

BROKEN MAP

The man who catches my eye, or let's face it, does not, from where he jogs around the track, is ...what... a thoracic surgeon? I discern, in the crags of his enthusiastic face: all the years and years at Harvard medical school; the stolen minutes of unconsciousness on a cot in a physicians' locker-room; the daily exchanging of scrubs for workout gear; the kindly scientific eyes; a tender, efficient, apologetic smile. Also some knowledge of what a thorax is and where it lives in the body. And like whether a person might die of a one or not, and what one feels like in the hand. His eyes: green and amused. In the bathroom of his penthouse (this too I can see in the crags of his face) he tends two Daddy Long-legs, pets, who inhabit a corner high over the tub. He keeps the windows wide open so they can catch gnats. He is careful where he steps, careful to close up the toilet seat. When by mistake he nearly crushes one of his spiders, he lays it onto its back on a square of toilet paper and with a pencil and a surgical tweezers, he uncurls its scrunched legs and places it safe on its towel-rod to "heal thyself." Because it's tough to spin webs on porcelain tile, he agrees to let them borrow the corners of towels.

Later I spot the kindly surgeon sudsing up a busted car on one of the postage-stamp lawns on Smith Street. Smith Street is more the idea of a street than an actual street. Picture the globe scattered here and there with shoebox-like houses, and God remarking, "It would be good for them to devise a system of narrow corridors for getting from one little dwelling to another via automobile."

But there's a kid chasing after a basketball today on Smith Street, and even a gas station selling lottery tickets at the Jackson Road intersection. I'm driving my boy, Thomas, to High School. In our kitchen this morning, rather than finishing eating his breakfast of blueberries and toast, he sat sketching a preliminary portrait of Prime Minister Patrick Manning of Trinidad and Tobago. He likes to sketch them all twice. Having sketched the dimpled cheeks, he paused for a moment before shading the cleft of the chin, his upraised fingers making incremental shading marks in air. Jumped three grades by a string of baffled teachers, he's youngest by nearly four years in his class. A few of the girls are smaller than he, as is one of the teachers (music) but none of the boys. At lunch he sits with kids who drill him on zip codes of capital cities and how to say swear words in foreign languages. He finds their faces online - for every week, a new Prime Minister - and hangs his sketches on a map he adds to with newsprint and tapes to the wall of my bedroom, since the wall in his bedroom is way too small. He has knobby knuckles, colored pencils. I worry kids laugh at his cool, tinted, Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki-style eyeglasses. If I were him I would be lonesome, but he doesn't seem to be. Sometimes I ask, "Are you lonesome, Thomas?" but he only rolls his eyes. And sometimes I remark too brightly to him, "When you get married-" or "When you have children, I'll -" in order to learn if, at twelve years old, he scoffs at the likelihood of normal things ever happening to him, but he doesn't scoff, he only rolls his eyes. He's a private sort of boy. He rarely divulges. Normal in normal ways, I mean. Loved, I mean. Loving. The idea of him grown, eternally solitary, passing the right person by without the two of them knowing to stop for a moment to fall in love with each other, opens a chasm of pain in me. I'm sucked into it, I mean. And there's a song I sometimes hear on

the radio, about a man who goes a hundred years never finding his soul mate (who is always, of course, just around the corner searching for *her* soul mate) that makes me crawl five miles on cobbles in my mind and light candles on an alter. Do all mothers feel this way about their sons? Needing to know that the boy (man) will be loved, held, cared for, admired, by some other person, when their mothers are gone?

On Saturday mornings, when Thomas sits in my room for hours on end regarding his sketches, his map, the clefts of the chins, I imagine him, instead, playing that old fashioned maze game - the wooden box with the heavy, silvery marble, the two sanded wooden knobs and the tilting, swiveling maze – with friends.

Outside the surgeon's house stand two ordinary wooden bird feeders and one hummingbird trumpet, which suggests to me he isn't a thoracis specialist, really, at all, but an ornithologist supplementing his Department of Natural Resources income by marketing himself as a freelance consultant for prairie rejuvenation and wetlands preservation projects. He organizes sandhill crane counts. He oversees testing for the presence of toxins in oriole eggs. I know this isn't so. Well if it is, I'll be shocked. I mean I know I am only imagining things, like the day I was certain that a phone call I missed was my sister calling to say that our inheritance had been miscalculated. And like another time I fell in love with that soulful composer, who turned out to be a severely mentally disabled person who feared deep down that he was really an onion. And like once, when my son lay asleep in his crib, I said to myself, "Get used to it," meaning, I needed to accept that he was really a creature disguised as a boy, sent from another planet in order to transmit observations about earthling moms for a celestial Wikipedia. I really did (do) believe these things...but at the same time I knew (know) that I was (am) making

