# Zoetrope

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Joaquin reasoned that it had to do with the linguistic excess that kids in their formative years had to compensate for with imaginary narratives, which were, more often than not, simply outrageously outlandish and silly. And, of course, he would say that. He was the sort of person who would be sure to trot out some theory of evolution or quote Darwin after watching a herd of elephants fly like flummoxed chickens. He was an escort-cum-pornographer, but he thought with his big head—no pun intended—and had always valued a sound explanation for stuff that challenged empirical evidence. This time, though, I had to disagree, because it was coincidentally sometime after Joaquin and I had decided to separate for good that Clay began talking about his imaginary brother named Buddy.

You'd think it would've pleased him to have a brother at long last, even an imaginary one, but apparently Buddy was a little bad hat and annoyed Clay round the clock. One morning, he said to me, in such a concertedly solemn tone I'd thought only the mailman could master: "Buddy sings like a pig about to be gutted." His obviously discomfitingly violent flights of fancy bothered me less than the laundry list of things he later said he hated about his imaginary brother. For one thing, Buddy reeked of "grilled cheese stuffed in a two-week-old unwashed, crusty sock." This he told me, I think, that day I bawled out Joaquin for overflowing the clothes hamper with his soiled socks and briefs and, good grief, even a quarter of a moldy grilled cheese sandwich. Buddy also hated taking a bath, unsurprisingly, and so all the dirt had rolled up and formed on his skin a thick purple fur, which resembled, I later realized, very much that of the cutesy stuffed dinosaur who ingratiatingly professed his all-encompassing love, to every biped infantile enough to believe him, on TV.

The fact that my son had cooked up a friendly reptile whose species had been wiped out eons ago to be his brother was, in some twisted sense, endearing. It was amazing, Joaquin said, the way Clay constructed these run-on stories that he was processing vicariously through his imaginary brother,

in order to try out the words he soaked up every day from around him like a sponge. But things got suddenly weird when, the morning I told him his father would have to travel back to LA, again, Clay looked at me from under his thick fringe and asked if what Buddy had told him was true: that Joaquin and I were planning on a legal separation. And I remember thinking I must've had left some of the documents lying around, or that he must've overheard one of our conversations, and right then, in a moment of frighteningly perfect clarity, I saw happy Christmases going down the tubes, replaced by lengthy arguments over at whose place Clay would spend the holidays and unwrap ridiculously expensive gifts he'd ruin or outgrow anyway, but which I'd slave for through the coming years by donning rags and selling my kidneys, just because I'd spend the rest of my life feeling guilty of being a bad, bad mother for asking for my singlehood back.

"You must have mentioned something, Fran," Joaquin said, on the phone, when I told him.

I said, after a beat, "Buddy thinks it sucks that there's no divorce here, in the Philippines."

"Tell Buddy," he said, "he's damn right."

Just when I thought things couldn't get more weird, one day Clay's teacher called to make an appointment, and naturally I figured it was about our situation. Mrs. Gonzalo's voice was breathless in a sexy way, the kind I'd squandered many minutes of my young life trying to imitate, though they would've been better spent on piano lessons or eyebrow threading. "Nothing serious, of course," she said, "but we have Clayton's best interests at heart and it is our job to discuss issues that might hinder him from achieving his full potential." Was she reading this from some brochure? I told her Clay's father couldn't come because he'd gone back abroad, and in the silence that followed I could almost hear the cogs of her brain working, making teacherly tut-tutting sounds, could almost see my dream of bagging the Parent of the Year Award flushed down the drain.

It turned out Mrs. Gonzalo was a supremely glacial woman in her sixties who seemed to have lived her entire life in tapered trousers, with a pair of tortoiseshell glasses and her silver hair pulled into the harshest bun known to mankind. We'd arranged for a meeting right around pickup time, and she sat me down on an uncomfortably tiny wooden chair from across her, in a wide, windowless office that looked impossibly immaculate and impersonal. The air-conditioning was gracefully benign, though, and after a long moment I

began to feel like we were equals here, just two grownups wanting the best for my son, never mind that Mrs. Gonzalo was looking at me with a wirelike smile that kept horrendously twitching at the sides, like infinitesimal isolated seizures.

"Those are really wonderful art works you've tacked on the bulletin outside," I said, trying to be bright and breezy and evasive. Her expression was one of both amused indifference and tight-lipped indignation, just fixing me with her steely gaze, and for a moment I was forced to study her back, in particular the way her face seemed doughy and medicated when looked at straight on.

"I'm sorry to ask something so personal—" Mrs. Gonzalo began, and I was glad I had my whole we-are-going-through-some-family-crisis-but-we-are-holding-up-perfectly spiel down pat, "—but has Clayton been diagnosed with cancer?"

I stared at her blankly, then blinked at her, nonplussed. "I'm sorry?"

There was silence, and Mrs. Gonzalo's face fell. "I did wonder. Clayton has a very vivid imagination, I daresay, and he's been telling all sorts of stories to his peers, some of which are, quite frankly, far-fetched." She smiled with relief, as though telling me my son was a total fantasist had lifted a huge load off her chest. It was all I could do to nod along and smile politely, like a lunatic.

"I'll have a word with him as soon as we get home," I said.

"Tread lightly," she said. "It is not unusual for kids of his age to fabricate tales and fibs when they're going through rough times, such as parents' separation. I suppose you know about Buddy?"

I winced inwardly as I realized his imaginary brother existed even outside the home. "We've even set aside an extra place for Buddy at the dinner table!" I chimed in with a hearty laugh.

"His imaginary brother," she said neutrally, the corners of her thin mouth almost in spasm.

"Buddy is such a lovely, lovely creature," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"I'm sure he is," she said. "But I'm concerned about what Buddy has been telling Clayton lately. For example, well, Clayton said Buddy had told him their father was an adult filmmaker."

