

Afternoon Tea

While reaching into the corners of her daughter's closet Jessica's fingers brushed against a memory. All woodgrain and sharp angles, she lifted it into the light of the room and steeled herself for a misty wave of nostalgia. A carving. Gourd shaped with a square stem. One of her daughter's earlier works. With an attempt at a bowl gouged out of the bulbed end, it looked like a three-year-old's attempt at paraphernalia.

She knew immediately what she had found but for the sake of a last bit of comedic bonding feigned outrage and swung around to Emily framed in the doorway. "What is this?"

Emily stopped breathing, dropped the basket of laundry she had been hauling to cross the room. "Where did you find this?"

"Next to your empty box of rolling papers and Dad's spice grinder."

"Mom. Stop."

"You? No. The twins maybe, but not you."

Emily plucked it from her mother's open palm, twisted to find better light. "How long has it been?"

"Sis?"

"Since the last time she came?"

"Who?"

"I wonder if it's still in tune." The girl raised the tiny instrument to her lips, blew a note, lifted a finger to pitch up. Scowling, she eyed it like a jeweler. "Needs redrilled."

How old when it first manifested? Three? Four? Three.

A girl of many hobbies, they never gave a second thought to Emily's whittling. She remembered the first time Emily asked for a chunk of softwood from the hardware store. Stuck between the choice of eggshell and satin at the paint counter, Jessica waved her away, but the tot persisted.

"That would be absolutely perfect!" She heard from over her shoulder. "Mom, can I get a few of these? With money? Can I give that man some of your money and bring these home?"

She was three. Talked circles around the other kids. It wasn't the blessing you think. That was all her father's doing, with his dictionary editing work and his unceasing patience with her obsession with language.

But those little cuboids of balsawood were new. Two inches to a side, an inch around the back. She held one out to her mother like an offering centered in her open palms.

The next day she weaseled a paring knife and disappeared, returning a few hours later half-naked, thumbs bleeding, covered in wood shavings. "I forgot to go to the potty," she said looking down at her soiled pants.

They didn't know what to say.

And now she is eighteen and grown and packing for college.

“Ms. De Villiers,” Emily said. “Do you remember the last time she came?”

Jessica stared.

Emily stared back. An expression that Jessica couldn’t parse. Eyebrows up, lips parted.

“Imaginary friend, Mom.”

“Oh. Oh God. Yeah.”

“I must have been like thirteen.” She gave a final toot, handed the flute back to Jessica.

“Put that back where you found it?”

Jessica did, pulled herself from the closet to find her daughter gormless in the center of the room. “More clothes,” Jessica said, pointing.

Emily snatched the box and disappeared through the door.

Crossing to the desk, Jessica check-stepped over a brown smear on the carpet, looked back as it scurried into the closet.

“You alright?” Emily at the door.

“Jeeze. Yeah, scared a mouse out from behind your desk.”

Emily froze midstep. “Where’d it go?”

“Closet. Glad I wasn’t in there.”

Bounding to the closet door, Emily dropped to her knees and fanned her arms into the shadows beneath the hanging clothes. “Where did you put it?”

“What?”

“The flute?”

“Back corner.”

A rock back and Emily was on her feet. “It’s gone.”

“What?”

“The flute!” Giggling, she turned a slow circle watching the floorboards.

“Em?”

“Yeah?”

Jessica pointed at another box on the floor. “Clothes.”

Emily hefted the box, glanced into the unlit corners, stepped toward the door and stopped, heeled around. “Let me know if you see another one.”

“Hey!” Jessica called out the door.

“Yeah?” From the hallway.

“What do you need out of your desk?”

“Nothing. Wait.” Emily appeared with the box on her shoulder. “Is my bit brace in there?”

“What?”

“Actually, the Eggbeater would work better. Get the egg beater and the tin of bits. I’ll be back.”

“What?” Jessica said to the empty doorway.

Emily’s floating head cartoon-sideways in the doorframe. “The drill. The rotary drill. Looks like an egg beater. Tool roll. Bottom drawer. Bits are in a tin. Top drawer.”

Jessica rummaged till she found the box of bits. Opened the bottom drawer on a pair of eyes like gleaming beads in the clutter. A whiskered freeze and twitch, then the mouse leaped free in a grey-brown arc and zigzagged maniac to the closet. Jessica stood breathing with her hand on her forehead, composed herself then bent to the drawer. Where the mouse had sat was

another of Emily's instruments. Carved imitation of mandolin or banjo the sagging runs of string jangled as she lifted it from the drawer to eye it then placed it on the desk.

She stared. The Instrument. The closet. The instrument.