them up. At other times, the balance shifts: I know I make them up, but even so, I can't help but believe in them. Like he isn't divorced, the DNR ornithologist surgeon. Instead he's widowed, still mourning. There's a daughter, fifteen. Widowed, grieving, he bought her her first set of pads, two training bras, the absolute wrong style underpants. You can tell from her manner there on the lawn, hosing hollyhock stalks, that her patience with him is turning lately, just barely, to tolerance. From across the cafeteria she gazes at my son in the handsome Peruvian blouse I bought him, the blouse crowded with Tony Blair and Indira Gandhi buttons.

Finally I pay a visit to two hairdressers I know who might get a thrill out of setting me up. I pull them out of their twilight firefly reverie in their garden one evening and drive them to Smith Street, where together, side by side in white trousers, they walk to the ornithologist's door. He opens it topless, backlit by greenish flickerings. He does not invite them in. Probably less than a minute goes by. I stay in the car in a breezy, warm dark. He disappears from the threshold, comes back holding a notebook and pen, prints out his name and number, and pulls the page from the spiral with such uncanny precision that every flake of white paper remains attached.

Even if his name weren't Thomas, same as my son's, I'd have liked him right away on the telephone, especially his apology to me for not having noticed me at the YMCA, or imagined who I am or how much money do I have or lost like in the stock market (fat chance) and what kinds of sorrows.

But he's out of a job, it turns out when we meet for our date a night or two later. He picks me up in his car, which is basically a muffler being dragged along on wheels.

And despite the birdhouses, he knows even less about birds than I do, now that I've researched indigo buntings in hopes we'd have something (buntings) in common. He can't do calls (sweet-sweet-chew-chew-sweet-sweet) and he doesn't know nests. He has that funny way of lisping *right here* (rye cheer) but in a bitter tone of voice as if he's mocking somebody. We are seated at Fratello's with two pints of stout and a platter of nachos. I don't need to look away from him in order to relinquish the idea of him calling Yellow Headed Warblers to us from out of the trees, or of him holding a thorax, like a bird, in his hand...but nevertheless I exercise a moment of private, inner silence in order to slide these debunked fantasies into a separate, less unreasonable part of my mind. I feel a *click* inside, and then a gentle whirring motion as I let them slide past. I do the same for his face, of which the weather-beaten crags, now that I'm seeing them so close up, aren't rugged, exactly, but have been sanded away at a grain at a time. I have no right to be disappointed in him. Not once has he pretended to be the person I'd hoped he was. I only balance a whole black olive on half a tortilla chip, and try to lift it to my mouth without knocking off any more food. For days I've been swimming inside my vagina, dreaming of scaling that wise, kindly face and being touched by those hands that have mended the thorax-izzes of Cedar Waxwings, but now here I am on dry land again, mincing my olive, not knowing how far we might be able to take this thing. *We*, meaning me and Thomas and Thomas, or Thomas and Thomas and I.

“What kind of job were you laid off from?” I ask.

We are seated at the bar on stools so high that when my shoe (platform) falls off my foot, it makes a dent in the other platform of my other shoe, which fell off before.

“Loading dock,” Tom answers. “Only I wasn’t laid off, I should probably say. I was fired. Only don’t ask me why. Not a word. Okay? Never. Promish me,” the funny lisp emphasized.

Because really his name is Tom, not Thomas. I still want him in bed, want it not with my legs so much anymore, as with other parts of me that worry all those fireflies might have been wasted if we simply part ways. Their brief hour on earth wasted. By me, I mean. No lovers watching them blink on and off in the garden, I mean, as a result of my leading the two hairdressers away from their reverie of them. Fireflies survive for but three or four evenings. Basically they screw, reproduce, and die. I guess we’ll smoke a cigarette after our dinner, Tom and me. I picture him ferrying crates of cigarette cartons up the loading ramp at K-Mart, along those spinning metal tubes. I picture us lounging side by side smoking together, even though we both quit smoking a long time ago. I imagine us agreeing to smoke one or two cigarettes in order to enjoy doing the thing we most enjoy doing, at least once, together. People with money, like in the stock market, don’t understand the value of a pleasure like smoking, which compared to other pleasures costs practically nothing, money-wise, which especially since the inheritance really did turn out to have been miscalculated is something I need always keep in mind. You need to factor in all sorts of other things, too. Like all the places you’ll sit when you’re smoking, the benches with views designed for being looked at while smoking, the stairways and doorways within which the meanings of things are made clearer by smoking there. When I first noticed the crazy non-composer, for instance, the one who fears he is an onion, he was sitting on just such a bench, not smoking but contemplative, self-contained, a man of thin skin but deep, spiraling layers. It’s not sex I crave so much

