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The Red Thread

Even with her toothache, Natasha Bromley couldn't resist Jonas Jackson Snow when she saw him on the train: skinny in big tan cords, the profile of a boyish tortoise. His eyes were closed. A headset like a pair of folded-down mouse ears wrapped around his skull. He held in his fist a microphone, angled in her direction. She rose from her seat, kneeled on one knee, and moved her mouth near his mike.

"What are you listening to?" she asked.

Even before he opened his eyes, Jonas knew he'd find Natasha. Citrus oil embedded her skin and clothes. He'd caught her lemony scent on the B line platform, and positioned himself on the train perpendicular to her along the orange and chrome benches. His mike amplified her every move. He wanted to hear her breathe, to feel the friction of her massive thighs, to decode the continual tap of her fingertips against the bench. She exhaled the scent of lemons, waiting for his answer.

"I'm listening to you," he said. She sneezed into the crook of her elbow. The explosion triggered by her sinuses shot its way through the mike, ricocheted like a gift through his body. She pointed to her jaw.

"My tooth is killing me," she said.

"Bless you," he said.

Natasha was long-haired and big-hipped and packed into her clothes. She'd just found a boiled wool hat. She liked that Jonas inhaled into the paper bag that held the lemons from her father's fruit shop.

"They're for the dentist," she said. "Want one?"

Jonas peeled and ate the lemon like he would an orange. When Natasha got to her stop, Jonas followed. He followed her up the dark stairs to the dentist's. He insisted on waiting with her in the examination room. Natasha didn't mind. She eased back in the dentist's chair, folding one hand into the other as the dentist scraped at her teeth. She felt her saliva pool at the bottom of her mouth as her jaw grew numb from Novocain.

"Do they use fluoride where you live?" Jonas asked.

"It's city water," Natasha said. But Jonas had no idea what Natasha said.

"There's fluoride, all right," said the dentist, who prided himself on understanding his patients' slurry speech. "But if it actually prevented tooth decay, I'd be out of a job."

Jonas inhaled when the dark, hot scent of drilled tooth filled the cramped room. He turned up his mike to feel the wet hollow whir of the drain and the determined buzz of the dentist's spinning drill.

Later that day, at the city's countless Don't Walk intersections, Natasha could not stop looking at Jonas from under the eyelashes she'd painted blue that morning. Jonas secured himself to Natasha's hip like a human holster, tapping secret, Morse code messages onto the lip of her collarbone as they headed toward the

park. There he coaxed her into a headstand: boots cast on grass, socks askance. Argyle and sport. Hers and His Hosiery atop a turntable she'd found at a thrift store for ten dollars, along with three records: Sun Ra. Page and Plant. And Jonas insisted on Sousa, too, for patriotic sex.

"I don't have patriotic sex," she'd told him, her words still slurred. Sex, for example, sounded like shexsh. "I do it for myself."

"You should try it sometime," he'd said. "I'll buy the record for you." And he did.

From upside down, Natasha admired the black lacquer on Jonas' toenails, the point and flex of his skyward feet. His turnip-colored shirt slid past his ribcage. A thin trove of hair bisected his strong body through the navel. In the sky, ribbons of birds, curved like half a lasso, seemed to pull her toward him. And then, this:

*We'll make mittens this winter
Boil wool into yarn
Dye it with Mercurochrome*

She said these words aloud as the blood in their bodies rushed toward the ground in liquid stampede. Their eye sockets pulsed. Blood pooled in the upper lobes of lung and kidney. It saturated the Southern sides of their bones. It reached into the neglected tips of capillaries and upper heart chambers. Like pilgrims to a shrine, each red cell moved toward its respective crown, the sacred spot of infants. Here sadness drained from Natasha. Here it leeches into the lawn. And the last of her numbness left her mouth.

"See? All you needed was a change of perspective," he said.

"Now my legs are numb," she said. She contemplated wool for the mittens. "Do you know where we could buy a sheep?"

