

## Renovations

On both sides of the Wisconsin River there are hemlocks and red pines atop sandstone banks. Yellow warblers and barn swallows sit in and stare out of the holes in the surrounding cliffs while meadowlarks and bald eagles fly under the sun. Sailing downriver, a paddle steamer passes algae clusters and white pine boughs in the current. Many people in tank tops and sundresses are on the lower and upper decks of the steamer, sitting and talking to one another with glasses of red and white wine on their tables. Nick and Jackson are sitting together on the top deck, and while Nick glances at the river, Jackson drinks the rest of his glass of red wine. Nick's glass of white wine is still full.

"It was weird, yeah?" Jackson asks.

"Not really," Nick says.

"He should've called. He can always call."

"Maybe he was busy."

"That's no excuse. He said he'd show up at noon, and you know what?"

"He showed up at quarter to one?"

"How'd you know that he—?"

"You told me. Last night, remember? Before we went to bed."

"No, I didn't. I would've remembered talking to you about Harold."

"You're always talking about Harold."

"No, I'm not."

"*And?*"

"Don't be like that," Jackson says. "We're supposed to be enjoying ourselves."

"What happened with Harold?"

"Really want to know?"

"If it'll move the conversation along."

"Wait. If I already told you the story, then why do you—?"

"I fell asleep before you finished."

"Why? Did I bore you?"

"I was exhausted from work. And from remodeling the bathroom. Which reminds me, don't forget to buy those matching his-and-his bath towels at Khol's next week."

“I won’t forget this time.”

“And the gold shower curtain. Don’t forget to buy that too.”

“Sure.” Jackson clears his throat. “Anyway, with Harold, I considered telling him that I wouldn’t condone tardiness or—”

“I might have to gut it out after all.”

“What?”

“We should gut it out.”

“What? Who? Harold?”

“No. The tub.”

“What tub? What’re you talking about? I’m trying to finish—”

“Sorry,” Nick says. “Just thinking aloud. I wanted to finish the bathroom renovations sooner, but with work, you know?”

Jackson shakes his head. “If you don’t want me to talk about Harold, then we can talk about something else. You wanted me to finish the story.”

“No, I just wanted the conversation to move along. The bathroom still needs—”

“Well, to make a long story short, when Harold finally arrived to his appointment, I wanted to say, ‘As long as you’re my client, you have to come on time from now on.’ ”

“Why does it matter?” Nick says.

“What does what matter?”

“If he arrives late or not. You get paid either way.”

“That’s not the point. It’s the principle. Being reliable and considerate and—”

Nick laughs into his hand.

“I mean it, Nick. As long as he arrives late to his appointments, I’d seriously consider—”

“No. Not that. You said ‘come on time.’ Classic.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“Tell me.”

“Just trying to enjoy myself. You know I love sexual innuendos, right?”

“I don’t want you to *try* to enjoy yourself. I want you *to enjoy* yourself. As for the innuendo...” Jackson trails off.

“Too soon?” Nick says. “Or too late?”

“Another innuendo?”

“No. Forget it.”

Silence.

“Want me to finish?” Jackson says.

“If it’ll make you happy.”

“It would, thank you.” Jackson clears his throat again. “I didn’t say anything about his tardiness to him. Instead, I focused on his reports, then he left when we were over.”

“That’s... That’s it?”

“No. Before he left, I slapped him. Threw him onto the floor. Yelled, ‘If you come—if you show up late next time, I’ll pluck out your eyeballs and force them down your throat. You understand?’ ”

Nick doesn’t say anything.

“I think he understood,” Jackson says.

Nick looks at Jackson with a smile. “If only, if only.”

Silence.

“He’s not a bad guy,” Jackson says. “If I invite him over for dinner, maybe you’ll see what I see.”

“Wouldn’t it be unprofessional to invite a client over for dinner?”

“We’re old college pals.”

“Then why are you suddenly fixated on his constant tardiness? It’s not weird for him to show up late. He probably doesn’t even own a clock.”

“It’s the principle, Nick.”

“No, it’s not, *Jackson*.”

They look at each other in silence as a server walks up to their table.

“Anything else?” the server asks.

“I’m good, thanks,” Nick says.

“No, thank you,” Jackson says.

