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Colorado State University

THE GARDEN OF PERFECT BRIGHTNESS

There was a difference between being genetically part *Abdopus horridus* and actually *becoming* such a thing, a difference that was significant to their doctor but which eluded Yael's grasp entirely. Much like how she couldn't appreciate the distinction between a Red Sea octopus and the more than three hundred other species that might have threaded their way into the increasingly peculiar chromosomal fiber of the Tal-Vitola family. What mattered to Yael wasn't even *how* such an incomprehensible thing could have happened, what with all they knew these days about genomes and such, but what they were supposed to do now. How were they supposed to go forward with their lives? She held her daughter's clammy hand, tried to locate herself somewhere in her own body, and felt violently nauseated. Everything in the examination room, space-station white and LED blue and polished chrome, seemed to vibrate with an unpleasant aura. There would be an incapacitating migraine soon.

"Your daughter's still your daughter," said Dr. Mizuno, anticipating the question. "She's not going to wake up in her bed one morning a full-blown mollusk, tentacles waving all about." She said this with wiggling fingers and a little laugh that would have been insensitive coming from another doctor, but instead made Yael feel like they were in on something together. "That's the wrong way to think about it."

"OK . . . so, what's the *right* way to think about it?"

Had Misha been with her in the waiting room of the Pediatric Genetics Lab at Hasbro Children's Hospital, he would have found the children insufferable. Squalling, fit-pitching children, children demanding candy and juice boxes and screen time and *everything*. It wouldn't have mattered that they were at the hospital; he would have thought them an outrageous violation of his personal space, which is what he felt about most children, with the sole exception of Ruby.

"Sartre said that hell was other people," Misha had told her

once, in another waiting room indistinguishable from this one. “But he clearly never had much experience with other people’s *children*.”

It tested friendships and family loyalties to be married to a misanthrope like Misha, but Yael actually found his pickled perspective a useful defense at times like this. Even if this was also the reason they were in couples therapy. Sure, for her anxiety and depression too—because why not?—but mostly to make him address his anger issues. The thing was that Misha raged too hard at life—*but not at me*, she was always quick to say. But surely she and Ruby were part of the life he raged at? These things were not separable, were they? The couples therapist insisted that Misha’s anger was a “secondary emotion,” a coping mechanism for stress, for the radical upending of their lives since Ruby’s premature birth, for the uncertainties that had plagued her tiny body ever since. And deeper still: the ongoing trauma of his mother’s bone cancer when he was very young, the resentment at his father’s detachment and the hasty second marriage and everything after. He was supposed to acknowledge and honor those parts of himself that felt anger and practice behavioral changes to channel these rages into healing. Or something like that. Neither of them really believed in this “parts therapy” thing, but they were doing it anyway, showing each other a commitment to working things through, which maybe was enough? And if it wasn’t, then perhaps his decision to replace his Adderall with microdoses of MDMA would unclench the fist inside of him. She had read somewhere about scientists who gave octopuses ecstasy and discovered that it made the usually solitary creatures want to be with each other, coil their tentacles around one another. The brochures Dr. Mizuno gave her did not mention this, but it suddenly occurred to her that she’d read that article aloud to Misha, shortly before the fragile, too-early Ruby had finally been able to leave her incubator and come home. Was this a premonition? Was she now a person who believed in premonitions?

Yael, profoundly alone inside her memories, had scanned the Hasbro space, inhaled the overbright strangeness of it all. The dislocations of it all. But then, she often felt this, even about the supposedly ordinary things: the shopping and the bathing and the sing-talking and the food-making and the cleaning. And

she'd remembered how this morning, after Misha had driven away, there was a pooling petroleum rainbow on the slick black asphalt, beautiful and dangerous. Too many things struck her as both at once. When this was over, she'd thought, when they knew what they were going to know, she and Ruby would go to the park for the solar eclipse, and this too would be beautiful and dangerous.

Waiting, waiting, she'd searched the faces of the other mothers seated in those incongruously gaily colored chairs. Few of them bothered to return her gaze. She'd tried to guess the circumstances that had brought them all there. How many of them had received diagnoses of something serious, something terrible? How many were about to? About to have their lives yanked from their grasp and medicalized, made the property of a vocabulary they barely understood? The endless specialists, the treatments, the medications, the hope and desperation. Watching other people's children, she had been aware that a very Misha part of her was thinking: *You've done this to us, children, and it's not your fault, because there's something happening to you that you didn't ask*

for or deserve . . . but it also is your fault, because you are something that is happening to us. It was wrong to be thinking like this, giving herself over to her intrusive thoughts. The couples therapist had told her that when they occurred, she too was to

She'd tried to guess the circumstances that had brought them all there. How many of them had received diagnoses of something serious, something terrible?

speak to these disruptive parts of herself, invite them to share the space with her other parts. She had nodded, as she always did at the therapist's office, and intrusively pictured herself chopped into little parts in a freezer in some Rhode Island psychotic's basement.

