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for

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Potent Stem

"What if you don't believe in God?" asked James. Dierdre kicked him under the table. One woman, Dierdre's aunt, James had surmised, smiled at the question. It was really more like a smirk.

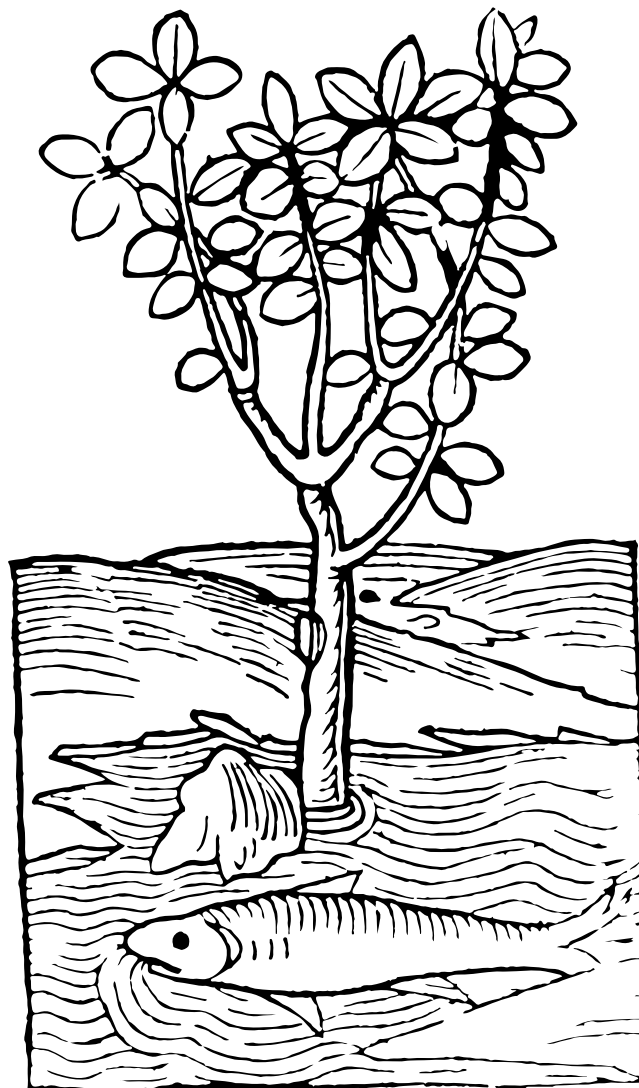
"No really, what if you don't believe," he tried again, looking around the table for eye contact with anyone. Dierdre's head was bowed but her eyes were tilted towards the ceiling. She was cutting a piece of chicken with a steak knife. "It's hard to draw the line, then," he added. Again, no one responded.

The same woman gave another sad smirk. It was condescending this time. "If something helps humanity," she started, and then trailed off. "I mean, well." She put a forkful of coleslaw in her mouth.

"Humanity," the guy across the table scoffed. "Humanity would best help itself by dying off, don't you think?" He looked younger than everyone except for James and Dierdre, maybe in his mid-twenties. He had been easily distracted throughout the dinner, sometimes getting up and looking at a photo on the mantle. It was as if he, too, had never been here.

"People used to say that so much was 'playing God,'" said James. "Abortions, robotics, sex changes. But then you have orthodontics and prosthetics and—I mean, is internal medicine playing God? Is hypnosis? Is air travel?"

"Yes but," Dierdre's father interrupted, "why are we even talking about this." It was not a question, and the way in which he said it was meant to end the conversation. It did. The rest of dinner was tenuous, though. The chicken was tough to saw through, with tendons fraying until they snapped and pockets of cartilage setting knives off their paths, causing the awkward sounds of metal skidding across ceramic. James could feel



his own heart beating, and so he sensed Dierdre's father's heart, a new transplant, beating, too. Mr. King was not supposed to drink or eat red meat after the operation, Dierdre had told James, which explained the inexpertly prepared meal. They were all used to something else. A glass of neat scotch hardly left Mr. King's hand that evening, though. With each sip, James pictured the heart, a pig's heart that had been decellularized until it was pigment-less and for this reason sometimes called a ghost heart, evaporating. The alcohol dripping directly onto it, burning like acid. Liquid soaking into each ventricle, drowning some whirring motor until it sputtered out.

