

## Shelter

Jacob watched as the baby's curled figure filled the monitor. Her puffy little body squirmed, and his own stomach tossed and turned: in six months, Lily would be born, and he would watch her squirm on the embroidered pink sheets Lena had already folded neatly into her crib. Lily, the darling namesake of Lena's grandmother. Jacob was excited to finally, at thirty-three, have pictures of his own to pass around the office—but he didn't yet know what lay beneath this anticipation. He figured he would find out when he first felt Lily breathing in his arms. She would cry and smile, and he would know.

"It's certainly a girl," the doctor said, directing his laser pen toward the ultrasound image. "At this point, you can tell more from what's not there than what is."

Dr. Frank glanced at Jacob, and Jacob offered a small laugh. He was simply glad to have a doctor who expressed human emotion. Jacob and Lena had been to another gynecologist a few weeks prior, but the experience had exasperated both of them. Jacob hadn't liked the way Dr. Jenson had looked at Lena. Dr. Jenson had the taut, thin build of a distance runner, and wore thick glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes. They had been too focused, his face too intent, as he examined Lena's stomach. Then the crotch of Dr. Jenson's pants moved as he leaned over Lena. Jacob almost demanded they leave right then, but bit his lip. This had been Lena's first big decision of a—not unwanted, but sudden pregnancy, and Jacob had promised to let her have final say during the process. He was relieved when Lena suggested afterward that they try someone else. "I noticed he didn't smile once," she had said. They decided to pretend the appointment didn't happen and try again with someone new.

Dr. Frank now looked at Lena's stomach kindly, almost reverently. His eyes softened as

he examined her, and he asked before he touched.

Still, Lena looked uncomfortable as the doctor placed his hands on her. She hadn't yet become accustomed to this new part of her—something to be probed and examined. She had been so skinny; now, she fretted about bulging so quickly. Her favorite checkered t-shirt lay torn at the base of their dresser after it had shown her belly when she pulled it on that morning. But Jacob thought Lena looked even more striking than before. Tiny tingles ran up his spine when he watched her in the armchair in the corner of his apartment where they lived, wearing her reading glasses and sweats, a novel propped on her stomach. He stared, too, in bed when she wore baggy night shirts that suggested only an anthill of a bump beneath, until Lena eventually looked down from her book and nudged him with her elbow. "She doesn't like you staring," Lena would say.

Dr. Frank now stood straight, his own belly a slight paunch, and addressed them both. "I can always tell by this point how they'll come out," he said, roaming the ultrasound image with his laser. "And she's going to be a beauty."

Lena looked at Jacob and offered a broad smile. For the past three months that smile had been fleeting; on top of doctor appointments, they needed to move into a house with a room for Lily. Jacob's excitement had faded as Lena raised ever more logistical concerns about preschool boundaries and crib designs. But the glow now on her face, which showed through every freckle under her eyes, sent through him the same trembling energy as when they first met.

Only five months ago, fate had led them both to Schlotzsky's Deli in West Eugene on their lunch breaks. They had sat down at the same table simultaneously. "Is this seat taken?" Jacob said. He was pleased to have thought of anything at all to say to this woman who, even at that first moment, he wanted for his wife. She said no, and their courtship began. Lena's

smile progressed from embarrassed to confident and relaxed, and Jacob ate as slowly as possible. They talked about his job servicing power lines for the local electric co-op, and her job selling items for people at internet auction, and then an upcoming production of *As You Like It* they had both heard about on the radio. He said he had once played Cassio in *Othello*, not sure if that would impress her, and she leaned in and confessed to having played Feste the Clown in *Twelfth Night*. They decided to meet again that weekend for the play. It was not only this shared love for theater, not just Lena's gleaming orange hair and rosy skin, but her conspiratorial leprechaun-green eyes that made Jacob want to sit with her through the rest of their lives.

Jacob felt sure he could nurture and raise Lily with Lena by his side.

Dr. Frank had been wrong.