"Ruby, honey?" the nurse had said with a gentle smile. His friendly blondness, his symmetrical toothiness, had appeared in the playhouse window like he was a sitcom neighbor. "Come on in, sweetheart. You too, Mom." For a moment, Yael could almost believe that nothing would really be wrong if they could just keep speaking to each other like this. They walked down

the hallway, following a rainbow-striped path, Ruby behind her, tunelessly humming a cartoon theme song, fixated on walking only on the blue line.

Dr. Akiko Mizuno was about Yael's age and entirely too pregnant to still be working. Her black hair, streaked with silver strands, had been pulled back into a sleek bun, and she gave off the impression of being precise and serenely competent. She spoke in a crisp, no-nonsense manner that at first made Yael worried she'd be yet another doctor who'd dismiss her as a hysteric. Everywhere she'd gone, she was sure that she was the one doctors thought of as their *problem* parent.

Am I their craziest? she'd texted Misha from the hospital parking lot just before the appointment.

Someone literally has to be was the entirely unhelpful reply.

But seeing Dr. Mizuno lower herself with obvious difficulty onto a neon orange yoga ball, Yael had decided she rather liked this woman's soft features, her intelligent dark eyes, their pupils nearly indistinguishable from the color of the iris. This was a face that inspired trust. *She'd* take Yael seriously. *She'd* know how it changed you to see your impossibly small infant cut from your body too soon, fighting for life; how you could never take anything for granted again. Yael could ask this person about ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, about growth hormone deficiency, about salicylate intolerance—all of it! They could talk to each other like *mothers*.

“So the good news is we're going to get to the bottom of this,” Dr. Mizuno had stated, studying Ruby's file while the girl busied herself with the pinging, clicking, irritating musical-activity table in the corner. The doctor's smile was reassuring, not condescending. “I'm going to order a PET/CT scan today so we can get a better look at the internal structures, and another blood draw to do T₃ and T₄ tests to dial in on the thyroid activity, but let's start with what I'm seeing in the initial bloodwork and the genetic marker test—”

On the ride home, Ruby was fixated on the gauze taped to her arm, the rust-colored splotch of blood that had seeped into the whiteness. It had been torture for all of them, Dr. Mizuno included, to do the blood draw. Ruby's screams had been oper-

atic, exhausting, and she'd been sullen and silent since then, so it came as something of a jolt to Yael when she finally spoke.

"Sorry, Rubes, what did you say?" She hoped her voice sounded normal, although she felt anything but. Downtown Providence was just coming into view, hard and sharp against the not-yet-darkened sky. Her head was pulsing with pain.

"Is my blood bad?" the girl repeated. Yael had actually heard her the first time but had wanted to buy herself a moment to think. It wasn't enough.

"What? No—*ahuva*, no! It's not like that. Your blood's as good as anyone's. *Better*, even."

"But the doctor said there was something wrong with my blood."

"No, that's not what she meant. Not at all. She just said there are some things in it that are—*different*. Just a little different, that's all."

She tried to catch her daughter's eye in the rearview, but the girl's gaze had shifted to somewhere beyond the windshield, maybe somewhere into the future, in which she would be different from what she was now. Or *who* she was, not *what*. Yael would have to learn the right ways to say this, the proper language to use. She tried to keep the conversation going, but Ruby had already returned to being mute, subdued, so Yael turned up the radio instead. Out surged the kind of deranged, crashing, war-or-storm classical that she hated. What sort of lunatic drove around listening to this motherland-invading frenzy? Ruby, hands on ears, hated it too. She'd lately become averse to loud music of any type, including Misha's beloved '80s heavy metal, which had once delighted her as a toddler. Misha had singled this out at their last couples therapy session as a particular bummer. "Not even AC/DC or Iron Maiden anymore," he'd said. "Not even 'Sweet Child O' Mine'!" She had wanted to strangle him with his own stupid padlock necklace when he said this, but now it seemed more salient. Stereo off, their mutual silence filled the car, and Yael wondered if maybe one day, when it had all run its course, Ruby's silence would be complete and final. Or would she communicate only in some way they couldn't understand? Would they become strangers to one another? They had already taken the Point Street exit when Ruby spoke again.

“I don’t want to be an octopus. It’s stupid. I don’t want to be one.”

“We don’t say ‘stupid.’ And besides, they’re very smart.” Even as she said it, Yael knew this was not the point to be making. “But I don’t think that’s really what the doctor meant, Rubes. It’s not like that.”

