

116

Jesse Nee-Vogelman

As a kid I asked strangers with beards to read to me in parks.

When my mothers split up, Moss Henry asked me if it was because I didn't have a father figure. I always thought Moss Henry was a weird name for a therapist.

"I have this recurring dream where a wolf breaks into my house," I told Moss. "And then I chase it out with a baseball bat and we both run over the edge of a cliff."

"Do you think you have to chase the wolf because there isn't a male role model to defend your household?"

I think Moss has a crush on my mom. Mom 1. But at that point, only Mom 2 was dating men again.

"I was never a lesbian," she said, putting on a second nicotine patch. "I just played one for eighteen years." I think that's probably why I'm a good liar, until I remember we're not genetically related.

Mom 1, though, was still playing the part. She still belonged to the Lavender Stork Society, with all the other lesbian mothers. Jo and Kerry Ann. Kirsten and Kathleen. Marlene and Scotty. In pre-school I started a fight when I insisted that playing house required two mothers. A counselor tried to correct me and I gave a black eye to the boy who would be father.

Jo and Kerry Ann have a daughter and I loved her. Our parents said we were planned together, which I mistook to mean we were engaged. But then I learned you cannot plan for love. But then I learned that love does not solve everything. Of course, those things came later.

The daughter's name is Kaylie, and she held me when I was born. I was a Caesarean two months premature, wrapped in wet floppy robes of loose skin. In her own tiny hand I resembled the red blind baby of a marsupial that had left the pouch to die. There's a

picture on my fridge of her crying as they took me to the respirators. In all the photos of her at that age she has beautiful skin. Looking at those photos of her as a child, I still want to undress her. Once, outside her living room on the porch, we played tit-for-tat, but I felt cheated because when she pulled down her pants there was nothing to see.

I told this story to Moss while we played games together: Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em Robots and Mouse Trap and war with those giant foam swords they give to anger therapy kids and catch with two frayed mitts in the clinic parking lot. They were the most expensive playdates I ever had, until college when I began giving away drugs to my friends.

Then, Moss asked me when I felt most betrayed. “When Kaylie made me watch the Star Wars movies out of order.” I didn’t realize at the time how fixating on Darth Vader’s “I’m your father” reveal would only feed Moss’s theories.

Every memory I have of Kaylie’s home is sunny. The grass is dry and they have fruit. Fresh tomatoes in mesh wire cages. Strawberries in ordered plots framed by uneven pieces of driftwood. They’d floated downstream during the ’86 river flood that had fertilized their fields and killed my friend John Wilson’s sister before he was born. She and her friends had tried to raft through the storm. There were apple trees. Trees with pregnant peaches. A row of blackberry brambles that divided their property. From inside the bushes we ate unripe berries in secret that I picked on tiptoes from the highest thorns until our clothes turned brown and pink from the dirt and the blackberry juice. Through the soft canopy of leaves I could see the six full-sized porcelain bathtubs filled with flowers. Jo arranged them length-wise in a crescent circle, like half the rays of an exploding star. A bathtub of roses. Of daisies. Of begonias. Bathtubs of herbs. In the brambles, the smell of basil and thyme arrived to us, dry, so unlike the wet smell of blackberry mush and the sticky sweat of our bodies.

In the middle of a family dinner at Kaylie's house, over brussels sprouts, my mothers had another fight. This brought on a fresh round of sessions with Moss. Whenever my parents got upset, they sent me to a therapist. It reminds me of the stories Mom 1 used to tell about her grandmother yelling at her from across the street back in 1950s Jewish Brooklyn. "*Marshala*, put on a *sveater*, I'm cold!"

"Hey Moss," I said. Today we were playing video games. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Yes," he said. We both agreed it is terrible.

Kaylie has a little brother named Kevin who wore a bumblebee dress. Sometimes we dressed up in silk scarves and danced like the maidens in Aladdin. "Hey everyone," I'd yell and stand in a corner facing the wall with my arms embracing myself and my head slightly tilted so that from behind it looked like I was kissing someone. But Kaylie was outside already, playing princess to daisies. She was wearing a sparkling cone on her head with a purple tassel, and when she opened her arms fields of yellow weeds bent over in the wind.

On Christmas, Kaylie and I kissed inside the orange plastic slide in her backyard. The light shined through the plastic like hot grease, turning it yellow and translucent where the sun shined brightest. When we emerged, it was cool and grey. Off my chest beat the bright terror of sparrows. Climbing the slope to her home, we saw them trapped in the collapsed rubble of the birdhouses we made that week for Crafts Night. When her mother asked at the doorway, we had to say that no, we did not feel the earthquake.

