

"Blowing Bubbles"

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Virginia was in a sea of browned, patchy grass, but she was not sinking. The buoyancy of her gauzy, ankle-length skirt, which was distributed in an imperfect circle about her huddled form, kept her afloat.

If Virginia squinted, she could penetrate the haze of the late August heat and see the yellow house, whose color effectively camouflaged it against the pale sky. Behind her view of the house lay a gravel path, which eventually found a monotonous blacktop road, which eventually fed the monstrous interstate, which plowed through mile after mile of cornfields. Virginia rarely drove on the gravel road.

She drove even more rarely on the blacktop road, and she drove even more rarely on the paved, serpentine form of the interstate. She preferred to float in the sea, where the deadened tips of the grass and the crumbling patches of dried dirt hydrated her.

In her right hand she held a lidless Mason jar. Spencer often used it to hold the spiced fruits he made, which he would use to fill puff pastry shells and bake in the oven for the parties they used to have or to top his whitewheat toast that he had with his tea in the mornings. Virginia had dumped the spiced apples he had made the night before into a Tupperware container, which she'd shoved in the refrigerator next to the Parmesan cheese. She had refilled the jar with liquid dishwasher soap from the bottle on the counter.

Virginia judged from the low position of the sun in the sky that Spencer would be home soon. He would be pleased if she were in the house when he arrived, but he would not demand it. She decided that she could stay outside for another hour before the feeling like guilt bothered her.

She wondered what Spencer would make for dinner. The night before, he had made lasagna, and she had not been ashamed to eat three helpings at dinner in addition to another at midnight when she could not fall asleep. Spencer had taken the dish's remainder for his lunch, and the dirty pan remained stagnant in the sink.

Virginia studied the blurred horizon for the form of the dark blue sedan, hoping that it would not appear. As she

searched, she pressed the flat palms of her hands together, as though in prayer, and plunged them fingertips first into the Mason jar. All her life, she'd received comments—she was not sure whether to call them compliments—on how slender and delicate her hands were. They were smooth, softly tanned, and without blemishes or spots. She held them in the jar for a few moments before she lifted them to her face, carefully turning them back upright and pointing her fingers toward the cloudless sky. They were sticky and slippery at the same time from the soap suds. She looked again for Spencer and did not see him.

Gingerly, she drew the outside edges of her hands apart, taking care not to break the clear, swimming film that stretched between them like a piece of cloth over a jar. She guided her nose and mouth between her parted hands, held her breath, and gently and gradually released it against the taut soap. A sphere formed and broke free from the edges of Virginia's fingers, taking its time in its ascent. Virginia locked her eyes on the bubble's perfectly curved form as it modestly soared above her head, above the roof of the house, and above the sun before ceasing to exist with a silent but abrupt pop. She blinked and looked away.

More out of restlessness than compassion, she decided to make Spencer happy and go in early. After wiping the soapy residue from her hands onto the crumpled grass, she rose and began walking toward the house against the stealthy wind that had nearly managed to arrive unnoticed. The gusts subtly gathered in strength, and their force seemed to multiply with each passing miniscule unit of time. Virginia's stride became laborious.

When she reached the house's back door, she fished in her skirt's deep pocket for the key only to find the door already unlocked.

Spencer was in the kitchen assembling a marinade of some sort. Virginia had not noticed the dark blue sedan's turning off the gravel path and into the patch of flattened grass beside the house.

Spencer looked up with poorly concealed eagerness. "Hey, there," he said. "I gather pork chops are okay for dinner? I tried to call but you were out."

"How long have you been home?" Virginia asked. She seated herself at the kitchen table and watched Spencer's hands, which were lightly whisking some ingredients whose names she did not know into a glass bowl on the counter. His hands were coarse and boxy with short, square fingernails and bulging knuckles.

"About two hours," he said and laid the whisk in the sink, having finished with the marinade. "I left early this morning so I could get home earlier."

