

A WARM BREATH

IN THE MONTHS AFTER my friend R.'s death, I suffered bouts of shame deeper than any I'd experienced before. These were often followed by unreasonable fits of anger, which had me shaking my fist at drivers when I was walking and shouting at pedestrians when I was driving. At least I considered them unreasonable at the time, which is why I didn't tell anyone about them. Now I might accept all this as ordinary, a natural part of the grieving process, as inevitable as my eventual recovery. While I was in the middle of it, though, I didn't know recovery was possible; I believed, with near certainty, that I was slowly and quietly losing my mind. I went through the motions of job and domestic life, teaching my classes, meeting with students and colleagues, preparing dinner with my wife, changing and bathing and playing with our infant daughter, but secretly I was saying goodbye to all of them, imagining I wouldn't, or couldn't, be among them much longer. It both amazed and infuriated me that no one seemed to recognize how close I was to taking leave of my senses, how deeply I'd retreated into sorrow, though preventing such recognition was exactly what I'd intended.

My daughter was just shy of six months old when R. died, and that may account in part for the intensity of my shame. For me to be immersed in the newness of her life when R.'s was ending seemed not only unjust but incredibly selfish. I didn't deserve to delight in her smiles, to cheer her first efforts at sitting up on her own, to celebrate her reaching the half-year mark two days before R. should have turned thirty-eight. I did those things anyway, in a distracted fog, all the while feeling I should have been actively mourning the loss of my friend, sitting in a darkened room in uncomfortable clothes, shutting out the world with all its potential for pleasure and contentment. At the same time I berated myself for not being more present in the here and now, for not taking note of every one of my daughter's chortles and gassy

grimaces, for not snapping pictures of her in every new outfit, for not writing down the exact time and date of her first bite of solid food, for not acknowledging how precious each moment was, how quickly everything would change. I was caught, in other words, between living and not living, a condition that wasn't entirely unfamiliar to me but one that caused me terrible anguish and kept me from losing myself in daily routines.

It was in this state, oscillating between wonder and despair, that I stepped out my front door one early morning in mid-March, less than three months after R. died. Two years earlier, when we'd first decided to have a child, my wife and I had moved to Salem, Oregon, to be closer to our jobs, and now I walked its streets at odd hours—five-thirty on a Sunday morning, a quarter to midnight on a Tuesday—glimpsing its features through the dim filter of dawn or dusk and seeing in its shadings hints of all the places I'd been before. What should have been a simple sidewalk in Salem became sidewalks in Morristown, New Jersey, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in Edinburgh, in Prague, and even in places I'd read about but had never visited: St. Petersburg, for example, where I'd been transported in the works of some of my favorite writers, Babel, Chekhov, Turgenev. I don't know what I was looking for in these places. A suggestion of solid ground, maybe, or a map with which to trace my trajectory from the person I'd been to the person I'd become: one for whom loss had seemed inconceivable to one who now saw loss looming wherever he turned.

I always had my daughter with me on these odd-houred walks, in a front-loading baby-carrier that kept her snuggled up against my chest, her arms tucked around my sides, legs dangling. She loved being carried that way, secure up top, feet free to kick as they pleased, and she let out a little squeal of pleasure whenever I buckled the carrier around my waist. At the time, it was the only thing that kept her from fussing. She was active and curious and frustrated by her limitations, especially physical ones; after a few seconds with a toy she couldn't grab and lift to her mouth, she'd start barking out odd disgruntled shouts whose inflections reminded me of an angry Russian cabdriver with whom I'd once argued for more than twenty minutes on a street corner in Soho.

This was years ago, maybe even a decade, but I'd never forgotten the sound of the little man's voice, the exasperated way he coughed out words, switching between English and Russian, making hand gestures that were sometimes threatening, sometimes full of self-pity.

He'd driven me from Penn Station to visit a friend whose office was above a boutique on Greene Street, and the dispute arose over a luggage surcharge he'd tacked onto my fare. I didn't have anything that could rightly be called luggage, just an overnight bag into which I'd stuffed a change of underwear and a fresh T-shirt, a toothbrush and a stick of deodorant, a book to read while nursing a hangover on the train ride the next morning. I'd been at my parents' house for a week by then, driven half-mad with boredom in the north Jersey suburbs, desperate for a night out with my friend, who lived, I thought, a far more exciting life than I did, commuting on the subway every day from Brooklyn, working as an illustrator for an art-book publisher, surveying all the bars in the city for the best selection of Belgian beers. By the time I made it to Penn Station I was in a state close to euphoria, my imagination rich with the untold promises of the night ahead, and because I was distracted and had my guard down, I made the mistake of letting the stout Russian driver take my bag, a limp duffel not even a third full, and toss it into the cab's trunk.

And how enraged he was that I refused to pay the surcharge, which bumped what should have been a ten dollar fare closer to fifteen. Part of my refusal had to do with how little cash I had for the evening and how many Belgian beers I wanted to sample, though there was also the principle of the matter, the fact that no one in his right mind would have called my overnight bag luggage; if I hadn't been so excited when I got out of the train I would have just kept the bag on the seat beside me and not let the driver bother popping the trunk. As it was, he wouldn't pop it again to let me get the bag out until I'd paid the full fare. But after a week back in New Jersey, I was feeling particularly obstinate, and unusually willing to be the object of someone else's anger, and I just stood there on the corner of Greene and Prince with my hands in my pockets, shrugging whenever I understood what the driver was saying. "You can keep the fucking bag," I said, playing up the

New Jersey accent I'd long since excised from my ordinary speech. "I'm not paying any surcharge."

After a while the driver's anger wavered, taking a turn toward resignation, and swelling with pride, with the vicious power of victory, I gave him a nasty half-smile, held up a ten-dollar bill, and said, "You want this or not?" And then there was only sadness in his face. He was shorter than me by two or three inches, his shoulders rounded and hunched forward, his hair wispy. His eyes were small and deep-set, his nose a misshapen blotch, his lips loose like a dog's. There was something tragic about his expression, something that suggested a long history of degradation and struggle, my refusal to pay the surcharge one in a long line of crushing setbacks. He reached into the cab, popped the trunk, and with his head lowered, put out his hand. He'd wasted twenty minutes arguing with me, when he should have been out looking for more fares. I could imagine the look on his wife's face when he set out the day's earnings on their meager apartment's kitchen counter. "No surcharge?" she'd ask, a frail, bony woman with hollow cheeks and a wheeze in her breath, and he'd shake his head and turn away to hide his tears. I handed him the ten, and for his time and trouble, added a five dollar tip.

Only later, when I was sampling Belgian beers in an East Village bar that looked like all the other bars my friend brought me to, narrow and dank, with no place to sit and a crowd we had to push through to get our drinks, did I learn that New York cab drivers weren't allowed to charge for luggage, that such a surcharge was illegal and should have been reported to the Taxi and Limousine Commission. By then I was on my second or third beer, and down five extra dollars from the cab ride, I was beginning to get nervous about how many more I could afford.

But my friend's friend had just shown up and insisted on buying the next round. He was a recently graduated law student, and because he'd just passed the bar exam, was feeling generous—aggressively so, I thought, as he shoved away my outstretched hand before the bartender could take my cash. "You didn't actually pay him, did you?" this friend's friend said, butting into our conversation, tilting his head back so he

could look at me down his nose. I wondered if this was a stance taught in law school or one that came naturally when someone passed the bar. It seemed so studied and uncomfortable, the awkward angle of his head, the way his chest puffed up. It made me want to sit down, though there wasn't an open seat in the entire bar, not even wall space to lean against. Instead I stood with my arms crossed, my beer glass hugged to my chest, shifting my weight from one leg to another. "You must have been wearing a T-shirt that said, 'Sucker.' Or, 'Straight Outta Jersey.'"

