

KRISTIN FITZPATRICK

A NEW KUKLA

Richard agrees to meet Raisa on the ninety-fifth floor. She'll have the herbs and a surprise for the baby, too. "You've been married nearly a year," she says. "Surely there is a baby." "In a month," he tells her. "A girl," she says. "It has to be." This is what they say this morning, when she returns last night's call: three rings she didn't answer.

He wants to get the tea, or herbs, whatever, at her flat tonight, wants to listen to her kettle whistle, to adjust the antenna and curl under her arm while they watch the puppet program. "Come to my new job instead," she says. "And be there by closing time." Her husband works first shift now. She has to catch the Howard line by nine-fifteen.

By eight o'clock the lift reaches the twentieth floor, and his ears pop. The pressure pushes on his forehead, on his temples. He rotates his jaw without opening his mouth. Pop, pop. He doesn't want the other passengers to click their tongues and exchange looks. At the sixtieth floor he grabs the rail behind him. The pressure has landed on his chest. He wants to kneel or lie down.

He hasn't seen the John Hancock Center since it opened, not up close. He hasn't strolled down Michigan Avenue since he first left the narrower streets of London to take the job at the university, when he first met his wife. They were walking along this block, the one below, because it was a romantic place to take a new girlfriend, and as he led her into the wind, her scarf kept threatening to fly away. He caught it every time. Each time she laughed harder and drew him closer. There is already a taller tower in the works, to be finished next year, but the project may drag on longer, maybe until '73, he's heard. Now, in the lift, it feels like he's already moving down rather than up, as the pressure crushes him, forces him to push his shoulders back, pull his head up, and breathe from his gut.

Doors open at the Ninety-Fifth Restaurant. He gestures for

the men in suits and the women in pearls to file out ahead of him. They relieve their ears by moving their jaws—“Like cattle, or pigs!” one of them says. All laugh.

This is the restaurant he has heard about. Carpet and white linen absorb most of the laughter. Chandeliers cast a white-gold sheen on wineglasses, fur coats, the fold of an ascot. Patrons file out or ask for one more. A piano keeps time.

It is ten past eight when he enters the lounge and sees his brother-in-law, Bobby. Richard steps aside to let a waiter by, and he stays there, frozen, in the dark space along the wall. It is Bobby’s hair that catches his eye. It glows the same orange as the end of the cigarette Bobby holds up next to it. In certain weather, his hair curls tight as the tobacco shreds when they burn. Richard watches Bobby as he flicks ashes onto the floor, spits into a half-empty glass, shouts, curses, and makes a backstroke-like gesture. He is talking to the bartender, who keeps his head down, arranging and rearranging coasters and bowls of mixed nuts and bottles underneath the bar. Even when Bobby leans forward and asks for affirmation, the bartender does not look up. Bobby has brought the rough and tumble of the Back of the Yards to the Ninety-Fifth.

If Richard could breathe, he would ask Bobby for a smoke. If he could hold down anything beyond guilt and grief—and it is precisely guilt and grief that he feels rising up to his mouth now as he searches for Raisa—he would take a seat next to Bobby. He would forget his reasons for coming here and kill an evening with Bobby Conlan.

He unbuttons his collar until it splays out to the edges of his shoulders. He wants shirt fashion to cycle back to a time when collars didn’t draw attention. The inside of his collar is wet now, as sweat runs from forehead to sideburns and pools above his clavicle. He looks around. The men’s room might make a nice hiding place, a place to hide until this woman who isn’t his wife finishes her shift, but Bobby might walk in. It’s not worth the risk. He wants to board the lift, return to the street, and run home.

Richard knows Bobby has been working up to this drunken state since noon, after he put the *Back in Ten* sign on the door of Conlan’s Nursery, clicked the lock, and marched to the corner. He probably threw some crisps in the bag to cover the bottle.

Lunch. Bobby is tired from the day's lifting and change making, from watering the plants, and from staring through the window. This is his hard day's night out. He is here because he can't blow all his money at the Rusty Harp or the Broken Chord. He can't shoot the breeze with those guys, can't empty his wallet down to driver's license and draft card. Not there, not tonight, in these hours for private grief. Tonight the Conlans—Bobby and the others, but especially Richard's wife, Gail—are preoccupied with their older sister, Joy. Gail has not left Joy's side since yesterday.

Richard takes a step this way or that way to allow more foot traffic, light traffic, to pass by. In the process, he moves closer to the bar, and to Bobby. He remembers that Bobby is Robert Junior, and he wonders whether Gail would want to name their daughter, if it is indeed a daughter, after herself. He'd meant to ask her yesterday.

It was a bit warmer than usual yesterday, the last day of winter. He left the house early, but he would be home early, to take her to a nice dinner. One last surprise before the ninth month. At three o'clock he trotted up the steps and through the door. In the shower he sang "Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter," then changed into a nice shirt, pressed trousers, the tie she'd given him for Christmas. He wouldn't cover his white collar and tie knot with a scarf. She liked seeing it behind the wool lapels of his overcoat. When she looked away from him in the shop, he would pluck a rose from behind a glass door. A white one, her favorite.