I was so gobsmacked I didn't know what to say. "That's really interesting." My voice was a nervous squawk. I searched my mind for further acceptable adjectives. "That's preposterous. Exceptionally flabbergasting and … unmistakably fictitious. That one surely takes the biscuit."

We'd explained to Clay that his father was a filmmaker based in California, and we were very careful not to specify what kind of films he was actually making, because it wasn't exactly the sort of thing you'd go around boasting to other bratty four-year-olds in a Jesuit school. "Where on earth could he have gotten that absurd idea?" I said, with only the teeniest quiver in my voice.

"I wouldn't make a big deal about it," she said. "But it wouldn't hurt to be mindful of what we say, or do, or leave behind for them to see …" Was this woman seriously insinuating I'd been so irresponsible as to let my child get ahold of whatever it was she thought I had?—which I didn't, of course, just for the record. She went on, "The mind of a child absorbs all manners of things."

"I couldn't agree more," I said rather too cheerily. She stood up as if to indicate she wanted nothing else to do with me, and retrieved from a pile in the corner of her table a sheaf of papers which she handed me. I browsed through them, beaming, proud in the way only mothers could be proud for a fleeting minute of their child's messy finger paintings and ghastly watercolor sketches.

"He's been doing well in other respects," she said. "In fact, he was the only one to spell *ecclesiasticism* correctly, although, I must say, he really didn't have to discuss *apophatism* in class."

You had to hand it to Clay for turning a spelling quiz into an opportunity to share in class what his father, a devout atheist, had probably told him during one of their nightly ten-minute talks, before picture books, bath, toothbrushing, and peeing one last time. A tiny part of me was proud, and this I felt more profoundly when I walked down the hallway to the playground and saw Clay sitting on the bottom step of the rubberized stairs, his head buried intently in a book of knowledge he always carried around with him. He lifted his head and saw me, flashed me a wide smile, then trotted on his broomstick legs to meet me and launch his jelly-smudged face at my pencil skirt.

"Frannie!" he yelled in delighted shock. All heads turned toward us, the mothers throwing daggers my way. One of the teachers wrenching a squalling

boy away from the monkey bars stopped to flick an antagonistic look at me, suddenly bristling all over, like a tormented cat.

"Hey, sweetheart," I said, ruffling his thick mop of ringletty hair. "How's school?"

"Stupendous!" he said, and went on in a monologue about his day's rip-roaring adventures.

I drew him away and bent down. "Clay, have you said anything about, um—having cancer?"

"I think so, but not exactly," he said. "I said I had 'atypical teratoid/rhabtoid tumor.'"

I was poleaxed. What he just said sounded Russian and rather demonic, something you'd want to hear before killing yourself with a bludgeon to the neck. I wanted to coax more information out of him, reiterate to him the ethical boundaries of fictionalizing, but before I could he'd already toddled off toward the sandbox, pouring handfuls of sand into his unwitting classmate's blueberry milkshake, chuckling, the golden sluggishness of the day glinting off his hair like a wispy halo.

The disconcerting upshot of my meeting with Clay's teacher was to send me down memory lane to the first time Joaquin and I were called into Clay's teacher's office, in the kindergarten where he'd been enrolled before transferring to the hoity-toity Jesuit school. It happened around the time Clay started to become interested in Jesus, having watched *The Passion of the Christ* in what was supposed to be a nonsectarian classroom. I was willing to concede that I wasn't literate in Jesus and had my well-entrenched doubts and discomfitures as regards the subject, but Joaquin, despite privileging intellect, self-determination, and skepticism, was tolerant enough to educate Clay about the history of Jesus, his philosophy and proselytism—not his purported divinity, but rather his awing humanity.

During playdates on weekend mornings, after rollicking spurts of enviable energy, Clay and his curious gang of waggish nippers gathered around Joaquin to listen to every ugly detail of Jesus's death, how he was flogged and beaten, abased, denied by his most trusted disciple, crowned with thorns, nailed to a wooden cross alive, and suffered the death throes a good while. The crayons and rubber dinosaurs and train sets lay forgotten the entire time, tiny sticky hands gripping the edge of wing chairs as the kids waited for the *awesome* part, which was that Jesus was believed to have risen

from the dead and ascended to heaven—whereupon the small beasts around Joaquin would shriek their wonder and run off at the mouth about how *supercool* Jesus was, like Superman.

Only Clay would stay seated, his forehead prematurely furrowed. Later in the night he asked in a too-earnest voice, "Why did Jesus's mommy let those people be mean to him?" I was pretty sure she didn't, that she elbowed her way through the milling crowd to get to her son, except that, well, I wasn't totally sure she was around when Jesus was being flagellated. Was she perhaps in Nazareth? Maybe Mary was someplace praying for the Holy Spirit who'd impregnated her to fix this freaking clusterfuck, and fast. I couldn't even recall if I'd seen her near the end of the movie Mel Gibson had directed, but, then again, I'd been probably distracted by Jim Caviezel's body—if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about the guy who'd played Jesus. Anyhow, I somehow wandered off course and explained how Mary loved Jesus, so much so that she didn't mind giving birth to him in a manger stinking of horse dung, practically away from civilization, how she wasn't spooked out about getting knocked up by a ghost, in the first place. This I told him in theatrically upbeat tones, with funny faces to boot, and, of course, not exactly in those words.

"But I thought Jesus's daddy was God," Clay said, baffled. "And Mary's husband was Joseph."

I decided I had to be careful not to make Mary out to be a loose woman. I said, "Well, you see, that's the wonderful thing about Mary. She was preserved from any stain of original sin—"

"Original *sin*?" he practically hissed, his eyes bulging.

