

# The Wrath of Nature

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**Laura's bedroom was above the summer kitchen, where her** mother had rolled out pie dough on an old oak table with one short leg and a hole in the middle. Pearl was the mother's name. Charlie's first wife. At thirty-six she fell asleep at the wheel and swerved off a ravine into the Wabash River. The year was 1969.

After Charlie married Vita she got rid of the oak table when her two daughters said it was rotted and ugly. The Grace Hopkins Society was grateful for the donation. Vita sorted through clothes and undergarments left in Pearl's dresser and closet as long as Charlie had been widowed, almost two years.

Laura was fourteen and made fun of Vita's town lady ways. Told her perfume attracted mosquitoes, that lipstick was only for Sundays. Cats, even pretty ones, belonged in the barn.

From Charlie's girl Vita learned how to milk cows, butcher chickens, drive a tractor, load and fire a shotgun, spit watermelon seeds into a can. How to skim cream and make butter, watch caramel cook just long enough so it wouldn't burn in the pan.

All this and Vita still starched her aprons, collected fancy lotions, bought shoes she never wore at Jacqueline's. She painted her nails before bed, every Sunday night. By sundown on Wednesday all that shiny red was ruined. Chipped from tip to cuticle.

**Late afternoon, Vita arrives at Larkspur Manor, in gray slacks** and a white cashmere sweater. Her lipstick is red but not garish. Mascara brightens her pale blue eyes. Her white hair (blond in her youth, dyed a honey shade in middle age) is chin length and cut in layers. She's worn the style for years, ever since a waitress told her she looked like the actress Helen Mirren.

The door to Charlie's room is open wide. Inside, the television is blaring, tuned to a talk show with a couple arguing on a stage. Vita turns the television off, admires the flower bouquet she brought

yesterday. Not daffodils from home, blooming wild outside the barn, but tulips and hyacinths purchased from a florist.

She kisses Charlie below the tube that runs across his cheek. His dark eyes look past her, at the wall painted mauve. Two pillows prop up his back.

“Pearl, my sweet darlin’,” he says. “Love of my life.”

Vita pats Charlie on his arm without correcting him, moves a chair closer to his bed. She sits and removes a magazine from her bag. She starts flipping through pictures of entertaining ideas, dream gardens, and spa bathrooms the headline says will *Soothe Your Soul*.

She turns another page, asks if Dr. Rice had already come by.

Charlie stares at her blankly. “Our boy, Byron. He was here today.”

“Not today, Charlie. Byron and Aileen came yesterday. With the grandchildren.” She keeps her eyes on the magazine, admires a white duvet and pillows edged with lace.

“And Byron wasn’t your boy,” she says, not unkindly but evenly, for this is the part, not the Pearl part, that she wants corrected, if only for the walls to hear.

“That boy was a hellion. That’s what they said, darlin’.”

Vita feels the stab to her heart. She knows this was true, despite her best intentions.

*Not just a handful but a hellion.* Decades ago, this had been the word around town, since Byron’s father had shot himself in the head at the age of thirty-nine. Found face down in mud by the reservoir, his best suit ruined, his bank briefcase empty except for a thermos of coffee gone cold.

At seventeen, Vita’s fatherless boy was calling her dirty names in public, taunting girls at the A&W. Up to no good at the reservoir at night, skipping school on Fridays.

When Charlie caught wind of the gossip, from a waitress named Lillian Butz, he was sitting at the lunch counter in Rick’s café. Charlie got the specifics he needed. That evening in May he addressed a letter to Vita, still Mrs. Lange in correspondence. Full-time farm

help that summer was needed. Fair wage, room and board were offered. Wife had passed on, he wrote, but there was a daughter who cooked up a storm. No one went to bed hungry.

At first Vita balked. Her pride was offended. By the last of the month she was at her wit’s end. Arrangements were made in a day. Charlie fixed up the attic with insulation and three walls, a bed and a dresser.

For all of June Byron worked at the farm, went to bed restless and angry. He skipped Sunday worship and lunch with his family, found another church to his liking. By July—his body lean from labor, his skin golden-brown—his demeanor appeared greatly improved. At his childhood home in town he gave his mother a bouquet of daisies and a kiss on each cheek. At lunch he said please and thank you, a prayer to his savior. When his two younger sisters fought at the table he told them to be good.

