THE WELL

Virginia Watts

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"Why do you always take this way home?" Aiden complains to Pierce, tipping his chiseled chin, nodding to the right. "Why can't we just take the shortcut through the woods?"

"How are we going to hitch a ride if we aren't on the main road?" Pierce counters.

"It's because of the Stauffer well, isn't it. You keep trying to avoid it. Are you afraid a troll is going to pop out and drag you in? You used to love throwing pebbles in that well,"

"I'm not scared. I'm not scared of anything. I'm not a four-year-old thinking there's a ghoul in our bedroom closet or that a howling coyote is a werewolf coming to eat us."

"Come on, Pierce." Aiden says. "You're still scared of some stuff." "Name one thing."

"Haystacks for one," Aiden answers, reaching around to the back pocket of his jeans for a pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco. He scoops a generous portion, tucks it into one cheek. "Want some?"

"No," Pierce says. "I'm giving that up."

"That's such bullshit. You know you'll miss the buzz. Maybe that's what's wrong with you, nicotine withdrawal, because seriously, man, I don't know what's up with you lately."

Pierce turns his head away from his twin brother. This is Pierce's favorite time of day, early evening when air iscooling, dark is tiptoeing from between the trees in the mountains, creeping toward the valley full of family farms and tended fields. This time of day means the end of another grueling workday at The Crawford Farm. Old Man Crawfordis such a bastard. Doesn't care about pissing breaks, lunch breaks, breaks of any kind. Pierce hasn't told Aiden yet, but this will be his last summer kowtowing to Crawford. Anything would be better than shoveling hog shit at the crackof dawn followed by fieldwork under the beating summer sun with that son of a bitch hollering at you every five seconds.

Aiden spits a stream of amber tobacco juice. Pierce can smell it. His stomach recoils. Lately that's how Pierce's body has been reacting to the details of everyday life.

"Spit the other way," Pierce says.

Aiden wipes spittle from his chin with his shirtsleeve, says, "At least admit you're afraid of haystacks. You take the tractor way wide of em' like every day."

"I'm not afraid of haystacks per se. It's when animals burrow inside that I'm not crazy about. Crawford has usstack them up too tall, and the bottom bales sit so long then. By the time we get back to them, who knows what has moved in."

"That only happened once and it happened to me, not you," Aiden reminds him. "I was the one who stuck my pitchfork in and brought out the wiggling rear end of something."

Pierce turns his head away from his brother. Hides a gag. "Yes, I remember," he groans. "It was half a baby possum followed by a ton of squealing from the other babies still hidden inside."

"Was it a baby possum? I thought it was something smaller, like the ass of a mole."

The brothers stop abruptly at the sound of female laughter trilling across the breeze. One of them is Lina Crawford. Lina has a distinctive, high-pitched laugh. She is the prettiest girl in their senior class. Smart too, earned a scholarship to attend Yale University in the fall. She must be walking home from town with some friends. They are out of sight just over a bluff ahead. It's Saturday. The Crawfords live in a stately farmhouse. Loads of room. They are known for their parties. Christmas, New Years, Fourth of July. Parties of all kinds.

Pierce turns abruptly right and with Aiden following, they jog down a short path, once a dirt drive, leading into what remains of the old Stauffer place. The access point is so overgrown that to find it, you have to know exactly where to look.

"Apparently, you are also afraid of running into Lina or maybe girls in general," Aiden teases when they stop.

"I'm not afraid of running into Lina or any girl," Pierce says. "Why would I be? But do you want to run into girls looking like we do? Reeking of hog shit?"

"Excellent point, my brother," Aiden says, delivering a solid slap on the middle of Pierce's back that sends Pierce reeling forward. Pierce catches himself before he falls. They might be twins, but not identical ones. They are both good physically fit, good athletes, but Aiden has always been taller and more muscular.

The old Stauffer place, a fraction of chimney and some moss-covered rubble, is about a quarter mile off the main road. Pierce frowns but trails Aiden to the well in what used to be a back yard. The well has remained surprisingly intact considering the house burned down over fifty years ago. A complete circle, missing only a few stones, mortarcracked but intact. There is no longer a structure over the top, no rope and bucket, as there once was when Aiden and Pierce were little boys.

The brothers halt at the edge of the well. Pierce squeezes his eyes together to rid himself of the memories that always come flooding back to him when he stands at this spot.

The smell of her lavender perfume mixing with the sweet sweat that had dried on her soft, pale neck.

