

VIKING

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FOR MY FAMILY

*What is love and what is hate
And why does it matter?*

—The Flaming Lips, “In the Morning of the Magicians”

We’re here because we’re here because we’re here because we’re here.

—World War I trench song

EVERYTHING MATTERS!
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PART ONE

In Utero; Infancy

- 97 First, enjoy this time! Never again will you bear so little responsibility for your own survival. Soon you will have to take in food and dispose of your own waste, learn the difference between night and day and acquire the skill of sleeping. You will need to strengthen the muscles necessary to sustain high-volume keening for long intervals. You will have to master the involuntary coos and facial twitches which are the foundation of infantile cuteness, to ensure that those charged with caring for you continue to provide food and clean linen. You will need to flex your arms and legs, loll your head to strengthen the neck, crawl, stagger to your feet, then walk. Soon after you must learn to run, share, swing a bat and hold a pencil, love, weep, read, tie your shoelaces, bathe, and die. There is much to learn and do, and little time; suffice it to say that you should be aware of the trials ahead so that you may appreciate the effortless liquid dream of gestation while it occurs, rather than only in hindsight. For now, all you need to do is grow.

There is one significant exception to this. You may have noticed that you share the womb with other objects. The most obvious and important of these is the fleshy tether attached to your abdomen, known as the umbilical cord. It is, quite literally, your lifeline, providing blood, nutrients, and vital antibodies, among other things. Already it has wrapped twice around your neck, and while this may not seem to you, who does not yet breathe, to be particularly dangerous or untoward, it can imperil your entry into the world. We will not lie—it could kill you. Now, be calm. You should remain as still as possible throughout the rest of your gestation. While this will do nothing about the entanglements already constricting your neck, it will go a long way toward preventing further looping or other complications—*vasa previa*, knots, cysts, hematoma. Any of these problems, by itself, is not particularly dangerous, but two or more occurring together can be big trouble, so you should maintain perpetual vigilance against the many temptations to move. Of course, there are some who would argue that it is unfair

to ask a fetus to exercise impulse control. You, however, would do well to avoid those who complain about life's unfairness, and instead get a head start on building self-restraint.

Light and noise present the toughest challenge to your resolve to remain still. They come to you through your mother's abdomen, and you feel an impetus to move toward them, to stir the viscous bath of amniotic fluid with tiny fingers and toes in an effort to absorb the warmth of sunlight, or hear Carly Simon trill. The urge to move is natural and understandable. As will be the case throughout your life, no matter how long or brief, the choice is, in the end, yours. Simply bear in mind that most every choice will have consequences, and in this instance those consequences would likely be quite grave.

96 Your mother has one other child, your brother, who was a tornado in utero, so your lack of movement causes her alarm. We should mention that she is prone to unreasonable anxiety and nervous tension, minor disorders that have several underlying causes, not the least of which is the verbal and physical abuse she suffered as a child at the hands of her father. This is why she pokes at you and spends hours with a transistor radio pressed against her belly, trying to bait you into moving. Despite the fact that her abdomen continues to grow, she wakes one night convinced you'll be born an ashen husk, your fingers hooked forever into lifeless little claws. With this image lodged in her mind's eye she weeps, her hands laced together in a protective hugging posture under the swell of her belly. Now, a boy's aversion to upsetting his mother is among the more primal and tenacious instincts, and so you suffer an almost irresistibly powerful urge to kick and twirl, to give unmistakable evidence of your life, to turn your mother's sobs to relieved and slightly embarrassed little hiccups of laughter. Do not yield to this instinct, or you will put your life at risk. Protecting yourself now means you'll have many years ahead with which to repay her grief. Besides, you can rest assured that this is not the last time you will make your mother cry.

Eventually your father's hands, along with two unscheduled visits to the obstetrician for ultrasound and fetal monitor, soothe your moth-

er's fears to a level she finds tolerable, and she wraps the transistor in its power cord and returns it to the closet, and stops staring for long silent hours at the television.