Months later, Jacob tried in vain to see beauty in Lily after his wife's screaming hours of labor. Lily's color was far too dark, and a glassy red and purple cord twisted around her neck. Then there was the ringing silence. Lena's moans halted, but Lily did not cry, or squirm, or kick. The number of white coats in the room tripled almost immediately, but when the last one stepped away several minutes later, Lily lay still. Dr. Frank shook his head, and Jacob picked Lily up, wishing only that her chest might rise and fall. He could hardly understand why it didn't, and could not pull his eyes from this still form that had come from his wife. When he finally looked up, he saw Lena sprawled motionless across the hospital bed, her exhausted body yielding to the bed's wet sheets. She seemed neither his wife of two months nor the woman he had met at lunch so long ago, simply—flat. Against her forehead and eyes stuck sweat-matted hair; her drawn face had lost its color and contours; and her belly sagged, the peel of a fruit mined for its flesh.

Lena raised dull eyes to the ceiling. They closed slowly, then snapped open again, and

Lena began to wail. Her earlier moans had scared Jacob in their depth and length, but these shrieks were sharper and bore a keener sorrow than any human sound he knew. She leveled her eyes on Jacob. Tears built and dripped slowly; she lacked the energy to sob. Jacob registered the weight of the baby in his arms—he didn't know how heavy she was, and now there was no reason to weigh her—and the truth finally penetrated. Terror poured over him, his arms shook, and the baby's head lolled. He handed the baby to Dr. Frank and hurried from the room. His tennis shoes caught against the floor, and he stumbled into the far wall, catching himself against the warm glass of the window. Sharp August sunlight blinded his eyes. He staggered down the hallway to a restroom a hundred yards away, and threw up almost as soon as he entered the first stall. Not all of it went in the toilet. He watched it come forth, his lunch, then water and bile. He sank to the cool floor, drooped his head, and failed to cry, empty. He fingered his rolling wedding band, thinking of the same ring on Lena's finger, and passed it over the knuckle and back. He leaned forward and spat thick foam into the toilet, flushed, and walked back to his wife.

One month later, Jacob returned from work to find a pet carrier and fifty-pound bag of dog food on his side of the garage. He parked in the driveway and sat with his hands on the wheel and his seatbelt buckled. Lena had never mentioned wanting a dog, and judging by the packing-crate-sized carrier, it was going to be big. Now hardly seemed the time. Lena was going in to work a few hours a week—but neither slept well. They kissed each other good-night, then lay in silence for hours. If Jacob had to get up with the dog, he doubted he'd have the energy to work on power poles all day.

A scratchy bark came as Jacob turned his key in the front door, and a foot-tall yellow lab squirmed out. The dog sniffed his boots briefly before bounding to a patch of grass by the

sidewalk and crouching. Lena appeared and beamed at the lab, which now wriggled on its back right where it had peed.

"So." Jacob raised his eyebrows.

"Saved from the shelter." Lena leaned against the door frame, in baggy gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt. She had worn some combination of sweats for the past month, despite her new morning workout regimen. She wore them even to bed, and Jacob felt sad to look at and touch a body of cotton every night. He struggled to accept and love this new flat, fit Lena when he could still imagine a belly, even a baby, underneath her loose clothes.

"That would explain its lying in its own urine. Does it have a name?"

"Yes, *she* does. Lily."

Jacob's arms suddenly seemed to be supporting a phantom weight, and he leaned back against the rail of their porch. "Lena, I can't call her that."

"But that's actually her name. I found her at the Humane Society. They had a cute cocker spaniel, too, but I thought you would like the lab more." Her head tilted to the side as she watched the dog, and she hunched up slightly against the door frame. She looked like a shy child.

"Fuck its name. I'm not calling it that, and I don't want it in our house."

Lena sank to her knees and snapped her fingers. The dog trotted up, and she collected it in her arms. She kissed its forehead, then extended it to Jacob. But his arms couldn't take any more weight. Jacob felt ill and pushed past her to the stairs inside.

"We needed something, you know." Lena's voice cracked.

