

One

It seems I have a story, *mine*.

I know little about it, only that this is the place where it best begins, a second in time when whatever happened before is less commanding than what is to come.

Such is this moment, this peculiar moment.

I am unborn.

Just now, sperm entered egg—it's common enough— and here I am. As tall and as wide as the prick of a pin. Smaller than the period at the end of a sentence.

For me, as for anybody, I am connected to every other thing in the universe. You knew this once. The hummingbird's sinew. The intransigence of the waterfall. The black puddle standing in bright sun, lumpy with sewage. The rock's summation. The dulling of the lion's eyes; his tongue red with blood. The stark veined hands of an old man, clasped as he sleeps on a sidewalk. A vast island of tangled plastic in the middle of the ocean. All of it connected: me to all that and more. All of it connected, and me to all of it.

I will forget this, bit by bit, as I approach the moment of my birth. As you have.

This I just know.

You may believe in the vast interconnectedness of everything there is; further, you may cloak it in wonderment and Sunday school and He Is Risen, so on. That's how Mother was raised.

Or you may not believe—firmly, resolutely, certainly not. No. That's more how Mother is now.

Anyway, these choices aren't available to me. True is true.

With every minute, the world asserts its curious pull. A pull that strengthens slightly and slightly, slightly and slightly, as it will every hour, every day. This too I know. Yet I don't know whether I will be born or not. Unlike the past, the future is invisible.

Whether I go forward into the world or go back into the *amazing nothingness* from which I came, it's all the same to me. There's no difference. You have your life, the things you know: your thoughts about death and birth, about the unborn and the infirm, about the innocent for sure and the sentenced to die. Those are your thoughts, they belong to you. You in your world, me in mine.

Me, I can go back from where I came, back into the amazing nothingness, or I can go forward into Mother's world. Either way. It does not matter to me.

There are other things you need to know about me. I don't speak, see, hear, or taste, but I know things; rather, there are things that I'm aware of, that are just there. I'd say they are in my *mind*. As good a word as any. Things just come to me, things that seem *new* to me, they come to me as words: *mind*, or *amazing nothingness*. Big things, enormous things, I encounter them freshly, as if no one ever experienced them before.

Or there are things more familiar that I witness, through Mother. Words I somehow know.

Already this is true.

And sometimes, it's like I'm somewhere else entirely, witnessing things far from this infinite warmth inside the womb.

In my mind, I am at the top of Mount Everest and, just below, there is the flotsam and jetsam of the climbers who went all the way up and of those who never came down. It is so high; how can snow be so cold? In the womb, the oxygen level is just like the top of Mount Everest.

There are things I know.

Where do words come from? That I don't know. But here they are. These are mine.

## **Two**

Mother is, above all and other, in my mind. Vast details of Mother. I could make you a list, but the details of her are coming at me so fast, and the list would be so long. Why would you care that much?

She is stretching. She is prone. She is naked, I gather. She stares down her body: dark aureoles on her breasts, those two gentle mounds. She is making sounds.

“You make love sort of like you walk.” There is someone in her eye, standing there, regarding her. No gentle mounds. Tight small nipples. Is that a tail between its legs? The tail is in front, not behind.

Most upright animals have the tail behind. This I just know.

That is not a tail.

That is Father.

If I am born, I will be a boy. Just like Father. Tail in front.

Mother likes his tail.

“You mean I fuck steady and slow?” His voice is low in Mother’s mind, lower in pitch than hers, low like a tiger’s growl.

“I mean you bounce to your own peculiar rhythm,” says Mother and then she chuckles. Everything around me shakes, she is a belly full of chuckle. Then she changes. If the chuckle is warm, than this—whatever it is—is something other. She is looking at Father and he has changed. And that changes Mother.

This is *caution*.

Father leaves Mother’s eye for somewhere else.

And then I jolt electric.

I don’t know why.

It is not unlike sperm permeating egg, only it starts then stops then starts again; for you, it would be like a hard hard twitch or a holy epilepsy.

I jolt and I jolt and I jolt again.

For me everything is very vivid and there is no sound, Mother and Father are gone. I am with all the animals there are. Each unique. All together. Fur, scale, gill, eyes, antennae, snout, claw; moth and bear and whale and dog. I regard them all, in an instant. They don't regard me. As if they were all one, and me too.

Doesn't quite fit into words, not yet.

I jolt and I jolt; roughly half of the upright animals have a tail behind *and* in front.

And then the animals are gone.

Mother lays back and angles her toes out straight from her ankles and out of her mouth blows air; this is a sigh and it is not cautious. This is leisurely and slow and mostly Mother is warm and happy and she is remembering other men as category—she names it *first time*—and she sees a string of men standing there before her in her mind, tail in front (some up, some down) and some of those men are recalled warmly and some not and what is a *first time* and some of these men she still thinks about from time to time and she was actually thinking about one of them just now instead of Father—she was recalling a man named Justin, an all-time favorite, and she is remembering his hands on her hips and the sweet deepness and how his sounds were and how his intensities were such welcome surprises and *is that a first time?* she feels a little guilty for

thinking about him instead of Father who, after all, was right here doing the do *doing the do?* but then the bouncing of Father was so peculiar, it didn't graph from high to low so much as from stop to start, from ragged intense to near inattention.

She chuckles again. Was he nervous, was he bored, was he wondering what he's doing here? Or is he just some wild wandering phallus with his own compass and strange aim?

She chuckles again and it shakes me all up.

And then she pauses.

Maybe, Mother is thinking, this marriage wasn't such a good idea.

### Three

If the world unfolds in a sequence, and it seems that it does—this happens, then this happens, then this—I'm having trouble understanding the sequence of Mother. The things bouncing around in her head seem out of order to me and I can't put them into a line. A line being the simplest thing, isn't it?

Here is Father. Over here are other men: this one, this one, this one. She likes them tall. Over here is Mother's mother. Mother's father. They are young and unwrinkled; and now they are old and gray. Here they are shiny and happy; now they are shriveled and afraid and looking away. Who are they, where are they, when are they?

Here's a little girl—and *that* is Mother a long time ago. It is as if I am now in her little girl brain and all is current and unfolding. She is moving through space, the wind is blowing her hair back. She is going as fast as a bird diving headlong into the ocean to fish, she is in a *car*, that's what she calls it, her head just inside the open window; the roaring wind sews her eyes nearly shut but not quite. She glints out at the world as it flies past—the buildings with words on the side, the roads connecting. She is on what is called a *freeway*; there are many.

Mother misses the freeways, she misses the time when everyone had a car. The cars moving together, at about the same speed. Singular in purpose, shoulder to shoulder.

Moving forward.

It's no longer like that. It hasn't been like that, not for years and years.

The little girl is thinking of nothing. Amid its steady howl, the wind thwacks like a sheet snapping, like when Mother makes her bed in the morning, except in this fast wind there is more thwacking than that of a single sheet: again and again and again, soft then loud then louder then quiet, all to a jagged rhythm. Mother is feeling the wind and the speed and there is nothing else to it.

When Mother's mind is empty, there is a kind of peacefulness to her.

“Wanna beer?” Mother snaps back and there is Father, a towel around his waist. His chest has hair, grizzled like a bear. If I am born, I hope to have hair like that someday. His head is covered with hair: on top it is thick black and long over the top of his ears. On his face, it covers his chin and cheeks and partial down his neck. His eyes are the color of dusk sky.

He is so young, thinks Mother. Young is what I wanted. What I want. I had my choice. It all happened so fast. It happened just *yesterday*. She likes the sharp angle of his shoulders: straight, wide. He says, “I’m gonna need more than one to face all those people again.”

“It seems you need more than one to do most things,” says Mother. She is surprised at her own evenness in saying this, she feels no judgment. Is, as it is, as it is.

Father shrugs. “I’m a drinker. As you know. Want one?”

“Yes.” And Father leaves the room, Mother listens to his bare feet slapping down the hallway on cold granite floor. And Mother is wondering how this will work.

What, really, will he do all day?

Will he stay here? It’s not like he’s a reader, and she laughs to herself. Maybe he’ll spend all day on *Gates*, is he the type who looks at sports, porn, movies?

What is *Gates*? She’s not thinking about what it is, it’s just a word in her mind, but it’s so many things all at once.

