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The night before her Oma died, Wendy was in a booth at the bar with Lila, Raina, and Sophie. It was eleven p.m., and they were all tipsy. Sophie was saying, “Age is completely different for trans people. The way we talk about age is not how cis people talk about age.”

“You mean that thing,” said Wendy, “where our age is also how long we’ve been out or on hormones or whatever?”

“Or do you mean that thing,” said Lila, “where we don’t age as much. Because we die sooner.”

“Both those things, yes!” Sophie said. “But there’s more! There’s much more. Think of how hormones preserve you. Look—we could all pass for twenty-one if we wanted to. Fuck, I met a lady in New York who was *sixty* and been on hormones for decades; I swear she barely looks older than us. One sec,” she said as she flagged down the waitress and they all ordered another.

“For the guys too, hey?” said Lila. “My boyfriend gets carded all the time ... He’s thirty-four, man. *I’m* younger than him.”

“Exactly,” said Sophie. “And yet not just that!”

“Are you giving us the latest from Twitter, Sophie?” said Raina.

“Fuck off,” Sophie snorted into her empty bottle. Wendy couldn’t tell if she’d laughed or was actually upset.

“You are kinda our link to the Trans Girl Internet,” said Wendy.

Sophie made an exasperated *aachh* sound. “This is something I’ve thought of for a while. Can I go on? Is that okay with you?”

“Apologies,” said Raina. “Please.”

“Okay,” she went on. “I don’t just mean the difference in how long trans people live. And I don’t just mean in the sense that we have two kinds of age.

But the difference with transsexual age is what can be expected from you. Cis people have so many benchmarks for a good life that go by age.”

“You’re talking about the wife, the kids, the dog,” Wendy said.

“More than that. And also yes, that. It didn’t stop being important,” said Sophie. “Cis people always have timelines. I mean, I know not every cis person has that life, but—what are the cis people in my life doing? What are they doing in your life? Versus what the trans people in your life are doing? On a macro level. Ask yourself that.”

“Is that just cis people or is it straight people?” said Lila.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Sophie. “I just mean: How mainstream society conceives of age doesn’t apply to us. I swear it doesn’t.”

The waitress came back with the round. “Thanks, ladies,” she said.

“I wonder if cis people think about their past in the same way we do,” Raina said suddenly.

“How do we think about our past?” said Wendy.

And Raina said, “Hmm.”

“Well,” said Sophie, “if you want news from the Trans Girl Internet—” but then another waitress dropped a tray and some jokers in the bar cheered and Wendy got up to pee anyway and sat sipping from a mickey of whiskey in the bathroom, calmly thinking.

1

The night Wendy's Oma died, she had sex dreams. Only sometimes did she have sex dreams—usually Wendy had nightmares, and usually she was being chased or hurt. But this morning in her dreams, when her grandmother died, a girl was fucking her over an old television in an abandoned gym. She woke up with her phone dingling. Her dad. *Call me when you get up it's important.*

Wendy put her face back in the pillow with her hair piled around her like a hill. She trailed a long arm down the side of the bed and skittered her phone across the floor. Her bladder was pulsing; sunlight through a crack in the curtain hurt her eyes. She was still drunk, and every part of her hurt.

Wendy lay there curled into herself in the half-light, her head softly beating, not sleeping. She lay like that for a full hour. Her pee swelled, and the light grew brighter.

When the phone rang, she made her body get up and scrabble for her phone. It was her father.

“Jesus shitstick Dad, what,” Wendy said. Her voice was deep and raspy, a smoker's voice though she rarely smoked anymore. Her words felt as chunky in her mouth as a potato. She was still drunk. She'd feel fuzz behind her eyes the whole day.

Her dad was crying.

“Ben?” said Wendy, putting a hand to her mottled face, ruddy-cheeked and pale.

“Ben? Dad?” It was chilly and the first snows were sticking. She tied up the curtain and shut the window to let light and warmth into her room. Her legs were shivering.