- 95 Although the biological goal of sex was achieved with conception, your father still has a hefty sexual appetite (as does your mother, though out of concern for you she will not admit it). To you his advances are terrifying. You hear him seeking entry with his tongue and other parts of his body, and your instinct is to recoil, which is perfectly normal—the perception of one's father as an omnipotent predator of great physical strength serves a vital function for most boys, and usually persists well into adulthood, though paradoxically it does not seem to preclude the desperate striving after his love and approval. You try to hold fast, but a stronger, more immediate impulse toward self-preservation takes hold, and you kick against the uterine wall, pushing away from the sniffing and growling at the entrance to your home, and as you drift slowly up the umbilical cord draws tighter around your throat, and a knot forms. Your mother, feeling you stir for the first time in two months, smiles and invites your father in, prodding him with the heels of her feet. They have sex, a rough pulsing in your warm world like the addition of a third heartbeat, and in that moment when you hear your mother moan you gain the knowledge of betrayal, what it means but also how it feels, and though it of course does not feel good you shouldn't be discouraged; we can tell you that no matter how long you live, no matter how mature or philosophical you may grow to be, almost all sudden enlightenment will feel precisely this way, like a boot in the stomach, like acid on your tongue, and the sooner you accept this the better off you'll be. In fact, you should be glad—at your age, to have understood and assimilated an abstract yet acutely painful concept such as betrayal is, in a word, prodigious. It indicates you have a better than average chance to succeed at the task for which you have been chosen.
- 94 Now the danger to you is quite grave. With the development of a knot, the umbilical cord will not tolerate any more tension. You must stay put. Having felt you move, from here on your mother will find every

excuse to have sex, and you will have to suffer in absolute stillness. Your life depends on it.

- 93 Still, when she isn't locked in sexual contortions your mother is the safest, most comfortable home you can imagine. And since the likelihood that she will be the only home you'll ever know has increased exponentially, you should make an effort, when not cowering from your father's incursions, to enjoy every moment here.
- 92 One small, positive development in all this burgeoning trouble is you are nearing the end of gestation, and due to a precisely timed infusion of hormones you want to move around less as you approach your birth. Slowly you roll one last time, until you are fully inverted and in position to emerge from the womb. As a bonus, your father begins to find your mother less and less sexually appealing. It's not your mother's size that repulses him, but rather her distended navel, which juts ever longer from her belly like a severed finger regenerating itself. He tries not to look at it but inevitably can't help himself, and when the wave of disgust comes over him he feels ashamed and emasculated all at once, though of course he would not admit this even if he could. Thus you are left in peace to gather your strength, every ounce of which you will need, especially since, as we'd feared, the obstetrician did not detect the knot in your umbilical cord. Had the knot been noticed, he almost certainly would have opted for a cesarean delivery, thereby reducing the danger to both you and your mother. As it stands, with a vaginal delivery planned, things are likely to be hard, protracted, and quite dangerous.
- 91 Soon the day comes. Your mother knows in the morning; she has slept fitfully, and as she rises and waddles to the bathroom she feels the milder contractions begin like seismic tremors in the small of her back. You know, too. You sense the swish and shift and though you can't have any idea yet what it means, you're still not sure that you like it. For one thing, your mother begins, by and by, to scream, and you're certain you don't like that, trapped as you are inside the amphitheater of

her belly. For another, the shift portion of the swish and shift causes your umbilical cord to draw even tighter, spurring your first experience with physical pain. Your mother's screams rise an octave, and the warm fluid in which you have spent your entire life flushes away, replaced by slick undulating walls equal to the fluid in warmth but hard, insistent, pressing from all sides, pushing you down, down, inexorably down and out of your home forever, and now you are certain you don't like this at all because no one likes change unless it is from something bad to something good, and besides the umbilical knot and loops have cut the flow of blood both *from* your placenta and *to* your brain, bad trouble indeed. Your heart slows, and the pinprick of consciousness grows hazy, fading from red to pink to gray. Something's wrong, your mother wails to the doctor and nurses. They ignore her; they are the experts, after all, they have done this a thousand times, and your mother is in pain and exhausted and probably not thinking right and should leave it to them. Your father tries to quiet her with a kiss, his lips and any real comfort they might offer trapped behind the minutely porous shell of a surgical mask. The delivery team goes on ignoring your mother's pleas until the image of you, stillborn, stiff and blue and twisted, returns to her, and she screams at them loud and long enough to be heard two floors down, in Oncology. At the same moment the fetal heart monitor sounds a frantic alarm, and its display of your pulse—dangerously low and still dropping—begins to flash. There is a great and sudden hustle. Hypodermic shots are administered; trays of gleaming steel instruments are deployed. By the time they pull you, purplish and limp, through the new orifice in your mother's abdomen, you are unconscious. Your expression—eyes closed but not clenched, face perfectly relaxed, tiny mouth agape—is one of perfect neutrality. This is the expression you should wear for all your life, no matter how long or brief it is, so that no one, not even you, will ever know whether you are in ecstasy or anguish.