Will he go out, be with the people he knows, those working and those out of work? He can’t tell his friends the details of this, how this came to be, he can only tell them the fact of it. That Mother and Father have joined. *Married*. Father understands this, she was careful in making sure of that when she chose him.

And he will be here when she returns in the evening from work. And he will go out with her when she has to go out, like tonight. When she goes to *work*. She doesn't want to think about tonight's work, but she can't help it, but she doesn't want to. And this evening, and every evening that will follow, Father will be here all night—and sex is going to change, she hopes, as they get to know each other. It will, it always does.

She has only known the man for a month.

He can work if he wants, he knows that. And part of her knows that part of him wants to work again. It's been a while.

But, unlike before, he does not need to work. He has a real job now.

He is an actor, Mother says to herself. That's how she became aware of him.

What is an *actor*?

But Mother is not thinking about what an actor is. She's thinking this—all this—is not about him doing just what's he's told.

This is not abject slavery.

Servitude is not what she wants, not at all, and that's not the kind of man he is.

But he knows how this works. He knows his job.

His real job is husband.

#### **Four**

If every thing in the world is tied to every other thing—ocean to sky to land to animal and back— then every other thing is tied to me. As words resting in a line, that seems simple enough.

It is not simple.

I know, because I go out into it.

Just now, I have taken leave of Mother, and out I go. Out into it all. It's like before with all the animals and their tails, except now, instead of their assembling here before me, I am out amongst the whole of it.

I don't know how.

I only know that some things far from the deep warmth of Mother are as vivid to me as she is. And when I am out in their environs sometimes I float. Sometimes I move amongst. I observe, witness. Things happen out there, but not because of my presence.

Of this I am fairly certain.

And yet these things that happen out there affect me.

They scare me.

The drawing back of the ocean, the odd quietude, only to be broken by the waters' furious return.  
The shredding of wood beam and thatched branches, as if chewed furiously and spat out wet.

The end of this kind of bear; that kind of insect. Endings that came after thousands of years. The last heave of breath and that is all. No one knew.

The fire that burns and burns with nothing to stop it, eating houses and trees. The black smoke, its slow roll over cindered hills, like the pulling of a blanket over a child before sleep.

The inland rain, falling for days and days. The family on the roof, drenched and shivering, hoping for the waters to recede. The taunt of the helicopter overhead.

The fury of the crowd in the far away city square as they clash in hunger just before dark. The unknown rage that rises; a surprise to all involved even though it was inside them all along. Now that it is out in the world, its imprimatur permanent, a reaction is guaranteed: machete and bayonet, and then a reaction to that, thrash and evisceration, and a reaction to that, entrails exposed to the unforgiving sun, until that particular raging hardens into the defining moment of the many assembled. The moment never forgotten, although the rage itself is, receding back into each of the many where wounds unheal, and unheal again, and unheal again.

Mother has two words for all this. She calls it *The Problems*.

The world outside scares me and then amazes me all at the same time. There is so much that is stunning, miraculous—side by side with *The Problems*, swirling around simultaneous, mixing and separating and mixing again. How can that be?

The discoveries of a baby everyday. The love conferred.

The garden at dawn, the still of the furrows. Small lit dew on the varicose leaf.

The lope of the egret, the slight swiveling wings.

The first bite of apple, the tart slap on the tongue.

The story retold and retold and still there is mirth. Millions and millions of chuckles at any given moment.

The confidence of one in the goodness of another.

And the pain that lays over the old woman's bed as if a shroud of needles, pricking every toss and turn. It obliterates all joy and recognition, it continues and continues because death will not come.

And the pain of betrayal when the certainty was so deep.

And the pain of the loss that could have been avoided but for gray expectations.

And the pain for all the time that disappeared into the world's ridiculousness.

And the pain of misunderstandings that cannot square and can only explode.

All of it tied together. All of it tied to me.

I cannot go out into it.

It is too much.

I will stay closer to Mother and Father.

### Five

Mother is drinking a beer.

She's tasting it.

It comes from what is called a *can*.

This is what *cold* is when it enters the mouth, when cold is on her tongue. Sharpness. Cold down her long throat. Cold, a little less, as it flows into her belly.

Different than the cold of snow: the numbing chill, the misery of it. This is cold on the inside, a satisfying cold for Mother, going into her near where I am, vicinity wise.

Roughly.

Is everything cold that goes in the mouth?

Does everything taste like beer?

Beer changes her in her head. Beer changes me.

I hope there's more beer.

I hope there's lots more beer.

A long, long river of beer over tongue, down throat, in belly, in head. Does Mother know I feel this way?

I am nowhere in Mother's thoughts.

She does not know of me.

Father's head is suddenly between Mother's legs. His tongue is inside her, flicking. He is like a salamander. She shudders, she likes this, she lets out a sound like a sigh. She pushes Father's head away.

She likes this, more than beer. But not now.

"C'mon," he says. "The first time is never any good."

"The first time was fine," she says. She has a little acid in her stomach as she says this. I like beer in her stomach. I don't like acid in her stomach. The acid is there because she is not telling

Father what she knows to be true. She is being very careful with the muscles in her face, with her breathing. She is being careful because of Father.

How could Mother's face muscles affect Father?

“One thing you need to know about me?” says Father as if he doesn't know the answer. He is sitting between Mother's spread legs, his knees wrapped in his arms. Mother can't see his tail. He is looking up at her.

“What's that?” Mother rubs her foot against his shoulder.

“I like to fuck all the time. I just do. I'm told I'm not normal. I don't care. That's what my body wants to do, and I like that feeling, I like walking around horny all the time and I like fucking. And I like fucking you but I'm not good at it yet but I will be good at it. I know I will.”

Mother chuckles.

I like chuckles. I like beer. I'm not sure what it is, but Mother likes fucking and Father likes fucking and so I bet I like fucking too.

I don't like acid in the stomach. Mother is being careful again, with her muscles and her breathing and her eyes—be kind, she's thinking. “I can't say I like to make love *all* the time,” she says. “But I like it. A lot. And I like making love with you. And we did just fine.”

“Even for newlyweds?” asks Father.

“Impulsive newlyweds,” says Mother.

“It wasn’t impulsive,” says Father, and of course he’s right, thinks Mother. Of course.

“No, I guess not,” says Mother. “It was just so very...fast.”

He’s so confident, thinks Mother. So very confident. Sure of himself, of his sex. That he doesn’t know me at all doesn’t factor in. thinks Mother. He’s that confident. Or that stupid. She chuckles again, rubbing his shoulder with her foot. Father never went to *college*. I don’t know what college is, and Mother isn’t thinking about what college is. She is thinking only that it makes Father and Mother different.

“What?” he asks, and this time he doesn’t know the answer.

“When I woke up yesterday morning, I didn’t think I would be a married woman,” says Mother.

“Not yet.”

“You knew it was coming.”

“As did you. I misjudged its velocity.”

“Velocity,” says Father, and he snorts a laugh. And then he nestles his nose between her legs and his tongue is deeper than before and Mother sighs and she likes it but her mind isn’t between her legs, it is going somewhere else.

“Sorry,” she says. “Tonight is a big night, and there might be trouble.” Images of a room bigger than this one, filled with people. *The Mingling*, that’s what Mother calls it. There’s beer in glasses and other drinks and men and women talking and it is a huge room in Mother’s mind, an important room in her life. Different faces rise in her mind, and then fade, then others rise and fade. Some of these faces she calls “the beautiful people” and some of these faces she calls “the money people” and they are all now in her mind at once, circling each other, circling and circling. Talking to one another and talking to her, they all come round to Mother eventually. To pay respects.

With each of the beautiful people, Mother has a long story. I can’t keep them all straight. Father is one of the beautiful people.

With each of the money people, there really isn’t a story. There’s a blank space with them. Still, they are very important to Mother.

There is one money person who stands out in Mother’s mind. She can see him, his name is Torvaldson. He is the trouble. He is why Mother cannot let her mind fall between her legs. He has a story, and Mother hopes others have not heard it.

The only other money person with stories—not just one, but many — is Mother. She clearly places herself with the money people. I have so much more to know: Mother is a money person?

*Money?*

Tonight is Father's first night at The Mingling as her husband. Mother doesn't want others at The Mingling to know this, even though Father might want it public. He's the kind of man who likes to crow.

