

FIREWALKER

Alone in her daughter's latest apartment without even her needlepoint for distraction, Marian wandered amid two sleeping hounds and the chaos of cartons. Youngish — Marian thought — Sara is youngish for the apartment's style — probably fifteen years younger than the other residents. Oh, Marian knew them, those well-boned Baltimore women with jawlines surrendering to chocolate, like the definition of the crown moldings beneath coats of China White semi-gloss.

Sara would be the first of the next generation — the whirligigs. Plants and dogs and incidental furniture cobbled together. How far could she possibly have gone for dog food and coffee?

Sara's paintings peeped from between the cartons; it seemed to Marian that her daughter's pictures were always stacked like that. As if they weren't worthy of the wall's permanence. Marian remembered visiting her in Boulder and hearing her ask the hirsute musician she lived with then — "Help me get a few hung. Just a few." It never happened. They leaned against the walls like children whose benighted parents have brought them to a cocktail party. Small, reverential landscapes, tender still lives. More joyful than beautiful. A penchant for siennas, ochers and, almost always, a touch of crimson. But the artist's brush was tentative, as if she were afraid to commit her hand to what her eye knew was true.

When she first moved back East, Sara worked as a research librarian at Bowdoin and had grown enough as an artist so the faculty included her work in a student exhibition. Marian had insisted on traveling to Maine for the opening — Edmund was in the early stages then and the trip would distract him—Marian hoped. But, of course, it didn't. Marian pictured him, one of three men bothering with a tie, holding a plastic cup of ginger ale as elegantly as his favorite baccarat tumbler. For Edmund, the exhibit was but another ordeal among decades of Sara-ordeals. By their daughter, he did his duty, nothing more.

And now Sara was back in Baltimore. Marian imagined her in a heavy Peruvian sweater hurrying to the university library, burying herself in the stacks, surfacing in the twilight to walk her dogs. On weekends going to openings of other people's exhibits. Perhaps another lover.

In the quiet of the apartment, Marian felt the carapace of her forty-year deception cracking. Forty years of deceit and duty, surely that had been atonement enough. She would do it — tell Sara the truth about her blood and bones. The truth would either destroy her or free her to trust the surety of her eye.

Edmund had been dead three years now, and their sons, they would reel, but not break. They had too much at stake — Matthew practicing law in Connecticut — Frank, two children and on the tenure track. Besides, their sons were too tightly woven on Edmund's warp. If she told Sara who her real father was, perhaps she'd leave life's periphery for its center.

At a stirring in the hallway, Harvey, the retriever, looked to the door. Max, a pound dog, cowered, expecting the worst. When Sara opened it, he jumped up and slobbered joy all over her cheek. She set the dog food on the floor and crouched to him, the scuffed leather sack she used as a handbag slipping from her shoulder. "Are you my goodie boy, Maxie? Are you my goodie, goodie boy?" Her long fingers stroking him, she smiled at Marian: "Sorry it took so long, Mom. The damn ATM was out. If we're going to eat, you'll have to pay. I'm starved."

The diner, with its mulligan-stew menu of the owner's native Indian tastes and American carbo-cuisine, was pure Sara. Aromas of tandori chicken entwined with the smell of sputtering cheeseburgers. "Nice,

Huh?" Sara grinned. She could always do that — find humor in the offbeat, as if she had sucked at the teat of the inside joke.

"Different." Mirian smiled, watching Sara's hair cascade about her face — that hair — Marian alone in a hospital and cupping a tiny girl's skull and weeping to hold her lover's most obvious patrimony — a jubilation of red hair.

After two blond, straight-haired boys, here came this little girl with her tangle of red curls. At first, Marian tried keeping it cropped close, then straightening it in braids. One of Edmund's sisters or his brother would recall a great aunt with red hair and then there was that second cousin on their mother's side, wasn't there? Marian had dug in the attic for albums until she found pictures of a distant red-headed great uncle. These almost forgotten relatives, how she blessed them for giving credence to the story they all needed to believe, that curly red genes had survived the generational slurry to surface in this little girl.

And then there was that artist's eye. A week before her fifth birthday, Sara pushed her peas around her plate, eyed the blond brother to her left, the blond brother to her right, and announced, "The only thing I want for my birthday is a big box of paints. I'm an artist!" At the party, Edmund couldn't bring himself to say, "Make a wish, Sara."

