

Birth Rites

by. shadow backus

Jamie Ryder was at once solidly inside her body and outside of it, observing as her face slammed into someone's chest—a flat but strong chest. She was aware of how fiercely her nose burned and how painful sunglasses hurt when forced into one's face and, she was vaguely aware of a curious interest in the fact that the situation had occurred at all. Both reactions were short lived.

Inhaling, as much from the sharp pains as her embarrassment, she sucked in a circle of the other person's shirt. Her fingers flew to her face and she discretely dislodged the shirt from her mouth and while checking for any saliva that may have slung out of her mouth.

When the chest laid his hand lightly on her shoulder, her next breath was as sharp and audible as if she were on stage—That's how she felt during most social interactions. Unfortunately, she never knew her part or her lines.

The man—it was a young man—removed his hand, presumably in response to her jump from the contact.

She did jump surprise. Really, when she thought about it, it was no shock that this little scene was the opening act of her first semester on campus. All she could do was pray for some portion of a retake.

Jamie's sunglasses had fallen to the tip of her nose when she tilted her head back to see the owner of the man and his t-shirt. A pair of grey-green irises below silver-blond hair peered down at her. From the time their eyes connected, his seemed to be surprised, certainly, but warm—as if he'd found a long lost friend. Warm that is, until a wily grin took over his face and cemented her back into shyness.

Mumbling an apology, she stepped around the fellow student and looked intently at her dad's ancient ipod. The more she tried to deny that the scene was still rolling, the more she frantically tried to find, or at least remember, which song she'd intended to select prior to the collision.

A mental picture of playful crinkles on the man's nose blurred her view of the screen and button she wanted to navigate. She continued to feign occupation with the music player, but slowed to taking small steps, as she was now virtually blind as to where she was headed.

She could feel him, his energy, still engaged with her.

Hunched over and heart beating, it felt as though her life depended upon finding that one playlist, though she'd settle for remembering how to access a song or an artist at this point.

"Hey," he called to her retreating form.

Somehow she knew the hall was empty, despite chatter flowing from open doors. He was talking to her. Could she scurry out of the building pretending that she hadn't heard him? Maybe; except that her step had faltered when he'd spoken. And, she couldn't ignore the eyes boring into her back. Determined, she coolly turned to face him. As if daring fate, she carried on walking backward toward the double doors.

"I'm Trick." When she skipped the moment to reply, he spoke louder. "Trick. My name," he said, pointing to himself. "Or, Logan. Logan's my given name."

She was still processing and didn't respond.

"Most people call me Trick. I don't even know if anyone in the dorms knows my real name." With his gaze moving up at a diagonal, it looked as if he was honestly pondering the matter. When his eyes rested on hers again, his head was still at an easy angle.

It was clear she was going to have to interact with him further—before her run. She wished she'd crashed into him after her jog. She'd have been much more calm and collected.

His lips moved into an easy smile, but he didn't draw closer.

Thank God.

"What's yours—your name?" he asked, still a bit loudly.

Jamie tugged on an ear bud wire until it popped out. "Jamie. " She kept her face neutral. "No nickname." She didn't trust herself to do or say anything clever. Any additional comment she made would have surely fallen flat. For some reason she instinctually knew his opinion of her mattered.

He leaned against the wall and crossed his feet at the ankles, and appeared to study her.

At this, she almost sighed with relief. A man with an ego. All he had to do now was cross his arms over his chest, and smirk with condescension. Anyone posing like that was too self-satisfied for her. She could dismiss him without further agony to herself.

But he didn't cross his arms and his face only softened.

Her lips parted in confusion as she stared back at him.

He was actually giving off humble vibes.

What was she supposed to do with that?

"It's a good name, Jamie. It sounds trustworthy, and sporty, and a tad different." He stood on two feet again shoving a hand into his front pocket. "I live upstairs. It looks like you're in a hurry. When you have time, I'd like ask you what your middle name is."