He tapped her totem-pole shin with his big toe. Quarters and tokens rained from her pockets and their towering bodies collapsed into one another. Legs sizzled with moving blood on the somersault. Red jean straddled tan cord. Tan cord zipper, unzipped, and no underpants and groping dark palms sticky still from the sidewalk lunch and breath spoiled too from boiled meat and mustard. It didn't matter. Her tan thigh spilled thick over his brown back, accordions overworked, blue mascara smeared, Natasha's green shirt unbuttoned on a borrowed wool blanket. The coins winked the sun into her eyes when wind parted the leaves of trees. The shuddered rush of pulsating blood shuddered through as he released into her. In that instant her black hair turned purple.

"Tell me your name again?" Jonas gasped.

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Even when Natasha got too large for headstands, she'd spend five minutes each day, feet skyward, filling her head with blood. The baby inside her, in silent rage at the gravitational shift, would buttress herself against her mother's diaphragm and kick at her liquid-filled bladder. Natasha imagined the child was sending her coded messages in the rhythmic language of the unborn. When Natasha wasn't waiting on customers from her father's fruit store, or building expansive pyramids of un-bruised Meyer lemons or clementines or blood oranges, she would reply to her child by tapping her fingers against her abdomen, rippling the liquid in her amniotic sac, waking her baby from fetus sleep.

Natasha's hair remained plum-purple after that day in the park. She'd joked about it with Jonas, awkwardly, as they reassembled their clothes. With the last of her waxy lipstick, Natasha wrote her phone

number on Jonas' arm, and they went their separate ways: he to his mother's house in Fort Lee. She to her father's apartment, her home of twenty-three years, in Washington Heights, lugging the record player and a small sheep she found by chance at a farmer's market just north of the park. Hermann, Natasha's father, knew from her hair color that she was pregnant the moment Natasha got home, for her mother's hair had done the same when Natasha was conceived. Hermann took one look at Natasha's purple hair, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and started to clear out a wall of books in his study to make room for a crib.

"It will be good for us, this baby," he said. He looked down at the ivory-colored sheep at Natasha's knee and petted her woolly head. "And a lamb, too. Very good." On his lunch hour, Hermann would remove his fruit vendor's smock and take the sheep across the street to the park to let her graze. For snacks, he gave her the fruit too old to sell, and she soon grew fat and fragrant. Her fleece shone, fluffy and glossy. As Natasha's stomach grew larger, her hair turned the color of garnets. She ate sour cherries and grapefruit. She devoured the innards of quartered limes and quarts of yogurt. When he never called, she all but forgot about Jonas.

The baby came early by two weeks, on Tax Day. The red cord wrapped around her tiny blue wrist like a slimy telephone line, filled with unsent messages and citrus oil nutrients and her mother's last meal of takeout taquitos. The baby's hair was bright orange and thick like a chick's. Her brow was dark and wrinkled, angry at times, with a pronounced nose and little chin. From the start everyone agreed she smelled like tangelos. Every third hour, she would wrap her gums around her mother's nipple and drink. And the sheep, whose fleece grew so large its span grazed every doorway she passed, would lie at Natasha's feet each night as the baby nursed.

Sometimes, when she walked the baby through the park, Natasha would look up at the trees and inspect each leaf. Evenings, she'd play the Sousa record and consider, with a hand wedged between her legs, patriotic sex. Mornings, she would tap-tap on the edge of the baby's crib to send her more coded messages, trying to not think about Jonas. She didn't know that his sleeve had smudged the seven on his arm into a two on the bus ride home, making the digits connect not to her but to a cheese shop on Mulberry Street. She didn't know that sometimes, on his lunch break, Jonas would take the B train to her dentist's in search of her X-rays. She didn't think to find him sitting on Saturdays in the same spot in the park by the pond, waiting for her return. But he was there, microphone in hand, hoping she'd show. But she never did.

