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The Woman Next Door

My life could have gone a different way, of course, but that's no revelation. I could have married the first man I loved, borne him children, watched him throw them up in the air at the park and catch them on the way down. I could have learned Hebrew for him and lit candles every Friday night. We could have gone into business together: children's therapy; math tutoring; general, necessary rehabilitation. We could have grown old still debating whether Primo Levi took his own life and whether love or loss is the better teacher.

There is nothing wrong with living next door to yourself. Watching the way another you, in the same hairstyle but a different-colored blouse, might walk to the end of her driveway to retrieve her mail. She might wear diamonds instead of pearls, because those are the gifts the people in her life have given her. She might string different lights in her windows on different holidays, because those are the occasions her world has offered up for celebration.

But in the end, the house you sleep inside of is the one that's yours, and you can never know if she is sleeping easily or if she lies awake crying, if she cleaves to his chest like a swaddled baby or a prized lover, if she too imagines a life next door.

As it happens, I did have the chance to marry the first man I loved, and I turned it down. I told myself I would be no less happy for it, and I was right. I am no less happy today—July 2, 1995—than I have been on any other today in this lifetime.

For example: Last week, I had a cavity filled. I pinched my own arm and closed my eyes and thought of nothing but not feeling the pain. Now isn't *that* something to be proud of?

Or for example: Steve came home early yesterday, and he took

Dolly to the park. I followed on my bicycle once I noticed they had gone. He pushed her in the smallest swing, first from behind, then he walked forward to rock her by the chubby baby knees she so thoughtlessly abuses on the kitchen tiles. It was because he wanted to watch her smile.

He didn't even have to tell me that was why.

Dolly's smile looks like mine. Neither of us shows our teeth, though only one of us has the opportunity.

And here is another example: At the high school, I got promoted; they installed a computer with dial-up, right in my classroom. I am one level higher and one day older.

When I was a little girl, fifteen long years ago, my brother took me to the carnival. I suppose I was taking him, since I still topped him by five inches and six-hundred vocabulary words, but he was the one who coveted the rides. I wanted only to gape at the spectacle of the thing, to live inside the colors and music. So I left Abe to his Ferris wheel on the periphery of the grounds and made my way toward the sleek, central red and blue tent, where strands of cotton candy floated like dust in the air.

An old man in faded suspenders appeared from the vibrant folds of canvas. "You keep on smiling, little lady," he said, his syllables accented and strange. "You light up these grounds." Which was kind, since the fairgrounds were already startlingly bright. I smiled in return. I heard this sort of praise frequently, then, but I never noticed I was smiling until someone told me so. It was just the shape my mouth took at rest. I would not go so far as to call it dazzling.

"My name is Kurt," said the man.

He extended his hand. I should have said, *Mine's Ellie,* but I was still too young to hear unspoken questions. I heard only the crackle of popcorn kernels, bursting from red-and-white-striped incubators inside the pavilion. Kurt chuckled at my delight. He seemed very old, and he wore a beard and a flat gray cap, like a newsboy in old-time Europe or Chicago. His vest was brown and newer than his face.

"Come," he said, dropping his hand. "I'll tell you a story." He beckoned me inside the tent, and I followed.

By name alone, the canvas interior was no less colorful than its painted outer walls. There, still, were golden costumes draped from silver hangers, bronze pulleys bearing auburn rings, red awnings overhanging blue podiums. But they were faded and frayed like yellowed newsprint, called black-and-white out of respect rather than honesty.

The old man sat on a four-legged stool and conjured a three-legged one from beneath a tablecloth. I hoisted myself onto it.

"Your story?" I reminded him.

His throat bobbed once, up and down. "I'm afraid," he said, "that it might drain the smile from your face."

I promised him it wouldn't. He began to tell his story. His voice almost didn't shake.

Or for example: This afternoon, as I was handing her to Steve, Dolly accused me of not loving her. She only has gums for a mouth, but she quieted as I laid her in his arms on my way to the front porch, and then she looked at me until her eyes said, "Please love me back."

Her irises are Steve's, unreflective as highway steel on a smoggy day. His eyes have made that plea, too. And mine. They've helped our objects to identify, but never to relent.