But as much as this friend's friend taunted me, I couldn't get angry at the little cab driver, or outraged at his deception. In fact, I felt a strange admiration for him, a growing regard, and decided that in the end I hadn't given him the extra five because I'd believed in the surcharge, nor because he'd spent so long arguing with me, but rather because of his performance, even if I hadn't recognized its genius at the time. Now I appreciated how authentic his look of sadness was, how convincing his fury and his sigh of resignation, so carefully timed and artfully delivered, as if he were rehearsing a character in a Chekhov play.

And maybe the real reason I'd given him the money was because I couldn't interact with a little Russian cab driver and not recall my favorite Chekhov story, "Grief" (or, depending on the translation, "Misery," or "Heartache"). In the story, a St. Petersburg cab driver sits in his sledge on a snowy night, picking up the occasional fare and otherwise staring into the darkness. His son has just died, and he desperately wants to share his grief with someone else, to have his sorrow acknowledged. But whenever he tries to relate the story of his son to the passengers in his cab, they either ignore him or scold him for not driving fast enough. In the end, with no other way to unburden himself, he turns to his faithful horse and tells her what no one else is willing to hear.

I was introduced to this story in college—where R. and I met the first day of freshman year—by my favorite writing professor, Doris Betts, who at the time had just published a novel that revolved around the illness and death of a young girl. At a public reading to celebrate the book's release, Doris told the audience that it took her ten years to

finish the novel, because, she said, "I just couldn't kill that little girl." Finally, it was Chekhov's story that helped her. In "Grief," she said, the swirling snow and the horse's breath on the driver's hand kept the story from being maudlin, balanced the driver's grief with the world's beauty and mystery, and made his loneliness so devastating. In her own book, it was an image first of white chickens, dumped from an overturned semi, and later, of white fudge, made by a sympathetic neighbor, that made her accept the little girl's death as real and necessary.

At that point I didn't understand how chickens and fudge could do such a thing, nor had I experienced much grief in my life. But as with almost everything Doris said, I tucked it away, treasured it, and knew I wouldn't forget it. She was probably sixty then, still youthful, with a mischievous smile and an aristocratic North Carolina accent, and she lived a life I couldn't quite imagine, on a horse farm a dozen miles south of Chapel Hill. During the semester I'd occasionally run into her at lunchtime at a restaurant on Franklin Street, where she was always sipping from a glass of chablis. "Makes the afternoon glide by," she said once, when she caught me eyeing the glass, and smiled her mischievous smile.

Our fiction writing class met in the afternoon, and I can imagine the wine helped her keep a straight face while discussing our stories, which that semester always included at least one horrifically graphic sex scene. To this day I can't forget certain images from my classmates' stories: a blowjob under an orange street lamp, a skirt slipped up to reveal panties with the crotch cut out, the tip of a penis described as a tender mushroom. I wonder what Doris must have made of us, a bunch of horny twenty-year-olds who spent far more time humping than reading, writing, studying their craft. But she was always generous, always discussed our work with the utmost sincerity, offering advice along the lines of, "It seems, when he's having fellatio performed on him, that he's completely forgotten about his sister's cancer. You might want to consider how those two things are related."

I, too, was writing sex scenes, but mine were from the perspective of a female character, which I found quite transgressive at the time, as well as pleasantly titillating. But when I turned in a piece for a class

workshop, Doris gave me a serious look, stroking her chin. "Now, Scott," she said, "I don't get the feeling," and here she paused, looked up at the ceiling, stroked her chin some more, "I don't get the feeling that this woman menstruates." I found the criticism—any criticism—utterly debilitating, and gave up the story almost immediately. But as with everything Doris said, I took it to heart, too much so, and without fully understanding that she didn't mean it literally. The next story I wrote did feature a woman menstruating—in the midst of a sex scene, no less, which not only provided an excuse to write a horrifically graphic description to one-up my classmates and possibly haunt them to this day, but also to make a neat parallel between a physical mess and a character's psychological counterpart. Not terribly complex, and not entirely convincing, but honest enough to make Doris smile and wink and say, "You started to get under this one's skin." The remark triggered an instant flood of self-regard. I beamed at my classmates, most of whom scowled in return, plotting their own next graphic sex scene to out-gross mine. If I thought bloody sheets were something, wait till they brought in urine, feces, dead animals, the ghost of a murdered child.

It took me several years to realize Doris's two comments were related, interchangeable, even, and that what she'd meant when she'd said she didn't have the feeling my character menstruated was that I hadn't gotten under her skin, hadn't immersed myself in her body and mind, hadn't done the hard work of imagining what it felt like to be her. It was a failure not only in writing but in my life more generally. I was too often retreating into myself, shying away from other people's unhappiness and struggles, cutting myself off from friends when they needed me most. This was something I'd promised myself to work on over the past decade, and by the time my daughter was born it had become something of a mantra: Be present. Be patient. Imagine what she's going through. To truly love her means to get under her skin.

I had these words in mind while I watched her yell at her toys when they wouldn't cooperate, trying to imagine how frustrating it must have been for her to know exactly what she wanted to do with her little fingers but not be able to control their haphazard movements.

And I'd try to soothe her, to bring the toys up to her mouth so she could gum them and decide which textures she preferred—to my surprise her favorites were often the woolly, prickly ones—but before long I'd hear in her barks the cadence of that Russian cab driver in Soho, and then, within moments, without any conscious decision but also without resistance, my thoughts would have left my daughter altogether and found their way to Chekhov and to grief.

I tried to re-read Chekhov's story in the weeks following R.'s death, hoping, I suppose, for some kind of solace, for a connection, for reprieve from the loneliness of my secretive shame and anger. Like Chekhov's sledge driver, I'd hardly talked to anyone about my sorrow; unlike him, I'd hardly made any attempt to do so. But reading the story, I imagined, I, too, could be soothed by the warm breath of the faithful mare. A couple of years earlier I'd bought the complete *Tales of Chekhov*, translated by the venerable Constance Garnett, a thirteen-volume set in a tidy white box, which now sat in a place of prominence on my bookshelf. I'd always wanted to be someone who owned the complete Chekhov, and even more, someone about whom other people thought, when they stepped into my office, *He owns the complete Chekhov*. I took pride in the collection as a mark of my sincerity, of my devotion to literature and to the short story in particular, and though in those two years I'd managed to read only the first four volumes, I could, if I wanted to, read at any given time any story Chekhov had ever written.

But now the story I wanted to read I couldn't find. I scoured the index at the end of the final volume, turning the pages back and forth to see if I'd somehow missed a page, but in all thirteen volumes there was no story titled "Grief," the only title by which I'd known it up to that point. Then, in a state of near-despair, which was accompanied by a rush of rage, I spilled all thirteen volumes onto the floor and rummaged through them, looking for my grief-stricken cab driver and the swirling flakes of snow, thinking how cruel the world was to keep it from me, the one thing that might have given me solace and comfort, that might have allowed me to be more present to my daughter's challenges and triumphs and delighted smiles. And if she hadn't been napping in the next room, I might have thrown those volumes of Chekhov stories

against the wall, one after another, until all thirteen lay face down on the floor, their bindings broken.

Finally, I found the story in Volume 9. To my deep disappointment, Garnett, the first person to translate the monumental Russian literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into English, had titled it "Misery." As much as I admired her, I couldn't help feeling she'd made a terrible mistake. Misery and grief weren't the same thing. The words weren't exchangeable. Misery may have been a component of grief, but grief was far more complex, more nuanced, less fathomable. I'd been miserable before, plenty of times, but this was different, this was pain that had no container, that was boundless and voiceless, and that made me feel I was quietly and slowly losing my mind. Now I wanted to tear the book to shreds rather than read it. But I did neither, instead sitting miserably on the squat sofa in my office, which doubled as our family TV lounge, and which no one, since I'd bought the Chekhov set, had entered with an eye toward scrutinizing and being impressed with what lined my bookshelves.

