



PRELUDE

Perspective Box

It seems a sort of peculiar toy at first, this elaborate painted box: a curiosity, almost ugly—what is this weird antique? I've been walking through room after room of paintings hung against the museum walls' deep silks, rainy afternoon light filtering down through the skylights above, galleries full of splendid things. But somehow it's this dim little side chamber—where a spotlight shines on this unwieldy object, right in the center—which I can't seem to leave.

Perspective Box with Views of a Dutch Interior was made in the middle years of the seventeenth century, in Antwerp or Amsterdam, by one Samuel Von Hoogstraten, Dutch painter, aficionado of perspective, connoisseur of the complicated effects of light. A man who loved the eye's involvement in the world. A man who lied with pigment; painting, he wrote, "deceives in a permissible, pleasurable, and praiseworthy manner."

I've been thinking about praise, and the praiseworthy, all day—or rather, trying *not* to think about them. I'm entirely, irremediably nervous. I've come to London because I am among the finalists for a literary award, meeting British poets and publishers, doing some interviews with the press and BBC radio. The event's surrounded by a hoopla no American poetry award would ever generate; the *Independent*, reporting on the reading last night, where each finalist read a poem or two, described me as "a whispery beanpole." I am behaving as though I am a calm and more-or-less balanced adult, but in fact I'm reduced to something distinctly adolescent by the whole thing. Of course I'd like to win the prize, but can't quite let myself imagine that; I don't like to imagine the alternative either. Both options make my self-doubt flare, since to win would seem the strangest of flukes, an honor I couldn't possibly merit, and to lose would confirm my own restless doubts. This is the terrible dilemma of prizes: we cannot believe we deserve them, and we cannot quite believe we don't.

I am a believer in self-doubt, in my better moments; there's nothing like an appropriate amount of it to keep us humane, clear-headed, level. But under these circumstances I have no perspective on my doubts, which seem to be mounting and vibrating, slapping against me like the waves I stirred up this morning, swimming furious laps in a public pool in Soho.

Wandering the National Gallery's cool and formal chambers, I am trying to get as far from myself and my anticipation of the evening as I can get, and perhaps that's what this strange wooden contraption promises.

I learn from the label on the wall that there are *six* of these *perspectyflkas*, as they were called in Dutch, remaining in the world, flowers of a minor artistic tradition. In the fifteenth century, Italian artists enthralled with perspective constructed boxes to experiment with the illusion of depth; their projects exemplified the passionate Renaissance marriage of science and art, their love for the mathematics of vision. French and German painters made "peep shows," shadowbox assemblages of wax figures and objects, theaters behind glass. But the Dutch perspective boxes contained nothing at all, nothing but paint.

This one's perched on an elaborate black stand, and embel-

lished on its top and sides with decorative motifs: cherubs, implements of the artist's work. One wall of the box has been left open, covered now with a sheet of Lucite, so that I can peer into the interior: painted walls and floor and ceiling, all representing the interior of a room. Uncurtained windows, open doors, furniture and books, paintings and mirrors, coats hung on a wall rack, a letter dropped on the floor's geometric tiles: ordinary life.

But something's strangely wrong. Some things are too large, others tiny, and nearly all seem bent or misshapen, twisted weirdly around corners or across floors and walls. That shape on the floor? A spaniel, his four paws resting firmly on the ground, but above his legs his body stretches wildly up the wall as though he'd been caught in a carnival mirror. The dizzy pattern of the floor tiles spins, as if in the vertigo of the world's worst case of astigmatism. This is serenity transmogrified, Vermeer on hallucinogens.

But in the two walls which abut the transparent side are peepholes, little lenses like the eyepieces of telescopes. And when I place my eye to those disks of glass—revelation! The painted room suddenly is a room, each thing in place and in perspective. I can see every key on the virginal, the sharp outlines of the dropped letter (addressed to Von Hoogstraten himself, is this his house?), the boots and jacket in their place, the good dog who has been waiting to be seen.

The painter has rendered distortion so exactly that the lens corrects it perfectly; he paints the world misshapen, and the glass shapes it right again. Which means that he has had to misshape things just so, to bend forms so that light through the lens will bend them back again.

Why in the world go to this much trouble? Samuel Von Hoogstraten's compatriots went to astonishing lengths to capture light transfixing a slice of lemon peel, the touch of sun on the lip of a pewter pitcher. All that struggle to get things right, and then he takes evident pleasure in painstakingly getting them wrong. Or at least seeming to, until the correcting lens reveals to us that his chaos is, in fact, art.

I try to walk away, but find myself stopping at the door, turning, walking the perimeter of the little room to view the box from

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all sides. Then I'm pulled back to it again, unsatisfied, wanting more.

