

GRIFTERS

Roger Mensink

George enjoyed living in this remote part of the country—a watery region of river valleys bounded by low, rounded mountains, each harboring a patchwork of farmland, pastures, and woods. The house he had bought sat back far enough in the trees so that it couldn't really be seen from the road unless a person stopped and looked. And on the other side of the road stretched a lake, pretty as a picture. George loved how the fog hung over the water and that on most days it wouldn't burn away until well into the afternoon.

The winter had turned out to be colder than expected. George had spent most of the long months living indoors with his daughter, Elizabeth. A couple of nights a week they'd played a board game called *Stratego*. It was usually Elizabeth who captured George's flag, but what did it matter who won or lost? More important than victory was how the plastic pieces, from the lowly scouts to the lofty marshals, might imprint themselves on Elizabeth's

imagination, as they had on George's when he was young. He remembered having arranged his armies as if they were so many versions of his future. Let Elizabeth have that too. Let her have the slow building of a recoverable past constructed of simple red and blue pieces, their figures embossed in silver and gold.

Now it was late spring. The last of the snow, in the deep ditches and on the north facing slopes, had at last evaporated or been drawn into the earth. A slow warmth had settled over the land—a welcome warmth, so unlike the shimmering heat of Texas. George would have never suffered that heat if it hadn't been for his sister, Janet. When she moved to Austin to marry William, her third husband, George hadn't wanted to come along, not again, but then he did. William had asked his college friend to give George a job, and for two years George had managed Herb's two Giganto carwashes in town while Herb, who'd made his first killing in the natural gas industry, was away opening more of them in the rest of the state. George had embezzled as much of Herb's money as possible. It was not difficult.

On this morning George was busy in the front yard digging a small pond, into which he wanted to put some turtles. The yellow school bus had just picked up Elizabeth; she was the last of the children who lived outside of town.

When Janet pulled up at the house the first thing she said after getting out of the car was, “Really? You couldn’t do better than this? Was it a teardown, Georgie?”

George took a good look at his older sister. She wore a pale violet business suit, oversized sunglasses, white sneakers, and a blaze orange hunting cap. She must have picked up the last while getting gas somewhere, to give her added protection from the locals.

“Well, I guess I got an idea in my head,” George said. He put his shovel down and wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve.

Janet shook her head and looked past him at the sagging house. “And you and Elizabeth live in it?”

George stepped forward to embrace her, delicately, like hugging a broom. Janet kept her hands at her side. She smelled of perfume and something stronger, maybe hand cleanser.

She waited for him to back away. “Anyway, I found a place on the other side of town,” she said. “If you can call it a town.”

“You’re welcome to stay here,” George offered.

“No.”

From somewhere a dog barked, a lonesome baying, and from somewhere else, far away, the persistent sound of a chainsaw. Birds sang in the trees, the smell of melting sap hung on the breeze, and sunlight dappled the leaves. But all Janet was taking in, George knew, were the four summer tires he hadn't gotten around to putting on the truck, the old refrigerator to be hauled away once he got the tires on, the lumber piled up for the tool shed he planned to build, and the snowmobile covered by a gray tarp. All the things that made up country living. What you could afford to settle back into when a homeowners association wasn't watching.

"But I would like to come back this evening and see Elizabeth," Janet said.

"Well, then have dinner with us."

A generous offer, but George could have held out his soiled hanky from the look Janet gave him. Still, she acceded.

"Thank you very much, Georgie." Janet turned and picked her way back to the car. She opened the door, but before she got in she turned back to look at her younger brother. Her left hand rested lightly on the door frame.

"Did you steal enough to keep all this up?" she asked.

"I think so," George said.

That evening George worked in the kitchen while Elizabeth and Janet sat at the dining table. They spoke quietly, in a private manner, but at some point George heard Janet mention Elizabeth's school, the one with a less than 70 percent graduation rate, full of the children of parents who juggled multiple jobs or who placed signs by the road in front of their houses that spelled out a variety of services. The minimum wage hustle: trying to make ends meet. He stopped chopping carrots to listen.

