

## Shuck

Ellen begins to bleed on Monday.

Shuck appears on Wednesday.

When she first starts to bleed, she thinks nothing of it.

It begins as a trickle, a few drops of blood staining her underwear, cramps beginning to take hold of her lower abdomen. This is not abnormal; she's been expecting this at some point. This is how most of her periods start. She swallows 600 milligrams of ibuprofen and returns to her desk, expecting things to be solved.

But then, instead, things only get worse. The blood begins to drip faster and faster, until she's soaking through a tampon an hour, excreting dark colored clots with a jelly-like consistency. The cramping feels as though it's tearing her stomach apart. Something feels *wrong* in her body, as though it's crumbling beneath her.

It turns out, much to Ellen's surprise, that this blood had at one point been a baby.

They'd taken her urine and tapped her veins, pressed onto her stomach one of the ultrasound wands that she's only seen on the medical dramas that her mother used to watch when she was growing up. *I'm so sorry*, the doctor says, dressed in pink scrubs, *I recommend taking Ibuprofen, 800 milligrams every eight hours*. They send her home, still bleeding.

This is not something that Ellen ever considered. That there could be something growing within her, sucking away at her energy and her nutrients, changing her body and her mind

without her ever realizing. It's gone before she knew it was there, a parasite within her body, strange and foreign, rejected and expelled, tissue leaking down her leg.

She drives herself home, her knuckles white against the steering wheel. *Did someone come with you?* a nurse asked. She'd shaken her head, unable to form words in her mouth. Her roommate, Mallory, is away, back home at home for a funeral. She's new in town, she doesn't have any real friends quite yet. They live on the outskirts, near the river, in a house that she finds quaint if not a little drafty, as though there's too much space between the slats of wood that form the exterior walls, allowing the outside seeps in when it's not welcomed. It's dark by the time she leaves, sunset coming earlier and earlier each day as November passes, until it seems to be omnipresent in her days. Mornings are defined by following dawn, afternoons are a countdown to dusk. The streets look strange and unfamiliar without sunlight, illuminated by flickering streetlights, the color of their light alternating between white and yellow and gray. Ellen follows the tinny voiced directions from her GPS. They lead her home.

She vows to call Mallory in the morning. She crawls into bed and forgets to turn on the heat.

Shuck is more monster than canine when he appears on her back porch. He seems to have appeared out of the forest that sits behind her house, a large nature preserve filled with poorly maintained trails, winding rivers and rolling hills. At night, sometimes she swears that she hears trees rustling and coyotes howling, eerie and wild in her seemingly suburban neighborhood.

He's drenched with water, shivering and splashing droplets all over the frost-covered planks of the deck. He's the size of a deer, long-legged and slim, with bright yellow eyes and sharp teeth that remind Ellen of Little Red Riding Hood. His coat is overgrown, tendrils of black

fur haphazardly sticking out away from his frame, creating a cloud around his body. He's hopping with flees, and although he stands as a menacing presence, he whimpers and bows to her when he sees her, seeming to kneel at her feet.

She names him Shuck because it feels right; he feels like a demonic presence, sent to protect her.

The baby's father, had it gone to term, would have been Ellen's last boyfriend. His name was Magnus, a blond, broad, tall man with hands that were too large to intertwine with hers. She'd had to grab onto his thumb when they walked down the street together, like a child.

Their relationship didn't end in any dramatic way. He had to move back to Canada, and Ellen couldn't go with him. He'd promised to visit. Ellen moved three states north and two states east. They called each other every once in a while. He sounds like he misses her still. She can hear it in his voice.

This baby would've been the product of a trip that he'd made to visit her, claiming to be on business in the area. He showed up at the house one afternoon, smiling sheepishly with a pastry in a crumpled brown bag and left the next morning. He'd told her that he still loved her, his form swallowing hers in bed, surrounding her on all sides until she couldn't tell the difference between the two of their bodies, her skin reaching equilibrium with his. She'd wept and hoped that he wouldn't notice. He kissed her goodbye.

Ellen hadn't picked up his calls since. There was no reason to, really. She thinks that if he'd actually wanted to be with her, he would've tried harder.

Ellen isn't sure if she believes in God.