The room where nothing's clear, even the dog smeared up the side of the wall—that room comes clear, seen through the right glass. The lens corrects, clarifies, puts things in their proper arrangement. The glass lozenge allows me to see that I am looking into not merely one room but a house: there are chambers beyond this one, rooms with people in them—a woman reading, quietly, in a chair beside a window's wash of cool Northern light. That Dutch glow seems made of both physical light and the lamp-shine of interiority, the polish things acquire in the steady, affectionate illumination of attention. Occupied rooms, lit by our seeing.

He doesn't believe in darkness, Samuel Von Hoogstraten, doesn't hold with chiaroscuro; for him clarity is all, and isn't it possible that clarity might shine into every corner of the house, might bring its resolving certainty to everything, bring each object into right relation with all the other things in this little world: his terrarium, his terrestrial comedy of illusion? Does he mean that even the most distorted form might come true? No matter how deep the trouble, how twisted the form, the rectifying lens of art could set it right?

Or no—does he mean it this way, that art *must* distort, must bend the shapes of things? If this hellish playhouse weren't deranged, then the device wouldn't work, the lens would smear rather than resolve, cripple these figures rather than bring them to life.

But there are *two* lenses, dual peepholes through which to peer into this little chamber. Is that the point? Always a choice to make, which aperture to put the eye to. From either direction the house goes on and on, and even at the end of the diminishing series of chambers there isn't an end but a doubt—a slice of room, maybe another door, at least a window that bathes a woman or a man who can't be seen, a map or a Turkey carpet, in that pearly winter light. Perhaps a mirror's hung on the wall, and in that way the chain of rooms is infinite, continuous, unknowable.

I try again to move on, into the next, brighter gallery. But it's no use, it's Samuel Von Hoogstraten I'm thinking of. What I want to be is alone, in this intimate room, with his box. When anyone else

enters I wait in a corner till the intruder passes on, until I can return to my private study.

Maybe he was driven by doubt, too, unable to rest in two dimensions? His rooms and hallways have the almost-depth of stereopticon views, or those 3-D contraptions of my childhood, View-Masters, a sort of plastic binocular in which spun a cardboard disc holding transparent slides; pull the trigger, the disc tumbled, and the slides told a little story: wonders of the Grand Canyon, the labors of Hercules, the sorrows of Bambi.

What did Von Hoogstraten think he was doing? Who knows what he believed? What's important is the resonant object, here, now, inviting interpretation and resisting it at once, a physical embodiment not of one idea but of many. It breathes with that odd, cold, long life that some works of art have.

This motionless thing—which has long outlived its moment of fashionable novelty, its unrecapturable context—offers a permanent demonstration, in its deep silence. Here is chaos brought to order and order dissolving again. We think that art makes order out of the unruly, but here chaos is made, too. And so we're allowed to play, serious children, in Von Hoogstraten's dialectic: back and forth, between the formless and the formed, worlds of appearance. Disorder resolves into pattern, then dissolves again, back and forth, as long as I stay.

Which might be all afternoon; I have all day, nowhere to be till evening. I don't know that in a few hours T. S. Eliot's widow—charming, a bit vague around the edges, a blond blur—will present to my book a prize named for her late husband, and that she and I and my British editor and various luminaries will all head off for a celebratory dinner in some fancy London *boîte*, where she'll tell me stories of her life with "Tom" thirty years before. (My favorite: driving through Cape Cod, they tossed martinis out the window, with the intention of intoxicating the squirrels.)

The pressure of the competition seems a world away; I've lost myself in the world of this box. And I feel at home here, strangely, though I'm thousands of miles from anything I know; there's something familiar about this house, something oddly comforting and unsettling at once, hard to resist.

And suddenly I want to lift off the lid of the box, want to break

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all the rules and grab hold of it, rip off the roof so I can peer down into those rooms. . . . Though it wouldn't work even if I could do it; there's no choice but to look through a lens.

Maybe around some comer—at some angle I'll finally discover, if I lean into the eyepiece, if my eye works hard enough to probe the hidden recesses—I'll find them, not Samuel Von Hoogstraten's hidden people but my own, the family I can't seem to see through any more direct means. They are hard to approach; they don't want to be known.

Memory confounds and veils them, and were they ever clear to begin with? They were hidden from each other by a distorting rage, by sorrow, by the plain nameless gulf that comes between people. Whatever became of their kindness? Hard to see them even now, years later, far away from them, years away. Can I find them in these phantom rooms (only paint, only light on a screen) whose entrances and exits bend and shadow, diminish and vanish?

I look deeper into the dreamed house: sonorous old clock marking the shadowy hour. Sad objects: ancient blue pitcher with a stag in high relief, cracked blue-and-white cups, photographs of the dead, faces cooling as they travel on into their seclusion. Who knows their names now? Sway of the old clocks golden pendulum. Sepia print of hunting dogs pointing to unseen prey. Glasses chill with gleaming distillates: vodka, turpentine. And here is the woman, weeping beside a painting she's made, a bruised-looking bowl of lilacs, their cloud of dark panicles seething anger or sorrow. If I came upon her when she didn't expect anyone, mightn't I see something that would help me to understand her, and the obliterating gesture she'll make toward her son?