The funeral was quiet and simple, at the EMC Church out in the country. Wendy wore a simple black dress. She cried exactly once, during a hymn, silently and horribly, like a little girl told to shut up. But for the rest of the day she felt warm and blessed. She felt a lot of love for her grandmother. She felt grateful she'd had so much time with her Oma. She felt grateful her Oma'd been given a long life. In that way, Wendy had a beautiful, strange synergy with all the old Mennonites in the room, the ones who ignored Wendy or spoke to her in microseconds and hushes. The ones who truly believed the old woman was in heaven. They and Wendy both were sad that she was gone. But they were happy to think about her too.

That's the difference, Wendy thought, between her grandma and everybody else who'd died.

She turned away when she saw people she didn't want to recognize her. It was stupid. It would be hard to mistake her around here—her hair was black and went down to her waist, and she was tall by anyone's standard.

And what, what was the point in fighting? Sacrifice wasn't meaningless. It'd been eight years since she said to them, "I'm a girl," and some things you couldn't fight that long. She was angry about it, but she didn't start anymore. She did not appear in the obituary or funeral program, and her dad had warned her about it ("It's out of my hands, I'm sorry") and it pissed her off, but she didn't say a word. Her family had gotten kinder over the years. It wasn't that hard.



Back at her Oma's house, neighbours brought hot dishes and a Superstore bag

of buns, then left. Her aunts began to prepare the table. Wendy came into the room with a beer, looming over them like a tree.

“Can I help with anything?”

“Oh, well, thank you, Wendy, but we’re very set here! You just go ahead and enjoy yourself. You go visit.”

Wendy sat and drank her beer in the living room as her uncles and cousins played on their phones.

She listened to her aunts gossip about their kids, about their kids’ sports teams. One of them fetched her daughter to run to the van. When they ate, nobody cried. It was like a normal family gathering and no one was crying and did Wendy care every time she heard the cut-off first syllable of her old name and sudden third-person *hes* and *hises*? It used to be worse. It didn’t matter. Her grandma was dead.



Long after everyone else went to bed, Wendy was on the back porch staying up with the men.

“You remember how Mum would pack us homemade tomato juice?” yelled her dad.

“Oh! *Najo*.”

“Hahahahaha.” He was blitzed. “Complete with fuckin’ tomaaaaato *chunks!* You’d be trying to be all fuckin’ cool for some girl and take a swig and your whole mind’s on how you’re ever gonna get your hand up her shirt SPLOOSH,” and Wendy and her uncles all laughed and drank and laughed.

There were cigars. Wendy smoked one. She enjoyed the rich ugliness of cigars. Someone took a picture that she later loved and put on her wall, back in

the city: She's sitting dazed and drunk on the bench next to her dad, cigar in her mouth, her hair streaming down her sides like onyx waterfalls and light snow coming down, American postcard-style snow. Ben was laughing and leaning back with his mouth tilted against the sky, grey hair flowing to the ground.



"There's probably tomato juice still in there."

"Is anybody else frightened to look in the fridge?"

"Need the morgue more for the fridge than we did for her."

"*Najo.*"

"Jesus Christ," Ben said. "So when Wendy's mum—God rest her soul—when she first ever came to the house. She's this big city girl from university, right. Here at our fuckin' backwater-ass—"

"—and you're still trying to get your hand up her shirt."

"Probably on this bench."

Wendy laughed and hacked something up.

"You okay, girl?" said Ben.

Wendy coughed. "I'm fuckin' grand." She loved hearing stories about her mom. She had no memories of her.

"So here she is," he continued. "This smart and sophisticated city girl, she thinks she's coming to the farm for some hearty country meal, right? And Mom comes out with a big fuckin' vat of soup, *slams* it down, and there's a fuckin' *chicken leg* sticking right out of it!"

"Chicken's probably still there too."

"Your mother said grace on that one, God bless her."

Wendy hadn't brought her winter coat. She was so sleepy, and almost went

Little Fish

in to bed, but instead got a blanket and wrapped it over herself and sipped her dad's vodka and listened. Wendy liked being quiet around her family. And being quiet wasn't usual for her. It was nice. She didn't remember going inside.