"So you're perfectly all right?" his sister asked. The conversation dropped away again, then came back with a reassuring laughter. George needed vinegar and moved toward the cupboard next to the doorframe between the kitchen and the dining room, where there had never been a door. He moved quietly toward their giggles.

"Battleship?" his sister said.

"No, *Stratego*," Elizabeth corrected.

George put his head through the door frame. "You love *Stratego*," he said.

Elizabeth looked up, pretending to be surprised. She was full of happiness, excited her aunt was there at last. "I do love *Stratego*." She threw up her hands and laughed. "I love it more than anything."

Janet, her back to George, yielded nothing. Instead, she waited for the interruption to pass. And this was his own daughter, his own house!

Elizabeth saw her dad's face darken. "I swear. I love it more than anything," she insisted. She laughed harder, to convince him.

"You better," George said. He narrowed his eyes, a feigned scowl to put her at ease, and returned to the cutting board. Janet's unwillingness to turn and acknowledge him was a goddamn affront. This sister of his. She'd been Elizabeth's age when their father had taken off. A year later their mother had moved in with the town's optometrist, who had two children of his own—a new life. And the rest went as expected. Like curlers busily sweeping their brooms before the stone as it slides along the ice, the adults had eased Janet and George in a certain direction. No surprise then when the two no-goods, brother and sister, went on a jumbo-sized shoplifting spree. They tossed their loot into a hole they'd dug in the woods. A *fort* they called it, large enough to sit in—covered with a sheet of plywood. By the time their cache was discovered it was almost full: cowboy boots, sunglasses, fishing gear, electronics, models of race cars and WWII tanks in unopened boxes, entire toy trains sets. Everything lost all value as soon as they stole it. And it was ridiculously easy.

George would stretch his tee-shirt over whatever they'd decided on filching and mosey out the store while Janet provided the distraction.

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George considered asking his sister to get the hell out of his house. He removed the apron Elizabeth had given him for Christmas, the one that made him look as if he were wearing Swiss lederhosen, and brought in the food—whole fried crappies caught from the lake, with carrots and mashed potatoes and coleslaw. But on his last trip from the kitchen he considered how the injury of something like that would fall on Elizabeth more than his sister, so he let it go and sat on his chair, doing his best not to tilt it over as he filled each of their glasses with water.

“It’s nothing fancy,” he said. He opened a beer for himself and pressed the can, cold from the ice, against his cheek. “So, where exactly are you staying?” he asked.

Janet placed the tips of her fingers on the table. She’d made a reservation at a Best Western Inn.

“But why are you staying there?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, it’s a franchise,” George said. He popped open the lid of his beer.

“It has to meet certain standards. Like, it can’t have bedbugs.”

“What are bedbugs?”

“Nothing you would ever want to be acquainted with, dear,” Janet said.

Dear? George got up and grabbed the remote. Janet noticed and twisted toward him, not bothering to hide her amusement. The nerve of that! Growing up, when had they ever faced each other as a family across a common table? And just because Janet had learned to share a meal and not a television set didn’t mean he didn’t still need the babbling screen for the shelter it afforded him.

He sat back down, sensing Elizabeth’s confusion. Like him, she was used to watching TV while they ate, but now here was her aunt, who had begun a discussion of climate change. Were her teachers teaching it in school, she wanted to know.

“Dad?”

George gestured at the television. For the past few nights they’d been watching a series about the Arctic—slow reality, a group of sailors attempting the North Passage, mostly about how they interacted with the local people.

“Climate change is real,” he said. “Just look at that. See what’s happening in the Arctic.”

Elizabeth tapped her aunt's shoulder. Now she could explain. "Last night they had to shoot a polar bear because the ice had melted. The bear came into the town, and so they shot him." She forked some of the mashed potatoes into her mouth and turned toward the television. "But I don't think we'll see anything sad like that tonight."

"No, I hope not," Janet replied. She leaned into her plate, but her eyes too had angled toward the blue light.

"How are the crappies?" George asked.

"I'm eating them," Janet said. "Actually, they're not bad."

And then they were all watching what turned out to be some remarkably sharp footage of Inuit children playing soccer in what used to be snow but was now mud.