I heard Steve lock the door behind me. I reminded myself that I'd decided years ago to tolerate this man; once he loved me, I couldn't bring myself to be the one who did not love back. I refused to gain that brand of empathy. Soon enough, I was pregnant with Dolly and longing to be this thing sprouting clean and new inside me. But I grew older each day that I grew rounder, and wishing to erase my years became both easier and more shameful. As my students labored over equations I'd made too difficult, I performed my calculations: at ten, when I met Kurt, a year was 10% of my life. At twenty-five, it is 4%. And my fellow teachers had the audacity to call me a young mother.

I would sit at my desk looking at the circle of my belly, illogical as the earth, and thinking to myself: She will be a granddaughter to Kurt.

Then I thought: But I was never out to find him a granddaughter. A son. I was supposed to find his son.

I should bring you to the present, for the sake of clarity. I am on a train, though I should not be. I am going to Chicago to break the most important promise I have ever made.

Steve doesn't know, although I did tell Dolly.

"Once upon a time," the old man said, his knuckles cracking the way Abe and I spent hours practicing, "I lived inside a dream. I had a beautiful wife who made the sun wake up each morning, and a small son who made the earth turn. Can you believe it?"

I couldn't.

"My Yankel was smaller than you," the old man said, "and the whole world spun on his finger like a basketball."

"Anything's possible when you're dreaming," I told him.

"Ah," he said, "but the best part of this dream was that it was *real*! I woke up and I slept to it. My wife and son and me, and our neighbors and our chicken and our little village in Czechoslovakia. I loved them very much. This was decades ago, the '30s—can you even picture such a time and place?" He paused. The tinkling of the Ferris wheel outside was slowing, and I hoped that Abe would rejoin the line and ride again.

The old man drew a wooden block from beneath the table, half-carved into the front end of a horse, then a small knife. He laid them both on the checkered tablecloth. "It is more important to love than to be loved," he said. He picked up the broken horse. "That will be the moral of this story."

How old was I when I met Yoni? I couldn't have been much older than fifteen; I still thought there were more things I knew in this world than things I didn't. Kurt had left the circus earlier that year. In my pocket, I carried the ticket stub on which he'd written his new address.

Yoni looked some fifteen years older than I, at least thirty, and he walked toward the carousel that I was working and handed me a ticket.

He had a severe accent and brown hair and a tight smile and eyes as dark and warm as an August night. He chose Trixie, the smallest horse on the carousel, and he wore a pleated gray newsboy cap, and he rode alone.

"Better than Prague," he said to no one as he circled. He laughed, and I could have sworn the sinking sun lingered on the horizon.

He was Kurt's son. I knew it instantly.

When the painted snouts slowed, I asked him if he'd given me a ticket. I still regret it. I asked him if he'd given me a ticket and he said he had. I didn't know how to keep him talking. He had lived more years than I had in this go-round, and before that part of him had spent a whole lifetime in a village with a chicken named Eli. I knew more about him than even he did, maybe, but what I didn't know was how to hold his gaze on me. I hadn't learned yet that my smile had uses over and above easing Grandma's ulcers.

I told him that I didn't think he'd given me a ticket. His newsboy eyes were older than the skin beneath his beard. They aged a little when I said it. He was still standing on the platform, petting Trixie's mane as though she were alive. He did not have the money for an extra ticket, he told me. Turning out his pockets couldn't prove that he had handed me his original.

He was a trained psychologist, he told me. He'd been tutoring since he came to America. If I liked, for payment, he would help me with my homework.

I accepted the offer, mentally matching his vowels to Kurt's. I reached into my pocket for my roll of tickets and handed him a loose stub.

I can feel how young his fingers felt in my palm to this day. I'd told a useful lie, and it let me capture him, but I still regret it. When he was Kurt's, he loved horses. While he was mine, he never rode the carousel again.

This train is a sleeper, but I don't buy a bed. I am used to wooden trains that shudder around the turns. I spent two years in Europe that

way before I met Steve, my upright head alert on my shoulders, seeking a cap in a corridor, an accent on a conductor, some fragment of Yoni.

An intercom announces that the café car will close when we pass Cleveland. I finger the receipt on which I've written the address, tucked in my wallet where I can't accidentally hand it to a beguiling stranger who's bartered a ticket. For a decade, I've hoped I wouldn't see Kurt until I could show him his son, reborn. But a search bar on my new computer yielded his address, easy as Chicago, and I've been captive to this promise for too long.

