

*Pluvianus aegyptius*

Summer in the city is suffocating and ominous--a single long day where the thick air leaves a film of pollution and sweat on your skin that comes up black under your nails when you scratch your mosquito bites. That air crushes you from all sides, sticking in your lungs. You feel freer than the snakes of moisture coming out of the pavement, but that freedom is scary. Every day around four o'clock people look for a sign, any sign, that the afternoon storm will come to break up the humidity for a couple hours so the parents can congregate out in their yards to sip which wine and chat with each other about whose kid got into Middlebury. The signs are these: the silvery undersides of the maple leaves whipping in the wind, the dark greeny clouds rolling in from the northwest, and the silence when all the birds stop their calls. But even if you get lucky with the weather that afternoon, you wake up the next morning and the humidity plasters your hair to your forehead as soon as you open the front door. You've got to get out, people reason.

The place we go is Eagles Mere. We stayed at Oakcrest, my mom's stepsister's house in The Park, which is the neighborhood near the main beach. I liked coming there at first because I could sail and swim and hike the path around the lake lined with wild blueberries and rhododendrons and mountain laurel. I liked getting away from DC and from our house, which has raku pots with browning flowers and sketches on the wall of things like mountain men and naked women and bird and dusty coffee tables with stacks of *Utne Reader* and *The Post*. I used to think other kids' houses looked that way, but then I realized that their houses have richly colored walls with framed paintings that didn't show breasts or beards, and there are pillows and elaborate bunched up curtains and couches that you can't sleep on covered in patterns that match

the room. There is no dust even where there should be dust.

I stopped liking Eagles Mere because of people like Caroline Beasley and Lisa Lombardi and Alden Hill and Connolly who is known only by his last name instead of Ryan. The way they called “Hey, Simon” sounded like an insult. I started dealing to their group last summer and now the way they talk to me sounds cute and coy from the girls and proud and coachlike from the boys, but before that I never hung out with them. Before dealing I’d spend all summer walking to the beach by myself and stopping at the Sweet Shop along the way to pick up some strawberry ice cream or something, and sometimes the kids would drive by in somebody’s Jeep or Saab and yell out at me. My favorite thing to do was just sit on our dock and read a book, or hike the path around the lake to this pine tree that had fallen out at an angle over the water, and I’d climb out on the smooth, blanched trunk where no one could see me. I’d watch the swimmers and the boats. I felt like a bird of prey. When I was young, birds were my favorite. Mom used to get me books from the library with photos of all the different species with the common and proper names underneath. I always wished I were a snowy owl.

I deal to Mark and Wyatt and Maryanne as well. They’re from Philly but they aren’t Main Liners so they don’t matter. They’re older, but they don’t run lifeguard or teach sailing, and even the little eleven-year-olds laugh at them because they’re renters and that’s funny. I guess their parents don’t know any better. It sucks, too, because it’s not like the parents know anybody like my mom. At least she has a reason to make us come here. Mark and Wyatt and Maryanne hate it because no one likes them, and so they smoke weed and drink Keystone Light in the gazebo and make fun of people like Connolly, but that’s because everyone knows what Connolly’s dad did to Mark.

The summer before sophomore year I came up to Pennsylvania with an ounce of schwag

and a glass pipe I stole from a store in Georgetown. We got there just as the sun was starting to set and the trees and roofs were all golden. I decided to go for a walk down the luge hill towards the boathouse. So I walked towards the boathouse and looked out at the lake, tipped orange with the sunset, and I smelled the air, clean and unhumid and lake musky. When I was done looking I walked back up, but before I even got to the top of the hill this white Explorer came speeding down, system pounding, and it turned around at the bottom and as it was coming up I got kind of nervous because the car slowed.

“Holy shit, it’s fucking Simon!” a guy yelled.

It was Mark. I was so happy I jumped up on the side of the car and climbed half in through the open window even though Wyatt was sitting in the passenger’s seat. My elbow was pressed into Wyatt’s stomach.

I probably knew Mark better back then than I do now. We only started coming up a few summers ago, and you aren’t really an Eagles Merian or whatever unless your family has been coming since before your parents or even your grandparents were born. It was all over for me—for us—before we even packed up the car. Last summer I met Wyatt and through him I met Mark and Maryanne, and we would get together at night to talk about how hard it was to be the way we were. I wasn’t quite the way they were--my mom went to Dartmouth and before that, Cathedral. But we were close enough.

I went back to Wyatt’s house and he smoked us all up and I told him I could sell him some bud. He laughed but in a surprised, excited way, and said sure, he just couldn’t believe Simon Harper was selling bud. I had the trees in my pocket so I showed him. He bought a gram. I asked if he could help me get set up with the other kids but he said no because they were douchebags. He only said that because his dad didn’t drive a Porche or a Land Rover. Neither

did mine, but I had something that I treasured in secret that they wouldn't understand. It was this feeling that I got when I thought about Sundays at Nana's townhouse on O Street with the parquet floors and African masks, where she talked in that smooth, downturned voice about her job at the World Bank while she prepared a gin and tonic with her bony fingers. I don't know why, but I knew that meant something. Like the name Alice.

