

BEFORE COMPLETION

His chariot overturned, something that has been coming, perhaps, because he has been working so hard, double shifts, and I see the things, the material things he buys with that skill in his hands, his work environment so dangerous I feel my skin peel with guilt when I kiss him off to his shift every morning. Bringing home his calloused hands, a house, car, clothes, and food is his expression of his love. And in this heat.

And the occasional sincerity that pops out whenever his ego is engaged elsewhere. When he's not busy protecting the shell I saw through when we met eight months ago.

How can I not pity him? He's struggling with my filling womb. Day after day it reproaches him. Can he Do it all, he is thinking. And I am this strange woman with green breasts who will soon be saying there is a doctor to go to, baby clothes to buy, diapers, new shoes.

Is that why yesterday he spent one hundred dollars drinking for an afternoon and evening in a bar?

Was he with someone?

It's dangerous for him to be so detached, removed, looking down at me from his safe perch; he might just float away and never be able to find his way back. Or, when he does, it will be too late.

The problem, of course, is change. Permanent change. Think of the risk: you bring a woman into your house and then this woman becomes pregnant with what might be a monster or a unicorn--(it will be a warrior and it will be a she; I can see her now in her white tunic, that sword in the air, a white horse coming out of the sky as she stands upon boulders, wild boars and mountain goats on the stony ground below her). A daughter that will be stronger than her father.

But all he can think about is that his life has changed irrevocably. Will there be a hawk on the top of that ladder? He's full of so many colors that he doesn't want to exhale; he wants to hold his breath forever, fears the next one he takes will not be so beautiful. All the hues he is holding inside--they'll mix together and become black. So he must exhale soon, or the black will wipe out all of us.

He has just vomited for the second time in the bathroom. I set a glass of water beside him on the tile floor so he could rinse his mouth. I tip-toe through the rowhouse, pretending indifference to his hangover.

Of course he thought he had already fulfilled himself; growth was done. But he sees now that each new step reveals another and yet another step, and our feelings are never safe; they never jell unless we are sick.

He's made himself sick. With fear.

The fulfillment of his cup, overturned into his lap. His cup runs over and stains the garments I wash. He's dreaming about all the things he's wanted that now I'll keep him from getting. He drinks instead of pushing himself up to the next plane.

Can I be blamed because he was looking for a woman, the stomach that he wanted to kiss and press his face into, now the soft round belly of a woman swelling with his child? Why do women and men make love if not to have children? We sublimate it, but I am living proof that birth control pills are not infallible. If you come in me a baby might come out. That is what it means to be a woman, whether we take advantage of it or not, that is how we control or lose control of our lives. The woman draws him home after his shift; when he walks into what used to be his own house, he steps into her. And thus I give to him.

But he makes me take from him as well, and in his black nights I am the merciless deity that robbed from him everything he thought he had. I am the moan that slips from between his lips as he lies down now in the bed and turns his face away from my kiss, the room shaded and reeking of alcohol.

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And so I will have to teach him by shock, my grand escape a final attempt at education. I will step out into the world, leaving him completely behind.

For how long should I wait for him to come around? You cannot teach those who do not want to know. And MY lesson has always been for me to be kind to myself.

I have given up; my absence is a matter of time.

For how do you teach someone to love? By loving them or by loving yourself? How many more mornings can I wake hopefully, before I become bitter, before bitterness becomes the second nature I have always promised myself I would never adopt? Because I know there are better men than he.

So I plan my route, my escape. Soon I will know exactly how I will make my move. My girlfriend will

come with her car for my clothes, only two suitcases worth, the rest I can leave behind. My pots and pans to my friend Maria; she can never leave, her feet are nailed to her trailer floor, her two daughters, the man who has had three wives and will not marry her. Yes, I will leave her my iron pots and stainless steel pans to replace her bent aluminum. She will be cooking for the rest of her life.

And me? Not for much more will I be listening for his truck to stop outside the door; soon my world will revolve around the world revolving.