Two mornings later in her dreams, Wendy was being chased down a long hallway with carpet. And white wallpaper with the patterns of cherries and locked wooden doors. Her hair was short in this dream. She was running fast, but they were faster.

When she woke, it was morning but not daylight. Her long muscles creaked and uncreased as she stood up from the living room fold-out in her nightgown, lacy and shimmering and moon-blue.

She went to start the coffee and stood by the kitchen window where outside, slivers of purple were breaking through the dark. The coffee burred, and rays of orange and magenta and violet spread out over the snow. Everyone else was gone, and Wendy and Ben were going back today. It was always sad leaving here. And how many more times would she be coming back now. Realistically.



“Dad.”

“Yeah.”

“When are we leaving?”

“I thought we'd head out at one.”

“You're kidding me! That's so early.”

“I know, I got this guy to meet.”

“Whatever. It’s fine.”

“Good.”

“Who do you—”

“Ssssh sssh ssssh—this part’s important!”

They were watching cartoons. Wendy rolled her eyes and got up for more cereal; her grandparents’ old house was the kind of space it was hard not to eat in.

Then, in the kitchen, the phone on the wall rang.

“Hello?” Wendy said into the receiver.

“Hello!” The voice was unfamiliar and female and old. “Aganetha?”

“Aganetha?” said Wendy, confused at first. “No, there’s no Aga—.” Wendy put her hand on her forehead. “I’m sorry,” she said. “No, this isn’t her. We called her Nettie. I’m so sorry. She’s dead.”

Silence.

“Five days ago. It was sudden,” she added.

More silence, then the woman said, “Oh my word.” A long time passed, then she added, “My condolences. I knew. She had not. Been well.” Wendy thought the woman might be crying, but then she said, in a heavier tone, “She’s with the Lord now.”

“Yes.”

“No one told me.”

“I’m sorry,” Wendy said genuinely. “I—I am. Someone should have.”

“Am I speaking to family?” said the woman.

“Yes.”

“And who am I speaking to?”

Wendy’s reflexes kicked in. “I’m more like a close friend. Friend of the family.” Her voice became higher, more melodious. “Would you like to speak to Ben? He’s just over in the living room. I’ll get him.”

“No!” said the woman. “No. No, I don’t think Ben—well.” More silence. “Is someone else at home?”

“No.”

“Ah.” This puzzled Wendy. Most people calling on Nettie liked speaking to Ben. They got a bang out of him.

“May I ask who you are?” said Wendy.

“Anna C. Penner,” the woman said. “From Morweena. Morweena, Manitoba.”

Wendy waited for her to say more.

“That’s north of Arborg,” Anna continued. “In the Interlake.”

“There are Mennonites up there?” Wendy said before she could stop herself.

“Oh, yup. Quite a few,” said Anna. “Doesn’t surprise me some people may not know that, but. Aganetha and I. We went to school together.” The woman was clipping her individual words but her sentences were slow, rushing through some parts and leaving gaps of quiet in others. And the accent in her voice was coming out clearly now, the kind that paradoxically turned *school* into *skul* and *Pepsi* into *Pahpsi*. She continued: “I just called to—so, you’re a friend of the family. Your name?”

“Wendy.”

“Don’t know of a Wendy,” said Anna. Then she made a slight titter. “Oh! I suppose you’re. Seeing Ben. Forgive me, I didn’t mean—”

“Bless me!” Wendy said acidly. “You know, perhaps I would rather not have this conversation over the phone.”

“Of, of course, forgive me, rude of me—well. I’ll just tell you. I wanted to tell Aganetha something that concerns her husband. As well as her grandson. Ben’s son. You know Ben’s son.”

Wendy was silent.

“You must,” clipped Anna definitively. “Goes by Tulip now. Or some such name. To my understanding.”

Tulip had been Wendy’s first name for about a year.

“I know about Tulip,” said Wendy. More silence then: “Anna, why are you calling?”