For a second I was glad Joaquin had already covered the basics, including the whole Adam and Eve bit. "Remember when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden?" I said, floundering miserably. "Even though God specifically, emphatically asked them not to?"

He said, appearing to think about it, "Like you forbid me to eat cookies before going to bed?"

"Precisely!" I said. "Only, in their case, disobeying God meant carrying a sin—the original sin, a real bad, bad sin—which they have since passed down to generation after generation."

That was when, to my astonishment, Clay dissolved in a flurry of tears and snot and barely managed to squeak out between sobs, "I promise I won't eat cookies again before bedtime!"

It took a good twenty minutes of rocking him back and forth, and making more funny faces to get him to quiet down. And I thought I was off the hook until Clay asked me again about Mary and how baby Jesus had gotten into her tummy, at which point I dropped the ball by mentioning *immaculate conception*, and then spent the next six minutes mentally berating myself all the while smattering about "magic," without going into excruciating detail about, well, the bees and the birds. I thought I did a decent enough job then, even forcing cheeriness in my voice that enthralled and disarmed Clay. But not a week had passed when his teacher called, concerned about a "slightly disturbing incident" in which Clay, she recounted apologetically, had told a three-year-old girl in his mixed-age class, a sturdy-bodied kid named Lea, that she could be carrying Jesus in her tummy.

One of the nice things about Joaquin was that he was always able to charm his way out of a tight spot, though it did help that a lot of people fell for guys who could pull off donning a jute sack and still looked like primed for the runway. He had a way, too, of speaking exclusively to the person he was conversing with, making you feel like you were the prettiest woman or the coolest guy on the face of the Earth—something he did with Clay's teacher, a chirpy fresh grad, no doubt, who'd just stared the whole while at his cheekbones, which you could imagine yourself rappelling down. In the meantime, I found myself upping my smile volume by the beat, not that anyone had noticed. By the end of the meeting, Joaquin had successfully done major damage control on our son's future and, meanwhile, I'd strained my facial muscles so hard I felt as if I'd just had Botox.

On our way home, Clay had tired of scrunching his face up against the window to look for space aliens and soon just dozed off with his face buried in Joaquin's lap. The sounds of homebound traffic had already died almost to a hum when I pulled in to the driveway, and inside the car I knew Joaquin would in a moment break the silence he'd maintained all through the drive home.

"I think that went well," he said, watching me from the backseat. "You know, considering …"

"People never finish their sentences anymore," I said. He shook his head, scowling, cracked his knuckles, and looked out at the drowsy street drinking in its last fill of the sun. For the briefest second, I struggled to remember what it was about him that made me fall for him to begin with.

When it was clear that silence was the order of the day, I reached over to gently prod Clay to wakefulness. Then Joaquin took Clay's tender frame into one arm and deftly opened the car door with the other, while I stayed in the car another moment and looked in the side mirror to watch them walk up the doorsteps, a small head cradled against a giant's chest, like something in perfect contrast with all the things I knew not a squat about, all the questions I didn't have the answers to.

In the end, it was Buddy, after long insistent messages delivered through Clay, that convinced us to phone the clinic at the children's hospital. Somehow—without exactly telling the pharmaceutically calm woman on the other end that my son's imaginary brother was, for some reason or other, under the impression that Clay had a malignant, diabolic-sounding tumor—I was told to head straight away to the ER to have Clay CT-scanned. The attending physician and all the importantly white-coated personnel found it curious at first that I took him there not as a referral from his pediatrician, but merely out of, as I'd mentioned to them, a cryptically gnawing mother's intuition.

The CT scan required that Clay fall asleep, which he did, without so much as a fuss. I stayed in the cafeteria, one of the most brightly lit and darkest places I'd ever been, and there listened to a girl at the next table supply the words to an unsuitably perky tune coming over the speakers, as one grim-faced parent after another got up for another coffee refill. It wasn't long before I was called up to the ER and told by Dr. Yu, the head of the pediatric neurosurgery, that Clay's brain was enlarged, and the first thing I thought of then was something I'd read that correlated the size of one's brain to one's IQ, so surely, I told myself, that must be something good, right? The next thing to do, Dr. Yu said, was to send Clay for an MRI, and that was when I knew for sure, terrifying as it was, that it wasn't to prove his precociousness that my son would need images of his brain.

It amazed me that Clay had so far held his own through this, not bursting into tears as the anesthetics were administered, but only sitting anxiously and peering up at me every now and then. The MRI took about an hour and a half, during which time I roamed the hospital hallways in something of a daze, my eyes peering into other people's rooms as I passed their open doors,

as if rubbernecking a car crash, and glimpsed faces pinched with pain or with unsettling resignation. In the waiting room, there was a woman in sweatpants who looked overcaffeinated and couldn't stop rocking a cute, bald girl in her cavernous lap. Back in medical imaging, Dr. Yu nodded gravely at me before showing me the MRI images on his computer. "What we have here is a tumor," he said, pointing at a round something that looked to me innocuous enough, "which is very *actively* growing." I had hoped until then to hear the words *very actively growing* used to describe my son, not a nasty tumor that had lodged itself in his head because of some unknown pathological anomaly.

Those three words marched through my head like an odd, silent prayer as I watched over Clay sleeping in a small, fluorescently ablaze room, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest lulling me almost to sleep. Each time I caught myself drifting off, though, those three words would dart into my thoughts, like a swinging bitch slap. A growing tumor was hard enough to wrap my head around, more so an actively growing tumor, and much more so a *very* actively growing tumor. Besides, on what earth would a doctor diagnose a child to have a tumor? Which was, as I saw it, equivalent to using Johnny Depp's photo as an anti-drug poster: an unpardonable crime. "But he's only four," I'd said, when the reality of those three words finally hit me, as if I could talk the doctor out of his diagnosis. "He eats Brussels sprouts and broccoli," I'd countered, "and even slimy okra!"