One afternoon in September, Natasha checked the almanac she'd found uptown at a tractor supply store and decided it was time to shear the sheep. In the living room, as Hermann watched *Jeopardy!*, Natasha placed the sheep's neck between her cord wood knees. She ignored the sheep's bleats for release as she sheared her to the skin. The next day, she boiled the wool in a lemon juice solution and used the baby's bathtub to dye it red with mercurochrome. It dried on garbage bags and newsprint on the floor in a sunny window. The dye stained the newsprint so pink that Hermann nearly mistook it for his *Financial Times*. A few days later, Natasha combed and carded the wool into a felted red plane. And the next time Natasha bathed her, the baby's skin turned pink. Natasha rubbed the lanolin from the sheep's wool into the child's skin as she cooed in a white cloth diaper.

"A gift from our sheep, baby girl," she said. The pink skin suited the child, and for the sake of contrast, Natasha dressed her in a jumper the color of peapods. All the while, the freshly-shorn sheep glowered as Natasha dressed the baby. She glowered as they walked the five blocks to the fruit shop. She glowered because she, too, had grown accustomed to customers' compliments. Sometimes, when no one was looking, she'd admire her fleece in the hall mirror. And now the fleece was gone. Natasha's shearing made her forlorn, far too skinny, and sometimes, when she was at her lowest, the sheep would nuzzle her way under the carded red wool that waited by the windows. She stopped sitting at Natasha's feet when she nursed the child. Instead, she'd go in the living room to watch *Jeopardy!* with Hermann. But one evening, the sheep noticed Hermann wasn't on the sofa. Natasha found him an hour later in his fruit shop, hunched over hands of bananas, dead.

After the funeral, it rained every day for the rest of the month, and well into November. Natasha did not play her turntable. She did not listen to *Jeopardy!* as she nursed from the next room. And she sent no coded messages to the baby girl, for any message she'd send would upset them both. Natasha would stare in silence at the sheep sleeping beneath the carded red wool as she nursed the baby, longing for her father. The sheep now stayed always under the wool, and would no longer follow Natasha to the fruit shop. But on the first sunny Saturday of December, Natasha decided to take the wool to a craft center in the East Village and spin it into yarn. The wool's ruby color and lemon-scent made it the envy among the spinners, even though it stained red the wooden wheel's thin groove and Natasha's fingertips. The skein of wool grew so large that Natasha rolled it home with a dolly from the fruit store, the baby strapped to her chest. At night, between feedings, with the skein of red wool to sustain her, Natasha began to knit a mitten. She was slow at first. But she came to understand the logic of mitten production, the pattern of knit and purl. She began to enjoy the peculiar clicks of the needle, imagining what secret messages they sent. By mid-December, Natasha finished her mitten. The sheep's fleece gave her enough wool for just one mitten, but it was a very large one. The wide cuff, for example, reached past her armpit when she tried it on. In the thumb alone, two fists fit with room to spare. Natasha heard the baby stir, and she got up to watch the child and to listen to her steady baby's breath. She moved closer to take in her scent, oranges and lemons, her dark skin and orange hair. She stroked the child's face with the nubbed thumb of the mitten. The wool left an aureole of red on the baby's cheek. Just then Natasha recalled Jonas listening to her on the train, in the dentist's. Smelling her lemons. Her hot tooth. The boiled wool hat she'd found, which she still wore. The headstands and the patriotic sex. Her plum colored hair. Her tooth began to ache, and she understood that she missed Jonas. She missed him terribly. In the phone book, she found a street address for a Jonas Jackson Snow in Fort Lee. Then she found in the kitchen an oversized envelope and a purple pen. In her purse she found a roll of stamps. She hoped it would be enough.

Before Natasha went to bed, she stuffed the mitten into the envelope and left it on the floor in the hallway, covered in stamps. As Natasha and the baby slept, in the earliest hour of the morning, the sheep trotted by the envelope. She could smell her beloved fleece inside and chewed a hole in the envelope's corner to get at it. Finally, the sheep's gnawing reached the meat of the mitten, at its cuff, and when she pulled at the woolen thread, it unraveled. When she heard Natasha stir in her room, the sheep tottered off to her spot on the sofa, as quietly as she could, and feigned sleep.