This, at the beginning of their relationship, was a problem for Magnus. He'd grown up on the plains, in a town where everyone spent their springs picking rocks and their winters playing hockey. He'd gone to church every Sunday with his four sisters and parents, all of them sitting perfectly in a row, humming along to hymns in some vein of Christianity that isn't nice enough to women and makes Ellen anxious. He'd grown up wearing matching pajamas on Christmas mornings and saying things like *cheese and crackers* instead of *Jesus Christ*.

He'd grown over the time that they were together. So had she, she supposes, slinking away from atheism towards agnosticism while Magnus slowly lost faith in the doctrine he was taught. It's not the sort of thing that either of them presents with, their religiosity or lack thereof. They didn't argue about it at the end. At Christmas, Grace used to buy a set of pajamas for Ellen too but knew not to expect either of them at midnight mass. They'd come to an understanding.

But it's the sort of thing that Ellen thinks about now, confronted with a large dog and a newly empty womb. She wonders what her mother, Lindy, would say, if Ellen told her about the baby and the dog, the concurrence of these events while Mallory is not home and Magnus is still gone, the quick succession of events that seem far out of her control. Unlike Magnus, Lindy was the sort of woman who placed her faith in the occult, in tarot cards and horoscopes and love lines. Ellen tends to find this ridiculous too; the idea that there is some predicting force out there, a way to make the unknowable attainable. Her mother burned sage and filled her pillows with lavender and proclaimed that she'd never get along with her younger sister, Josie, not because they were siblings, but because Ellen was a Scorpio and Josie was a Gemini.

They're two sides of the same coin, really, Ellen concludes, both far-fetched and detached from reality. But Ellen gets it, for a moment, that desire to place responsibility on someone, on *something*, outside of reality, of the ideas of chance and luck and probabilities and

coin flips. 10 to 20 percent of pregnancies end in miscarriages. Ellen knows this because she looked it up afterwards, unsure of what anything the doctor had said meant. They think this is an underestimate; there are pregnancies lost before they're ever known, their loss disregarded as spotting or periods. Many miscarriages aren't ever reported.

Some might call her situation bad luck. Others might look at her profile on paper and call her lucky; the decision of what to do was taken away from her. If Grace knew, she'd call it God's plan. Lindy would search her tarot cards for a rationale. But Ellen's left without an explanation, staring at probabilities and a large dog, wishing she didn't have to search for an answer.

The dog's presence in the house is more foreboding than comforting. He lurks around corners, entering each room timidly and cautiously, as though he assumes that there's danger waiting for him on the other side. He feels foreign in the house, whimpering and hiding, howling at odd hours of the night, barking at anything that passes the front door.

Ellen's thankful for him though. She takes him in that first night and cleans him with de-fleeing shampoo that she has from Mallory's last cat. He shivers in the bathtub, spraying her in lukewarm bathwater. He's thin, his ribs palpable beneath his matted fur. She keeps him in the bathroom that first night, feeding him hamburger with her hands until he's content, vowing to bring him to the vet the next day, to see if he's chipped or if she can keep him.

Of all the things that Shuck is, Ellen thinks that he's mostly a distraction. Ellen's working from home for the rest of the week, sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop and sketch book, a heating pad pressed against her back. On Thursday, after Shuck is inspected and declared unclaimed, Ellen buys him a collar with her phone number on it. He wags his tail in the

passenger seat of her van, his mouth contorted into a goofy smile, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth. She buys him dog food and a rope toy and a stuffed sheep and a bed. She returns home, and he curls up at her feet beneath the table.

Ellen's always wanted a dog. *It's a commitment*, Magnus had always said, as though she wasn't aware of this. Magnus liked to travel, wandering various parts of the country, backpacking across mountain ranges, spending weeks in canoes. Ellen was more than happy to do this with him, and she's sure that Shuck would've been too. Ellen thinks about sending him a photo of the dog, but she hasn't answered his messages since returning home from the hospital.

Ellen wonders, though, what would have happened if she'd called him with news that they were having a baby, that they were going to be parents, instead of hiding the absence of a baby, a loss of something they never knew was there. If a dog was too much of a commitment, what would a baby be? They'd lose it all, everything they were looking forward to in the next year. Magnus would probably be a little glad, Ellen suspects, that she miscarried. Ellen thinks that she should be happy too, that this should be a relief. But it's just opened a hole in her chest.