The server takes Jackson’s empty glass and walks away. Jackson reaches across the table and picks up Nick’s glass, which is still full. Jackson takes a sip of the wine, then sets down the glass. They remain silent while their table becomes shaded: they look up and see a rain cloud over the sun.

“Not again,” Nick says.

“Do you remember our first date?” Jackson says.

“Regrettably, yes.”

They laugh to each other.

“Wasn’t that bad,” Jackson says.

“Oh, but it was.”

They laugh again.

“I didn’t know it was going to rain at the time.”

“Me neither.”

“And I didn’t know you hated fishing.”

“You never asked.”

“That’s why it’s called a surprise.”

“More like a shock.”

Jackson smiles. “Wasn’t my proudest moment. But at least I packed an umbrella.”

“Which broke when we ran to your car.”

“Now that was a shock.” Jackson looks at the water beyond the boat. “It was great for me.”

“What was?”

“The date. Despite being drenched, I loved our first date.”

“Me too.”

“Misty rain through the windshield. Humming drumbeats of rain against the top of the car. Steam on the windows. Glimpses of sun in the gray clouds.”

“Unforgettable.”

“Yeah. I still remember every word you said in the car.”

“I wanted you to drive me home.”

“Then why didn’t you say something?”

“Don’t know,” Nick says. “Maybe I liked talking to you.”

“And now?”

“And now it might rain again, and we haven’t brought an umbrella.”

“It’s just one rain cloud.”

“You never know.”

“No,” Jackson says. “I mean it: *And now?*”

“Now what?”

“Do you still like talking to me? Even after all this time? With what happened?”

“We’ve been dating for three years.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Do you still like talking to me?”

“About anything in particular?”

“You know what I mean.”

Silence.

“I forgave you,” Nick says. “End of discussion.”

“I don’t think it is,” Jackson says.

“I forgave you.”

“It wasn’t with Harold.”

“I’m over it.”

“If you say so.”

“I forgave you.”

“I met Mason before I invited Harold to be my client. It’s not my fault that—”

“Don’t say his name.”

“—that they look similar.”

“I’m not blaming you for anything anymore.”

“Anymore?”

Nick looks away from Jackson. “I forgave you.”

Jackson drinks the rest of Nick’s wine while Nick looks up and sees another rain cloud.

“I don’t believe you,” Jackson says.

“Sorry, did I say something?”

“Knock it off.”

“I’m just trying to—”

“I don’t believe you... What do you want me to say?”

“Right now? Nothing. Let’s *try* to enjoy—”

“It happened a whole year ago, Nick. I apologized. You forgave me.”

“Exactly. So I don’t need you to tell me what I already know.”

“Stop lying.”

“About what?”

“About whatever *this* is!”

“Lower your voice.”

“It was the dumbest thing I ever did.”

“Lower your voice.”

“I didn’t make excuses at the time, but—”

“People are staring.”

“—but at least I was honest. Mason and I were drunk at his place when we—”

“Don’t say his name. Don’t *ever* say his name in front of me.”

“I thought you forgave me.”

“I did, but... It’ll take time, you know? I need more time.”

“You think so? Honestly. You think so?”

“Stop talking!”

The server walks to the table. “Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

“No,” Jackson says. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“I heard you from the other side of the boat.”

“It’s nothing,” Nick says. “We’re fine.”

“Because if there’s a problem—”

“I said nothing’s wrong,” Jackson says, and pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket.

“Smoking’s not allowed onboard,” the server says.

“Can I have at least one drag?”

“Would you like to speak to the captain?”

“No. Thank you.”

When the server walks away, Jackson puts the pack of cigarettes onto the table. “I should’ve asked for another glass of wine,” Jackson says.

“Don’t,” Nick says.

“Don’t what?”

“Just... don’t.”

Silence.

“What do you want to talk about?” Jackson says.

Nick says nothing.

“If you want my opinion,” Jackson continues, “you’re doing a good job with the bathroom. Gutting out the tub sounds interesting. Were you planning on buying a bigger one? Big enough for the two of us? You like things big.”

Nick says nothing.

“Get it?” Jackson says. “ ‘Things big.’ Another innuendo.”

“Don’t.”

“What now?”

“Don’t try to be funny.”

“I *am* funny.”

“No, you’re— Never mind. Let’s just stay quiet for the rest of—”

“I bought us tickets for this boat ride so that we could talk.”