I couldn't let myself give in to the facts staring me in the face and also go on thinking things would work out, couldn't for the life of me imagine going through the motions of interminable days here in the hospital, where I could see the white ceiling weighing oppressively and feel the imperturbably blank walls hedging me in, squeezing my being into something shapeless like oil. And so I let myself believe other things instead. Such as that if I covered his face, his crown, and his forehead with just the right number of kisses, then perhaps I could magically suck the darned tumor out of his system, or else suck it into mine, where it could very actively grow to its heart's content—which would then be, I realized as I quietly rained upon him my tears, just as well.

I could tell you that I lost my virginity an hour shy of my twenty-sixth birthday and that I went to an abortion clinic five months after, like they were the beginning and the end of a tired storyline whose interim you could confidently guess at. The former involved me and a man who I wasn't committed to at the time, while the latter featured only me, a woman who

had until then been inoculated against hurt and wavering that came with infuriating indecision. Although both were my choices, one made me feel potent and the other left me prostrate, paralyzed with ambivalence.

The first one was a product of both the fantastical belief that I had to save myself for Prince Charming, who'd come along on a white stallion and swoop me off my feet, with whom I'd ride into the sunset, and the more practical, though equally ludicrous, belief that sex was something particularly tricky for women, especially for someone like myself who couldn't even wear a leather bustier on account of not having the chest to hold it up. The words of de Beauvoir and Friedan faltered in the face of the question of whether to Do It or not to Do It, which I believed not many men found themselves pondering heavily as much as women did, because men just Do It. Like Nike.

When I finally decided that I'd Do It, it wasn't with the man I was going with at the time, someone who I was drawn to intellectually and emotionally and physically, but who believed, to my chagrin and alarm, that the exercise of his sexual will was fundamental to any relationship he had had with a woman. You'd have thought that with a man like that, who always had his hand up my thigh unbelievably immediately when no one was watching, I'd get laid faster than you could say *sex*. During some tonsil hockey or tongue fencing, for example, he'd pause to brush his squishy-looking lips against my ear and whisper, while groping my boob rather distressingly, "You know you like it." And of course I didn't like it all that much, but somehow blood clots could form in your mildly mashed breasts and then travel to your brain and make you kind of grunt and purr, which your sexually repressed boyfriend would interpret as a throaty moan of assent and so he'd squash your knockers even more, whereupon you'd slap his hand away, thus ruining his mood.

The man I did Do It with was my best friend whom I genuinely cared for and who cared for me. The sex was awkward and singular and depressingly slow, like getting your master's degree. The morning I saw the cross on the stick, two weeks after, I called him and we spent the afternoon wandering the tree-lined avenues at the state university we'd hailed from, the sun-dappled, bowery branches providing welcome shade. Then we talked about what we were going to do. It turned out there was nothing he was going to do about it, because it couldn't be possibly his after all. He told me a story that involved laboratory tests and spermicidal count and an abortive operation abroad, a story so remote from mine that I didn't understand until after a vital minute of silence, into which you could've poured all the ironies of life, that what it

all meant was that he couldn't have knocked me up, or any woman for that matter. I remember not knowing what to say, not knowing what to feel. I remember thinking absurdly that there must be hidden cameras around then, at the Sunken Garden, filming this travesty of a melodrama. I remember instinctively lifting a hand to my tummy.

Afterwards, he called me the Virgin Mary twice, and the first time he said it I laughed like my life depended on it, a hysterical horselaugh that was more just air out my nose, till tears welled up and smarted my eyes, and in a minute we were laughing again, then I was both crying and laughing into his palm, and he said, matter-of-factly, "I can't help you." The second time he said it, I could no longer trust myself to laugh as though I'd just lost it upstairs without hearing my voice crack.

"You're the Virgin Mary," he said, not glancing my way. "Maybe the second coming of Christ will be through your womb, and we'll all be saved." When I thought he had nothing more to say, he answered a question I didn't want to ask him: "Maybe it's the right thing to do, keeping it."

The trick was to deny the dread I felt, and the helplessness. Nearly a month in the hospital allowed for a routine: at around noon, I'd duck out of Clay's room and walk into the restroom, where I'd shut myself in a stall, feel the door shudder as I slumped against it in a fury of tears and anguish. There was a minute or even just a fleeting second, during this cathartic flare-up, when I'd look back on the days folded away forever before the word *cancer* began to define our lives, trying to recall what it was—what seemingly inconsequential, inoffensive evidence—that I ought to have caught earlier. In my mind's eye, I stayed in that stall until the moments and leap seconds extended into lifetimes, but I knew it took only a few fast breaths, pulling myself together, gathering enough wits to soldier on for the rest of the day, before going back out to resume the life I'd put on pause.

A sort of shunt had had to be implanted in Clay's head, to serve as a drainage pipe for the removal of the accumulated cerebrospinal fluid, and it was around this time, in the second week of the ordeal, that Joaquin came home and was quickly filled in on the latest developments by Dr. Yu and his neurosurgical team. He was as gripped and unmoored by sorrow as I was, but the only way he knew to set about the emotional acrobatics required of us in this situation was to wield the ungainly language of medicine. Despite thoughtful cautions from the professionals, Joaquin looked up anything even remotely related to Clay's case on the Internet. He printed out whatever

journal articles he could find and pored over them, highlighter poised in midair, his black-rimmed glasses slipping a fraction down his nose. He had such heartbreaking faith in these impeccably robed, masked strangers and in their unflinching stoicism that he always came up to them with questions, which I sometimes suspected even the doctors didn't have the answers to. And in time, he began to speak in polysyllables and talked the names of drugs that I couldn't even begin to pronounce.