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Later in the evening, after Elizabeth had gone upstairs to do her homework, George and Janet moved to the front porch. George settled into one of two mesh recliners, recently ordered from Amazon.

Janet watched him, her back against the door jamb, a glass of water in one hand. "It's potable, right?" she asked, delivered with the hint of a smile.

George wasn't about to bite that easily. He felt Janet to be in the way—of this moment, the quietest of evenings. Somewhere over the trees, the moon had come out. The lake lay brilliant in its pale light. "You've been drinking it all night," he said. "Elizabeth's been drinking it. It's good water." He took a sip from a fresh can of beer before placing it in the cupholder. "I should drink more of it myself."

Janet drew close and perched herself on the other recliner. She sat there long enough without saying something for George, at last, to give up and ask why she had come. Surely, it wasn't on account of Elizabeth that she'd finally made the long journey, by airplane and rental car. And what about the famous matter of the three strikes—strike one having been the idiotic death of William, as Janet had always put it, with the emphasis on *idiotic*. It had happened while they were vacationing on the Gulf of Mexico. George had made some new friends, and one afternoon it was decided to rent a speedboat. They took William along and off they went, a gaggle of nearly middle-aged men in board shorts, ample bellies burned from the sun, whooping and hollering and holding up their beer cans as they bounced over the waves. Not one of them had noticed William wasn't on the boat anymore when they docked. It all had to

be pieced together later. Strike two had been George's two-year-long embezzlement, for which Janet felt she had not been adequately compensated, and strike three his moving away with Elizabeth—to this place, of all places.

"We have an opportunity," Janet announced, swirling the water in her glass.

George slunk further into the plastic slats of the recliner. The word *opportunity* had a history. After their cache of booty was discovered, the optometrist forbade them from reentering his home. The last thing he wanted was for his own children to be infected by the criminal influence of those two. He insisted George and Janet be placed under the authority of the juvenile court. But for once their mother had put her foot down, and not even the police had thought it was such a good idea, probably because George and Janet looked a little too much like their own children. Instead, they were referred to counseling, and it was there Janet had first used the word, sitting across from a young woman who'd brought up the topic of circumstances. Calmly, Janet had explained she was not and never would be a victim of circumstances. Instead, she would see all circumstances as an *opportunity*—to steal whatever she liked, for instance.

Once released from the hothouse of their barely tolerated lives, Janet had wasted no time putting her philosophy into action. She'd barreled from one opportunity, one reckless upgrade, to the next, making sure to annihilate each in her wake, the way a guerilla traveling through the jungle burns all traces of camp before moving on. But she'd always taken George along.

"God, I don't need another one of those," George answered. He tilted his head to indicate that behind him was the only thing that mattered, up there where a luminous rectangle of light kept watch above the porch's awning. "And neither does she."

"*She* is surrounded by opioid addicts and meth abusers," Janet said, though she'd taken care to lower her voice.

"But that's not true." George had to laugh. "Have you seen her Instagram account? Have you seen her pictures, what her life has been like the last year? Her friends, the fun they have, their adventures? She doesn't miss any of the old places."

"That's because she's twelve years old." Janet slapped away whatever bug had landed on her neck. "But in another two or three years those adventures will take on another hue. Her friends' older sisters are already there, rest assured. Ready to show the way."

George looked sharply away. Wasn't it incredible to claim this care for Elizabeth when Janet had never even called or emailed or texted? The last time they'd seen Janet was at one of Herb's traditional barbeques. The big Texan liked to throw them on occasion when he was back in town. George had told Janet he and Elizabeth were moving for good, and by way of response she'd thrown a side of pinto beans at his feet. *Strike three*, she'd snarled, then turned and walked away.

So, no, it wasn't love for Elizabeth, who'd always adored her aunt, that had brought Janet here. A car passed on the road before them, briefly scattering the yard with light.

"Fuck," Janet said, as if some backwoods threat had been narrowly avoided.

George took another sip of his beer, wishing he could just sit there and absorb the evening and feel nothing.

"I'm getting married." Spoken like a pronouncement, but even Janet could hear it didn't quite fit. "Again," she added.