The museum vanishes.

Cool black pistol dreaming in a drawer. A folding wooden yardstick edged in brass, precise case of drafting tools, a man also seething: resentment, loneliness? Though he's well hidden, attempting to disappear in my dollhouse mirrors. A lace-paper doily folded into a little fan, a souvenir: here the daughter who's already gone, smart girl, run as far and fast as she can. In this room—so far back in the house you wonder that you could ever find him!—a boy lost in a book, which is itself a tiny box. He's dreaming into its unseen rooms, rooms he'll travel all his life. Somewhere in the air

above him a strange bird flashes by, flutter and hurry, bright turbulence. The book he's reading configures this space: house and mother, sister and closet and father, endless hallway, tumult of wings. His book angles and skews them by artifice, and then tries to use artifice to set them right.

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Rainbow Girls

In 1959, in Memphis, Tennessee, my sister, Sally, became a Rainbow Girl. She'd been initiated, she told me, into a secret society. What did it mean? What were they not allowed to tell? It was my family's year for the sororal; my mother joined the Order of the Eastern Star and wore around her neck a little golden symbol which indicated her membership. I liked their name—ceremonial, vaguely Egyptian—but the simple necklace was far less interesting than the florid ephemera of the Rainbow Girls, the things Sally hid in the treasury of her lowest dresser drawer, mementos of every one of their occasions.

I am not allowed in her room, but I adore secrets, or rather *secrecy's* trappings, especially the hidden souvenirs of my sister's beauty, her unseen evenings.

Memory (stage designer, costumer, expert in theatrical lighting) orchestrates the scene like this: my sister's darkened room, a little

summer twilight bluing the window and the chest of drawers. *Chifferobe*, my grandmother calls it, rich old word that seems itself to smell like a closed drawer; *bureau*, my father says, polished word, waxy, tobacco colored. This one isn't dark and varnished like my grandparents' stuff, or the hodgepodge of old furniture in the other houses we've lived in; this new blond suite, angular, forward looking, seems a physical expression of my sister's grownupness and privacy. My parents never buy anything new, so who knows where it's come from; they must have had some little flourish of money as well as some burst of interest in style. Or did Sally choose it? She is almost sixteen, I am newly six; she will leave home soon, but we don't know that yet. For now the important thing for me is that she has become a Rainbow Girl. Is that where she is tonight, off with her new sisters? My parents are down the hall in the living room, watching television, far away, absorbed in something that does not concern me, so I am free to pursue my investigations.

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Her room is full of things that might invite my attention: a luscious satin pillow a boyfriend won for her at a fair, with verses written on it in stiff gold cursive and a border of irresistible yellow fringe. An autograph hound, a stuffed dachshund with a lean body of white cloth on which her friends have written salutations and verses and names. A record case made just for 45s, an object that seems feminine and precise, exactly suited to its purpose: beige vinyl fabric, fabric hinges, and when you lift the lid her favorites are revealed, black and glossy. I could pull out the matching phonograph and plug it in, but that wouldn't really interest me much. I like to hear the openings of the songs she likes—"You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog," "Love Me Tender," something by Brenda Lee—but I don't feel like sitting still for the rest of the song; I don't believe I will be rewarded for sustained attention. As I will be, I know with all my heart, the full certainty of my six-year-old power of belief, when I look into the drawer.

To recollect: that verb's exact, since here in the haze are elements of a collection, an assemblage of things so long unseen they might as well be the stuff of someone else's life. That fringed carnival pillow: I haven't seen that for forty years! And there it is, in sharp focus, weirdly noisy, the fabric crunching slightly when leaned into,

its texture unpleasant but also fascinating, as you run a finger across the roughish print of the text and the satin interstices: scribble of a sentimental poem of devotion. And though the devoted and the devotee have long moved on, and the physical pillow vanished decades ago, its texture is precisely available to my fingertips now. Am I a repository of vanished things which float to the surface, slowly, one at a time, each with invisible links to another?

My raggedy stuffed tiger, for instance, with its green glass eyes—little fragments of the divine fire, alert, energetic, like something out of Blake, though of course I don't think that then. He has long been put away, in the attic of our house on Ramses Street (the front porch has wide columns which taper at the top, a watered-down reference to Luxor). On some excursion with my mother into that hot, sequestered place, reached only by a mysterious collapsing stair that folds down from the ceiling, I've found him again and have taken pleasure in the recognition, a pleasure more complicated than mere affection. The nicely battered tiger is of a time which I think of as the past—of, as it were, childhoods childhood. Now, at six, I have a past; I have an object which refers to who I used to be.

But the drawer, precious and hermetic, refers to who I am now. And to something else, something veiled, and perhaps there's even a veil inside it, among these scraps of sheer and sparkled treasure. Sally must have shown them to me, proud of her new sense of belonging, though what they meant to her and what they mean to me are quite different things. For her they're evidence of a common bond, proof of sisterhood; for me they are alluring artifacts of difference.

