

Dream House as House in Florida

(From IN THE DREAM HOUSE by Carmen Maria Machado)

You visit her parents' house in the southernmost part of Florida. You fought the whole way down—at the Dulles airport she made you cry at a Sam Adams–branded restaurant and several strangers looked over with judgment as you pressed a napkin against your face like a consumptive—and you are relieved to be there.

She has an ancient cat who immediately tries to bite you. Her mother is birdlike, too thin, and you are worried—for her, for yourself. Her father shows up later, pours himself a generously sized cocktail. Her family is funny and mean. They are different from your family, who you feel have never appreciated your mind. And there is only her and her two parents and you are jealous; there is no other word for it.

They feed you. Chicken and Israeli couscous and cookies and kalamata olives and a bean salad with so much dill. Seafood and risotto and fresh fruit. You laugh. “Maybe we should move here,” you say, and her mother smiles brightly, and for a moment you feel like a scene in a movie, a boyfriend being plied by the culinary arts of the mother of your lover. You never see her mother eat, not once.

“If you go out for a walk later,” her father says, drinking his third martini, “make sure you watch out for alligators.”

“Alligators?” you repeat in alarm.

“They probably wouldn’t attack you,” he says. The glass is, suddenly, empty. “Probably.”

The next day, you get into a fight about almost nothing at all while sitting on her childhood bed. You decide to walk away, go sit in the kitchen. “I’ll be reading,” you say, and you do, for almost an hour. Her mother is standing at the counter, chopping something fragrant and chatting at you in a bright voice.

Your girlfriend comes into the kitchen, and asks, “What are you reading?” as her hand starts to circle your arm. “I’m—” you start to reply, and her fingers tighten.

Her mother, still chopping, says, “Are you girls still going to the beach later?” Her knife raps against the cutting board with unnerving precision. Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don’t understand; you don’t understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don’t know what to do. This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal. Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response.

An hour later, you are at the beach, just the two of you. “Let’s go in the water,” she says.

You follow her in because you don't know what else to do. The Florida ocean is like nothing you've ever experienced—warm as a bath but, paradoxically, full of threat. The ice-cold oceans of your girlhood seemed more hostile to life; anything could be lurking in this beautiful, tepid water. When you get out up to your necks, she says, "Let me hold you!"

You stare at her.

"Why are you so pissy?" she asks. "You've been like this from the moment we left the house."

"I need to talk to you," you say. "Earlier, when you grabbed my arm—that was so scary. You touched me and it wasn't with concern or love. You touched me with anger." You feel like a fucking hippie, but you don't know what other language to put to it, the panicked tattoo of your heart. "You squeezed and squeezed and—" You lift your arm out of the water, where you have begun to bruise ever so slightly. "Why did you do that?"

Her expression is flat for a half second before her chin begins to tremble. "I'm so sorry," she says. "I didn't mean it. You know I love you, right?"

The rest of the visit is uneventful, except for one night toward the end when you both come in from the pool just after sunset. You open the sliding glass door to air-conditioning and escalating voices, and as you cross the kitchen together, you see her father stepping toward her mother. He's holding a drink, and he's shouting about—something. She is tight against the counter. Your girlfriend keeps moving, without pause, but you stop for a beat and look at them. Her mother flashes you a glance, and then tilts her chin up toward her husband and says, "I need to finish dinner," before turning her back to him. The moment feels fraught, but it passes and he stalks away.

In your girlfriend's bedroom, you are shaking. Outside, the air is filled with prestorm pressure. She strips down to nothing and stands there covered in goosebumps. "I don't want to be like him," she says, "but sometimes I worry that I am." It doesn't sound like she's talking to you.

When the storm breaks, the thunder is as loud as a gun.