George took care not to show much interest. "Really?" he said. "Anyone I know?"

"Oh, yeah."

“Herb,” George said. Because it wasn’t that hard to figure out.

Janet had begun to click the fingernails of her thumb and ring finger together, a nervous, insect-like sound. Another car passed. This time she paid it no mind. “Good old Herb,” she said.

“Good old Herb,” George said. He picked up his beer can and took a long swig. At the barbeque, while bending down to wipe the beans from his shoes, he’d looked up to see Herb standing next to his repurposed picnic table—big batch cocktails and wine bottles on top, a galvanized steel tub full of ice and beer bottles underneath—ladling something pink and frothy into Janet’s held out cup. George had felt suddenly possessed by an uncanny insight: of the past and the future collapsing into the present, and also that *idiotic* might have had a lot to do with *premature*. And indeed, here was Janet, having effortlessly made the leap from William to now Herb. For that he had to admire her.

“So, you’re in love,” he said, to tick her off, though she didn’t react. Something shifted; Elizabeth had turned her light off. On the other side of the road the lake reflected the fluorescent glare of the moon. George tried to ignore the power of Janet’s stare, the closeness of her primitive loyalty, the fidelity that was reserved for him alone. To continue calling it an *opportunity* like that and share it with him—like a cat bringing a dead mouse into his bed. George was

repulsed. By her silence it was obvious Janet wanted him to fill in the rest. But all George wanted was to shrink away. When she'd first called for him in Petaluma, to the first of her husbands, he'd shown up a week later. What else was there for him to do? From that initial world of wine and bourbon tastings, she'd taken him to the second of her conquests—to San Diego and boat shoes, fish tacos, and fitness. And from there to Austin—to golf courses, barbeques, and sprawling ranch homes. And now, if she had her way, back there again.

Janet said something, lost in the tire noise of another passing car. As his eyes adjusted back from the glare of the headlamps, she called him Georgie again, to belittle him.

“What?” George said.

Janet's eyes gleamed in the blackness. The bloodless tissue of his own kin. George had always accepted she was beyond the reach of love. But he had found his.

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The next morning Janet showed up early. It was a Saturday, and after breakfast the three of them walked by the side of the road to the swimming beach—another point of contention because how could George let his daughter swim

in that shitty lake, full of catfish and crud? Weren't there any public swimming pools nearby or maybe a country club?

George reminded Janet that Elizabeth loved to swim, that she'd been swimming since she was three. Elizabeth skipped a few paces ahead, adorable in her shorty wetsuit and sneakers.

"Isn't that when her little mum killed herself?" Janet asked. "When Elizabeth was three years old or so?"

George stopped dead in his tracks. Elizabeth had been too young to understand, or even remember, when her mother, someone George had only ever known because of the child they shared, had hanged herself from the worn doorknob of a motel restroom without warning or known reason. That his sister would bring this up while Elizabeth walked within near earshot was not just cruel, it was reckless.

Sensing she had gone a step too far, Janet briefly patted George on the arm. "Let's just keep walking."

The beach was nothing fancy—some sand the county had dumped there, a floating dock with a diving board, the swimming area marked off from the rest of the lake by marker buoys—but Elizabeth loved it. She had been waiting

for this moment to show her aunt what she could do. She kicked off her sneakers and splashed into the water. She moved herself forward along the muddy bottom until she was waist deep. Then, she dove in and began to swim toward the dock, legs kicking, arms windmilling.

“Look at her go,” George said. He couldn’t help but be proud of his daughter’s drive and lack of fear. It was too early yet for anyone else to be swimming. Elizabeth was alone out there on the lake.

“She could use a coach,” Janet said. She turned up her collar and put both hands in the pockets of the coat she wore that morning, though it wasn’t that cold. Her tone had softened, a thoughtfulness coming into it. George didn’t take offense.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking in that direction.”

“Have you?”

He nodded. “But let’s watch.”

Elizabeth had clambered onto the dock. Even from a distance it was obvious she wasn’t out of breath, not even a little bit. She made straight for the diving board and shook the water from her hair. Her voice resonated over the lake. “This will be a swan dive.”