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She smiled, now, at the purple-haired waitress — Marian watched her taking in every detail, the multiple earrings, the aborigine nails — that wonderful intensity as she discussed the merits of gucci abu over lamb vindaloo. In Sara's world there were no strata: As a child she had chatted to Marian's maids as cheerfully as she did with Edmund's partners. In Sara's world all tables were round; all diners, equal.

Greta Conyers, Marian's friend, retired like herself from the Briarley School, had said it best at a luncheon two weeks earlier — Greta's own daughter, living in Wyoming, her emails full of wolves and bears. "They're always starting over," Greta had said. "Perpetual sophomores. Familiar enough to be comfortable, uncommitted enough to get an anticipatory thrill. No permanence, only possibilities. Forever young."

"What are you thinking about, Mom?"

"Nothing. I should get the house painted."

"Frank said you were thinking of selling it."

"That's your brother's idea. I don't know. It needs to be painted."

"So you're not going to sell?"

"Greta Conyers is in Long Acre Heights. Do you remember her? We go to lunch. It's a retirement community in Worthington Valley."

"Then it must be hell. That witch couldn't live any other place but. Of course I remember her. She flunked me in trig."

"It's probably too late to get it painted now, but I should at least get the walk fixed before winter. The flagstones are very loose."

"I always liked the flagstones. Their colors. Especially when it rained."

"It needs work."

"How Dad hated shoveling them, remember? I thought he was going to burst a Goddamn blood vessel."

"They're really coming up now. Especially near the oak tree," Marian said.

"He'd get so red in the face. Christ!"

I have to tell her," Marian thought. Her life has become a whirlwind, cycling from coast to coast. She'll never find terra firma, will always be fighting Edmund, not knowing his is the wrong ghost.

She remembered him — scarf hanging from his neck, top coat open, grim faced at the snow shovel, and his daughter, her red hair atangle, calling, "Daddy! Daddy! You'll get your feet wet!" And his mouth tightening as the flagstones snagged the shovel. And his, the only shovel scraping on St Bart's Way. He had a meeting — always a meeting. And the walk had to be cleared; someone could slip. "They could break a leg, understand, Marian?" And she, watching him go, his the first tracks down St. Bart's Way.

“You OK, Mom? Want a taste of my Channa Masala?”

“I’m fine. This lamb is actually better than I expected.”

“This diner reminds me of a place I stopped at in New Mexico with Kyle. You remember, Kyle, don’t you?”

Marian vaguely recalled a bearded, balding counselor, something with drug abusers.

“It was in Las Cruces. A German place that sold Mexican food. I swear they sold hasenpfeffer tortillas. The maitre’d wore a serape and lederhosen. I swear.”

Even as she talked, Marian watched her eyes follow the back of a forty-something, his gangly wrists protruding from his corduroy jacket, his head bent in the stoop of the self-involved intellectual. The sort of man she was always bringing home. The sort who’d expound on some theory of literary criticism while Edmund listened, bemused, asking a question at the appropriate time so he wouldn’t have to talk, while Sara sat enthralled.

“Something wrong, Mom?”

“I’m all right. Do you know what Greta says is the worst thing about those retirement communities?”

“I suspect for Greta the worst thing is wherever she happens to be at the moment.”

“It’s the lights. Greta’s something of an insomniac. She corrected her papers at four in the morning. Can you believe that? Well, now she wakes up even earlier. The worst thing, she says, is looking out the window and seeing those flashing lights. Then you know that someone else is gone. She thinks the management has the ambulances come at night so the residents won’t get upset. She’s probably right.”

“I told you, Mom.. Greta always was a bitch. The next time you want someone to go out to lunch with, call me. Not her.” Marian recoiled. She had seen them — the aging daughters taking care of aging parents, toddling them to the beauty shop, the dentist. Their own gray hair needing a touch up as they beeped open their vans for their mothers. She didn’t want to become just another distraction so Sara wouldn’t notice her own shadow lengthening.

The wind caught them as soon as they left the diner. Marian watched Sara search for her keys in her handbag.

“Before you take me home, take me to Keswick Road. The twenty-four hundred block.”

“Why?”

“Just something.”

