"These Small and Tedious Longings" by Franziska Hofhansel
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These Small and Tedious Longings

by Franziska Hofhansel

He was fifty-seven. My age is irrelevant. I am tall, my eyelashes are goopy with mascara, and I speak softly when I am on the telephone. This is all you need to know about me.

I won't disclose his name. It does not belong in my mouth, and certainly not in yours. Know this: he has a fantastically ordinary name. It is so common and plain you would not believe me if I let it slip. You would think me a liar, and I am not: I am fastidiously protective of the truth.

He was not handsome in the least. Does this surprise you? It shouldn't—attractiveness is a rare quality in a man.

I won't have it said that he was charismatic or interesting or a preternaturally effective speaker—he was nothing of the sort. Rather, he was kind in the way that men are often kind to a certain type of woman; the type who are young and pale and thin enough for them to picture our bones pressed taut against our skin, lake-like.

I suppose you might say that I approached him first. I suppose you might also say that he had known my parents and my parents' friends before I was conceived or contemplated, and that he oversaw the circumstances of my birth, and that once as a child I watched him sip tea on my mother's old couch and confess my fortune to her as one would relay the outcome of a poker match.

"She's a queer child," he said, and my mother said, "Yes," and frowned and leaned forward like some sort of crystalline seer. He was wearing jeans—I remember this clearly, for how funny, to see a priest in jeans!—and his fingers picked at the tranquil blue fabric as he spoke. "She's a clever girl. Very funny. You'll need to—you must watch out for her, yes?"

"I won't have her working at that restaurant," my mother said. "If that's what you mean."

"Not exactly. I shouldn't worry too much about her in that respect. I would only—they won't like her, do you see what I mean? She's a bit quiet, yes? Not much interaction with visitors."

"She'll grow into that."

"Well. She might. And she might not."

"She'll learn from Tim and I," my mother replied. "We don't have anyone around anymore who doesn't like the golf course. And she's clever, as you say. She's picked up on it, I'm sure."

He sat up. "I'm not suggesting—there's no issue with criticism. The restaurant understands that. It's no problem if she does become, you know, influenced in some way. All these protests and such—I don't have a problem with that. No one does, I'd imagine. It's only the silence, yes? And all those remarks of hers… She must be clear about where she stands so that the rest can be…so that we can all be prepared."

"We value honesty," my mother said.

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"Of course. Of course you do. I would never—I'm not implying anything regarding principles, or anything like that. And you musn't—there's no need to mention any of this to Tim, I shouldn't think. No need to make him nervous, hm?"

I'm afraid I can't recall the rest of the conversation—I was very young, and not nearly so observant as my mother and the priest might have feared. I resent being named a queer child. I was not strange so much as indifferent, and now I am not so much indifferent as I am estranged.

At any rate, my mother and the priest were convinced that I was slippery, somehow—there was no core, no center to my fleeting rage or earnest solitude; I was without conviction, and therefore dangerous.

I suppose I must disclose the gravity of their concerns. I do not enjoy golf. I do not detest it. I am wonderfully ambivalent; it bores me, I suppose, but it is not the sort of boredom which enrages or festers, unmoored by a kind of melancholic violence; I am simply unmoved. And so sermons are deadly.

For the first sixteen years of my life, I was not expected to observe the priest's speeches. I went to church, certainly, but like all the other girls in my year I only went to the basement to paint golf balls and learn my lessons. The basement was dark and musty—as basements are—and there was an inexplicable warmth to our exile. We hunched over our paints and history books like ghastly moths, adjoined by our small and tedious longings: to locate kindness. To find ourselves within a green damp meadow and to be sure of our presence and our presence alone.

It was here that I first became aware of beauty. I sat next to Rachel Blythe and noticed—through slivers of mottled, papery light—constellations of freckles; her lovely, sloping nose; dark and morbid eyes. She had a goodness to her: some mistook it for vulnerability, but it was not sweetness so much as a lucid and blooming strength.