Mother's stomach surges acid.

### Six

It took Mother a while to decide what to cover herself with. These coverings are called *clothes*; she keeps her clothes in what is called a *closet*. There are a lot of clothes in there! Lots and lots of them, most are dark colors. She must dress and redress and redress all the time to have so many clothes.

And shoes! So many shoes! More colorful! They come in pairs, like mothers and fathers.

A closet is like a room with no furniture and lots of clothes, although she has a bench down the middle. On one wall of the closet, there is a mirror. When Mother looks into it, she can see herself, and so now I see Mother. Where Father's hair is straight, Mother's hair is curly and longer; it piles dark on the top of her head. Her eyes are rounder than Father's, and bigger and browner and once she smiled in the mirror, it was like two lights went on. Her nose starts on top, narrow, then goes wider down her face. Mother thinks it too big. Her lips are full and her chin juts square and resolute, sort of like her nose. Unlike Father, with all that hair on his face, I can see Mother's cheekbones; they are up higher and round. Hers is a wide face with a neck fitted to hold it up. Her skin is warm and browner than Father's, although her skin is slightly whiter on her breasts and between her legs, where Father was licking. There is hair there, I guess Father likes to lick hair. Her nipples are dark. Her arms are long and slimmer than Father's—she

doesn't bulge like he does—and her thighs are wider than her arms, her hips are a little wider than her shoulders. I like my Mother's look. If I am born, will I look like Mother with a tail, or like Father without breasts?

I wonder what I look like now. Something is happening to me, I don't know what it is.

She puts on some little pants and these two cups on her breasts and selects a black dress and two shoes and goes out into the room where the bed is.

It did not take her long to dress, although the entire time she was dressing she was watching a screen. Father sat on the edge of the bed naked and watched it too. The screen is like a mirror, but neither Mother nor Father are in it. Someone else is in it. Someone else is talking. Something about the fourth tsunami, it's a man's voice, he doesn't say what a tsunami is. Judging from what Mother sees, I have been in a tsunami before. It takes people out and leaves them in the middle of the ocean. It takes the homes on the beach and smashes them together.

The screen is called a *television*. Mother thinks it's quaint, retro. Her private joke about her youth. The television is hooked up to the *computer*. The computer can be run by an *earbug*. It is a miniature computer inside the ear that talks to the mind. Father loves his earbug. Mother only uses hers when she must. Everything in the house is hooked up to the computer. The computer is hooked up to Gates. Gates is hooked up to everything else in the world, but it's hooked up different than how I'm connected with everything else in the world. This I just know but I don't understand.

“Together we walk,” says a voice in the television. There is a long line of people walking in a line. “Together we walk on The Day of Forgiveness.”

“I think I’ll bring the gun tonight,” says Father.

“Good,” says Mother. She likes that Father has a gun. It fills her with a warmth like she has in the bed but different. *Safe* is the word; it is a big feeling that pushes out fear. “The Harringtons saw three refugee kids mug a couple from out of town there at the corner of Broadstone and Seventh last week. Ronald didn’t have his pistol and couldn’t do anything about it.”

Father nodded. “Like China here?” Jerks his head towards the screen. There are three people there with small eyes. Their skin is different than Mother’s. Different from Father’s.

What is a *redneck*? Father’s neck is not red.

The three people with small eyes are taking things from a building. This is *looting*.

Father extends his left hand straight out as far as he can, out towards the screen; his fingers cup up towards the ceiling. His right hand raises close in until his thumb barely touches his nose. He squints one eye. The finger on his right hand points at his left and, squeezing, he says, “Kikik. Boom.”

This makes Mother a little afraid of Father.

“Hurry, get dressed. I’m going up to the roof,” says Mother, and she finishes putting on her shoes. They have a narrow stilt in the back, which Mother doesn’t like that much. They make a clicking sound against the floor as she walks.

This must be where Mother lives. A big billowy room, white walls tall, shiny windows. Big screen on this wall, big planes of color on that wall—that is *art* that Mother no longer likes. The click of Mother's shoes are the only sound.

And then another room of yellow walls that are short and another room of tan walls that are tall again with another screen and art that Mother prefers. And then she opens a door and the room is narrow and very tall.

A series of ledges. These are *stairs*. Mother always takes the stairs because she can't trust the elevator when the power goes out. I don't know what this means. This is a *fact*. Mother accepts facts. Facts are like the ocean and the sky in Mother's mind. They are defining, unmovable. No amount of pondering renders them different. They may change a little, like weather, but still above there is sky. And here, before her, is a fact. She sighs, and starts up the stairs. The click of her shoes is louder now, it bounces around this tall, narrow room that goes up and up and up.

She climbs and climbs and then she pauses, her breath is loud. This is the seventh floor. She used to live here. No more. There is an empty place in her for this seventh floor. Emptied out. It is like a man she used to love, a man that left her, it is like old love, this seventh floor. This is how Mother is thinking to herself: You knew it so well, you loved it every inch. Then you had to separate and it broke your heart and you anguished and you died the little deaths of the unwanted changes until suddenly you were done with it because there's nothing left in you that hasn't been consumed by it and you are just empty and now old love is a fact, a fact with boundaries that prevent its little deaths from spilling out all over you again and again. A fact that pushed you around and now is done with you, and you with it.

Mother feels nothing but the nothing. But it is not peaceful.

She is climbing again, climbing up, up until she throws open a door and all is sky, blueness in all directions but beneath her feet.

The roof is covered with *grass*, that's what this green is. *Lawn*. Mother raises her left leg and takes off the pointy shoe, and then her right and she lets her toes go naked to the grass. This too is a place she loves, but less than the seventh floor, because she doesn't know when or if she will have to separate from this too. No matter. The blue above is all encompassing. Mother wonders if there will be a brilliant sunset soon. All the brilliant sunsets now; that is maybe all that is good from all that has happened. That is what she thinks. Her toes are in the grass. The cool of the soil. The roof is much larger than any of the rooms in Mother's house; it is the size of 40 closets. The grass goes to the edge of the roof in all directions; it is a large patch of green unbroken—no furniture, no screens, no clothes, no people-- but for one large patch of plants. Some tall, some short. Some hang bulbous shapes from them. Others are leafy and purple.

There is the bay laurel tree in the big barrel. The fragrant leaves. She climbed these as a kid; and now she keeps one near her again. This she loves especially.

This is where she comes when she can. This is her *garden*. She picks it, she waters it, she eats it, she dreams here of other times, she blanks her mind here, she kills bugs here one by one, she doesn't like the weeds here, she waters when there's sun and worries when it rains and rains and rains and very few know of her garden, no one but Father and a few people in the building.

He is behind her, she senses him. They don't speak. She doesn't want to go. She puts her shoes back on and follows him back to the stairs, and down one floor. It is the twelfth floor, but she thinks of it as *The Arterial*.

“You know why I married you?” asks Father, opening the door to a long hallway, shadowed in slight light.

She thinks she does, but she says “Why?”

“Your stairs. I married you for your stairs.”

This I don’t understand, but Mother does. It has something to do with when there is too much rain.

### Seven

I am constantly changing.

Every second, I am different from the second before.

Whatever of me is physical, of matter--whatever that is—it increases and increases and I become more.

I am referring to the smallest things there are. Inside of them are smaller things, and inside of them are smaller things still. And at the very center of the smallest things there is nothing.

More and more of the smallest things and the smaller things still are clumping together, forming the physical me. How I get from here to something the size of Father seems absurd—in the face

of it, in the fact of it. Yet that, evidentially, is how this works. It is just one more thing on the list of preposterous.

At some point, I will be too big for Mother, and I will have to leave her. I don't know that I want to do that. It's either that, or I will return to the amazing nothingness. In some ways, that seems better although I'm not sure why.

Mother too will leave the world she lives in, and she doesn't want to do that. This I know. But she won't leave her world because she's too big for it, it's just that we come from nothing and we return to nothing and the circle is the shape of things and we go onto it and around, only to return to the starting point.

The starting point of nothing.

Sometimes Mother thinks that people, all of them together, have become too big for the world and that is the problem. But they can't leave the one world they know because they've gotten too big. Only a baby can do that.