The doctor and nurses place you on a tiny table nearby and set to work, pressing with fingertips on your chest, suctioning your nose and mouth, and eventually they succeed in reviving you. You're moved to a protective plastic box and tethered to life by tubes, wires, adhesives

both high- and low-tech, hollow needles the diameter of a strand of your father's hair. Despite the harsh lights and the stinging prick of the needles, this new home is not so unlike the old one. You are swaddled in piles of soft blankets, connected and held fast by the tubes and wires. For a few days your situation is what's called "touch and go." Your parents receive a quick overview, complete with pamphlets and sympathetic embraces, of the myriad developmental problems that may crop up but are by no means, it is repeated time and again, a foregone conclusion. For now, let them worry about these things; they are the adults, your shepherds, and as adults it is their responsibility to suffer the knowledge of threats they neither understand nor can do a thing about. You have but one job, comparatively simple: surviving.

90 And it seems, eventually, that you will do just that. Your body temperature and blood pressure rise, your heart rate stabilizes, and your lungs begin to inflate on their own. Soon, to your dismay, the tubes and wires are removed, one by one, and you are taken from the incubator, forced once again to relinquish the safety of your cocoon, though you are allowed, as a small consolation, to keep the blankets. Do not be upset. These are all signs that the danger has passed, that your life has begun in earnest—you've become a person, fully formed, autonomous and self-sustaining.

89 And with this happy occasion comes the task we spoke of earlier, a lifelong proposition which is likely to seem a burden to you, but which we encourage you to try to think of as a privilege, a great honor. First, though, you need to understand this truth:

Although to you we may seem quite knowledgeable, even omniscient, we in fact know only one thing for certain, which is this: thirty-six years, one hundred sixty-eight days, fourteen hours, and twenty-three seconds from now, on June 15, 2010, at 3:44 p.m. EST, a comet that has broken away from the Kuiper Belt near Neptune will impact the Earth with the explosive energy of 283,824,000 Hiroshima bombs.

That's it. We don't know anything else. For example, we have no idea if you will live long enough to witness this phenomenon. There are things we can surmise, though, one being that if you are still alive when the comet hits, neither you nor anything else on the planet will be afterward. All of which raises the question—your task, burden, privilege, call it what you like—a question which men and women, great and not-so, of every color, creed, and sexual persuasion have asked since they first had the language to do so, and probably before:

Does Anything I Do Matter?

It is our hope that, with knowledge of the epic disaster to come and the advantage of our continued assistance, you will have greater success at answering this question than those who have come before you. And we wish you much good luck.

Debbie

Ever since we brought Baby John home from the hospital I've been having this dream. The same dream night after night, only it's not just a dream since it really happened when I was a girl so that makes it more like a memory that haunts my sleep. I wake up pulling on the sheets and it feels like there's water in my lungs, and I cough and gag, trying to get the water out so I can breathe. My hands reach up and grab at my throat but by now I start to feel that there's no water, it's just air, and I'm confused for a few seconds, still gasping though now I can breathe just fine. I lay there and watch the square of orange light from the streetlamps on the little woven throw rug on the floor and scrunch the comforter up in my hands and after a few minutes my breathing calms down. There are bits of dirt at the foot of the bed and I think suddenly that I should change the sheets and it seems a funny thought to have when I'm still so scared but that's how reality comes back to me. By this point I'm wide awake and so I get up. I don't have to worry about getting out of bed quietly because there's no one there to bother, John's at the bakery working and won't be home until after eight. So I get up and go to Baby John, even though he's fast asleep in his crib and not fussing at all, because somehow this dream, in my mind, has something to do with him. Like even though in the dream I'm the one drowning it's somehow a threat to my baby and that's why I keep having it, night after night, like it's trying to tell me something.