There was a particular reason I couldn't re-read the story right then, and it wasn't just because Garnett had titled it "Misery," nor because it was too raw, too close to the pain I was suffering, to my shame and anger. Rather, it was because in the years since I'd last read it, I'd forgotten the cabbie's name. And catching sight of it now on the story's first page, even before I'd read a sentence, I was so startled that I had to close the book. It was such a shock, in fact, that I cried out, waking my daughter too soon from her nap. And when I went to soothe her, rocking her against my shoulder, patting her back as she shrieked, I was thinking mostly about the driver's name: Iona. How could I have forgotten it? As soon as I'd seen it again, the entire story came back to me, the series of humiliations Iona suffers as he picks up passengers and tries to tell them about his son's death; the rude young men, one of them a hunchback, who insult and abuse him even as he tries to join in their merriment as a salve to his pain; the final, excruciating abandonment to sorrow as he breaks down and tells his horse the truth no one else will let him speak.

In one of my earlier readings, I'd taken special note of the name,

a Russianized version of Jonah. It added a complex layer to the story, a parallel between the driver and the biblical prophet, the latter swallowed by a literal whale, the former by the whale of his grief. In the Bible, Jonah tries to avoid passing along his divine message, that the sinful city of Nineveh will soon be destroyed; Chekhov's Iona, on the other hand, is desperate to spread his message—*My son has died! Isn't it terrible? Isn't it wrong?*—but he is a prophet without an audience, in a world of unbelievers, and his prophecy is blown around with the swirling snow.

The trouble was, six months earlier, when Chekhov's story was as far from my mind as possible, my wife and I had named our daughter Iona. Of course we hadn't named her for a grieving Russian cab driver, or a biblical prophet who tries to deny his fate, but rather for the mystical Scottish island in the Inner Hebrides. I'd never been to Iona, but during one of my ramblings in western Scotland the year after I graduated college, I'd been close, on the Isle of Mull, just a mile away. I'd wanted to take the ferry across, to see the famous abbey that had once housed the Book of Kells, to visit the graveyard where lie the bones of both Duncan and Macbeth, to walk its rocky cliffs and isolated beaches. But I'd been pressed for time—I didn't want to miss my chance to tour the Oban whisky distillery and try a free sample—and instead made my way back to the mainland.

The name Iona had since taken up a special place in my mind, a stand-in for peace and sanctuary, for a magical landscape just out of reach, possibly unattainable. When my wife was about seven months pregnant, she and I were talking with friends who'd just come back from Scotland, and Iona came up in our conversation. The friends hadn't been there, either, but we all talked about it with a certain reverence, as if it were a kind of Nirvana, a place we were all striving to reach. At one point my wife and I looked at each other, and without speaking, agreed: if our child was a girl, this would be her name.

Peace and sanctuary were hard to keep in mind, however, when Iona sat on the floor of our kitchen yelling at her toys with the inflections of a Russian cab driver, and became harder still once I associated her name not only with a mystical island I'd never visited

but with a grief-stricken Chekhov character and a biblical shirker of prophetic duties. The toy that caused her the most trouble was a little fabric cow with a crinkly nose and a plastic ring on its back, whose head tilted upward to reveal a mirror the size of a silver dollar on its neck. Oh, how she wanted to put that crinkly nose in her mouth, to gum the plastic ring and lick the little mirror. But her hands wouldn't cooperate, and as soon as the fabric touched her tongue, it was gone again, back to the floor, and her noises then struck notes of outrage, of betrayal, of self-pity.

Early on that Sunday morning in mid-March, just less than three months after R. died, I saw her eyeing the cow—her mortal enemy, I'd started calling it—across the kitchen while I tried to feed her cereal she mostly spit out, and as soon as I put her down on the floor she tried to scoot in its direction. But she was still far from being able to crawl and couldn't move more than a few inches closer. "Are you sure you want that pesky cow?" I asked, and she looked up at me with her big gray eyes, all innocence and wonder at the world that was so new to her, and I thought, of course she wanted the bastard cow, she hadn't yet learned to hold a grudge, hadn't yet discovered that the world could be so unfeeling as to taunt you with the same cow day after day, with its inviting plastic ring and little mirror and crinkly nose—so much promise, so much potential for disappointment. So I brought her the cow, and within seconds it slipped from her fingers, and she barked her outrage at it, and though it was March in Oregon, cold and misting and still dark outside, I ran for the baby carrier and buckled it around my waist, desperate to show Iona that life wasn't all malicious cows and slippery fingers, brain tumors and close friends dying far too young, that there were certain things you could count on no matter what.

By the time we made it out the door, Iona's arms tucked around my sides, her feet dangling at my waist, a blanket wrapped around us both to keep off the chill and mist, it was maybe six a.m. My wife was still asleep. She'd been up nursing Iona at least two or three times in the night, and even with an extra hour or two in bed, she'd be yawning and rubbing her eyes most of the day. She'd only recently gone back to work after a semester off for maternity leave, and the transition

had been a shock to both of us. How was she supposed to juggle the various demands on her time and energy, with both our daughter and her job calling for her attention every minute of every day? How could she be mother, thinking about diapers and pureed mango and nursery rhymes, at the same time she was art professor, discussing conceptual approaches to photography and video? And how was I supposed to lose myself in grief when she needed me to be present, to help her navigate the challenges of her newly divided identity?

She was genuinely sympathetic about R.'s death, and she understood grief well, having lost her mother to lung cancer several years before we'd met. But she was too exhausted most of the time to notice the sadness that clouded my vision, too overwhelmed to glimpse the shame and anger I did my best to hide from her. Whenever I did mention R., which was rare, she gave me a startled look, as if she'd forgotten I was grieving. Or maybe in her exhaustion she imagined R. had died years ago and was surprised to hear me talking about him as if I'd seen him so recently. In any case, she'd give me a hug, whisper, "I'm so sorry. What a time this must be for you," and then rush off to our fussing daughter or to one of her students who couldn't figure out how to use a camera.

To keep from waking her, I always closed the door as quietly as I could. But then I had to open it again to toss our cat inside. He'd taken to running after me, howling, whenever I took Iona for a walk, as if he were worried I was stealing her away, or maybe that I was carrying her into unsafe territory. He'd lived his whole life in this neighborhood, and though he was a serious rambler—he couldn't stand to be inside for more than a few hours at a time—his range was a one-by-three block radius, from 14th to 16th Streets, between Trade and Ferry. To cross those boundaries must have seemed to him unprecedented and treacherous, and he'd come tearing down the sidewalk, calling out in horror, as I neared the intersection of Ferry and 15th, half a block from our house.

We'd first spotted him slinking around our back fence a few weeks after we'd moved to Salem, his right ear mangled from a fight or an infestation of mites, a patch of hair missing above his tail, and

named him Mr. Scrappy. He was nervous around us at first, but when we coaxed him into letting us scratch his head, he immediately started purring and drooling, so much so that when he later climbed onto my shoulders and rubbed his face against my head, I came away with clumps of wet hair. Soon he was following us around as we worked in the garden, chasing the string I trailed for him, running up apple trees and pretending, it seemed, to be a fierce jungle cat, swiping his paws and spitting at us from the lowest branches. Do cats play make-believe? If it was anything else, I don't know what to call it. As soon as he came down from the tree he was purring again, drooling on my pants leg. There were dozens of cats in the neighborhood, most mangy and underfed, but all except Mr. Scrappy kept their distance. After a week or two, we were ready to claim him.