“Yes it *is*. That’s what she said. So that’s what she meant.”

Yael glanced at the seat next to her, the sheaf of brochures Dr. Mizuno had given them, and tried to imagine handing them to Misha, repeating any of what the doctor had said: “They’re excellent problem solvers,” she could say, and then tell him about how the doctor recently heard from a family in East Greenwich with the same gene whose daughter just graduated from MIT.

It wouldn’t be like in that story about waking up as a bug, she reminded herself. Dr. Mizuno had explained that wasn’t how these kinds of recessive genes worked.

“Summer grant for research in lie symmetry, grad school. She’s doing great!” Plus, she would say, “Isn’t it a relief, really, to finally know what’s wrong with her? Knowing it has a name? Now things make sense, don’t they?” And when

Misha inevitably wanted to know what kinds of questions she had asked, would she admit that her first question hadn’t been “But how could this happen?” or “Can it be cured?” or even “Can I get a second opinion?” but rather “Will she still be able to dance? She dances so beautifully.” Because it was true and because dancing meant the world to Ruby and it was far too early for any of them to let go of their dreams just because their bodies had plans of their own.

“But listen, *ahuva*,” she ventured. “It’s really not so bad, is it?”

“How do *you* know?” said Ruby, barely audible.

“I guess I don’t really, but . . . I’ve heard good things. For instance, ahm, they’re excellent problem solvers!”

“You’re just saying what the doctor said.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’m new to this. I just mean, try not to worry about it and let’s see how everything goes.”

In the rearview, Yael could see her prodding at her arms, testing them, maybe. Dr. Mizuno had said there was no way to know exactly how the gene would express itself. The changes

might be only internal; in fact, they might have already happened and nothing more would be noticeable. It wouldn't be like in that story about waking up as a bug, she reminded herself. Dr. Mizuno had explained that wasn't how these kinds of recessive genes worked. It would be subtle, most likely, an oddly shaped tile here and there in the molecular mosaic. People probably wouldn't even recognize it unless maybe it ran in their families too.

"So don't go investing in an aquarium?" Yael had said, having felt, then regretted, the need for a joke. Maybe she could use that when she broke the news to Misha? And actually the correct term was *arms*, not tentacles, she remembered, which for some reason she had found reassuring when Dr. Mizuno had said it. It suggested some sort of continuity, at least. And anyway, Ruby still had just her regular human arms and probably always would. Yael wondered if she found this comforting or somehow disappointing, but decided against asking her. There would be time for that.

"What's *aba* gonna say?" A quaver of worry in the girl's voice.

"Well, I think he'll say, 'Congratulations.'"

"What?"

"He'll say, 'Congratulations,' my love. And then he'll say, 'You always make me proud.'"

"He won't say that."

"He will! Because it's true. And then he'll say that some very important people were octopi. Octopuses."

"Like who?"

"Like who? Like, well, Marie Curie, and, ahm, let's see . . . Neil Armstrong . . . and *Louis* Armstrong . . . uh, Bob Dylan . . ."

"I don't know any of them." The quaver had turned to petulance. All Yael wanted was to keep it light, stay on the surface.

"You don't? Well, ask *aba* to fill you in. It's all in the octopus who's who. And you know who else you'll find? Everyone in BTS—Taylor Swift, even!"

"Taylor Swift is just Taylor Swift. She's not an octopus or anything."

"See, that's where you're wrong. You just don't know. Although technically, she's like 60–65 percent squid—but hey, still in the family!"

Yael smiled at Ruby, knowing the girl didn't believe her. She

was nobody's fool. But even so, she had kind of smiled back because she wanted to, which is really all Yael had been aiming for.

"*Octopodes*," said Ruby.

"What?"

"It's *octopodes*. That's what the doctor said they're called now."

"Oh. Kind of a mouthful, isn't it? *Oc-to-po-des*? Wasn't that when I was your age. But then the dinosaurs all have different names now, I guess, and Pluto's not a planet anymore, I don't think, so—you know, everything changes."

But Ruby, chin to chest and slumped down in her car seat, had stopped listening.

What *would* Misha say? Would he be afraid? Angry? Blame her for it? He couldn't, really, because Dr. Mizuno had said that since he was Ukrainian and she Ashkenazi, they were *both* carriers. Some random tumble of the chromosomal dice roll, dizzyingly described in the pamphlets as having to do with mitochondrial DNA and Y-DNA, phylogeography and haplogroups, double recessive alleles, genetic variation in the R1a clade among the Ashkenazi Levites. But who'd ever heard of such a thing? How was anyone supposed to digest this and just go on?