Ellen doesn't like to look in mirrors.

She hasn't ever, really, too much poking and prodding and distortion, her legs becoming longer, her features warping as the glass's angle changed. She spends too much time inspecting the pores on her face, combing through her hair until she deems it presentable, inspecting the profile, pinching deposits of fat and reminding herself that they're okay, it's human physiology, even as Lindy's disordered voice echoes in her brain.

And now, looking in the mirror has become a challenge. Her body feels strange, when she looks at it. Her chest is still sore and swollen, her stomach feels different than it did before.

She looks at her figure in the mirror and can't see anything besides what she might have looked like, had that baby grown, morphed her body into something foreign that she wouldn't have been able to recognize. It feels, in some ways, that that change had already begun, stopped midway at some offshoot, unfamiliar to her and yet not visibly different.

It makes her sad to place her fingers on the skin above an empty uterus.

She goes to the gynecologist four days after the bleeding starts. The doctor spreads her open with the metal speculum, inspecting her, only to find that nothing was out of place. *These things, unfortunately, happen*, her doctor said from behind the curtain while she clothed herself, still feeling agape and exposed. *It might be a sign that there was something genetically off with the fetus that made it incompatible with life. You should be able to get pregnant again, though, everything looks good.*

These words echo in her head as she returns home that evening, turning down the winding roads that lead back to the house. She's always been a daydreamer. When she was a kid, Ellen would lean her head against the window as her parents drove her around, alone in the backseat with the vibrations shaking her skull. She still does this, when she drives, navigating her way home on autopilot. This evening, there's a family drama playing out in her brain, one where she's pregnant, her body expanded and odd, softer around the edges. Magnus is there, staring at her from across the room with love in his eyes. He presses his lips against her cheek and places a hand against her stomach.

A deer stands in the middle of the street ahead of her, and Ellen slams on the breaks to avoid crashing. It blinks, once, twice in her direction, before skittering across the street towards the river. Ellen can feel her heart pounding in her chest. Magnus is gone from the back of her eyelids.

Shuck is waiting for her at home, standing at the stop of the stairs, his tail thudding in a greeting. She pats his head and feeds him, refilling his water, before climbing upstairs into bed. It's before eight, but the sun's been gone for hours, and her eyelids feel heavy. Shuck comes upstairs when he's done, circles the bed, and plops down on top of her, pressing her against the bed. The weight is comforting. She feels more grounded than she has in days.

Ellen only calls Magnus after Shuck arrived.

*This is what I've been waiting for,* she says to herself, petting the dog methodically, grooming his hair into neat, long lines down his back. He whimpers and looks at her with his preternaturally yellow eyes.

He is quiet on the other end of the phone. It's silent behind him, save the occasional ambulance siren. She can hear them, different than their sound in the states, echoing in the room behind Magnus. *Oh okay,* he says after a while. *Are you alright?*

*I still feel kind of ill, but I'll be okay,* she replies. He sits in silence on the other end of the phone. Ellen wonders if he misses her. He begins to weep, on the other end of the phone. She thinks that she misses him, that she has for a long time, even though she won't admit it to him and ask him to come back to her.

*Are you alright?* She asks after a while, when the crying seems to wind down.

*Yeah.*

*Are you sure?*

*Yeah.*

She wonders if he knows that she's lying too, because she doesn't believe him for a second.



Mallory comes home that weekend, reappearing with a wild smile and a haircut, new bangs cutting harshly across her forehead. Ellen tells her what's happened since she's been gone, and Mallory tries her best to help.

She walks Shuck in the trails behind their house, near the river, letting go of the leash and letting Shuck sprint ahead, sniffing seemingly random spots, his tail wagging aggressively, thudding against trees as he passes by, inspecting the woods as though he's looking for something. Mallory goes to the grocery store and makes chicken soup. She tells stories about her family, filling her in on the drama of the funeral. She feeds Shuck chicken scraps when she thinks that Ellen isn't looking, the dog's whining giving both of them away.