“Then you should ask for a refund.”

“I wanted to redo our first date.”

“I got that.”

“I wanted to make sure everything’s fine between us.”

“How many times do you need me to say I forgive you?”

“As many times as necessary.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“Jackson, I’m not a freaking mind reader. What’re you trying to say?”

“Mason.”

“I told you to never—”

“He moved to a different state last April. I blocked his number on my cellphone. I unfriended him on Facebook.”

“Good,” Nick says. “And?”

“It was a one-time thing.”

“It’ll take time to get through this.”

“It’s been a whole year.”

“Yeah, but if you love me...” Nick trails off.

“Go on.”

“Never mind.”

“Finish your thought.”

“If you love me...” Nick trails off again.

“Forget it.”

Jackson picks up his pack of cigarettes, stands up, and walks to the back of the boat, where there is no one else around. He pulls out a lighter from his pants pocket and lights a cigarette. As he smokes, Nick walks up beside him. Below them, there’s a large, rotating paddle.

“Mason has blonde hair, Harold has blonde hair,” Jackson says. “Both are chubby, both wear identical glasses.

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” Nick says. “It’ll take time.”

“What can I do to prove that I’m still the man you love?”

“Things have changed.”

“Do you still love me?”

There are tears in Nick’s eyes. “Why would you ask that?”

“If you don’t love me—”

“Don’t say that.”

“—then what’s the point? What’s the point in talking about the past or the future? About Mason or your bathroom project?”

“You think I’m jealous of you and Harold?”

“Are you?”

“No!”

“You sure? Are you really, really sure?”

“Yes, I’m really, really...” Nick trails off. He looks at the ground and takes a deep breath.

Looking at Nick, Jackson takes another drag before flicking the cigarette into the river.

“Do you love me?” Jackson asks.

“I forgave you.”

“Do you love me?”

“I said I forgive you.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Jackson says. “What’s the point in forgiving someone you still hate?”

“I don’t hate you,” Nick says. “I hate what you did.”

“It’s been a whole year!”



“I know! Stop reminding me!” Nick’s voice goes soft. “When you told me what you did, I wanted to go to Mason’s apartment and...” He trails off.

“Talk to him?”

“No,” Nick says. “I wanted to hurt him. I wanted him to feel my pain. Then I wanted to hurt you. I could’ve drove to Mason’s place and yelled at him, threatened him. I could’ve told his boyfriend what you said you two did while I was at work earning money for the renovations, for the bathroom I fear I’ll never finish. I could’ve gotten Mason drunk and hurt him the way you hurt me.”

“But you didn’t. Right? You could have, but you didn’t?”

“What if I did? What would you do?”

“Don’t speak.”

“Would you forgive me? Would you forget what I did?”

“Tell me you didn’t do it.”

“I’m not going to say. Figure it out for yourself.”

Nick turns away.

“Tell me you didn’t do it!” Jackson reaches out and grabs Nick by the arm. “Tell me you didn’t do it!”

Jackson lets go of Nick’s arm while the two of them stare at each other.

“I didn’t do anything,” Nick says.

“Really?”

“Do you think I would hurt you?”

“No. But you said—”

“I didn’t do anything. It took every part of me not to make you hurt.”

“And now?” Jackson says. “What do we do? Do you still love me?”

They look at each other in silence while the server walks over. “Everything all right?” the server asks.

Nick nods.

“We’re going to dock in the next ten minutes,” the server says.

“Thank you,” Jackson says.

The server walks away.

“I’m going to sit down,” Nick says.

“I’ll stay and look at the paddlewheel,” Jackson says.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll find you when the boat docks.”

Nick walks away. Jackson looks at the paddlewheel and the churning mist below it.

When the boat docks, the paddlewheel stops and the other passengers begin to disembark.

Jackson returns to the table, where Nick is sitting. There are still rainclouds overhead.

“Want to go to the store with me and buy supplies for the bathroom?” Jackson asks.

“No,” Nick says.

“I can drop you off at home. I can pick up the supplies.”

“No.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Let’s go home—and stay there forever.”

“Sounds great. I might even ask you to *come*...to bed with me.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I thought you liked innuendos.”

Nick smiles. “Only when they’re unintentional.”

“If you say so.”

Nick stands up and they walk away from the table together.