Joaquin was the one who'd informed me that "atypical rhabtoid/teratoid tumors" (ATRTs), the kind Clay had, represented only about 3 percent of pediatric cancers of the central nervous system, and this, I thought, was the sort of probabilistic luck that I'd always dreamed of to have a shot at the sweepstakes. This was not what I'd bargained for, I told myself, not the series of scans and antibiotics and checkups and emergency surgeries that I'd only watched in movies before, and which now took on a more catastrophically nightmarish form in a reality I didn't feel we deserved.

This was also a reality no child deserved. Days and nights in giddy succession zipped past us and were marked only by the growing pile of newspapers on Clay's night stand, each one bearing headlines already exiting into oblivion, disorientingly offset by the idle rhythm of hospital time that never had a humming machine, a blinking monitor, or a wheezing respirator ceased to remind us of. In Clay's troubled face I saw the paradoxical march of time and its almost palpable linger.

The world, as I'd last known it, still unruffledly went about its business. For a short while, two days to be exact, we were allowed to reconnect with human civilization and pretend to be the functional, unscathed, unburdened carbon life forms that we'd been before. It was a Wednesday, I remember, and after frivolously lunching on vanilla-flavored ice cream, Clay surprised Joaquin and I by requesting we go talk to Jesus, in the Catholic chapel we'd never before set foot on. The four of us, including Clay's insurmountable imaginary brother, Buddy, walked in and sat down on one of the front pews. It somewhat pained me to think that, back in the hospital, we'd specifically told the hospital chaplain and those other Jesus people, to their openmouthed dismay, to be sure to make themselves scarce around us. Sympathetic though they were, we preferred to be comforted by the secure knowledge of science and shunned the formless solace the supernatural offered. That day, before we left, Clay said that Buddy was sad that they had to go back to the hospital that night.

And it was indeed true: Clay's tumor was hemorrhaging and so we had to drive back in the bitter evening cold to the hospital to have it removed. Joaquin and I, we alternately sighed and wept and wept and sighed, the pauses between an exhaled breath and the next measured by our tears, which seemed to us inexhaustible and criminally useless. Like the only survivors of a plane crash, we clutched each other, rocked by sobs and the jitters of our overcaffeinated bodies, and it was so clearly the only time in a long, long time that I felt I wasn't alone in my monstrous grief, that the two of us were in it together. When the oncologist walked into the room, we sprung apart like teenagers doing something particularly lewd under the gum-studded bleachers in the school gym. He informed us, not meeting our eyes, that the tumor might spread to Clay's meninges.

"You mean, the cancer could metastasize within the CNS?" I asked, in the back of my mind surprised at how foreign yet matter-of-factly these words rolled off my tongue, wondering whether I'd become that type of person who threw around acronyms as if everyone knew what they meant.

By this time we'd learned to read in the faces of the people who delivered the news, in the shifting of their eyes and in the pitch of their voices, all the words they didn't speak and the things they didn't have to say. It was the skill I taught my students at the state university, that of reading between the lines and tearing apart and stripping to the bones a poem or an essay or a short story, until they got to the bottom of things and found answers in the face of only a smattering of words. It was the skill I hadn't known until then would come in handy in predicting the fate of my child.

Four hours later I'd polished off a chunk of pistachio halvah that Joaquin had two weeks ago bought at a Greek store in LA. Now, that seemed like a century ago. Rightfully oblivious of anything else, Joaquin typed away at his laptop and read up on even more discouraging statistics available for him to chew over. Then Dr. Yu's laconic, ratlike assistant came in to tell us that Clay had "pulled through," and these words, not for the first time, seemed to me wrongfully descriptive of a child's condition, like a big cosmic joke, so convinced was I that a four-year-old's only purpose in life was to play and be a babbling beast. In the ICU where he'd been taken, post-op, Clay was nestled in an intricate tangle of tubes, wires, and IVs, peacefully drugged. Occasionally, he clutched at the air as if for an invisible hand reaching out. It was the universe's miserable excuse for a prank, I'd come to believe, to watch your child gingerly slip into nothingness when, by natural design, he was supposed to outlast you by decades; when it was you whose every dip of heart

rate, every change in blood pressure, every ragged breath he was supposed to register, to weep over.

I didn't know I'd fallen asleep until I awoke to a sort of commotion in the room. A gang of masked strangers surrounded Clay's bed and moved in their annoyingly brisk, censorious manner. Through angry tears, Joaquin told me Clay's blood pressure had plummeted and he'd had to beep the nurse. Clay was whisked out of the room, and just like that we were again left balanced on the fulcrum between helplessness and terror. My eyes flitted to the giant, dumb clock on the far wall. It was four-ten in the morning. Joaquin took my hand and led me to the cafeteria, where we both ate a slice of a bricklike peach pie in companionable silence. There was a familiar-looking girl at the next table, humming along to an upbeat tune coming over the speakers, and under her eyes were deep purple hollows, like kohl. Then I almost saw myself—my pudgy face, my messy hair, my slovenly clothing—through her eyes and gave an involuntary simper. We practically leapt as though jolted awake when, after a long while, we heard our names being called over the intercom.

He was sleeping. While the oncologists and Joaquin talked about the schedule of his chemo, I sat by Clay's bed and kissed the fingers of his tiny, limp hand over and over, not caring in the least that he always pulled it away. I reached through the tubes to feel every assuring thump of his chest.