At dinner, he would call her by name. Gail, let's go out tonight. I think my wife, Gail, would like a table by the window. Isn't that right, Gail? Yes, she would say, a nice view. But he wouldn't say, Gail will have the pasta. When the waiter arrived, he would say, Gail, what will you have, dear? He would close the menu and watch and listen and smile while she ordered, and then he would ask the waiter to bring him her second choice.

She would like to be called by name. And when she asked about his day, he would wave off the question. Work is work, he would say. He would place his hand over hers on top of the table and ask, How was *your* day? She would tell him what the regular customers' kids and grandkids were up to, and she'd say, Joy is really keeping the place together. And if she was in the mood,

if she was not too tired from the anticipation, he would ask about the baby. He had flipped through the name book. Donnelly the dark brave one, Donovan the dark warrior, or maybe Duana, a little dark maiden. They would settle on a name.

But at half past three yesterday, the doorbell rang. Richard sighed and dropped his shoulders. He left his tie in a single knot.

A man in uniform stood holding a folded flag in both hands. Pins and small ribbons lined his breast pocket. Richard lost his balance. He reached behind himself, pressed his fingertips into the space on the wall just below the framed portrait of Mike: soldier, husband. Joy's husband.

"I'm afraid she doesn't live here right now," he said. He had to stop and swallow and loosen his tie to get the words out. "It's her house, but when he was called up, she moved into the flat above the shop." He patted his front, his tie. "I'm her sister's husband. I'm family."

The soldier stared at his feet. "Yes, sir."

He gave Richard a lift to the shop. The ride was three blocks: one west, two north. Richard didn't know whether to direct him to the shop or tell him to keep driving. East, he wanted to say, straight into the lake. His tongue was swollen with the wrong words, with thirst for the right things to say. It was thick enough to mute him, and he was grateful for this. And then it came: the jolt in his stomach, the surge up through the chest and into the armpit, down the arm. His eyes threatened to pop out of his head. He coughed and choked down the burn. He'd inhaled his lunch. Fish and chips again.

The heartburn his doctor had described didn't match Richard's symptoms. His pain stuck around longer, kept him racing and paranoid, but the doctor had given him nothing. "Your blood pressure isn't that high," the doctor had said. "You're young. Eat better. Take a walk." He laughed. "Get out of the office." And so Raisa's herbs, the tea, to slow everything down.

When Richard and the soldier reached the shop, part of him wanted to ring the bell, stand in front of the door with his head down, next to the poor guy, or behind with a hand on his shoulder, to help him get the words out.

Richard walked him in and flipped the *Open* sign over. The soldier delivered the message to Joy and held out the flag. Joy

dropped her head, brought a hand to her mouth, and retreated to the greenhouse. Gail turned and watched her go.

Richard held out his hands. The flag was light, but it felt heavy as he set it on the counter.

Gail stared at it. "Mike was a good man," she said.

Richard rested his hands on either side of the flag. She placed her fingertips on his nails.

"Be an angel and bring some overnight things from the house?"

He tilted his head, peered into her face. She wouldn't look up.

"Matter of fact, just bring the hospital suitcase by the door. That'll last me a few days." Something was caught in her throat. "Actually, I won't need it till morning. Could you bring it in the morning?" She backed away and smiled at him the way she smiled at customers when it was time for them to leave. "Have a good night, honey."

Her face was free of tears. Conlans didn't cry in front of guests. She bowed her head over the flag again before she turned and walked back toward the greenhouse.

Richard went home and spent the evening in Mike's chair. He'd lost his appetite for anything but scotch and television. He clicked the dial around until he found the puppet program. He sang along. That's when he called Raisa, for the first time in a year.

It has been a long year for the Conlans. When Richard sits next to Bobby at the bar, neither of them speaks.

Finally Bobby says, "Look at this place. Nice, huh?" He doesn't lift his head.

"Not bad. Come here often?"

"I figure I deserve it."

"You do."

"You sure you're not spying on me?"

Though it is a joke, the question hits Richard in the gut, and when answers lodge in his throat, the question tells him he needs a drink. He studies the vodkas that line the wall behind the bar. Each brand is too strong, too dangerous for his blood. When he leans forward to order a gin and tonic, he notices the *Southtown Economist* on the other side of Bobby's arm on the bar. The front page features a soldier.

Bobby rattles his glass until all the ice cubes settle. “Commies killed my brother-in-law, Richard. He grew up down the street. Used to watch my ass before I learned how to fight. Showed me where to hide from the cops, you know?” He laughs and slaps Richard hard on the back. He pulls harder on his whiskey, and then cups it in both hands. “I keep picturing it.” He looks into Richard’s eyes. His pupils are full with more than drink. “Picture some brainwashed, red-blooded gook sneaking up on him while he hid under a tree. Maybe Mikey was sleeping under the tree. A *bamboo* tree, for chrissakes.”