He resists the temptation to bring his fingertips to his nose to see if any scent of her might still linger there.

Aiden drops a pebble into the well and counts aloud until it plops into the standing water at the bottom. He turns his head and grins big at Pierce. Even though Aiden has grown tall and mighty as a lumberjack, he is still the happy-go-lucky boy who always loved throwing pebbles in the Stauffer well. Aiden is sure to live a happy life right here in Potter County doing what he loves, what he has always loved. Give Aiden a hoe, a rack, an axe, a riding lawn mower, the key to the tractor. Give him any chore on a farm and he's happy doing it even for the likes of Crawford.

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Two summers ago, Lina Crawford had a birthday party. That fateful sixteenth year that supposedly marks the opening of the rose bud of what exactly. Sexuality? Sensuality? A green light that you are suddenly old enough for things like that? Maybe, but the tiaraed Lina had dressed in a frilly, frosty pink dress more appropriate for a curly-headed, kewpie doll of a girl on the occasion of a fifth birthday. There were giant unicorn balloons strung up around the perimeter of the Crawford's heated inground swimming pool. The music escaping into the evening air had been ridiculous. It was 1995. Not 1965. The Beach Boys? The music must have been Lina's parents' idea. Probably the whole party theme was, including Lina's dress.

"You're a horse with a dick on your head," Brad Fender hissed to one of the unicorn balloons bobbing in the breeze over his head. He was pouring vodka from the thermos he'd snuck into the party into glass coke bottles gripped in the hands of six boys. It was a hot August night. Pierce held his bottle steady for mighty Brad, star athlete, the *Dude of all Dudes*. That's how Pierce secretly referred to Brad Fender.

"Notice that Lina is the same color as the frosting on her cake?" Brad asked the hunched group of boys.

"Yeah, so what?" Justin Hayes was the one who always answered Brad. Not surprising. Justin was second inline to the throne of the *Dude of all Dudes*. The backup quarterback, the co-captain to all of Brad's captainships.

"Before the end of this night, I'm going to lick that dress right off of her," Brad announced, smiling as wickedly as the devil himself, like the serial killer in every serial killer movie ever, Pierce thought.

"That's disgusting," Pierce heard himself say.

Aiden launched Pierce a startled expression from across the huddle. The mouth of the *Dude of all Dudes* fell open like the mighty jaws of an Amazon crocodile.

Pierce shrugged and fake-laughed as heartily as the best thespian. The *Dude of all Dudes* hesitated, squinted his eyes around the rigid bodies in the circle, then laughed too. Everyone else followed suit. Brad was the most popular guy in their high school, their whole universe. He could make you or break you, but the twins could never stand him. They just played along to survive. Pierce thought, how dense can a person be? It was so easy to fool the *Dude of all Dudes* into believing that anything bestowed upon him was intended as a compliment.

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Aiden hunts in the woods behind the Stauffer well for more pebbles, piles up a sizable mound.

"If we throw all those in, we'll fill the thing up," Pierce says.

"We've been throwing pebbles in there all our life. Nothing changes. It still takes six full seconds to hit bottom like it always did."

"I always wondered why wild animals don't accidentally fall in it."

"Because animals are smart as hell," Aiden answers, hurling a pebble at Pierce, who ducks.

"Knock it off," Pierce says.

"Seriously, what's your deal lately? No more chew? Half the time you don't want to hang out with anyone. What's going on?"

There have been so many of these private, perfect moments between the brothers that summer. Pierce worries thatif he doesn't use one of them soon, there won't be any more coming. He reaches out, grabs a pebble, and tosses it into the well, doesn't know how to start. Aiden hesitates, then fills the silence.

"One of the best days of my life is when we were back here fooling around with the guys and for some reason, Brad decided to try to push you into the well."

"He has always been a complete asshole. How old were we then? Like eight? I mean, he was born a sicko. I didn't even do anything to him that day."

"You just didn't laugh at his stupid knock-knock jokes, and, as usual, he acted like a spoiled baby."

"Well, you got him good that day. That was the first time I think anyone ever put him in his place. But he sure forgot about it fast."

"Maybe. I tell you one thing. None of the guys forget how he screamed like a baby when I hung him over the well by his ankles. They just don't mention it."