The procedure was expensive, dangerous, and so cutting edge it was considered experimental. Mr. King had suffered through a long recovery time, during which Dierdre had spent many weekends visiting home instead of going to her first college parties with James. The pig's heart had been put through a mysterious scientific process to empty it of the qualities that make it pig-like, said Dierdre, using words that didn't seem right but which she swore the doctor had used, like "detergent," "matrix," and "scaffolding." They can do this with plants, now, too. They can make a graft out of something that is neither human nor animal.

Mrs. King may have been frowning at Mr. King's drink, the way he clutched it as if his hand were hiding the glass instead of bringing attention to it. Her face didn't show signs of frowning, though. The thickness of her expressions, the offset wrinkles that were maybe less pronounced but likely more noticeable because of their misplacement—pleats pointing at the bridge of the nose instead of whiskering around the eyes, broad folds above the top lip and parenthesizing the nostrils—gave away some of Mrs. King's emotions but managed to mask judgment. She was one of those women who had surpassed appearing any certain age. James wondered if, for her at least, this was the desired outcome. She didn't dress young, although he had to guess that at some point she did, maybe when she was young, maybe sometime after that.

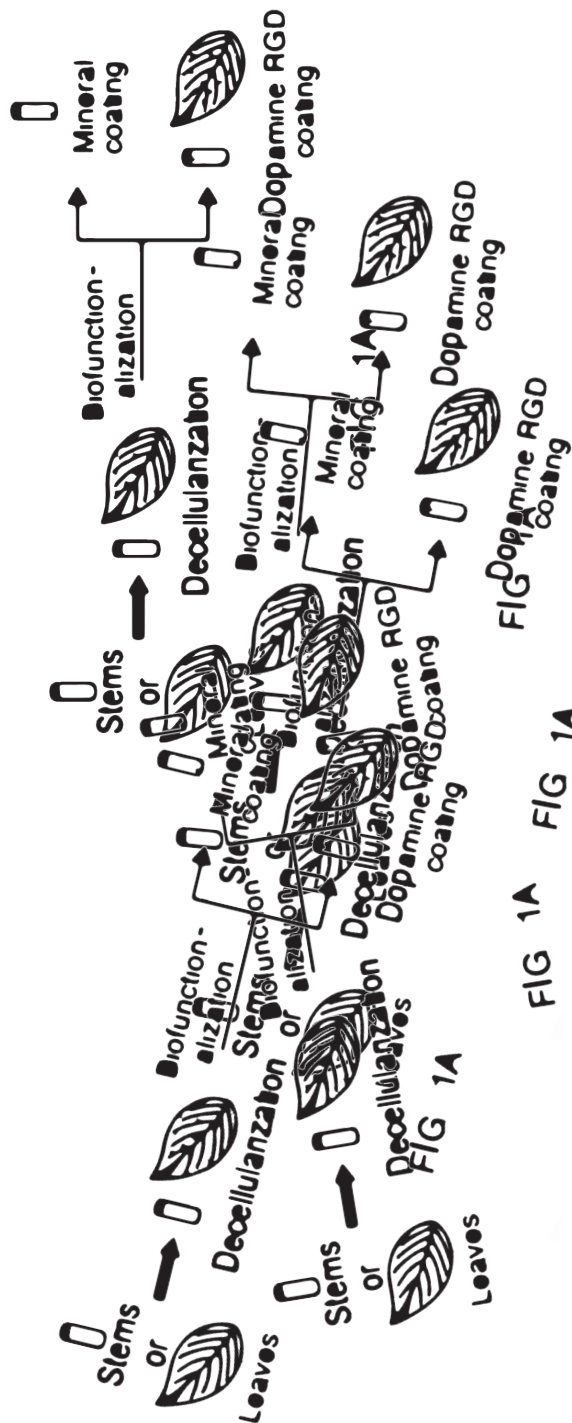
She could have been trying to turn back time, to preserve it, to slow it, or to split the difference, but ended up with a compromise that simply looked unnatural, if only very slightly, which is really all it takes. If she had waited a few more years, would the cosmetic surgery field have been advanced enough to have avoided all this? They can do things with plants, now. In a few more years, those years could be erased from the skin. The absence of time, grafted on. A snake diving into a new surface. James had seen photos of decellularized spinach leaves. He had seen vascular plants taking in nutrients through cut stems and wet roots, food coloring rising through the veins of a celery stalk, vines climbing windows with centipede-like feet. James could swear he saw tiny scabs where Mrs. King's forehead had been injected. The more he looked at it, the more her face looked like shaved foam.