Jacob walked past the closed door that hid the crib Lena refused to let him take down. She wanted to preserve Lily's memory, she'd said, but she, too, mostly avoided the room. It had become a stale tomb, as if Lily were buried there. He pushed the image from his mind and

collapsed on their bed's down comforter, crying. He felt with acute pain the void that came with their baby's death, but didn't know how best to fill it, or if he was ready to. He was still feeling out his grief's dimensions. How different it must be from Lena's. Jacob's nausea grew as he cried, and he went to the toilet to throw up. After the last heaves, he sat back against the wall. A sharp bark rang out from the kitchen below.

Once Jacob had changed clothes, he closed himself in the upstairs office. He wrote checks for several bills, then stilled. Hunger built in his stomach; such a simple pang to understand and so easy to fix. Eventually, Jacob returned to the bedroom and lay quietly with eye shades on. When Lena came to bed, he heard no dog. Not even Lena could sleep with Lily in the same room.

Three weeks later, snow had already begun to fall in earnest in the Cascades. Jacob marveled at the early-winter flakes piling up. Only his carbon-fiber snowshoes kept him from plunging through the lumpy white powder that stretched in all directions. Eugene had been similarly colorless when he and Micah had left that morning, everything muted beneath the endless gray banks of October rain clouds. Micah, Jacob's coworker, moved briskly ahead, and Jacob tried to quicken his pace in his unwieldy shoes.

Lena would be in the woods by now, too. She had sent Jacob off on his overnighter with a kiss, then waited for Kim from work to come get her and take her to Silver Falls. Today was their personal "Explore Oregon" day, a suggestion from their therapist. Jacob thought it sounded silly, but when he had seen Lena nod, he had, too. This morning, she had looked the best she had in weeks. She seemed dressed up in her boots, nylon pants, and raincoat, and her smile showed that she was feeling better.

"I definitely saw a prostitute at the mall yesterday," Micah called, a dozen yards up the

hill. "Then on my way home I caught a homeless guy shitting on a rock."

Jacob took a dim view of Micah's crassness, but let this statement go. Jacob had basically invited himself when Micah had mentioned his plans last week in the utility truck; he'd feared he wouldn't be able to find anyone else to explore Oregon with. The last time Jacob had seen a prostitute was six months before for his bachelor party in Las Vegas. Most of his high school friends still lived in Reno. This woman had been leaning against the sphinx of the Luxor, draped in sequined gold. Jacob refocused all his energy on moving his feet, heavier with every step. His quads tightened from the exertion, despite the occasional pole-climbing he had to do at work. He was now a mile and a half from both Micah's Bronco and the snow shelter ahead, though, so he had no choice but to keep moving.

Micah neared the top of the rise, and Jacob tried conversation to make him slow down. "You're always—" Jacob paused to regain his breath—"saying that you saw a prostitute."

"But this time I did!"

"So what?" Jacob asked.

"You just should have seen her, that's all. Spiked heels, fishnets, vinyl shorts that barely kept her legs in. She was just like you would imagine."

But Jacob imagined someone different. She had deep brown skin and was wrapped in gold, poised on two four-inch, Dorothy-red heels—the woman Jacob had solicited as he shuffled away from his friends on the gaming floor at 4 a.m., drunk. She had seemed a mystery of light and dark, her skin absorbing and her dress reflecting the glow of the hotel's floodlights, and he suddenly wanted to take her to his room and clutch her, pull the light out of her. For fifty dollars, she would be his. Jacob reached for his wallet before he realized what he was doing. *He was drunk. It was four a.m. He would soon have a wife.* He hurried to the casino entrance and didn't look back. But it was something else that had brought him to his senses.

With Lily growing steadily inside of Lena, he had already felt married. He considered himself no less of a husband without the baby, but struggled to convince Lena of this reasoning.

Whether or not she acted like his wife seemed to depend on which side of the bed she rose from.