It's one of Pierce's favorite sounds, the two of them dissolving into a fit of laughter. They both sound so much the same that Pierce can't tell if he's hearing himself or his brother. All those times when no one else understood what could possibly be so funny, when it was only Aiden who could bring a smile to Pierce's face, when Pierce didn't realizehe was smiling until his brother pointed it out and smugly took credit for it.

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Lina's party went along about the same way all teenage pool parties go where alcohol, a pool, and bikinis areinvolved. Brad made sure that the six girls in attendance got an ample pour of vodka in their Coke bottles as well.

Pierce had decided in advance that he wasn't going to swim, left his swim trunks behind in his dresser drawer.There would be little more than endless volleyball matches with the girls on the shoulders of the tallest guys and a lot of male-on-male dunking and attempted drownings. Lions competing to be the pride male when everyone already knew who that was.

Pierce wasn't the only guy to beg out of pool antics. Lina's cousin Andrew was a few years younger, no doubt intimidated by the older boys, so Pierce whittled away the first half of the party tossing a football back and forth with him.

Lina Crawford was a really nice girl. She wasn't snobby even though she had a privileged life and killer looks. Pierce had always liked her. It was as simple as that. They had a lot in common. They were in the same classes at school. They both liked math, all kinds of math— algebra, geometry, trigonometry,—the same books, horror movies, and orange Tootsie pops. Neither liked pizza. As her birthday party wore on, Pierce's skin began to crawl every time Brad's block of a hand reached toward Lina under the pool water. At one point, Andrew had called to Pierce from across the yard, "Hey! Arewe passing the ball or are you trying to kill me with it?"

The *Dude of all Dudes*, encircling Lina's slender waist to feign getting her out of the way of a spiked ball, slipping his meaty fingers under the bikini strap tied in a bow in the middle of her lovely back. And more than once, cupping theperfect round of one of her butt cheeks to give it a little squeeze. The whole scene was making Pierce physically ill. The worst of it was how Lina tried gallantly to giggle it off, playfully shoving Brad away. The way she cast desperate glances toward Pierce standing on dry land. Pierce felt like a coward.

When the food was served, everyone finally got out of the pool. Lina wrapped a towel around herself and made a beeline for Pierce and Andrew who had taken the opportunity to sit and bounce on the diving board. Lina sat on the edge of the pool, crossed her legs, kicked at that water. She smiled up at them.

"Sorry for the stupid music and decorations," Lina said. "You know how parents are."

"I do," Pierce said.

"Aren't you guys going to get something to eat?" She asked. "Andrew, you're usually a bottomless pit."

"Soon," Andrew said, eyeing the broad-shouldered guys on the other side of the pool punching each other.

Pierce said. "Smells good."

Even with her hair wet and tangled, her lips a tinge of blue from staying too long in cool water, Lina looked like a dream, better than any magazine cover. She had perfect, milky white skin, light brown eyes, long, dark lashes and a lovely, peach-lipped smile. It would be weird to say to anyone, so Pierce never did, but Pierce often imagined her as a delicate, elegant reindeer constellation. Slender. Long-limbed. Graceful. Not of this earth. This earth would never begood enough for her. Something so beautiful inside and out should only dwell and leap among the fantastical stars.

Pierce first began sensing real trouble when Lina followed him to the food line, then sat beside him a one of thepicnic tables, close enough so their thighs pressed against each other. He tried to give her some room by wiggling toward the edge of the bench, but she moved closer.

Brad was watching them intently from another table. Brad had been chasing after Lina for years with theeloquence of an oaf, and zero success. Pierce didn't have to ask Lina how she felt about Brad. He was sure she felt the same way about the *Dude of all Dudes* that he did.

In turn, Lina had been chasing after Pierce, if Pierce was honest with himself, but Pierce had always been able to put a damper on things quickly. Then he would manage to convince himself it probably would never happen again. In school, where he saw Lina the most, he'd whisper a killer joke, pretend to find something terribly wrong with their chemistry experiment that needed their immediate attention or artfully change the subject. Lina was not only book smart, but she was also unfailingly intuitive. She always got the hint and backed off, though often Pierce had to endure a shadow of hurt as it passed like a cloud across her radiant features.

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"Seriously, Pierce," Aiden says. "What's been eating at you lately?"

Pierce sighs. Although it is early evening, a nearly full moon is shining over the top branches of the trees running along the back of the Stauffer place. After such a hot day, the aroma of pine hangs heavy as wet wool in the air. Upthere like that, the moon looks like a single candle on top of a cake. Those were great days. The celebration of their mutual birthday. Recently, Pierce has tried to remember when it was, exactly, that he began to feel alone even with Aiden by his side. It is impossible to pinpoint.