"It's not as rare as you might think, these genetic chimeras," Dr. Mizuno had said. "We've learned so much, even in just the past few years. Big strides. Honestly, it doesn't even make sense to talk about human beings the way we did before. The strings of information we used to call 'junk' DNA? Turns out, much of it's ancient viruses that became a part of us over time. Isn't that something?"

"That's really something," Yael echoed, unsure of what to say.

"And we share most of our genetic code with cats, mice, cows, pigs. I mean, when you get down to it, plants and animals share an ancient common ancestor and all of it comes from the primal star matter. For goodness sake, we share more than half our code with *bananas!*"

"But . . . that doesn't mean we're bananas. Does it?"

"Well, no, it doesn't, but in a certain sense it also *does*. Bananas with extra ingredients, if you like."

"I'm not sure I do . . ."

"It just means that all things are made from variations on the same stuff." Dr. Mizuno had by then grown especially animat-

ed, bouncing a bit on her yoga ball with an excitement that was infectious enough to almost make Yael think they were talking about something wonderful. “We’re really all just made up of long chains of simple nucleotides. In the case of genetic chimeras like Ruby, sometimes the latent code belonging to other organisms expresses itself more than is typical—that’s all we’re really talking about here.”

Yael nodded. It didn’t seem all that crazy put this way. They could live with this, couldn’t they?

“I understand it’s still hard to talk about,” Dr. Mizuno continued, rising unsteadily to hand Yael a folder full of information. “But I assure you they’re out there, families like yours. You’re not alone.” She offered her the number of a support group in Boston, which Yael took, thinking that she would do it at some point, if only because Ruby was going to need a friend who understood, and so would they, because an octopus is a solitary creature, after all. For now, though, there was the park to play in, and the eclipse to watch, and the silent rehearsing of ways to try to tell Misha this newly confounding thing.

Nearly at Humboldt Park, it occurred to her, and not for the first time, that things were maybe not this much of a challenge for everyone. The parents she’d encountered there, or in cafés, or at Music Together classes at the JCC, these young mothers and the occasional dad no more seasoned than she, spoke with eiderdown lightness of their bright, burbling progeny. Their alien lives seemed to her impossibly warm and sun-dappled, an impressionist painting of an outing by the sea. *Oh, she’s such an easy baby, took right to the breast! He’s content just to be in his bouncy chair. We don’t even have to rock him to sleep! The twins get up at four, but then they nurse and sleep again until seven!* Their anecdotes of curated adorability were nearly pornographic. What would it be like to be so untroubled, so untouched by fear? To have *not* failed to construct a buttermilky, Instagram-loved nursery? To have not failed to populate both nursery and Instagram feed with reclaimed architectural details and twee British clothing and recipes for organic baby food extracted from vegetables grown in a God-kissed raised garden bed? Had these people never awakened their infants for fear they’d stopped breathing? Had none of them imagined, while crossing the cratered, postindustrial Providence streets, how the

stroller might be swept away atop the chrome fender of the car whose drunken driver had not seen them in time? Could it be that she alone looked into the lunar beam of her child's face and felt filled with the apprehension that they were—all of them—doomed? It was terrifying, this love, and older than organisms. This was not a secondary emotion. This was the thing that had first crawled out of the ocean to seek the sun.

But a diagnosis *was* good, wasn't it? To know that it wasn't just in her head? Wasn't just intrusive thoughts. There was an explanation now, however bewildering the genetics might be. Wasn't this vindication? After all, Ruby's issues *had* changed considerably in the months since Yael had first noticed how unusually pale the child's skin had become. Worse, her appetite—always iffy—had diminished; she'd lost weight and muscle tone, had perpetual pale lavender circles under her eyes and bluish lips. Their pediatrician had confirmed that her growth rate was in

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the lowest percentile for a four-year-old. At the same time, her loss of several baby teeth was happening much earlier than normal. This hadn't helped Ruby's bodily integrity issues one bit. In fact, she was so terrified when Yael

had tried to tell her that the tooth fairy would take the teeth away and leave a present that Ruby slept with them clutched in her damp fist, guarding them with her life. Ever since, Ruby had returned to sleeping in their bed. Wedged between Yael and Misha, the girl's body would twitch and shudder as though she were being electrocuted from the inside. Maybe a reaction to something in the barium swallow from the most recent endoscopy? Or an autoimmune disease? Was it lupus? No one slept.