as to have certain layers deeply in common with the person I'm doing it with. The minute Tom and I light up a cigarette after our dinner, we'll have something in common because we'll be smoking. And if we sit on a bench, we'll have something else in common because we'll be sitting on the same bench. I tinker a minute with lettuce and cheese, wondering ... is it really so important to have things in common? Might something lasting, or at least temporary, come out of being almost entirely different from each other?

My bare foot thumps against a chair leg. The other practices its arch; point, flex, point, rotate, cramp.

“What's your favorite time of day for reading the newspaper?” I ask.

“Monday and Tuesday evenings.” That's when he feels most alone, he adds.

“And why do you feel most alone on Monday and Tuesday evenings?”

I've already warned him I'll ask what I wish. It's up to him whether he answers or not.

Because that's when his daughter, who has field hockey, prayer group, and band practice on other nights, is most likely to be holed up in her room, postponing a game of Parcheesi with him.

“You play board games?!” I ask.

But he only shrugs his shoulders, reminding me of Thomas rolling his eyes. His favorite newspaper section is Real Estate. He gives a tender, efficient, apologetic smile when he tells me this, just like the smile I had imagined.

The first thing we do when we get to his house is introduce me to his dog, whose name is Sushi, and then he shows me the basement that he hadn't quite finished refinishing when he ran out of what he calls "funds."

The rooms have space at the tops for a new false ceiling. The ceiling grid has been hung, but the stacks of new tiles will be returned to Home Depot as soon as he finds his wallet, which has the sales receipt in it, which is lost, which is why I paid our bill for the nachos and stout. In the space above the walls, which are of the same consistency as Rice Krispies bars, and which you can practically push right over just by not even really leaning on them, can be seen some pipes and coils amid cobwebs and bare bulbs that make me wonder if the spiders have enough to eat up there.

I ask Tom what he thinks might be appropriate names for his pet spiders, assuming that they are mother and son. So we stand side by side in the unfinished basement thinking up names. Maude and Timothy. Penny and Dime. Beyond the grid for the ceiling can be seen the glowing margins of another zone, to which Sushi leads the way by slinking through the furnace room. Tom says that the dog makes him feel less alone some days, but not always. He follows her into a doorway with no door in it, and beckons me past. There's a creek in there. A heron stands on one leg in the shallows and a red-belted kingfisher perches on a branch jutting out of a log. Moss more resilient than pillows grows on the banks. There's a feeling of peace like when you're walking at twilight, peace you know isn't real, peace you know is not representative. We sit there not smoking, drinking it in. It seems churlish to smoke even imaginary cigarettes near imaginary wildlife. Our grandchildren, Tom muses - meaning not the grandchildren we might someday have together, of course, he tells me, embarrassed, but the ones that are

born to our daughter and son, not that they'll have children together, either, I mean, he tells me, embarrassed - our grandchildren might be born into a world where there is no longer wildlife anywhere. Children will need to be shown pictures of indigo buntings in books in order to understand what kinds of animals birds once were. There will be videos in tiny damp rooms in museums showing ordinary starlings squawking from tree to tree, and people old enough to have once seen trees will describe how much they miss them and how, even after all this time, they still pray they might someday stumble upon one. A book of drawings of birds by a painter, Goodday or someone, sold at auction for \$1.76 million some weeks ago in Paris, I say to Tom.

The heron stands still, but the kingfisher dives. We can't see the water droplets on its feathers when it flies back up, but we can see glitter. We step into the water ourselves, splashing and playing, and when we climb out, the water is dry on us, too. Our clothes glitter, Sushi glitters, our hair glitters. You would think that he has never had a blow job before in his life for the sounds he makes, a string of whip-poor-will-ish cries mixed in with pleadings with me never to stop what I'm doing, never to go away, never to leave him alone. He seems truly afraid, terrified really, that I might stop what I'm doing, stand up, and just walk out on him lying there. His pants are down around his ankles, his musty sneakers still tied, his tanned knees exposed where I shudder between them. I wear nothing but my camisole. When we're done, we say, "wine."