Jacob's breath became ragged as the hill steepened near the top, and he was thankful when Micah stopped to pull out the map, trying to manage its folds with his gloved fingers. Micah looked abominable in his winter get-up. His white winter coat had turned a faint brown from heavy use, and his features were hardly visible between his hood and the untrimmed beard spreading up his face and down his neck. Micah was thick, too, like the old growth around them; he could probably walk across the snow without the help of snowshoes.

"How does it look?" Jacob pushed his merino wool beanie away from his eyebrows.

"Just another half-mile to the overnight shelter. We're making good time, considering."

Micah's words seemed to hold no spite, but Jacob and Micah had only ever gone out for beers together. He doubted Micah could help him come to any new place of peace. Besides, Jacob was nearing the point of being able to pull through on his own. Lena was the one who remained astray. He'd insisted on counseling for her benefit, with the outside hope the therapist would suggest removing the dog. She hadn't.

Jacob's phone beeped inside his jacket pocket, and a few robins in the trees, perched on branches like statues, took off in quick, swerving flight. The hill had apparently brought him into service range. Micah shot him a dour look, then folded up the map as Jacob listened to a message from Lena: *Hi, honey, I hope you're having fun with your friend. I'm at home. I called Kim to postpone. I'm sorry—I just needed to stay with Lily today. See you tomorrow when you get back. Love you.*"

"Well?" Micah asked.

"My wife. Problems with the dog." Micah knew about the baby, but Jacob had been too embarrassed to explain Explore Oregon, and didn't feel like talking things over with him.

Micah shrugged. "I'm a cat person myself." He started forward, and Jacob followed.

Jacob knew that Lena had changed back into her sweats and lay in the den with the dog. What right did she have to break her plans and remain home, while he trekked through the mountains on tennis rackets?

Jacob resisted the dog out of loyalty. He was trying to move past Lily, just to feel normal again, but sometimes he felt that as though he was still her father. He had held her in his arms, however briefly, and felt her warmth, before she—what? Had Lily died, or had she never been alive? Was it Lily in Lena's womb when they had read about the big hungry bear and the red ripe strawberry—or just a failed group of cells? Had she felt anything when she heard his voice? There in the delivery room, blue like a large bruise, Jacob couldn't believe that she had ever thought or felt.

She had kicked, though. Lena had lived with these kicks for the better part of the year, and she often placed Jacob's hand on her stomach to feel them—the only time she wasn't self-conscious about her belly. Afterwards, Lena said she felt phantom kicks, especially when she didn't eat—which was often—and her stomach growled. Jacob told her they would go away, but that further saddened her. Recently, he had caught her on her back with the dog on her stomach. When she had seen him, she had returned to making her decoupage boxes. These she intended for the kids at the orphanage—"There's no reason they shouldn't have a bit of color in their day, too," she'd said—but she would never deliver them. She needed something to drag her from the cell of grief she'd made. Why Jacob couldn't be that something, he didn't know.

Finally, with Jacob's legs protesting fiercely, the trees thinned and they stepped into a

clearing. Micah emerged first, then Jacob. Criss-crossed tracks led to a log forest service shelter at the far end. Wisps of smoke were beginning to spiral away from the chimney in the peaked roof. They trudged across the last stretch of snow, and Micah pushed open the door.

Two people were stooped building a fire at the opposite end of the rectangular shelter, bundled in snow clothes. Only when they turned could Jacob distinguish them: a woman and a man in their early forties, he with a half-moon scar running down his right cheekbone into the scruff of his beard, she with close-cropped black hair.

"Howdy, strangers!" Micah said.

"Right back at you," the man said, and gave a friendly nod. "I'm Bill Neeson, and this is my wife, Darla." He gestured with a piece of kindling toward her.

Darla waved a mittened hand. She wore khaki boots with elaborate puffs of wool overflowing from their tops, and a matching red jacket and pants. She looked like the robins from earlier.

Micah and Jacob unlatched their snowshoes and crossed the room. Bill offered Jacob a firm shake; a thin, hairless line ran across the back of his hand—another scar. Jacob wondered if there were others, imagining a grid of scars like the tracks outside, and whether they had multiple stories or one. He moved his hand to a scar at his hairline, a stamp-sized right angle from his first week back at work after the stillbirth. He'd become lightheaded as he rode the truck's lift to the top of a pole, and fainted. He awoke on the grass with Micah over him.