John says I'm still just scared by how the baby almost died when he was born. That I'll stop worrying after a while, when enough time has passed that I know deep down he's okay. This is what Doctor Rengell says, too.

Baby John doesn't sleep as good as his father. Most times when I pick him up he cries and waves his arms around, opening and closing his little fingers until they find my nightgown and take hold of that. Sometimes he sucks on it, the nightgown. If he does this usually he goes right back to sleep. If he's mad about being woken up and doesn't want the fabric to suck on, he'll fuss and I'll walk around the bedroom slowly, bouncing him a bit

with my arm under his bottom. I stroke his head with its soft baby hair like cotton candy. And my hands will be shaking still.

Sometimes the baby's fussing will wake Rodney. He'll come walking into the bedroom, rubbing at his eyes.

Go back to bed, I say to him.

I'm hungry, he says.

It's not time for breakfast yet, I say. Go back to bed.

I can't sleep with that baby crying.

Rodney, I won't tell you again, I say.

Usually at this point he'll realize I'm not kidding and go back to his bed, though he always drags his feet and gives me a dirty look.

I don't know what the dream is trying to tell me about Baby John. He's not actually in it. How could he be? In the dream I'm just a little girl, the same as when it happened in real life. I don't think of the baby while I'm asleep. It's only when I wake up choking. Then my first thought—even before I try to breathe—is about him. He's in trouble, I think. Something's wrong. It's that deep-gut certainty you get. Like the feeling I have sometimes while I'm standing over a pot on the stove, or else just watching *All in the Family* and out of nowhere my heart takes one big beat and suddenly it's racing and I'm trying to catch my breath even though I'm just standing there. It doesn't make any sense. But you're so certain some terrible thing has happened or is about to happen. You're so certain there's something to be afraid of.

I pay attention to these moments. Because I think this is God's way of trying to tell us things we can't otherwise know. So when I wake up afraid for Baby John, there's a reason. I've got to be careful. And I've got to pay attention.

This is how the dream goes: When I was a girl of about six my father took us all to the river. It was sunny, summer, you'd think it was the weekend because my father wasn't working but the truth is most of the time he didn't have a job so it could have been a Tuesday. Not counting my father there were nine of us, all nine kids. My mother stayed at home this time, which she must have had a good reason because normally she didn't trust my father with any of the kids except Rodney, my brother Rodney who

my son Rodney is named for. At thirteen my brother Rodney was just like Dad and spent most school days shining shoes at the bars in town and could take care of himself. But my mother didn't trust my dad with me or the other younger kids, not Patti, who was probably only four or so at the time, or Drew, who was just a baby. But there we all were, walking in a line down the path to the river with Dad at the front. Behind him was Rodney, carrying the baby, and behind Rodney were Matt and Louie, carrying a big cooler. Inside the cooler was a jar of mustard and a loaf of bread but mostly it was full of Narragansett beer.

At the bottom of the path there was a grassy area along the water with enough room for the ten of us to spread out. There was a dock there, too, where people put in canoes and paddleboats. The dock was old and tilted to one side. Some of the wooden boards were cracked, and one was missing, leaving this gap in the middle of the dock like a missing tooth. The river was wide and black and ran hard toward the Scott paper mill, and past that the falls.

This is the part in the dream when I start to get scared—seeing that dirty water go past. How black it is even though the sun is big and bright in the sky. The water bugs riding on the current. I get scared. Watching my father pull open one pop-top after another, I want to get up and run. But I can't, because even though I'm me, I'm also just watching myself. And this is another way that the dream and the memory are the same—I can't change either one. I've got no control.

