

**A House of Gold***Fiction*

The Signal was a gesture my mother invented the summer before she became a landscapist. She had Tafty and me up in the attic because she believed *The Signal* possessed magical properties of protection, but Tafty and I could never get it quite right. She wasn't always going to be around to protect us after all. So, it was very important we do it just so, and that's why we needed to spend all afternoon with our shirts stuck to our backs, waving to each other in front of my great grandmother's dressing table mirror.

Because we needed protection.

Tafty and I still sometimes make *The Signal* upon arrivals and departures, or if we sense some dangerous presence. We gaze deeply into one another's eyes for a moment, and then make them wide with too much white, mimicking our mother's eyes.

We make *The Signal* across reception halls, across pool tables, while sitting in pews, or on airplanes after stowing our carry-on; or if we just need a good laugh to go on at all. We have the same dark humor shared by most survivors. And yes, we did survive, at least enough to continue making *The Signal* into adulthood. And no, most of what we survived will never be written down, or made official, because that's what we have both agreed to.

It was the next summer my mother started calling herself a landscapist. That was the same summer I French kissed my first girl. A landscapist is a painter of landscapes, everyone had to ask my mother about this, which I suspect is the main reason she'd started calling herself one. I'd never seen her paint an actual landscape, or even hold a paintbrush, but then again, as with many things about my mother, it made sense suddenly, all at once, and only after it was too late.

Her name was Holly Ramsay — the first girl I French kissed.

Holly Ramsay lived across the lake and had two older brothers that were also blond, tan, and athletic. All of them water skiers — a whole family of those. I knew that I was supposed to be attracted to girls with purses rather than baseball card collections, those that knew more about rouge than small engine repair, but I was drawn to Holly Ramsay like iron filings to a horseshoe magnet. She was the one that filled my cheeks with hot. She was the one that caused my hands to tremble when unlocking doors before her gaze. She was the one that turned my mind into word-jumbles and gridlock. So, she was the one I



French kissed that summer; actually, we did more than that, but it was just the right amount of more of that.

For being fourteen.

For being on summer vacation.

My skin tingled when I felt her eyes covering the skin my swim trunks did not. She would later tell me she felt the same when she caught me gawking at her breasts. They'd only just begun pushing out from under her secondhand surfing shirts; so soft, so warm, as only sun-bleached second-hand cotton can be. She refused all bras but could sometimes be coaxed into a swimsuit top under her T-shirt, but only to put an end to her mother's nagging, or to stop her brothers' infinite teasing. Her only swimsuit top was far too small, tattered, and smelled like her fishing boat. So, when you think of Huckleberry Finn's shoes, atop those you'll find Holly Ramsay's training bra.

And she had her own fishing boat!

So, yeah, she was perfect.

If you asked my mother if she wanted unleaded, midgrade, or premium gasoline, she might mention the fact that she was a landscapist. *Oh, you don't know? Well, that's a painter of landscapes.* If she ordered a Hawaiian pizza, and had somehow convinced the small pizzeria in High Crest to deliver it out to the lake for a ten-dollar tip; she might look around conspicuously, lean out the front door, and tell the delivery boy she was, in fact, a landscapist.

A total fucking landscapist.

A landscapist all the way.

If the man that did the actual landscaping needed the keys to our woodshed for something, she would help him only after mentioning she was a landscapist. He would pretend to be interested but also busy with the landscaping.

"Oh, yeah, I remember you telling me about that," he would say.

"A landscapist is a painter of landscapes," she would answer nonetheless.

He would nod the knowing nod of a man who doesn't give a shit about all the sounds coming out of this woman's mouth — because he did not — and yes, there is a very specific nod that some men have. You may have spotted this nod before, it looks like windshield wipers set on intermittent.

My father has the best intermittent nod I've ever seen.

He nods intermittently even while sleeping, just in case a woman might be speaking toward him while his eyes are closed. And no one was more pleased than my father when he found out that my mother had become a landscapist in a single stroke. He bought her all the necessary equipment of the landscapist, the best sable-hair



brushes from England, the finest pigments from Paris, an easel from the Netherlands — overnight delivery — all of it. He even had his secretary find a local woman who actually painted landscapes and hired her to come out for the entire month of June.

