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RED-FACED MAN

Austin Wines

We ran up and down those old wooden stairs, every day, up and down, up and down. Up was the easy part. We would stretch out our short, tanned legs as far as we could in order to smack a sneakered foot onto the topmost stair within reach, grab onto the old railing and pull ourselves upwards like a mountain climber. But going down, going down we had to confront the red-faced man. The red-faced man clung to the towering wall of the stairwell, his black, marble eyes piercing into the glow of a single hanging light bulb from the shadows in which he resided. His most menacing feature was also his most recognizable, his tanned, leathery-red skin. It creased tightly around his strong cheekbones, framed by a collection of gray and white feathers he adorned on a headdress. His pepper colored hair hung down in matted braids. It was recognizable because it was my father's face, and a mirror of my father before his, reflecting the same color as his father and the father before him, too.

Adorned directly below the red-faced man was a plaque reading "good judgment comes from experience, experience comes from bad judgment—Old Indian Proverb." We rarely stopped to read the faded script for fear of being trapped in the man's gaze for too long. We knew what the red-faced man was capable of. In the night he would throw bottles, slam doors and overturn tables. His putrid, sour-whisky smell wafted down the lightless hallway and into our room. We knew it had to be the hauntings of the red-faced man because in the morning, when the sun would seep through the shutters and lift us from our beds with its warm arms, we would walk out of the hallway and into the main house to find everything arranged as it had been the day before, perfectly placed, swept, and shined. Only the faint burning scent of his presence remained. Some nights we would awake to a cacophony of grunts and groans, the red man enthralled in some animalistic dance as my mother softly cried. We were frozen to our beds, afraid to speak out or move. What if the red man came for us in the night?

Our cousins told us even more horrific stories about the red-faced man, forcing them out of bed in the night, or forcing himself in. They each had their own red man that haunted their home, too, silently waiting, watching for night to arrive, for his flask to empty. One day our cousins Charlie and Annabel came to stay with us for the weekend because the red-faced man had beaten our aunt blue. He did something else, too, but we couldn't decipher our mothers' muffled whispers through the wall separating the family room and kitchen. When they finally came out, their faces were as expressionless and stiff as that of the red-faced man. It was a look seen often on their faces, but unlike the face of the red man, our aunt's face was bruised, patched a vibrant purple-blue, a pattern our own mother sometimes carried. That's the story of it, the red-faced man and the blue-faced woman, naturally opposite, conflicting, but when one appeared the other always followed.

They told us to go downstairs and to "stop snooping around and mind ourselves." And so we did. Everyone raced back down the stairs to continue our usual childhood romp, but not me. I went down the hall and ascended the old dusty stairs slowly, countering the cold stare given by the old, weathered portrait. It was the first time in all of my life that I wasn't afraid of it; I knew that he was of no harm, because our red-faced man sat lethargically in his armchair down the hall, drinking his brown liquor, waiting for a blue-faced woman to bring him his dinner.

That Sunday we went to church. Our cousins sat in front of us and next to them, our aunt, with the thick, leathery-red arm of her husband wrapped around her once again. I looked around the sanctuary as our red pastor asked us to bow our heads in prayer. The room was filled with red-faced men and blue women, all calmly sitting with stiff, vacant faces. And I can't remember a time when I ever prayed as hard as I did that day, my hands tightly clasped, turning my knuckles ghost white, eyes shut tight; I prayed for me and my sister and all of my cousins. I prayed to God that we would forever be white.