulled on her pantyhose. She put on her heels and slipped the dress over her head and zipped it up the back. She raised her arms in front of the mirror and twisted her body so that the dress flew out around her calves. She saw how well it hung at her waist, how lithe and light she seemed, how smooth the skin was on her bare shoulders. She opened the door and stepped out. When she reached the kitchen, her mother was slumped against the kitchen counter with her head in her arms.

Hearing Frances, she straightened and faced her. "Did you know?" she said.

"Did I know what?"

"That he was having a baby with that woman."

"What woman?"

"Josephine."

There was a silence. "No, I didn't know."

"The least he could have done was tell me to my face. I have to find out from Nana. In a phone call."

Frances could not think of a single thing to say. She watched her mother clench and unclench her fists—the fingers extending and protracting in their own ugly dance.

"You know this means we've lost him, Frances. It was the one thing we had over her. Now it's over. Now she's got him."

Frances could not reply. A current was running through her legs and arms, making it impossible for her to find a comfortable way to stand.

"I guess for you it could be a plus," her mother said. "You'll be a big sister. That might be something you'd like." These last words were nearly lost as her mother slumped over and began to cry.

Frances could sense a gesture inside her, the offer of a hand or a shoulder or a kind word, but she couldn't bring it forward. It was trapped under so much other emotion—anger and confusion and revulsion as she stared at the back of her mother's head. The dark hair had parted to reveal her mother's scalp, pink and awful, and it was this as much as anything that set Frances against her.

"Well at least we know now he's not moving back home," Frances said.

Her mother stood up and reached for a tissue. She blew her nose and looked at Frances.

"Is that what matters to you, Frances?" she said quietly. "That you're right and I'm wrong?"

Frances shrugged.

Her mother shook her head slowly and pinched her lips together. She turned and brushed past down the hall to her room. She closed the door behind her.

Frances sat down and listened to the rain and the sound of her own pulse in her throat. Fred would be there in an hour. Fred and the limousine.

Finally she heard her mother come out of her room. She stood up as her mother headed past her toward the front door, turning as she reached it and pausing, regarding Frances as if from a great distance, as if noticing her for the first time. She looked her up and down and said nothing. Not how beautiful she looked. Not what a nice job she'd done with her hair. Not how lovely the dress was, how perfect. Not any of the things Frances had come to rely upon and had so abruptly given away.

"I'm going for a drive," her mother said.

"Okay," Frances said. She sat back down. She watched her mother take her keys from her purse and leave through the front door. She listened to the car backing down the driveway and the silence that followed. She let her shoes drop off her feet—they were pinching her toes—and she stripped off her pantyhose.

Then the crunch of the limousine was there on the gravel drive.

Frances put the heels back on and slipped out the back door into the wet December night. The moon was hidden behind a dark ceiling of cloud and the rain fell on her shoulders like small, cool kisses. She pulled her bike out of the garage and rode out the alleyway so she wouldn't be seen. She headed down the hill, her dress tucked under her, the skirt flapping around at her feet. Speed gathered under her and streets she'd known her whole life seemed laden with new meaning, with drama, as if music accompanied them. She took the curves without braking, her pedal scraping the pavement once and then once more. She turned into the parking lot at Eddie's and stopped. Through the window, she could see Becky's face, its bright colors aflame, and Johnny—the broad curve of his back, the thickness of his neck. They were laughing, not rushing through the close but laughing and taking their time, standing closer than Frances had imagined they would. She watched them, the bike between her legs, the rain soaking her chest and her thighs and her knees, molding the dress to her body.

Becky turned, finally, and her eyes opened wide as she saw Frances. She pointed, and Johnny moved toward the window. In the instant he saw Frances his face opened with its easy smile. His teeth glinted gold under the bright yellow lights—which made Frances think of Josephine, the clink of her bracelets against the glass tabletop, the sound of something about to break.