My mother refused all instruction, of course, dismissing her tutor at the door.

“Oh, there’s been some misunderstanding. I *am* a landscapist.”

The elderly woman looked confused and expectant of something — probably the payment my father had left on the counter. Instead, my mother closed the door while the elderly woman stood peering into our senseless summer through the sidelights.

My mother wasn’t particularly interested in traditional landscape painting — not exactly. What she liked to do instead was order very expensive books from far off places. Books full of landscape paintings by Pieter Bruegel, Rembrandt, and Claude Lorrain. She would stack these books upon her Adirondack table and sit out on the deck in her Adirondack chair; every so often, she would sip her Long Island ice tea, and then look into these books, then out into the landscape, and then back into these books, and then back out into the woods. Whatever it was she had going on inside her mind, that was enough. Enough for her to consider herself a landscapist, and so we didn’t choose to bother her about the specific details.

The actual painting part.

Even my younger brother, Tafty, who had the most inquisitive mind among us, especially over his mother’s activities of the day, gave her a summer pass. Besides, Tafty had his hands full of muck, sticks turned to spears, swallow-tailed butterflies, tree frogs, water tigers, bird’s nests, and salamanders. Had our mother claimed to be a political cartoonist, or a pyrotechnician, or a sexologist studying astronauts, someone might have paid more attention, but a landscapist seemed safe enough, even innocuous at times, until of course it wasn’t.

I had my hands full as well, and Holly Ramsay was more summer-time distraction than I had ever had before. She tasted faintly of bouillon to me, always a little salty around her edges — somehow a little beefy — a mystery until I discovered the amounts of beef jerky this girl was consuming; always a piece of that tucked away somewhere on her person. She was like our nanny Becky Lee was with poetry, only instead of slim books of verse pushed down a back pocket or tucked away in the glove box — it was dry salted beef.

A ration for survival.

Poetry and desiccated beef have this much in common.

Holly would pick me up in her dented fishing boat, its sputtery five-horse motor pushing her across the water toward me, to collect me



from the end of our dock. We would pull our wake off to one of her many hidey-holes: a secret cove somewhere, or an inlet that even she would have difficulty finding again; a secret coarse-gravel beach covered in driftwood and discovery . . . so that we could make out among the ferns after promising each other once again that we were only just practicing — only just friends.

I was a spider web and she a twig.

And practice makes perfect after all.

We would wear ourselves out, having done all we were willing to do in this pretend practice, and then she would fish while I read Ann Rice. Oh, yes, this was my summer of Ann Rice, and I was reading the bejesus out of her; everywhere I went so went Ann Rice. Of course, Becky Lee had introduced the two of us at the perfect moment. Becky Lee, my nanny, my portal to sanity.

Sometimes Holly and I would go to the public beach; if I pestered her long enough, she would take me there. She didn't like the public beach, or the public swimming docks. She wasn't overly fond of the public in general, didn't like town, didn't like crowds, instead keeping herself under the shade of trees, or on the hunt for something off in the brush to be harvested for lunch, or caught from under the lake — a perch, a morel, a trap full of crawdads, a handful of huckleberries. She took such pride in that, as if her cupboards were barren at home, and her mother wasn't always forcing her to sit down, to be still for a moment, to eat something other than lint-covered strips of cured beef.

She was cute.

She was so damn cute.

When she would allow me an entrance into her blue eyes, I would stay for as long as I could. There were times when she seemed to alter the light around herself, to cause its flicker, a sudden brightening — a bending. I know now that I was the cause of this, my pupils suddenly dilated by desire. It was a strange kind of magic. The whole of the summer seemed composed of the stuff so that it covered everything.

When my mother wasn't busy as a landscapist, she was also making new friends. Carl and Courtney. They owned a boat too: a metallic-green speedboat with white faux leather upholstery. White bucket seats. If you get right down to it, that's all you really need to know about these people — to understand that is to know all the rest.

White. Bucket. Seats.