Richard watches Bobby’s knuckles turn white. The glass shakes. He puts his hand on Bobby’s forearm. It feels like a bundle of taut ropes.

“Maybe it was a machine gun, close range. In the head, so he’d go fast, or maybe in the stomach, and it took hours. And the asshole probably stood over him and watched.” Bobby’s voice cracks. “Then I picture him standing over me instead.” He wipes his thumb under one eye and makes a fist. He draws in air through his nose until he sits up straight.

Richard finishes his drink.

Bobby orders another round. “Mike was a smart guy, like you. You could have been friends.”

Bobby has a full scholarship to the university where Richard is Dr. Sims, Assistant Professor of History. At first Richard saw quite a lot of him, maybe more than he saw of Gail. But lately Bobby hasn’t been hanging around Richard’s office or bumping into him on the platform, where they wait for the same train.

All of the Conlans are like that: here one minute with arms outstretched, then off they go without a warning. This morning Richard’s hand searched Gail’s side of the bed. In that moment between asleep and awake, between the last dream and the new day, he froze. Panic surged through his middle. And then he rolled flat on his back, breathed deep, and woke up alone for the first time in nearly a year. He took her suitcase into the flat above the shop, above the corroding letters of the family name, then came down and manned the till so Gail and Joy could lie in bed a bit longer. Joy would not want to lose a day’s business, would not want the neighbors to wonder. Richard sold a few carnations before going to the office. They have started selling carnations at half price.

For most of that hour, Richard looked out the window. He felt guilty for enjoying the stillness on his side of the glass as hospital workers trudged home and factory hands rushed out. Guilty for sipping tea before putting some on for his wife, for enjoying small talk with neighbors.

Then a familiar woman broke his gaze, walked along the window, right to left. She turned and waved. He knew she was a cousin on Gail's mother's side, but he couldn't recall the name. She lived on this block: across and a few down.

She stamped her feet on the mat before stepping in, but her boots still spread squares of packed snow across the floor. "They got you running the place now, huh?" she said.

"Just opening up. Gail needs her rest. Joy, too."

"Sisters need to be together." She walked to a low shelf and fingered a leaf on a plant he couldn't name. She was either a McCormick or a McCarthy. "When do we get our baby?"

"In a month's time. Mid-April, the doctor said."

"That's right. This is the time to rest." She inspected a terrarium, then stepped back. "The ninth month might as well be the seventh day. All you want is a little peace after your creation. You know, before the chaos starts." She approached the door. "Off to the bakery. God bless."

As she left, he smiled and held up his hand in the same static wave he had offered to all customers. Soon she would learn that the chaos had already begun, that upstairs, death and disorder would soon wake from a long and silent night and her family's cries would bellow down Forty-fifth, command black veils and yellow roses into St. Luke's, and continue east, bouncing up off the lake. He wanted to run out and warn her, in a shout, but this bit of news was not ready to be broadcast.

When the bartender hands over Richard's drink, Richard asks Bobby how he held up at the shop today.

"Business as usual. It'll be in the paper tomorrow," Bobby says.

"How are the girls?"

"Just stayed upstairs."

"Gail feeling sick, is she?"

"Didn't complain."

Richard uses all but his last ten dollars to pay the tab and hands the rest to Bobby. "Catch a cab, all right?"

“You’re a good man. Jolly good.” Bobby’s impression of him is getting better.

Richard shakes his head.

“Gail knows how to pick ’em.” Bobby slaps a hand on Richard’s shoulder and turns toward the elevator. After a few steps he turns around. “What are you doing here anyway?”

The weight on his chest jumps, bounces on his lungs and heart. He checks his watch: half past eight. The tick of the second hand pounds in his head. This beat is not drowned out by the low horn of grief. Guilt is not audible either, but he knows Bobby is watching guilt color his face.

“This is history.” Richard clears his throat and forces a smile. “I wanted to be the first Englishman to reach the top of the city.”

Bobby looks away, toward the lake. “Always working.”

“Say,” Richard says. “How’s it going in the Western Civ course?”

“Half over.”

“And?”

Bobby takes his lighter out of his pocket, thumbs the trigger. “I’m acing calculus.”

It has taken twenty minutes, has taken the chain of hints—Bobby’s gestures, the pupils, the tear, the sitting on the stool at all, here, in a place like this—for Richard to figure out that Bobby has failed his history midterm. He wants to yank his words back, shoot them down ninety-five stories. Bobby is good enough at math to understand that he will lose his scholarship, that his number will come up. Time to trade in book and pencil for helmet and weapon. Richard is good enough at reading to know what Bobby wants.