You see now that this abnormality can manifest in different ways. You thought her free of it but she was only better at hiding the obsessions. Notches on the doorframe, she caught every inch of growth the day of. Mom I'm an inch taller come see, she said. The signs were there. For you it is numbers but for her it is shape and form and potential and the volumes inside and out of all things. The sculptors mind. The architect.

Stop lying to yourself, she caught it too. But unlike yours, her obsessions will be useful.

She saw but did not see Emily standing in the door, waving her hand in an attempt to break her mother's trance.

"Mom?"

"Huh?"

"You alright?"

"Oh. Yeah. Saw another mouse."

"Where?"

"In the drawer."

Emily jiggled across the room, dropped to the floor beneath the desk. "Where'd it go?"

"Closet."

Jolting up, Emily grabbed her mother by the arms and laughed and held her gaze. Wild eyed energy, whites visible the whole way around. *Surprise? Panic?*

Jessica recoiled.

"Ope. Sorry, mom."

How you worried then over those eyes. Those same eyes long ago in the hospital bassinet. The eyes that you tested. Would she shy away?

“The banjo! Wow!”

Jessica turned to see the girl dialing the tiny knobs at the end of the instrument’s neck.

“You know, I didn’t think all this was affecting me but I guess it is.”

“What do you mean?”

Emily waved the banjo. “This. I don’t think I’ve seen Ms. De Villiers since that Calc Two final, what? Sophomore year?”

“Wait. Yeah. You had the twin’s craft table in here. Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing her again?”

Emily shrugged. “Why make you worry?”

“Last box. Want me to carry it?”

“No, I’ve got it,” Emily said, throwing it onto her shoulder. She staggered a moment, dropped it back to the ground. “You put my tool roll in this?”

“Yeah, did you want it out.”

“Yup. I’m going to work on that flute before I leave.” She unpacked the tool roll and box of bits, hefted the box back onto her shoulder and headed for the door. “Can you get that craft table for me?”

“Oh, sure. Tea?”

Emily smiled. “Absolutely.”

They sat silent with their legs crossed, knocking knees in the space beneath the toddler table. They had brought mugs and the teapots and sugar and when Jessica lifted the kettle lid, they laughed at how her glasses fogged but still they did not speak. Time passed as the woman

watched her oldest child crank and re crank the handle of the drill. The light of the day almost gone beyond the window.

“Rain?” Emily said, head down dialing the tool with her finger.

“Night.”

Once more the shockback, the indecipherable walleyed look. “How long have I been messing with this?”

“An hour.”

“It’s this pinion.” She lowered an ear, rotated the gears. “Can you grab a file for me?”

“Where?”

“Tool roll, middle pocket. Three files. Grab the smallest.”

Reaching blind behind her, Jessica crawled her fingers atop the desk to the center of the tool roll, felt a brush of fur against her palm. Wiry and warm and the heartbeat beneath hurrying as she wrapped her fingers and brought the mouse to the tabletop where it stood upright on its back legs, eyes unblinking above its grey belly and in its paws the metal file she had been reaching for. “Alright, I see you now,” she said. “I don’t understand how I can see you but I see you.”

Emily looked up from her fiddling and saw her mother and the mouse, laid the drill atop the table, held out her hand for the mouse to place the file. “So, you were lying when you told me you could see her. All those years.”

“This is her? Ms. De Villiers? A mouse?”

Emily laughed, saw the hurt on her mother’s face and straightened out. “Sorry, no. This is one of her children.”

“I don’t understand.”

Emily bent to her work. “It was never just Ms. De Villiers, remember? Tea service for four. Five?”

The mouse and its sapient calm atop the table and Jessica watching herself twinned in the toybox orbs of its eyes breathless to keep up.

“You mean you really never saw them? Anything like them?”

“No.”

“I just assumed it was just an us thing. Since you and I are—” The girl shrugged. “You know.”

The mouse lifted a paw to scratch an ear, began cleaning its whiskers.

“What do you mean, ‘You know’?”

“Quirky. Different. Weird.” She looked up to find her mom still lost. “On the spectrum, mom.”

And Jessica let out the breath she had been holding for eighteen years. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever get tested?”

“For what?”

“Mom.”

“No. No. It didn’t exist then. Wasn’t a name for it.”

“But wasn’t it obvious?”

“Obviously.”

“So, what did Grandma do?”

“Sent me to school. What else could she have done?”

“Private tutoring. Early college.”

“With what money?”

Emily flushed, turned away. “Here comes another,” she said. And out from the darkness of the closet and across the floor came another mouse. Grey brown and larger and heaving its little feet attempting to haul behind it the flute from before. It lumbered and halt-stepped with its burden till, at the table legs, it looked up at Jessica. She lowered her hand to let it hop on and elevatored it up.

Emily unmoving, watched the mouse haul it’s burden across the tabletop. “Bring it here,” she said. The mouse let down the flute, watched as Emily raised it for inspection. “Do you remember which it was? 34? 33?”

