

FIND WONDER IN ALL THINGS - EXCERPT

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*J*ames walked into the marina restaurant and plunked his duffle on the floor beside him. He wanted to talk to Mr. Elliot before going to the Pendletons' houseboat, which would be his home for the next two and a half months.

He looked around the restaurant; it hadn't changed one iota since he was last there. The same Formica-topped tables, their fake wood-grain chipped off in places, were scattered about the dining room. Arranged around the tables were the same vinyl-upholstered chairs his legs used to stick to on hot summer nights. He smiled when he saw the old, revolving pie case still standing next to the cash register, proudly displaying every type of soggy-crusted cream pie known to man. The air was filled with the familiar smells of fried fish and Thousand Island dressing. Turning toward the wall of windows that

overlooked the lake, he saw a leggy redhead leaning over a table and scouring away with her dishrag. The circular motion of her arm initiated a nice circular motion of her backside. He noticed this in a purely aesthetic way, of course. He was all set to call out, “Hey Virginia!” when she turned around, and he stopped short. It wasn’t Virginia.

The dark blue eyes speared him from across the room, and his breath caught. *It can’t be, just can’t be—can it?*

“Laurel?”

She stopped, dropped her arms to her side, and stared. Suddenly, her face bloomed into a riotous mix of recognition and joy.

“James? How are you?” She held out her arms and walked toward him, wrapping him in a warm, but not too intimate, embrace—the way one should embrace a friend from long ago. He encircled her in his arms.

“Wow. I almost didn’t recognize you! I thought you were Virginia at first.”

She laughed as she stepped back to get a good look at him. “I was twelve years old the last time you were here.”

A million thoughts raced through his head: smooth, sweet-talking things like, *You sure grew up right*, and numbskull things like, *When did you grow legs up to your neck?* He settled for another, “Wow!” and a particularly lame, “You’ve changed a lot in six years.”

She shook her head in amusement. “It’s so good to see you! Daddy says you’ll be working here this summer?”

“Um, yeah—I was just checking in with him before I went over to the boat to unpack.”

“So, I guess you are staying with Stu?”

“He’ll be here for a couple of weeks. The Pendletons are heading for Europe at the end of June. They’ll be gone for the rest of the summer, so I’m ‘boat-sitting’ for them.”

“Oh, I’ll have to tell Ginny.” She winked at him, and he felt his heart stop and blood burn up his neck to his cheeks.

She was almost staring at him, and suddenly she shook her head a little, as if waking from a daydream. “I’m working here too, waiting tables—trying to save some money for college.”

“Me too.”

“Where are you again?”

“University of Dayton.”

“Ah.”

“And you? Where are you off to?”

“Benton College.”

“Where?”

“It’s a liberal arts college just a bit north of here.”

“Oh.” He paused, expecting her to explain some more, but when no other information was forthcoming, he gave a self-deprecating little laugh. “Never heard of it.”

“You missed the signs on the interstate, huh?”

“Guess so.”

She tilted her head and gave him a radiant smile. *Christ, has she always had a smile like that?* He felt warm all the way down to his toes but squashed the feeling down deep. *What’s wrong with you, Marshall? This is Virginia’s kid-sister—not some college co-ed.*

“It’s just so good to see you. I can’t get over it. You bring back memories of good times.” She turned toward the door that connected the restaurant to the marina shop. “I’ll tell Daddy you’re here,” she called over her shoulder.

He couldn’t help himself—he watched her rear-end in those white sailor shorts as she went. Mr. Elliot happened to appear in the kitchen doorway just in time to catch him staring.

“Hello, James.” His mustache twitched in amusement, and James realized her father had seen the whole ogling move. How embarrassing—not to mention job-endangering!

“Oh, there you are. Look, Daddy. It’s James Marshall. You remember, right?”

“Sir.” James sprang forward and held out his hand.

“It’s pleasant to see you again.” Mr. Elliot had a strange, almost formal way of speaking. Somehow, though, with his wire-rimmed glasses, his balding head and his scraggly ZZ Top wanna-be beard, the odd phrasing fit him.

“Thank you for the job, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“I’m sure you will.” He indicated the duffle on the floor behind James. “Why don’t you go on over and put your things away.” Mr. Elliot checked the clock on the dining room wall. “I’m going to put you on the two-to-ten shift, which gives you a little more than three hours to rest up and get settled. Hate to put you to work your first day down here, but what can I say? We’re short-handed.”

“No problem. I’m ready when you are.” He looked at Laurel, forcing his features into a nonchalant expression. “You work tonight?”

“No. I’ve got the lunch shift today, nine-to-two. But I’m sure we’ll see each other around. I’ll have to go hunt Stu down after work and see how he’s been. I haven’t seen him in a couple of years, but he won’t be the shock you were—all grown up and everything.” She approached the kitchen. “See you this afternoon, James.”

“Bye, Laurel.”

She lifted her hand as she disappeared behind the swinging kitchen door.

“That’s my girl.” Mr. Elliot beamed with pride. “Did she tell you she got a free ride to college?”

“No, sir.”

“Yes, well, it’s not exactly free. All the students accepted at Benton work at the college to pay their way, but we’re awfully proud of her in any case. We’d have been hard put to pay tuition for her and for Virginia. Laurel’s going to study art, either art studio or art history.”