"I hate working for Crawford, that's all," Pierce answers. "He's such a dickhead and we're not making a penny over what we got paid last summer and the summer before and before that."

Aiden drops in another pebble but doesn't count this time.

Pierce glances behind him in the direction of the overgrown, dirt path they'd taken to reach the Stauffer place. The world is quiet. Lina and her friends would have reached her house by now. It is less than a mile away. Strange how one patch of the earth can be full of life and promise, vibrant, loved and well kept, while right around the corner, another piece is a sinking back into rock and darkness and dirt, disappearing, dying.

"Don't give me the runaround," Aiden suddenly sounds sharp, uncharacteristically annoyed. Pierce stiffens, peersat his brother who is on the other side of the well. Aiden has taken a seat on the edge.

"What are you talking about?" Pierce asks.

"Nothing's different about Crawford and you know it. He's been paying us the same shit wage since we were nine years old. Level with me, Pierce. Now."

"Nothing's wrong," Pierce says. "Other than the fact that we stink and I'm starving to death. Let's get going."

"No," Aiden says, and folds his burly arms across his chest.

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At the picnic table, Pierce dug into his plate of barbequed chicken and baked beans. Better to get the contents of this paper plate down the hatch and this part of the evening over with as quickly as possible since Lina seemed determined to keep her thigh glued to his. She wasn't eating a thing, just swirling salad greens around on her plate with her fork. At one point, she'd flicked a chickpea onto Pierce's plate. Unsure what to do, he simply scooped it up and ate it.

"Hey, Andrew," Lina said quietly to her cousin seated across the table. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Can you go inside and ask my mom if she remembered to put the ice cream on the counter to soften before we cut the cake?"

"I can go," Pierce offered.

"No, it's okay," Lina said. "Andrew will go."

The moment Andrew was gone, Lina leaned over and whispered into Pierce's ear. Pierce didn't have to look at Bradto feel the boil of his seething glare. Pierce didn't answer Lina. Didn't react to her whisper at all. Chose instead to look skyward toward another nearly full moon to try and collect his thoughts.

"Hey, Pierce," Aiden's voice came suddenly. "I could use a hand over here."

Pierce swiveled his head around, located his brother pointing to the back of the gas grill. Pierce lost no time. He unfolded his lean legs from the picnic table and went to join Aiden, kneeled beside him on the grass. Sure, they lookedlike they were ducking behind a perfectly operational grill, but it was a tense time.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Aiden hissed through clenched teeth. "Brad is about to string you up and beat the living daylights out of you."

"It's Lina," Pierce said. "Not me."

"Make it stop, Pierce. I am dead serious. Brad is getting really wound up, and no one feels like dealing him tonight, especially me."

"Okay, just don't do anything. I'll figure something out."

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Pierce reaches for a pebble, and, gripping it, he steps to the edge of the well, and leans over to squint at the black circle at the bottom. Even in the winter, when there is nothing except skeleton arms of trees, what sunlight can penetrate the well only illuminates reddish black wall tiles a few feet down.The black circle at the bottom never changes. Never goes away. One time, Aiden and Pierce tried using a spotlight tosee what was at the bottom better, but even that didn't reveal anything new, although, for moment, with such a bright light beaming straight down, Pierce thought he saw something move in the water, or ripple, or it was probably just his imagination.

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Lina's whisper had tickled. Pierce shuddered with pleasure when the warm, wet tip of her tongue touched the skin on his ear lobe. *I've got more vodka to slip Brad. When he's wasted, meet me at the Stauffer well*, she whispered.

The *Dude of all Dudes* could never refuse booze. By the end of middle school, he had a reputation for drinking toomuch, for losing his shit and puking his guts out wherever he stood. Lina's plan would probably work if her parents didn't catch on to the presence of alcohol at the party and send everyone home first.

The one part of her clever idea that might go off track was Pierce, even though there had been countless times over the years when he wanted nothing else other than to be alone with Lina.

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Pierce drops the pebble toward the black hole, counts out loud into the well, his voice hollow as a drum.

“Look, Aiden,” he says, “you know I’ve never been exactly in love with farm work like you are and I’m not interested in retail like Dad.”