Outside, the world is changing. Or, rather, Mother and Father are changing the world as I know it by moving through it. We are on The Arterial. It is a long hallway, dim light, Mother's heels clicking on a shiny floor. Father is carrying what must be his gun, a long stick with a curvy piece thrust out from the middle. We arrive at the end of the hall and pause until Father throws open the door and peers out. He steps outside; he motions at Mother. She goes to the door and looks out at him. He is outside, up high in the air; before us is a grunged metal walkway over to the next building, a taller structure of stubble and brown where another door awaits. Father steps out on the landing, studying the next building, looking down at the windows and then down below,

then up at the roof. His gun held to his chest. Mother is just behind, watching him, liking his certainty and his confidence; it's different from his sexual confidence which he really should recalibrate with every woman he meets, except now he should not have other women in his life. That's in the contract. But if his confidence had to recalibrate every time he opened a dangerous door, we would never leave the house. So Mother likes some parts of Father's confidence more than others. That that isn't fair makes her laugh to herself. Some of the things a younger man doesn't know are better left unsaid.

A white bird glides by, just above Mother and Father.

I alight.

I am now gliding high in the air, I have bird eyes and a bird head swiveling. This is how feathers feel, heavier than the bird's own skeleton and its hollow bones; this is how it feels when a feather separates from a bird and floats casually away, a quick pained pluck and then a hole that squeezes, disappears. This is how the air feels—like wind, only the air is still and I am not. It doesn't thwack, this air. It sighs.

Below, the straight lines of streets, straight like The Arterial but much longer. Streets thronged with people walking in two directions, this way and that, so many people clogging the sides of streets. People walk fast, slow. Some run. Many move faster than that, mounted on something with circles beneath. There is one car, I remember it from Mother's imaginings. It is moving slow among the crowd.

Someone picks up the can filled with fire and throws it at the roof of the car. The clang of the can on the car carries up to the sky. The can of fire rolls slow off the back of the car, which does not stop.

The high line of buildings. I fly between. Windows on both sides, some open, some closed. The fall of shadows, where the buildings break light. A bird can rise above the buildings to where there is only blue, a bird can descend down among the legs walking and scurry between.

I am in a womb.

“It’s safe,” says Father. “Go now.”

Mother walks quickly over the metal walkway and she doesn’t look down because looking down makes her scared and that’s always been the way of it with her.

“We can’t get all the way there on The Arterial,” says Mother. She hadn’t thought of that before now. She is remembering the corner of Fourth and Broadway. It is a ball of fear. Father lifts his gun in the air, looks back at her, blinks one eye only. “I’ll get you there.” That is called a *wink*. Mother doesn’t much like winks, she’s letting it go. The last time she was married, she couldn’t let things go, now she lets things go, just let it go, she repeats. When Mother lets things go, do they go somewhere else? Where is that? Will they come back? What if Father winks again? All the things that have been let go by all the people all over the world, can I go where they go? Can a bird?

Part of letting go is not dwelling. Letting go is moving on. Like we move on The Arterial. On and on. We have been walking almost half my lifetime which admittedly isn't much. When will we get there?

Click. Click. Click. Click. Mother's heels seem resigned to click forever. We come to the end of the metal walkway, and Mother opens the door and we are inside again in a long, hallway. There is a man and a woman approaching, but they are nicely dressed and Mother feels no fear.

The people nod at Mother and Father, and Father nods back and we keep walking, walking down the long hallway with a door every so often on either side.

"The Torvaldsons will make their debut tonight," says Mother.

"Did Jenny take his name?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you take my name?"

"I like my name. And I'm not that kind of girl."

"Not that kind of woman."

"Tit a tat. I think the Torvaldsons will work out okay."

"Do you think we'll work out okay?"

“Yes. Dear. But I don’t want us to announce our marriage to The Mingling tonight.” She turns to look at Father. He has a look on his face that makes Mother think of the word *petulant*.

“I want to tell the world,” says Father. “I want to tell The Mingling I married the boss.”

Mother is the *boss*. I don’t know what that means.

“Tonight is the Torvaldson’s night,” says Mother, and she’s being careful with her face muscles again, because Father is looking at her intently right now. This is a *lie* that Mother is telling. A lie is something that is not true, but it pretends to be true with face muscles and words. “I don’t want to rain on their parade, not tonight. We’ll share our news, maybe at the next Mingling.”

“Well, fuck,” says Father.

“Or maybe the Mingling after that.” Mother is thinking about how much work it was, finding the right woman for Gerald Torvaldson. How many Minglings he attended, how he almost pulled out of The Minglings altogether. He was, after all, already married. It didn’t really bother Jenny, who is a pretty tough girl.

Mother is thinking how she found Jenny just last month in Stockton in a shoot of one of the final episodes of *Tyrone Baine*, the one in which Jenny’s character was killed off. It was fortuitous that her character ended on a Northern California shoot, as Mother had been following Jenny for five episodes, following her because couldn’t take her eyes off Jenny, following her because she thought Jenny belonged in The Minglings. Mother would have travelled for Jenny, even to Los Angeles, that far, because Jenny belonged at The Minglings. Jenny is an actor, so this is an

*actor?* Like Father is an actor? Men and women are both actors? Jenny had a certain magnetic quality to her, more than just youth and a slender frame. It was in the way she met others' eyes, the way her shoulders squared as she walked, her arms drapery and long. The way her smile knew the joke but wouldn't allow a full laugh because that would be crass, a crack in the style of Jenny. She carried herself with the kind of poise that sailed well through the lives of the money people, a confidence that, earned or not, suggested that deeper veins of sophistication ran through her. All it takes is a suggestion, no more, that there is some place deeper under the pretty face. That's enough to get in the door, that's all The Minglings require. That's what Mother looks for, on every screen big and small; on every show, no matter what the budget. That's what Mother provides. Mother can take Jenny and Gerald to the contract. There, they can work out their commitment. Not Mother's problem. Jenny could make a lot of money at this. Mother could make a lot of money on Jenny.

I have no idea what any of this means, only that Mother is focused on this as she walks. She is glancing at Father from time to time, glancing at his broad back and then down at his gun.

### **Eight**

I go back in time.

It is sudden. A voltage in my cells.

I find myself in the past and the only way I can keep my bearings is to stay close to Mother. To her forebears. Otherwise I don't know where I am. Or when I am.

It's as if she and her forebears are a long rope hanging down into a dark place, the features of which I can't see from here. Mother is the top five feet of the rope; just below her is her mother—she is the next five feet of the rope—and below that is Mother's grandmother and her five feet of the rope and on and on and back and back.

Down and down.

I can't see the end of the rope, but there are moments like now when I grab a hold of the rope and down I slide a little, just a little. What appears dark from above is more visible from below.

If I don't stay close to Mother and her long rope of kin, I might be out somewhere in the present. I don't always control where I go when I leave Mother and Father, though when I can—as when I alighted on the bird, and flew in the bird's wind—that can be spectacular. But it's not always that way: I do know when I go-- Mother vanishes, Father vanishes. Others are suddenly around me—animals, people, bugs, rocks, rivers, ocean—and I am some place very different from this long hall and the everclick of Mother's heels.

But whether it is the past, or just somewhere other in the present...that is hard to peg down. So far, I know the past by its clothing, how it differs from Father's.

Mother's mother I know because she looks like Mother. She would be my *grandmother*. Same thick neck, some brown round eyes, same curly hair. Her skin is browner. Grandmother's clothes are shinier than Mother's, a different kind of cloth. It doesn't wrinkle. It doesn't need ironing. That kind of cloth they don't make anymore.

Grandmother has Mother over her knee, Mother is very young. Mother is horrid in her heart. Her pants are down and Grandmother is slapping her on her bottom. The bottom is in back: two globes of flesh, divided by a line. Father too has a bottom, I've seen it. Mother is crying for real, long wailings of pain, disbelief, what are you doing, I didn't mean it, I am sorry. I'm not sorry, I did mean it. You shouldn't have. You shouldn't have. That stings. Doesn't really hurt. It's shocking. It's like the cold of beer on the tongue but bad.