The next morning, the chewed yarn slipped from the envelope's hole and caught itself on a loose bolt in the mailbox when Natasha dropped off the package. The postal carrier who gathered the packages later that morning did not notice that red yarn trailed her all the way to the Post Office. Tethered to the inside of the mailbox on Haven Street, the mitten continued to unravel, Natasha's perfected purls undoing themselves stitch by stitch as the harried clerk hand-stamped the oversized envelope and a beat-up mail truck carried it across the Washington Bridge to Jonas's mother's landlord's front porch on Overland Street in Fort Lee. The envelope was so big, it could not fit in the mailbox.

Jonas' mother came home from the laundromat that evening, disconcerted by the pink and red stains on the envelope. She was from a formerly fancy family in North Carolina and did not like that her son was associated with someone who wrote in looping letters with purple ink. She left the envelope on the porch, and called her sister long distance to complain. "That nasty envelope is the size of eight pillows," she said. "Bigger."

When Jonas saw the envelope when he came home that night from work, he set down his sledgehammer and studied the package, which had no return address. When he opened it, all that was left of the mitten was its thumb, and a cord of red yarn that stretched through the hole in the envelope and down the street as far as he could see. He could smell the mercurochrome and the lanolin and the lemon oil threaded into the wool. The different scents assembled in his mind to form an image of Natasha. He

stretched what was left of the mitten on his head – it was that big – and with his mother shouting after him, he began to walk down the street, gathering the red yarn elbow to hand, elbow to hand.

When Jonas got to the Washington Bridge, he nodded to the toll man, and tried to give him the fare into the city. The man, seeing the red skein on Jonas' arm, refused the money and waved him on, wishing him a happy holiday. He was a tidy toll man and was glad that someone, finally, had come to remove the woolen thread from the bridge. Wet wind fell on Jonas' face as he walked across the Hudson. He crossed the upper deck of the bridge, careful to avoid oncoming traffic, along the dark curbs of the highway until the bustling roads gave way to an older, quiet neighborhood in the Heights with sidewalks and rows of shiny parked cars.

When he got to the Post Office, Jonas was relieved that the mail carrier had used the same door to enter and exit, for all he had to do was pull on the yarn for a few dozen yards and out it came, intact. Finally he arrived at a mailbox on Haven Street. It was a little road, shaped like a "U," lined with apartments. He pulled at the woolen thread and the last of it released itself from the bolt inside. He looked around at the buildings on the quiet street, the large skein in his arms. This whole time he believed Natasha would be waiting for him at the other end of this cord. For months he'd thought of her, not sure where to find her, or how, after her lipstick smudged. He looked up at the rows of dark apartments, and waited on a bench nearest the mailbox for two hours, tapping his feet, longing for his microphone, seeking some sign of her. He hugged the skein on his lap to fend off the cold. At midnight, a golden light went on in a second floor apartment. Jonas stood to get a better view. In the window, surrounded by shelves of books, nursing a baby with orange hair, was Natasha. He took in her long, plum-colored mane and her wide hips. He yelled up at her. "Natasha!" He yelled her name again.

When she heard her name, on the fourth shout, Natasha clicked off the light, looked out the window, and saw him. She appeared downstairs moments later in a down coat and her boiled woolen hat. The baby, covered in a blanket, was still at her breast. The cold gave shape to each of Natasha's breaths. He could smell her lemon scent.

"I got your mitten," Jonas said, gesturing to the woolen thread. Natasha took his cold hand into hers, and they sat on the bench. The baby was angered by the cold when she finished her meal and began to kick. Jonas looked down at the kicking baby. He stilled her legs and inhaled deep. He took the great thumb of the mitten off his head and knelt before Natasha to place it on the baby's downy crown. Then he stroked her cheek until she fell asleep. As the wind blew down Haven Street, Jonas took the woolen skein and wrapped the three of them inside it, and as he tapped coded messages onto her clavicle, they stayed huddled and finally together, beneath the beaming streetlight.