To our surprise, though, he wasn't a stray. He belonged to a neighbor who lived in the apartments behind our back fence, a low-slung building painted industrial gray, with the odd name, "La Mer," printed in script on a sign facing the street. We were fifty miles from the ocean, and the only water nearby was a narrow diversion from the Mill Creek, once used to power the massive nineteenth-century woolen mill on 12th Street. After a few hours romping in our garden, Mr. Scrappy would climb back over the fence to his owner, an obese woman with a jangling voice, who acted as unofficial manager of La Mer. She was always yelling at one tenant or another, for parking crookedly in the small lot behind the building, for putting glass into the dumpster rather than the recycling bin, for vomiting in the shared laundry room. If she wasn't yelling at the tenants, then she was yelling at her grandchildren, who rode plastic tricycles in the alley that dead-ended at our back gate and cut their feet on broken glass.

It always astonished me to see Mr. Scrappy rubbing against her enormous leg the same way he'd just rubbed against mine, as if somehow he found the two of us equally warm and comforting, though she couldn't bend down to scratch his mangled ear as I did, and usually she was too busy yelling at someone to notice his affection. Occasionally she did pick him up, and he'd climb around her shoulders and head, purring and drooling, and I'd watch from my side of the

fence, partially hidden behind a shrub I'd just planted, boiling over with jealousy. She didn't deserve such a friendly, playful cat, I thought, and clearly she couldn't take care of him. She called him Panther, a name that didn't suit him at all, though he was jet back, with mesmerizing yellow eyes, and I wondered if it was the name that made him pretend to be a wild jungle cat, and wondered, too, if he played make-believe with his owner the way he did with me, though it wasn't likely since there were no trees on La Mer's property, which was mostly concrete, hardly wider than the building itself.

Not long after we arrived, though, the woman was moving out. As she packed her truck and yelled at her grandchildren to stay out of her way, Mr. Scrappy traveled back and forth over the fence, alternately rubbing her legs and my wife's and mine. When he was up on my shoulders, drooling into my hair, she called across the fence, "I can't take him with me. You want him?" I was overjoyed, of course, triumphant, even, but I couldn't help thinking I should feel sorry for the woman who had to give up her cat, and for Mr. Scrappy, too, losing the only family he'd known. I tried to hear a catch in her voice, some indication that she was heartbroken and holding back tears. I waited for her to tell me what the cat liked to eat, where he liked to sleep, how recently he'd had his shots, but all she said was, "He's yours now." She yelled it in the same gruff, exasperated voice she yelled everything, as if giving up her cat to strangers or leaving him to fend for himself on the street were all the same to her, no different than telling someone to clean up his vomit in the laundry room.

All this may shed light on the character of the neighborhood, whose official name was University Addition, but which, until recently, had been known around town as Felony Flats. Bordered by the college where my wife and I teach to the west and by a maximum-security state penitentiary fifteen or so blocks to the east, the neighborhood boasted turn-of-the-century homes like the one my wife and I had recently bought and partially restored next to ramshackle apartment buildings like La Mer. Through years of decline after the woolen mill shut down, its main function had been to house the families of inmates at the prison, and then to house those inmates after they were released.

During the real-estate boom of the past decade—the boom my wife and I joined at its very tail end, just a few months before Lehman Brothers went under and the market tanked—it had seen some gradual gentrification that had all but halted now.

The result was a neighborhood frozen in mid-transition. On our block, 15th Street, between Trade and Ferry, there were mostly families, professionals, skilled laborers, small business owners, college students. Across the street lived the director of a downtown funeral home. Next door was a gay state employee who was endlessly working on an elaborate remodel of his house. On our other side was a retired machinist who'd spent twenty years in a garage-door factory and who now worked as a part-time lifeguard at the YMCA. In the afternoons he carefully tended his collection of English tea roses and played Chopin on an old upright in his living room. On weekends we'd all occasionally find ourselves out on the street at the same time, raking leaves and chatting about the weather, enjoying our tree-lined street, our charming old houses, our sense of ease and security.

But this was only half the neighborhood. Just to the north of the funeral director was a group home for incarcerated Latino youth—former gang members, mostly, who were being re-integrated into society by a charitable organization affiliated with the Catholic Church. On weekday mornings, a dozen dark-haired boys in white shirts and black pants shuffled sleepily from the house into a waiting van and were driven off to jobs or classes or community service activities. On weekends they'd play basketball in the driveway.

A block to the west, on 14th Street, stood a collection of less charitable organizations, unofficial halfway houses for patients released from the chronically underfunded state mental hospital a mile away. In half a dozen once-elegant and now tumbledown Craftsman cottages—originally built, I suspect, for middle-managers of the woolen mill—individual rooms were rented out for a hundred bucks a month. On stoops up and down 14th, unkempt men with dazed expressions stared at passing cars or shuffled up the sidewalk, and a few ranters flailed arms and stomped feet, airing grievances to anyone who would listen. For a month or so, one old guy with a beard to his chest would

appear at our fence, where our property cut the alley short, and while taking gulps from an oversized beer can, shout into the backyard. I first noticed him while washing dishes, and thinking he could see me through the kitchen window, guessed I was his intended audience. But another time I was in the garage, and he couldn't see me. Instead he shouted at the grass and bare trees, at the shrubs and raspberry canes I'd just planted, and though I strained to hear what he was saying, all I could catch were groans and throaty howls.

I wish I could say my wife and I had bought a house in this neighborhood naïvely, without understanding its nature, but this is only partly true. For one thing, it was all we could afford at the time, because I didn't yet have a permanent job at the college, and with an adjunct salary I couldn't contribute much to mortgage payments. But also, after commuting for years, we wanted to be as close to work as possible, and from here we could walk to our offices in seven minutes, and to downtown coffee shops and restaurants in ten. Plus, the place had an enormous backyard, and my wife, a gardener with ambition, saw nothing but potential in its vast stretches of weeds and dead grass.

But above all else, we were seduced by the romance of the project, spurred on by the excitement of buying into a neighborhood on its way up, the trailblazing spirit that had motivated people—white people, that is—to exploit Oregon's riches since the mid-19th century. We'd seen it happen often in Portland over the past decade: a neighborhood once full of crime and drugs quietly infiltrated by a few intrepid young couples with good credit, dressed fashionably and armed with a keen aesthetic sense, who'd restore a neglected Victorian and live happily beside their less fortunate neighbors until property values and taxes started to rise. Soon the neighborhood would be full of bars and restaurants and upscale boutiques, and in a blink only one original family was left, and you'd see them in their front yard, looking bewildered, wondering where all these well-groomed white kids had come from and why an omelet cost fifteen bucks at the new café on the corner.

We'd missed the boom in Portland; neither of us had had any money when properties there were still affordable, and now we were

shut out of that market for good. But here was humble Salem, shabby state capital to the south, still mostly untouched. True, it didn't have the great food Portland had, or the music and arts, the progressive politics, the youthful spirit and hipster fashion—in fact, it had none of these things—but its real estate was fairly cheap.

The house, built in 1917, had a wide front porch, a bay window, beautiful fir floors buried under filthy carpet and cracked linoleum. Part of the deck was rotten, and the basement and attic, we found out during the inspection, were infested with rats, but these were minor considerations. You could tear up carpet and fix decks and get rid of rats. We threw ourselves into the project in the same spirit of love and abandon and innocence with which we'd thrown ourselves into marriage and would later throw ourselves into parenthood, and within a few months the floors were refinished, the kitchen gutted and remodeled, the rats expelled, the dead yard coming to life with budding leaves and the first sprouts of perennials.

