

"Are you alive?"

The girl on the porch lay silent. After a moment she lifted her head to look through the screen door and squint at the figure standing in the shadows of the kitchen. "I'm not sure," she said.

"Well, your head's still moving," Beatrice said and then laughed.

The girl's lips lifted into a wan half-smile, and she dropped her head back down again. "I guess it is. I must be alive then."

A moment later the screen door popped open, and the woman stepped out onto the porch, bringing with her the heavy scent of cooked bacon and baking as she stood above the girl's head. "This heat makes me crazy," she said. The girl slid her head away from her aunt's feet; she did not reply.

The woman looked across the yard, casting her eye out over the lines of shadow that stretched across the driveway, hatched from the shaggy burr oaks and tall black walnut trees. Her glance skimmed the frilly, exuberant tops of the corn in the garden and followed the line of the white plank fence along the edge of the yard, sweeping the whole property, as if to ascertain that all was in place for the coming of night. Her eyes finally came to rest upon the girl.

"How can you stand it?"

She braced her hands on the bulwark of her hips as she spoke. Then with first her right hand, and next her left, she adjusted the sturdy straps of her brassiere, hoisting each breast away from the hot skin of her belly for just a moment before letting them down. There were damp half-moons of sweat on her cotton top.

"I feel like a boiled tomato. All limp and squashy—" This drew faint laughter from the girl.

"I'm not joking. How do they expect a person to live in this heat? It's not healthy, either. If you don't wear those dark glasses I bought, you're gonna get cataracts before you're forty." She stared hard at the prone figure at her feet, flapping the fabric of her skirt to create a breeze. The girl did not return her gaze.

"And you better be wearing your sunscreen," she added, then stepped

gingerly around the girl's legs and collapsed with a groan into a vacant rocking chair. "Good God."

The girl still said nothing. She had draped her arm over her face and was sheltering her eyes in the crook of her elbow.

"You know how dangerous those U.V. rays are? In Australia they have to wear hats. It's the law. On account of the ozone. You know, you're gonna ruin your complexion working in that sun. I'm glad you're almost done with it."

Beatrice frowned down at her niece. Something in the girl's posture reminded her of an ostrich with its head in the sand. The girl's long limbs were birdlike, and she could easily imagine her pushing into the large silence of the sky without the least look back. She thinks I'm nagging her. I'm not nagging her. Why does she always think I'm nagging her when I'm not even nagging her?

Bea produced a folded handkerchief from the bosom of her dress. She sighed and distractedly opened and refolded it on her lap several times, then patted her cheeks and sopped her brow with it. She would be so happy when these teenage years were done.

She began to talk again, even though she knew that the girl would rather be quiet. She talked about the heat, the drought, and the latest gossip from town. She went on for a long time while the girl listened listlessly, making small polite sounds now and again to approximate attentiveness.

"It's suffocating. I can't breathe." Bea puffed out her cheeks. Then she closed her eyes and tried to lose herself by conjuring a vision of the ocean. She was stripping off her sticky clothing and walking in, a broad Venus, with the cool water swirling around her limbs.

The girl sighed with unconscious relief when her aunt's voice finally ceased. These are the differences between us, she told herself: I like the quiet while Beatrice does not.

Also, the heat did not bother her. In fact, she loved it. It was one of the few things that she knew, looked forward to with certainty, and understood. The girl carried the memory of this heat in her skin all winter long. She saved it up like a solar cell, just so she could take it out in the cold season and warm herself by it. She lived all year long, almost, just to drink in this impossible heat of summer.

The girl was cold-blooded and spare, and this was her nourishment, even though it probably took as much as it gave. It drew everything out

of her. But this was the feeling she most liked—aridity. The heat burned clarity in. It felt clean and godlike to her. (The yellow fields, the metallic locust song, the silvery dry maple leaves turning up their undersides in a hot wind. A dry white road rising through dusty green pasture.) So empty, uncluttered, pure.

Beatrice, on the other hand, was oppressed by the heat. She began to wilt at eighty degrees. It hung around her heavily like wet wool. It made it difficult to move, difficult to breathe; it made everything difficult. Her hair itched, her clothes felt too tight. She was always damp and perspiring. If only she could have done it without disgracing herself, she would have flooded the garden and wallowed in the cool mud like a sow.

But, in all fairness, she had wanted to love it here. She had tried to love it for the girl's sake, but she was inherently unsuited. She liked soups and roasts, she was a baker, she imagined a house cozy with roaring fires, falling snow. She loved rainy weather—which there was never enough of. But most of all she missed the ocean.

Thinking these things, as always, gave Bea a vague feeling of dissatisfaction and unrest. And she began to wonder for the millionth time why it was she had ever agreed to come out here. She stretched out her short thick legs in front of herself and pushed out her bottom lip in a pout.