You could hear those white bucket seats coming from down the lake like an afternoon thunderstorm made out of gasoline and sparkle paint. I came to think of Carl and Courtney as the Orange People Eaters, because in addition to the tans they acquired from a life spent



gamboling over sun-glinted waters, they also must have used some kind of skin dye, or a tanning bed, or maybe they just drank too much carrot juice.

I don't know.

And whatever it was they had going on with their skin tone, they accentuated their orangeosity by wearing light-colored clothing that fluttered around behind them as they traveled across the lake. They often sat at the end of our dock with my mother, feet covered by water, drinking Michelob Light from a cooler full of that. (My mother had started providing them with a bottomless supply of Michelob Light.) It was the first time I'd ever seen my mother drink beer, and as June passed away to July, they seemed to be enjoying the end of our dock more and more often.

It never occurred to me that they might also be enjoying my mother's company.

Enjoying my mother's company?

It would take years for me to realize that my mother was going to be the most interesting person I was ever going to know. She was charming, attractive, charismatic, and a caster of spells — not always the good kind. I can still hear the sounds of their echoed laughter across the water. Laughing, unbelievably, at something my mother had said. I can still see the sight of her roaring off with them for the first time, holding onto her sun hat from behind. It seemed someone should say something about all this, but what could be said?

Really?

And who would be the one to say it?

And to whom would it be said?

Here's one thing that can be said: my father was away on business. It's hard to imagine, but that was indeed the case. He wasn't there with us still, yet again. It was sort of like his main thing. His secret super power.

His calling, or whatever, if you will.

He would spend hours not in the backyard, or not out in the garage, working so hard on not being there until he got his absence just right. He was a perfectionist in this way. He would spend weeks not eating breakfast with us — never mind all the dinners we didn't eat together — many years would be spent in the pursuit of this near-perfect nonattendance, the days, the weeks, the months, the years . . . they would simply disappear that way forever, never having existed in the first place. However, by a new turn, Tafty was also absent. He was in Aspen with our grandparents, and his being gone was felt throughout me. It made my hands go cold, being at the lake with just the Orange People Eaters and my mother, and with only myself to attend to. I



was establishing what would become a life-long pattern of not looking after myself very well — not at all.

So, it was August when the Orange People Eaters decided that my mother should be taken to a rendezvous, and in August, too, that she decided she should go. It seems that in August these things are most often the case; people are never quite themselves in August. I'd assumed I'd be left alone, was proud of the fact that I could be trusted on my own for part of a day, a full night, and part of the next day, all at the age of fourteen and without our nanny, Becky Lee, being called away from her own summer vacation to watch over me. I don't know why I'd assumed this, or what had even given me that idea. Only that it must have arrived late one night like gossamer floating on a moonbeam and settled over my brain before slowly turning itself into a belief.

I called Holly over immediately, of course, so that we could make out on a couch instead of a bed of sticks and rocks located far too near an anthill. I had her shirt all the way off for the first time ever, and I desperately wanted to kiss one of her small breasts, but I was too scared to follow my desire. I wanted to grind myself into her sharp narrow hips until I'd turned my own pelvis into powder, but I didn't do that either, because that was when Becky Lee opened the front door and walked into the living room.

We jumped.

Holly's body vaulted off mine and seemed to hover. I believe she shouted, "Holy shit!" mid-hover, so as not to draw too much attention to herself. Becky Lee always wore ridiculous sunglasses, even by mid-1980s standards, which she casually clipped off so she might better see into the dim goings-on of this draped afternoon living room.

"Oh, guess I should've knocked first," she said.

She always seemed to be carrying far too many bags at once, always and everywhere.

She strolled across the living room setting those down as she went.

"OK," she said with her back to us. "Damn, it's hot out there. Your mother wanted me to come stay the weekend. I'm guessing she neglected to mention this?"

"Yes," I said.

Becky Lee opened a cupboard and went up on her tiptoes to peek inside. She then opened the refrigerator to confirm what she already knew. "I'll go get some groceries." She wiped her brow with the inside of her elbow. "Yup." The refrigerator door closed itself after she turned back to us. "So, I'll be back in about an hour — hour and a half." She tucked the temple of her sunglasses down her shirt collar.

She raised her chin, "Who's your friend?"