"You fellas have impeccable timing," Darla said. "We just arrived fifteen minutes ago."

"We haven't even had time to properly warm each other up yet!" Bill leaned over to kiss his wife. She raised her eyebrows, but didn't shy away. That morning, Jacob had been amazed when Lena had kissed him with Micah watching from the driveway.

"You just watch yourself," Darla said with a grin. "You might end up with another scar."

She pulled an imaginary knife from the waist of her pants and sliced it through the air at Bill.

"Don't worry, guys," Bill said, running his index finger along his scar. "It was just a hunting accident."

They both seemed crazy, but some excitement was a relief. Jacob's life seemed to have been on mute since he and Lena picked out Lily's tiny mahogany violin case of a coffin. The silence and stillness of the mortuary had followed them and taken root in their house.

Three sets of bunk beds lined the wall. Bill and Darla were set up on the bunks in the corner, their bags rolled out on top and bottom. Their sleeping separately surprised Jacob—whatever his and Lena's distance in daylight, they lay touching all through the night as they drifted in and out of sleep. He would have felt strangely alone sleeping apart from Lena while in the same room. Maybe the nightly rituals of marriage changed and loosened after so many years. But Bill was also a few inches over six feet, so maybe it was just a practical matter. Jacob and Micah each took a bunk for himself, then rejoined Bill and Darla around the fire. It was only five-thirty, but Jacob's legs were cramping more frequently. He would have to sleep soon.

Soon the rich, greasy aroma of baked beans and chili, and the Mediterranean spices of a can of stewed tomatoes filled the room. Bill had packed in two bottles of wine from his father's vineyard—Jacob could hardly imagine bearing such superfluous weight for three miles of snowshoeing—and he passed around plastic cups while Micah tended the food and fire. Now that Jacob was sitting, his hunger had grown ravenous, and he became steadily light-headed as he sipped red wine in the warmth of the wood stove. The room had no windows, and his head nodded, jerked up and refocused, then nodded again. Lena would be eating dinner now, too, or, having finished, be walking down the hallway to the den. He imagined her coming up to the door that only she opened, once every week or two, turning the handle

slowly and entering. Seeking the rear wall in the dark room and standing over the empty crib in the corner. Bending to pick up the blanket folded at the foot, holding it tight.

"Where are y'all coming from?" Darla asked Jacob.

Jacob cleared his throat. "Eugene. A couple of hours south. You?"

"Astoria. Decided it was time to get out of town for a 'lovers' weekend,' you know?"

Darla had a chubby face, though she was not unattractive for it. More like she had yet to shed the last of her baby fat.

"I'm on something of a getaway myself, I suppose," Jacob said.

"So you and Micah...?" Darla nodded at his wedding band.

Jacob let out a peal of laughter, too loud for the small room, and Micah and Bill turned from the stove to look at him. "No, I'm married. To a woman, I mean. Lena's back at home."

"Watching the kids?"

"Something like that," Jacob said.

"We decided it was best not to have kids," Darla said.

Jacob's right quad seized, and he extended the leg to relieve it, holding it aloft. "Why?"

"It—would have taken too much of our time and energy, taken away the closeness Bill and I have."

A few trembling flames were visible through the wood stove's slightly open door.

"Are you okay?" Darla cocked her head.

"I'm just a bit overheated is all. I need a refill." He walked to the table, picked up the wine bottle and looked at it. If he had another cup-full, he wouldn't be able to stem his tears.

"Dinner is served!" Micah called.

When Jacob returned to the fire, he sat opposite Darla. Within ten minutes, the food had vanished, and Bill and Darla brought out a pack of cards. Jacob took part half-heartedly for a

few rounds of gin rummy, then excused himself and went to his bunk.