In my escape I will rent a car, borrow a tent, and drive to the ruins, Indian mounds outside the city limits, out in the hills that no one goes to except the ones who live in their trailers, their farm houses, their Vietnam veteran hideaways with no running water. I have a credit card. I have my degree. There is a job waiting for me somewhere. I will leave everything behind and start over.

Just this multiplying seed inside me I will carry as I go. I must protect her from my bile.

A doctor would tell me I was foolish, but I know that my daughter absorbs the food I eat, the oxygen, the water I drink. So how could she not know of my suffering, the bitter taste on my lips, the sweetness gone, all the dreams amounting to nothing? He is drunk again today, just enough after work to make him numb.

And so I will drive to the ruins, the Indian mounds, the caves overlooking the river before it winds its way into town. I will leave a letter and the golden band that is supposed to pass for a wedding ring, on my finger to prevent me, I suppose, from feeling humiliated.

But what do I care! If I were married, it would be to this beautiful man who is no more, suddenly a son of a bitch who looks for pretexts to shout, hiss, scream, rid himself of the frustration that is drowning him.

We have ruined his life, he thinks. Without us there would be nothing to worry about, And thus we will give to him what he thinks he wants--the freedom that used to strangle him. We will empty the house we filled by our presence and give it back to him. He will have again the space that we took away.

For it seems to me that I was never without this child growing inside me. All my life I have been preparing for this. All of my life. My breasts swelling, nipples a deep maroon, my stomach growing round and hard like a basketball. So I will protect this daughter from bitterness though I will be alone, unwed, for the moment unemployed. I can no longer consider her father, his cruelty, the motives behind his fear. Those are problems he must resolve without me. I cannot be his whipping post.

She cannot be our whipping post.

Above all, I must be healthy. For her. And him I will not allow near me unless he is healthy as well. Yes, we will leave him what he thinks he wants, trusting that our leaving is what he has needed all along.

Without us, there is nothing, no reason. Because when a man loves, no matter how he fights it, he can never be the same. He either opens to himself or closes forever.

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I make a list as he lies drunk on the bed. I sit in the next room, feeling the air pass between the front and back doors, in the antique rocking chair he bought when I first told him I was pregnant. Who knows what image he had of me then--an earth-mother rocking in an American primitive, now the great-grandmother with bad breath who perched him on her knees, always held him too tightly and wrapped him in a scratchy blanket. I creak in the hall in the breeze. Like all women, I watch a man in his sleep, hoping he will wake up and talk to me. I need to talk.

But his answer is always a silent If you don't like it, leave.

So I'm leaving. Like that, click. The invisible.

My list: walkman, address book, a few tapes and books, passport, wallet and credit cards, a few clothes (pink dress, sneakers, shorts, sandals, t-shirts, underwear), face and body creme, shampoo and rinse, vitamins. Toothbrush and toothpaste.

Who knows where I will go with my thousand dollar cash advance!

But what I really want to do is crawl in bed beside him, sure he will not turn a stiff back to me, the length of him an indifferent blade against my curved body. I no longer feel safe approaching him: he doesn't love me. The daughter inside me knows he doesn't love me.

I wrap my arms around myself and it is not enough.

And what man would not agree? What man would not want to be left so that he could suffer, the strike a slap on his backside, forcing him to take a breath and yell, squawl his naked infant cry into the wilderness? Until he loves and weeps, he is his own prisoner, until he knows his own limits, he is limited.

A man prays for a woman who will give him enough rope to hang himself.

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The plan in action: today when he goes off to work I am leaving; my friend is driving over in her Volkswagen bus to get me. We will rattle to the car dealership where I will lease an economy car. I will kiss and hug her goodbye and promise to write. I will leave him a note propped up against the bar.

I pretend to be asleep when he turns off the alarm and lights a cigarette. He sits in the half-dawn of what will be a double shift, smoking, tapping his ashes into a bowl filled with more ashes and twisted cigarettes. He does not look at me.

I lie on my back, my stomach a slight immovable swell, fingers placidly pursed at the knuckles. Pretending to sleep, my eyes slitted, just the slightest glint of my light escaping and catching him, there, his slouched profile in the darkness giving him the hump of a burdened man.