“Holly Ramsay.”

“Well, hello there Holly Ramsay,” her eyebrows popped. “I’m Becky Lee.”

“Hi.” Holly said, still panting, possibly hyperventilating, and still ready to jump out the closest opening if that became necessary.

“Well then . . . I shall return.”

She walked to the front door before looking back over her shoulder, “Do you need anything while I’m out?”

“No, thank you.”

“Pizza and shrimp cocktails tonight. Would you like to stay for dinner Holly Ramsay?”

I’m sure that she did, but Holly shook her head — no — no — no — she would like to disappear from here immediately. Becky Lee closed the front door to leave us alone in our hot panic. I believe it was then I reentered my body and felt my pulse thrumming my veins, my face burning bright — joining my T-shirt in its dampness.

“Oh, fucking-fuck,” Holly said.

I couldn’t say anything next.

“Will she tell?”

I shook my head. “She keeps secrets . . . everybody’s.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yeah. My mother says she could work for the CIA.”

Later that evening, after eating mushroom and olive pizza, we made our shrimp cocktails before watching videos, which was a thing we always did, every summer, since I started remembering those.

We watched *Heathers* and then *Young Guns*.

Becky Lee said, “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

I shrugged over the open pit mine of my stomach and said, “I guess . . . a little.”

“She’s cute,” Becky Lee said.

“Yeah.” I looked down to hide my smile.

“Would you like to know a little secret?”

I nodded.

“I dated girls for a while; well, a girl.”

“Really?”

“I’d gotten tired of having my heart broken by the boys.”

“What happened?”

“She broke my heart.” She picked up a cold slice of pizza, took a bite, tossed it back into the box then pulled her legs up into herself. “God, I have the worst taste in men,” she said still chewing. “As it turns out, I have the same taste in women.” She shrugged, “I suppose I just can’t help myself — you know?”

I did not.



And that was all she ever said about it.

The next morning she advised me to start locking the front door.

Two days later Becky Lee went back to her own summer vacation.

Mind you, I couldn't actually play the recorder. My plan was to fake play the recorder — to blend myself into the cacophony of my fifth grade recorder recital. All of my planning, then as now, involves some form of vanishing from view. So, that's what I had going on, I was pretending to pipe along to "Home on the Range." And then I saw this woman and I thought: *What a god-awful dress. That's the worst pink of all possible pinks. I mean, there should really be laws passed against such pinks. The exact same color as skin when it's turned cold.*

And then I thought, *Oh no, that woman doesn't have on a dress at all — that's a naked woman.* And then I thought, *Holy crap, that's a massive wild tangle between that naked woman's legs.* And then I thought — *Oh-my-god-that's-my-mother. My mother is naked. My mother is streaking my fifth grade recorder recital in front of everyone I know.* And it was my mother, naked, streaking my fifth grade recorder recital in front of everyone I knew.

Of course, "Home on the Range" slowly fell to pieces; there were no other choices for "Home on the Range" that day. It became volcanic ash fluttering to the polished gymnasium floor. I wished then I'd practiced my recorder. I wished that I'd practiced at the crossroads, playing well past midnight. I would have sold my soul to the devil to acquire the ability to send my soul soaring down that cheap plastic tube. I would have burned that gymnasium down like Charlie Parker; cut the place to pieces just like John Coltrane. Then no one would have noticed the sprawling black savanna between my mother's slender thighs, or her bouncing breasts, or her manic ranting; maybe they'd even forget about her lack of dress entirely.

I'd play the cloth back across her skin in this way.

However, I hated everything about the recorder and I still do.

In fact, just a few notes from a recorder will give me the dread-flickers to this day.

When manic, my mother possessed a sort of off-putting panache. A gravitas. She had class. She wasn't wild crazy or foaming at the mouth crazy. She was far too sophisticated for good old-fashioned crazy, or everyday crazy, or any kind of ordinary madness. She strolled the gymnasium, now that she held its full attention, completely believing herself the bellwether of the ball.