Even away from the fire, Jacob felt feverish, and his legs were stiffening. He decided to step outside. A turbulent dark had fallen, composed of shifting shadows and rustling trees. Black pine branches hung over the back side of the shelter, as though they were an open hand preparing to lift it from the ground. Across the clearing, a quarter moon illuminated the snow with a soft glow. Jacob headed left into the woods.

Without his snowshoes, he sank two feet with every step. This postholing was even more laborious than snowshoeing, but he had no destination, and contented himself with the crunch of each step. Stars bright and faint spread across the sky, filling and texturing the darkness in a way the ambient light of the city made impossible. Jacob had seen some of these same stars with Lena from their hot tub, but never so clearly and in such depth. A longing arose to stay here—Lena could come, too, and stand with him in the snow. He would kiss her under this blanket of stars without her shying away. They would stock the shelter and never go back.

He moved up a slight ridge. From the top, he made out Orion, the hunter of the night sky. Three dazzling stars made up the constellation's belt, and close by, Sirius, the Dog Star, nipped at its heels. Jacob began to cry. Seeing these stars, that star, millions of miles away—and millions of years in the past—and Lena always just as far, was too much. Even their marriage couldn't bridge such a gap. His mistake had been thinking that it could.

Jacob turned toward a scraping sound and saw a beam of light bobbing up and down along the snow. He was surprised when Darla emerged from the darkness.

"How," she said, breathing in bursts, "did you make it this far without your snowshoes?"

"Thinking about other things, I guess." He looked back at the sky, but now saw only the residual glow of the flashlight.

"You aren't really okay, are you?" she asked.

He thought about lying again, but she deserved the truth after seeking him out. "No, I'm not. Earlier, what I said about my wife—we don't have any kids. A month and a half ago we almost had a daughter, but she died during birth."

"I thought something awful might have happened. You still look like a deer in the headlights." She paused, taking a moment to look at the stars. "Was she planned?"

The question took Jacob aback, but Darla's tone was gentle. "No. Actually, Lena became pregnant a few months after we met."

"Well, given and taken away by fate. Maybe it was for the best."

His impulse was to yell at this stranger. But Darla's frank honesty was refreshing, and no anger built inside. That he didn't have to bear this woman's pity was a relief. "Maybe—" He thought of Lena's shame over her belly, her retreat into herself. "—maybe it was. But what kind of parent can say that and believe it?"

"I lied earlier, too," Darla said. "We tried for years to have a child. Couldn't do it. Never figured out if it was me or Bill, but nothin' doin'. These days, it's true I don't want a child, but there was a time I dearly wanted one. A daughter, a son. Didn't matter."

"I'm sorry."

"Here I am with Bill, our love all the stronger for what we've gone through. That was our test. We passed. And if there's not ever another little Darla in the world, I can live with that." She swept her arms wide, encompassing everything around them, and her flashlight played across the treetops before giving way to the black sky and faraway twinkles of light. "Go ahead and take a minute. But if you need anything out of Micah, you better come back sooner rather than later. He pulled out a quart of whiskey, and he and Bill are not long for this world."

She turned, and her light faded into the pines. He pulled out his wallet and removed a picture. He could only see its outlines, but knew it by heart. He and Lena were in the theater lobby during the intermission of *As You Like It*. She wore a knee-length pale yellow dress, and her head was tilted as Jacob explained some plot point about the previous act. She wasn't yet smiling, but her lips were slightly upturned. He stared at her, imagining. Imagining what their life would have been like if Lily had lived. Years of pictures and trips and landmark birthdays, of fending off boyfriends, of sports teams and parent meetings—of devotion to Lily. And to each other? Maybe he and Lena would have drifted apart anyway, gradually; maybe they would have divorced and left Lily in the lurch between homes.

His eyes had readjusted to the night, and Jacob followed his tracks back by the light of the moon and stars. He had no answer. He knew only that he felt severed. He pulled off his left glove and held his hand up to the sky, watching the starlight glint off his ring. Where before it offered a promise of love and union, it now seemed a sentence to a fractured life. Jacob rolled the ring smoothly over his knuckle and placed it in his pocket, then moved off into the trees, back to the shelter.