The name was on the tip of her tongue when it became apparent to her that he and she were standing well over eight feet apart. He remained focused on her, but didn't pursue. Was he actually aware of how he was making her feel and not gloating? Moreover, was he aware of how much space she seemed to need at the moment and chose to respect it?

"We'll get back to that some other time. Soon, though. I'll see you at the New Student Orientation tonight?"

She closed her mouth and nodded in response. Her brain was starting to hurt. Though she was trying not to, even from this distance, she could see his every detail—the way his dark lashes outlined his eyes, the stubble on his jaw, and, *oh my*, the spot of wetness her mouth had left on his shirt. She whimpered and lifted a limp finger to indicate the mark, but a company with bright lights and stage whispers had, at last, crowded her brain.

Jamie leaned onto the handle of the exit door, offered a paltry finger wave, and escaped down the stairwell. When she reached the small courtyard between the dormitories, she exhaled. *It isn't really a big mark; it'll dry; it isn't as if it will leave a stain. Will it?*

She'd apologize whenever she saw him again. *Or, no—that would point to the fact that I should have made light of the situation and offered to take his shirt to the dry cleaners in the first place. It looked silk. You have to take silk to a drycleaner don't you? Where's the nearest drycleaner?* She covered her ears with her hands and repeated to herself to figure it out later.

The courtyard images before Jamie reminded her that she hadn't exactly chosen a small college to attend. People and stimuli were everywhere. She'd better get used to it because she

was bound to bump into fifty more people during the entire time she lived in Madison. She just hoped she didn't slobber on anyone else.

With a heavy sigh, Jamie wove through bike racks toward Lakeshore Path, and attempted to push aside the self-consciousness she'd felt with what's-his-name. Again, a picture of his dancing eyes and dense lashes emerged. She stooped under a low-hanging branch and squashed the memory, promising to think only of the nature surrounding her in this moment.

Nature was something on which she could always rely to calm her. She set out at a fast walk, imbibed with fresh air. She caught glimpses of the lake through trees that lined Lake Mendota's grassy shore. Within the spaces, she spotted ducks on the green water. Out of the water, however, students swam everywhere. The owners of ripped jeans and Birkenstocks, talked, laughed, slept, and threw Frisbees. Jamie admired their apparent ease with life, their peers, and themselves. She longed to be self-assured and gregarious in the same way they were. In the same way, Tripp-*no*, Track, *no*, Logan-*yes*, Logan was.

Revisiting how she'd left him in haste, Jamie swallowed, and felt discomfort spread over her for the third or fifth time. She wanted to crawl out of her sensitive skin, but she couldn't stop the repetitive play of her wimpy actions. Let it go, she told herself. Then, as though divine intervention could enter the physical realm, a blare of musical horns made her jump out of the self-flagellating inner dialogue. University of Wisconsin band members were beginning rehearsal on a field two hundred yards to her left. She focused on the drums reverberating in her chest and picked up her pace.

Before long, she was able to anticipate wildlife up ahead. The reassurance of trees would soon encompass her. As a rule, the further Jamie got from civilization, the more she mastered herself. For all of her life, the smells of moist dirt, molding leaves, and the sound of crunching twigs beneath her feet consoled her. The wind always gave her hope and felt like freedom. In addition, her heart thumped excitedly in response to any small animal who might skitter across her path. More than nature, the act of exercise mollified her scattered mind.

When she was under cover of the woods, she knew that she'd be able to do well with her new life if she could run regularly on this path for the rest of the school year. Muscles warmed, she squeezed her shoulder blades, set her core, and relaxed her neck and arms. Her trot progressed to an effortless jog. At last, she was able to allow her thoughts to peacefully meander through her morning: The morning her new life started; the day she moved into her home away from home for the next four years.

A tinge of guilt crossed Jamie's mind when she remembered her mom's glistening eyes from that morning. Jamie knew that her going to college was hard on her mom. But, she also knew that Nina Ryder wanted this to the same degree her daughter did. Nina Ryder had wanted all good things for her daughter since the moment she and her husband had adopted Jamie.