He wants Richard to pull a string or two, but he won’t ask. None of the Conlans will ask. They’ll give him that sad face and tell him he’s a good man, that Gail and the baby are lucky to be his. Richard will pull, will talk to Bobby’s professor, will put in a favor, will put in more time. Bobby is his brother now. Time, Richard is learning, is what brothers give.

Raisa is leading a tour from the elevator to the east window when he sees her. From his chair in front of the north window,

he turns to watch her gesture or clasp her hands in front of her skirt. The panic and guilt and grief have settled now that Bobby is out of the building; shame and regret—and relief—have taken up residence inside him. The relief is one that comes only from seeing her, from recognizing her shape. She is saying to tourists, he imagines, “Look, over there, beyond the reach of the lights, to the site of the city’s first shantytown, to the first dock, the old shipping route.”

She escorts the group to the elevator, and when they are gone, she walks to the window in front of him. A few unguided clusters and couples wander around.

They look out at the lake.

“They hired me for the German and French groups. They needed that, as well as English, of course.” She sounds happy.

He smiles and clears his throat. “And Russian?” he says.

She looks down, shakes her head once right and once left. “I didn’t mention that.” It is a whisper. She turns around. “Call me Ruth.” It sounds like *root*, or *russe*.

He wants to send his words underground. He does not want to speak German. He chooses French.

“Raisa, I miss you.” It is easy to say this in French.

He stands and moves to a spot behind and a few meters to her left. He sticks his neck out, tries not to look down. The lake has thawed into a blue-black sheet. The moon lights up the floating ice patches. It leads his eyes to no opposite shore, no destination. He wipes the sweat from his palms onto his tweed trousers. *Shhhhp*. He smoothes his sideburns, slips his hands into his pockets. *Shhhhp*.

“Looks like an ocean,” she says.

He steps back from the glass, sits down again, lets the gin work. He wants her to give him only one leaf of whatever that stuff is, the stuff he said he needs, in each bag so he can visit her every night. He wants the chest pains to get worse, as bad as they were before the wedding, so he’ll need to call all the time.

When he first saw Raisa, he had been on his way to the library. At the Roosevelt stop, he stepped out to let people from the middle of the car make their exit. When he stepped back in, she was holding the spot on the pole he’d been holding. He looped a finger around it above her hand. He’d just visited Gail

at the shop, where the scents of lilies and lavender wrapped around him. Now he smelled this woman's hair. She turned to look at him. He let go of the pole, rocked on his heels.

She squinted. "You have irregular breathing pattern." He thought she sounded German.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

Richard heard a rattle. He looked toward it, to where a man with a seat glanced up from his paper and frowned. Two foreigners misunderstanding each other.

She lowered her voice. "Your heart. It beats too fast?"

He squirmed to get his arm free. He pulled it toward his chest, felt bones and an empty cavity at the sternum. Nothing beating. "Dunno. I suppose I might."

At the next stop she squeezed out the door and turned around, made a strange wave of her hand, a beckoning. He followed her to the end of the platform. She produced a paper sack from her pocket. "Just herbs," she said. "You can drink it like tea. Free, for you."

"I don't think so." He walked away.

"If you want it, be on same train same time tomorrow."

A week later he could smell her across the car. It was October and still humid. He followed her home, drank her herbal cures. The tightness in his chest eased up.

"Stay," she said. "I'm making supper."

Her husband worked nights. She had no children. Her apartment was cold. He brought her small gifts: nothing much really, just candles or daisies or oils from the hippies outside the market. She did not thank him—she could buy her own flowers and perfumes—but she did not throw his gifts away. Once when he walked out of her washroom, he caught her smelling the flowers, eyes closed, lips curved upward. She turned toward him and drew in a sharp breath.

He waited.

"Tea?"

While she cooked he drank whatever she made and watched television. He wasn't sure he was being cured of anything, but she had what Gail didn't: experience. She knew how to boil a man's tea, to judge by the slump of the shoulders how much to ask about his day, to use leaves and oils for making it all better.

He clicked the dial past news and sport and variety shows until the puppets came on.

On the last night he stayed later, until the hour before her husband returned. She stroked his neck and pulled his head under her chin. "You deserve this every night," she said. "Everyone does."

"I'm getting married soon," he said. "Hopefully I'll get what I deserve." He sprang out of her arms, held himself up by his hands and leaned over her, with one hand on each side of her waist. The sheets felt warm under his hands, warm with her body heat.

"And what is it called, the erasing of the first one?" she said.

He swallowed the word down, but then it rose up, sliced his throat. "Annulment." He dropped back to his side of the bed. "But I won't have to do that. We're not telling her family about my past. They'd never have it."

Raisa pulled the covers up higher, over her shoulders. "Lucky man."

He climbed onto her again. "Don't ask, don't tell. That's the best way, isn't it now?"

"It is the only way."

"Especially if I'm going to become a Catholic tomorrow, for God's sake." He shook his head. "So after tonight, I won't deserve anything."