We saw no menace in the neighborhood, nothing particularly threatening in the former gang members or the shuffling and stomping crazies, not even in the rats, which were so plentiful in this part of Salem, we soon learned, because the sewer system had been built so solidly that it had lasted more than a hundred years, giving generations of rodents a chance to prosper undisturbed. The neighbor who bothered us most was one of the professionals, a real-estate agent who blasted smooth jazz from speakers wired onto his back porch. Otherwise, we were content, with few misgivings. We worked in our garden, played with our cat, walked to classes, waved to the boys across the street, and until Iona was born saw no reason to question the wisdom of our choices, not even when the housing market crashed and it became clear that whatever gentrification had begun in the neighborhood was finished for at least a decade, the price we'd paid for our house no longer such a bargain.

That's not to say we never had an anxious moment. Without our fully realizing it, the possibility of loss tinted our bucolic life in Felony Flats when Mr. Scrappy slinked into our lives. Even after his owner moved away, my wife refused to believe he was really our cat, steeling

herself against disappointment, saying only, "We'll see if he sticks around." Mr. Scrappy came with us into our house happily enough, gobbled the food we put out for him, jumped from one of our laps to the other, explored our small rooms, hopped onto counters and tables, scratched the couch. Then, after a few hours, he was ready to go out again. We wanted to keep him in for the night, to acclimate him to his new surroundings—our twelve-hundred square feet vast, we imagined, compared to a stuffy one-bedroom apartment—but soon he was howling and jumping at the windows, and we had no choice but to open the door and let him go. He went tearing across the yard, over the fence and into the alley where the old drunk with the tall-boy cans yelled at our flowers and shrubs. Soon he was out of sight.

We hoped he'd come back before long, after discovering that his owner was gone for good, but though I stood on the back deck shaking a bag of cat food a dozen times that afternoon and evening and well into the night, somewhat mortified to be calling out his name for all the neighbors to hear, more than a day passed without a glimpse of him. I paced the house, scolding myself for having gotten attached, for having believed that our good fortune could last. As I had when my last cat died, I promised myself never to love anything again. And then, remembering Doris Betts's words and feeling guilty for thinking only about myself, I tried to imagine how it was for Mr. Scrappy, abandoned by the woman he so obviously loved, shut out of the musty apartment where he'd slept most of his life, with nowhere to go, nothing to eat. What a dark night it must have been for him, how sad, and when I spotted him creeping around the back of La Mer the next afternoon, I was close to crying. I shook the food again, and this time he hopped the fence and came running, tail straight up in the air, mangled ear twitching, and after eating and purring and drooling, he took a nap on the crack between our couch cushions. He stayed a few hours, then was gone again, and once more I paced and told myself that nothing was permanent, that I should reserve my affection for inanimate things that couldn't leave me: books and records and the black mug R.'s parents had given me as a joke when we'd graduated college. On the side it read, "I AM THE FUTURE. SCARY, ISN'T IT?" I'd drunk my coffee out of

it every morning for more than fifteen years.

Even as Mr. Scrappy settled into a new, comfortable life with us, eating high-cost food that filled out his middle and hid his ribs, he maintained a certain wildness. He was a product of the neighborhood and a part of it, and its transience was in his blood. Most nights he'd spend a few hours on the crack between the couch cushions, but come three or four in the morning, he'd scratch at our bedroom door or walk on our heads until one of us got up and let him out. And on nights he didn't come back at all, I didn't sleep, quite certain I'd never see him again. When he showed up in the morning, I'd mutter snippets from songs about wanderers, mostly as a way to comfort myself that this was simply his nature, a need that couldn't be suppressed. *My days they are the highway kind, they only come to leave*, I'd sing as the cat slipped out the back door and trotted toward the garden beds, suddenly getting low on his belly when he spotted a starling pecking at the lawn. *But the leaving I don't mind, it's the coming that I crave*.

I didn't know how far he'd follow when I took Iona for walks, and fearing he'd try to cross busy streets, as soon as I spotted him on the front porch, I scooped him up, tossed him inside, and shut the door behind him. This would mean, I knew, that my wife wouldn't get any extra sleep after all, because within a few minutes Mr. Scrappy would be howling and scratching at the door, and she'd have to drag herself from bed to let him out. But it would also buy me the few minutes I needed to get around the corner and out of sight, and though it may have caused the cat some distress—either to imagine I was taking the baby into hostile territory or to think I'd gone off on adventures without him—I locked him in with relief and hurried down the steps.

This ritual, of scooping up the cat and tossing him into the house, made for a happy start to the day for Iona, who spent much of her time, when she wasn't sleeping or barking at her toys or going for walks, trying to get as close to the cat as possible. Usually he knew to stay out of her way, but on occasion, when he was sleeping or eating or cleaning himself or otherwise distracted enough not to notice her little hands reaching out for him, she'd manage to get hold of his fur. The fingers that were so clumsy with toys had no trouble gripping Mr. Scrappy's

flank and pulling him toward her. And though he was shocked and clearly in pain, he refrained from biting or hissing or even growling until I pried her fingers away. Now, with her hands tucked around my sides, she couldn't get at him, but for a moment before I tossed him inside, his fur brushed against her face. And when it did, she let out a piercing shriek of delight right into my ear, so loud that I winced and closed my eyes.

As painful as it was, the shriek couldn't help but cheer me. It was similar, I thought, to the way the insults and abuse of the hunchback and his friends cheer Iona the cab driver in Chekhov's "Grief": a sign that life went on, however daunting, in the face of devastation. Nothing bolstered my mood like my daughter's wide-eyed wonder at the brand-new world. It was hard to believe that everything she saw and heard she was seeing and hearing for the first time. Daffodils and crocuses sending up fresh leaves. The squawk of geese making their way north. An empty forty-ounce bottle of Olde English 800 tucked under a boxwood beside our front walkway, catching the beam of a floodlight on the side of the boys' home and glinting under the still-dark sky. All of it was equally magical to her, and she whipped her head from side to side, nose brushing against my chest, taking in every sensation as if it were as vital and precious to her as her mother's milk.

I couldn't imagine her amazement for long, though, before thinking about R.'s final days, when he knew, or at least suspected, that everything he saw and heard he was seeing and hearing for the last time, when he knew or suspected that each sensation was one he'd never have again. The last glimpse of clear sky through his bedroom window. The last jellybean he'd taste but couldn't swallow. The last Carolina basketball game, which the Tar Heels lost, 78-76, against Texas, on December 18, the day before R. died.

And it was precisely this irreconcilable doubling of sensations—first daffodils, last jellybeans—that crippled me with shame and convinced me I was losing my mind, and when I found the empty forty of Olde English that someone had tucked, absently or maliciously, into my boxwood, I nearly went ballistic. For a second I couldn't breathe. Then my mouth filled with sour spit, and before I knew what I was

doing I had the bottle over my head, glancing up and down the empty street, ready to hurl it at whichever flophouse crazy or drunk had left it.

Mist fell into my hair and onto Iona's blanket. I imagined the sound of the bottle shattering on the pavement, the blissful release, the boys in the group home across the street shocked out of dreams of a productive, gang-free future, the funeral home director running for the phone to dial emergency. I imagined the pop and skitter of shards, the crunch of tires driving over them. Who knew how many times I'd heard these sounds, but for Iona they would be as new as the sound of geese squawking overhead. Maybe for her they'd be pleasant sounds, perfectly innocent, and though I didn't really believe this, I pulled my arm back farther.

I don't know if it was right then, while I still held the bottle over my head, or later, in a state of distress, playing over the moment and recalling the bottle's weight, the smooth glass on my palm, the wrinkled label against my thumb—but at some point, the thought of breaking glass triggered two strong associations, coming, as memories do, in flashes, one after the other, so quickly that I was aware of them mostly as a physical sensation, a sudden stiff breeze that made me flinch with chill.