She said, "The battles have all been lost! By you people. The spokes. Until you open yourselves to the hub, you shall remain spokes to the wheel. People, people, people. Have you ever stopped to feel your own flesh in this world, to coin a phrase, to dance the reel, to blink into

the sun before picking the ripest fruit? Do something real . . . for real! But you don't. You don't dare. On script, conscripted, line by line, by line, by line."

She started jumping up and down, like jumping jacks, but without the arms.

She stopped doing them for the same reason that she had started doing them.

"You don't have to guess about tomorrow, not ever, the same, the same, the same, standing in line to see the sea."

She shook her head, disappointed, so disappointed, her hands upon her hips. We didn't see it her way, we couldn't, but she wasn't giving up on us just yet. She would break through to her masses.

"A procession of peasants, preprogrammed, prepackaged, prefabricated, pedestrian!"

And then with the grace of a Rose Queen on parade, she dismissed the room with *The Signal*.

Here's the thing: I can still recall the dress she was supposed to have been wearing, right down to the pattern: purple triangles, golden confetti, and red crescents — one-hundred-percent high 1980s. A designer dress. However, here is what I could not recall, or rather, had completely forgotten. My father. He had also been there. He'd flown in to surprise me. He'd arrived a little late and left a lot early. So early, in fact, that he'd slipped my memory until my therapist asked his whereabouts.

"Interesting, isn't it?" he said, leaning forward, his chair creaking, which is what he does when he's found something interesting, and also what his chair does. "How well you remember your mother's episode, word for word, down to the pattern of her dress, but not your father's abandonment during a crisis."

I don't know if it's very interesting, or just what was most often the case. My mother's manic ranting becoming as common as my father's absenteeism. Becky Lee swooped in to save us all. This was also most often the case. Becky Lee covered our mother with her houndstooth coat while everyone else covered my mother with stares. Becky Lee whispering the serenity prayer, or some other magic poem into my mother's mind as she guided her away while everyone else whispered only after she'd passed. Becky Lee, leading my mother out to the car by the shoulders. Becky Lee, returning to pretend nothing had taken place, not really, nothing of importance at least. Becky Lee willing to take the eyes of anyone willing to take her eyes, her chin up and her shoulders back, come to gather Taft in her arms and to wave me down from the silent stage my feet had become bound to.

She was always carrying us off to safety in this way.

No one, not trained specialists, or even alligator wrestlers, could



handle my mother's mind with such expertise and grace as our poet-nanny Becky Lee. Becky Lee, throw-casting a net over my mother's mind, yarding out all her blue sharks, sea urchins, and serpents, especially the serpents, plenty of those, and dumping her catch upon the decks, filling the hold, throw-casting again, until her net came back empty, and my mother's mind had been cleared, and we could all go on in safety for a time.

Becky Lee always wore this retro houndstooth coat when she wasn't covering my mother with it. Secondhand Sally was my mother's name for Becky Lee when she wasn't around to be called by it, but Becky Lee didn't give a damn what other people thought about her coat. Her style was her own, and so she wore it well. Many of my friends had young nannies who dressed smartly, especially for things like grade-school recitals, but they all looked the same, and then again, some of my friends had au pairs turned suddenly into stepmothers, as if by some mysterious au pair pussy magic.

Becky Lee was Becky Lee and she knew it.

She wore men's reading glasses and green nail polish. She read poetry just as clandestinely as she smoked cigarettes out behind the carport, chewing spearmint gum to cover her tracks. There was always some poetry concealed away on her person, a thin volume of verse, a grocery receipt with a few of her own words scribbled on it, but she went nowhere without poetry. She carried concealed poetry wherever she went, and she did so without license.

She would say, "Other people's opinions of me aren't for me."

She would say it all the time.

She would mean it every time.

Do you know what an accomplishment that is?

To be unconcerned about other people's opinions?

What real and true magic there is in that?

I had no idea, but I spent a great deal of time observing it in action and wondering.

Wondering about the magic of Becky Lee.

After my mother's triumphant return from a weekend away with the Orange People Eaters, some headlights swept across my bedroom curtains. I awoke. I went back to sleep. It happened again, later that same night, well after midnight, and then came a knocking at our door, and then a pounding at our door, and then a yelling through our door. I couldn't make out all the words, but "bitch" was being used at a high frequency and decibel. I cracked the bedroom curtains just enough to fit my eye through the black glass to find a car's headlights.