That's where Yael's "obsession"—Misha's unsupportive and judgmental word—began. Was it so irrational, really, to insist that something tied together Ruby's digestive abnormalities, her abdominal cramps, her coughing and thick mucus and watering eyes? She would ask the internet. *Multiple endocrine neoplasia*, it said. She had been looking into the recent incidents of

involuntary muscle twitching. *Tardive dyskinesia*, it said. *Tardive Tourettism*, it said. And the weight loss? *Cervical dystonia, ulcerative colitis, colon cancer*. It wanted to go on and on, and it took her with it. Yael downloaded documents from medical journals, dense with jargon and impenetrable acronyms. Her browsing history was an intricate burrow; her algorithms nudged her toward primevally dark fringes. Yael no longer cared that Misha despised the sight of her iPhone's ghastly light irradiating her side of the bed. The staccato sound of her fingertips on the screen, then the silence of her intake of information, then again the skittering of the fingers, their urgency. He was waiting, she knew, for the return of his wife from her journey into the bowels of medical terror. But how could he be satisfied by the idea that Ruby had *nothing*? How could he keep saying, *Let's just wait and see*, when every conceivable explanation *had* to be tried, every doctor *had* to be implored to read the documents, order the tests. All of it was too much to bear, but then most things were too much to bear. How did anyone survive parenting? *Did* anyone, really?

Everyone at Hasbro had been on their phones that morning, scrolling through time itself, waiting for the start or the end of whatever lay ahead of them. On the aggressively enormous TV was a morning-show segment about a little honey-haired girl who'd been abducted in Montana. The anguished family was being interviewed. They held up a photograph of their daughter and implored the evil in the world to give her back. Yael had wondered, sickened, how they could be watching such a thing here, of all places? Were they all numb to this kind of information or did they need the pain of others to override their own? She had reminded herself not to judge—everyone had to improvise with their own instruments. But this? *Next up: one weird trick for getting your hottest beach body ever*. What did one thing have to do with another? When did the darkest human suffering become an acceptable diversion, intertwined with celebrity news and sports? *And after the break: the case of a teen driven to suicide by cyberbullying classmates. Plus, Paul and Matty with game highlights and Amber with tips for viewing today's total eclipse!*

Yael had gotten up and stooped into the playhouse where Ruby was quietly singing and pretending to bake cookies in

the pastel-hued plastic oven. She sat on the floor next to her daughter and tried very hard not to think about how fragile things were, how precarious and tinged with tragedy, how permeable the membrane that separated them all from catastrophe. These were the kind of dark and circuitous thoughts she knew she was supposed to shift into something else, but instead she was reviewing that morning's fight with Misha, which certainly didn't help.

At a low frequency just beneath the numbing bass of Motörhead's "Ace of Spades," Misha was thinking about this argument too. His microdosed ecstasy was not doing enough to elevate reality, least of all the grim fact that in a few hours he would arrive at the Crowheart, Wyoming, nursing home where his father lay, cobwebbed in fading memories. Why had it happened, the fight? It had been early, a few hours before he was supposed to leave. Ruby had finally drifted back to sleep after brutalizing night terrors, and Misha had crept out of bed like a cat burglar to see where Yael had gone. Down the hall, he poked his head into the bathroom, bright with lavender and eucalyptus. Yael lay in the bath, languidly sponging her skin, eyes closed, head nearly submerged. Unaware of his presence, she floated, a water lily in her private pond. He'd felt like some dumbshit teenager, stupid and lust dazed. Was it despite the recent infrequency of their physical contact or because of it? This was something they hadn't counted on, the cooling of ardor, the sudden recession of sexual energy from their lives. He'd told the couples therapist that he'd expected maybe it would be different for them, that they'd be the exception, but after Ruby, the changes set in and they were the exception to nothing. "You imagine these things are what happens to others," he'd said, "and then, *whammo*, it's like you come home to discover the locks changed." He was grateful Yael had chosen not to comment on the unfortunate analogy, but even he couldn't quite get past having said "whammo," like some asshole on a 1960s sitcom. He never knew what to say at these things, how to behave.

But that morning: water from the sponge at her collarbone descending to the well of her stomach; the saturated bitumen-black of her hair rhyming with the glistening dark between her legs. He'd held his breath, watched sunlight off the bathwater

dapple the room. The floorboards had creaked beneath him, startling her, and she concealed her breasts, suddenly modest. Misha had stood frozen in the doorway for a moment, the pervy voyeur stung by the unexpected return of the gaze. She'd nearly laughed aloud at his fumbling improv of what a person would look like were they searching for something in a medicine cabinet. "Would you hand me a towel, please, *luba mayn?*" she'd said, audible curve of a smile in her voice. He complied, swallowed his embarrassment, and looked at himself in the toothpaste-stippled mirror, finding there a sallow, hollow-eyed man whose graying, scraggly beard made him look like a wheat field in winter. He had no business thinking about sex while having a face that looked like this. But then *maybe?* Behind him, Yael's towel-muffled voice:

"You know, I think it's worth asking the doctor if it could be salicylate intolerance."