The decision to keep it, after that day of walking around the university campus, was one I initially felt so sure about. The prospect of single motherhood became an exciting, challenging thing overnight, one I was willing to take on, like a solo-flight science project. Two months after nary a conversation with me, though, the man I did Do It with decided, in a fit of unexplained dementedness, to move in with me. At the drop of a hat, he left his job in LA and stuffed my apartment to the gills with books and a roomful of filming equipment he never really got around to use anyway. In the afternoons, we both reclined on matching ratty divans lining the opposite walls, for hours on end, reading silently to ourselves and sometimes aloud to each other. Often, we didn't bother with breakfast. We went weeks without washing dishes and doing laundry. At night, after he made love to me, I'd lie still and weep because I knew he loved me and I him, but it was the kind of love that I wasn't ready for and couldn't take as I knew that either it somehow wasn't enough or it was so bigger than myself, I feared it had a looming expiry date that would leave me all high and dry.

To my colleagues and friends from college, who had begun sending me wedding invitations, I often referred to him as what I'd had for the past several months instead of a serious relationship. He turned down all the invitations, tortured as he was by the politics of marriage, the central role this archaic act played in sustaining patriarchy, and all sorts of heteronormative things that smart people like him steered clear of. His staunch allegiance to his principles was no small reason why I fell for him, but now, somehow, I found myself passing up a few wedding invitations myself, in case he thought my attending such a ceremony would be the height of antifeminism. Our LGBTQ friends lauded our decision, and even I had to admit that I enjoyed talking about our progressive politics, with the airs of self-abnegation you typically hear from owners of rescue dogs, more than I actually liked living it. It sickened me to realize how much of a big self-interested fraud I was.

Being with him felt like walking on a bed of hot coals with one leg tied up behind my back. It became apparent to me, in spite of myself, that wearing a fluffy white dress and sharing a sinfully sweet multitiered cake with a gentleman in a tuxedo was the stuff of my dreams. I knew it sounded silly and certainly paled in comparison to the earnest political and social stances where he stood, but I liked to think that this was where my feminism proved to be not as shatterproof as I'd thought. That we were never going to be married, however, was a fact so apparent it seemed to me beside the point to convince him otherwise. The two of us were held only by a tenuous thread stirring in the pit of my stomach, reminding me of its reality with a constricting rhythm in my throat, like one pulsing fist. But it was an intimation of life, I realized one night, that I didn't think I really wanted.

All of a sudden, all of my original misgivings about motherhood came rushing back and my once unswerving determination to become a mother turned into an amorphous ball of ambivalence. The reservations I harbored ran the gamut from *Don't want to turn into a cow after pregnancy* to *Don't want to be compelled to make decisions for someone else's interest.* I didn't consider myself vain or proud, but was it evidence to the contrary to say that I feared having a child would curtail my freedom to travel, my fondness for mortifyingly expensive cocktail, my sex life? To say that I was afraid to transform into the archetypal woman in the doorway, who called out to a small departing figure, "Take care!" in that hasty peck-at-the-door spirit before turning away and confronting the screaming silence of the house? And I thought I didn't have the makings of a mother, that wherever this type of women were

manufactured was surely not where I'd come from. Once, I had read a story submitted to the college journal, of which I was one of the content editors, was about a guilt-ridden mother who'd stuffed her baby in a dumpster, and, to my horror, I'd identified with her and her fear, her deranged motive for offing her daughter: that she'd bungle motherhood irredeemably.

Meanwhile, much to my plain surprise, he'd gone on such full daddy mode that one morning he surprised me even more by buying a glamorous, overpriced house in the suburbs. Jobless though he was, the inheritance left by his late father could tide him over for well more than forty years. The thought of being a suburban couple with a baby on the way was, however, a cliché I'd thought he'd never cotton onto. He became so exponentially excited that he bought playthings and sippy cups. A couple of times he visited me in my office and brought with him books on pregnancy that he'd checked out from the college library. He enrolled both of us in a Lamaze class that wouldn't start until after seven months and asked me what I felt about the name *Nikolai Vasilievich*, his favorite author's. "Revulsion," I wanted to say. Instead, I just went, "I like *Sojourner Truth* if it's a girl."

I had no delusions about making a stand for women everywhere, like one of my female friends accused me of upon hearing my story, when I decided to get an abortion. The clinic, if it could be called that, was in a nondescript concrete building from the sixties. The room was well air-conditioned, and tacked on a wall the color of excellent margarine, seeming so out of context, was a poster of a provocative teenage Britney Spears. A friend of mine who referred me to this place had said that the abortionist was someone you could trust with your life, and I'd found this description funny, if not ironic. The receptionist was unflatteringly dressed in a blue shirtwaist. I'd put on a coatdress and matched it with a pair of biggish, bumblebee-esque black shades, the kind celebrities wore to avoid the paparazzi. I comforted myself by thinking this child would turn out an axe murderer or a terrorist or a psycho, and relief laced with perpetual doubt rippled through me. The feeling was physical, though, for right then and there, on a couch tattered in all the right places, I threw up. The receptionist gasped, and I sprinted to the door with bile spilled right down the front of my dress. I hailed a taxi and spent the ride staring at a plastic rosary hanging from the rearview mirror.

Bushed but almost mechanically activated, Joaquin and I talked with the doctors and signed off on papers and divided our calendar into weeks that corresponded with cycles of chemotherapy that Clay had to undergo.

The oncologists advised against radiation therapy, although Clay was already four and the risks of long-term complications due to brain irradiation were lower, and decided instead on an intensified induction chemotherapy at first, which involved a regimen of vincristine, etoposide, and cisplatin. Each cycle, we were told, used chemo at doses toxic enough to completely deplete the bone marrow, which would have to be regrown through stem cell rescue. In between cycles, we arranged visits from relatives and friends who crammed the hospital room with every imaginable stuffed and balloon animal on the planet and many chocolates that Joaquin and I were forced to eat, since the nurses had hung up a bag of intravenous liquid food for Clay. All sorts of drugs were dispensed at regular intervals. Fairly soon, visits to the ER had become commonplace.