On my knees in the half dark, I slip the drawer open, and it's like a pirate chest opened in a movie, little glimmers brilliant on the faceted surfaces of the treasures, little musical chimes sounding as if these were audible jewels. No light in the room except the glow emanating from these things, which include: a fan made from stiff folded net fabric—did Sally call it chiffon? No, that was the filmy beige stuff on her prom dress; this is tulle, striped, one watery hue merging into another, a skyey spectrum like the prisms in the air in my ViewMaster slides of Niagara Falls, rainbows over a lucky boat named *Maid of the Mist*. Glittery ribbons, camations

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made from Kleenex clipped with a bobby pin and fringed, just so, then unfolded into a burst of imitation blossom, one drop of cologne fragrant at the center. Scents, powders, delicious nail colors, an album into which she's pressed Rainbow invitations: the night all the new girls dressed as pickaninnies, required to do their faces from this round tin of blackface. They put their hair in one hundred—count them—little pigtails. Better: the invitation to the Rainbow Cotillion, inside whose stiff engraved fold of paper floats a perfect bit of aurora, like a ripple of colored atmosphere. *Aurora*: undulation of three vowels moving like heat-shimmer up off the Memphis pavement. *Cotillion*: I fall into the warm haze of the word, which contains crepe-paper flowers pinned to wrists and sashes, arbors made from twisted bits of tissue paper, and somewhere there are bells, reverberant as though the cotillion were held underwater, and bell-shaped dresses—tulle and chiffon and the stiff gold-printed satin of the pillow, the lovely whiplike tentacles of the fringe—all circling forever, almost untouchable, in a sphere of their own. In the album are ticket stubs and place cards and flattened decorated nut cups, party favors, beside which the familiar daily world of our house and things, the plain navy and dull scarred brown of my school seem dun, workaday—unseasoned, a tired old broth redolent of nothing but necessity.

Something about this pleasure feels entirely private. How do I know this is something to hide? Partly it's just that this room and its thrilling stuff are *hers*, but something runs deeper than that: my fetishism isn't about Sally but about beauty itself, about wrappings and presentation and display, about artifice and its perfection.

My education in beauty had already begun, and the new experience of school brought its brightest exemplar. Little Miss Sunbeam—whose face emblazoned an infinity of bread wrappers, whose image glowed on the sides of fleets of bakery trucks, the buttered bread in her hands like some physical manifestation of happiness—came to Peabody Elementary for purposes of entertainment, as if we were troops who required some recreational distraction, and for the rather shameless promotion of cottony white bread. (Our own brand of bread is Rainbo. I like to steal slices

from the kitchen, put the slices in a Mason jar with the lid screwed on tight, and bury it in the backyard. When I dig it up, magic: little galaxies of blue-black mold, *fleurs du mal*.) Some message about achievement must also have been implied in our grade-school assembly, since this perfect child was so accomplished she merited elevation to the fierce light of our auditorium's stage.

Peabody was a square building, imposing, multistoried, of gray and somnolent cement, something of civic pride or cultural ambition about it, something already historical and over by the time I got there, though no one had really noticed yet. A Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington hung in our classroom. It was unfinished, my teacher said, which is why his shoulders rose out of nothing, a billow of blank canvas, though it looked to me as if the Father of Our Country poked his head up through a bank of summer clouds, though he seemed oblivious to them, cheerlessly and permanently important. We faced him and the flag first thing in the morning to say the Pledge of Allegiance, sing a verse of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and then sit down at our desks, bow our heads, and mumble some unmemorable prayer. The best part of the song was the lines

*From ev'ry mountainside
Leh-et freedom ring*

which offered a deliciously abstract, vague prospect to visualize, something you could think about but not see. Lessons all day, mostly involving letters, phonics; I loved the phrase "consonant blend" and liked to say it to myself. White chalk dust, foggy clouds of it, when the erasers are taken outside and beaten out. Milk money, and the worn white marble stairs going up, up into Peabody School to the library, when we're taken there for a story, lined up according to our height. I am the tallest boy in first grade, but I don't feel large. I am a very careful boy. I want to do well and am aware of certain dangers. Take my Dick and Jane book, that reader in which little bouquets of short declarative sentences so quickly replace the new magic of deciphering the code with the boring actuality of what the symbols represent: "See Puff eat." We are each assigned a copy of the book, which we keep in our desks and are sometimes allowed to take home. I look ahead, curious

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about what else might appear on the stiff, strange-smelling pages, and right in the middle of my book is a horror: a starburst of mold, somebody's old—jelly sandwich maybe?—smashed right between father (in his brown fedora, just like my father's) and Dick and Spot. Not cool and beautiful like my buried bread-mold garden but too vivid, fierce. I am scared my teacher will think I've done this, violated the book; I'm responsible for it, after all, and I love my book even if it is weirdly boring and we read it so slowly, as if we are savoring something as insubstantial as a slice of that airy bread. I want to hide it, but the smell is so disgusting I have to tell her, and she doesn't blame me at all.