She laughed and pulled him closer.

Tonight he studies her profile as the lights touch it through the window. She is so close to the glass. The year has been good to Raisa. She wears her hair down, and curly, but it is pinned back in a way that conceals the gray that creeps into blonde, and in a way that reveals her face. Her lips are painted pink, and if she were to smile and he were allowed to touch her, he could thumb a line all the way from the corners of her mouth up the sharp angle of her cheekbones and stop next to eyes that burn a blue flame. He could hold her face in his hands, with his fingertips in the hair behind her ears. Her new hairstyle and her year without him have erased ten years, maybe fifteen. That would bring her down to thirty, so young that they may be mistaken for siblings. Richard and Ruth. A grown-up Hansel and Gretel carrying on in some foreign language.

A tear slides down her face, draws a line from eye to cheek before she wipes it away, then looks across the water. He watches her shoulders rise and her head bow.

“Excuse me,” she says in English. She turns toward the ladies’ room.

Groups and couples shuffle toward the elevator.

Maybe Raisa has had a hard day. Richard won’t ask, and she won’t complain. He won’t either. He won’t tell her that his day began at the nursery, because she might ask why. She doesn’t want to hear that later, at work, he had to move to a new project, that he’s been lifted out of the British fur-trade era and thrown into a Civil War biography. He won’t tell her he spent the morning boxing up a year’s work and the afternoon gathering an overview for the next year: north, south, battles, death, and then migration, desertion, rebirth.

While Raisa cries in the restroom, he watches taillights and headlights move up and down Lakeshore Drive. Northbound on the right. Eventually he will have to learn to drive on the right. He and Gail will move to the suburbs, buy a car, a house with a garage. She will want more children and a bigger house farther away from town. Away from campus and public transit and the Hancock Center.

Raisa’s voice sneaks up behind him. “Richard,” she says.

He turns. Her face glows with no trace of tears.

“The view from in there is the best. Ladies stay a long time. You should see.”

She sits two chairs away from him while they watch a couple steal their last looks and saunter away. She gives him a smile that means *Come here, you*. It is the kind of expression Gail hasn’t learned yet. Shame and regret vanish, and whatever’s happening in his chest is not crushing. He stands. She leads him by the arm toward the restroom. He laughs and resists, but she pulls him closer, wraps her arm tighter around his.

The south wall of the ladies’ room is glass all the way down to the floor. From here, the lake hugs the left side of the city. His eyes jump from white lights of office buildings to museums to the river. The green-black spot, he figures, must be Grant Park, the launch pad for the protests. Farther south is the bottom of the lake: industry, Indiana, colored lights.

He wishes it were earlier, so they could watch the sun dance

a finale on the lake, on Buckingham Fountain, office windows, and rooftops. Though he wants to know, he doesn't ask her what time the tiny bulbs flicked on over the marina. He squints until each boat's and car's and train's chain of lights blend together, like an impressionist painting. She slips her hand over his on the railing. His eyes shift focus and he watches their reflection. Her face is still blurry, and her hair glows white-gold. Only the glass stands between them and all that light. He touches it with one finger. It is cold enough to burn him.

He steps back from the window, close to the corner stall, and he keeps glancing toward the door, keeps listening.

From under the sink Raisa produces a bundle, wrapped in a homemade blanket. "Open it," she says. It is a nice gesture.

He unwraps the blanket. Inside is a puppet of Kukla, from the program they used to watch. On their first night together she had shown him a blonde doll she was sewing for a neighbor. "My first *kukla*," she said. "You know, a doll." He asked if she had seen the Kukla puppet on *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*. And so their ritual began.

And this is how it ends? By unveiling the product of what they once had? She has reduced those nights, those warm nights in the dead of his first foreign winter, to a little balding man with black eyebrows pointing directly up. Grief shoots guilt out now, out of the ninety-fifth floor with a brassy blast of anger.

He knows now that she kept watching the show without him, because the doll is spot on for the original, and oddly, Richard notices, Kukla looks a lot like Mike, like that portrait on the wall that Richard sees when he looks at anything today. He throws the blanket back over it. Maybe Raisa has become a feminist, and giving a male puppet to a baby girl is making a statement. America can do that to women.

"He looks like the real thing," he says. "She'll love it."

"You don't like it. Forgive me. I just thought . . ."

"It's okay, really. It was kind of you."

"What will you name her, your new daughter?"

He starts to breathe clearly now. Raisa, he wants to say. "Fran," he says.

She laughs. "Really?"

He loosens his grip on the bundle. "Why not? She's got the second most comforting voice in America."

She smiles and lowers her head. She is flattered. He takes both of her hands. Together they hold the bundle. It brushes against the railing and the glass.

"She'll learn to sing straight away," he says.

"Instead of crying?"

"Yes," he says. It is a whisper.