Most days, Clay awoke as if in a mild psychic fever, his movements uncoordinated and feeble. Often visibly afraid, he mumbled strange half-words that sounded nothing you could find in the dictionary. On days he was awake, if groggy, we filled the room with our laughter and songs, and people passing in the corridor saw us and smiled. Clay, more than several times, insisted we listen to Buddy sing and for five minutes Joaquin and I stared into space, quiet, smiles plastered on our faces. He regaled us with stories about his travels with Buddy, to places chillingly resembling gold-paved, cloud-covered heavens in drawings I knew all too well from pamphlets handed out by proselytizers. His long, jagged squawks of delight at jokes only he could understand tapered off into wheezes, or roaring coughs, or dry heaves. We were careful not to hug him too hard or hold his hand for too long, afraid that he might crumble like a dry cracker even at our slightest touch.

"That's normal," one of the sweatpanted mothers on the oncology ward told me over a lunch of congealed soup. "Some days I can't even bear to look at my baby like that, all undone, ailing."

The rustling of magazine pages, the occasional blare of a ringing phone, and the snivels and sobs punctuated the sotto voce dialogue among parents whose children were also beset by cancer. Here, we were all enlisted in a battle that we would've bowed out of, if only we'd had our druthers. Joaquin and I, we listened to one unbearable story after another which we took as we would a fistful of change, perfunctorily and emotionlessly, and after a while one sad story didn't seem an especially sad one as the whole place was so suffused with sadness anyway that a shared portion of someone else's grief didn't really add anything additional. Both of us understood, too, without saying so, that we

were to insulate these strangers from our misery and the loneliness we now wore like a mourning coat hanging off of us in big, drooping folds. We were too insular in this regard, not letting anyone in on what we felt was ours, though one thrust upon us against our best defenses.

It seemed like another lifetime when Joaquin and I had decided to separate. I remember the night we were lying awake on the same bed, with a third party, a ghoulish, unmistakable presence, bridging our two bodies. I remember shifting a little, in the tentative way one would stir beside a bedfast patient, and Joaquin, after a beat, pressing himself against my back and spooning me closer into his robust frame, his lips on the nape of my neck and his eyes wetting the tendrils of my hair.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a voice as thick as chocolate fudge. "Please, Fran, say you still love me."

Here I turned over and faced him, held his head close against my chest until he stopped shaking, crying. I could feel his shuddery breath hot on my skin and I held him closer. I said, "I'm sorry."

And it was at that very moment that I understood finally how two people could say the same thing and mean differently, or not really differently at all. I knew the urgency of a shared confession, how you could simply feel the truth singing out of your bones, sometimes in the most unlikely place and the most unlikely time, and how clarity could still lend itself to you, marvelous and momentary. I knew, despite my emotional protestations, that the end of something good could be the beginning of something worse than you'd bargained for, or of something better that could come only of losing things you'd once held dear and sworn you couldn't live without, along the way.

It was a feeling that splintered your thoughts in its first onrush and twisted you as if rung like a wet towel in the next. And, indeed, I felt as if I were about to give birth to not just one, but a whole generation of babies, plus the rest of my intestines and bladder. Through it all, he held my hand as I was being wheeled to the ER, rubbing the web of skin between my forefinger and thumb as if that was where the baby would come out. He cooed, mumbled, patted my eyebrow with a washrag.

I could say that was the beginning of it, the rather infantile rage I felt toward him, who kept telling me that everything would be all right, as if he had a way of knowing. It was the kind of certainty that approximated impartiality and thus sounded believable. But lying in that bed, then, with

strangers unlaughably peeking their heads in between my canted knees, I only knew that every time I screamed his name I was cursing him in my head and ready to jump out of my skin in contempt. The worst part was perhaps to see him smile so excitedly, like a puppy, with that everlastingly encouraging expression on his face; to know that he thought I was screaming his name because we were all in this together and all that sickeningly happy preggers stuff I'd been told by well-meaning friends to think about during labor, but which, alas, melted away in the face of pain.

And it was true, because pain, unlike what the Lamaze teacher had spieled a gazillion times, was not good. Pain was having to push a creature the size of a pumpkin through an orifice that had only previously admitted nothing larger than an eggplant, which had once upon a time convinced me that if I could let something that large in, then delivering a human being would be easy as rolling off a log. It was easy, of course, for him to say those anodyne words and make those pesky, little coaxing sounds when he wasn't the one made to feel guilty for having a coochie as small and inelastic and ornamental and only occasionally utilitarian as a peephole; when he wasn't the one spread open like one sorry gobbet of meat, with huge helpless haunches and tears exposed; when he hadn't been the one in some kind of discomfort pretty much the entire nine months, and who would now be ripped to ribbons as a crazy, unholy storm shivered through her entire being; when he wasn't the one who had to wonder why no squalling pinch-faced spawn was being shoved to his chest. To be told by some stranger that the baby had "expired," like a canned good gone sour.

He had no right to tell me it would all be okay, the storm had passed, we'd get through this.

For there wasn't an end to it, really, only a prelude to days rolling away forever—the fluid passage of time I could only mark by the mounting mess of balled and bloodied panties and thick tampons in the wicker trash in the bathroom, by the increasing rock-hard heaviness of my breasts, which every day I'd had to pump of their souring milk that sprayed like blood from a nicked artery, and by the laconic messages accumulated on the answering machine from him, the vanished lover, who'd turned tail, quick on the draw, "to figure things out." One morning, the courier had to bring a scowling barangay *tanod* with him and knocked on my door, worried something had happened to me when he'd realized the mail could no longer fit through the slot. Something *had* happened to me, all right, but explaining it, I feared,

might wind up in tears and awkward consoling that went beyond a thoughtful messenger's job description. And before I knew it, my baby would've turned a week old. I went to the vanished lover's room and sat on the foot of the bed, watching the sun spill through and lick at all the stuff I'd spent a sleepless month's wage on, and which I'd weeks later start giving away, all the pretty little things awaiting the pretty little child that never came.