I can tell she *does* blame a girl named Valerie, though, who one day defecates on the floor while we are sitting at our desks working. How does she do it? She has her underpants on and a dress, a plaid wool jumper in a red-and-yellow tartan that suddenly looks sad, and yet right there on the linoleum only a desk or two in front of mine are two little turds, firm, perfectly formed, and terrifying. Many of us know the poop has come into the room with us before the teacher does, and when she discovers it other things seem forgotten. The big printed letters that ring the room, each lowercase version beside its capital parent, the clumsy tablets with alternating solid and broken blue lines, to help us shape the letters we practice with our fat pencils—all are eclipsed by the poop. Teacher picks it up with tissues. I'm aware of her red fingernails, a faint sweet scent of talcum. She doesn't shout or spank Valerie, but somehow it's worse. She says, "Why didn't you ask to go to the bathroom?" Valerie doesn't answer. Of course there isn't any answer, so Valerie looks all the smaller in her hapless Scotch plaid and I take it all in; I don't ever want to ask to go the bathroom (marble, cool, noise of water, big boys), because somehow I wouldn't want anyone to know I need to, but this means you have to choose between two kinds of shame, and Valerie made a bad choice.

A danger: out on the asphalt playground, from which the school's flung up into the air vertical as a Venetian palace, is a shady comer where immense old trees have been allowed to stay. The huge circumference of one oak (treasure of fallen acorns, in September) borders the street, half on the playground, half buck-

ling the sidewalk in a slow and undramatic earthquake. On this sidewalk, somebody said, a man in a car offered a girl candy. *Come into my car with me, and I will give you candy.* Then what happened? Something to do with safety.

I walk home from school on streets with big trees, sometimes wet in the rain, which brings new pleasures: dark navy and black umbrellas, unfurling vinyly smell. Safety patrols in their yellow slickers. Safety patrols! Another danger: big kids with shiny plastic sashes and authority with which they probably shouldn't have been entrusted. They have their own cloakroom, a clubhouse repository for their uniforms, and five minutes before school is over for everyone else a special bell rings and the safety patrols hurry to their cloakroom, don their badges and sashes, and rush to their comers. I have been to their room, once, on Halloween, when there was a special showing of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. The cloakroom itself seemed permanently moist, full of slick things, swathed in darkness.

The yellow-hamessed safety patrols came to seem scarier to me after the safety movie. The entire school was assembled; we first-graders marched into the auditorium last while the older kids watched us. Big numbers and visual static fired on the huge screen, large as the stage itself, pulled down over the red velvet curtain.

The movie concerned terrible things which happen to children who aren't careful. One girl walked home from school every day along a path that required her to go around a train yard, but that way was long and not as interesting as the parked trains, so the girl decided to take a shortcut, which means she broke a rule I didn't know: Never Walk Under a Parked Train. I've never been on or near a train, but still it's something I don't know. How many rules don't I know? The girl walks under the train, it's dark under there, there's a rumble and then everything swirls around into sirens and there she is in a hospital, bandaged and covered with cuts and dark shapes as if the dark under the train got on her skin, a tube in her nose, and bags of blood hang in the air next to her bed and maybe she won't live. Some children won't live, not if they're not safe. Don't Cross the Street without Looking, Don't Take Candy from Men: the movie's horrible and the horror's thrilling, too. The movie makes you think your body is vulnerable, subject to invasion,

cutting apart; that means you *have* a body, *are* a body. Like the moldy pages in my reader, the movie's shocking, physical. Seeing blood is like seeing Valerie's poop: it comes from inside you, can't always be held in, makes trouble, makes everything shriek and stop. Walking home from school: step, step, my legs, step, swing, my arms, look, swivel, wish, my head. Soul way down in there, little winged me, little shoot, like when you cut open an onion and there's that new green hidden in the center, wanting to shout its way out, but be careful: lose your body and the soul jumps out, like the little man my grandmother told me jumps out of the log in the fire when you hear that pop—that sound means he's broken free of the wood that held him. But you don't want to break free, do you? Body feels strange, alien when you stand back from it: rub the back of your neck, just where the hair starts: whose hair, whose head?

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Our auditorium was put to less sanguine but equally instructive use the day Little Miss Sunbeam appeared. Was the girl on the bread wrapper actually drawn in her likeness? More likely I saw one of a series of Misses, since all that was required were apple cheeks, a pinafore, and those signifying ringlets, weirdly quaint and otherworldly even in 1959. Who was she? Older than as presented, I imagine, a girlish almost-teen in a Shirley Temple dress, white ankle socks, and tap-shoe Mary Janes.

Those tap shoes! They partook of something, gleamed with that Rainbow Girl allure—something like a kind of ectoplasm spread across an ordinary surface, transformative, lending the lucky thing a resonance, an authority.