Grandmother hates this, but this can't wait until her husband gets home. No kid of mine talks like that. No child says that to me. This is the first spanking in Mother's life. It is the only one by her mother. There would be two more, and soon. Mother wants to be a good girl but she can't be a good girl when everything around her is wrong. What is right is to be outside playing with Miranda and Judy. Miranda taught her the word and it made them giggle, on the rings in the playground at recess, swinging from one end to the other, the slight clang of metal circles. Butt. Head. Put them together and it's one word. Butt. Head. What is right is to run free and laugh. What is right is to play on the rings. Butt. Head. What is wrong is being forced to stay home. What is wrong is being slapped on the bottom. Butt. Head. Grandmother is wrong. She makes things wrong whenever she wants.

A butt is a bottom. But why is a *butt* a *head*?

Grandmother is shocked but not just by the word. Her daughter flung the word to be cruel, cruel from some part deep in the girl she didn't know was there, that she discovered in the doing of it, to her own surprise. She had the defiance of an adult, defiance and contempt. Such ugly confidence. Pricked Grandmother in her heart. And now, her little girl is learning about consequences. They scare her.

They better.

“What about Fourth and Broadway?” Maybe it is Mother’s fear that brought me back up the rope to The Arterial. It’s like a spanking, this fear. They are almost at the end of the walkway. She’s not thinking about what happened last at Fourth and Broadway. She won’t think about that. She just wants to know what to do.

“You spend too much time in buildings,” says Father. He keeps walking and he’s not turning around to look at her. “They see this,” and he holds out his gun to his side and shakes it just slight, “and they bother someone else.” He glances over his shoulder, but Mother doesn’t think he’ll stop walking. He might, if he wore heels. But Mother’s not going to say a word.

At the end of the hall, there are two doors. One says “Stairs.” The other one has numbers above it, and one of the numbers is lit. “Elevator’s running,” says Father. He looks down at her shoes. “Can’t risk it,” says Mother. And she goes first, down the stairs.

Mother doesn’t talk. The acid in her stomach is more now; her head is a jumble of street and The Mingling and the gun and the soreness in her feet and nowhere in Mother is the delight of beer on the tongue which, if I was Mother, I’d rather think about right now but she can’t.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mother waits. The bottom of the stairwell is like a small gray room with a roof far up and away. Father comes down behind her and before she can turn, he presses himself against the back of Mother and pushes his tail into Mother’s bottom, two times fast and hard and he’s grinning but Mother pushes him back hard, “Focus,” she says and this is *anger*. And fear. And nervousness. And *adrenaline*, that’s what’s her mind calls this but I don’t know what adrenaline is.

He throws open the door. We are down on the street. Mother looks up to the narrow sliver of sky between the tall lines of buildings. We used to be up there. I used to be the bird up, up above this. Across the street is the *grocery store*, The Co-op, where Mother buys *food*. It comforts her, the grocery store.

So many people.

Too many people. They don't look at Father or Mother. They look down at the ground. They walk fast in dark colored clothes. Hands in pockets. I don't see other guns. We start to walk. Dark windows to the left. To the right on the street are rows of bicycles moving our way and against. Mother is remembering what happened last time at Fourth and Broadway, she got hit by a bicycle, that's what those faster moving things with circles are, there are so many of them out on the street, moving, moving. Almost as many as there are people walking. Mother is remembering how a bicycle ran into her as she tried to cross the street, the man almost fell off his bike but he didn't fall and he didn't stop. Mother did fall and her leg was bruised; she was more scared than hurt and no one helped her up and she had to just lay there for a minute, and she almost cried then stopped herself, she just swallowed it and met the eyes of others but the eyes did not stay on hers, they blanked and kept walking past her.

Sometimes the way of the world gets the better of Mother and then she has *pride* and she won't let the world show on her face because she is as tough as this world is, she knows this about herself but sometimes she has to tell herself this because that helps her be certain. She's as tough as this world and so help me *god*, you won't crack me open and see otherwise. So help me god. What's a god?

Shoulders jostle all around Mother. She is wearing her old coat, she is blending in she thinks.

Father stays close. Fire in the big cans here and there out on the street, the spiring smoke. A man with a gun like Father's is standing next to the fire can. "It's only eight blocks or so," says Father and Mother nods. Mother is looking down at the *sidewalk*, it is unsmooth and graypocked; she steps over a big hole, three steps, then steps over another. No one speaks, there is only the volume of people in motion, the rustle of pant legs and coat sleeves against limbs. The sound of Mother's clicking feet melt into the larger shuffling over gray broken ground. Mother's ears are adjusting, now she can hear some people murmuring between themselves.

The buildings to the left have small signs in their dark windows, with small words on them in unsteady fonts. Words I don't understand. *Bakery. Cocktails. Restaurant. Laundry.* The signs in Mother's girl mind by the freeway in the car were very big and they glowed red and blue *ROSEVILLE AUTO MALL* and *LIQUIDATION! ALL MUST GO!* but these signs don't glow or shout, they shrink back and wait.

Mother peers into the *restaurant* where there are five round tables and four chairs around each, and a long counter with a gray man behind it with a face like an owl who watches Mother watch him with less interest than Mother has in him, she won't eat here not ever, it's not where she goes, it's where Father might go but not her, you can get sick in places like this and he didn't just marry me for my stairs, he married me for my restaurants. This is what Mother is thinking.

A building ahead with a big sign above, a sign that extends wide out onto the street with big black letters against a white background:

ReGAL TheATRe  
DeATH bY MooNLiGhT 2:  
The ReCKoNiNG

Father slows. The door is indented into the building, a few people are entering. In front, on the street, there's a sign behind glass that's like a window. Father is reading it. "I wanted to read for this, I know the guy." Father rests the butt of the gun on his foot, and his shoulders slump a little. "The director?" asked Mother, looking up at the sign, this is a *movie* theater, a place where she used to come see *movies* not that long ago, but no more. "The producer," says Father sharply. "From back in the day, he's a lot older now, but then I'm a lot older." "You're not older," says Mother. Father shrugs, says "He's done pretty well, he's stayed big screen all these years. He didn't even let me read." Father shakes his head a little, and Mother can see his reflection in the glass in front of the sign, there's lines on Father's forehead that weren't there before.

"Take it slow," Mother says steadily. "You've got time now, no rush. You've got me." This she says as a kind of fact, without an emotion attached to it, the same way she talks about stairs. "And there's a million movies out there." She touches his arm, but he's still reading the sign, as if every word held something fresh and important. "A million *little* movies," says Father and now Mother can see his eyes, glazed and far away in the glass. "I want back," he turns and looks towards the front door of the theater, "in there."

Mother sees the man approaching behind them in the glass first, even before the low voice croaked "I haven't eaten in three days," and the man touched Mother's shoulder and Father brings his elbow up his whole body in torque and it catches the man blunt hard in his gut and he falls back and in one easy motion Father swings up his gun and cocks and Mother screams no and she raises her arm up under the gun and she's looking at the man, he has dark skin, dark like a thousand years and you don't know how he got here and you don't know why he's hungry and you don't know where his mother is and you don't know about dark skin and you don't know and Mother is an uproar of body and mind; she is screaming at Father, telling the bewildered

man to get gone fast, he scrambles up and runs into the street and then Mother is glaring at the people that paused to watch, glaring and glaring at them and I want to be anywhere else than here anywhere else but Mother's system starts to calm and she turns to start walking and they don't speak to each other, they just walk.

### Nine

Sergeant Flanners is in a *uniform*. It's a kind of clothing, it's very dark with a shiny *badge* on his chest where his bosoms would be if he was a woman. Mother thinks he's handsome, but then Mother always had a thing for a man in a uniform, I don't know what this means, but Mother feels a little tingly at the sight of Sergeant Flanners, who calls her *Ma'am*, as in "Ma'am, we're all set for tonight. I'll just cover it myself—Wendy thought it best." And Mother thinks that is fine, because Wendy is smart and we've used Sergeant Flanners before and he's pretty good for a cop. Discreet.

Sergeant Flanners followed Mother and Father up a flight of stairs, this one very wide and very bright with a soft red flooring that is kinder to Mother's feet which are very sore and about to get sorer until finally they could all sit down to dinner.

And it is a big room and the light is bright and there is a big screen on each of the four walls, much bigger than at Mother's house and there is bright art in small batches on the big walls but Mother's first thought was I like the *music*. It's *old school*.