"I miss the ocean," she said.

"Do you remember how light looks on the ocean? Aren't you eager to see that again? When you go to school in the fall, you can drive to the water on weekends. Lucky! I've been thinking about it some. What if I go with you? We might never come back."

The girl was listening to her aunt with one ear, and with the other she was following a nighthawk as it bleated—bean-bean—over the fields beyond the garden. The little sound made her strangely happy, and for a moment she clipped her heart to those small wings and flew with it. Then she focused on what her aunt was saying, and in her mind she grew stubborn and cold, and there was a part of her that said, No, no, no, I don't think so. And another part of her that wouldn't even address it at all—that simply looked away in silence. But when she spoke, none of this internal dissent was evident to her aunt. She answered mildly, in a soft voice, "Oh, I don't remember the ocean, Bea. It was so long ago."

But Bea didn't hear; she was still talking. "I could find a shack on the beach. Just a shack. And while you're in class, I'll go beachcombing. You

know, things are always washing up. I'd never get bored. Who knows? Maybe I'd even meet a friendly fisherman." Then she opened her mouth and laughed—huh-huh-huh—and the sound of it made the girl smile in spite of herself.

Beatrice's laughter always had that effect. It was a pleasant sound that shook things out of themselves. It arose from her chest with a resonance that made the slats of the chair beneath her creak. Beatrice could laugh at the drop of a hat, and once she got started it was irresistible, rolling out of her in great waves until she was breathless and teary-eyed.

The girl sat up, then hoisted herself to standing, unfolding her full length, slow and luxurious as a velvet ribbon. She stretched and yawned and reached her arms overhead, cracking her knuckles loudly. Then she bent over her aunt, who was still chuckling about her fisherman and blotting at her eyes with the handkerchief, and pecked a quick kiss on the crown of her head. Beatrice immediately reached her arms around to hug her, but the girl was gone; she had already pulled away. Anna's expressions of affection were always like that—like the brush of feather—light, fleeting, and brief.

This reserve had always disappointed Bea, and she expressed her displeasure by fretting. "Birdie, you're too thin. You're not eating your lunches, are you? I'm gonna start getting up early to cook you a real breakfast then."

"You don't need to do that," the girl said. "I have toast."

Beatrice scoffed. "A person can't live on toast."

The truth was, like all the animals, the girl lost her appetite in the heat and often ended up dividing her lunches between Jon and Grady. She wished that she could explain the pleasant lightness that she felt in her hunger and exhaustion, but it seemed much too odd a thing to explain. And Bea would only say something like, Oh no, that's just low blood sugar talking. You need to eat more protein. In Bea's mind, all problems—even the most existential—could somehow or other be traced to poor nutrition.

She dropped into the rocker beside her aunt and threw her feet up on the porch wall. "Sorry about the sneakers. They kinda stink." The older woman sniffed absently and pushed her rocker with her feet. They sat for a long while then in companionable silence, watching as evening overspread the land and the baked earth eased out a long breath, held through all the day's exertions.

The bean fields were quiet. The red sky grew rich across the wide landscape. And the trees seemed to inch upward with their limbs outspread to catch the cooling air. Plants respired in the darkness. Their pale, fibrous roots, sounding the soil for moisture, reached blindly in all directions.

The crickets creaked in the honeysuckle bushes. The trumpet vines, twining the porch trellis, slept in silent dreams of trumpeting. The moonflowers hung heavy and low, effusing their inky nighttime scent.

The sky turned dark at the edges, and Beatrice shivered and scooched her chair closer to her niece. She reached out and patted the girl's hand where it rested on the rocker arm. "Sometimes I feel so small here. You know it?" And she meant it, she really did feel small, and it was terrifying. She liked it better where things were on a more human scale, where the sky was not so devouring. That's why she had a weight problem, she figured; she was constantly trying to shore herself up against all this godforsaken emptiness.

The girl listened in silence. She didn't feel as her aunt did, but she didn't like to contradict.

Bea persisted, "Don't you know what I mean, Birdie? Isn't it just the loneliest feeling?"

Anna cleared her throat, feeling on the spot to respond. She chose her words carefully. "I don't know. Sometimes I think it's good to feel small. It reminds me that...you know...God is there." She did not say anything more. For once, she just wanted to watch the evening unfold without talking. She wanted to become perfectly still and transparent, so that the beauty of the twilight could sink into her and pass through.

But Beatrice was a bulwark of earthly flesh, and she resisted with all her might such dissolution. She found the emptiness unnerving and tried to scare away the quietness. She wanted all questions answered immediately and all unknowns quantified. She had truck only with the tangible, and if it was not something you could sink your teeth into, something you could eat on, well, by God, what good was it?