Silence, the house lights dimming, the velvet curtain black now, and drawn. A drumroll, and then a voice we've never heard before, an assured voice from TV or the circus, "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, brought to you by the Sunbeam Bread Company, the little lady herself, Little Miss Sunbeam!"

And she launches herself through the curtain's opening, flinging both sides back with a showgirl's knowing toss of the arms, and begins to dance a full-throttle no-holds-barred tap routine. She is a dynamic entity of blondness, legs, and polka dots, her arms spun in circles as she does time steps, tap shoes clicking out an entrancing speedy patter, ringlets bouncing, and then—wonder—

she opens her mouth to sing, and does. *What* I could not tell you now, can in fact barely reconstruct the details of her performance, it is such a rhapsodic blur of aesthetic achievement, show business, and glamour. Her dance seems spontaneous, so effortless does she make each move appear, but of course it's carefully planned, a faultlessly executed performance of who she's labored so to become, any sign of her work subsumed in the bravura of her art. She is my first diva, probably all of twelve, a painted doll in rouge and big eyelashes, and who wouldn't be entranced by such a production? Since it's both transcendent and a little frightening at once: she is of us and yet so much more than us; there is no danger to *her* body; she is beyond limit and has entered a realm in which she is above all harm.

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I have a problem with my parents, which has to do with what to call them. I don't know when this began, the origins of my situation seem to go so deeply into the past. I've only six years of experience, far less of memory, but as my tiger demonstrates, forgetting is a long, deep well, already dark with layers of unrecorded time. Who knows what occasions and relics that seemingly empty shaft contains? I have no conscious awareness of this problem, of course, as children never have terms for what in their lives is truly grave.

With each parent, this difficulty arises from opposite causes. My relationship with my mother is immense to me, and occupies so much space I can barely see around it. She is both my element and also somehow singular, slightly forbidding; she is not to be displeased. Though she is often quite tender to me, there is something about her which precludes ease; that's the signal characteristic of our relation: intimacy without ease. "Mom" seems out of the question, its casual, everyday quality entirely wrong; there is some gravity or strain to our connection which prohibits it. A good boy, I am in some way her representative in the world of better possibilities than she has known; I am to do well in school, am somehow precious. Things are expected of me, and such a child would address his mother as "Mother"—but that feels weirdly stiff because it acknowledges an absence of spontaneity: the term makes

us part of a drama, makes me an actor in a family play.

With my father it's simpler: we simply lack connection. He's a force on the horizon, but a distant one, like the sort of storm you see in the Midwest, visible across uncountable acres of cornfields. Maybe it will sweep in to give you trouble but probably not, not often. In my mind he is concerned with a particular universe of things that have to do with his work shiny metal lunch box, domed like a vaulted chapel. Drafting tools set precisely in leather cases, three-sided rulers for measuring what? Shiny white hard hat. Little red castle, two-towered, on a decal on the windshield of his government truck, emblem of the Army Engineers. Mornings he eats shredded wheat soaked in milk from a tall drinking glass while the coffee percolates, then he's gone. Home at night, home from a trip, sometimes he brings me something, some breakable little toy, reward for his absence. I manipulate him with expectation, make it clear that I will be so pleased to receive something (a "play-pretty," our term for toy, something I used to say as a baby) as consolation, but I already know I don't need consoling. After-shave, boxer shorts, milk of magnesia in blue bottles: mostly I don't need to call him anything.

Though just now I do, because I have done something wrong, and there is about to be a crisis, and only I can avert it.

I am in Sally's room, absorbed in the pleasures of the drawer. Above the bureau is a large mirror, and I am lifting things from the drawer up to see them in the glass, to see them beside my face: *real* play-pretties, though these aren't toys but instances, embodiments of beauty, and I am attempting some physical connection to them, seeking some relation between them and my body: what might be done with this, and this? How would one hold oneself, how compose the face, the look, to bring oneself into the realm of the things? Somehow the requirement is to bring the body into their universe, align it with their laws: how to become worthy of that shine? Here on the bureau top's a water glass, its base cut with little faceted grooves. I remember that to have perfect posture—Sally's told me this—you must learn to walk with something balanced on your head, a book or a drinking glass, and if you hold yourself perfectly erect and walk without the object falling from your head then you are a *model*. Meaning: different body, accom-

plishment of the body? I put the glass on top of my head, pulling myself up straight, the glass wobbles, I lift my arms up for balance, that's better, I'm getting it now. Another wobble, so I try moving my head from side to side a little like a Balinese dancer, and that's it, slip and disaster, the glass crashes to the floor and shatters, unnaturally loud.