So I have to watch myself sit there in the grass, as far back from the water as I can get without being in the trees. I've got my back to the river because I don't want to look at it. The sun is hot in my hair and I'm playing with my Little Miss No Name doll, although playing is really the wrong word, what I'm really doing is sort of caring for Little Miss No Name and at the same time trying to make myself as small and quiet as I can while my father drinks beer and gets red around the straps of his tank top and hollers at the boys to stop throwing rocks and quit fucking around with that dead squirrel. Little Miss No Name has a pale, dirty face and a big gray tear falling from one eye, and she's wearing a burlap dress with an orange patch near the hem. The only thing that's pretty about Little Miss No Name is her hair,

so blond it's almost white, and I try out different hairstyles, first putting it in pigtails, then a braid, then parting it straight down the middle.

Little Miss No Name is my one gift from the Christmas before. Since it's the only thing I have that's mine I'm selfish with it. Patti wants to play, wants to take Little Miss No Name's dress off and put it back on, and she grabs at the burlap shoulder. Patti doesn't have a toy of her own. Back around Easter she stuck her Zip the Monkey in the flame of the range top to see what would happen, and that was that. I'm sitting Indian-style and I tell Patti no and shift my weight back and forth on my butt until I'm facing away from her, my back blocking her from the doll. She gives up and starts digging in the dirt between her legs.

Time goes by, I don't know how much. Rodney and Matt and Louie and Freddie search through the rocks in the shallows for crawfish. They find a few. One finds Freddie first and pinches his finger. He runs to my father, who's lying with the baby in the shade beneath a tree, and my father takes a look at the cut and tells Freddie to walk it off. Freddie goes to walk it off and my father cuffs him on the back of the head, but this is one of those times he's just playing.

I've decided that Little Miss No Name has misbehaved somehow and so I'm punishing her. Not punishing her, but what's the word? Scolding her. I scold Little Miss No Name and that big tear keeps rolling out of her eye.

Then Dad tells Rodney, who is his right-hand man, to get the bread and mustard out and make some sandwiches. Everyone but me gathers around the cooler. They use their fingers to spread the mustard, then press the two pieces of Wonder together and eat. Their hands and mouths are covered in yellow. I am hungry but I don't join in. My father, still lying with his back against the tree and a can of Narragansett between his legs, notices I'm sitting by myself in the grass.

Debbie, he says. Eat.

I turn and look at him. I'm not hungry, I lie.

What did I say. It is not a question.

I get up and join the other kids. My knees ache from sitting Indian-style for so long. The back of my neck, the part that my hair doesn't cover, feels tight from the sun. I know it will sting later. My brothers and sisters crowd

around the cooler. They push each other and laugh but when my father clears his throat they settle down and just eat.

I take one slice of Wonder and put a little mustard on it with my pointer finger and fold it over. I take small bites and it seems like I'll never be finished but every time I look up I see my father is watching me and so I eat it all. It's been a few hours and he's had enough to drink that he's got that look now. When I've put the last bit of crust in my mouth he looks away finally, across the river, and I sneak back to my spot in the grass.

When everyone's finished eating my father sits up with the baby and says to us get in the water. The baby is crying, his face all scrunched up under the bonnet, and my father bounces him on his knee but it's not helping because he's being too rough and the baby's head is jerking all over. Go on, you kids, my father says, get in the river and cool off. And this is when the fear that's been growing inside me explodes suddenly. The other kids do what they're told and get in the water and start splashing and shoving each other. I hunch over, using my fingers to comb Little Miss No Name's hair. I slow my breathing to almost nothing and keep my head down.

This is always what I do. Be quiet and still and try to sort of fade away. Sometimes it works when the others are around. Because the boys, and Freddie especially, are loud and always getting into some sort of trouble and so they attract a lot of my father's attention and make it easy for me to disappear.

But this time there's no way to hide. I'm the only one who isn't in the water, besides the baby of course.

Debbie, my father says. Get in the river, there.

I don't look up.

Girl, he says. This is his warning voice, and it scares me, but not as much as that black water. I just keep combing Little Miss No Name's hair. This is me with my head in the sand. I know it won't work, but there's nothing else I can do.

Finally he gets angry and puts the baby in the grass and stands up. The baby cries and reaches up his chubby hands as my father comes to where I'm sitting and stands over me. I'm shaking, hunched over the doll, pretending I don't notice his shadow.