She steps away and reaches under the sink again, behind a pipe. He notices a run starting in the ankle of her stockings. He watches the rip spread upward and begin to trace a mile of leg. He turns back to the window and his eyes travel down South Lakeshore, to the point where the Eisenhower cuts in.

"Your pain is back?" she says.

"Come again?"

She stands up and holds out a plastic bag with large capsules inside. "I ran out of herbs. They got expensive. This is the same, or better."

He opens his hand. She shakes out one blue pill, then another.

It is past nine when she tells him she's glad he called, glad he came to see her. She needs to talk. She's had trouble keeping it all together. But she's been making more time for her husband. They're not getting any younger, she says. She thumbs behind them, to indicate the north side. "He is home, cooking supper for me. I teach him. He's getting better."

He wants her to say this in French, wants her smile to look foreign if it's got to be for someone other than him. He studies her hand, follows the bending and bulging green veins until they disappear at the knuckles. The skin is folding, settling in irreversible patterns of lines.

"I'll walk you to the train," he says.

They descend to the street without a word. She is in a rush, and he is inching along. He motions for her to go underground ahead of him. The temperature has plummeted and now he misses his scarf.

"Thanks again," he says, and holds up the blanketed bundle.

She squeezes his hand, turns, and then clicks down the stairs.

Richard's train approaches the platform, not slowing down or speeding up, but sliding south out of the black tunnel for a moment before entering another. It rolls into the fluorescent light of the stop until its shadow on the ceiling grows larger, curves and expands forward, and reaches the stop ahead of the

train. Bodies step off. Bodies step on. The conductor's voice sounds as though it is under water, as if the snow has drained into the tunnels and turned the subway into a submarine. This is a southbound Englewood–Jackson Park train, the voice says. Southbound toward the Dan Ryan expressway.

The light inside the train does not cast shadows and does not dim for pockmarked skin or wrinkled trousers or mismatched socks under crossed legs. In the tunnels, the inside light is even less merciful to the preachers who move from car to car. Often Richard has imagined a northbound commute home on the Ravenswood line or even out west on the suburban train, any route that stays above ground. But tonight he knows he will stay in the Back of the Yards. He will wait on the Dan Ryan platforms with the dice throwers and pill pushers and girls who slip phone numbers into the pockets of his overcoat. Richard presses his hand to the glass. If it is cold or hot he doesn't notice.

The subway shoots like a torpedo from Chicago Avenue to Grand, under the skyscrapers and above ground to Roosevelt. Once the train surfaces, on this first night of spring, snow blankets the tarpaper roofs of buildings that huddle close to the tracks. Farther out it covers the tops of letters on signs above the Lucky Dragon restaurant and above Comiskey Park, so that each letter in "White Sox" is covered appropriately. Everything special stays hidden until spring comes, when doors and windows open to draw the sun in. Groundhog Day is one of the stranger American phenomena. The man next to Richard elbows him each time he turns the page and snaps his evening news. "That little shit didn't have a shadow this year. So what's this?" The man slaps the weather report and sweeps an arm into the aisle toward the snow outside.

Richard laughs through his nose and shakes his head. In his best impression of Bobby he says, "No kiddin'."

"Out Like a Lion" is the second-page headline. Lions, lambs, groundhogs. A rodent in his hole decides when winter ends. The lowest of creatures casts shadows or doesn't, dictates the next two months in the future of the most intelligent species on Earth.

Richard comes home to a cold house. Before he turns up the furnace or the lights, he sees it as he did on his first night alone there, after he'd rented it from Joy. It is furnished in dark

woods. Chairs and hutches are networks of cylinders and rectangles. There are few curves or carvings. But they are strong woods, heirloom pieces, the kind that yield surprising worth if you bother to get them appraised. The hutches hold crystal, china with green flourishes, teapots, and trinkets. A shaft of moonlight reveals a pattern in the tablecloth. It paints the white lace blue, the oak and maple black.

In the basement, Richard digs through a box marked *History Books*. He pulls out a frame, peels out a handkerchief from his pocket, uses it to dust the glass. "Iris," he whispers. His daughter, the secret child, stands with her favorite gift at her second birthday party: the dragon puppet his mother made. Once she had opened it, his father slipped his hand in the dragon's back, opened the mouth, and they all sang, "Ollie Ollie Ollie." Before Richard snapped the photo she'd giggled so much he had to ask her to stop and smile for the picture. "Daddy, look!" she said, and held out the gift, continued her laughter. She laughed so hard her eyes folded into her face, her mouth stayed open, and her hair bounced below her newspaper hat. Her mother had left it curly and down so that it seemed to grow sideways out of her head like a mess of golden yarn, like his hair. It made him giggle too, so much that the camera shook. She stood off-kilter in the frame, at once offering the gift to him and sliding away, tumbling over. He packs the photograph back into the box.