The next day I forced Kaylie and Kevin to watch as I threw baseballs in the air and swung at them with my dented teal and aluminum bat. On the third swing the ball jumped like a shot into the neighbors' yard and tore down an old California sycamore. As the tree fell we screamed and ran back to the house laughing until our sides split and we collapsed in a heap at the base of a hill in a pile of dog shit left by their one-eyed terrier named Buster.

I didn't tell Moss about what happened behind the bushes. I'm not even sure exactly because Kaylie blocked the way.

"Only I can go back there, because I'm their doctor."

She had a toy stethoscope in her ears. She listened to a tree and then to the palm of my hand.

"You're dying," she said.

"Come on, let me see."

Kevin and Harriet made some noise through a thick wall of leaves, but I couldn't understand them.

"How does it work then?"

"You take off your pants and rub together."

I felt intuitively that this was true, but something about it didn't add up. "Wait! You don't even have anything down there to do it with!" But Kaylie was already back behind the bushes again, preparing her stethoscope.

We took baths together and slept together. We jumped together on trampolines, and lay together on the prickly weeds when we tired. In the pictures of us at this age, she is the beautiful one. Her hair more golden than mine. Her freckles neater and more purposefully arranged. She drew well and liked to cook and make things out of clay. Behind the bathtub of begonias we ate tomatoes and she carved my face into the dirt with her nails. From above her head she took a tomato and squeezed it. The pulp covered her hands in a red translucent jelly studded with seeds. She rubbed the juice onto the dirt, covering the cheeks of my likeness in a dark rusty red, like the color that smears onto your fingers after holding an old brick.

"Am I bleeding?" I asked, feeling my skin. "No," she said. "You're covered in tomato."

As I got older, I stopped crying when I left her house. I could always say goodbye, as long as I got a plastic baggy of pretzels for the ride home. Moss called these transition objects. When I woke up, we were already there. While Mom sat outside alone in the red Toyota, I went inside and fell asleep in a bed shaped like a racecar. In all my dreams, I go very, very fast.

This week, Moss and I played the question game. Fifteen questions for fifteen minutes of Nintendo.

“Do you like Mitch?”

“We went to the Giants game together.”

“Does it bother you that your mother is dating men?”

“I like him better than Gary.”

“Gary gave you that orange dinosaur?”

“Mitch gives me cherries. He buys whole crates of cherries and bikes them back to our house. He sells them by the road with a sign I painted in daycare.”

“Have you seen Mitch this week?”

“He’s with mom.”

“At the clinic?”

“Yeah.”

“How is living with Kaylie’s family?”

“They give me a calendar for every holiday, no matter what.”

“What are you going to be for Halloween?”

“A welder. I’m going to wear Mitch’s welding mask and overalls.”

“That’s a very unique costume.”

“That’s not a question.”

“How is your other mom?”

“Birth mom?”

“Yes.”

“She’s okay.”

“Is she still not getting out of bed?”

“No. Maybe.”

“When do you go back with her?”

“Tonight. She says she’s fine now.”

“When are you moving?”

“When mom’s out of the clinic.”

“When will that be?”

“I don’t know. Soon.”

“Will you miss Kaylie and Kevin?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What’s New York like?”

“It’s very nice.”

“Do they have fruit?”

“I think so.”

“Good. This is your last question.”

“Is your other mother dating anyone?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

Mom 1 and I picked up Mom 2 from the clinic.

“How are you?” Mom 1 asked. They had not seen each other in a month, but Mom 2 needed us to pick her up because Mitch found out he has two kids in Seattle and left.

“All clean,” said Mom 2. “How are you?”

“Can you please not smoke in the car?” she said.

Two days later when we showed up at Mom 2’s apartment the U-Haul was already outside. The inside of the trailer was big and for a while I hid behind the boxes so I didn’t have to help pack. When I got bored, I went to clean the apartment, and I knew that Mom 2 had been acting again because as I carried the trash to the curb it jingled with the light melody of glass on glass.

We’re not genetically related, but I inherited some of her tendencies. After the move East, the taste of the Big Apple unraveled some the sinner in me. It happened during middle school, when we developed nicotine patch habits. City taxes made cigarettes too expensive, though I sometimes kept a crumpled pack under my shirtsleeve for the look. I ate fruit only at breakfast, and then only bananas. I’ve heard the Cavendish is going extinct, though.