Now we're in a movie again, a safety movie, in slow motion: I am standing paralyzed by what I've done, there's a rush and roar from the direction of the living room, my father rising from the couch, he's coming down the hall, I'm afraid he's going to spank me, I remember the last time, the humiliation of it, him pulling my pants down on the porch and whaling me, his red face filled up with blood and rage, striking at me because what have I done? *Now* I've done something plain and sharply lit like the big shards of glass on the floor, and I've backed up into the corner of the room, away from the breakage and away from the door he's about to come through, and as he does the movie gets even slower. He's a blur in pajama bottoms and white strap undershirt. He's running, one leg raised high in the air, high as my head, he's saying something, but the film's going so slow I can't understand it, something like, "What the hell have you done?" but the word *What* hangs in the air, oily, dark, and long. And I see that he's barefoot: his feet and ankles are pink and white, those are the colors of him, milky rosewater skin exposed beneath the blue pajama trousers, his foot's in the air and he's moving forward, he wants to see what I have broken and is about to step down hard in front of the bureau where the glass is, the biggest piece gleaming there with a diamond drop of light on its sharpest point like the glitter on the rainbow treasure gone cold and perverse.

I want to say, *Stop*, I want to say, *There's glass there*, don't! I have all the time in the world, as the film goes sputtering in the loops and sprockets of the old elementary school projector; I have minutes to say, Daddy, don't *step on the glass*. But nothing comes out of my mouth; I'm fixed there, forever, a boy who tried to be a model.

And then he screams. End of film, crackle, sputter, and then slap of the last bit of celluloid against the reel: somebody turn it off.

Now, here's my father on the couch, foot in a bowl of water my

mother's brought, a big tin basin. Strangely I am not being punished, not even yelled at; I seem to have disappeared, my mother and father entirely occupied with the wound. The water in the basin turns pink, then deepens, a bowl of hellish rosé, and a pale piece of skin floats on the surface: pink and white.

I'm sent to what my parents call "the neighbor lady's" while they leave for the emergency room. There is some sense about this that I am being consoled, though of course I am not the wounded one; am I looking stricken, is my fear in my face? The neighbor lady has a wonderful maid named Martha; her lap's practically a continent. We sit at the kitchen table, me and the neighbor lady's daughter, whom Martha will only refer to as Miss Carla, although she is at most a fourth-grader. Martha makes popcorn for me in a black iron pot (cheery zing and pop against the lid) and says, "Child, your daddy's going to be all right."

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At all of eight or nine, Miss Carla requires a prefix of respect, her four-letter pedestal. She's acquired a certain hauteur; she is elongated—because she practices ballet daily, up on toes, hands above her head, becoming taller, more attenuated?—and a little cruel. She teaches me to bum ants on the sidewalk with a magnifying glass. I don't like it, don't see the point, except for the fascination of the circle of focused sunlight, its wavery edge becoming solid as it shrinks down to a punishing pinpoint, as Carla's very white hand finds just the right position for the lens. She incinerates them with abandon, and they writhe just an instant and wrinkle up. She catches lightning bugs in mayonnaise jars and carries the dying little lamps around as a kind of sorry torch. When I try this one evening, my mother says, "But they might be parents. What if their children are waiting for them?" and I let all the bugs go. Digging in the damp clay of the backyard, Carla and I find a perfectly enormous worm, a foot long and just as pink and big around as my thumb; with her toy spade she chops it in half with abandon, so that each half will grow a new body. She adores and cultivates her power and seeks new theaters of operation in which to exercise it. One day I am myself, in some subtle way not without its fascination, not without desire, its object. She opens her closet to show

me her trove of ballet costumes: an arsenal, a ritual wardrobe, the treasure of the trolls kept in the dark beneath their bridge. Glitter and sequin and tulle upon tulle in layers, no single piece standing alone but each a part of an ensemble, each bodice with its attached tutu accompanied by headpieces and matching shoes, sleek and sheened, with their strange, blunt toes.

A show begins: Carla goes behind a door, emerges, in a bit, in the outfit of the moment, which is linked to a piece of music, which is linked to particular steps. The item revealed, coming to life as her body occupies it and steps into a position, then another. Then the scene's over, back behind the door, another outfit, soon the pieces strewn everywhere. Martha out in the hallway: "Miss Carla, are you in those clothes? You know your mother wants you to take good care of those." No response from Carla except that she goes to draw another suite of fabrics from the dark. Martha moves away, mumbling.

Why does it seem cruel? The show's somehow about titillation—not sexual, exactly, but a display of wealth and of possession. It demonstrates, for Carla, her power over the adults who've bought her this dragon hoard of glitter. For me her impromptu pageant is about the oddly potent associations of the stuff, and how she's transformed by it. Does she recognize in me some fascination or longing, a puzzled rapture in what she possesses? I sit on the edge of her bed, in thrall, powerless. The show continues, the *chef d'oeuvre* an extravaganza à la Josephine Baker: Carla emerges as a night sky, her black outfit the empyrean between the little lights of heaven. Bits of glimmer comprise a shifting disorder of constellations. Stiff black feathered cloche, black sequins, *noir* sparkle that rustles with a faint iridescence, prismatic gleam emerging from a rhapsody of gloom; Queen of the Night, Mistress of Devils, body of the Snow Queen, so milky she looks blue, especially in her shadowed armpits, the hollows of her legs as she spins then bolts across the room in near jetés, so long, angular, and black that she's a black swan, her long neck strained and undulant. No, better: a black flamingo.