He phones the flat above the shop. He waits. Too many rings for such light sleepers. He walks the one block west, two north, and up the stairs. Halfway there, he realizes that he grabbed the Kukla doll on the way out, and he tucks it under his arm. Without a sound he slips the key in and the lock turns too easily. The light is on in the kitchen, a single bulb on a chain. He tiptoes the six steps to the bedroom. The bed is empty. Blankets hang off of it in every direction. The suitcase sits in a corner, forgotten.

A fist pounds on the door. He peers through the hole. McCormick, McCarthy. He gulps, catches his breath. In. Out. Another pound. He turns the knob and pulls.

In the cold air, a white cloud of breath rises from her mouth. "I looked out my window and I saw you run up the stairs and I says, *It's another break-in!*" Her shoulders and chest heave. "But then, *No, it's him*, I says. *The Englishman.*" She huffs,

and another cloud carries the question. "They're all at the hospital, so why are you here?"

"Sorry, just popping by. Are they—?" He points behind himself, to the suitcase. "It's time then, is it?"

"Soon as the water broke, *shhhp*." She sweeps an arm out. "Off they went. Hours ago."

He darts to the cupboard and grabs cash from a hidden coffee can.

She steps inside. "I'll turn out the lights and lock up." She hands him the suitcase and the doll. "No time like the present, Daddy."

He runs down the steps, along Forty-fifth to Racine. He can feel the cold in his fingertips now. It burns.

He pumps his arms, full with doll and suitcase, as he runs south toward Forty-seventh. There will be a cab. There has to be. His lungs burn and he wheezes. The suitcase wobbles and yanks at his wrist, slaps his knee.

He doubles over in front of the church, his church. In a few days, Father Duggan, Mike's uncle, will say all the right things. Michael didn't deserve this. No one does, Father will say, especially not this husband, son, brother, friend, soldier. They will not have much of a wake without a body. They'll just have a flag and a picture surrounded by flowers. But by the end of it all, in Mike's parents' house or in the back of the Rusty Harp, the older men will all sing about meeting the soldier again in sunshine or shadow. They will teach Richard the words.

In case Richard had trouble finding the words to direct the cab driver, he and Gail had mapped out the route to the hospital. She had scribbled phone numbers of cab companies at the top. Hell if he remembers now where they left the map.

He walks into the wind, finds a steady pace, and consults the maps in his mind. Political, topographical, pre-Columbian, ancient Greek and Latin. He hangs each one in front of him on the wall of snow. He counts the lines on the time zone map between Greenwich Mean and Central Standard. This is difficult because he hasn't called home in a while. He tries to recall whether it's daylight saving season yet, and the difference makes him feel even farther away.

It helps a bit to know that in an hour, his father will wake up, slump over his eggs, open the shop, and sell a few papers, as he

says. His mother will send more stationery to Richard and Gail, emblazoned with s. "Write more letters," she will say. It is what she always says. Richard will fill the pages and send them back to London with pictures of the baby. His mother will clip them to the fridge, next to the photos of Iris, and then his mother will bring her hand to her mouth. "Sisters," she will say. It will be a whisper.

At Forty-seventh and Halsted, Richard spots a cab. It's late on a Wednesday and it's snowing. He is lucky. He does not deserve this rescue. The car grows as it cuts through diagonal sheets of snow. The headlights come into focus. Now that Richard is still, he feels the wetness. The snow has drenched the space where his scarf should be, pasted his trousers against his shins, and seeped into his stockings. He feels it at the ankles, but the toes are numb.

The hospital is a bit outside the driver's range, but it's on his way home. His skin is the color of Gail's eyes, the color of rich soil under patches of snow.

His voice is gravel. "This your first kid?" he says.

It is a simple question: yes or no? It tells Richard to just choose one, because this is just small talk with a stranger. His memory calls up the right answer, and then the real answer grabs it on the way out, strangles it. While he coughs he watches snow curl around a traffic light, a telephone pole, but all he can see is the photo in the basement box.

Finally he gets the word out. "Yes. Pardon me, but I'm a bit nervous. Thank you for picking me up. It's kind of you."

"This is America. Got to make a dollar."

The voice on the radio introduces King Oliver's band and the driver turns up the volume. "Canal Street Blues" helps Richard relax. He is ashamed of this calm he feels during Gail's pain. He is ashamed to be late. Research, he will say. I had to conduct historical research at the top of the city.

King Oliver helps Richard steady his breathing. Out the window, vans and trucks and economy cars race by Richard and the driver and King Oliver.

"Say, man, would you call this jazz or blues?" Richard says.

The driver pauses. He corrects the wheel over the metal grates on the bridge. Richard cringes and shrinks down out of his rear view. He wants the driver to reverse and drive over his words,

back and forth a few times, then pull over and help him kick them into the river.

“Well, I always thought it’s jazz,” he says. He shrugs. “But old Oliver went and called it blues, didn’t he? Maybe it’s both, or maybe it’s just the blues.” He tries to catch Richard’s eye in the mirror. “So, you hoping for a son?”