The first, from childhood, was an image of my next-door neighbor, a kid a year younger than I, standing in front of a basement window, with a rock in his hand. The rock was maybe the size of a grapefruit, and when he held it up, he glanced at me over his shoulder. He was angry at his mother for reasons I didn't know or have since forgotten, but the look he gave me wasn't an angry one as much as one of satisfaction, of the immensity of his power. It occurs to me now that the look probably wasn't so different from the one I gave the Russian cab driver in Soho when he finally accepted my refusal to pay his surcharge.

This neighbor boy was nine years old at the time, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome and a source of torment for his adoptive parents since they'd brought him home as an infant. Other kids often taunted him with cruel nicknames: Crazy Eights, Loony Tunes, Nutter Butter. With the rock raised over his shoulder, eyes narrowed and nostrils flaring, a mean little smile playing over his lips, he did look genuinely

deranged. Still, when he glanced at me I understood what he wanted: consent and complicity. It didn't matter that I shook my head and backed a step away. He raised the rock higher. His arm twitched, and then the window was gone. Somehow I hadn't seen the actual impact, but the sound went right up through me, and I felt for a moment that the boy's wild look was mine, my brain infected by the confusing jumble of thoughts that made his face twist up in rage.

It was a strange displacement of guilt, I think, but for that moment I really believed I was now as loony as he was. The idea scared me but also came with a certain amount of relief, as if I no longer had to resist what had always been inevitable, and the sight of the window, with just a few glass shards sticking up like broken teeth in a gaping mouth, suddenly made me laugh. The boy joined in, hesitantly at first, and then with abandon. We cackled and hooted. But soon his mother shouted from the kitchen, and I snapped to, my mind as rational and full of ordinary fear and remorse as usual, and when the boy picked up another rock, I ran as fast as I could into the woods behind our houses.

The second association dated from my early twenties. I was in Budapest, sitting on the steps of a youth hostel, drinking bottles of Dreher beer. Around me was a small crowd of revelers, talking in six or seven different languages. It was a warm night in late June, far past midnight, and beside me was a young German woman I'd met in a bar a few hours earlier. We'd been talking and drinking and laughing ever since, and now our bare knees and elbows were touching. The only thing keeping us from going to bed together was the unfortunate fact that our beds were in hostel rooms where five other people were already sleeping. But I was still holding out hope that after another beer or two this would no longer seem like such a significant obstacle.

The German girl had a musical accent, a sweet, heart-shaped face and pointed chin, a bob of light brown hair that kept getting in her eyes, and a smile that made her face crinkle up oddly, making me think, on several occasions, that she was about to start crying. Once, I was quite sure of it. I finished the bottle I was working on, set it aside, and yawned. And then she gave me that strange smile, the end of her small nose reddened, and a worried note came into her voice as she leaned

away from me and said, "You are not going to sleep, no?" Only with you, I thought, amazed and delighted that my yawn could elicit such a response from her. What I said was, "I could stay up all night," and then offered to get us another round. When I came back with two more bottles, she shivered, though the temperature had hardly dropped since the sun went down. I took the opportunity to put my arm around her and rub her smooth shoulder as if it needed warming.

From then on I suppressed all yawns and went for more beer when our bottles were still a quarter full. And the drunker I got, the easier it became to stay awake, especially as the girl drooped against me, her words beginning to slur, her laughter making her small breasts dance beneath the thin fabric of her tank top, the soapy smell of her sweat inspiring me to rub her shoulder again and then sneak my fingers under my nose. Sometimes she couldn't find the word she was looking for in English, and then she'd deliver a speech in German, which would make her laugh even harder and grip my hand, and I'd think, you, my sweet Aryan friend, are going to fuck a Jewish boy before this night is through.

By about two or so in the morning, we were the only travelers left on the steps. The other people still outside all worked at the hostel or were friends with the people who did. They were no drunker than we, but there was a roughness to the tone of their jokes and taunts, none of which I understood, that made the air turn colder, the row of dumpsters against a stone wall menacing in the shadows. I considered suggesting we go inside, but this would have meant risking everything: I wanted to put off the moment when the German girl would decide whether or not to join me on my bunkbed for as long as I could. And maybe she wanted to put it off, too. As soon as she noticed we were alone with the hostel staff and their friends, she stopped laughing, but she didn't make a move to leave. We watched them, maybe half a dozen men and three women, jostle each other in the street. One of the men chased a woman with a beer bottle held to his crotch. "Crazy Magyars," I said, but the German girl shook her head. "Not Hungarian. Slavs." Croats, she thought, or maybe Bosnians. Refugees, she said, with an edge of concern in her voice.

And almost as soon as she said it, there came the sound of shattering glass. Once again I didn't see the actual cause of it, but the sound made both of us sit up straight. The German girl still held me tightly, but now hers was a grip of fear rather than desire. In the street, the woman who'd been chased now brandished the beer bottle by its neck, its bottom broken off. The man who'd been chasing her had a hand over his cheek, blood running through his fingers. He shouted, and the girl shouted back, waving and jabbing the bottle in his direction. This was horrifying enough, but what was worse was that the rest of the group, including the other two women, stood laughing and egging their friends on, even though one was bleeding, and the other, I saw now, had her shirt torn at the neckline.

The sound that followed was far worse: the smacking of skin on skin, and not the kind I'd been imagining all night, German thighs and belly slapping against mine. This was a solid, stinging whap, followed by the girl's shriek, and then another whap as the man raised his hand high in the air and brought it down on the girl's half-turned face. The hand came down again and again, and the girl shrieked and shrieked, but she couldn't get out of its way. The friends weren't laughing anymore; they just stood somberly, drinking their beers, the other two women watching each blow, the men looking away. The German girl wasn't holding on to me anymore, either. I knew she was crying for real now, but I didn't turn to see her crinkled face. Whatever freedom we'd felt in each other's presence, strangers who'd spend this one night together in a strange city and never see each other again, was gone. Between us now was some other, darker knowledge: that freedom never lasted, maybe, or that it was always illusory to begin with. But I wasn't ready to let go of it yet and tried to take the German girl's hand. She moved it out of reach.

Finally, after one more slap, the man let the girl fall to the ground. He walked away, holding his cheek. The other two women approached without hurry, and with no sense of urgency attended to their friend. I had a weird curiosity to see her face, to understand how she'd come through such a beating, to know how it had altered her. But all I could see were her bare legs rising up to her short skirt, a scrape on one

knee, a foot turning circles at the end of her ankle, as if she were doing nothing more than trying to loosen a stiff muscle.

I picked up my beer and drained it. The German girl was already standing. I followed her inside, keeping my eyes on her back, on the curved lines of shoulder blades under her tank top. At the door to the dormitory she turned to me, and I raised my eyes slowly, reluctant to face her. To my surprise, she hadn't been crying after all. Her expression was still and stony. She was waiting, it seemed, for me to say something, or do something. My desire hadn't diminished a bit, though now rather than whimsical it felt desperate. But I couldn't manage to speak or move. She opened the door and walked inside and just before disappearing, stuck out a hand behind her. I thought she was reaching for me and put out a hand of my own. But she was only grabbing for the knob to pull the door closed. By the time I woke the next morning, she was gone.

Even as these associations came rushing in, I knew they wouldn't stop me from throwing the bottle. But they did make me wonder what images might flood Iona's mind, years from now, at the sound of breaking glass. She wouldn't remember the specific context, but she'd always connect it with her father's secret shame and anger, with things that were just under the surface but out of reach. She'd know, from the very beginning of her life, that there was more to the world than what she could see, that a perfectly peaceful morning, which began with so much promise—her arms tucked around her father's side, her feet kicking free, her black cat's mangled ear briefly brushing against her cheek—could take a sudden ugly turn, and out of nowhere a forty-ounce malt liquor bottle would explode on the pavement in front of her, and startled former gang members would come running into the street.