Virginia vaguely remembered hearing the low, rhythmic beat of Spencer's alarm clock when it had still been dark outside that morning. She felt a twinge of the feeling like guilt for not having made a similar effort to be at home, but it was not strong enough to sting.

"Sorry," she said. She felt as though an apology were appropriate.

"For what?" Spencer was now pouring the marinade into a plastic bag that also contained the raw chops.

"For staying outside for so long?" Virginia said. She felt suddenly indignant that she had succumbed to the feeling like guilt and apologized. She was not sorry. She had nothing for which to be sorry.

"It's a beautiful day. You should be outside." Spencer used his hands to evenly distribute the marinade over the meat.

He had seemed to read her mind, and Virginia sheepishly looked down at her hands.

"So are you sure you can drive me tomorrow?" she asked.

"I told you I would."

"But it's on your lunch break. I don't want to inconvenience you." This statement had never failed to absolve Virginia of blame, make her appear considerate, and get her what she wanted.

"It's not a big deal," Spencer said firmly. He put the bag of meat in the refrigerator. "I'll pick up something on the way back to the office."

Virginia nodded and studied her reflection in the layer of glass covering the wooden kitchen table. With pleasure she noticed that her cheeks were particularly rosy from the wind outside.

"Don't feel like you have to stay here and entertain me," Spencer said with forced casualness. "Why don't you go read your book? Or you can go back outside. I mean, if you want."

Virginia remembered that she had left the Mason jar full of dishwasher soap outside, but she did not feel inclined to retrieve it. Spencer would disapprove of its use and of the fact that she had displaced his spiced apples. He would not make this sentiment apparent in any way, but perhaps that was worse.

"I think I'll go read upstairs." Virginia pulled herself out of the chair.

"Okay. I'll let you know when dinner's ready."

Virginia left the kitchen and climbed the stairs. The fronts of her ankles scraped each step and her feet felt like dead weight. When she reached the bedroom, she crawled onto the bed on top of the pale blue bedspread that Spencer had selected fourteen years ago on the premise that the color was serene. And it was.

When she and Spencer had gotten married, both sets of parents had bought them the house as a joint wedding gift. It was located on a piece of newly developed land off the interstate, and its price had been a bargain. Only three other houses were close enough to be considered "neighbors," and the closest one was a quarter of a mile away. The location provided easy access to the interstate, which would take Spencer to his job as a clerk for the law firm in which he was now a partner. Both Virginia and Spencer had been thrilled by the prospect of decorating their own home and had completed the task with enthusiasm. Virginia rested her cheek against the silk pillows that she had selected, which Spencer had denounced as frivolous but to which he had grudgingly consented. She had clapped her hands in delight and leapt into his arms like a child right in the middle of the store.

Virginia felt exhausted as she lay on top of the disheveled bed and stared at the small, blank television screen. She had not slept much the previous night, and now she wanted a nap. Spencer would wake her when it was time to eat. He usually did.

Virginia dreamt of a wedding. The ceremony took place in an airy, cream-colored room with endless walls. The bride wore an amorphous taupe dress that blended with her healthy, softly tanned skin. The groom wore a simple but flattering gray suit with a pale blue tie.

She opened her eyes to see Spencer, who was changing his shirt. She realized that he had cooked dinner while still wearing the pressed white shirt that he had worn to the office. He was now buttoning a plaid cotton one. His bulky fingers fumbled with the buttons and searched for the tiny slits.

"You're awake," he said softly with a matching smile. "I wasn't going to wake you up for another twenty."

With some effort, Virginia sat up on the bed. Her tangled dark hair had come loose while she had slept. She searched among the pillows and the creases in the bedspread for her tortoiseshell hair clip. She found it on the floor just under the bed's skirt.

Spencer rolled up his sleeves. "You up for a glass of wine?" he asked her. "I picked up a bottle on the way home. The chops have got maybe another fifteen minutes."

Virginia did want wine. "Red or white?" she asked.

"Red."