“Any kind’ll do.” Richard swallows, clutches the doll. The blanket is soaked through.

“You think your kid will look like his pop?”

“Hope not, for his sake.”

They laugh.

“Have you got a son?” Richard says.

“Two boys. A girl, too. People say the first boy’s my double. Don’t know if that’s true, but I like hearing it.” He looks straight ahead and smiles.

“Your kids watch television?”

“Sure. All the time.”

The driver drops him off at emergency. Richard is a few dollars short. He tucks what he has into the bundled doll and holds it over the front seat. “My best to your family,” he says.

The driver turns toward Richard’s offering, swivels his shoulders and neck farther than he has to. “Yours too.”

His legs and lungs are heavy, but Richard passes the elevator by. He takes the stairs two at a time. He stops and heaves on the landing between three and four west. It is a considerable effort to breathe deep and stand tall.

When Richard enters the lobby, Gail’s father is leaning against the nurses’ desk. He looks up at Richard. It’s been a hard day and Richard isn’t making it any easier.

“Richard,” he says. It sounds like a question. “You made it. You just missed the calls Bobby put in to your office.”

Richard looks at Bobby, who hovers over a paper coffee cup and then meets his eyes for an instant and shrugs. He is giving Richard time to explain.

Gail’s grandmother is concentrating on a ball of white yarn she holds in both hands. She holds it just loose enough to feed into the blanket Gail’s mother knits. There is very little slack on the line. Gail’s mother, Mrs. Conlan, is forty-five. Raisa is forty-five. Gail has urged him to call her mother Mum, or at least Marian. Marian and Robert. Mum and Dad.

“I had some field research up north,” he says. Mrs. Conlan stops knitting. The grandmother does not look up. “I should have left a number with Gail. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, for everything.” He bows his head, and then it comes: the tears, the shaking across the back of his shoulders, the tightness in the sternum like a cough that lasts all winter. He looks up but does not lift his head. “I’m sorry, Mum.”

Mrs. Conlan stands up, starts—or resumes—crying as she walks toward him. Gail looks the most like her: white skin, black hair, eyes like dark wood, full lips, small frame, all in soft curves. Mostly dominant traits. She hugs him for the first time since his wedding day. In that final squeeze before releasing him, her knitting needles dig into the space between shoulder blade and spine.

Mr. Conlan clears his throat, and his wife pulls away from Richard. “Get in there, son,” he says. “You’re about to be a father.”

Joy is standing in the room. She doesn’t occupy her hands with needles or newsprint. She is letting Gail crush them. “It won’t be much longer,” she says.

Richard does not want to disturb them. He stands in front of the door and back a bit, outside of Joy’s view. In the throes of labor, Gail looks just as calm as she had when they met. She had brought him cookies on the day he moved into Joy’s house.

“My grandmother says I shouldn’t have made these,” she said. “She says English people don’t like the same kinds of cookies we like, but it’s all I know how to make.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” he said. “I’m a misfit.”

She looked around and kept saying what a nice house it must be to live in. “Joy and Mikey will have a nice family here, when he comes back,” she said. “When they move back in, maybe you can rent the apartment above the store.”

A nurse walks to the door and opens it. “Mr. Sims?” she says.

Joy sees him now and nods for him to come in.

Gail doesn’t seem to notice the call of his name, but when she opens her eyes and gasps for air, she sees him. He rushes toward a sloppy embrace. They shake.

“We missed you,” she says.

They let him stay. He stays through Gail’s pushing, thrash-

ing, and sweating. A doctor's voice announces each step forward: a dilation, a head, a shoulder emerging. Birth, and severance, before cries of relief.

A boy. Bald, pink, screaming.

They let Richard stay through the morning. He waits for each time the baby returns, and each time he whispers an apology for wishing this boy, his boy, had been a girl. He searches the face for his mother's pointed nose, his father's cleft chin, and then he inspects the head for a strand of black hair among the white fuzz. My son has blond hair, he will say in his next letter home, and eventually, My son has learned to walk, to speak, to read. He remembers his first mother-in-law had said some babies start out with blue eyes, like his. Like Iris's. My son looks just like my daughter, he thinks. He had never held her like this, in these moments between asleep and awake, not on the day she was born.

He extends the baby out and up. Every muscle in Richard's body relaxes and the baby dips in his hold, but Richard has the back of the child's head in his hand. Tears pour down his cheeks, trickle out, and soak into his sideburns when he smiles. "Ollie Ollie Ollie," he sings.

He begins to laugh, laughs alone next to his sleeping wife. He laughs until all of him shakes. He shakes from the center and his arms rattle like maple limbs. The baby tilts but does not slip or cry. Richard smiles and laughs and shakes until the tears flood over him and onto the baby's blanket. His chest contracts, but he doesn't worry. No refill necessary, no reason to call for herbal or synthetic cures. He has all he needs right here.