"What day is registration?" Beatrice's voice ruffled the silence like a rock thrown into a still pool. "What day do the dorms open up? We should go as early as possible, don't you think? Should we drive and make a real trip of it? Yes, let's drive. Definitely drive. It's so exciting."

The girl's head jerked inadvertently. "I don't know, Bea. With work and all...it's gonna be difficult."

Beatrice sighed wearily. "Oh, Anna, you promised. You promised. We weren't going to go over this again. Harlan is simply going to have to make do without you, and that's all there is to it. When it's time to go, it's time to go. And the sooner you get done there the better."

The girl was silent. She had shut her eyes and was watching a strange large word walk across the blackness of her mind. *Kelivaroitus*. It meant nothing to her at first. Of course she knew her mother must have used it, but she had no idea what it meant. It was a word that made her skin hurt a little...a cautionary tingle.

"You promised," Beatrice said, her voice hardening into an angry whisper.

Then suddenly she remembered it: the Buick, its tires worn thin, fishtailing on black ice on the way home from the supermarket one December night. *Kelivaroitus*, her mother had said, very nervously. Slippery road.

The girl bent forward in her chair and leaned her elbows on the porch wall. She set her chin lightly on her crossed arms and looked out on the garden and then turned her head and peered away into the darkened trees. She didn't speak again for a long time. It appeared that the conversation had come to an inconclusive end.

Anna had always been careful with her words, measuring them out as if each one cost her something and she did not have a lot to spend. She had an aversion to excess of any kind, and especially disliked cluttering the air with her own scattered thoughts. She weighed her words in her head first, arranging and rearranging them to get them right, often ending by throwing most of them away before they were ever spoken. She preferred writing to speaking. She was a quiet girl.

Beatrice had never been particularly patient before the girl had come, but she prided herself over the years on having learned from her, among other things, to be patient. And as she waited now for the girl to speak, as in other trying times between them, she repeated to herself, *Patience, Bea. Patience. Patience is a virtue.*

But then her frustration got the better of her, and she burst out, "I'm not sure if you understand me, Anna. Dear. There is no 'if' about this anymore. You are going. End of subject. Period. Exclamation point! This is your future, and maybe you're not so happy about it right now but—believe you me—you'll thank me for it later. Harlan Whitehouse and your job at the farm are the least of my concerns." She crossed her

arms over her chest with obdurate and unequivocal finality.

In Beatrice's mind was the image of a bridge of which she herself was the engineer, foreman, and chief contractor. She had painstakingly constructed this bridge over a long period of time, yet it was not for herself, but for the girl. It rose out of the sadness of the past and climbed into a bright, shiny future. Bea even mused at times that perhaps her sole purpose in life was just this: to see that the girl crossed over this bridge safely into the world of light. That she made something successful of her life and was happy. But it had gotten more and more difficult as the girl grew older and began to pull against Bea with ideas of her own.

While growing up, Anna had always been a shy, private child who spent most of her time playing by herself outdoors or reading or writing. She had a true talent for writing, Bea had discovered, but getting her to share her work with anyone was worse than pulling teeth. Even her teachers hardly knew. But Bea had succeeded, after agonizing exertions, to convince her to submit a story or two, and just as she had predicted, the girl had won prizes immediately—from the Weekly Reader, and an Alfred Harmon Young Writers Award, and even a sizable scholarship in her senior year from the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. She had graduated from high school unknown by many of her classmates and even teachers because of her shyness, but with high marks and honors.

Bea wanted nothing more than to see Anna's talent flourish and grow, but it was a constant struggle. The girl was maddeningly indifferent to her own ability and at times seemed even ready to turn her back on it and ignore it completely. But Bea was indefatigable. She pressed on tirelessly—supporting, reassuring, encouraging, cheering, guiding. Until, praise God, Anna buckled down, got focused, applied herself, and was accepted to an Ivy League college. She was offered a good financial aid package with a combination of loans and a job in the university library. All was well.

Then, within less than a month of her departure for school, Anna had suddenly backed and stalled and then refused to go altogether. There was a horrendous scene between them, but the girl had dug in her heels so deep that a team of wild horses wouldn't move her. Even at the risk of losing her scholarship and her library job. She simply wouldn't budge.

Bea had been livid. And there were some terrible things said between them. But finally, finally after long, exhaustive negotiating sessions, they

had patched things up. They had established a fragile truce by settling on a one-year deferment as a suitable compromise: the financial aid package was renegotiated, the scholarship committee appeased. So the bridge was back in place, but it listed under this new, invisible weight. And ever since then, the girl was somehow different: she no longer listened, she drifted, she seemed shut off, closed into herself. She was no longer subject to persuasion. And, above all, this infuriated Beatrice.