I had trouble drawing air into my lungs.

I thought of all the places I might hide.



It was Courtney Orange.

I could tell by her skin, even in the darkness, even by the blue moon light, she was just that orange. She also seemed maybe drunk. My mother crept into my room and whispered, "It's OK, baby. She'll go away. Just go back to bed."

She also seemed maybe drunk — it was hard to tell with her sometimes too.

She closed my door and went back to doing whatever it was she was doing before the pounding had started. I tried to do the same, but sleep didn't come until the curtains warmed with dawn's light and I'd finished *Queen of the Damned*. I lay still and wished Becky Lee could have stayed another week, and that Tafty hadn't been flown so far away from here, but then again, I was glad he wasn't here at all. A pounding in the darkness was just the sort of thing that would send him quadruple checking every lock on every door every fifteen minutes, so as to give himself a break from re-alphabetizing our video cassettes, or checking to be sure no one had disturbed the order of the cereal boxes in the pantry, also alphabetized and re-alphabetized. When that night had finished with all its darkness, the Orange People Eaters stopped appearing at the end of our dock in their white bucket seats.

After Becky Lee caught us on the couch making out, Holly began distancing herself from me. She stopped riding over on her much too large BMX, or motoring across the inlet in her fishing boat. She didn't return the calls I hated making to her house because one of her brothers always answered the phone. I would have preferred our correspondences taken place by letter, in epistolary style, and delivered by the Pony Express, or possibly a messenger pigeon. I finally decided that if she wouldn't come to me then I must go to her.

I lay in wait by one of her favorite spots, reading *The Mummy*, or *Ramses the Damned*, and slapping away insects that didn't seem bothered by the repellent. It took much longer than I thought, but she did eventually turn up with a fishing pole and a crawdad trap just as I knew she would. I popped out from behind some brush and launched myself onto the cut bank.

Ta-da!

And after that had happened, I realized my plan hadn't extended itself into a future beyond ta-da, and so I was now completely unplanned.

Holly looked away from me and then back with a small grin.

She beached the boat, jumped over the gunwale, and draped the bowline over some sun-bleached driftwood hung up in the mud.

"Hey," she said.

"Is that tobacco?" I asked.

She spit and nodded, "Just a pouch."



“Is it gross — can I try one?”

“I don’t have any more. I can get you one, if you want.”

“That’s OK.”

“Whatcha doing?”

I folded my arms, looked to the ground, and then back into her blue eyes, “Why won’t you hang out?”

She looked to the maidenhair fern at her feet, then off into the pines, anywhere but me, before expertly shooting some brown spittle to the ground, some of that staining the corner of her small mouth.

I swatted something away, something fluttery and long-legged.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“No.”

“How come you’re avoiding me?”

She took a big breath and finally looked me in the eyes. “It’s . . . listen . . . I don’t know if I should tell you this or not . . . is all. I wanted to think about it, but I couldn’t decide, and then I just kept putting it off.”

“What?” I knew then I was being dumped for the first time.

She looped both her thumbs through her blue jeans and then loosed them. “I don’t know if you are going to want to know this, I mean, I know I would —”

“Just tell me. I’d rather know,” I said, lying to us both.

The first girl to break my heart. The first of anyone to do that. I wasn’t standing anymore but somehow hovering above my legs. I thought I was doing a good job of not crying, but the tears were right there, building, waiting to be called down — *cry later, cry later, cry later*.

Holly pushed some hair from her eyes, “I saw those two speedboat idiots . . . your mom’s friends?”

I nodded, confused, “Yeah?” How do the Orange People Eaters factor into our breakup? How had they become a part of my first broken heart?

“They were with your mom,” Holly closed one eye. “On that one beach I showed you with all the agates, and she, well, she was having sex with them . . . with the both of them.”

“At the same time?” I had yet to imagine the possibility of such possibilities.

I must have closed my eyes because I don’t remember seeing Holly after that.

I sat heavily on the bank. It wasn’t a total collapse at first.

This woman . . .

Who was this fucking mad woman that was supposed to be a mother?