*Music.*

*Music.*

*Music.*

It's permeating Mother everywhere. It enters through her ears.

It has sounds, like Mother and Father's voices, but music goes up,  
up,  
up,

Then down,

down,

down, it swims on silvery water.

And then here comes a voice,

*Space ships can't tame the jungle  
And I feel like I'm giving in  
We've been drivin thru a desert  
Looking for a life to call our own*

And Mother starts to move to it, her left shoulder forward a little and moving in a small circle, her right shoulder back and moving the same and then they reverse, her shoulders moving as if they were the music itself, and her head starts to bob on the strut of her neck and part of her feels so good, so relaxed, it's a little like being in bed with a man, this is *rhythm*, but part of her is looking around the room at the many people assembled and doing what she calls *the math*, but all I want is this music, it's better than beer; more like the sigh of air beneath the bird's wing.

*I push  
I pull  
the days go slow  
Into a void  
we filled with death*

*And noise that laughs  
falls off their maps  
all cured of pain and doubts  
In your little brain*

And Mother takes Father's arm and starts to move around the room. Her shoulders are still moving just a little, her head does. Heads are turning towards her, men's heads and women's heads. Some people are moving together to the music, moving with their whole bodies not just shoulders and heads, Mother sees a man called Raymond *dancing* with a woman named Shauna and that's what this motion is *dancing* and Mother loves Shauna's work, such a versatile actress with such sublime taste who never busted the big move because she still thought good work was worth doing even as the world is collapsing, her cheekbones so high and sophisticated they could be *national monuments*, this is what Mother thinks.

Sometimes there are thoughts in Mother's mind that, without corresponding explanations, are inexplicable to me; they roll past me like beer or an acid stomach only there's no physical impact, there's nothing at all, it's noisy like gusting wind. What are *national monuments*?

Still, Mother is thinking, Shauna chooses her movies as if the difficult and the universal were two lines that will intersect high above the horizon, they will, they must, and so she still takes on the hard parts and the hard movies that get watched once but then quickly go to free on the *movie stream*, which Mother respects, except now Shauna is just a little older and just a little less employable and not the dazzler she was in her youth and Raymond would be lucky to have her, even if she was a little old, maybe thirty. She's still a good dancer, of understated hips and a lithely sex. Still, poor Shauna. Raymond is an earthly bore.

What, for example, is a *movie stream*? We stopped at a movie theater where Father drew his gun; a stream is water moving down the mountain. This I know. Was there a stream and mountain inside the movie theater? I wouldn't put a big building around a mountain and a stream, I'd leave it outside. There are more birds there.

*Something's coming sky is purple  
Dogs are howling to themselves  
Days are changing with the weather  
Like a rip tide could rip us away*

Some parts of music are long, they hold like the float of an egret.

Some parts of music are very short, as if the raindrops would fall one at a time striking the same leaf at the same place.

Some parts repeat in a pattern more rigid than the white tips of the ocean.

Some parts are never heard again.

Some parts of music glide like a panther. Some parts of music attack fast like piranha's mouths.

Some parts color gray. Some parts color bright red.

There's so much going on in this music, all of it happening at once, that it would take forever to understand it.

This music is created by a man. A bear cannot do this. A whale sings, but he cannot make this many sounds. The wind has only a few notes and no one can make those notes repeat when they

must. No, a man did this. I might be a man someday, if I am born. A man did this. A man my grandmother listened to all the time. His name is *Beck*.

*Beck.*

*Beck.*

*Beck.*

To have created such a thing as this, this *music*, he must be the king of the world. Except he's dead.

"Shauna is still a babe, even if she is old," said Father.

"You're a pig," says Mother.

"I'm not a pig."

"A pig would be tallying all the women here tonight: babe, non-babe, near-babe, babe-not."

"All the women here tonight are babes."

"You're tallying. Pig."

"I'm not a pig."

“That’s a pig thing to say.”

“I was the only boy in a family with five girls.”

“And?”

“I call it like I see it.”

“*Pig.*”

“Shauna is a *babe.*” And Mother is thinking how she herself is not a babe like Shauna, and she’s fine with that, she knows who she is and what’s she’s got. and Mother loves her lovely, the lovely that is hers, and pride is tall in her and goes way back and Father is damn lucky to be with her, and while he himself is a babe, and that’s one of the reason he’s at this party, one of the reasons he’s married to Mother, he won’t stay long if he’s a pig. Mother won’t abide. Contracts can be broken. Especially contracts that are barely a day old.

There’s a lot going on in Father. He’s complicated like music. He is a man and a pig and a babe, which must be short for baby. Women are also babies, but only men are pigs. Mother looks at him and in this moment, he is neither pig nor baby. Maybe he will change later into a pig baby. Perhaps that will happen tonight. Perhaps in some magic moment, this whole room will change into babies and pig babies. What, then, will happen to me? Mother is, evidentially, not a baby. And she doesn’t abide pigs.

Maybe then we can leave.

I can leave. I can leave now, there's much happening here that I don't. . .

*Fire.*

The fire is in a hand, a man's hand.

This man is named Torvaldson.

This man is the trouble Mother is worried about. But the trouble has nothing to do with fire.

Mother sighs. Nothing is simple.

People are circling around the fire in the hand. Mother is thinking that Gerald Torvaldson has too much money and too little brains. As if fire in the hand were precious, like an earbug. An earbug can connect you to everything. Fire in the hand is that and only that, maybe another way to light a cigarette. But then again, it's his night. If ever Gerald Torvaldson was going to show it off, it would be on this, his final night at The Minglings.

Everyone is talking at once, so many different voices that Mother can barely hear the music.

*Gerald, I didn't really believe you had it and how does it burn and it must be illegal and hell yes it's illegal and I wish I still smoked.*

Mother's heard about it. But she's never seen it. It's called *Zippo*. Mother moved closer to watch.

Where Father is a tall straight line, Gerald is a circle with a pink head. Where Father has hair everywhere, the top of Gerald's head is mostly shiny pink with scant strands of gray. His lips are red, and when he talks his mouth opens into a wide gash and his every word is pronounced more

precisely than Father or Mother. "It's vintage 1933. It burns naphtha, distilled from petroleum. That's why it is illegal but I don't care. It's worth it. And I *do* smoke." And then Gerald pulled out a golden box from his jacket pocket and took out a white stick and put it in his gashy mouth and then he held out the Zippo for all to see. Zippo is a shiny silver box; it looks heavy. He flicks it open and half the silver box falls back; inside the Zippo there is a circle and a square with holes in it. He rolls his thumb fast down one side of it and up comes a flame, pure and constant and certain as a rock. And he lit the stick in his mouth on fire and the tip of the stick was a small dim sun. He closed the Zippo box, no fire, and then he held out the gold box and several of the people took the white sticks into their mouths and Gerald opened Zippo and rolled his thumb and lit their sticks on fire and as the Zippo came close to them, their eyes glinted and they stared at it. They each breathed in on their stick and then gray air came out of their mouths.

"How do you refill it?" asked Mother. She thinks Zippo is awful. These are the times we live in. You don't carry petroleum around in your pocket and you don't burn petroleum for a parlor trick. It must have cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars. The police could put him in jail for this. They could all be put in jail for this. But the police are not coming. Not here. Mother looked over at Sergeant Flanners, who is standing by the front door. He has a gun just like Father's, he rests it on the floor.

"I know a guy. He makes naphtha for me. He makes a lot of things for me. And no, I'm not telling you his name." Everyone laughs; Gerald's eyes glitters a little. And then he held out his large arm and a tall woman nestled herself under it. "Enough about the little toys of life, that's not why we're here tonight. It is my pleasure to introduce not Jenny, who you all know, but Mrs. Torvaldson!"

And then everyone in the room held both hands up in front of themselves and slammed the hands together five or six times in a loud noise, which made Mother's hands sting but she was smiling

even while thinking that Torvaldson is so rich and so powerful a banker of astounding wealth and Jenny's life will be better now and everyone here was assembling in the hopes of a better life, a life Mother was giving them all a glint of, one Mingling at a time, and everyone else was smiling so they must not mind the stinging hands.

And all heads were turning towards Mother and she kept her smile on and said in the loudest voice ever except when she was screaming at Father not to shoot the black man, "Congratulations to the Torvaldson's and their joining together. We are each so happy for you, and we wish you every possible happiness in the days and weeks and years ahead." There is more slamming of hands.