Debbie, he says. I told you to do something.

I don't like the water. I can't swim.

Chrissakes everyone can swim, he says. All you do is flap your arms and legs around. Now get in there and cool off.

Except for the shaking, I don't move.

And then he's done talking and he lifts me by one arm and is carrying me that way, his hand squeezing my upper arm hard. I start to scream. The other kids stop playing and watch as my father carries me onto the dock. My feet drag along, making a sound like a drum as they thump in the spaces between the boards. My father steps over the hole where the one board is missing. When he gets to the end of the dock he turns and throws me off into the deep water, way past where the other kids are, out to where the current can grab you.

I go under, into the cold and dark. The world disappears. And I wake up and think: Baby John.

I remember to breathe, alone there in my bed, with the light coming in from the streetlamp and bits of dirt in the sheets. With my heart pounding I go to Baby John and lift him from the crib and hold him too tight against me. And pray to God to show me how to protect him, and from what.

In real life, past where the dream ends, I almost drowned. I went under and stayed under until my father realized what he'd done and came in after me. When he pulled me from the water I was half out of it but I remember a couple of the other kids crying. And I remember being on my back in the mud, my father pushing on my chest and saying Breathe, goddammit even though as far as I could tell I was breathing already. His voice was still angry but when I looked up at his face, behind the glaze of the beer buzz I could see fear in his eyes. Whether he was afraid more that I would die, or that he would be responsible if I did, I don't know. Either way it meant he cared, and that was good enough for me.

Years went by and he went from mean to just crazy, but I remembered the day he was afraid for me, and I still loved him. When he turned his hunting knife over in the light of the TV as I went up the stairs to bed and smiled at me and said Maybe tonight, I still loved him. When I got married at sixteen just to escape, I still loved him. When he died alone in his trailer two years ago, I fell down and cried for three days, because I still loved him.

This is the way, now, that I love my baby.

Father

88 Here is what you need to know about Father:

Father is a ghost, a specter, mostly absent, then appearing suddenly, in glimpses, as a huge shape under the bedcovers at twilight, a bowed silent head over newspaper and steaming coffee cup. Father is a mustache; once he shaves it and you do not recognize him and for three weeks you scream and writhe every time he appears, until it grows back. Father is nearly mute. Father was not exactly loquacious by nature, and then he went away and killed people and was almost killed himself, and when he came back a year later he decided his mouth had only three functions, and speaking was not one of them. For a while he thought his mouth's primary function was to take in liquor, and so he did that, working two jobs all the while, seeing your mother through her first pregnancy, and though he did not throw glassware or punches, did not spend money allocated for food or the electric bill on booze, did not ever wake up in a crumpled car or in jail, he nonetheless decided, after two years of drinking hard, after ballooning to 295 bloated pounds, that his mouth now had only two functions—the drinking of coffee and the smoking of cigarettes.

And though at one year old you don't yet know much about your father, you should be aware that he is the type of person who does not change his mind once he's made it up. On the one hand, this is good, since he's not likely to backslide on the drinking. He is steady, calm, a man of unremarkable but ironclad habits, who while at war learned the value of sleep, and now does not allow anything—noise, crisis, lack of time—to keep him from it. And while it is never a bad thing to have a reliable and sober man for a father, his unshakable composure can make him seem apathetic, even cold. And just as his decision not to drink is almost certainly permanent, so too is his decision to hardly speak. Know this, assimilate and accept it, so that you don't waste energy, in later years, trying in vain to elicit words like "love" and "proud" from him.

87 Unlike your mother, your father smokes in the house.

86 When he comes home from the bakery in the afternoons your father likes to lift you from the crib and hold you, but casually; he hoists you to his shoulder like a sack of rocks, holds you in place with one great forearm under your backside, and goes about his few household activities—stirring sugar into coffee, shaving his cheeks and trimming his mustache—as though you aren’t even there, as though he’s always had just one arm. Sometimes he forgets he is carrying you, and retires to the bedroom for an hour or two of sleep with you still clinging to him like a remora on a shark. You’ve learned that if you fuss a bit (but quietly, quietly, he doesn’t respond well to loud noises, especially right next to his ear, and though he has never become demonstrably angry, there is, just beneath the surface of his calm, the implication of a rage so dark and violent it frightens even him, a rage he takes great care to keep under control, pausing when annoyed to breathe and flex his hands) he will remember you are there and be sure not to crush you as he settles his bulk into bed.