So that now, after all this work and time, instead of being face forward, well on her way to that shiny bright future, Beatrice was discouraged to find that her niece was nowhere at all. She was snagged, dallying aimlessly, unimpressed by the shiny span wires and arches that beckoned. She was lodged like a brace of leaves and twigs, spinning in a side-creek eddy. And contrary to Bea's best efforts, the past loomed above her larger than ever now. It had come again to hover near, and its darkness seemed as raw as the open grave. Old wounds had sprung and grown oppressive again and the more room the girl gave them, the more they seemed to circumscribe her life.

"I'd like to take a trip this fall," Anna spoke at last, raising her chin from her arms as she gazed off distractedly into the dim yard. "If I could do anything though, I'd travel west, not east." As far away as possible. Maybe to the mountains. "Or maybe to Finland."

Beatrice sighed with obvious frustration, deciding that she would not even dignify this nonsense with a response. The girl sensed her aunt's anger, but she kept speaking, though her voice had grown tentative. "You know, I can still picture Mama's face perfectly, but not Willy's. I can't see Willy at all. I can only remember him by the things that he said. Do you think that's weird?"

"No, I don't think that's weird," Bea snapped irritably. "There's nothing weird about it. I'm sure it's that way for everyone. I can't picture Nikos without a photo anymore, either."

"I wish I had known Nikos." The girl's gentle voice immediately disarmed her aunt. She spoke so quietly that it was almost impossible to hear her over the wind and the crickets without leaning in. She went on, and Bea tipped closer with her ear.

"My mother's eyes were beautiful." Like a window on a lake, she thought; they offered you a view with so much brightness. "At least when she was happy," Anna added. But then she remembered her mother's sadness, and it was just the opposite; she could see those eyes contracting

into double points of darkness. She had a caught look then that swallowed all the light.

The girl drew a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, warily, feeling almost ashamed, embarrassed, that perhaps she had already revealed too much. She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes, drawing all sound and emotion into herself to still it. She didn't want a tremble to betray her. She didn't want to seem morbid or perverse or abnormal by still talking of these things, but she thought of them often, and sometimes she simply couldn't help herself. Things slipped out. She was quiet for a long while then, carefully gathering things up, walking through rooms.

She pictured the apartment in Bridgeport. She was walking through every room. It was an exercise she enjoyed. She put all of the furniture back as it was. She unrolled the red rugs, re-hung the white curtains, and carefully replaced the polished Windsor chairs. She set out the knickknacks on the coffee table. (A porcelain cow with a crooked tail, a poodle in a tutu standing on its hind legs, a rabbit with candy in its belly—things that Willy had hated, things that Mama had collected just to spite him.)

When she drew a blank and forgot, for instance, what the legs looked like on a certain candle stand in the corner or whether the handles on the drawers of the captain's chest were brass or iron, then she waited, not moving on until she could see them right, just right. Meanwhile, she had grown motionless as stone, forgetting Beatrice's presence entirely.

It was dark now, and the girl's face was shrouded in shadow. Beatrice stopped her rocking and held her breath. She stared at her niece intently in the gray light. The girl's uncanny stillness, the rigid line of her back, and the way she gripped the rocker arms made the woman shiver uncomfortably.

She was walking through the whole place very slowly, because she knew that in the last room would be the best thing of all: Irja, her mother. She was anticipating it with a feeling of greater and greater happiness.

"But you know what's strange?" She suddenly turned to focus on her aunt, and Beatrice jumped in surprise at the odd sound of her voice. The woman squinted to get a clearer view of the girl in the gathering dusk. She could see the glistening of her eyes and the vague outline of her body and head and the faint shine of her yellow hair.

"What?"

"When I dream of her, she is always tired and unhappy. I can't picture

her smiling. In my dreams, it's like she doesn't even know me anymore. I can tell." The girl's words trailed off, and she turned away.

"It's like I see her face, but it's the face of a stranger now." And her mother's face was like a mirror. It was what she knew herself or...didn't know herself by.

Beatrice was silent, her large heart beating hard within her. She was disturbed by these images—immeasurably disturbed. All of her anger was forgotten as she tried to wrap her thoughts tenderly around the girl, as she tried in her mind to fly backward ten years, until the child was nine. She stretched herself thin reaching backward.

She wished so hard that she could gather up the little girl. Gather her up and press their heads together close and really know what the child, who has lost everything, feels.

Anna stretched forward again and leaned against the rail. She was thinking how, some early mornings, she would rise and be startled by her own image in the bathroom mirror. How sometimes she would look at herself and think for the briefest moment, Who is that?, not recognizing her own reflection. She rubbed her eyes hard with both hands as if to erase the vision.

"Oh Beatrice. Sometimes it hurts just being human."

Beatrice felt herself at a loss. She did not know how to respond to this. So they were both silent for a while.

"I guess that's the truth," she answered at last.