"Please join us in the next room for a lovely dinner. Your seats are designated, as always, please sit by your name. And that goes for you too, Harry." And this makes people laugh and they all start to move away from Mother into the next room, except for the tall woman who had squeezed herself small under Torvaldson's arm, but now stood straight up. Torvaldson is being swept into the next room without her. She seems more relaxed, standing still and staring calmly at Mother.

"Jenny," said Mother walking towards her and putting her arms around her and pulling her close. No perfume thinks Mother *perfume?* but maybe Jenny doesn't wear perfume just yet, she and Gerald are pretty new to each other. Sometimes the working actors don't take to perfume that quickly, thinks Mother, it's such a foreign substance anymore until you can afford Zippo lighters and the kind of food that is waiting in the next room and then slowly the actors adapt and adapt, as the perfume absorbs the skin and the wine absorbs the mind and the Zippo absorbs the eye, until the time comes when actors who don't work anymore wouldn't be caught dead at a function like this without perfume. That's how it was for Rachel and Penny and June. And it will be for Jenny. Just wait, Mother's thinking. Just wait.

“I don’t know what to say,” says Jenny. Mother likes Jenny’s look, *willow* she’s thinking *willow*.

“I want to thank you for all this, really.”

Mother is nodding and searching Jenny’s eyes, she’s wondering if the words are real or not, and of course they are real, they are in Mother’s mind as utterances, but still Mother doubts them and why is that? Is Jenny lying too?

“Some of your actors still work, don’t they?” asks Jenny. She looks over her shoulder for Gerald, and Mother follows her eye. Jenny is looking at Father, “He works, right?”

Father is talking to Sergeant Flanners. “Not yet, but he will, I think. He wants to. But unlike you, it’s been a long time for him.” And Mother doesn’t want to think about Father working right now, it’s going to be a long process and I don’t know what she means by that, “Have you and Gerald talked out the work clause in your contract?”

“He thinks it’s uncommon that the actors still work, is it?”

“Some do, some don’t.”

Jenny looks down, considering this, then says, “I think he wants to give me what I want, but my working is a sticking point. He was quite generous with me, quite flexible. The allowance is more money than I had even when I was working all the time,” says Jenny. “But his business has him six days a week—at the least—and I think he’s wondering if he can travel with me, or how he’ll feel having me gone from the house a lot. Right now,” Jenny’s eyes drop, “I’m not forcing the issue. I’m just getting used to this, all this.” And Jenny let her arm sweep over her shoulder towards the dining room. “I’ve had tougher roles,” she says, “than playing the rich wife.”

“*Tyrone Baine*,” says Mother and suddenly an image of Jenny falling out of the sky fills Mother’s mind, she’s falling falling falling through space and then whoosh a big white cloud spreads over her and her fall turns into float and Episode Four must have been hard to shoot. “Episode Four must have been hard to shoot,” says Mother, but then she thinks that Jenny looks bored and then Mother says, “It gets easier, this new life of yours. It gets safer. It changes your life.”

Jenny’s eyes are faraway, Mother wonders where. “Easier. I’ll take easier. And I’ll take change.” She brushes her hair back slightly and stares down. “I never thought it would get to the point where I couldn’t handle the streets anymore,” said Jenny. “To when I didn’t think I was tough enough. I’m a tough girl, always have been.” She paused, “But it’s been two years since the tsunami and even here up north, the streets have changed. It’s gotten too tough. Tougher than me.” Jenny shrugged and looked up straight at Mother. “I just can’t do it anymore.”

Mother is remembering the long line of land next to the big water; the sand, the beach, the ocean. She’s remembering being there with her mother, walking in the fog. The beach as it was is gone now, a chaos of wrecked homes and smashed cars and debris where no one goes, with so many people displaced and sent off wandering, especially in the south, from California all the way down to end of Chile. These are images Mother pushes away, she doesn’t want them in her mind but still they are there, almost as if she can see two California’s at once—the California when she was young, and the California she lives in now. Barely recognizable as the same.

“I think you’re taking this the right way,” says Mother. *The right way*. “Give it time, let the marriage breathe a little. You’ll get used to each other. You’re a smart girl, and he’s not a bad guy. You can make the life you want, that’s what I hope for you both.” Mother thinks she understands Jenny a little more than some of the other women that come through these Minglings. Mother feels

her, and yet Jenny makes Mother feel older, something about Jenny's vulnerability. Mother is hearing how Jenny can handle the streets, but part of her doesn't believe it. Tough or not.

"I could have met someone without you," Jenny says to Mother and Mother is feeling something like a chill in the air but she is not more cold than I can tell. "But this worked out. My husband is not a bad man. He's a very rich man. He wanted out of his marriage as much as I wanted off the streets."

And now Mother has an image in her mind of Mary Torvaldson, the *ex*; she is shorter than Jenny and wider than Jenny and the image of Mary in Mother's mind is that of a woman screaming in a restaurant screaming at her and Gerald when they met for lunch to discuss the final arrangements of Jenny, just the final payment and some paperwork that ended Mother's involvement, and Mary showed up at their table her hair a wild muss and her face a strange mask of colors that I can't understand her mouth too red and her cheeks too cherry and a frightening blue on the thin flesh between her dark eyebrows and her eyes, her eyes like that of any dying animal's I AM NOT NOTHING, I AM NOT LEFT OVER, I AM NOT IGNORED, I AM NOT LEAVING I AM NOT LEAVING I AM NOT LEAVING until a man in a uniform like Sergeant Flanners carried her away from the table her voice trailing behind her like the shriek of a dying bird and this is the difficult part of inserting one's self into other people's lives, thinks Mother, this is where you want to get in and out of them so quietly that you barely leave a mark or else you have images like this for the rest of your life.

Word of this episode may have gotten out—to Jenny, to others here at The Mingling. Such public displays were to be avoided at all costs. But judging from Jenny, and from the way the others were regarding Gerald, Mother is thinking she was the only witness to Mary's debacle. And that makes Mother a little calmer, in her stomach.

## Ten

There are, far away, stretches of jungle where wide trees and leafy greens fight upward to the lit sky, stopped by the shadows thrown by their own assembled growth: their branches and fronds form the canopy that darkens the jungle floor and that in turn curbs the growth of the plants beneath them.

It is, yet again, a circle.

And in this jungle, most of the animals live high up in the canopy—almost half the species that exist everywhere in the world live in this small place— and life is cacophonous and chaotic.

I know because I have been there. The glowblue macaw stretches its yellow wings; the siamang gibbon puffs his big bulbous throat and sings for all to stay away; the howler monkey with his green palms steadies himself on the branch of the fig tree with his long, long tail. And a fight of all against all begins—the blonde capuchin monkey with his raccoon face and the black headed spider monkey—the everbattle for the figs that never go out of season.

Here I've seen the male bird of paradise shimmy his goof merengue of love.

But never before have I seen anything like this. For this, according to Mother, is a *dinner party*.

It might as well be a *jungle*. That is the word Mother uses although Mother has never been in a jungle. It is a dinner party. And Mother is bored with it. Mother is wondering where Wendy is.

Almost on *cue* there is Wendy. This is what Mother thinks. Wendy's hair is long and dark and wispy and Mother thinks of Wendy's eyes as blank brown. They never register much. Skinny in shoulders and chest and waist; she moves fast and exudes nervousness. It never bothers Mother; I can tell Wendy is important to her somehow.

I go into Wendy.

I didn't know I could do this.

But I can.

Wendy is fifty-two plates of dinner, Wendy is a list of guests; names she knows by heart. Wendy loves Mother, she hates Mother; hard nipples every time she sees Father, she is imagining his tail as she looks at Mother; in her mind is a woman with graying hair slapping a young girl's face, an old man with a tube up his nose, four dim blue plates hung on a pale green wall, fourteen empty bottles of clear glass in a green square container, a strip of black velvet four feet long, a pendant shaped like a star, a four-legged animal named Max, a small lump in her breast that she's not worried about anymore. She thinks Mother is beautiful. She thinks Mother is too stern.

Is everyone else as confusing as Wendy? She makes no sense.

I'm not going to stay in her.