Sat back upon its tail in very human repose, the new mouse stared.

“Of course, you don’t.” She turned to the first mouse. “Grab both.”

It did, returning with a bit in each paw.

Emily took the bits, dry fit the first into the hole. “Nope. Going to be 33. Here.”

The mouse took the 34 and walking-sticked it back to the tin.

“More will show up,” Emily said as she fit the bit into the drill. “Stress triggers them and then they seem to trigger Her.”

“Ms. De Villiers.”

“Yep.”

“There,” Emily said as she finished drilling. She blew away the shavings and eased the flute down onto the tabletop. “Try that.” The mouse hefted it as a man to a contrabassoon, balanced it, and blew. Seemingly satisfied, it lowered the flute and sat. Staring up at the women, it flexed its pawpads and yawned.

Silence stretched. A clink of spoons and scrape of china on china. “Have you met your dorm-mate yet?” Jessica asked.

Emily stared into the dark places. “Gonna make another one appear,” she said. “No.”

“Does she have a name?”

“Hailey.”

“I’m sure she’ll be nice.”

“Did Grandma know?”

“That I was different?”

Emily laughed. “Different? God, Mom. Stop being humble.”

“How could she? What would conformal field theory mean to a single mother in middle America?”

“Do you think you could explain it to me?”

“No,” Jessica said. “You’d need years and an intuition for it.”

Emily looked down, picked at her bare feet beneath the table. “That an MIT thing?”

“No, Stanford has a group working on it if you want to try. Plenty of time yet.”

“Why didn’t you ever get me tested?” Emily said, staring at her feet.

Another silence. Another mouse. Jessica spotted this one first. From the underbed dim with a miniature snare drum on a strap around its neck and a pair of matchsticks grasped in its paw. “And then what?” Jessica said. “Say we got you tested, diagnosed, whatever. Say that happened. Would you be sitting in front of me right now? With the weight of that on your shoulders do you really think you’d have made it where you have? Stanford?”

Emily looked up from her feet and Jessica noticed for the first time that her daughter had been crying.

Still is. Hold her. She is you. Hold her.

Jessica crossed the distance between them, wrapped her arms.

“I’m scared mom,” Emily said.

“Of the drive?”

Emily laughed through a sob, sniffed. “Mom. No. Of losing you. Being gone. Changing. I can’t believe I’m saying this but I’m already missing the twins.”

More eyeballs in the closet catching the overhead light. Jessica watched them come in pairs and sometimes alone carrying their instruments in their paws or over their shoulders or dragging them behind. They came and came, their little bodies lining the floorboards, their eyes glittering up at the women sat in the center of the room.

Jessica stared down at the crown of her daughter’s head.

Did we manage it? Were we parents to you? Something better?

And Jessica began to weep.

Ambivalent to the drama unfolding, the mice waited for the cue that would soon come.

All tomorrows are debts we are told we should be grateful for. But how am I to make plans for tomorrow when I have yet to settle accounts with all of my yesterdays? The little sins? The greater?

“Remember when I wanted to get my nose pierced?”

“What was I supposed to say to that? You were maybe seven.”

“Six. You know I tried to do it myself with a capri sun straw?”

You can think yourself an array of sentient datasets, but your first real human crisis of emotion will reveal that all wrenches thrown into the machine of you are of the monkey variety.

“Why did you quit, mom?” They were whispering now.

“School?”

“Yeah.”

“I met someone.”

“Dad?”

“You.”

And the mice all lifted their instruments. The first trill blasted the women onto their feet. Brass to open. Then came the drums, a march for tiny feet. Then the brass again and Emily jittered with excitement still wrapped in her mother’s arms.

“She’s coming.”

“Should I refresh the tea?”

“Too late.”

They played it all in mousetime, waltzing across the floor frantic beneath the feet of the swaying women, the woodwinds came in and the tone shifted somber and their little eyes closed as they swayed, lifting fingers to change notes and her daughter’s tears wet against her chest. The strings sounding the leitmotif, the drums, the drums, and then silence.

A knock at the bedroom door.

“It’s for you, Mom.”

The sea of mice shifted and a path appeared. Jessica stepped through, turned the doorknob and opened the door. In the hallway stood Ms. De Villiers, an enormous mouse in white Victorian dress complete with bustle and bird-adorned velveteen hat. Eyes as large as bowling balls in her head. Whiskers long enough to brush the hallway walls.

“How do you do?” Ms. De Villiers, said, extending a lace glove to shake Jessica’s hand.

Jessica blinked.

Ms. De Villiers blinked.

The bird atop Ms. De Villiers hat blinked.

And from over Jessica's shoulder came the sound of Emily laughing and laughing and laughing.

"Do come in," Jessica said.