She thought she’d have known the house right off, but she had to retrace her steps; it had been “rehabbed.” In a brave effort to add elegance, urban homesteaders had painted the red bricks beige and hung a door with mullioned panes in place of the aluminum one Marian remembered. There had been a flight of narrow stairs to the second-floor apartment and she had given each step a name: Alexandros, Aeneas — the last — Richard. She heard Sara behind her but didn’t turn.

“Mother, what are we doing here?”

“Nothing. I just wanted ... Nothing.”

“Why are we here?”

“I grew up here.”

Alarm widened her daughter’s eyes. She thinks I’m cracking up, Marian thought.

“Oh, Mother, no! You didn’t grow up here. On Winslow Street. You remember. You grew up on Winslow Street,” her voice oozing that coaxing tone Marian thought would be appropriate soon enough. “We have to go now, Mom. I’ve got to go.”

The door opened. A young woman with sun-streaked hair and an oversized man’s shirt came onto the porch. She held the door ajar as if listening for something. “Can I help you?” “No. No thank you; we have to go,” Sara said.

A toddler stepped onto the porch and wrapped an arm around his mother’s leg. He grinned at the two woman on the walk. Marian took a step toward the open door; she felt the press of Sara’s arm.

“I grew up here. I wanted to come here again.”

“Do you want to see it? The house?” The young woman had the sort of trusting nature founded on blond-streaked privilege.

“No ... no thank you. It looks as though you’ve got your hands full. Thank you for asking.” Marian felt Sara’s hand on her arm until they reached the Toyota. The October wind was whipping that red hair — streaks of gray. “You grew up on Winslow Street, Mom. Got it? Winslow Street!”

Maybe she should stop here. She had lived one lie so long, why not live another — let Sara think she was slipping, losing her grip. What was to be gained from the truth but pain?

After all, that was what Richard had been all about, after Edmund’s slavish belief in the idea of marriage as enterprise: the marking of milestones, desire deferred in the hope of greater fulfillment. So she had fled to Richard and discovered the exquisite pain of the firewalker; the pain of pleasure without promise. “I grew up the first time on Winslow Street.”

“What do you mean ‘the first time’? You only get to grow up once.”

“You only get to be a child once, Sara. You get to grow up many times.”

“So, what’s this place?”

“This is where I grew up after Winslow Street. With someone else.”

“What are you talking about? Who?”

“Someone. An artist.” Richard. His name was Richard.

“Who?”

“I dropped a book. He picked it up.” When he stooped she had known there were no accidents, only fate beginning millennia before, aiming like a meteor to the afternoon a book slips from your grasp, and a man bends, exposing the glory of his hair to the sun through mullioned windows of a school where he’s come to meet his sister Greta. And then he’s standing over you — yourself being tall, but he taller still — and saying to you, “You know, dropping the Iliad won’t free the world of wooden horses.” And then you climbing the stairs ... Alexandros . . . Aeneas. And anticipation moistening even your palms. And all moments you’re together are liquid and, being liquid, transient, until made solid in a baby you name Sara.

“Who? Who are you talking about, Mom?”

“Someone I met. It was at Briarley. He picked up a book.

I had dropped it.”

“What are you telling me?”

“I think you know.”

“You were already married when you began teaching at

Briarley.”

“Very.”

“Jesus, Mother. I don’t need to know this. I just don’t need to know this!” The wind was whipping her hair.

“Having an

affair is your idea of growing up?” “I didn’t mean that. I grew up later.” “Will you stop

talking in fucking riddles?

“I grew up when I left him.”

“Jesus! I don’t need this! You and your riddles. I don’t need this.” She was fumbling for her keys, getting in her car, her hair in her eyes, and then driving away, leaving Marian alone, watching the ratty Toyota going away, watching her daughter going away. Again.

Across the street the second story windows of the mean little row houses were opaque in the afternoon light, but Marian knew what they shielded. Those afternoons with Richard were spent in a room with identical windows — they had laughed when they rattled. She knew even now the wind was seeping across the sills, stirring all the loves, dreams, needs, disappointments, recriminations, and fears where they had lain for years under radiators, dressers and beds. All those incorporeal engines whirling now over the worn carpets, the dime store throw rugs, the wind blowing them down the hallway where they would shelter in the corners of the stairs until the wind caught them again and swirled them to the lower hall — its floor smoothed by years of skips,

steps and staggers. And then the wind pulling them under the door with its frosted glass and down the concrete steps to the walk slicing the little yard. And there they were free to rise.