My mother.

And why?

What had I done to deserve her?



“Shit. I’m sorry,” Holly said. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

I couldn’t say anything for the longest time because it seemed like my mind had forgotten how to use that part of my mind. “No. It’s cool. I should have known. Fuck. I just wish she would stay indoors.”

“I should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

I shook my head. “Is that all? Is that it?”

“That’s not enough?”

“But that’s why you won’t come over? It wasn’t about us getting caught?”

She shook her head.

I smiled, so happy not to be broken hearted. “Good.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I told you she was crazy.”

“That’s the truth right there.”

I spent the rest of the day and most of the evening with Holly holding me from behind, loose around the shoulders. The longest hug I had ever received. She listened to me as I tried to explain to her once again, to help her understand, this time fully, what I meant by saying: “My mother is crazy.”

After that, she understood.

She totally got it.

Other things of note that happened that summer: our mailbox was shot through with many small holes, the result of birdshot I was told by the landscaper, who’d been tasked with its replacement; the result of a hunting accident is what I was told by my mother, who’d done the tasking. Also, my mother’s new Saab was keyed one evening while parked in High Crest. Then someone scattered a bunch of landscaping rocks all over our lawn, as if a stone hen had laid a thousand eggs in our front yard. Our landscaper was tasked once again. My mother watched the Easter egg hunt from the deck. Her arms folded across her chest. She made no sound. Had she made a sound, it would have been a far off drum beat building — bom-bom-bom-bom — a single guitar string bent backward in an eerie way from the depths of her jungle.

My mother started staying up later and later into the night, unable to sleep, the television always turned to the news, sipping a drink in the morning, the afternoon, and into the evening but never really getting drunk, just always drinking.

A soother.

That’s what she always called them.

*Have you seen my soother?*

*Has anyone seen my soother?*

I knew what I was looking at because I knew what it looked like; what signs to look for, even before I’d known they were signs to heed,



or their meaning; I understood the cyphers of a coming collapse. Also, my father's return date had been written on the calendar in my mother's perfect cursive, and things always got worse before his arrival.

I tried to stay away from her.

I spent nights at Holly's, just hoping my mother would hold it together until his coming, not miscalculate, or misjudge by a day or two and have it happen too soon, or too late, and so save the best of the worst for him. If she were building her defense for the insanity plea in divorce court, to cover up her infidelity, she would have an airtight case by Saturday afternoon. Just in case my father became overly curious about hunting accidents involving our mailbox, or words like *CUNT* scraped through the new red paint of her Saab, or if he got to thinking about some odd thing the landscaper had said in passing, and accidentally wandered off into some thoughts beyond work.

My father picked Tafty up from the airport on his way to our summer vacation home on the lake. I'd often wondered what his first thoughts must have been. I've never asked. We aren't familiar in that way, but I should, right now even, pick up the phone and call: "So, do you remember that one time you and Tafty came to the lake house from the airport? What did you think when you first rounded the corner? What impression did that make?"

But I won't pick up the phone, that's just not who I am, and not who he is, but the way we have always been together, which is apart . . . far apart. I can imagine his answer and that's enough: "That was all so long ago. Why do you ask?" Most my questions are answered in this manner, with another question: *Why do you ask?*

Tafty said that he was asleep when they arrived, so he has no memory of his first impression, but I remember mine well enough. Holly and I were eating Cheerios at her kitchen table across the inlet and watching *Open House*, when one of her brothers said from the bay window, "Someone painted a bunch of shit yellow at your house."

We went to the window that over looked the water.

Someone had indeed painted a bunch of shit yellow at my house.

I thought for sure it was another attack by the Orange People Eaters.

I had Holly run me across the inlet. I leaned over the bow, felt the water that slapped against the hull as we went, warmer than the morning air we cut through but still chilly.

No breeze that morning.

Smooth waters.

A stillness that held its own breath.

But I was wrong; it hadn't been an attack by the Orange People Eaters.

"My god," Holly said. "Should I stay?"

"No . . . I might be back over soon. I'll ride if I have to."



“OK . . . call if you want me to come get you. I’ll answer.”

“OK.”