Virginia wanted red, but she knew that Spencer preferred white.

"Okay," she said and slid off the bed. She loosely fastened her hair to the back of her head with the clip.

"Meet you downstairs," said Spence as he rummaged in a drawer for a belt.

Virginia had poured herself a glass and was staring at the door of the oven when Spencer returned. He opened the oven door to check on the chops and then poured himself a smaller glass of wine than Virginia's. He leaned against the counter to watch her watch the oven and took a sip.

"How was your day?" Virginia asked. They both knew she did not care about the answer.

"Oh, you know," Spencer said. "Lawyer stuff. Nothing special."

Spencer's first few years at the firm had been exciting for them both. Starting as a clerk, he had quickly worked his way to the position of public defender. He had relished defending innocence and bringing justice to the court system. He had enthusiastically recounted the details of his cases to Virginia when he had come home each night, and she had listened eagerly. He had called her during recesses when his cases were out of town with an escalation in his voice that she seldom heard now. He had breathlessly read her his closing arguments and had asked for her feedback. A few years ago he had traded his job as a public defender for a position as a bank lawyer and a partnership. He made more money and his schedule was more flexible.

The wine diluted Virginia's perception and she soon was sitting at the table with a plate in front of her, unable to recall how she had arrived there. She and Spencer sat at perpendicular sides of the table, sharing a corner.

He had asked her how she had spent her day. She had told him that she had read a little and done laundry. This was true. She had skimmed the arts section of the paper in the morning and had washed a pair of socks in the sink and dried them by laying them on top of the air conditioning vent. The pile of clothes in the hamper in the downstairs bathroom, however, had not diminished.

They ate in near silence. Spencer's few comments were reflected off Virginia's ears. The words were fragmented, scattered, and dissolved into the empty space of the room.

The chops were delicious, as Spencer's meals usually were. Virginia envied his culinary skill. He had learned to cook in college after having lost his tolerance for the food

offered by any of the campus dining halls and for Ramen noodles by the end of his junior year. He had found it not difficult to procure ingredients and found that most recipes allowed for leftovers when shared by him and his roommate. In the long run he had found the change to be financially beneficial. His meals were simple but delectably so. Virginia could still remember the first meal he had made her and how odd she had thought it that he had invited her to his apartment for their first date's meal instead of to a restaurant.

"This is cheating," she had joked flirtatiously. "It's like you're skipping a step."

He had laughed it off a little nervously. But he had ended up skipping that step that night after both had eaten his eggplant casserole, the dish he still made for every wedding anniversary.

Spencer went to his study to work after dinner. He told Virginia that he would take care of the dishes in a little while. For now they were piled in the sink.

While Spencer went to his study, Virginia poured herself another glass of wine and leaned against the counter. She stared at the stack of dirty dishes in the metal sink. It reminded her of the pile of dirty clothes in the downstairs bathroom that Spencer would probably tackle tomorrow.

Virginia was suddenly annoyed by the putrid, filthy pile in the sink. The pile was not really putrid, nor was it filthy, but she still wanted it to disappear. She put down her glass, walked determinedly to the sink, and picked up the plate off which Spencer had eaten. With her free hand, she turned on the faucet to rinse the residue of the marinade and the salad dressing.

Once the plate was rinsed, Virginia leaned over to open the dishwasher. As she did, she felt her right hand, the one holding the plate, quiver, just barely. Then her wrist seemed to freeze, and her fingers released the plate, which politely crashed to the floor.

She clenched her teeth and furiously kicked the side of the counter, the open door of the dishwasher, and the jagged shards of the plate that lay like a mosaic on the floor.

Spencer appeared. "You okay?" he asked with a barely detectable hint of apprehension.

The question infuriated Virginia even more. Of course she was okay. The plate was not. "Yes, I'm fine," she said. "But the plate's broken. God-damn it!" She kicked at the plate pieces again with her bare foot.

"Careful," Spencer said quietly. "Put on some shoes."