*What would I have done?* she asks Mallory, one night, while they lie on the couch. She's been thinking about this ever since, debating back and forth. When she asked Magnus, he hadn't known. *either I would have deferred to you,* he'd said, redirecting the choice back to her.

Mallory shrugs. This seems odd to Ellen. There is something about this question that is inherently devastating to her. She can't bring herself to make a decision, to fulfill the what-if, because even though she hadn't known, there's still a gnawing of loss in her stomach, a loss of control over her body that feels wholly uncomfortable.

*You would have figured it out.*

*I know,* she replies, *but what is your first instinct?*

*I don't know,* she says. *I think you and Magnus would have figured it out though. You two always worked well together.*

Shuck howls at the backdoor, staring at a shadow dancing along the back porch. Following his line of sight, she sees the outline of a buck, with its antlers standing large in the

forest of baren trees. It seems to be staring at Shuck, standing at the other end of the footbridge. There's a sliver of moon in the sky, and the darkness is startling, allowing the buck to appear and disappear into shadow seamlessly.

*What are you looking at?* Mallory asks.

*Can't you see it?* Ellen replies, pointing in the buck's direction. Shuck starts to whine, staring up at Ellen with his large yellow eyes.

*See what?*

*The buck.*

*No, I don't see anything,* Mallory says, getting closer and squinting.

The buck disappears, and once he does, Shuck begins to calm down, walking in circles around the two of them until he plops down onto the kitchen floor. Mallory looks at the dog skeptically. Ellen returns to the couch, her heart beating faster than normal. Mallory places a hand on her shoulder.

*Did you really see something?* Mallory asks.

*Yes,* Ellen replies. Mallory stares at her with her eyes narrowed.

*I believe you.*

Ellen finally stops bleeding.

Shuck disappears.

After a week of blood, it begins to peter out. The clots begin to grow smaller and smaller, the pads and tampons last longer and longer. The cramping eases. She can stretch her back, undoing the knots that had developed over the week. She feels well enough to go back into work.

As Ellen begins to feel better, Shuck starts to act *weird*.

It's the sort of weird that he was that first night, before he settled in. He becomes an ominous presence in the house again, looming like an apparition at the top of the stairs. He begins to pace the back screen doors, as if looking for an escape route. He refuses to eat the kibble that she leaves out from him, only accepting meat from her hands. He makes odd, human-sounding noises in the middle of the night that keep Mallory up. She swears to Ellen the next morning that the dog was *singing*, the words familiar but unintelligible. Ellen wonders if she should worry, but she remembers the buck and decides just to nod.

*I don't know what's going on*, she says to Mallory, watching the dog sit in an armchair, staring out on the woods behind the house. He looks forlorn, his eyebrows contorted to convey the utmost sadness. Ellen looks at the dog, and for a moment, sees her own emotions in its face.

She's worried. There is something that feels inevitable about the dog leaving, even though she feels herself becoming more and more upset by the idea.

*There's something wrong with this dog*, Mallory whispers to her one evening while Shuck is stationed against the glass, peering into the night beyond. *I think we should let him go*.

But Ellen shakes her head, stubborn and persistent that the dog will settle in. She's become very attached to the creature, and although she knows that they could find another dog, she doesn't want to. She's convinced that there was a reason that he appeared when he did, that he's stayed as long as he has. She doesn't want him to go.

But, as she suspects, one morning Shuck is missing. He's not at the end of their bed or by his water bowl, he's not at the backdoor wagging, waiting to be released. Ellen knows that she

should be panicking, that she should be searching every nook in the house, looking for him. But, instead, she feels at peace. She makes herself a cup of coffee, the ceramic mug warm in her hand.

She steps onto the back porch, dried leaves crunching underneath her feet. It's a cold and blustery morning, the wind sharp enough to cut through her woolen sweater. The sky is bright blue above the bare branches of the forest, clear of clouds. She can feel the cold in the back of her lungs. There are crows circling above, swooping down into the forest, and resurfacing again. Ellen thinks she hears barking in the distance, but Shuck never reappears. She retreats inside, her toes frozen.

The next morning, she wakes up to find that the bleeding has completely stopped. The cramping has almost totally subsided. She goes to the bathroom, and for the first time in what feels like an eternity, she's not reminded of the loss when she does. Her body is beginning to heal.