His mood had shifted abruptly. The erotic fugue state expelled, the dull reality returned.

"A *what* intolerance?"

"Salicylate. It's the chemical in aspirin, but it's also in a lot of foods, like apples and blueberries, which she's been eating plenty of lately. Maybe *that's* her problem. A lot of people have allergies to it, sensitivities. It can go undetected or be misdiagnosed . . ." She'd looked at him expectantly. Hoping for what? Common purpose. He knew this and also that this was not what she saw in his expression.

"This is what?" he'd said, more sharply than intended. "From the internet? Another fucking hypochondriac blog?" The anger was perforating his skin like porcupine quills.

"I didn't ask you to comment on the source. I know what you think. I'm just letting you know what we should be asking. You need to take this as seriously as I do or—I don't know. I'm anxious enough having to go to this appointment without you."

"I just think that—look, I've said it before. I mean, it's not healthy, what you do." He usually tried to say "we," so it wouldn't come off as accusing, but it was already too late to reel it back. The accusation was what it was. "You go on and search and search and inevitably you find something, because there's *always* fucking something to be found—"

"Are you done?"

"But what is it you're going to come away with? Logic and

measured thought or a new panic?” Their voices rising, at this same precipice they’d been at so many times.

“Are you done?”

“I mean, who posts their testimonials on the internet, for Chrissakes? The guy whose headache clears up with a couple of Tylenol or the guy whose headache is undiagnosed brain cancer? El, people that post these stories are either fringe lunatics piecing together their conspiracy theories or just some unlucky fucks who’re the exceptions to the rule—”

“Are. You. Done?”

“No, I’m *not* done. Because you—you don’t believe that there *is* a rule and instead trust the exception. To you, these people sound like clear cries in the wilderness. It’s fucking magical thinking!”

“Are you done are you done are you fucking *done*?”

The air had grown thick and hot with the violence they were not willing to do to one another. It filled the space like a poison fog. When Yael spoke again, her voice was quiet, shaky.

“It’s my right, Misha. It’s my responsibility—*our* responsibility—to find out what’s wrong with Ruby. To fix it. You think I’m crazy, but if you’re not willing to do the work, I will. Someone has to make this the priority, or we’ll never help her out of it.”

“Maybe *it* is nothing. Maybe nothing is wrong with her. Maybe it’s just her body being too young—a thing she’ll grow out of. I don’t know. But you don’t know either.”

“*Maybe* isn’t enough. You have to be a better advocate for Ruby. She can’t do this herself!”

In the fragrant steam, still clothed only in a towel, Yael had begun to sob. They’d embraced; she’d accepted the embrace. Misha’s exasperation deflated into a small, dark sadness. Damaged just a little bit more, but together.

“It’s just . . . nothing matters more,” she said, burying her face in his chest.

“I know. I know. But she’s probably just fine. We can choose to believe this.”

She looked at him, eyes wet, puffy. She suddenly seemed so drained of life.

“I can’t do that. Not yet.”

What would have been best? To yield—to have said that he understood, that she was right. That he’d follow her lead, investigate every possibility, phone more specialists. He relaxed his

grip on Yael's waist and said only, "I'm sorry, El. I have to get ready. It's going to be a long day."

Between the time she and Ruby left the hospital and when they crossed the Point Street Bridge, the eclipse had already carved an eyelash-thin curve on the edge of the sun; soon enough it would be total. Beneath it, the waters of the Providence River had glittered in the diminishing light, boats bobbing on its surface in spreading whorls of jettisoned gasoline. Something about the triple stacks of the Narragansett Electric Plant, its cables and their slouching catenaries, the pill-white chemical tanks just beyond Fox Point's hulking, carceral-concrete hurricane barrier, all had felt bludgeoning. Yael fought a wave of dizziness, another pre-migraine surge, and thought she might very well pass out and drive into the river while the secretarial lunch crowd at the waterfront bars looked on in day-drunk shock. The next day, she would be the news they'd be watching in the waiting room at Hasbro.