"What are you majoring in?" she asked James. "Do you know yet?"
 "I was leaning towards economics."
 "That's a good field," said Dierdre's aunt.
 "Yes, but I'm getting more interested in philosophy."

Dierdre looked up from her plate at him. Her aunt audibly sighed.

Beads of sweat collected on the sides of his glass, a stout tumbler with a heavy base containing what Mrs. King had called a "dry rosé." When he visited his mother, James didn't have a drink at dinner. He wasn't of legal drinking age, and even though no one was trying to keep any secrets, laws were abided, if only out of habit. After his twenty-first birthday, there would be some remark about letting him grab a beer before joining the adults in the family on the porch, he was sure, but there would also be some performative shrugging, some show of it all being a show. This is what you get, for waiting, for pretending to wait, at least. This is the substance rewarded to people that have aged: an ice cold one, a dry rosé, a glass that looks so tightly gripped it might burst, tearing the fine skin that holds all these tissues in place until they decay from the inside out. The peeling silver scales on chapped fish flesh. Oyster mucous on white-lipped shells that grow in mud. Root vegetables drained of color and peeled of hair.

Dierdre had seemed ecstatic on the bus ride to her hometown, saying that she knew her parents would like James. She'd placed her forearms on each of his shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck, the way she always did. She'd pointed out features of the town from the window as they approached the station, where her mother was waiting in a car. She'd leaned over the front seat to talk to him on the twenty-minute drive to the house. How were the dogs? She'd asked her mother. A pain since she was the only one that took care of them anymore. James loved dogs and would love to take some for a walk, she said. We'll see, said the mother. James loved Dierdre's enthusiasm for such small things, like dog walks and bus rides. She'd gradually gotten quieter as the conversation dulled, though, and as they



dropped off their bags in a bedroom that had that once-lived-in look that brings some mothers to tears, Dierdre's energy sunk. Now, her eyes were glazed, her small hands focused on the utensils and meat in front of her.

She had the same wide-set face of her mother, nothing of her father, a close resemblance to her cousin, who was talking, now, about his decision to go back to school for a degree in gender studies, eliciting mixed responses from all the adults. She was the first girlfriend of his that wanted to introduce him to her parents, the people that created her. They would continue to create her, even as she was creating herself, even after they were dead and she was stuck remembering her childhood and spending their money. Her features would become like theirs had become, until a certain point, when she would either get a new face, a new heart, or see what the next phases of life look like without them.

The top button of her father's flannel was unbuttoned. The shirt strained around his belly. Every so often, he would remind the table that he was listening to their conversation by saying "That's nice," in earnest and "Real nice," sarcastically. The pig's heart was no longer a ghost. It had attached itself to Mr. King's insides and sprung to life anew. It had prolonged a life and become the clock by which the family told time, and yet it was not born into the family, was not even born into the species. The metaphors conjured by the words pig and heart were inescapable and yet unutterable. Dierdre, James knew, would not appreciate him questioning her father's insatiable passion, the hunger for life that one would need, in order to go on living, he thought. The glass of scotch was emptied. The family finished their meal and began clearing their own dishes. The night trickled along, as if it was not blaringly strange and sutured.