"I'm not going to cut my foot, Spencer. I'm not a child." She felt like an idiot, first for dropping the plate, then for the tears she felt in her eyes.

Spencer left and then reappeared with a broom and a dustpan. "I'll clean this up," he said gently. "You go rest a bit."

"But I was doing the dishes," Virginia said.

"I'll finish them. You were almost done anyway."

Virginia hated this lie, and she hated Spencer for having even the faintest expectation that she would believe it and that it would erase any guilt from her conscience. She then felt defiant. She did not feel *guilty* for not finishing the dishes. They were a task she had started, and she wanted to complete it. It was her right to complete it.

"I'm going to finish them," she declared.

Spencer looked up from the dustpan, which now contained the broken plate. Behind his black-rimmed glasses, his eyes glistened a little. His jaw was clenched, as though he were bearing pain, and around the handle of the dustpan his knuckles were white. "No," he said.

Virginia stared at her crouching husband. "Fine," she said, barely audibly. "I'll...rest."

Spencer did not respond. He dumped the big pieces into the trash can and got up to search the broom closet for the vacuum cleaner to suck up the smaller pieces.

Virginia left the kitchen and headed toward the stairs. Right before she reached them, she changed her mind, veered left, and entered Spencer's study.

The room was walled with books. Many of them were books of law, but many were books of history and literature as well. Of several titles he had multiple copies. Virginia noticed that one of these was Thoreau's *Walden*. She remembered its numerous mentions in her high school English classes, but the work's importance had not been reinforced during her college years. Thoreau did not typically prove relevant to the studies of a biochemistry major.

She picked up one of the copies of *Walden*. It was a black green hardcover with dull gold lettering. She turned its thick pages, which were tanned with age but not brittle. She wondered how many times Spencer had read it or whether he had read it at all. She sat with the book in Spencer's leather desk chair. She read the words on the pages but did not register their collective meaning. Instead, she tried to recall what her high school teachers had said about *Walden* and Henry David Thoreau. She managed to recollect that Thoreau had secluded himself in a cabin at Walden Pond. He believed that the best way to discover oneself was to become immersed in nature.

She was still reading when Spencer returned to his study. He stood in the doorway and looked at her fondly.

"Enjoying it?" he asked.

She nodded and waited a few extra moments to meet his eyes. She had always liked them. They were dully blue in a way that made it difficult to tell where the irises ended and the whites began. Virginia mirrored his tender smile. When she did, she saw his eyes flicker a bit like the last gasp of a dying campfire.

"I don't want to kick you out," Spencer said both seriously and playfully, "but I have to work."

"I know." Virginia closed the book but did not move.

He looked at her a little longer before he strode powerfully to the desk and kissed her. The black frames of his glasses pressed against the bridge of her nose. She

placed her hand on the back of his neck, beneath the collar of his shirt, as he continued to kiss her motionlessly.

She withdrew her lips and looked at his eyes, trying to discern the edges of his irises.

"I'm going to go up," she said. She stood up and laid the book on the desk. "Didn't mean to bother you."

He blinked and nodded.

Spencer did not come to bed for another three hours after she did. She had been awake the whole time. She heard him open the door slowly and tiptoe to the dresser. The floorboards creaked beneath the quiet pound of his flat feet. She heard his sharp intake of breath when the opening of a drawer made more noise than he had expected. She heard him changing his clothes. She felt him climb into the bed beside her. He painstakingly slid himself under the covers and lay on his side so he faced her back. She was still thinking about how she would like to live in a solitary cabin in the woods like the one at Walden Pond.

Spencer awoke to find her gone. The shallow indentation where her body had lain awake was an empty reminder of her absence. He fumbled on the surface of the nightstand for his glasses and surveyed the room. Her shoes were gone. She was outside. She was always outside.