Instead of turning onto Hope when she reached the top of Wickenden, she'd stopped the car in front of the Aqua-Life aquarium. It had been a while since she'd taken Ruby to watch the epaulette sharks they had in their giant window tanks, once a favorite stop on their rounds. What a relief to see that the storefront had been completely repaired,

repainted since the big police chase that ended up with the front end of a fleeing F-150 crashing through the aquarium's front walls. The windows, shark tanks and all, had shattered, spilling out hundreds of gallons of

It's my responsibility—our responsibility—to find out what's wrong with Ruby. To fix it. You think I'm crazy, but if you're not willing to do the work, I will.

water and four epaulette sharks the size of greyhounds onto the street. No one expects sharks on a city street, least of all the sharks themselves, but for a while, there they were, stopping traffic, astonished to be struggling in the unfamiliar air. Now, though, the giant tanks were back in the windows and so were the sharks, one streamlined torpedo body rasping across the glistening skin of another in ceaseless circles. Transfixed, she'd thought of Ruby, cartoonishly bobbing along in that aqua ghost-light, a cool and

weightless purpled polyp, expanding, contracting, expanding, contracting. Changing colors, solving problems. She'd wondered if maybe Ruby was thinking the same things, if she was seeing something of herself. *It actually looks like a pretty good life*, Yael had thought, leading her daughter back to the car. She turned the key in the ignition and realized that the chorus of "Octopus's Garden" was, perversely, running through her head.

Now at Humboldt, the whole park was alive with moving, mottled shadows of the oak leaves above. The sounds of hidden birds, of dozens of plastic wheels pocking over gritty concrete paths. Shouts and wails. She couldn't tell just by listening which cries were pleasure and which were calamities. A gathering had already swelled to watch the eclipse, and bodies crowded the small space. The atmosphere felt charged; ancient fear transformed into spectacle. Some had been calling it the Great American Eclipse, although only Americans were calling it this. To be fair, that was because this was the only place the eclipse would be total. But still, it struck her as a very American thing to claim.

For now, the children, Ruby among them, were ascending the big slide, faces peering over the knife-blade shine of it, their expressions a mix of hesitation and fierce determination. Yael watched them teeter at the edge of their impulses, then, one by one, abandon themselves to gravity. Ruby climbed the ladder again, laughing, as though Hasbro had never even happened. Yael wanted to let that be, suppressed her urge to oversee, to shape and encourage and warn. She didn't want to be *that* kind of mother, even though she absolutely was. Because in truth you could never worry *enough*. The moment you stopped being vigilant, that's when things happened. This is why she had no time for the laid-back variety of twenty-first-century parent, bent on performing the mellow peace they'd made with chance. *Hey, if he falls, then he'll learn not to do it again.* And on they'd go with performative Tai Chi poses in the park while their children would collide and collide. This was not what she needed from other people. She wanted their uncertainty, their ambivalence. A true friend would look her in the eye and say, *I have no idea what I'm doing either, and it has me frightened to my very marrow, this crazy voyage in the dark, so let's do it together!*

Even in the Hasbro waiting room, it had occurred to her that everyone else seemed inadequately perturbed. What did she have in common with these aggressively put-together mothers who'd resumed their lives, gym-whittling their bodies back into shape, keeping up with the manicures and business meetings and date nights? And then there was Yael, in walking paralysis, pockets full of Post-its on which she wrote and then abandoned fragments of poems; in a desk drawer at home languished an unfinished—and by all indications, unfinishable—MFA thesis. She despised and scorned and secretly admired these women, these go-getters with their kombucha and jogging strollers and wine-clouded mommy groups. How dare they continue on as though nothing cataclysmic was happening? Why was it only she who found herself on the floor of a plastic playhouse in a hospital waiting room, hugging her knees to her chest, crying quietly?

This was it, then, she thought, perched on the edge of the sandbox and thumbing through the brochures. The brightly colored octopus illustrations, the middle-grade explanation of genetics and committee-written language that only increased her agitation. Yes, *this was it*: she had turned into her mother. Just as every daughter has been forewarned: “You’ll know when you have one of your own. Then you’ll know.” Wisdom offered as maternal threat, a reminder of the toll exacted by having been born. What would her mother say if Yael called now and announced that her granddaughter was a mollusk, which meant that probably they were too, at least in part, and maybe this explained something about them all? But she would never tell her mother, who would see in it evidence of Yael’s failure.

The talk at the park, as always:

Did you hire a sitter/nanny/au pair yet?

Did you sign them up for swim lessons yet?

Did you join the accountability group at the JCC yet?

Did you set up their 529s yet?

Did you sign the petition yet?

Did you get on the wait-list for that kindergarten yet?

Most of what was said always seemed to end in *yet*, implying that properly organized, responsible people had already done what felt to Yael either unimaginable or already too late for her to do. Occasionally, there was also: *What about subway tiles*

for the kitchen backsplash? About which she had no particular opinion, being uncertain what those even were.