The red Toyota careened around the corner — Marian had known it would; the circles of Sara's peregrinations had grown tighter; she was too close to the center now to resist its pull.

She leaned across and yanked open the door. "Get in, Mother.

I don't want a scene, but believe me I'll make one. Now get in."

Marian felt she had lost all volition; that she was alive only in her senses, the smell of dog, the crack in the dashboard, the can rattling somewhere in the back. Marian thought, this must be what dementia is like — to live only in your senses. My God! What a gift! She watched Sara, her hunched shoulders, her fingers wrapped around the wheel, her nails digging into her palms. Maybe keeping the forty-year lie was best. Was there such a thing as too much truth, she wondered. She had told Sara the easiest half and that had nearly destroyed her. Surely the rest would be too much.

But wasn't that how it had always been with Sara? Always someone, even her brothers, protecting her. Always someone thinking she hadn't the strength, without even giving her the opportunity to prove otherwise. Surely her endless peregrinations, and those rootless lovers came about because that's all they had ever expected of her.

"I can't face St. Bart's Way now, you understand I'm sure, Mother. You can call a cab when we get to my apartment. I just want to get home."

The neighborhood of sorrowful windows gave way to one with wide doors, chrysanthemums in riot. Sara shifted the Toyota with a vengeance.

"What I loved was the way you said it. So cryptic. So fucking ladylike. My generation, we're not so clever. We just call it 'screwing around,' Mother. The cruder among my generation call it 'fucking around.' But, as I say, they're so crude, those crude ones. You know them, Mother. The ones you would never let us play with, because, God knows, they were crude and we, God knows, were from fucking St. Bart's Way."

They had stopped at a light. A woman with long legs in blue tights pushed a stroller. A preschooler clung to the stroller's handle; in his free hand he carried a cluster of red maple leaves as proudly as a battle banner.

Marian wished she could take it back. What a vainglorious mistake she had made. Forty years she had held it secret and now this. She felt sick.

"My God, mother. Who was he?"

"No one. I shouldn't have said anything. I don't know. I shouldn't have said anything."

"What I want to know is why now? Why did you want me to know?"

"Nothing. I shouldn't have said anything." But she saw it was too late. Sara stared at her: "You said he was an artist."

"Did I?"

"Don't start with your fucking riddles. You know you did."

"His name was Richard Conyers. Greta's brother."

"That witch." The light changed. Cars were honking, but Sara didn't move. Marian watched her slowly realizing the enormity of the truth. Forty years hidden and here, at this corner, before this stoplight, everything, finally and forever, converging.

"He was an artist?"

"He was in Baltimore for a while, then moved to New York. I never saw him again."

"Greta had red hair."

"Yes. It's gray now. His was red too."

"Like mine?"

"Exactly."

The light changed again. Drivers behind them swerved around the Toyota. Marian concentrated on the crack in the dashboard. If one of her grandchildren were there, they would make a game of it, imagining it was the entrance to a magic cavern. She was a loving grandmother. They couldn't take that from her. She'd tried to be a caring parent. Some would say, even a devoted wife. None of it mattered: not the nursing, not the coaxing, not the encouraging, not the sustaining. Forty years. In the space of red to green, all gone.

"When I became pregnant, well, I didn't know for certain.

But, then, when I saw you, well, there was no doubt."

"And Dad, or should I call him Edmund? — he knew?"

"I don't know. He never said anything."

"Well, that must have just been fucking peachy. You didn't say anything. He didn't say anything. We were all just one big peachy God damn happy family on St. Bart's Way. You, me, Edmund, Matthew, Frank. A veritable fucking Brady Bunch."

Sara threw the car into first. Marian watched the flickering reflections in the side mirror. The cars behind. A blue SUV with a white haired woman in a baseball cap. A truck with a ladder on top and a man eating a sandwich. Then the bridge over Stoney Run. Lamps. So many times over Stoney Run. Did it always have lamps on the balustrades?

Marian wanted to sink into the anonymity of the civic river. Politeness would suffice. She studied the reflections in the mirror, the apartments, the unlikely deli, the blazing Bradford pear trees. Then Sara stopped.