George spread his arms as if to give his blessing. A pale blue mist rose from the water like steam. "Make it a good one," he hollered back.

Elizabeth solemnly crossed herself, a pretense picked up from some television show—they weren't Catholic. She took two steps forward and launched herself through the air, the board convulsing behind her. She extended her arms like wings, bringing them together just in time to pierce the still surface of the water. A smooth entry. At once, Janet faced George, unable to let it go.

George put his finger to his mouth. That didn't suit Janet.

"Don't you fucking shush me." A note of desperation lifted her words. "I can't do it all by myself, George."

George had only wanted to warn her—about the trick the kids played out there, something he'd been advised of at summer's end by another parent, a woman in a wheelchair whose son had pushed her onto the sand beside him. She'd explained how the kids liked to give the adults some anxiety. After diving into the water, they swam back under the dock to hold on between the floating logs, where there was room to breathe. The smoke from the woman's cigarette had stung his eyes.

"Listen," he said.

"No, you listen," Janet said. "I am so fucking angry with you."

“But that’s enough.”

“Actually, not enough. Like *this*,” she gestured grandly around her, “is not enough.”

George in turn pointed toward the lake. He wanted to emphasize the recently disturbed expanse of water, the curious absence of Elizabeth. But Janet refused to look. She stared at George and shook her head. To continue the experiment, George talked of other things. The border with Canada was less than fifty miles away, if Janet wanted to talk opportunity. He let that sink in. Also, he was preparing to build a traditional wood and canvas canoe, big enough for three people. “No, don’t laugh,” he said. Obviously, he wasn’t planning to smuggle cigarettes across the border in a canoe. But he *had* started working on the internet. George would have continued talking, continued prattling on if only to see how long he could. But Elizabeth at last popped back up.

“Oh, there she is,” he finished instead, his voice a sudden octave brighter.

Elizabeth treaded water, waving an arm. “I’m totally okay,” she called out. George flashed a thumbs up, then turned back to Janet. Had he ever seen his sister so deliciously fazed? Yet, when he explained what had just happened,

she'd already pulled herself together, meeting his eyes as if he were the idiot for explaining the obvious.

On the lake, Elizabeth again sprung from the board. This time she held her nose and spewed water from her mouth in the exaggerated pose of a fountain. She surfaced right away, and George applauded with overcooked zeal. For her next dive, Elizabeth hugged her knees and entered the water like a cannonball. For the finale, she over-rotated a front flip and hit the water awkwardly.

"Belly flop!" George laughed. He noted that Janet was now one hundred percent focused on Elizabeth. She even had the gall to ask if Elizabeth was all right. Which struck George as kind of funny. But he also saw how Janet's face had tightened. She looked abysmally tired in the morning's cold light, and in her tiredness George could see something of the immense effort it took for her to keep going.

"See where it leads you?" he said nevertheless. Without waiting for a response he headed toward the water, where Elizabeth was flailing her way back to shore. As she got out, he threw her the towel. But Elizabeth had eyes only for her aunt.

“Did you wonder what happened to me?” she asked, rubbing the towel over her head. “Aunt Janet, did you think I’d drowned?” She wanted to know if her ruse had worked.

“No, she didn’t actually have the opportunity to think that,” George volunteered.

Ignoring him, Janet helped Elizabeth dry her hair. “What I think is that you’re a mermaid,” she said. “And mermaids don’t drown, do they?”

George snorted laughter. As they walked back to the road, he flashed Janet another of his crowing looks. His sister’s expression hadn’t changed much. She stared straight ahead, thin-lipped and grim. George reeled it in, sensing, with a measure of unease, that Janet looked not just tired but fragile.

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Back at the house, he tooled around in the front yard while Janet and Elizabeth faced each other on the edge of the recliners, scooted close together. Elizabeth had showered and changed. She’d put on a new dress, carefully chosen at the mall the weekend before. She was sitting up straight, her feet tucked under her. Janet leaned forward, looking up into Elizabeth’s eyes, hands clasped together.

Now they were walking up the driveway to where Janet had parked the rental car. Elizabeth's hands were in the pockets of her dress, both thumbs sticking out. They stopped before him. Elizabeth bobbed from one foot to the other, carelessly swinging her upper body around.