Without getting dressed, he went downstairs to the kitchen to put on a pot of water for his tea. He detested coffee, and Virginia did, too. She rarely drank tea in the mornings now, though. She claimed to have lost her taste for the beverage. While the water was boiling, he placed a slice of bread in the toaster and opened the pantry in search of the spiced apples he had made a couple of nights ago. He did not see them there. The sturdy Mason jar in which he normally stored his spiced apples and peaches and pears had been relocated.

He checked the refrigerator. Perhaps Virginia had absentmindedly put the jar there, though she rarely ate Spencer's spiced fruit.

The fruit was in the refrigerator, but the Mason jar was not. The apples were piled in a Tupperware container next to the Parmesan cheese. Spencer took the apples out, forked some onto a plate, and put the plate in the microwave.

Virginia had been outside since four in the morning. She had not slept at all during the night, which was true of most nights lately. When she had gone out, the Mason jar was still there. It had refused to be toppled by the night's strong winds. She had sat beside it, as though it were a companion, and had doggedly watched the horizon until the sun had risen. When it did, she had watched its ascending path in the sky. She had watched it until the point at which Spencer would rise. Then she had watched the house.

She now thought she saw his silhouette in the kitchen window. He would be making his morning tea, the tea she had used to share with him before the liquid had begun to fall tasteless onto her tongue. She wished she could still drink tea with Spencer. Their mutual hatred of coffee had shown up on their first date.

"Would you like some coffee or something?" he had asked her, after they had finished with the eggplant casserole.

"Sure," she had said. She could not be rude. It was only their first date.

As she recalled the scene, she realized that she had perhaps seen a look of slight apprehension cross Spencer's face. But he had put on a pot—the coffeemaker was his roommate's.

Later, they had sat silently with mugs in front of them.

"So how do you take it?" he had asked.

"With milk and sugar." She had hoped that heavy additions of external substance would overpower the taste she hated.

"Me, too," Spencer had said. He had gotten up to get the milk and sugar, and both had praised the adorable coincidence.

Both had taken tiny sips and suppressed the convulsions that twisted their faces in response to the bitter taste that had managed to conquer the fierce onslaught of the milk and sugar. The charade had continued for about five minutes before Virginia had finally blurted out that she hated coffee. In relief Spencer had roughly grasped her head in his boxy hands and had kissed her with the fervor inspired by a shared hatred. Her fingers had become netted in his dark wiry hair, hair that was now beginning to thin, as he had guided her to the bedroom.

With a jolt Virginia remembered that she had moved the spiced apples to the refrigerator. She desperately wanted to tell Spencer where they were. She did not want him to have to eat his toast with butter. Then she realized that the refrigerator would probably be the second place he would look. Immediately she felt stupid for worrying.

The wind had ceased just as subtly as it had come, and the deadened grass was still. All motion had stopped. No visitors would knock on the door of the pale yellow house. No cars would drive down the gravel road. No planes would fly above the endless cornfields that swarmed about the monstrous interstate.

Virginia submerged her hands in the suds, which had become slightly dusty with the dehydrated dirt that had been disturbed by the night's winds. But the jar had not been blown over. The liquid dishwasher soap remained where it had been the day before.

Virginia's arms felt tingly, as though they were disconnected from her body. The muscles itched in a way that she could not scratch. She ran her tongue across the rough roof of her mouth and brought her soapy hands to her face.

With the utmost care, she drew the edges of her hands apart. The film formed the way it always did. It sparkled a little with the light lent by the pallid sun. It turned and tangled inside of itself, forming winding shapes and destroying them within the same instant.

The tingling in Virginia's arms amplified and began a steady but swift flow to her jagged elbows, to her forearms, to her arched wrists. Her right wrist jerked

briefly but violently, and the soapy film between Virginia's hands popped, squirting a bit into Virginia's eyes and stinging them sharply.

Virginia groaned in agony. She threw her body forward onto her feet and in rage kicked over the Mason jar so that it lay on its side in the lifeless grass. The soap seeped steadily out of the jar's opening and into the parched, crusty dirt.