But before I could throw the bottle, I glimpsed movement in the yard next to mine. A shadow sliding along a flower bed, too big to be one of the neighborhood's mangy cats. And then the beam of a flashlight, dancing over stubby rose bushes. With it came a voice, just mutters at first, and then a few distinguishable words. "All right, buddy, I got you now, you're mine," and then more mutters. I knew the voice, but still it startled me every time I heard it in the dark of

the early morning, when my neighbor, the retired machinist, searched for slugs and snails before they picked off the first tender leaves of his perennials. The flashlight played over the ground, and then his arm shot out, snatched an offending creature, and dropped it into a tub of beer. "Got you, buddy, you're mine."

He was a friendly neighbor, jolly, even, a big bald man of sixty, with a habit of laughing at his own jokes, even when no one else understood them, and a tendency toward self-deprecation I appreciated. "It's a great neighborhood," he'd told us when we first looked at the house. "No weirdos. Except the one who lives there," he added, gesturing at his place next door. He didn't talk only to slugs, but to his plants, too, and to the mangy cats as they crossed his yard, and to his lawnmower, his shovel, his hoe, and any other tool he used to maintain his meticulous garden. "How you feeling, buddy?" he'd say to one of the roses he was pruning. "One more snip, and you're done." Or to his lawnmower, when it wouldn't start: "Come on, buddy, let's not go through this again." He kept up a constant chatter, trudging from his garage to his dahlia beds to his plum tree, and if he looked up and spotted me across the fence, he'd give a big smile and say, "Don't mind me!"

He was always up by dawn, even in summer, and before Iona was born his voice would break into my sleep, along with the sound of his broom swishing along his front walkway. And occasionally that voice would take a darker turn, and so did my dreams, which, during my wife's pregnancy, were often anxious and fraught with challenges I couldn't overcome—I was either locked in houses or locked out of them, and though in my pockets I had rings jammed with keys I could never find the one that threw the bolt. And I'd be staring at the lock, muttering, "Goddamn it, buddy, goddamnit, you really did it this time, oh boy, oh boy," and I'd wake and stagger half-consciously to the bathroom, only then beginning to realize it wasn't me speaking but my neighbor, angry because a raccoon had gotten to his cherries just before they'd ripened, or because he'd overwatered one of the dahlias and rotted its roots.

There were enough mental patients in the neighborhood for me to have wondered, when we'd first moved in, whether the neighbor were truly disturbed, dangerous, even, and for a month or two I'd kept

my cell phone next to the bed in case I had to call the police in the middle of the night. I had fantasies about bodies buried under the roses and dahlias, the buddies he talked to not plants or tools but his actual buddies, former co-workers at the garage-door factory, maybe, who'd made the mistake of accepting an invitation to visit his garden. He was the kind of person about whom other neighbors would say, *He was so kind, so gentle. I never would have guessed he could do such a thing.* Except that I *had* guessed it, and if a camera crew showed up at my front door, I'd tell them so: *I knew it all along. I can't believe no one else saw it coming. He worked as a lifeguard! He played classical piano, for godsakes! Am I the only one who ever heard him talking to himself?*

Now I regretted having ever thought ill of him. He turned out to be a thoughtful neighbor, who warned us when starlings were pecking at our figs. When he caught one of the mangy cats taking a swipe at Mr. Scrappy, he chased it across his yard and over the fence. And when the residents of La Mer were blocking our alley access with their dumpsters, he called the city compliance officer. If he was disturbed, his disturbance was fairly benign, finding a healthy outlet in his muttering to the plants and garden tools. "In you go, buddy, in you go," he said, drowning a slug in beer, and Iona, who'd just learned to wave, chortled and flapped her hand in his direction. He straightened and giggled, then shone the flashlight on his face, which broke into a wide grin. "Don't mind me," he called.

Only then, imagining how I looked under the streetlamp, with an infant on my chest, a bottle raised over my head, mist falling into my hair, did it dawn on me that the malt liquor bottle might have been left not by a halfway house crazy or drunk, but more likely by a college student on his way from the dormitories to a party at an overcrowded house down the street. Maybe one of my own students, who'd discovered, as R. and I had our freshman year, that malt liquor was no worse tasting than the awful watery beer he'd been buying with a fake I.D.—Milwaukee's Best, Busch Light, Olympia—and even more important, that it was cheaper and stronger, with the desired effect of obliterating his senses and inhibitions for less than five bucks a night.

And with this thought came the image of R. and me walking across

campus, past Carolina's Old Well, under the colossal oak where, in 1795, the first student enrolled at UNC supposedly slept after walking all the way to Chapel Hill from Wilmington, ninety miles away. We hadn't walked as far—about half a mile, from our dormitory on the south side of campus, which was named for that first student, Hinton James. Both of us carried bottles of Colt '45, our breath steaming in the late October air. It was Halloween of our freshman year. R. was dressed as Bart Simpson, wearing a red hat and red T-shirt, blue shorts and blue sneakers, and carrying a rectangle of cardboard meant to stand in for a skateboard. It wasn't much of a costume, especially since he'd covered the shirt with a jacket—mostly because it was cold out, but also because he needed a place to stuff a second forty. My own costume was even lazier. I tied a shoe on top of my head, and whenever anyone inquired about it, I'd say, "What shoe?" or "What the fuck's a shoe?" or "That's a shoe? I thought it was a duck." All night I managed to keep a straight face while R. snickered beside me.

Halloween in Chapel Hill was a miniature Mardi Gras, with twenty-thousand people parading up and down Franklin Street. It was a chance for frat boys to dress in drag and for sorority girls to wear almost nothing—cat costumes were big that year: leotards, tights, high heels, and a few perfunctory swipes of face paint—and for all of them to shiver in the frigid night air while drunken locals used the cover of the crowd to cop a feel. The *Where's Waldo* books had recently hit their peak of popularity, and there were maybe two dozen Waldos standing out conspicuously in the crowd. R. kept shouting, "There's Waldo! There's Waldo! There's Waldo!" until one of the Waldos threw a Snickers bar at him to make him stop.

Finally someone recognized his costume and called, "Don't have a cow, man." He'd been waiting for this all night. R. had an oddly precise memory when it came to episodes of *The Simpsons*. He could quote whole scenes, doing all the voices himself, going on for so long that most of our friends shook their heads and turned away. He'd make himself laugh so hard his eyes screwed up behind his glasses, one scrunching up, the other bulging, until he looked a bit like a cartoon character himself, with his floppy blond hair and flashing white teeth

and bouncing Adam's apple. Now he quoted an episode in which Bart tries desperately to study for a history test to avoid repeating the fourth grade, finding that the only way he can keep from getting distracted is to slap himself whenever he starts drifting off. "Concentrate, man, concentrate," R. said, and soon he was laughing and slapping himself, and I chugged malt liquor and shouted, "What shoe? I don't see a shoe!" and thought that this night had all the characteristics to make it one of the best of my life.

And it might have stayed that way if R. hadn't wanted cigars to complement his costume and Colt '45, which sounded like a reasonable enough detour to me, especially since as far as I knew the night was just beginning and might never end. The convenience store at the corner of Franklin Street and Airport Road had windows mostly taken up by marquee signs advertising specials on beer and cigarettes. At one time the signs must have come with a full set of letters and numbers of varying sizes, but enough had since gone missing that now most were mismatched. You had to stare hard for a moment to figure out what they said: bUd 12-p 8.99. MBRO \$5. But even through the dirty glass and mismatched letters we could see that the store was packed. I decided to stay out on the sidewalk, the shoe still on my head, watching as R. navigated the crowd. He seemed small in there, pushing through so many people to get to the counter, picking up a pack of the Swisher Sweets he liked, the garish fluorescent lights making everyone inside look pale and sickly. And because that light was so unpleasant, I turned away to watch a pair of girls in leotards and tights stumble in their heels across the parking lot, long tails swinging, bare arms entwined and impervious to the cold, it seemed, their shining hair beacons in the night.