“Is another family member coming later in the day? One of Aganetha’s sisters, I wonder I should speak with them.”

“No!” Wendy said. Suddenly she was done with this conversation. “Look,” she said, summoning up old codes, what’d pass with this woman for angry. “I do not mean to be rude. However, we are sorting out quite a lot right now. Our grandmother is dead and there is a house and there are—cats, and ... There is so much to do!” she concluded. “So, if you would like to tell me your business, I would be happy to assist you, but if not, perhaps you could simply send condolences, I am sure you know our address.”

“You said you were a friend,” Anna said quietly.

“*I’m a—*” she said loudly and cut herself off, but a surge of anger that’d stayed down in Wendy for days suddenly raged through her blood, like she’d breathed it in with the air. She clenched her fist and bit down on her knuckles—

“Who are you talking to?” Ben called.

Gently, she calmed herself and put her body back down on the ground. She was about to excuse herself and say goodbye and hang up when Anna said something in Low German she couldn’t understand. Then she said, “You must have heard stories about Henry. Aganetha’s husband.”

“Yes.” Her Opa had died when Wendy was nine. He had been a quiet, stable, and gentle man. The opposite of her dad. Wendy had loved him

deeply. For a short time in Wendy's adolescence, his memory had provided her with the kind of man she'd hoped she might be.

"Yes," Wendy said. "I remember Henry very well." Then she shut her eyes. *Shit.* This was coming apart. *How's she supposed to not know me if—*

"He was like Ben's son. So there you go."

"WHAT?"

"So there you go!" repeated Anna, slightly more high-pitched. "And there are some letters and things. I thought she'd want to see. I ... sat on them for a long time. A long time. But lately I have been. Remembering things, Aganetha would say. About Henry many years ago. I realized ... perhaps it was not good to keep this secret. That's what I feel. The Lord was telling me. So I just decided that this morning and now I called and got you."

Wendy opened her mouth, and it was dry as plaster. She touched her fingers to her hair.

"But now she's gone. And I don't know who you are," Anna said rapidly, shakily. "I'm talking to a stranger. About all this. I better go—no, I'll ask a favour. I'll ask you to tell one of Aganetha's sisters. I assume they're still alive."

"Yes."

"Would you tell one of them what I told you, and ask them to telephone me? I'm going to trust in the Lord now that if you say yes, you will do it."

"Perhaps I can, indeed," Wendy said dumbly.

"Good," said Anna. "They can look me up in the phone book if they don't have the number. My address is right there too. They can come visit too, long as they call first."

"Okay."

More silence.

"I'm going to be going now," said Anna.

“Have a good day,” Wendy said faintly.

“My condolences about Aganetha. I thought about her often. She is finally with the Lord. Hallelujah.”

“Hallelujah.”



So many Mennonites these days, it seemed to Wendy, were rich. The humble old desperate towns of Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell books were gone, or at least shrunk, or fast on their way to existing only in traces, photos, myth, and books, and in the bedrooms of old people. In their stead were McMansions and Liquor Marts and gourmet coffee shops. The Liquor Marts closed at ten, and the coffee shops at midnight. There were big boxes and subdivisions and construction for new high schools and stores that sold fireplaces. The high schools had raffle prizes that gave trips to Vegas. They were the fastest growing towns in the province. Most rural municipalities were bleeding people, but Hanover and Stanley and Rhineland and La Broquerie were growing in double-digits—it had been a long time since Wendy had talked, really talked, to someone like Anna at all.

And in the city. The ones in the city. Wendy worked at a gift store close to Polo Park, and every other wallet with five credit cards belonged to a Friesen or a Penner. They could spend seventy dollars on a scarf and ask if there was a charge for a plastic bag. They would buy books on mindfulness and Taoism. She would see Hutterites driving Hummers.



Wendy stood in her nightgown, ratty skids of hair down her back, holding the phone receiver. She heard the alarm-drone noise of it being off the hook. Ben came into the kitchen and refilled his bowl with cereal. He took the receiver from Wendy's hand and hung it up. "You miss that sound?"