"There's a phone in the lobby, Mom. You shouldn't have any trouble getting a cab. You'll understand if I don't ask you to come up." And then she was gone. Her red hair thrashing in the wind, her sack of a bag slipping from her shoulder.

Marian called a cab and didn't notice the teasing wind as she waited. The apartments on either side of the street grew dark in each other's shadows, making the street a gusty canyon. And then, suddenly, Sara was upon her again. "He knew."

"What?"

"He knew."

"Who?"

"Edmund, for Chrissake. The man you were married to. He knew."

"What do you mean?"

"Since this is such a fine day for truth saying, try this one on: your husband knew all the while that you had been fucking around. Oh, excuse me, 'had an affair.' There, does that make it clear to you? Your husband knew. He knew all along."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me. That's how, Mother."

"What?" Marian shielded her eyes from the wind and looked for the cab.

"Up in Maine. He told me."

"Maine?"

"Yes. Maine. You remember. The exhibit. Or are all your memories only of yourself?"

Marian saw a flash of yellow turn the corner.

"What did he say?"

"Right when you were getting ready to leave. You were in the ladies' room. He said that I should keep painting. He said, 'You've inherited a good eye.' 'Inherited,' that's the word he used. And you know Edmund always chose his words carefully."

And then Marian slamming the door, saying "Take me to St Bart's Way," and seeing Sara hunched, running away, struggling against the wind.

She had an urge to move; she told the cabbie to stop a block from her house. It had been years since she, who had once pushed a baby carriage on every block, walked down St. Bart's Way. Marian remembered a little red-headed girl looking at the leaves of a maple tree and crowing, "Yeyyow! Yeyyow! I love yeyyow, Mommy!" And Marian's grip tightening on the stroller handle, her little girl's delight in color, her uncanny eye, making her own back stiffen.

That memory was more real than the wind snipping now at her coat. Or the leaves in the ivy beds, where a young father would have his children, on a November Saturday morning, clean them away. His rake, as Edmund's had, snagging on the ivy roots, and the leaves, the sycamore's indistinguishable from the oak's, all of them equally reluctant to surface.

She wondered what had it had been based on — that presumption of righteousness underlying all that endeavor, all that effort, even raking leaves. As though back-bending work undertaken on a chilly Saturday had greater moral content than the same work done by the transient men who shuffled up the street on weekdays. As though they could forestall whatever was coming. Squirrels, thought Marian, we lived like squirrels and their crazy hoarding. What did we think we were holding off? Only with Richard had she found neither compromise nor promise.

Once she had known every neighbor on St. Bart's Way. The Hearn — Ed dead of cirrhosis twenty years now, Joan in Arizona with their daughter, or maybe Nevada; the Kanes — six? seven? years in Florida, no card last Christmas. And now she couldn't even connect the houses with the cars. The young family next door, three children like her own, but now the father's gone: three brave pumpkins on the porch. A divorcee just moved in across the street; her children visited on weekends. What would she think if Marian rang her bell, brought her a basket of welcome? Did anyone do that sort of thing anymore?

At her house the wind had whipped the leaves into the borders of the flagstone walk buckled at a treacherous slant from the pressure of the oak tree's roots. She remembered Edmund saying "Sooner or later, they'll have to be replaced, Marian. It's either the walk or the tree. You'll have to decide" — she in heels, the black sheath Edmund liked, he holding her elbow — always the best of manners — to yet another dinner party. But the afternoon she walked away from Richard had sapped any strength for decision. And, in the end, she never did choose between the stones or the tree; they both lasted longer than Edmund.

Still, had Sara been right? Had Edmund known all along and said nothing? Did his duty? And did it until the effort sucked the life from him, and he was left holding a plastic cup and looking at paintings evidencing another man's talent in the hand of a daughter he had raised. And was that, too, not love?

Mail littered the blue Tabriz in the foyer: bills, advertisements — she didn't even recognize the name of the stores — a postcard showing lost children, a solicitation from Briarley School. She picked up a flyer from K-Mart. It was addressed to "resident." They got it right, Marian thought. That's me. I'm resident. Stooped on the rug, she ran her thumb over and over "resident," as if a caress could summon meaning, any meaning.