We go back past the flimsy, unfinished walls, upstairs to the living room, to drink Sutter Creek wine out of coffee mugs at a TV table. The front door that Tom answered on the night the two hairdressers alerted him to there being a person (me) interested (no longer) in possibly sharing a corner of the planet with him, is not four feet away from

where we sit. The whole house is like that. Walking into it is like turning the knob on a toaster oven. Sushi pants by the door, waiting to be let out.

“So why were you fired?” I finally ask.

In mid November, I run into Tom again, in the waiting room at the eye doctor clinic, where my son is inside, being treated for pink eye. There are three walls of chairs, and a coffee pot. Tom offers me coffee. He drove his mother here, he tells me, and has been waiting forty minutes to take her home. She has macular degeneration, and yes, he found his wallet. Then he gestures out the window at a sagging yellow car, and tells he’s no longer unemployed.

“Well, I should say that I’m renting, really, the car, I mean. Renting to buy. And that my new job is taking care of my mom. In her house. I had to sell mine. She pays me with social security.”

He bends over to pick up my pocketbook, which has rolled off my lap. You are not allowed to rub them – your eyes when you have pink eye, which I’ve caught from poor Thomas, whose eyes are pinker than mine, itchier even than mine, more worthy of a trip to the doctor than mine, and which can be treated with hot, moist cloths, which is probably how I caught it, treating Thomas’s pinkeye with washcloths, so as not to have to schedule this doctor visit. Because of something careless I said to him one night while we sat gazing at some lights we’d strung over his map, my son no longer sketches Prime Ministers, anymore.

“Thomas?” I’d said.

The lights we'd strung over the map were jalapeno peppers, but they were disappointingly All-American-looking, like hot dog lights or corn on the cob lights might be. Funny how you say things without giving a thought as to how you might someday regret having said them. Or even the very same day, regret them. Or the very same minute.

"I don't know that all of these Prime Ministers deserve to have the same amount of attention given them," I said to my son. "I hate to see you lavishing so much care, and so much attention, and so much time and all those colored pencils on all of them, when some of them deserve it but some of them don't. I mean Disraeli, like you say, he passed the Climbing Boys Act, and he rebuilt the slums. And he loved trees and novels. It must have been horrible being a chimney sweep when he was only a boy. He breathed in so much soot. He got stuck, sometimes. Sometimes he thought he might die up there! And he was always so cold. But William Pitt the Younger?? Maybe his portrait should be smaller than Disraeli's or not so many colors."

My son did not roll his eyes. I could see the strings of peppers distorted by curves of his eyeglasses, and that he seemed not to be allowing himself to blink, as if he were waging a staring contest with Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, who looked like George Clooney. It was clear to me, at once, he'd made some of them up. Some of the countries on his map, I mean, I didn't know what they were. Many of the faces I'd never even seen eyebrows like that before, and the names of the principle rivers I'd never heard of before. It didn't matter to him that some of his countries were actual while some of them were not, or that some of his prime ministers were good-hearted while some of them were not. He believed in them, that's all. He believed in their

wattles, their brows. He believed in their turbans, their single, looped earrings, the way they gazed at the attentions he lavished on them.

Sadly he pulled the map from the wall. I taped it back up. One of the pieces hangs over, now. I can see it in my mind, sitting here across from Tom in the eye doctor clinic, sipping over-creamered coffee - the paper corner of the map, like a swan's wing flapping there.

"But can I introduce you to my mom?" Tom asks, taking hold of my elbow and lifting me up to greet the old woman as she is led into the room. She wears giant paper sunglasses with cellophane lenses, which she is not to take off for the longest time. How frail she is. I'd forgotten she has the same name as me.

"Glad to meet you," I say, shaking hands with the skinnier, stoopy-er (more confused) Annie, who seems at once to be falling to rest on me as if my body is grass for her to lie down on. "And you have such a nice son," I say to her. "You did such a good job with him!" I pause, mortified. "He's lucky to have you. You're lucky to have him too, I mean. I have a Thomas too, I mean. A son. Thomas."

"I think so too, exactly," the old woman says, sitting down on my chair. The big sunglasses slip. One eye is exposed, a desperate, blurred, hungry eye, brightly disheveled, ravenous for me.

"I'll leave you lovebirds to yourshelves, now," she lisps at us. "I won't get in your way I promish. I'm good, rye cheer."