“No,” she said, puffing up. “I’m staying.”

“Just for a minute. If I don’t come back out in a minute you can go.”

She said nothing, made no motion, but she looked ready and able to do just about anything; chin up, shoulders back — sitting tall. She had that physical kind of bravery I admired. She didn’t seem to mind getting hurt if getting hurt was necessary. She seemed able and willing to fight, for me, and my heart filled with her in a way I’d never felt before.

When I didn’t come back to her in a minute, she pushed off from our dock and idled away; blue exhaust swirling above the water. I was glad to see her go, not wanting her to witness what I found after locating my safety-yellow mother. It was clear that she had smoked many cigarettes while sitting in her favorite chair and taking in her masterpiece. She’d done all the trees as high as the pruning ladder would reach, at some point she’d switched colors, still yellow, but more of a goldenrod, for the highlights I suspect. She’d been meticulous, of course, obsessive, her coverage thorough if not even, from top to bottom, even on the undersides of leaves and needles, a paper wasps nest, the roses, the lawn furniture, the lawn, the Saab, all painted safety yellow, even our bikes, safety yellow, all of it, everything now held lovingly in a safety-yellow embrace.

And so, she’d painted her landscape.

I had thought the paint sprayer one of her odder impulse purchases. I’d even helped her lug it from the Saab’s trunk to the woodshed, but after a certain point, you only ask certain questions, and those are the questions you’re certain you want answered.

If you were going by the amount of safety yellow that had been laid down in this place, in our forest and landscaping alone, then you would have to conclude that this was the safest place in all of northern Idaho, maybe in the entire United States of America, but for sure in northern Idaho. She had even safety-yellowed herself. None of that had been intentional but rather the result of intentions. A focused precision without care for anything but focused precision. It was, however, difficult to imagine she’d become any safer as a result. She took a drink of something clear, which was also a sign, a bad sign, a sign to be watched for.

She looked me over thoughtfully — before bobbing her chin, “Did you see?”

I nodded that I had.

Indeed.

She looked every part the woman who’d just completed her masterwork.

Spent.



“You didn’t think I was a landscapist . . . did you?” A yellow smugness cocked across her brow.

I shook my head, *no, no, I had not thought that — not once.*

She smirked.

Her eyes narrowed — *and just look how wrong you were about that my dear.*

I turned around slow then . . . took it all in.

I went into our lake house and called Becky Lee.

She was an hour and a half away but on her way.

Becky Lee arrived. Her white Escort smoking from an oil leak. She parked, jogged toward me, took me from the yellowed asters by the elbow and led me away, pulled me into herself, put my ear to her chest, so that I could hear her heart beating there, her arms heavy around me, keeping me in tight while holding me up.

Her smell: always cigarettes covered over by spearmint.

It was her only smell because she wore no perfume other than that. And there were many other things about Becky Lee. And here are those things: she was a poet. A real one of those. I guess it’s just the one thing really, but I can tell you this: it made all the difference.

It truly did.

It mattered that much.

There are many positions in this world that only a poet could possibly hold.

Being my nanny was one of those positions.

I believe she saved my mind.

And so, my life.

Tafty and I returned to the lake house only one time after its being painted yellow. We were with my father, because he was now semi-home until his life could be reassembled around his work. He wanted to pick up a few things before the place was sold “as is” with everything left inside as it was, a diorama of how our lives had been lived on that day.

The day our lake house had been painted yellow.

What we found under all that yellow paint was that everything had withered and died away beneath it. We found paint peeling off leaves. We found the lawn flat and brittle, crackling like breakfast cereal when we walked softly across it. We found a place made only out of its own surface, the shell of a place, the life beneath it having all gone elsewhere — moved on to some other place. We found a landscape by a landscapist. And after collecting a few things that no one needed, all of those in service to memories that no one wanted kept, we simply drove away forever. And as our vacation home upon the lake receded



from the rear window, my brother turned to me, and I to him, and without expression, we made *The Signal*, which was quickly becoming the only sort of goodbye we knew how to make.

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GABE HERRON lives outside a small town near Portland, Oregon. His stories have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He has worked at Powell's Books for sixteen years.