The parental talk was a nimbus of mist and also a toxic cloud. The children swirled around and through it, untouched by its meaning. They seemed lit from within. Yael was grateful that Ruby looked happy, healthy, especially after the morning's ordeal. How long would she be able to stay that way? How much longer did they have before other changes set in? She thought of something she'd once read for a grad seminar: "Time is a game played beautifully by children." A quotation, but from whom? Another thing she could only half remember, so many things fading already into the blur.

Voices percolated across the park: the eclipse had begun in earnest, the gestating sliver on the sun reminding them that they were, after all, clustered together on a planet, for however long. Someone behind her was informing those around him about the history of total eclipses, and she wanted to punch him so hard, even though she had never punched anyone. She was irritated and fidgety, the background radiation of the morning's tense parting from Misha still singeing the edges of her mood, further complicating the struggle to grasp what was going on inside her daughter's strange and precious body. All the things she had no control over. She wanted to shout: *The sun is not doing this for our experience!* But then, wasn't it?

Later, in the night quiet, Ruby open-mouthed and drooling on the pillow next to her, Yael will learn the following from the internet:

- Octopuses (she already knows she will never call them octopodes) all have venom, the blue-ringed octopus's venom can be fatal. There are no known instances of human-octopod hybrids having inherited this trait.
- Octopuses can regrow their arms if they lose them. A woman in Estonia claimed this had happened to her grandson, but it has never been independently verified.
- Octopuses have three hearts. Will Ruby? Yael will wonder if maybe that means Ruby will feel more love, and though she'll immediately know it's a stupid idea for so many reasons, it'll strike something in her.

- Octopuses have dumbbell-shaped pupils that split white light like prisms do. Their vision is panoramic.
- Octopuses have decentralized brains, meaning their bodies are themselves thinking things, that their arms have thoughts of their own.
- Octopus mothers die after their young are born. This is a tragedy she will not be able to bear.
But is it maybe also a mercy?

Once more than half the sun had gone into shadow, there was a sense that something was really happening, was unfolding in real time. They were all part of it, sharing it. She wanted more than anything to call Misha, bring him into this moment of the eclipse, wonder together in the vacuum of space, but earlier, when she had texted that she missed him already, he had said, *It's good to miss each other a little*. Even though it was true, she wished he hadn't said it.

The eclipse had entered totality. Yael thought: *Now we are in totality*. The corona was a sheath of fire around the Bible-black medallion of the moon. Everyone murmured, their gazes and phones fixed on the sky, eyes shielded by rectangular black glasses like that 1950s *Life* photograph of the audience at the first 3-D movie. Back when America consumed images of itself in *Life* magazine. Now they were all uploading their own pictures to the ether, little flecks in the algae bloom of images. She wondered how Ruby would remember this, tell the story about how they were here, together, to watch this daytime darkness spread over them like an oil spill, like an omen. An octopus ink cloud. *Would* Ruby remember it, or would it be just one more swirl in the paisley-patterned sense impressions from when she was young?

Yael thought: Now we are in totality. The corona was a sheath of fire around the Bible-black medallion of the moon.

This had to be one of the saddest phrases she could imagine: *When Ruby was young*. She never wanted to say it, even though,

of course, one day she would have to arrive at the moment when the story of this day, of this eclipse would begin that way. To say it would mean Ruby was no longer young. And who—*what*—would she be then? How would the changes take place? How would this alter them all? But they were not there yet, not there yet. Misha would have said that they shouldn't agonize about a crisis until it had arrived, because maybe it wouldn't be a crisis at all, in which case they'd have wasted their time—and for what?

For now Ruby *was* young, was still *Ruby* as Yael had always known her, still passing through the totality together, awaiting the return of the sun. The girl was near her now. She could feel her moist heat, her creaturely breath. They were in totality, the adults and their children, she and Ruby, certain slices of America, maybe Misha too. Yael, eyes skyward, tried not to think of the warnings she'd read about people selling counterfeit glasses that would blind you if you used them to look at the eclipse. Because how could you know until it was too late, your stupefied blindness the only proof? And if she were to remove her glasses entirely, take her chances just this once, this one unrepeatable time? Let it enter her eyes and never leave? The eclipse's gaze was beautiful and dangerous. Beneath it, earthly things were newly vivid in unaccustomed shadow. The park pulsed with opulent greenness and everyone seemed to sway, slowly, in the hushed totality, as if suspended in the depths of the sea.

Photograph by Larry L. Abraham

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

KHALED MATTAWA

ALEX TRETBAR

ERAN EADS

CAMILA RING

MIRANDE BISSELL

CHELSEA CHRISTINE HILL

KATHARINE RAUK

ERIN PESUT

JACK RIDL

JOHN JAMES

REBEKAH REMINGTON

CAROLINE HARPER NEW

MICHAEL FULOP

JESSICA DIONNE

ANDREW MAXWELL