"Aunt Janet is going to come back soon," she declared happily. "When she has more time."

George ran his fingers through his hair. Seeing them together like this had prompted a distant memory, something he would have liked to blink away forthwith, like a troublesome floater. It haunted him, the knowledge that Janet had once been more like Elizabeth, at ease in the world. But that would have been long ago, when a dress would have been hers by default and not worn with someone else's name attached to it, like a tag she wasn't allowed to remove. Their stealing had been a form of revenge, the therapist had told them. But if that were true, then it had been a revenge on things more than people. At least, that's what it had always seemed like to George. Which didn't mean that Janet didn't need those things—lots of them.

He stepped forward to hug his sister goodbye. This time she patted him on the back, most likely for Elizabeth's sake. As they pulled away, their eyes met. An accident. George frowned. He could handle the rage and the contempt but

not, well, whatever *that* had been. For the second time that morning he felt the sway of a mild sorrow pass through him. Because how could Janet be afraid of him, of all people, of what *he* might think?

George had often wondered how his youth might have been different if Janet hadn't been around, if it had been just him, with no one there to corroborate the injury of their lousy upbringing. Would he have surrendered to it? Been crushed? On the other hand, how would his sister have fared without him? He'd never been able to imagine it making any difference to her, but now he wasn't sure.

Janet blew a final kiss at Elizabeth. Obviously, there was nothing like that for him. She folded herself into the car, white sneakers the last to tuck in. Before turning onto the road, she touched the brakes. This is when most people would have held back—to make some last contact, a glimpse in the rearview mirror, a flutter of the hand. But not Janet. Her tires spun in the driveway's gravel before grabbing the pavement. Then she was gone.

After the sound of the car had receded and the everyday sounds of their lives drifted back in, Elizabeth piped up. "I really like Aunt Janet," she said. George looked at her. He knew it was hard for Elizabeth to conceive of Janet and him as siblings, as items that fit into a larger story. He was her dad, and

Janet was her aunt. That's all there was to it. But Elizabeth counted on that. It was part of being her age, when the web of relationships was still in its infancy, the threads mostly extruding from her, as they should. She started to go into the house, probably to get ready for the birthday party she was going to later that day. He would have to drive her. But first she needed some sort of assurance.

George tried his best to look cheerful. "I think you're right. She'll be back soon enough," he said. He wanted to believe it too—that Janet, in a rare exception to the rule of her life, might have something to return to. That's the best he could do. "Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to spend together," he added. He went so far as to ruffle her hair and say, "I promise."

Satisfied, Elizabeth turned on her heels and skipped away. After she went back into the house, George bent down to pick up his shovel. He planted it firmly into the earth and bore down. The dirt was soft and black in these parts, a pleasure to work with. The pond would soon be ready for tarping. But when George lifted the first shovelful, his lower back spasmed. Grasping the wooden handle with both hands, he leaned into the shovel to keep himself upright. He'd thrown out his back before, and this was really no big deal. He might even have liked to stay there for a while, in the middle of the dirt—to think

hard and long about how he loved the wet smell of it and to hell with everything else. But Elizabeth had seen. She stepped back out.

“Daddy?”

For a moment George didn’t recognize her. He sensed his heart quicken, fear induced, like how he felt when a blank spot in his vision foretold a migraine. In an act of will, he reordered the startling image into the familiar shape of his daughter. She was wearing the orange hunting cap Janet had bought.

“I’m all right,” he called out. Could Janet have forgotten the damn thing? Was that something she might come back for? Unable to turn around, George felt a wave of panic. What if she were there already, staring at him from behind the windshield, from the top of the driveway, like a weirdo trying to make up her mind about something?

But no. It was more likely Janet had given the hat to Elizabeth. And that was fine. In fact, more than fine. Cautiously, as the beating of his heart returned to a normal rhythm, George lifted a hand from the shovel and waved Elizabeth back into the house. A breeze had awakened, moving from the rippled surface of the lake through the trees. It happened every day like this. The

fog lifted from the surface of land and water, like the breaking of a seal, and then the air rushed in.

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