in the avenues of airplanes and paper

by Joe Meno

THE GIRL HAD GOTTEN HER heart broke by a man her father's age and since then had begun to put "air quotes" around everything. An elephant was an "elephant." Her period was "late." She was thinking of getting a "sex change" because she was sick of being a "single" "19-year-old" "girl" and "out of shape." No one could convince her to stop using the absurd gesture, try as they might.

"Have you seen my 'hairbrush?'" she asked her mother one evening.

Her mother, a thoughtful, wide-faced woman, looked over at the girl's arched hands, saw the gesture she was once again making, and said, "I think you have a serious problem, dear. It might be something medical."

The girl laughed right in her mother's face.

Back within the colorlessness of her room, she glanced down and saw that the two first fingers of both of her hands were still curled dangerously in the air. She felt a throb of panic as she had no idea what, at the moment, she thought she might be quoting.

THE GIRL'S ONLY CHILDHOOD memory was of "the deer" dying. It was right after a cousin's birthday party. Or on the way to her uncle's for Fourth of July. It was in the woods, somewhere way off in the suburbs. Imagine springtime. Or summer. It isn't really important, the time of year. The thing she was unable to forget was the shape of the trees, each a looming separate figure. They were driving in the Volvo and she was sitting in the backseat beside her younger sister, and the sun was shining on the crown of her father's head, right where he had begun balding. It made her love her father, seeing that pink spot, though she did not know why exactly: something about how vulnerable it made him seem. The girl looked back at the trees and suddenly her father was shouting and then there was a tremendous crash. The girl felt the seatbelt go taut along the side of her neck. She heard her sister beside her scream and saw her mother turn around, asking what had happened. The glass in the front windshield was cracked and was also smeared with what the girl knew to be blood. White steam was rising up from the smashed radiator and her mother was asking if everyone was all right but she was also coughing at the same time. The family climbed out of the wrecked station wagon, which was perched perilously over a culvert, the woods only moments before seeming sun-lit, now appearing unkind. Lying on the hood of the car was an enormous white deer—as all the deer who lived in the woods around the laboratory were oddly white—and it was a buck, with mossy brown antlers, its eyes open wide, its stark pelt mottled with blood. The girl felt her mother's hand on her own, felt the red welt from the seat belt rising along her neck, but she did not look away, as this was the last time in her life she was surprised by anything.

ON A DATE, THE GIRL DECIDED to wear mittens. It was winter and so it was somewhat appropriate. She did not dare take them off for fear of the ridiculous gesture she knew her fingers would make. Things seemed to be going well at first, but then, at the café, she went to the washroom. When she returned to the table, she did not realize she had forgotten to put the mittens back on, and immediately she began to put air quotes around everything once again. She used them to describe her "family." She wanted to make it clear she did not think her family actually qualified as a family. Her date, a junior on winter break from Brown, stared suspiciously at the gesture for a moment but didn't say anything about it. He had an anonymous-sounding name; Bill, or Brad, suddenly she couldn't remember. He was tall, with collegiate eyebrows, and he stared down at the girl's curled fingers with a pitying look as she put air quotes around every third word. One more round of illicit drinks passed, and afterward, he reached into his coat pocket and produced a small white business card, then fit it into her narrow palm. "This is the number for a family friend who I think can help you," he said solemnly. "He's a professional. It's totally anonymous." The girl looked down at the business card and barked a ferocious little laugh. The card was plain white, a medium cardstock, and a number was written along its face in black ink. Too embarrassed to say anything, she slipped the card into her small purse and looked away, determined not to speak, afraid her hands would betray her once again. Many minutes later they were sharing a cab uptown in silence; her date, sitting beside her, was still making small talk, trying to act like he hadn't noticed what a catastrophe it had all been. When the taxi pulled up in front of her building, he placed his fist beneath her chin, tilted her face upwards, and placed his rigid mouth all over hers. The girl decided then she was too disgusted with herself to try and resist.