“I think you just don’t like working for other people, especially Crawford,” Aiden says, stepping around the well tostand beside Pierce. “Dad said he’d help us buy a farm, give us some upfront money. If you and I were in charge, everything would be different. We’d be partners. We’d call all the shots,” Aiden reaches out, spins Pierce toward him and plants two hands on his shoulders.

Taxidermist by trade and owner and operator of the largest rod and gun shop around that part of the state, their father had made a very respectable living, and he did offer to help the twins get started with their own farm. Pierce knows that owning and operating a farm is Aiden’s dream. A younger Pierce had wanted the same thing. At some point, though, Pierce began playing along just to keep his brother happy. The time for playing has come to an end.

“The truth is you will have run the most successful farm around here,” Pierce says. “I’m just not sure I want to join you in that. Although, maybe, someday I will. I’ve sent some college applications out. If I get in some place decent, I’ve decided to give that a try first. Test the waters. I think I’d like to teach math.”

Aiden’s hands drop from Pierce’s shoulders. Pierce watches as the sides of his mouth tug downward. This is the moment Pierce has been dreading. The way the right side of Aiden’s mouth twitches uncontrollably when he’s really hurt or sad. The way he looks down at the ground when that happens thinking no one will notice. How he repeatedly tucks his hair behind his left ear.

Pierce wants to throw his arms around Aiden and weep like a baby. He almost does but holds back. The last thinghe wants to do is make things worse or unnecessarily melodramatic.

“So, you really leaving?” Aiden whispers, lifting his head.

The two boys look at each other. There are tears there, on Aiden’s cheeks, just as there are on Pierce’s.

“I’m going to try it out, that’s all,” Pierce manages. “I’ll probably be back home in a week.”

It is Aiden who throws his arms around Pierce and holds on. Eventually, the sound of themselves bawling andcarrying on to such a degree echoing in the woods brings laughter.

“Let’s get out of here,” Aiden wheezes.

“Finally.”

“By the way, Pierce, you aren’t as clever as you think,” Aiden says. “I knew what you were going to tell me, I justdreaded hearing it. And since we are having this little heart to heart, I also know exactly what happened between you and Lina back here the night of her birthday party.”

Pierce feels struck. “You were spying on us?”

“No, I was busy threatening to beat the life out of Brad if he dared follow you two here. As it turned out, he wasn’t as drunk as he looked.”

“Well, I should thank you then, but why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t a big deal. He backed right down. He’s scared of me. Remember? It was hilarious. The guys got a big kick out of it I think.”

“Aiden, I told you what happened between Lina and me the night of the party. I told you we made out back here.”

Aiden drops a final pebble in the well, waits until it answers back. "Pierce, that's not what I meant."

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When Pierce and Lina got to the well at the Stauffer place the night of her birthday party, the moonlight was all around them. It was a clear night full of stars. Pierce looked skyward, imagined her there again and peered over the side of the well.

"You can never see anything in this well," he said. "Ever notice that?"

Lina gazed down and nodded.

"It's too deep," she said, slipping her cool hand into his. "What are you hoping to see anyway?"

"Why do you put up with Brad?" Pierce asked. "Why don't you just tell him to leave you alone?"

"Because I am going to leave soon enough, and everyone knows that Brad is impossible. I don't intend to comeback and live around here. I want something different. A new kind of life. Of course, I'll miss my parents, my friends and you. Well, you a lot."

Pierce turned toward Lina, grasped her other hand. She stepped awkwardly forward and giggled. Pierce felt his heart flip and quicken as he pressed his mouth into her bare shoulder, kissed her tenderly there once, then trailing upneck, he kissed her there too. Lina shivered and gripped Pierce's hands harder, pulled him close to her. Their frames melted together. The kissing was gentle until it wasn't, everything a long-held, passionate, deep desire should be.

Lina stopped before Pierce did. He didn't turn away when she took a few steps backward and looked up at him.There was nothing to hide anymore. There was a real part of him that had hoped maybe it would be different with Lina.This was Lina, after all, and he adored her. Maybe his body would respond to the feel of her small, firm breasts, the curve of her feminine hips.

Pierce steadied himself for shock, disgust, confusion, maybe that shadow of hurt he'd seen pass over her features before, but Lina wasn't like anyone else, like any girl he'd ever known. She smiled. It was a sad smile, but all the same, she understood. If it could have been anyone, it would have been her.

Lina folded into his arms, and they held each other for a long time, listening to the sounds of the night, the bullfrogs and the crickets and from the bottom of the well, a trickle of moving water—or that was probably just Pierce's imagination.