“He shaped up, though,” Charlie says now to Vita. “Our boy shaped up right fine.” With his fingers he kneads the blanket on his bed, sighs as his eyes glaze over.

“We always wanted a boy. Didn’t we, Pearl? A son for us. A brother for our darlin’ Laura.”

**Afterward, Vita walks down a peach-colored hall. Outside a room with one window and closed curtains she watches a sleeping woman, lying on her side. Last week the woman turned ninety. There was a small party with staff, a niece, a sister-in-law still living, balloons and chocolate cake. Vita attended.**

A buttinski, the woman was. What Charlie had called her. She stopped by every week after Pearl died, to check on him and Laura. Her name was Ellie Holt. Had eyes the color of lead, Charlie said. A face like Lyndon Johnson’s.

He and Vita were talking and drinking coffee at the farm. The first time had been in town. There were suppers, too, what Vita cooked and Charlie complimented, though he salted everything twice and ate, mainly, bread with butter.

Ellie had let loose, Charlie said. Got all high and mighty. Told him Laura was acting strange, not right for a girl fourteen. Took after Pearl in looks. When Pearl was young, that is. Just as pretty, with those green eyes and auburn-colored hair. Ellie wondered if Charlie had noticed the resemblance, or his daughter's odd behavior. Knew the Lange boy was there for the summer. Hard worker, she agreed. Turned pious, too. Still, she said, the boy was unsettling. She reminded Charlie she was a devout Episcopalian.

Charlie told Vita he spoke up for her boy and showed Ellie the door, said the next time she came by with a casserole or pie a shotgun would greet her.

"My girl needs a mother. I need a wife. You need a husband. Only problems there are. All need fixin'." This was his proposal.

At the courthouse Vita wore a pink silk suit. Charlie gave her a ring, a bouquet of white carnations. By then, Ellie had been shipped away by her brother and his wife. For several years she lived with an ailing cousin in Aurora.

After Charlie and Vita married, Laura was quiet most of the time but also helpful and patient, eager to please. When Vita had mind to scald a dead turkey Laura took over, plucked the feathers off dry. She bleached the cellar floor every week, canned tomatoes in sweltering heat.

Vita's girls feigned illness when work was required, never during trips into town. They called Laura names, concocted cruel lies, said her mother did dirty things with men for money the night before she died.

Years passed and once, in the middle of winter, Vita couldn't sleep and found Laura lying on the porch, on the bare floor with one blanket covering her. Vita helped Laura to her room, checked in on her for a week when she came down with the flu. In Vita's ear, Laura whispered she had to stay sick. She pleaded with Vita to open the windows and let in the cold air. She begged Vita to let her starve. She said Byron would come back to her room at night and do terrible things, but maybe—just maybe, she said—he'd stay away if she didn't

get better.

Vita told Laura to hush. She told Laura she was delirious from fever. She made Laura soup from a can.

After she recovered Laura ate to get fat but couldn't gain a pound. She chopped her hair above her ears and bit her nails to bloody stubs. At sixteen she ran off to Texas, with a nineteen-year-old who promised a ranch and white horses, his constant love and devotion.

Charlie was heartbroken, never spoke her name again.

The boy's name was Lewis. Lewis Grubbs. With two b's, not one. Vita remembers distinctly.

Outside Ellie's door, Vita remembers, too, the frail old woman's birthday cake, purchased from a store. The cake had five or six icing roses, all of them blood red, so sickeningly sweet she almost retched after eating one. She remembers the cake she ate the day she married Charlie. Laura made four perfect white layers, buttercream frosting that tasted divine. She arranged a dozen sugared nasturtiums on top of the cake and around the edges of an heirloom china plate.

To make the cake fancy, Laura had said. She picked the nasturtiums herself.

**Last of May and Charlie's been dead for a week, buried next to Pearl at Mount Salvation, with an epitaph that reads *Loving Husband and Father*.**

Byron runs the farm. He comes around often. Every other morning, at least. He doesn't stay long. His wife and children come over on Sundays. They pay no attention to Vita; they come to eat and text.

Her daughters live far away. Neither one has children. The oldest, Eve, is divorced. She quit the piano for good and works for a chiropractor near Yale in Connecticut. Janine teaches Pilates in Santa Fe and lives with her boyfriend who fixes motorcycles and grows hot peppers for profit. Once, Vita remembers, Janine told her he studied

electronics for almost half a semester at a community college.