For example: I have not been fair to Steve. While we were dating, he learned every inch of me. He sang so many octaves lower than I that I felt as if I could harmonize. He reminded me of no one, and he proposed in writing.

A clown with a half-painted frown pulled open the flap of the tent. Kurt pointed to a box in the corner. The clown smiled, and I noticed that the sadness on his face did not need to be painted on.

"An old friend," Kurt told me.

"What fairytale are you telling this one?" asked his friend. The box jangled as he picked it up.

"No fairytale for this one. Just the truth."

"You must be a very special young lady, then," said the clown. He lingered for a moment, waiting for Kurt to meet his eyes. "It's not every day that someone gets to hear the truth." His voice was hard as the tabletop. One exaggerated black eyebrow and one small brown one descended together toward his nose, then the box turned and he was gone.

"Who is that man?" I asked.

"He is another person in this story," Kurt said. "And he does not believe that I should tell it."

"Why not?"

"He thinks what's dead is dead. Since a very cold day in November, a day when all our lips looked as red as his do today, and the rest of us was just as white." Kurt tightened the strap on his suspenders with

the hand that held the half-made figurine, and his knuckles cracked. "Do you have a brother?" he asked. I nodded. "He is mine," he said, gesturing to the place where the clown had stood, "and I want you to remember that he is a good one."

I have not forgotten.

Dolly could feel the wanderlust on me. The moment I bought the train ticket, she began to cry when I picked her up. She only proved I had to go; my own daughter should mimic my expression when she sees me, and she should end up smiling.

I left her to Steve and said that I was going to buy milk. I had checked in advance and performed the necessary wasting. The soil outside the kitchen window was white, and we were out of 2%.

When I am not back by nightfall, Steve will assume I've left for Abe's on the coast. He will not call until tomorrow. He knows an easy many months depends on a night of silence. If I am gone a night, if Dolly forgets my smell until tomorrow, it will not be the first time.

Yoni had sixteen bones along his spine that I could count in the dark. Eighteen that I could see by morning. He had a patch of lighter skin under his right shoulder blade, as if he'd been tumble-dried in a spot of bleach. He had two dime-sized indentations behind the right hip he slept on. He had back pains; I used to trace his spine where it bent to the left near his waist and came back to the middle four inches lower down.

Yoni wanted to marry me. I wanted him to want to marry me, so it all might have been very simple.

We agreed to an extra chair at our wedding dinner, in case I found Kurt, and a vegetarian meal, because Yoni did not eat chicken. We agreed to sign the contract in my church and in town hall, but Yoni wouldn't sign it in the synagogue. When I asked him why I knew his back so well, he told me that I was very young. Leave the psychoanalysis to him, he said. I had known that he was from the Czech Republic and wanted not to return; too much sad history there, he said. Too

many ghost people at his *shul*, the families that should have been.

I asked him to put our names in writing, in his Hebrew. I asked him to describe my back. I asked him to tell me how my mouth looked when I slept. How humid my eyes were. The age of my palm.

He could do none of these things. I had known that Yoni loved America.

I would have been a good mother to a child of Yoni's and mine. I would have been. The woman next door photographs her daughter and nails the pictures to the wallpaper in the living room, and she plays in the park and she does not buy nighttime train tickets. She sneaks into the nursery at night to hear the silent breathing. She seeks out bits of other families in her baby's eyes, and when she laughs she doesn't use a stunted smile.

"My son Yankel," Kurt continued, "had no brothers or sisters. He adored his uncle as his nearest playmate."

"The man we just saw?" I asked. "The clown?"

"The very same. But he was not a clown back then, so many years ago and miles away. He was an animal trainer at a different kind of fair, a traveling circus with no Ferris wheels."

Kurt took up the knife and whittled into the mane of the figurine. A pointed ear emerged from the flying wood. "He gave my son a chicken for his fifth birthday, which the boy would not hear of eating. Yankel named it Eli and made a chair so it could sit with us at the dinner table. Imagine! I told him to take the chicken out into the yard, but my wife just laughed and laughed. I told you that she made the sun rise. It was her laugh that did it; even if the sun was tired, how could he resist finding out the joke?"

I longed to hear such a marvelous laugh. I wondered if Yankel had been able to produce it, or if I could.