"No!" she said, high-pitched and startled.

"What's going on? Who was that?"

"I—I—"

"Tell me," said Ben.

"Someone called about Opa," she said, the first thing that came to her mind.

"No way."

"Yeah," she said, returning to her normal rasp. "They were behind the times."

"Who was it?"

"I forget," she said.

The best lies always come to you as you're saying them, she'd been reflecting lately. It was planned untruths that didn't end well.

"Something Hildebrand," she added. "It wasn't important. The guy was an asshole—oh, *and* he kept asking me if I was a man or a woman. Wouldn't let it go."

"What a dickwad," said her dad.

"Whatever," she mumbled. "Is there more coffee?"

"No. Make more," Ben suggested. He poured his milk and went back into the living room.

Wendy's head was imploding. She made another pot and then went into

her room and poured raspberry vodka into her coffee mug. She rarely drank in the mornings—but. Well.



Downstairs, in her grandmother's sewing room, there was a bookcase of photo albums labelled by year. Wendy put her hand on the earliest, 1961.

Pictures of her dad as a baby.

A lot with her dad and her Opa, wearing a grey shirt and huge owl glasses.

Cute. Wendy'd always remembered her grandfather with bifocals.

An adorable picture of her dad on a stool, filling a cup with water.

Her grandpa in a field, wearing the same grey shirt.

She sat on the floor, sipping coffee and flipping through more pages. He was always wearing a variation of the same big grey men's shirt—*That fits, though*, she thought. *Wear the same outfit day after day, your brain gets numb to how it looks or feels*—Wendy shut the album. No. She hated going down that road. She hated analyzing the whys of trans girls. She had always hated it, and she hated how easy it had become; the bottomless hole of egg mode. It made her burn with anger, thinking of all that lost energy. You could do it forever, and she'd played that fuckin' game years ago when she'd needed to, but she knew where that led and she was done with that game. She'd had a boy life. It was shitty and murky. So her grandfather probably had too and just never got out. So her Opa'd been a woman. Fine. Closed. She would keep the memory of her two grandmothers in her heart and that'd be that. Whatever. She drank the rest of her coffee in a slug and put the photo album back in the bookcase. Good enough.



“Hey, we gotta go,” said her dad. “Get your stuff.” He refilled her coffee without asking.

She put an ice cube in her mug and opened the fridge and her dad closed it and said, “Go go go, we gotta move!”

“Jesus, relax!”

“We have to go!”

Wendy closed and opened her fists, letting anger flow out of her.

She packed her things and added more vodka to her coffee. She lifted her moon-blue nightgown over her head and put on a white T-shirt with black jeans and a pink belt. She washed off her crusted day-old eyeliner, put it back on and added wings.

She shouldered her purse and bag. Her dad was still packing.

Wendy looked out on the yard again, sunny and bright and clear. It hit her—this might be one of the last times she’d stay in this house.

Ben yelled to warm up the car. She went out and started the engine and put her shit in the back.

It really was nice out—no wind, serene, sheltered by the poplars on the side of the driveway that her Opa had planted decades ago.

Aw, hell.

She grabbed her bag, took off her boots, and ran inside. Her dad shouted something again.

“I’m coming, Christ!” She padded downstairs and put the album from 1961 in her bag. She hesitated, then picked another from the year her Opa had died and another from the early eighties.



They drove into town where an old pasty woman with a kerchief sold perogies and gravy out of her mini-van beside the Walmart.

“Twelve cottage cheese, frozen,” said Ben.

“I’ll have three, fresh,” said Wendy.

The woman turned to pack their containers.

“I want a cigarette,” Ben mumbled.

They drove back into the city. Her dad didn’t speak. Wendy hadn’t registered any emotion from him, that his mother had died. They had been on good terms—but he didn’t seem any different. Wendy’d wanted to learn to make those perogies herself some day, but her dad had forgotten how. She’d meant to ask her grandma, but she was dead.