Because you most often cannot bear to look directly at him, you know more about how your father smells than anything else. He is a delicious combination of baker’s yeast and Aqua Velva, lemon frosting and tobacco smoke, Taster’s Choice crystals and warehouse dust. Some of these scents change in intensity with the time of day; in the morning the aftershave and dust are prominent; in the afternoons, the yeast and frosting. The coffee and smoke are constants, omnipresent.

85 Learn to pretend to sleep. Or else learn to wake without crying. This way, you can lie in your crib, listening to the night sounds in your parents’ bedroom, and discover that your father is not entirely mute after all, only mute with everyone *except* your mother. Wait for him to return, just before dawn, from loading and unloading boxes at the warehouse. Keep your eyes closed, or else the sight of his hulking silhouette will cause you to cry, and your mother will rise and come to you and he will remain silent. Be still, and listen. Do you hear, beneath the rush and fade of the occasional car passing on the street outside, beneath the

rustle of cotton sheets and the groan of mattress springs, a sound too deep and calm to be your mother? Listen carefully; it will continue for only a minute or two; he is much too tired to talk longer than that before dropping into a profound if brief sleep. This, then, is the sound of your father's voice, the sound of absolute safety and control.

- 84 Having learned that your father does speak, and having heard his voice for yourself, you now want one thing more than you've desired anything else in your short life—to know *what* he's saying. Every morning, after he comes in and before he goes to sleep, when he believes no one else is listening, you hear him speak to your mother, but you can never make out the words. Sometimes she answers, a falsetto accompaniment to his baritone, and sometimes she rolls over wordlessly to greet him, to be enveloped by the comforting girth of his arms and chest. Either way, he always has words for her, words whose meaning dangles in the air above you like a mobile hung just out of reach.

And while you deprive yourself of sleep morning after morning, waiting for him to come home, straining to catch just one distinct word, we should mention that most experts in the field of pediatrics recommend children your age get at least fourteen hours of sleep every day. This, we understand, may seem an unreasonable demand, especially since adults like your father apparently require almost no sleep at all. But you should keep in mind that, first, your father is not representative of the adult population as a whole, and second, your nervous system is still fully engaged in the heavy industry of development, burning around the clock at high temperature and velocity, vacuuming up stimuli and laying synapses, and needs all the rest it can manage.

Still, you persist, refusing the sweet potatoes and rice cereal your mother offers in the evening before bed so that you'll be wakeful with hunger when your father comes home. This effort is aided by the near-constant pain of teething, which makes it impossible for you to sleep for more than an hour or so at a time anyhow, but which also, it turns out, spurs in you near-constant urges to scream, to spray drool and nonsense baby vitriol in every direction. These urges grow increasingly difficult to deny (due in part to your fatigue, for which, we should add,

you have no one to blame but yourself), and several times, unable to keep silent any longer, you yield and cry out and your mother comes to you with the teething ring and your father, instead of speaking, merely sleeps. Your crankiness and refusal to eat has the predictable result of worrying her, and for several consecutive nights, when your father comes in from work, he is silent as she monopolizes the precious few minutes of conversation time, saying "I don't understand it, his appetite is just fine during the day, but for some reason after the sun goes down he won't take anything, he pushes the food away and fusses, tonight he flipped the bowl over and I ended up wearing strained peas, I think maybe I should bring him to Doctor Rengell," etc. For more than a week your father says nothing, only listens to your mother's concerns, his nightly routine of uttering a few precious if unintelligible words disrupted, and you're beginning to think that perhaps you've made a mistake, perhaps your strategy was horribly miscalculated and now that the routine has been broken it will not be reestablished, he will never speak again and you will grow up, grow old, and die never having understood a thing from or about him. Of course you don't yet possess the language to articulate this loss in such a way; all you have is the emotion, the impression of loss, which is its only authentic interpretation anyhow. Like a proper child you direct your anger over this loss at your mother and her unreasonable worry, until, one night, listening to her, your father sighs and, with an edge of irritation in his voice that renders his words just clear enough to be decipherable, says: "Take him to Rengell, then."