I hoped R. would hurry up already: we had more parading and shouting to do, and if we slipped back into the current of people marching up and down the street we might have been able to stay close to those bare arms and leotards. When I turned back he was no longer at the counter but at the door, which was blocked by a security guard in half a uniform, jeans below, a blue shirt with a badge above, hat askew. His costume was as lazy as ours, and at first I didn't think he was a real

security guard, just another reveler half-heartedly playing his role and enjoying the chaos, no different than R. quoting Bart Simpson and slapping himself silly.

But it turned out he was real enough, meaning he was employed by the store to keep the hordes of kids from stripping its shelves. He'd stopped R. at the door, patted his jacket, found the second bottle of Colt '45, and wouldn't let him leave. He didn't buy R.'s story that he'd had the bottle in his pocket when he'd come in, and he wouldn't listen when R. told him to check the shelves and see if any were missing. He'd already shouted to the clerk behind the counter to call the police. By then I'd joined the argument, vouching for R.'s story, showing the guard that I, too, had a bottle of Colt '45 in my jacket, though I hadn't been in the store. Why in the world would R. have paid \$3.50 for a pack of cigars, I asked, and stolen a \$.99 bottle of malt liquor? Did he think we couldn't have asked any of the kids in here with fake I.D.s to buy one for us?

But nothing either of us said made any difference. The guard was impassive, bored, powerful only because of his bulk, which kept R. away from the door. If he were any smaller, I might have tried to shove him out of the way and let R. make a break for it. I wish I'd tried anyway. The fluorescent lights of the store were soon tinted by the flashing lights on a police cruiser. A few revelers stopped to watch, but most kept parading, those Waldos in their red and white caps, the sexy cats, the equally sexy boys in drag, none of them acknowledging that this wasn't how the night was supposed to end, that it should have gone on until dawn broke so gradually we hardly realized it was getting light.

R. looked bewildered as the police officer made him stand with his hands against the outside wall of the store and then took each down in turn to latch them in handcuffs. I was still trying to argue, though now I didn't show the bottle in my jacket. Why couldn't he just write a ticket? I asked. Wasn't it overkill to arrest someone for stealing a single bottle? The cop was stiff and humorless, red face cut in half by a sandy mustache. After a minute he squinted at me, as if I were some kind of ranting lunatic, and said, "Why in hell do you have a shoe on your head?" Only when he folded R. into his backseat did it really strike me

that this wasn't a joke, wasn't a pretend cop making a pretend arrest, and it must have struck R. that way, too, because he started crying. He tried to wipe away tears with his shoulders, but with the cuffs on he couldn't get them close enough, and soon his nose and chin were wet. There were all kinds of things I wanted to say to him—*I'll get you out in an hour, we'll sue them for wrongful arrest, fuck these stupid pigs*—but the only thing I believed was that we'd entered some new kind of night, full of glaring light and harsh voices and the smell of car exhaust. I stood silently as the cop got behind the wheel and spoke into his radio. R. glanced at me, saw my helpless look, and dipped his head forward, the bill of his red cap resting against the grate separating the back of the cruiser from the front.

All these years later, carrying my eight-month-old daughter on my chest, holding a bottle over my head, filled with more shame and rage than I'd ever felt in my life, I had the same thought in my mind as when the police cruiser pulled away: the story was supposed to end differently. Bart Simpson doesn't fail his history test. He doesn't repeat the fourth grade. He doesn't get carried off in a cop car while his friend stands in silence, hands in pockets, shoe on head. He doesn't get a brain tumor and die two weeks before turning thirty-eight.

I wanted to throw that bottle. I wanted to run up and down the street shouting. I wanted to flail my arms and stomp my feet. But even as I imagined doing those things I knew insanity was only aspirational, that I wouldn't soon be locked up in a mental hospital or left to sit on the collapsed front porch of a neglected halfway house. I knew, too, why I wished so badly that I *were* losing my mind: so that I could be free to rant or stare blankly at the empty street, so I could experience the relief I'd imagined when my childhood neighbor smashed his basement window—relief from having to carry despair alongside my wonder, or to have wonder interrupt my despair. It was too painful to be so constantly divided, to manage emotions that could never be reconciled, the distinguishing mark, I knew, of a healthy and well-functioning mind. But here I was, with equal parts despair and wonder, standing outside my house in Salem, Oregon, mist edging toward drizzle, no sign of dawn breaking. The retired machinist had moved around to the

back of his house. Mr. Scrappy was scratching at the front door. In a moment he'd start howling, and my wife would drag herself from bed to let him out.

I lowered my arm. Iona examined the bottle as I turned it one way for her and then the other, and she cooed at the glint of clear glass, at the red and gold label, at the few drops of amber liquid rolling around inside. Her breath was warm against my neck, and I thought of Chekhov's cab driver talking to his horse and wondered if this was the moment I should get carried away and tell her everything, to finally explain my shame and anger. I tried to think of things she ought to know but had no idea what to say first. That R. loved *The Simpsons* and Carolina basketball and peaches? That during our freshman year he'd gone to Bible study classes those Sundays he wasn't too hung over to get out of bed before noon? That even though he was from North Carolina and I was from New Jersey, he was a far more aggressive driver than I was, regularly shouting at other cars on the freeway? That for some reason waiters in restaurants often forgot his order or got it wrong, and whenever they did he'd get this vexed look I still saw whenever I closed my eyes, a mix of insult and injury? That he got drunk at my wedding reception and made a long, ranting speech to me about the likelihood of most marriages ending in divorce? That before he'd gotten the tumor he'd been a bit of a hypochondriac, always griping about sore shoulders and upset stomachs, but that after his diagnosis he'd been utterly stoic, never once feeling sorry for himself or complaining that life was unfair? That I'd been so unwilling to believe he might die I put off visiting until he started hospice care, and that by the time I made it to him, he was on a feeding tube and oxygen tank, down to a hundred and twenty pounds, one eye screwed shut by the growth on his brain stem? That even then he'd kept his sense of humor, sneaking jellybeans his mother told him he shouldn't try to eat and quoting Homer Simpson? That after he did eat them, saying, "Mmm, forbidden jellybeans," they came back out through his nose, because the tumor no longer let him swallow anything but liquids? That during the three days I spent with him he dozed off in the middle of conversations, and once when he woke and I asked if he'd had a nice nap, he said, as if to reassure me, "It's peaceful

there"? That when I was leaving to catch my plane home, he hugged me and said, "I'll see you when we get through all this mess"? That no matter what Doris Betts had taught me, I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried, imagine what he was going through, couldn't put myself in his shoes or get under his skin, couldn't know what he was facing or how he could face it so calmly, couldn't feel his wheeze in my breath, the heavy tongue that could no longer push food down his throat in my mouth? That he died less than twenty-four hours after I made it back home, while I was walking my daughter in the rain, bouncing her and pointing out ducks in a swollen creek, here in Felony Flats?

I understood then, or maybe I'd understood all along: there's a reason Chekhov's cab driver never gets to tell the story of his dead son, that even when he does finally unburden himself to his horse, we don't hear his words. There was far too much to tell. Even if he went on speaking for the rest of his life, he wouldn't reach the end of his story before he himself was gone. And more important, what he really wanted to say was simply unsayable. I kept my mouth shut. Iona wanted to lick the bottle's neck, and when I wouldn't let her, she kicked her legs and barked her outrage. To distract her I picked a dandelion leaf and shook it under her nose. Then, when she wasn't looking, I tucked the bottle back under the boxwood and took off down the street.