A white sedan turns into the gravel drive as Vita sweeps the porch. Gray clouds hover over the barn.

She looks out at the car with a driver she assumes is lost.

The car stops. A tall, thin woman steps out: in flat shoes, a straight skirt, a pale yellow sweater. A gust of wind blows past; she tucks her hair behind her ears. It is wavy and shoulder length, a dark shade of auburn.

She faces the barn, the ominous sky. She stands like this for seconds, then minutes, before she turns around.

Vita watches but remains inside the porch, her broom in one hand.

The woman walks across the grass and glances up toward the hill in the distance, where her horse, Trixa, used to graze.

When she comes closer, or too near to be turned away, Vita opens the porch door. Casually, as if no time has passed at all, she says, "Careful, Laura, or the wind will get you."

She steps away and places her broom in a corner. She turns to face her guest, with several feet between them.

"I must apologize. The rattan set isn't out yet," Vita says. "I've had it just three years. Two chairs with the prettiest cushions, in cobalt blue and fuchsia. And a matching table with glass. Byron put it all away for the winter, in the sitting room, where that old kitchen and oak table used to be. You remember. I think it's warm enough for him to bring everything out. Wouldn't you agree?"

Laura digs the heel of her shoe into the spotless cement floor. She swallows what starts to rise in her throat. "How is he? Your son."

"Your stepbrother could not be better. He's a deacon at his church. He and Aileen have four boys. I don't see them as much as I'd like, but I can hardly complain."

She pauses. "We play cards every Sunday. They always bring me flowers."

Her lies come as easily as breath.

"How fortunate you are," Laura says.

"I am," Vita says, "truly blessed."

Vita gestures toward the door that leads inside the house.

"Come, won't you? I'll make tea for us both."

Laura hesitates then follows Vita up the familiar two and a half steps, to the main kitchen. The only kitchen now. The walls are no longer white but robin-egg blue. The open shelves her father built and painted when she was five—what exposed mismatched glasses and plates, canned tomatoes and mincemeat, peaches and spiced pears—have been torn out, replaced with maple cabinets, shiny white knobs on the doors. The floor is stained and polished hardwood, not chartreuse linoleum, what her mother had chosen because she loved that particular shade of green. The porcelain sink, what had a single worn spot, black and the size of a pebble, is now soapstone, with a fancy faucet and sprayer.

From a cupboard Vita removes two mugs and a box of Earl Grey, another with Chamomile. She fills the kettle with water, places it on the professional gas range. She turns the front burner to high, sits down at the table. Not the pine drop leaf from Laura's childhood but another painted what Vita calls distressed antique white.

Laura pulls out a cushioned chair and sits on the edge of it. Her back is rigid. She holds her purse in her lap.

"That tea kettle," Vita says. She points at the black-and-white kettle, designed to look like a cow. "Isn't it precious? Came from the church bazaar. Someone, a young newlywed, I think, brought it in brand new. Said she had another one at home just like it, if you can imagine. At five dollars, I couldn't resist. We raised money for all those tornado victims. Poor people. They still need our help. It's terrible. The wrath of nature. You see the pictures on TV. Sometimes I can hardly stand to watch." Vita sighs and shakes her head. "But I take heart in the other stories, too. It's just amazing to me what humans will do to survive, what they're capable of."

Her face expressionless, Laura listens and watches Vita.

"Deb Heiney," Vita says then. "You remember. Her mother, Virginia, used to do my hair. Deb said we set a new record. We raised

over five thousand dollars.”

“Congratulations,” Laura says. “Good for you.”

“For the needy, you mean.”

“How is Eve?” Laura asks, doing her best to sound sincere.

“Does she still play the piano?”

“She does. She just started teaching piano at Yale.”

“Yale. Really?”

“I know. Impressive, isn’t it? I couldn’t be more proud.”

“And Janine?”

“Janine’s in Santa Fe. She’s engaged to an electrical engineer.”

The kettle starts to rattle then whistle. Vita rises from her chair.

“Chamomile or Earl Grey, dear?”

“Chamomile, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Vita drops a tea bag in each mug, pours the hot water.

“I live in California now,” Laura says. “In San Francisco.”