Your mother, after brightening briefly, saying "Yes, I think I should," begins immediately to express concern over how they will afford this unanticipated and, really, she admits, kind of unnecessary trip to the doctor; meanwhile, your father rolls on his side to sleep, and you lie triumphant and joyful in your crib, suddenly if temporarily free of the ache in your mouth, having not only heard your father's words, but understood them, in your way, *to be about you*.

- 83 This triumph is short-lived, because the very next afternoon you realize something horrifying about your father. He comes home from the

bakery and lifts you to his shoulder, and you notice for the first time that, unlike everyone else you know, he does not have five fingers on each hand, ten total. On his right hand the pinkie and ring finger are gone, severed just above the first knuckle and long since healed over with thick, gnarled, waxy skin. You are horrified, feeling the stumps pressed against your bare leg and knowing them to be wrong, and you cry and squirm, pushing with your little arms against his chest. Midway through his shave, when it becomes clear you mean to keep screaming and struggling, your father brings you back into the living room and puts you down on the floor with a grimace, then returns to the bathroom. Your mother, having heard the commotion, swoops in to determine what's wrong, and though you try to tell her you manage only to soak her shirt with spit and tears, and it doesn't matter anyway because you realize, young as you are, that she can do nothing about your father's monstrous deformity, except rub cream on the stumps to keep them from cracking, and help him with any tasks that require two complete hands.

Your mother believes your father lost his fingers to shrapnel from a fragmentary grenade. That was the official story from the Marine captain who filed the paperwork. But this is what actually happened: Your father was on leave in Bac My An, a military R&R base in central Vietnam known to servicemen as China Beach, when he lost his fingers. On a sweltering November evening, on the second floor of a whorehouse, in the room of a seventeen-year-old Vietnamese girl, with his wedding band on, while her infant son slept on a mat on the floor, your father committed his first and only act of adultery, and then, drunk on Pabst Blue Ribbon and tequila shooters, promptly passed out. The Vietnamese girl had no Communist sympathies, had in fact no political convictions at all, but she did have a heroin habit and a dead mother and a son whose prospects were even poorer than her own, owing to prevailing attitudes among the Vietnamese regarding children of mixed stock. And though she was losing money while your father slept, she nonetheless let him stay, even nestled close to him despite the heat, lying on her side with her legs curled and her head resting in the crook between his biceps and shoulder. Because this girl, whose name was

Tran Ly, had no solace other than fantasy, she allowed herself to imagine that your father was the father of her son, and that tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, they would be married, and soon after she and her baby would be on their way to America. She imagined clean, waterproof buildings that didn't explode without warning. She imagined her son growing tall and strong, with good teeth and perfect English. She imagined dying of old age. And then, just as she was settling into this fantasy, allowing it to distill her down through the thin mattress and into a drowsy reverie, your father flailed in his sleep, striking her in the face and breaking her nose. Tran Ly jumped from the bed, screeching in pain and confusion, and when she pulled her hands away from her face and saw the blood she was reminded of her baby's real father. Her cries turned angry. "*Cockadau! Cockadau!*" she said, meaning: *I will kill you!* She stooped and reached between the bed and the wall, grabbing the cleaver she kept there, a cleaver her mother had used, years ago, to kill and dismember chickens. By now Tran Ly's screams had brought your father around somewhat. He opened his eyes in time to see the blade over him, glinting an evil red in the light from the window. He rolled out of the way, but let his right hand trail behind, and when it and the cleaver met, his fingers leapt, twirled, fell.

In the hospital your father pleaded for, and received, discretion from the captain filing paperwork on the incident. Tran Ly was not so fortunate. Not knowing what to do with her, U.S. military police turned her over to the South Vietnamese army, who treated her as Viet Cong and shot her twice—once in the head, once in the chest—with an M-16 rifle that had been manufactured in Hartford, Connecticut. And Tran Ly's baby . . . well, it's probably best that you not know what became of him.