I don't want to.

I depart her.

“How’s it going back there?” asks Mother.

“The kitchen is the usual chaos. But we’re on time.” Wendy’s eyes are as empty as the white of a knuckle, thinks Mother. But I know Wendy is not empty. How can her eyes be so?

Wendy walks away and disappears between two doors that swing into the kitchen.

And then it happens.

Something is coming into Mother’s nose!

It is like music!

She calls it *butter!*

*Butter and wine!*

It is slight and not overwhelming. It is coming from the kitchen. It’s not just butter! It’s butter and wine and *mushrooms* and one other thing, it’s the most important part, Mother doesn’t know what it is!

This thing in her nose makes Mother happy, even happier than beer. It comes in her nose and moves about her brain and does something to her tongue.

This is Mother’s world!

Music in the ear!

Butter in the nose!

And Mother is thinking this: that what is in the ear and in the nose makes the night *bearable*.

Mother sighs.

Cacophony.

She sits to the right of Gerald Torvaldson, who has traced the journey of his 1933 Zippo lighter through the years and auctions and prohibitions to a black market warehouse, located on the higher ground to the east of town where few people know to go. To his left is Jenny, who appears to be listening but Mother doubts it. To Jenny's left is the oil heiress Sharone Franke, to her left is this week's object of bisexual curiosity, a young actress from Fresno named only Veronica; she's had mostly small roles but, in Mother's estimation, has great promise. The two women are animated and full of the nervous talk of the unfamiliar but willing, willing for the worst, willing to see how it goes.

Father is to Mother's right, his hand on her thigh. He's talking to Ralph Beane, a banker, who has in the past helped Mother by loaning her his helicopter.

Ten people per table, five such tables. All talking at once. Mother can hear them all, I can hear them all. But Mother focuses on the people nearest.

“Our elevator works 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” says Beane. “We pay extra—a lot extra—but they have designated panels on the roof and an extra generator in the basement, which can be completely protected from flooding, and the super’s cousin is an elevator engineer. It hasn’t gone down once, and I’ve lived there three years.”

Beane is a matter-of-fact man, tall and of thin shoulders beneath a matter-of-fact jacket, thinks Mother, matter-of-fact lines on his face, matter-of-fact gray eyes that do flash kindness, matter-of-fact hair combed proudly, a slight gleam to the brown of it. Thin lips, almost non-existent. Not so matter of fact.

“You’re down by the river, right?” asks Father.

“Correct,” says Beane.

“Well, at least it’s a quiet neighborhood,” laughs Father. Mother’s wondering if and when Father might say something stupid and obtuse, like who in their right mind lives near a river anymore, no matter how good the elevators. But she’s talked all this through with Father and he knows he is to defer, to listen, to be polite and not insert too much of himself here when Mother is working. His role is to come along and act as her companion. Still she doesn’t know when he’s understanding exactly what’s she’s said versus simply going along to get along, as her mother used to say. She just won’t know that about him yet, and there might be awkward moments to come. Maybe tonight. Maybe now.

Maybe all I really need is food, thinks Mother. *Food?*

“Not really,” says Beane, “there are sixty apartments in the place, and every one above the third floor is owned or leased.”

“Is the third floor high enough?”

“I’m not worried. And there’s a heliport above, though we all can’t park there. We work it out. The only downside are the taxes on the elevator.”

“The elevator is taxed?” asks Jenny.

“More than the helicopter,” says Beane. He looks at Mother for a response. His eyes can be kind, thinks Mother, even when he’s talking about taxes.

“Do you think the new mayor is going to increase other taxes?” asks Mother. “He’s already upped taxes on the suck clubs.”

“When I heard how much Gerald was taxed...” says Jenny.

“She said we should all just move to Tribeland,” says Gerald and everyone laughed except Father, and Mother wondered how he was going to rectify it, where he grew up and where he lives now. One more new thing.

“The mayor’s a Denier, I hear,” says Sharone, suddenly interested. Veronica, next to her, looks away.

“I think he’s a Denier like Hank Reynolds is a Denier,” says Beane, glancing at a bespectacled man sitting two tables away. “Neither Hank nor the mayor are black and white about it, and I don’t think he’ll bring it into the mayor’s office.”

Deniers are in Mother’s mind as a category. Deniers say they have the truth. That the truth is bigger than fact. Deniers say the way things are is because of God. God is bigger than the world. Mother used to believe in God as a girl because her mother said she should but too much has happened. Deniers bend the world this way and that, from real to unreal, from guess to know. They aren’t scary as long as they are in church. But they are leaving the church. They are becoming mayors. This would concern Mother more but she hasn’t the time.

“The suck clubs deserved to be taxed,” says Beane. “Have you ever been?” He’s looking at Father.

“As a boy,” says Father, and he grins at Mother. He should look sheepish, thinks Mother. He doesn’t. Pig.

“What are they like?” asks Beane.

“Some other time,” says Father.

Beane leans forward and looks at Father earnestly. “But really—tell me. What was it like when you worked with Kyle Sender?”

Oh-oh, thinks Mother. Oh-oh.

“That was a long time ago, Mr. Beane,” says Father. He drinks a long slug of beer. I wish Mother was drinking a beer.

“You were so young, and Sender was so...so big. I’d seen everything he’d ever done, I’ve seen you in *The Three Thrones of Virgil X* at least five times...”

“I was 17 years old, Mr. Beane. They didn’t pay me all that much. Kyle was decent to me, not that I think he’s a decent a guy. He beat Mimi after they married, I know that because I know her, and I can’t ever forgive that. No one should. You either.” Father is looking straight ahead across the table, at what Mother doesn’t know. “But I was just runt little and scared back then, it was my first role...” “And your biggest,” interrupted Beane, and Father shrugged and oh-oh, thought Mother, oh-oh, he better not blow and she surges nerves but Father continues “and there were times when he was helping me through *Throne*, helping me to figure out a scene or how to play the emotions right and I was too young to even know that’s what he was doing, I just thought that was how acting worked, y’know I was young and thanks a lot and see you later.” Father shrugs. “So that was kind enough of him. I guess.” His eyes seem to connect across the table at Veronica, who looks at him. And Mother’s wondering what the two actors are thinking, looking each other in the eye.

“Did what Kyle Sender showed you stay with you, when you were in, say, *Tweedle Thee, My Sweet?*” Beane asked.

“Dinner is served,” booms Torvaldson, as two men in uniforms very different from Sergeant Flanners—no badges on the bosoms—arrived at the table carrying round surfaces from where steam rises and they set a steamy plate in front of Mother, who lowers her head into the steam and she surges pleasure, that is the smell of *food*. More than just butter, more than just

mushrooms, more than Mother can name and she just lets it rise through her nose and swirl around her, brain and tongue and nose and she is anticipating all the food to come, starting with this, semolina crusted sardines (hearts of palm, sierra beauty apples, verjus creme fraiche) and a catalan flatbread with wild mushroom, drunken goat cheese, oregano. She breathes in the flatbread again and sighs.

She is looking around the room, waiting for everyone to be served. I wish she would lean into that steam again and breath it in. It is more than beer. How will she put all that food up her nose? Or does it go in her like beer? It looks so different from beer. Why don't the sardines steam? Why is the goat cheese drunk, did the goat drink a beer?

Something in the corner of Mother's eye is wrong. She turns her head. Her eyes can't focus she doubts what she sees but then she doesn't and she screams FLANNERS FLANNERS FLANNERS her body spikes hot and her heart is pounding faster than even the stairs made it go and she can't see Flanners he's not by the door FLANNERS FLANNERS and there is the woman from the restaurant that Mother had just recalled, the screaming woman named Mary and she is right behind Jenny holding a stick it's a gun thinks Mother and Father is rising and standing in front of Mother and pop and Jenny's head goes red and wet and Father is pushing Mother's chair back and she is falling backwards with Father on top of her and as she falls backwards pop she sees Gerald's head go red and wet and Mother is on her back and the air is filled with screaming and Mother's eyes are up towards the ceiling past Father's shoulders and there she sees Mary standing over them the stick pointed at Mother and pop pop two holes in Mary's white blouse and pop Mary's head goes red and wet and she collapses, a red hole in her head oozing slow her eyes open but gone, staring straight ahead at Mother and through her.