It was weird things were like that. They make it seem in movies like you're either rich or you aren't. Maybe sometimes you're middle class, but even then all the people you know are just like you. For me, it wasn't like that. Mom worked at the World Bank and I went to independent school and stuff, but we were always getting hand me downs and our car was this old red Subaru with a *Coexist* sticker on the back. Dad wasn't the same as Mom. I think he dropped a bunch of acid when he was younger, because his eyes were kind of vacant and unfocused. He said "man" all the time. He wasn't the sit you down and tell you how it is kind of father. He takes a shit with the door open sometimes. Once this girl I liked, Shoshanna, came over and she walked in on him like that. I think my mom married him to get back at her parents, for being so stiff or whatever.

When Mom was young she was sent away to boarding school in England before she got homesick and sad and confused and her parents brought her back to DC. She speaks like an American now but certain words are twisted up with awkward propriety. Girls think it's cute how she says "glass" and "basil." I sometimes slip and talk that way too, and it makes them laugh and joke like they do about my long lashes and my rosy cheeks that I always thought made me look kind of gay. They seem to like it though, so I don't mind too much.

I didn't ask Mark and those kids for any more help. I thought about that weird secret feeling that I couldn't really pinpoint, the feeling of Alice and parquet floors. At first I went

down to the Sweet Shop at night when all the real Eagles Mere kids congregate, waiting for something big to happen that never really does. I went inside and talked to a couple, telling them I could sell them grams and and they could try my weed if they wanted, if they'd meet me by the boat house. They all sort of ignored me while they kept talking to each other.

Finally Alden said he'd buy a gram, but only for what he had in his pocket, which was four dollars. I said sure even though he was ripping me off. He said my weed wasn't as great as I thought, but he couldn't get any unless he drove to Laporte, and mine was decent and better than nothing. So we went out to the village green and we made our exchange and I headed home down the path through the darkening woods. I tripped on a root and stumbled as I was walking home and looking out at the water and thinking, thinking about how easy that was and how this was the way to be when you wear hand me down khaki pants and try to explain to people what Unitarian church is like. It felt good to have a use other than flopping my white-blond hair in my weird face.

The next day I was walking on the beach, barefoot in cutoff pants and an old t-shirt, thinking and stuff.

"Simon," a girl called.

I jerked around. Lisa was looking at me squarely, looking like she caught me or something.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Simon. I was trying get your attention but I don't think you heard me. Anyway, do you think you could sell me a gram? I'll pay you ten, I know Alden ripped you off."

Lisa had on a black and white swirly dress over her swimsuit, and the kind of big pearl earrings that girls wear when they don't show too much skin; the kind of earrings that sit there,

ripe and round, hinting at what might be underneath their polo shirts. She was that sort of haughty pretty, with sharp eyes and teeth so white they looked like weapons. She was kind of fat, but that made her boobs big and even more importantly, there was this thing about her that made her look cleaner from the inside. Other kids had it too. It wasn't something you could fake.

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

So I met her at the gazebo with Caroline and I did my thing. They asked if I wanted to come to Jenna's house for a party. I said sure. So we walked around Eagles Mere Avenue into The Park, the neighborhood by the main beach. I had never been inside the house of anyone like Jenna before. The basement was pretty different, and maybe that's why some people called her a Jap. The luxury of calling someone that kind of name seemed more desirable than any house.

The walls were polished wood and there were lights in the ceiling. At one end there was a big television and some couches, and then the rest of the room was matching carved wooden games: a pool table and a chess table and a checkers table and a ping pong table and a foosball table and a bar with five seats and a little basketball shooting table like the kind they have at fairs. Two kegs were by the wall and people were drinking and outside there was a boombox playing Dave Matthews Band and a couple people were smoking cigarettes, but mostly people were just stepping away to talk about someone who was behind the sliding glass door.

Sometimes at night instead of going anywhere, I'll sneak out on my longboard to be by myself and think. I like to be by myself, but I never go out during the day anymore because people think it's weird. Out on my longboard I'm really free, snaking down MacArthur Boulevard until I get to the forested part just across the city line, where the road starts to twist

and turn and follow the Potomac, between cliffs studded with solid pretty houses up private drives. That's a good place to smoke a bowl. It's so dark there you can't see your hands, and you just go in the woods a little bit and you're golden. I hate the MPD as much as the next guy, but they're not going to do shit there. Afterwards, I'll walk my board back up through the Palisades, sneak in through my bedroom window, strip down to my boxers, wrap myself in the cool sheets and fall asleep. I usually have school the next morning but I don't mind school as much as most people think. To be honest, it's actually kind of fun. It helps me tell the days apart.