We memorized our lessons together—hunched over in the dark, shoulders pressed together like wings—and argued over the necessity of the golf course. Rachel hated it: she drew tiny mean notes onto the golf balls before painting them over with a sterile gold. She never spoke of it with the other girls, but when we walked home together or sat on the grass, picking at granola bars and watching the sleek swing of golf clubs in the distance, she'd murmur hateful, vengeful things to me.

"I hope they fucking die," she said once.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?" she gestured towards the golfers loitering by the water cooler.

"Right, but not like, locals, right? Like just the visiting ones?"

"All of them. You know they don't actually give a shit about us, right? Even—yeah, like locals, or whatever. If they did then they would fucking—they would stand up for us. They'd close Ginney's. Get them to pay people better. They would do *something*."

"It's not like Maura and her group have gotten anything done either," I said. "They just walk around with those stupid signs, they don't actually— "

"Okay, yeah. But at least they're fucking trying." She shook her head. "I don't know. I just—I may lose it. Once we have to start attending sermons, I mean."

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"I can't imagine it'll be anything new," I said. "Same old stuff that's in our books. Just now we have to listen instead of memorize."

Rachel narrowed her eyes. "No. I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

"Those books we've got to read—about our *history*, or whatever—it's just some stupid story, you know? To explain how we got here, why we are the way that we are. But the speeches—they're personal, no? We're not learning a story anymore. They want us to place ourselves in it, you know? Like—"

"There is no *they*, Rachel," I said. "It's not—so Lance and Mckinley and whoever own Ginney's and that bit of land near the beach. And then Lance's step-brother has some kind of control over the course, and James as well, and then that's about it—do you have any idea who actually owns the damn course?"

"It's someone in—"

"Do you know their name? Or names? No? Then you haven't a clue. None of us do. It's not—people can't just reference, like, this 'they' business. It's not a set of people that does this, it's—"

"No." Rachel sat up, nostrils flaring. "No, absolutely not. Don't you dare start with that business about the bones. I don't want to hear it. We're going to have to put up with it all the time in a few months, I don't want—"

"It's not about the bones," I said. "Not really. I don't know how to explain it. But people who love the golf course, people who hate it—"

"They're not the same. Not remotely."

"No. But they're both a part of it. Do you see what I mean?"

She ran a hand through my hair and gazed at me with a kind of glassy nostalgia. "Yes. I know what you mean." Her hand did not leave my hair. She kept on looking at me and I kept on looking at her and far above us the sky swelled with dark and bruising clouds. "My mom wants me to start working at Ginney's soon," she said softly.

I took her hand in mine. "I won't let that happen," I told her.

"We need the money."

"I know."

She gripped my hand. "You should come with me. Not to Ginney's, I mean, of course not, but—" here she lowered her voice "—there's going to be a meeting at the schoolhouse on Saturday, and—"

I pulled away. "No. I'm not going to that. I want nothing to do with them."

"What are you afraid of?"

"It's not like that. I'm not scared, it's just that nothing ever gets done, and—"

Her eyes were bright and glistening. "Coward," she whispered.

"Rachel—"

She stood up, brushing bits of grass off her knees. "No. Nevermind. Forget I said anything, alright?"

There was no point in arguing with her. I could hardly accuse her of lying: I was a translucent animal. Weak, one might say. No backbone.

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Rachel did not forgive me. She continued to speak to me, and on our walks home she'd sometimes brush up against me without warning, arm against arm, as though collision was a tender and necessary act. Still—there was a wariness to her. She didn't speak of sermons or history lessons; she didn't mention Ginney's, and I didn't ask. I had spoken to my mother, and I knew now that I too would be working there eventually. There was no meager hope, no joy to be had: we were to begin our lives in the only way we were permitted.

In the fall, we attended our first sermon. I wore a salmon-pink dress and an ugly blue hat. Rachel dressed as though she were attending a funeral. Seeing as my mother disapproved of our friendship—she deemed Rachel a radical, contended that we were abnormally close to one another—we sank into the pews opposite one another and looked at our feet.