"And my son loved horses. His favorite was my brother's pet, a runt named Moab. Eli the chicken and Moab the horse and Yankel the boy, an unlikely group but a steadfast one."

I heard the clanking of gears as a nearby roller coaster scaled the

track. A moment's silence, then a girl's shriek as the cart tore downward.

"One day, a German convoy rode through town. Eli had long ago been given to the neighbors, who had promised not to eat him. We hid in the basement, stifling the sound of our breath, as the men rapped on our doors and windows. I remember holding Yankel by his right shoulder, so tightly my thumb printed white on his back. The cellar rattled. When the men continued on their route to somewhere else, we rejoiced, quietly. But then we heard a commotion outside in the snow, followed by a gunshot and a terrible whinny. Sarai and I looked at each other for an instant. I will never forget that. What made us pause to find each other? There are moments in this life that pass us by and matter as little as a fly in a pasture, and others that shatter the world."

Outside, beyond our tent, the roller coaster began its second ascent. "After that moment we both flew our hands from Yankel's back to his mouth, but he had already cried out. He knew as well as we did that the horse had been Moab."

"What happened?"

"It was undeniably the voice of a child," Kurt said. "Undeniably." He released the knife to massage his arthritic fingers. "Our hands were too slow." He lifted the tablecloth and replaced the unfinished horse. "And our hiding place was too small."

"What happened?"

"Sarai stopped laughing and the sun stopped rising, but it didn't matter anyway, since the earth could not turn."

The roller coaster descended. The girl screamed again.

A child in the front of my car is crying. Its mother sets aside her magazine to croon a lullaby.

Because we have Dolly, Steve and I are supposed to ease her into the world, not enjoy the world ourselves. Steve knows this. He takes me to school every day, drops Dolly at the nanny's, inserts himself at work, then collects everyone by nightfall and deposits us in a sensible house on a safe street.

But my hands and eyes and forehead are showing the toothpick tracks that will become my wrinkles, and I am still the one who needs the easing. I have spent my life searching for Yoni, sometimes by intercontinental rail and sometimes when I didn't even know it, when I was allowing Steve to court me or burying my passport in the underwear drawer or tearing through my bras trying to find it again. I search in Dolly, where I know I will not find him, and then I kick her castles to dust in the sandbox. Dolly rebuilds, and wonders why I don't crouch down to dig beside her.

I even search now, in the squeal like Yoni's laughter on the carousel, but it is only the screech of brakes that rocks me toward the platform and hands me to Chicago.

Kurt dried his craggy eyes on the graying tablecloth. A gruff-voiced man outside was shouting, *Ride again, kids! One more go!* We were silent for a long time.

"Other people my age wait for grandchildren," Kurt said at last. "I wait for the strongest Scotch tape on earth."

"To hold your hiding places closed?" I asked, but Kurt shook his head.

"There is a phrase we use," he told me, "called *tikkun olam*. It means healing the world. Our souls are torn away from one another day by day, and it must be someone's job to put the pieces back together."

I looked at his blunted knife on the table, his wood shavings scattered on the floor. "I can do it," I said. I do not know where I learned to shake on covenants like these, but I held out my hand. "I promise I can."

"You're a good promise-keeper, my dear," he said, though his eyes moistened. "Look at you: you're still smiling." We shook. His palm was as soft as Yoni's would be five years later.

"Do souls die, sir?" I asked. I rose, remembering that I had a younger soul in my keeping, as well, and that I needed to find Abe before my mother discovered I had lost him.

"No, ma'am."

"Then your son is still around somewhere, isn't that right?"

"It is with God," he said. "And yes, I suppose that is around somewhere."

"I will find the pieces," I assured him, and I slid between the canvas and emerged into the lurid reds and blues.

On our first night together, Yoni told me that children have a harder time with division than with multiplication. The concept of increasing, of building up and stacking higher: This is intuitive. Breaking down must be taught. And fractions, he said, *oy*. Fractions are the worst. Children do not understand that something might be less than one. Children think that everything is whole.

They must have a very hard time with the idea behind *tikkun olam*, I said. He said, *Who taught you tikkun olam?*

I should have explained about Kurt. I should have said: This might sound crazy, but. I should have said: I once promised your father I would find you, and I have, and bind you to me, and I will. But by then I did know how to hear unspoken questions. Yoni's was, *Can you know the loss and longing that I know?*

It was as easy as *Yes*. Yet I hesitated, caught between the question he'd asked and the one he intended, too slow to cover his mouth with my own and the world shattered.