It was rough for a while, but by the time I was arrested for drinking on my 18th birthday, I’d managed to kick off most other chemicals. Kaylie had to drive me home from the police station because she was the only person I knew could drive and was sober. The next time I was arrested, she didn’t pick me up. By then, I’d been ed-

ited out of the YouTube video showing the success of children raised by same sex couples.

But that was years later, after I'd given up on it all and returned home to her yard, where the earth had frozen with unseasonable cold. Of the two cats we'd given them to look after in our absence, only Scriba remained, though like Buster she'd lost both her sight and her desire to defecate in discrete locations. Maggie had crawled under the house and stayed there until she died and neighborhood boys dug out her bones to make fake Indian jewelry they sold to tourists.

That whole summer I did yardwork for them, to help pay off the accident. There wasn't really all that much to do, and I think they employed me out of some combination of loyalty and pity. At the time I wasn't allowed to drive so I rode my bike on that path past the vineyards along the creek covered in balloons of mosquito eggs. At a cluster of trees that smelled like semen, I'd watch a homeless woman thrust a long aluminum claw into the brambles in search of ripe berries, as wild quails wandered like children beyond the fence. Light bushels of grapes twined over and through the chain links to darken in the sun like slow bruises. Sometimes, when I had time to kill, I stopped with the woman and picked small handfuls of grapes through the metal diamonds in the fence. Their tight skin stretched and burst the juice down our throats, and for less than a second before the bitterness and cottonmouth set in, I tasted only their natural sugar.

When I got to the yard, I dug holes. I cut down trees and cut the trees into smaller chunks of wood to be sold or composted or used as firewood. As I replaced the driftwood that lined the strawberry plots, I found the large corporate stamp of Wilson Construction on one log's underside. I remembered that news story about the raft and fifteen-year-old Cecilia Wilson and those two dead boys. A group of Mormons going door to door at the river homes had found them all drowned with their pants around their ankles. That probably made

it difficult for them to swim. After I finished the trees, for two weeks, they paid me to get rid of the blackberry bushes. “We never wanted them. Blackberries are invasive. They’re weeds.”

I bled when cutting through the roots. I scratched my skin on the thorns until it looked like I’d tried to hold my old, blind cat. This all amused the small crowd of tent dwellers that had appeared in their yard that summer to advocate simple living. They lived under tarps and in miniature cottages bolted to trailer beds. Kaylie, who had grown fat under her ambitions to be an artist, dubbed them the Tiny People, and when we were speaking she showed me her sketches of them under orange, apocalyptic skies. When the blackberries were gone, though, the Tiny People looked naked and went home to camp in the Nevada desert, leaving only the bathtubs sprouting tall stalks of dead fruit and flowers, because I hadn’t been able to stop the locusts that had fled all the way from Florida during a heat wave last spring.

By contrast, Mom 2 had never made it out East. Somewhere around Missouri she hit a cold front and turned the U-Haul around to go home. I heard that Mitch came back and one day while biking to his cherry stand an ambulance pinned him to the side of an alley, so that he spent the next eight months with needles the size of my forearm sticking out of his leg. Mom 2 took care of him, but when the Giants lost the World Series, he got out of the wheelchair and went back to Seattle. The Mariners had won 116 games just the year before.

When these things became clear, Mom 1 married Hank, who had a beard and looked like other fathers. I had to teach him how to play catch in the streets of Alphabet City, but we fell in love anyway. He was good at horseshoes, and once when we were back in California for Fourth of July, he beat us all in the place where Kaylie and I used to lay under the trampoline and watch Kevin bounce until his heels touched our noses through the thin layer of black mesh.

Hank taught me to drive, so in a way he killed himself. It’s not right for me to place blame though. It’s not right for me to lay these

things on anyone. I have a little money, now, from selling the apartment so I have a lot of time to figure it out. I try talking to Mom 2, but she runs AA meetings now, and I can't fuck with that yet. Instead, I talk to the old men who sit next to me at the new casino, out past the cow field where I heard Harriet dumped her baby after her dad found out and tried to beat it out of her. I play the card slots. I have a system.

On Thursday, Moss came into the café where I work outside of town, and ordered a latte and two cheese omelets.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember you," he said.

His daughter was very polite. She even put down her makeup to move seats so I had room to pull over another chair and sit down.

"Do you still have all those games?" I asked. "The robots and the swords and those special therapy versions of Monopoly?"

"We have an Xbox now too."

"I always thought those games were bullshit," I told him.