The priest, as I have said, was not a handsome man. He had brittle skin and teeth; his hair resembled dirty wax. His voice was hardly priest-like—gravelly, unimpressive—but I was compelled to listen: I would find things in his utterings to criticize, I thought, and in doing so impress upon Rachel that I was not the wallowing sheep she had made me out to be.

"I am going to begin," he said, "with a story I am sure you all know by heart. I do so because there is no greater gift than the story of our origins. For many of you, this is your first time with us in this room, in this time, in this precious world which you are all now contending with as adults. And so I hope you hear and believe me when I say: welcome. We are blessed by your presence."

Scattered applause and murmurs; my mother's mouth creased like an old map and she squeezed my hand, placidly rearranged her face.

"Before the great fissure," he began, "this world was nothing more than rocks and bone. There were animals: yes. They were grand creatures. They had no need for light, for sound: they wandered the earth as strange ghosts, tracing one another's footsteps longingly, for they could neither see nor hear and their only sense of company came from the knowledge that there were others who had tread in their paths, others who had slogged through the crunch of skeleton and rock, weary and alone. They went mad, one by one: they could not prove that they were not the only moving thing! Perhaps, each feared, they had been turning in circles this whole time: they had wept for imprints upon ash, certain that someone else had been where they had been and had felt what they were feeling now—but doubt struck! And so they simply stopped. They turned in tiny, tiny circles. They removed their skin and became one with the earth, their bones sticking out like dandelions in a patch of grass.

"Alas! The dismantled skeletons could not rest. They were not meant to, you see: the rocks rejected them. The animals had been wrong: they felt it was unnatural to turn in circles for eternity, and so they simply collapsed. But that is not the way of the world! The original skeletons did not intend to appease their loneliness—the animals were *meant* to find their own hollow corners and turn and turn. Satisfaction is an individual conquest; their is no joy to be found in unity. Companionship is a useless impulse.

"The skeletons of the animals were distraught. Slowly rejected from the earth, they found themselves more alone than ever. They had been in partnership with one another to form and complete the animals; now they were fragmented, hobbling creatures. They had once been beautiful and dumb: now they were beautiful and useless.

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"The original skeletons grew frustrated: they detest weakness. There is no reason for idleness; it is a falsehood meant to lure us into penalty! We have no need for rest; sleep is merely an artifact of insanity. And yet the bones were kind: they recognized what was immutable and what was not. If the animal skeletons needed company, then they would give them company.

"And thus the earth was split: the skeletons took apart the rocks, and out of the rocks created men, who could see and speak and hear, and who were content to be alone. Animal skeletons lay all around: when men found them, they fashioned them into clubs, and with these clubs began the holy art of Golf. Men, as I have said, do not desire intimacy or socialization, but we are burdened with this land's past, and every now and then become afflicted with delusions of affection. To curb these impulses, we partake in a performance that is part violence, part atrophy: we golf. And that is why—"

"That's not what the lessons said."

I had not intended to speak. I had intended to sit there, fingers clasped together as though in prayer, silent and watchful. I had come to prepare for conversation with Rachel, to lock arms and whisper about the priest's nonsensical dramatics, to watch her eyes dart about as she detailed—in breathless murmurs—the sheer idiocy of his claims.

I spoke, I think, because it had occurred to me that this was a compact and inscrutable form of protest; I would be forgiven, in Rachel's eyes, for my cowardice, and yet the consequences would be minimal—this would not be the first time I had said something moronic or contradictory. There would be a brief and humiliating upset, and that would be that—even my mother, I imagined, might find it in herself to overlook my idiocy.

Murmurings arose. The priest cleared his throat. My mother clenched my wrist with such force I feared it might break.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I'll have to ask you to elaborate. I'm not quite sure what you—"

"We were taught," I said, "that the animal skeletons had chosen their fate. Not that it was forced upon them."

His smiled. "I don't recall having said otherwise."