THERE WAS ONE OTHER MEMORY the girl had from when she was younger: "the silver car." One day she was walking home from school with a girlfriend when a silver car pulled up beside them. They were in high school. The car—a Porsche or Ferrari, she was unsure—was so shiny, its paint a metallic flake, that the girl had to look away. She felt her only friend Marjorie Nichols shove a sharp elbow into her side and then very nearly dropped her book bag. She turned and for the first time saw who was driving the car. It was a boy, a young man, maybe 19 or 20, and he wore very large sunglasses, which distorted the size and shape of his face. The sun-

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glasses were mirrored and there was nothing you could see of his eyes or eyebrows other than the same silvery light that made the entire car seem like it had landed there from space. The girl was not impressed, and asked an ungrateful "So what?" before she noticed the driver-side door was open. The girl turned slightly, seeing the narrowness of the young man's body, how slight his shoulders, his sleeveless t-shirt. Also, he wore a pair of running shorts, but they were pulled down, and he had his right hand—the hand furthest from where the two girls were now standing—along his erect male member. Marjorie gasped as they hurried off, the car remaining parked there and the young women disappearing down the street. The girl smiled to herself—shocked, horrified, only for a moment—and then frowned, already bored by the thought of what had occurred to them.

THE NUMBER ON THE BUSINESS CARD was a Queens exchange. The girl dialed it later that evening while standing in "the hallway." She had begun to spend most of her time in the hallway of her apartment, brushing her teeth, doing crosswords, getting dressed even, as her room was still full of all sorts of things given to her by "the Hairy Ape," one of her father's closest friends. Her parents did not seem to mind or notice her standing in the hallway so often. If they did notice, they didn't say a word, as they knew she would be embarrassed by their interest. The girl had not decided yet if she was still desperately in love with this man, her father's friend, or if she was just embarrassed that the love affair had ever happened. So she stood in the hall, listening to the hum of the lights throughout the apartment, the canned laughter of someone else's television set eking from behind the closed door of her parents room, and dialed the number on the card, holding the phone against the soft divisions of her ear. The number rang and rang and rang and the girl was startled when a male voice finally answered, not at all sounding surprised. Yes, the voice on the line said, he could help her with her problem. Yes, appointments were always available.

OTHER THAN THOSE TWO childhood memories, there really wasn't going to be much to talk about. There was the time a few months back when she looked out her window and saw "a fire." Although the office building across the street was only two stories tall, people started to panic. Apparently, a copy machine on the first floor had burst into flames and the office workers on the second floor were unable to be evacuated. There were no sirens or alarms, only a burnt plastic smell, and a few plumes of purple smoke. The girl looked down and saw the street was filled with fire engines and people. A fireman was shouting instructions but the people inside the building were screaming too loud to hear. Finally, unwilling to wait any longer, certain people began to jump from the windows. When they landed, their bodies going flat against the harsh tarred pavement of the street below, they inevitably broke arms, legs, hips, and ankles. But still, one by one, they jumped. The girl sat at her window and watched them fall. It did not bother her as, even then, she had a feeling that what she was seeing was not real.

The psychiatrist's office was located in a nameless part of Queens across from an abandoned factory. The street featured one ruined industrial building after the other—factories that had once made airplanes, paper, typing machines. But now everything had been boarded-up and ringed-off with barbwire and so there was some confusion as to where to park. Inside the narrow building, the lobby directory listed the doctor's Icelandic-sounding name and his office on the third floor. The waiting room was beige and "green," not an actual green, but a mossy taupe. The magazines were foreign, and all had to do with golf. Keeping her mittens on, the girl signed her name at the front desk. The receptionist behind the desk, a radically beautiful woman with long blonde hair, thanked the girl with the smallest trace of a Nordic accent, then went back to whispering on the telephone in her unrecognizable language. The girl took a seat in a blue plastic chair, folding her dress beneath her with an unusual air of propriety, not wanting to appear, even in the waiting room, unsure of herself. She waited for ten minutes and then ten minutes past her scheduled appointment time.

A half hour passed. The girl sighed audibly and stood, noticing then that the beautiful receptionist had vanished. She had always suspected this about Nordic people, that they could not be depended on, their bone structure too perfect. Sitting back down, the girl began to sulk and considered walking out, when the door opened. A young man—whose face was almost entirely bandaged—stepped inside. There were strips of gauze and white medical tape covering everything but his nose, his two eyes, his mouth, and his left ear. A few strands of blond hair had escaped the bandages at the top. His left arm was in a sling. Confidently, he walked up to the front desk, signed in his name, and then took a seat across from the girl. He was dressed in what appeared to be blue pajamas, though he was wearing attractive dress shoes; he also had on what appeared to be a remarkably expensive gold watch. Once seated, the young man pulled up his socks, revealing a clashing green and red pattern in argyle. He cleared his throat, nodded in a friendly manner to the girl, and then leaned forward, elbows on the knees of his pajamas. He then nodded down at the mittens on the girl's hands.

"Are your hands cold?"

"No. Not particularly."

He nodded, as if he understood, though the girl thought that would be impossible.

"Are you next?" he asked.