"Could you buy Buddy and me a new toy?" Clay asked, in an uncharacteristically small voice.

"What kind of toy do you want?" I saw a little puzzled look of worry spread over his face.

He said, after a long moment. "Buddy said you should buy something to remember me by."

He appeared to me too bright at that moment, lighting up from within, though still visibly pale, withered with fatigue and welted with bruises. But the longer I gazed at Clay's ashen face the more he resembled a leftover afterimage from staring at a recently screwed-on, bare bulb for too long, fugacious and fading away right before my eyes. When I kissed him goodbye, the last sunlight had already painted the streets in the warmth and thickness of honey, needlepoint glimmers winking through the windswept trees and the sky unfurling itself dark and wide open. How unremarkable that day was, how my leave-taking felt to me so very temporary that, though I tried to be stern with myself, I couldn't help a sigh of relief from hissing out of me at the thought of leaving the hospital, to come up for air, knowing that I would so soon be returning to that place and see my child again.

Thoughts fly at me like so many trapped sparrows in my head. I'd rolled through not one but three red lights and still I found myself now ensnared in a space-time continuum that I'd operated within, once in another lifetime. Somehow I'd forgotten how this world worked, with everyone oblivious of everyone else, bumper-to-bumper traffic being the pinnacle of such anthropologic indifference. When at last the road congestion had slackened, I flew through the throughways with my heart clenched in my throat. Then I entertained a filmic imagination of the moment of my own death, filled with the graphic and sound effects of a Hollywood action movie, with a stunning glare of headlights, a screeching of tires, a panicky loss of control of the car, an explosion of the windshield, and an enormous crash of metal against metal that would leave my body bloody and mangled and crushed beyond recognition. It reassured me, even for a minute, this compulsively morbid

imagination of my mortality, which was in itself a bargain I'd be more than willing to make. A block away from the hospital, my breath caught in my throat like a darned seed, I stopped to cry.

Aware of the every tick of the clock, I ran through the semi-darkened hallways with my blue shopping bag in hand. The few people I passed in the corridor, some of whom were nurses who'd come in hourly to check on Clay, regarded me with a terrified look. A morose pack of the ICU staff had crowded the door to Clay's room, and I barged through them with all the muscular strength I'd somehow miraculously mustered. I heard only the relentless buzzing machines, or maybe the buzzing came from some monster inside me, I didn't know, a sound that flicked in me like bees in a hive. I felt half-scared of the doctors and nurses standing around Clay's bed, talking urgently yet monotonously, but also half-connected with them in our prayers to keep my son alive, his life literally in their hands. Then finally I saw Clay, bloated and beautifully misshapen, needles stabbed into his little hands like an acupuncturist's nightmare. And in one corner, Joaquin was alone in his preemptive grief, crying like I'd never seen an adult cry before. I let the shopping bag in my hand fall to the floor with a dull thud. From behind his horn-rimmed glasses the oncologist looked to me helplessly and all of a sudden a loud beeping pierced the rubbery silence. I told them to stop.

It was at this point that my memory failed me. Part of me still believed I was the mother just three hours before, who'd been asked by her son to buy a new toy for his imaginary brother, who'd promised she would, and walked out the door in utter naiveté, secure in the knowledge she'd come back to this room in no time. Now, head throbbing, my tongue sickly furred, I was staring at Clay, who'd not moved, and realized I'd do anything just so I could tell that woman that she was making the worst decision in her life, which was saying a lot for someone who'd time and again stumbled through the most unfortunate choices. I recalled wandering the mall and lighting upon just the right toy: a cylindrical something with slits in its circumference through which to view stars passing through a series of their natural motions, twinkling and blinking. It was something I'd like Clay to hold on to, for him to revel in its steady merry-go-round movement and its comforting familiarity, but which now felt in my hands like a wet bag of cement, like a cumbersome, purposeless thing.

A semblance of bemused calm belied how I feel emptied right then and at the same time stuffed as if with lead shot, my body too weighty for me to move, my breathing stilled, for I started to feel that every exhale I made was

one breath more than the room that contained our grief could handle. Then I felt an even thumping anguish rolling off Joaquin in waves, and prayed, at that moment, to whatever god Clay had believed in but which I couldn't find or identify, for the welling in my eyes to stay at the corners and not become actual tears, because then I'd have to face that this was real and that somehow I was one to blame, that, as though by comeuppance, my initial uneasiness about motherhood had set his death off. In the end, I faltered and heard a wail roaring through my ears.

There was another lifetime, of course, in which these tears were shed, though the notion of our child's death seemed as faraway and far-fetched as the idea of dead stars twinkling down at us forever. It was the night, four years ago, when for the second time in my life I was peeled open to the pulp. I had been wheeled down the hall to a parchment-white room, where I lay on a cot with white rubberized sheets, staring at harsh fluorescent panels that gawked at me overhead. Joaquin, after vanishing and tearing up the town, had returned like a wave you could always trust to surge back ashore but which you also knew would ebb away, yet again, sometime. He held my hand as my body rattled so hard like keys jingling in your pocket, let me hold his hand as strangers' faces pressed in and talked in hushed tones. I remember it was almost Valentine's, and somewhere, in a nice, cozy hotel room, I knew the man who I'd had a brief dalliance with couldn't care less that his son was being delivered to the world. I remember being pulled down into abysmal darkness, an insidious sense of free fall, then being pulled back up into a blaze of something like new life, like something that would last. I felt the weight of it on my chest, its unsullied perfect possibilities, and tenderly I kissed its tiny fists reaching up into the air and promised to hold on to it, forever.