A small line had formed at the counter. I didn't mind keeping them waiting because I spit in the food anyway. Next to me, I caught his daughter looking at the scars on my hand.

"They're from a windshield," I told her.

"Excuse me, is there something you need?"

Moss Henry is probably the ugliest man I've ever met, and I told him so. Then I asked him if he knew that Kevin had replaced the bumblebee dress with a Lebanese boy.

"His boyfriend doesn't mind the limp," I said.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember who you're talking about."

His daughter flinched a little when I touched her under the table, but she didn't move away.

"You used to treat me for these dreams," I said.

"They stopped?"

"No. But now, before I get to the cliff I catch the wolf and beat it with the bat until I'm covered by blood."

"Is that the end of the dream?" he asked.

“Sometimes, before the dream ends, I change into a clean corduroy suit. How’s the omelet?”

“Good,” he said.

Then I told him my mother died.

“Which one?” he asked.

But I wouldn’t tell him.

Moss didn’t say anything to that, so I took the opportunity to ask his daughter for her number.

“We should be going now,” said Moss, so I called his daughter a spiteful bitch.

She seemed offended, but when dates call me a misogynist, I explain that I had two mothers, so they must be wrong.

I went back to the counter and gave all the customers who were waiting free croissants. Then I took off my apron and went outside to light a cigarette. Moss and his daughter were still outside, looking confused. I apologized to them, but after I wiped my tears away, I realized I still had chili on my fingers from cooking the omelet. I fell on the concrete. I slammed my back against the glass storefront so the customers could see there was nothing wrong with me. Then the smoke from my cigarette got in my eyes. I prepared myself for the two pains to amplify each other and merge into one giant unbearable pain. But they didn’t. They remained separate. Like all great uniquely flavored heartbreaks, each hurting me just a little in its own distinct way. I’m sorry, I said again, and prepared to repeat myself when Moss’s daughter took pity on me by asking for a drag.

“I’m quitting,” she said.

I said, “I already quit.”

“Then why are you smoking?”

“Because I loved quitting so much the first time, I thought I’d do it again.”

To get the cigarette she stood next to me. She put her knees beside my head.

Moss came over and squatted in front of me. They surrounded me like we were a family again. He played a game we used to do in

therapy, where we spoke gibberish to each other. His daughter bent over and pinched the cigarette in my hand with her fingers. The fingers were very clean. When she did this, the bare skin under her skirt pressed into my hair. I turned my head slowly to feel the soft tug at my scalp, like a father lifting me by a fistful of hair. Stand up and be a man. So I opened my hand and let go.

As she stood up and stepped away, I told them that when I close my eyes, I still see myself saying goodbye to Kaylie behind the bushes. Her lips are red from eating strawberries. It's still summer. She's wearing a white children's blouse, and my hair is curly yellow, though it's already begun to darken and straighten in a premonition of my adolescence. Kevin is behind us somewhere on the trampoline, wearing his bee dress. We can't see him, but we hear the rusty creak of old springs, like an opening coffin on that recording of "Monster Mash."

She's bleeding. She's cut her hand on an jagged scrap of aluminum fencing we'd found in the tall grass at the edge of her home, fallen out of the line that separated her yard from who knows what. She'd taken it and we cut down the bathtub tomatoes and decapitated the begonias and carved our names into the side of the porcelain. We climbed inside the tub and we rode it like a ship. Then she mutinied and we capsized the tub. She screamed and threw fistfuls of dirt into the air and as the worms rained into our hair she grabbed my arm and dragged me to the shadows behind the bush line, where I am now looking at the grey corners of her eyes. She notices her blood on my hand and wipes the back of my fingers on the side of her face, reddening her cheek in blush.

"We should get a bandage," I say.

"No, it's alright. I'm a doctor."

We practice medicine together. Even as children the whole affair is innate and visceral. In the brief flash of our converging bodies we discover a rhythm, which matches the rusty squeal of a little boy bouncing on an old trampoline, as if with each pulse we caused the world to move.

After Kevin screams and the bouncing stops, we hide in our place behind the made-up forest as our parents call our names. Sometime after they leave to take him to the hospital, we emerge to the setting sun and tickle each other's feet as the sky changes colors. That was the summer I taught myself not to be ticklish, but when they brought Kevin home in crutches she had me pinned to the dirt with laughter. At that point, I was still too sensitive. Then, I hugged her mothers goodbye and took a bag of pretzels for the car ride, but I finished them well before we reached the airport. As the plane rose Mom 1 and I turned towards the window and together we linked fingers and waved goodbye to the state.