But not for long: my two cases are packed and stashed in the closet. There is a gym bag in the front hall, behind the door. He will become a different sort of burdened man.

The burdened man crawls out of bed in the half darkness and pulls on his clothes. He does not touch me before he slides away.

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Perhaps I belong here. Perhaps I have been here before, at the foot of this mound, the scratch marks of others in the earth, looking for ruins.

But I don't remember this sky so blue, so perfect with just that one cloud, hanging forever before me on the horizon, as if there had never been such a thing as wind.

This land, hollows formed when the glaciers melted. They carried all the topsoil away with their rushing rivers, seeking the easiest course, eating their way through mud to the ocean.

The rivers still run, some shrunken to streams. What is left is red clay, sulphur coal. This Indian mound.

Perhaps the diggers were the professors who came here with their students from the university. Miles away, they halted construction of the new highway; someone found other Indian mounds when they were blasting through the cliffs to form their straight path. And the university professors got an injunction, made them go foot by foot while they excavated. They found spearheads and bones, Indian seed pod corn that one of them managed to germinate after it had been two hundred years in the ground, surrounded by ashes. The professor grew a field of it.

And my seed, how long has it been germinating? Four months? A million years?

And my silly tent, with its ridiculous contents of bread, nuts, peanut butter, prenatal vitamins. Did we just arrive? Or have we been waiting to come here?

Perhaps the diggers were amateur archaeologists, fascinated by the Indian nations we destroyed, here for the artifacts.

From the top of this mound I see no where by down and over, out over the hollows whose trees are so tall their tops equal the height where I sit watching their swaying back and forth in the summer heat, the yellow fields beyond dotted with black and white dairy cattle, just the tip of a barn roof peaking out.

Most likely all of the barn is visible in the winter.

The evening before, when I arrived, as I was setting up my tent, fog rose from the streams below me, crawling up through the trees, the sky beige before the blackness descended.

There was no moon.

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He wonders where I am, the house cleaned before I left. His clothes washed, ironed. The note where he can find it, propped against a half-empty bottle that I am sure he will finish.

I don't know how long I'll have to stay here, how long until it will be right for me to leave. I felt this morning a tiny bubbling, my daughter moving inside. Hawks circled above me, round and round, a geometrical design on the white underside of their wings.

A lone runner moves along the road, a woman, steadily up and down the gravel inclines, the straightaways I can see from my perch. For three mornings I have watched her appear, intent, unaware of me. I watched her back until she curved around a bend and I was alone again. On the fourth day she stopped and took the path toward me. She was barely panting when she reached the top of the mound. She stood with her hands on her hips before me as I sat, not looking at me, gazing instead at the view below us, her chest rising and falling, outlined muscles in her long legs at my eye level.

After a moment she turned to me and said, "There are teenaged boys who drive around these roads to drink at night. I noticed you don't have a dog."

She insisted I go with her to the grocery store when she got back from work.

"If you want to do something," she said, "tomorrow you can cut my grass."

Cut her grass. Horizontal lines side by side, leaving little wheel marks. A job well done for one who is doing nothing.

"Call him," she says. "Let me call him."

But I shake my head.

At the supermarket she makes me pick out the vegetables.

"Lots of greens," she coaxes. "I'll go over to the fish counter."

She leaves me with an empty cart and a hand full of empty plastic bags.

He liked spinach.

I choose spinach and broccoli and a dozen oranges. I eye the grapes.

"Buy them," she says. Her crucifix shines. She reached past me into the cart. "Just let me deposit these tomatoes."

I knot the purple grapes without seeds into a baggie. A man weighs everything for me.

On the way home the windows are down and Barbara's short hair flutters about her face, around the frames of her sunglasses. We pass a farm house and she honks twice at a man walking in the front yard with a white cane. He turns toward the sound of her car and waves. She downshifts at the curve, the wheels throwing up gravel. We cruise around a horseshoe-shaped ridge and she honks once more at two women digging in a garden that has sprouted between two trailers.

"I run by here every morning," she explains.