Martha also looks blue, but because she is so black. I love her. She smells like clean ironed cotton, mostly because, when she comes to our house one day a week, or every other week, she

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spends the day ironing. My mother hates to iron, she says; on *her* ironing days, this ritual: she stands over the unfolded metal board with a big basket of clean laundry on the floor beside her: sheets, shirts, my father's patterned boxer shorts. On the edge of the board is her spray starch, a big ashtray, her flip-top box of Salems a deep mint green. Iron, smoke, spray the little atomized droplets, smoke, walk around, and smoke a little more. The gradual emptying of the basket seems endless, Sisyphean. One day when she's gone out I take one of the Salems for myself, light it, go out to the front porch and inhale the mentholed cloud, and am quickly dizzy and sick, swirling in my head like the girl who got hit by the train. Martha's ironing days are long and steady, no cigarettes; lovely scent of the hot iron and the smoothed clothes. A fine day for me, when Martha comes; I bring books or drawing paper and crayons and sprawl on the floor close to the ironing board, or pursue my favorite project of the moment, which is to cut magazine pages into very tiny triangles until I have filled a saucepan from the kitchen with them, and then I stir the paper with a spoon. Martha talks some about this and that: the weather, the work I am doing, her children. One day I meet them, when she brings them to Carla's house for a visit, because there's some problem and Martha doesn't have anyplace else for them to go that afternoon, which they must spend playing outside while she works; three small girls in clean, worn dresses, their faces scrubbed to shining, hair combed and tightly rubber banded. I like them, their sweet alienness. If I mention Miss Carla while Martha's pushing the iron back and forth along the metal-colored cloth of the board, Martha will sigh and say nothing, and then get into the spirit of her version of gossip, a good-natured mixture of resignation and complaint.

I like her word for Miss Carla: a "tribulation." Miss Carla is a tribulation to her. Martha's assigned task is to respect her (as rich girl and employer's daughter) and control her at once, which both Martha and Carla know is impossible. Carla resists and ignores, and yet she must always be Miss Carla regardless. Therefore Miss Carla has won, particularly since she has long ago conquered the prime arena of her struggle for power, her mother. Her mother is Carla's chief accomplishment.

"Neighbor lady"—as opposed to referring to her by name—is

an economical means by which my parents convey disapproval almost entirely overshadowed by fascination. The elements of her character that are to be censured are precisely those that assure unflagging interest in her as a topic of conversation. She's a single mother, a term no one's thought of yet; the phrase of the hour is "out of wedlock," which has to be explained to me. "Neighbor lady" avoids the sticky problem of the appropriate prefix; would she be insulted by "Miss"? Does she defile the dignity of "Mrs."? To her face, they take the Southern tack of blurring her to a "Mizz."

She is or was, my mother says, the mistress of a Famous Jazz Musician from New Orleans. My mother inflects *New Orleans* in a way which makes that pretty name seem aligned with *Mistress*, a pair of soft words, against the hard and opaque opposite term, *wedlock*. As if they represented two cities, choices a person might make, the shadowy and slightly indecent New Orleans on the one hand, and plain well-lit wedlock on the other.

Mistress is evocative and inviting: sibilant, a little hissy. (I love the phrase *hissy fit* which is what people have when they get upset.) The words tinged with a bit of Carla's mean streak, and her mother's lush burst of red hair, a color my mother maintains is nothing the Lord intended. She's often away; is she visiting the clarinetist? Is he the one who buys the outfits that rustle and shine in the dark of that closet, ensembles enough for an entire nine-year-old corps de ballet?

Probably it's the next day when I'm shown my father's stitches; probably I'd fallen asleep, next door, and someone's come to carry me home: sleepy body, up in the air over someone's shoulder; when you're carried, your face is that much closer to the sky. I know a little of what proceeds in great starry rotation over Memphis: Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Polaris, Milky Way. Or maybe it was that very night the wound was revealed to me, beneath its white shroud of gauze bandages, the suture displayed not as reminder of my guilt but as reassurance, so that I might understand the limit of what I've done, that it is specific and bounded: a jagged curve of black wire pulling together a violet seam along the pale underside of the foot, just the shape of the largest piece of glass.

Here my narrative vanishes in memory, gone underground like a stream. Or maybe now the scene shifts to some interior place: the classroom in the head, the room entirely lined with blackboards on which are chalked the characters I am learning to read, my version of an alphabet, gestures and figures translated to ideograms, star charts unreadable. Some adult says, *You couldn't help it*, but you're nearly asleep, aren't you; do you even hear? And now another interior space opens, not a schoolroom, though equally dark: a theater, on the strange promise of whose stage the Rainbow Girls are one by one making their appearance. In tulle and privacy, in tap shoes and spotlight, in a black glossier than all the night around her, in a wig wine-dark or flame or golden, each moves singly and shyly toward her debut.

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