One night I went down to the Sweet Shop as usual. It wasn't okay for someone who hung out with Lisa to ask a question like "Where's Mark?" but everyone knew this was business and so it was okay. So I asked where the fuck he was because I hadn't seen him in at least a week.

"You didn't hear?" said Caroline.

"Nah, what happened?"

"He's gone. He got caught selling weed and he left with his dad."

When I heard that I was pretty surprised because, as much as Mark smoked, he didn't sell, not even a gram here and there as a favor. He brought up weed for himself and his friends and held onto it until it was all gone or the summer ended, whichever came first. In fact, the last time I saw him, he bought a slice from me because he was running low.

And then it all made sense. You see, nobody trusted Mark's family because they rented a new bungalow and didn't have stories to tell about sailboat races from thirty years ago. Mark wore baggy pants, and nobody wears baggy pants in Eagles Mere. Connolly's family is different. Ryan wears chinos, sometimes pink ones. That's why Mr. Connolly found Ryan's

stash and told everybody about it at the town preservation meetings or wherever they all meet, and those weapon-toothed, sail-tanned people didn't have to ask who was selling their children drugs, because they knew which boy would sell drugs as soon as they saw his father didn't have any college stickers on his car.

The kids already knew what to do, but for good measure the parents told them what to say and bought eighteen-packs of eggs from the Iga outside of town. As for what happened next, I can only repeat what I heard. One day, Mr. Connolly calls Mark's house and invites him over to talk about the egging, as if he's surprised about it and wants to help. So Mark walks over to the Connollys' house, which is set back in the woods near the boat house. But as he's walking down the path this guy Eddie and Alden and some other kids jump him. Eddie, who's a big guy, hits Mark in the jaw and someone gave him a black eye. The black eye was the worst because every time Mark left the house, people knew. It was like that book with Hester Prynne, the girl who has sex and has to wear a big red "A" on her dress. The last anyone saw Mark, his left eye had swollen up so bad he could barely see out of it, and it was all crusted with blood. I think the fact that he had to go out like that every day was what finally made him leave.

The parents thought it was really funny probably, ganging up on a kid like that. Well, if he didn't want it, his family wouldn't have come to Eagles Mere, right? Everyone in Eagles Mere knew the only reason Mark left was because he was trouble. And after he left, I didn't see Wyatt or Maryanne too much, either. All three came back the next summer, but they didn't go out much. That summer I came back with three ounces.

So I kept on dealing to everybody, and the girls kept on smiling and the boys kept on giving me pounds because it was funny that they were rich and white and not poor and black and it felt good to not know what that was like. I kept on going to parties but only the big ones

where nobody talked secretly too much. I hung out at the Sweet Shop and the beach and everybody whooped when they saw me because they needed me. I made friends with this girl named Annie with sandy hair and dimples in her cheeks and these rolled-up cotton shorts that clung to her ass. We started going down to the gazebo at night to make out or sometimes swim illegally in the dark water, me in my boxers, her in her swimsuit that she always wore under her clothes. One night when we were making out she asked me if I wanted to have sex and of course I said yes, looking at her little face in the swaths of lake moonlight, and I let myself lift up her sweater and untie the strings on her swimsuit, leaving her looking just tiny and beautiful and scared even though she had had sex before, probably even with two guys in one night like Alden had said. I put my sweatshirt on her because she just looked so cold and stark there in the big Pennsylvania night. She said she had a condom which was good because I didn't carry one. I guess I figured I'd never need it or I'd jinx myself or something. I let her take over.

Even when I stood on the dock between Alden and Connolly, throwing up into the lake as they patted me on the back, even when I woke up stale and sore on someone's couch and everybody was talking about what an epic night it had been--as if what we did meant anything in a big sense--I knew what I was. I provided those kids with something they needed, and as payment I got to see what it was like to be them. I was close enough to what they were, but I still feared their cruel-looking teeth.

And Alden always said, it's too bad you weren't here in the beginning, it's too bad you'll never fully understand. All they talked about was back then, back then. But back then was just like now. Even the clothes were the same. There were still pretty girls in pearl earrings that shaggy-haired boys either made fun of because they wouldn't hook up with anyone or made fun of because they were slutty, which never really made any sense to me. There were still nights at

the Sweet Shop, still piles of bikes and rumors and shifting alliances that were only important because everything else was taken care of. Back then Eagles Mere wasn't better. Back then is just a make believe idea that makes it okay to call Mark white trash and a drug dealer. I asked Alden if he would kill someone just to preserve back then. He said, "Simon, you're fucking weird" and told me that sometimes I should just shut up.

Well, soon it was the end of the summer again. I went down to the Sweet Shop on my last night and everybody said goodbye because now it had been two summers and I had lasted pretty long. There were hugs and I'll call you's and I got all these AIM names and phone numbers on all these ripped little pieces of paper. I went with Annie back to her house and we had sex and promised not to forget about each other even though we knew we both would, and she would probably go back and fuck some guy in green pants at the first school party of the year.