I marvel at the distance, me, whose life has stopped but whose belly grows.

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She tells me nothing about God but her house is full of plants. Every morning I have been here she gets up and runs, returns lathered to what must never have seemed, even before me, an empty house. Then a long shower while I lie in the guest room in a narrow bed beside a closed sewing machine. She's in training, she says, for the city race.

"It runs the length of the river past the suburbs, out into the hills," she promises, "then circles around and comes back."

Then she says: "Call him."

It has been two weeks. My hand always stops before I pick up the receiver.

Last night Barbara and I sat out on her screened porch that looks out over another screened-in porch twenty feet away. Indigestion burned under my ribs.

"It's going to pour," she said. But the rain never materialized.

When he was eighteen, his mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage. He came home from his job at a market, and there she was, lying on the kitchen table, his father, younger brothers, and sister clustered around her body. He said that her feet hung over the edge of the table at the ankles.

"I'm sure he's ashamed of himself," Barbara said over her shoulder to me that night as she dished out the spinach. "He's probably out of his mind with worry."

"What happened to your husband?" I asked.

She shrugged and set the steaming bowl in the center of the table. She sat and unfolded a napkin into her lap, then said a silent grace. I imitated her.

"It started out with exercise," she said, handing me the butter, "and ended with religion." The kitchen was full of yellow light from the evening sun. She gave a half-laugh. "He didn't want me to change without him." She sipped iced tea. "But what's marriage that can't take change? What are people who don't?"

I moved my food around on my plate.

"Call him," she said. Softly. Insistent as a nun.

But what would I say?

"Let him do the talking," she said. "After all, he chased you away. He was mean to you."

Yes. Then why go back at all?

Barbara had an appetite. She devoured carbohydrates.

"Who said anything about going back?" she asked.

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A bright moon and I am alone. Barbara is out. There's a cricket in a shadowed corner of the porch, rubbing its legs together. I have watched the lights in the surrounding houses go out, some one by one as I imagine a

person passing through each room and turning them off. Others must be on a main switch: they all disappear together.

There was a photograph of him, taken on a camping trip, just out of high school. It hung on his living room wall. The day I moved in, he ticked the names of his buddies off, boys clinging riotously together with a whole river behind them.

"That's Joe with the bottle, Jim, Bart. Bart. He never made it back from Vietnam. Bill--his wife took him to the cleaners in their divorce. Smuckers--that son of a bitch got himself killed driving home from the bar six months after the picture was taken."

"Are any of them still married?" I asked.

He flopped onto the couch and put his feet up.

"No. None. Well, yes. Joe's still married. He lives in Tulsa with three kids. Joe went to college. And I guess Tom there--yeah, Tom's still married. Of course."

He named them all that day, my unpacked bags still out in the hall. He trusted me.

A car pulls into the driveway next door, a teenaged girl, her boyfriend borrowing his father's Olds. The engine turns off but they stay in the front seat for a long time, heads close together. Finally the passenger door opens, slams, and a slight figure with waist-length hair runs toward the house. The screen door springs shut behind her as she disappears into a cave of darkness, and I can hear a dead bolt thump into place.

His mother left a five-year-old baby behind when she died, and the girl grew up among men. When she started her period, her brothers teased her that she was dirty. Finally her teacher at school noticed the red stain on the back of her dress and sent her to the nurse to have everything explained.

He and I had been lying in bed that morning, talking about the mystery of birth, how we really are animals, one foot in the heavens and one in the mud, with an aversion to both.

("I wouldn't call it 'aversion'," Barbara had told me. "I'd name it 'fear'.")

And he suddenly remembered his younger sister's first menstration and how none of them had helped her, not even the school nurse, he guessed, because two years later she was pregnant. She lives on welfare now with three kids, all from different men. He called the men bastards, not the children, because the men had all run out on her when she needed them. "And who," he had demanded that morning in bed as he rolled away from me, "would marry her now?"

Tonight the moon is a woman sighing. Her grey eyes mourn above all passage, over the upturned faces of children gazing into the night. My daughter floats in her own ocean, moving like a ripple beneath my ribs.

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