Vita opens the French-door refrigerator, gets a carton of milk she sets on the table. She hands Laura her Chamomile, sits down with her mug of Earl Grey.

“Rita Gilroy,” Vita says. “Always a big-boned gal. She had an aunt who visited from California. Rita married Lewis. Lewis Grubbs. You remember him. When he came back from Texas he said he wasn’t cut out for ranching. He and Rita had six children. The youngest, poor thing, had one of those genetic diseases that skips generations. She died last spring.”

Vita closes her eyes and sighs at this sorrow, then says, “Where are my manners? Would you like a cookie, dear?”

“No . . . Thank you, though.”

“Are you sure? They’re biscuits, actually, with dark and milk chocolate. Came in a beautiful gold box. I ordered them from a catalog. They’re genuine European.”

Laura shakes her head and smiles demurely. She watches Vita pour milk into her Earl Grey, lets a silence pass. She remembers, for surprise guests, her mother served tea from a silver pot, not in mugs but china cups and saucers, on a tray with fresh cream and

sugar, cloth napkins, silver spoons from the buffet. Cookies, home-made, would be out, not just offered. And pie. Always pie, baked that morning, with flaky crusts of butter and lard, cream or fruit filling.

Laura remembers, too, her father who called her a liar and whore, and Byron his innocent boy. She remembers pleading with Vita to help her. She remembers being told to hush. She remembers leaving this place, this farm that had once been a part of her, as much as her own skin and bones. She remembers being sixteen years old, miscarrying her stepbrother’s child at a rest stop in Oklahoma. She remembers loving and leaving five men, including Lewis Grubbs, who beat her black and blue in Texas. She remembers surviving two mental breakdowns, passing her GED, tending bar and cleaning rich people’s toilets, for money to live and travel in France. She remembers making croissants and petits fours, a kind woman named Irène who taught her. She remembers eating cherries in the Loire Valley, reading Colette by the Seine. She remembers waking to a misty morning and sunrise in Lourmarin, believing it was such a beautiful sight that she could have died right then and there a blissful, grateful woman.

“I own a bakery,” Laura says. “A bakery called Pearl Marie’s.”

Vita sips her tea, stares into her mug. Behind her the wall clock ticks and ticks.

“Such a shame about Anna’s,” Vita says then. “You remember. Best bakery in town. Cherry cheesecake, almond macaroons to die for. Closed last year. Her daughter Gayle couldn’t keep it going. Poor dear was heartbroken. Told me the rent went sky high.”

“How awful,” Laura says.

“Yes,” Vita agrees. “Tragic, really.”

Laura waits for Vita to finish her tea, listens to more detailed town trivia. She doesn’t mention her father. She doesn’t ask if he had spoken her name, even once, before he died. Instead she praises Vita’s stylish updates, says the kitchen looks like a picture in a magazine. As she rises from the table she thanks Vita for the tea and conversation, her warm hospitality.

The hour is nearing seven o'clock. The cloudy sky is grumbling.

"It was lovely to see you, dear," Vita says. "Pity you couldn't stay for supper. You must remember. Don't be a stranger."

She waves to Laura's back when she is several paces past the porch door.

**That evening, Vita eats supper in the living room and watches** a nature program on public television. She learns about the endangered Iberian lynx. Scientists had studied the young and discovered that siblings kept in captivity could turn on one another; in some cases brutally, until death. When a fight breaks out, the narrator says, researchers sometimes have to brave the claws and step into the fray. Vita watches the young woman on TV. Wearing thick gloves that stretch past her elbows, she charges in and separates two cubs, to stop an attack when the lynx mother couldn't, or didn't.

After the program Vita raises the volume for the ten o'clock news, listens next door in the kitchen. She washes the few dishes in the sink, scrubs the copper pan, any remnants of canned chicken noodle.

The female broadcaster's voice is soothing and calm. She reports that a fifty-seven-year-old woman was killed shortly before 8 p.m., during the storm that passed through the northern part of the state. Police said the woman was driving on County Line Road, near the entrance of Mount Salvation, when high winds caused a tree to split and fall on her car.

Vita dries the dishes with a clean linen cloth. In the living room she turns off the TV and lamp. Reluctantly she goes upstairs, to what had been her escape and solace just before and after Charlie died: her son's former room, where she was afraid, for the first time she could remember, that the walls her husband built would collapse all around her.