

JAKOB

BACHELOR LIFE

When he gets home from Fieldhammer, Jakob heads into the bathroom and washes his face. This is his way of indicating that the work day is over. A little ritual. As he pats himself dry he notices that the washcloth reeks faintly of bodily grime and old soap. He pulls it away from his nose and checks it out under the bathroom light. It looks a little bit gray. He makes a mental note to wash it next time he does his laundry and he drapes it over the shower curtain rod, then goes back to inspecting himself in the mirror. He rubs at his stubble, checks his teeth, runs his fingers through his hair.

He's boiling water to make macaroni when the phone rings. It's his sister, Ruth, calling from Long Island.

They chat for a bit and then she says —So I have news.

—Lay it on me, says Jakob, dumping the pasta into the pot.

—Gavin and I are getting married.

—Hey, Jakob says. —That's great!

She gives him the lowdown on the wedding, the when and the where; she paints the whole proposal scene for him. —Very romantic, she says. —He did the whole get-down-on-one-knee thing. We'd talked about it before, of course, he knew I would say yes. But still. It was sweet of him to do it that way.

—Well, I like Gavin, Jakob says. —I'm sure you two will be very happy.

—Yeah, Ruth says. —You better watch out, though, I'm starting to pull ahead of you. It's going to be *you* catching up to *me* from now on.

—Hey, Jakob says. —I'm *glad* you're getting married. Maybe that'll placate Mom for a little while. She's really been putting the heat on me lately. Do me a favor and start having some kids, too.

—We'll see, says Ruth. —Anything's possible. So—you still seeing that same woman? Freya?

He uses a slotted spoon to fish a few pieces of macaroni out of the roiling water. He blows on them, pinches one piece between his thumb and his forefinger, holds it up, watches steam curl off of it. —Yeah, he says, and then he drops the macaroni into his mouth, chews. It could probably still boil for another minute or two. — She and I have actually been talking about moving in together when my lease runs out in September.

—Really? Ruth asks.

—Really, Jakob says. He holds the phone between his ear and shoulder, so that he can clear room in the sink for the colander. —We've been involved for two years now, you know.

—Wow, Ruth says. —It's going to happen.

—Maybe, Jakob says. Things got complicated between him and Freya this year, ever since New Year's, even before that, really. Maybe since last year, when he finished his degree and took the summer off. But things have gotten better in the last month. They've begun to make an effort to spend more time together, to go out every once in a while for a walk in the park or a drink at the bar. And they've started having sex again, with a surprising ferocity. So he's optimistic, even though he's not sure why things got better. He doesn't feel like he changed the way he was doing anything. It seems more like Freya has made some internal rearrangement that he doesn't understand. Or maybe they both just needed some nice weather in order to hatch. But whatever.

—I don't know, teases Ruth. —Two years? I think this is it for you. The end of your bachelor life.

—Maybe, he says, smirking, as he drains the pasta into the sink. The bachelor life? Is that what this is? He looks at the pile of dirty dishes, thinks of the gray washcloth in the bathroom, the galaxy of toothpaste-spatter on the mirror. He's been known to swig milk directly out of the jug, to shovel ice cream directly from the carton into his mouth. He supposes these are things that people imagine when they think of a *bachelor*. They are things he feels guilty about sometimes: they don't fit with the image of sophisticated adulthood that he had imagined for himself. Last night he sat in front of the TV in a bathrobe, he ate a Little Debbie cake and let the cellophane drift down to the carpet, and as he looked at it down there, amidst all the shreds and crumbs needing to be vacuumed, he thought *so this is the life you have made for yourself*. He thinks this is the life that his mother wants to save him from when she says *so have you and Freya talked about settling down?*

I'm doing alright, he tells himself. *It doesn't matter if my house is messy or if I'm, what, a slob*. He rummages in his utensil drawer for the scissors and cuts open the pouch of

processed cheese. *I have a job. I can pay my bills on time. I'm in a relationship; I'm getting laid regularly enough. That's more than lots of people can say.*

—You think I'll get to meet her sometime? Ruth asks.

—Sure, says Jakob. —I'll bring her to the wedding.

Besides, he thinks, there's no guarantee that I'd be less messy if Freya and I got married. She's kind of a slob herself.