James considered what his own father would have to say about art as a major. But then, he supposed sons were usually expected to choose majors that leant themselves toward a steady paycheck. James’s own major was business, and while he was definitely enjoying college life, he couldn’t have picked a more boring major. He wondered whether Mr. Elliot would be as pleased if Dylan and Crosby decided to major in art. *Yeah, James decided, he probably would.* The man was downright impractical.

“What’s Virginia studying again?”

“Pre-dentistry. Can you imagine? The girl wants to be a dentist. Sounds like hell on earth to me, but it’s what she wants, so we’re happy for her too.”

James didn't quite know how to respond to that. "Um, well—I'll just go put this stuff away then, and I'll see you at two. What should I wear?"

"Jeans and a t-shirt will be acceptable. Nothing too fancy. It'll just get stained."

"Right. See you then." He headed out the restaurant door.

ABOUT NINE O'CLOCK THAT EVENING, JAMES WAS UP TO HIS EYEBALLS IN dirty dishes when the door to the restaurant banged open, and he heard the laughing voices of Stuart and Laurel. He peered out of the kitchen and watched Stu amble over to a table James had just finished wiping off.

"Hey Stu, that one's already clean and the condiments stocked for the night. Let's sit on the deck and not mess up anything right before closing time." She headed toward the screen door leading out back.

"Spoken like a real waitress," Stu joked.

"Yeah, well, we can't all be spoiled brats like you," she said with a grin.

James was grateful. His back ached between his shoulder blades from carrying plastic bus tubs of dirty dishes to and fro, and he certainly didn't need Stuart to give him any extra work. He wasn't a wuss; he was in good shape for track and long-distance running, but he was starting to realize that there wasn't a lot of upper body strength needed for intramural cross country.

He wished that last couple would finish their coffee and chocolate pie so he could get out of there.

Back in the kitchen, he sprayed down the second-to-last load of dirty dishes for the night. Laurel appeared through the swinging door and fished out two glasses, stepping over to the soda fountain and drawing off two Cokes.

"Hey, Jim Dandy, how'd it go tonight?" Her cheerful expression irked him.

"Fine."

“It gets easier in a few days. Pretty soon, your shoulders won’t be so sore.”

“Hmmph.”

Her lips pursed in amusement, she turned around, bumping the door open with her hip.

James continued cleaning and stocking under the directions barked out by Phil, the shift manager. He peeked out into the dining room. No Laurel, no Stu, and—this was a bonus—no coffee-drinking couple either. Darlene, the waitress, was counting out the cash register, and Mr. Elliot had appeared out of nowhere to divide the tips at one of the tables near the back. Laurel came back in and kissed her dad on the cheek. He received her token of affection with a smile and without looking up from his task.

“Daddy, Stuart and I are going up to The Loft for a bit, okay?”

“Home by midnight, Punkin. Your mother will have a fit if you’re out too late.”

She rolled her eyes.

“You’re still under our roof, you know, even if you are almost off to college.”

“Yes, Dad.” She took a sip of her Coke and turned to see James carrying his bus tub to the last messy table. She met him there.

“Want some help with these?”

He shrugged.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, as she stacked plates and cups.

“Nothing. Just tired, I guess.”

“Oh.” She picked up a fork. “Stu and I are going up to The Loft for a bit.”

“Yeah, I heard. What’s The Loft?”

“Just a local place to hang out—pool tables, a jukebox. There’s live music sometimes too. Wanna come?”

He was slightly annoyed. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m working here.”

“I meant when you’re done. You should be finished by about ten thirty or so. Come on—say you’ll come. We can catch up and rehash

the splendid days of our youth," she said in an earnest tone, nodding as she took another sip from her straw.

He caved in an instant. "Well, okay. Where is it?"

She led him by the arm to the window. "Just up the ramp and then take that first left. It's a gravel road—not too far though—maybe a quarter mile. The locals take turns playing music sometimes. A few of them are pretty good." Her smile was inviting, and he was just about to return it when the screen door to the deck slammed shut, making them both jump.

"Hey, ready to go?" Stuart walked up and set his glass in James's bus tub.

"Sure," Laurel replied. "I think I talked James into stopping by after work."

"Great." He turned and headed for the door. "See you there."

They departed, and James was left feeling a little envious. He would like to escort pretty girls around the marina and up to the local music joint too, but he had to work for a living. Then he felt guilty. The Pendletons had given him a place to stay for the summer, rent free, and Stuart had given up his only down time at home to drive him there. It wasn't Stu's fault that James had to work summers. It was just the way it was.

For the next hour and a half, he heard the music from the top of the hill as he wiped counters and mopped floors. The tunes were right up his alley, too—a mixture of rock and country that floated on the night breeze over the water and into the screened windows of the restaurant kitchen.

A little after ten o'clock, Mr. Elliot came into the pantry where James was wiping down shelves and handed him a wad of bills.

"Tips," he explained. "Don't spend it all in one place or on one girl." He winked. "You need a ride up to town tomorrow to open a bank account?"

"Um, no thank you, sir. Stu said he'd take me in the morning."

"Ah." Mr. Elliot nodded. "Well, I think we're pretty much done here. Why don't you head on out and join your friends?"

“Sure. Thanks.”

“And keep an eye on my daughter,” he called after James good-naturedly. James held up a hand in acknowledgment as he stepped out the front door of the restaurant and into the warm, summer night.

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