"You implied—"

"She's joking," my mother proclaimed loudly. "She's just joking. Of course. It's a nervous habit—she simply doesn't know when to stop, she isn't—"

"Yes," he said. "Of course. A wonderful sense of humour. I remember. Shall we move on, then?"

He began to detail the moral implications of a golf match several hundred years ago. The congregation was silent: bemused, I thought. I had shocked them into contemplation.

I can't pretend to recall the content of his subsequent ramblings; the sermon passed in a hazy, monotonous blur. I did not get a chance to speak to Rachel; the second his speech concluded, the priest pulled me aside. I was to come and meet with him, he said, the following Wednesday afternoon. I would remember, wouldn't I?

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My mother, as it turned out, quickly forgave me for my folly; my employment with Ginney's was postponed in exchange for my meeting with the priest five days a week—he awarded us a handsome stipend for my 'commitment to learning.'

The meetings, for the most part, were spectacularly boring. I was to read a series of texts on the moral and spiritual aptitudes of various historical golfers. Once I had done so, I would report my findings to him and he would lecture me on the decline of moral hygiene in the twenty-first century. I was a dutiful listener—anything, I supposed, was better than working at Ginney's—and I became adept at solemnly nodding and expressing my most sincere sympathies every now and then.

Routine was hardly ever breached. I had the sense, at times, that he simply took pleasure in my boredom. There were only a handful of days in which he deviated from lecture. On one such day he took me for a walk around the golf course by the edge of town. Neither of us said anything for a very long time; I can't imagine either of us cared to know what the other was thinking. We were just nearing the edge of the course when he began to speak.

"I don't suppose you see your friend Rachel so much anymore."

I didn't reply. He took this as authorization to continue. "I hear she's getting on very well at Ginney's. A lot of the men—she's very well-liked, you know."

I imagined the town overrun with sea water. There would be nowhere to go, nowhere to hide—we'd simply have to sit atop our little houses and wait until we became too drowsy to stay afloat.

"She still attends those marches every now and then, of course. The signs are sort of sweet, don't you think? I saw one the other day—something about dispossession of land, I think. Very messy handwriting. I can never be quite sure what they're trying to say."

"I don't go to those," I said quietly. "If that's what you're getting at."

"I'm aware."

There was a sudden crackling sound. I watched a heavy cloud of smoke drift about in the distance.

"Bit early for a barbecue," he said. "Don't you think?"

"I suppose. Don't they normally have them mid-day?"

I began to make my descent down the hill. He reached out and gripped my arm. "Hold on. I want you to watch something."

There was very little I could make out. Far beyond the golf course were the pointed tips of houses, of course, and I could just barely glimpse the gleam of a truck parked by the grocery store. Had I looked closer I might have seen hunched figures gathered around a single spot in the road. I might have seen faces—pale, ghost-like—before they were engulfed in that hideous orange glow. As it was, I watched an orange tsunami sweep across the landscape like a mangled curtain. There were no houses. There was only the grass beneath my feet and the silhouettes of men with their elbows in the air.

He turned to me. "You understand now, don't you?"

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I let out a whimper. I touched a hand to my face. I wanted to make sure the bones were all there.

"What have you done?" I whispered.

"Nothing. I've done nothing."

"You've—"

"No. Your friends—alright, Rachel and her little band of activists. Her friends. They aren't subtle, my love. They organize and they debate and they scream and the truth comes out. Plans are revealed. Always. It was not my men who lit that match, dear. It was her. Them. They think—thought—they could burn this place down to the ground. That this place could burn. But we golf on the ruins of dead and ruined men and their bones are invulnerable. Only the town is flammable. But I have kept you safe, so that I might always have a reminder of futility."

The world is not an ugly place. It does not require justification. It makes no claims to ownership or agency; our homes are our homes because we have said so, because we plant our feet in the grass and refuse to leave and because we love our stubbornness, our strange and ill-willed audacity. There is beauty to be had and I have had it.

I ran. I left those awful hills and manicured greenery behind and as I entered that orange tsunami I began to weep. Rachel, my love, we are all we have.