Yoni said, "Those are words for a different time and place. Not America. Not you."

He turned his back on me, and the woman next door stepped out of my chest, fully formed and just born.

He is living on the twelfth floor of the Fisher Building, the oldest apartment complex in Chicago. I expect wind, but the air is still.

I see the sign on the door as I step out of the elevator, ballpoint pen on a sheet of computer paper: *Kurt Borg, Maker of Figurines.* I trace the letters with my fingertips, wondering if the hand my palms remember inscribed them. I open the unlocked door and walk in.

He seems to have been living here forever. Circus memorabilia

fills every surface and I might be a girl again, dazzled by an uptempo chorus. I listen. The wood-thick room is silent as a museum. My hand shakes, and I almost drop my tiny gift to him.

"Kurt?" I whisper.

Fist-sized mahogany horses watch me from the mantle. There must be a hundred in this room alone. Their immobile throats almost whinny, and I want to set this promise down between their teeth. I will leave it here like a figurine and belong to Steve and Dolly.

"Kurt?" I call, more loudly.

A commotion begins in a side room.

"What? Who's there?" The syllables are quiet and slanted, and I am thrown back to the carnival, the three-legged stool and the jangling box. But the voice is scared, too, and on top of everything I've come here to do, it pains me to know that I have scared him. I follow the sound down a hallway and into a bedroom.

"What is your business here, ma'am?" This voice is high-pitched and crisp, a woman in a pair of green hospital scrubs.

"I've come to tell Kurt—"

I see him. He is in bed with a tube creeping out of his nose. An oxygen tank wheezes, and I know that now is the time to do it. Now is the time to say, *But Yankel is dead. I've come to tell you he is dead. I'm going to stop looking for him.*

I inhale. For the last time, I remember hearing Yoni's crooked syllables on the carousel, feeling the notches like bullet holes in his back. I breathe out. I remind myself that Yoni had scoliosis; I remind myself that Yankel was only a child, who never learned to do math or spout psychology. Plenty of people love horses, after all. Even Steve prefers beef to chicken.

"Yes?" Kurt says. I know that the woman next door is caressing Yoni's broken back with her adoring hands. I breathe in again, prepared to kill her, but Kurt coughs before I can speak.

A trail of spittle is leaking from the corner of his mouth. Gently, the nurse dabs it away—and Kurt becomes, for a moment, Dolly: helpless and small, hoping for someone to wipe her chin. He must pay

for this woman. I wonder if his brother is still alive. The skin beside his lips is so pale that his blue veins look bright and false. I recall his kindness to a little girl before a circus tent, the lost ticket stub that might have led me to him earlier, and I know suddenly that his belief in Yankel's soul has kept him living all these years. There's a horrible strength growing in my throat. I understand that I have the power to break Kurt, too, along with my word.

I reach out to this precious old man in a bed. When I touch his knuckles, they no longer feel young. I doubt he can carve horses anymore. What breaks is my resolve.

"The sun still rises," I say. "The earth still turns."

I'd intended to tell him that Sarai never tugged the sun, and Yankel never spun the earth; both are dead and the universe continues; he was wrong about their lives and he is wrong about their afterlife. But my voice is as soft as the nurse's tissue, and I know I am letting him hear that his son is somewhere, swiveling the world.

The wrinkles beside Kurt's eyes deepen and elongate. He twists his head to the nurse. He laughs, and says, "What did I tell you?"

"You must be Ellie!" Her formal tone softens to a familiar drawl. "I was beginning to think Mr. Borg made you up." She clears a space for me to sit beside him on his bed. "He's been waiting for a visit from his granddaughter."

It is not so bad to live next door to yourself. To imagine that you have assembled a soul with different pieces, parts that will heal faster, last longer, lose quieter.

For example: The man next door to Kurt has a granddaughter. He beckons her to sit with him and takes her by the hand. He feels the roll of Scotch tape she has brought him as a gift.

"You did it," he tells her. The granddaughter offers a stunning smile, the first trimester of a laugh that lifts the sun, and her father cannot tell a fallen horse from a wooden figurine. The man next door to Kurt says, "You have found me."