

(“Torn” is a chapter in my novel AFTERMATH, forthcoming from Little, Brown.)

Torn

By Maria Adelmann

“In his anger [the little man] plunged his right foot so deep into the earth that his whole leg went in; and then in rage he pulled at his left leg so hard with both hands that he tore himself in two.” —Rumplestitskin

This is the end, I think. It has all already happened, the entire plot has already occurred. Nothing happens next.

Even so, my husband Harris begins to open the attic door. *Postscript*, it squeals.

Time chugs forward, but my mind thrusts me back. I feel pulled, always, in two directions, stretched like taffy, one end forward, the other back. You can see how it’s possible to be torn in half.

The attic room glows gold in the warm afternoon light. The singular circular window, the one R————— has always crawled into, reveals a cutout of blue sky fringed in blazing orange leaves backlit by the setting sun. The sash, pivoted open at its center, gleams like a shimmering gold coin, poised mid-spin.

R————— is dazzling in this light, beautiful and ugly at the same time, like a piece of kitsch: a lawn gnome, a plastic troll, a gold salt shaker shaped like a foot. How can it be, that I have come to know his strange contours so well? His skin is luminous, the hair on his arms takes on an ethereal glow, his face seems to flicker. Heat rises off him. I can feel it. I want to touch him. I want to reach out and touch him again.

Even as his face contorts, blooms scarlet, I think the warmth radiating off him has something to do with the fall light. This, and I’ve seen my share of flared tempers, know well that flicker into instant boil. Even as he flings his right knee high into the air, I think he’s going to smack his thigh and break out into laughter, and even as he doesn’t, even as he plunges his leg down instead, hard and fast, even as his heel hits the floorboards with such incredible force, even then I don’t realize he’s angry. For a millisecond, the floorboards seem, simply, to *bend*. He will become a projectile, I think, he will be flung through the attic roof, rocket across the blue sky, land in the arms of a great oak. He’ll be back again tomorrow night, scratched and scheming, always scheming. “You guessed my name!” he’ll whisper. “I’d like to hold the baby,” he’ll say.

This is not what happens, of course. The floorboards do bend, just slightly, but then they break. The crack is so loud it seems impossible that no one has heard, but the baby does not cry, the nurse does not come running, Harris does not shout for me to be quiet. Maybe he’s wearing those noise-canceling headphones, maybe he’s not on an important call at all but watching loud porn, maybe they all know to just ignore me up here. The boards splinter down as the heel crashes through: the foot, the ankle, the calf.

He's swallowed to the knee. The other leg is bent up as if he's sitting on his haunches. R————— struggles briefly, though not frantically, yanking at the leg with both hands, but it won't come loose. Then, in a fit of wild inspiration, he grabs his left foot with his right hand and pulls.

Only now do I realize that he is angry.

Only now.

Before all this, I was alone in the attic, waiting: nervous, giddy.

He crawled though the window like a spider, at just the appointed time. His skin was ablaze in golden sunlight.

"Is your name Randal?" I asked.

"No!"

"Rasmus?" I asked.

"No!"

"Could your name be R—————?" His face flickered, gold to red. His face has changed so much since I've known him, a fall leaf: yellow, orange, gold.

At first, I thought he was going to laugh. I had practiced it this way: two wrong names, then the right one, to make it a little surprising, to make it fun, like the moment magic is revealed as a trick: *Look, here's the invisible string! Look, I have been stringing it along all this time!*

He stomps his foot. The floorboards bend, the floorboards break.

I realize he is furious.

What he does next, I cannot unremember, I cannot unsee. My brain skips like a scratched record, back back back to this, back to this.

He tears himself in half like a piece of paper, except that it is not like a piece of paper at all. At first he looks like a costume unzipping itself, but the noises are insane: breaking bones, strange pops like cracking knuckles, the inside goop sucking at itself like boots in mud. He breaks in half from the bottom up. I don't understand what's happening until he begins split above the neckline, the skin pulling apart like string cheese. Even then, I don't comprehend it entirely. He's dividing, I think. Divide and conquer, I think. He's dividing like a cell, it's a kind of reproduction. How badly he wants a family.

Time is slow. The room is vivid with color. His rust-red leggings. His brilliant red face.

Neither of us screams.

I want to take it all back, I want to unsay his name. I want to just know it, a secret between us. The way he knows my name, the way he is the only one who ever calls me by it, just sometimes, in a whisper.

His brown eyes are wide open. Those eyes say that I have betrayed him, that he pities me, that I am doing this to him, tearing him apart. They say all this. They just keep talking. They say, *Do you think I would've just run off with the baby? Then you're a fool. Then you don't know what any of this was about.*

What was any of this about?

You know, his eyes say. *I just wanted you to admit it.*

I admit nothing. I can't move. He has given me everything I have. I feel as if something inside of me is being ripped apart, too. It's my own heart, metaphorically. I feel it as a visceral sting in my chest, as if I am being torn in half along with him, red muscle wrenched from red muscle, tattered edges, guilt surging like blood flowing out, evacuation from the wound.

Right before his face splits in half, he looks at me squarely, and he seems to understand that I am hurting because he is hurting, because I have hurt him. It is awful, how in this final moment—*his* final moment, his strange final moment—he should think of me and offer this kindness, a smile, a smile that says: *Hey, it's okay. I'll be alright.*

But he won't be alright because even as he smiles, the chin breaks in two, the skull splitting with a loud snap, and then the mouth, the very smile, blood running up the center of each lip, they could just be dry-cracked winter lips, but now they are apart, they are two half mouths, they are still smiling, each of them, like a canoe that's broken in two, stern and bow flicked up even while sinking, and the tear is rising, rising up the bridge of his nose, a red line running through his forehead like a crack in a vase, a forerunner marking the trail of unzipping, and the skin pulls apart like rubber, and the skull ruptures with a loud crack, and there are two of him now, completely, and he is not a cell dividing, and there is nothing to conquer, and it is only this: the self divided against itself.

The stuck half hits the floor. The freed half manages a strange half turn, blood flinging across the room in glimmering strings, as if flying from the skirt of a twirling ballerina. For a second, time moves so slowly that I think it has stopped, that we will be frozen forever like this, the blood mid-fling, the body hovering, my mouth open. I think of one of those photographs taken at high-speed, where a bullet floats nonchalantly, a playing card or piece of fruit torn in the wake.

It seems as if the body will never touch ground, it does not seem to be moving at all, but it is moving, as slow as continental drift, because time is always ticking forward, no matter the perceived rate, it can't be stopped, one moment always becomes the next, and so the blood does splatter, and the body does land, it rocks back and forth like a cradle before it settles into stillness, and then there is quiet and quiet and quiet.

This is the end, I think. Maybe nothing happens next.

But *next* always happens, it's happening now, it's the only thing you can count on.

As if to confirm this, the screech owl begins her nightly repertoire: a high-pitched whinny, a haunting gurgle.

My chest feels heavy, as if flooded by blood drained from my torn heart. This leaves my heart deserted, white and dry as overcooked chicken. Chicken heart, I think. Corpse heart, I think. Ghost heart, I think.

I feel my life itself split into before and after.

This is the after, I think, here I am, I have already arrived. I will live the rest of

my life over here.

The quality of the light is no longer gold. The sun has been sucked below the horizon. The light is fading fast.

“Harris,” I call.