"Yes. My appointment was for 4:30."

"He does tend to run a little late."

"Oh. Thanks."

The young man picked up one of the magazines and tried to read it, but then interrupted himself a few moments later. "Is it your first time here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I don't usually come on Wednesdays. I mean I do now. From now on. But not in the past."

The girl was unsure what the young man meant. She watched him as he tried to light a cigarette. He was having a hard time, with his arm in the sling, his fingers grasping the cigarette and the lighter, trying to ignite it while holding both at the same time. She thought to offer her help but then he finally got it lit. Afterward, the young man seemed pretty pleased with himself. He dragged deeply on the cigarette, exhaling with a glorious sigh. She thought she saw him smiling beneath the bandages and was surprised by the youthful quality of his voice when he spoke.

"Do you know any good jokes?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't know. I asked if you know any good jokes."

The girl tried to think of one but nothing came. "I don't know any," she said.

"Me either."

The young man with the bandaged face took another drag on his cigarette. He stood then and walked over to the window, peering through the dusty, beige slats of the blinds. Then he shook his head. "I don't like the way those birds are looking at my car," he said.

The girl had no choice but to laugh.

"The thing about this place is that you don't ever know who's going to be in the waiting room," the bandaged man said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know if I like having to wait with other people. It could make somebody anxious, is all."

The girl smiled a little, lifting a piece of fuzz from her dress.

"Listen, do you mind if I go ahead of you?" the young man asked. "I only ask because I have an awful lot to do tonight."

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "It's just not possible. I have plans."

"What plans?"

"Excuse me?"

"What kind of plans?"

"That's none of your business."

The young man seemed to take it at that. He sighed again and then puttered back to his seat.

"I'm here for a tic," he announced.

"A what?"

"A facial tic. I wink."

"You wink?"

"I wink."

"Why?"

"Who the hell knows why? That's what we've been trying to figure out. I do it without thinking."

The girl looked up and saw the man was doing it right then. His left eye was jerking open and closed.

"It's been a cause of some concern for my parents," he admitted. "It hasn't been easy for me either. People don't always understand it's something you don't control. It's caused me a few serious misunderstandings," he said, pointing at his bandaged face, his eyelid once again twitching, wink after wink. The young man crushed out his cigarette then walked over to the window and peered out again.

"They're gone for now if you want to know."

"Who?"

"The birds."

"Oh."

The young man turned and took his seat across from her again.

"The thing is I have this thing, tonight, I need to go to, with my friend. He's sick, you know. I was hoping to see him."

"I'm sorry. I'm in school," she lied. "Besides I have things to do, too."

The man nodded again and itched at his bandages.

"It's like Africa under here. It's hotter than you'd think." The girl smiled a narrow smile at that. He leaned in close to her and asked: "So there's really no way to switch?"

"I can't. My mother will be worried."

"Where do you live?"

"By the park. On the upper east side."

"OK then," the young man said, reaching into the pocket of his pajamas. "I want you to do something important for me. Can you do that?"

"What is it?"

He held out two paper tickets, placing them in her hand.

"Will you give these to my friend?"

"How would I know who he is?"

"He'll be waiting in front of that place on 88th Street. The one with the Indian head out front."

"I don't think I can do that."

"You're awfully unhelpful, aren't you?"

"Why would you say that?"

"These are supposed to be a birthday gift."

"I'm sorry. I have to get home right after."

The young man made a sound with his mouth, a clicking, and then nodded, sitting back down, shoving the tickets back into this front pajama pocket.

The receptionist—who had silently returned—finally called the girl's name at that moment. The girl stood, smoothed out the hemline of her dress, and followed the long- necked receptionist into the doctor's office. Things went from there: the psychiatrist had striking white hair and a well-trimmed white beard. He was seated behind a formidable wooden desk, just as the girl had imagined. She sat in a comfortable chair and spoke for the entire hour, thanked him when they were done, and stood once again, pressing her palms against the front of her dress. When she walked into the lobby she was surprised by how disappointed she was when she didn't see the young man with the bandages. She asked the woman behind the desk where he'd gone but she only shook her head and frowned.

Out in the hallway, waiting for the elevator, the girl looked over and saw the young man with the bandages trying to get a drink from the water fountain. He was leaning there, holding down the button for the fountain using his arm in the sling, while the other hand held the bandages against his face. His lips and nose were both getting wet. He was a little like a clown in his movements—stiff, exaggerated, jerky. He did not seem to notice the girl standing there. She waited for the elevator and watched him, then decided she'd be coming back next week.

END