

Above the Rooftop

It was unusual to find her on the balcony the day she left, so early in the morning, still slumped into the baggy blue pajamas which always puddled at her feet. Her head was tilted toward a slab of spring sky between buildings, her arms clasped to her chest. It was strange to find her awake that early and outside; it was even more strange to find her still.

Elisabeth is nearly always spinning; invisible gears, their teeth enmeshed, quietly engaging other gears, or receding to a simple rotating stem, a separate axis buried deep. There are times you can see it in her hands, if you know how to look, hands haphazard upon the table except for a fine movement in the fingertips which might be mistaken for a tremor or the absent fondling of a piano.

Sometimes, I place my hand upon her shoulder and leave it there. She likes that, she says. She feels gently pressed to earth, she says, quietly seated into place. There is the moment I embrace her from behind, in a grocery store or a parking lot, arresting her forward motion for an instant, clasping my hands along her

stomach and easing her back toward me until my breath settles at her neck; or the moment when I take her hand, pulling her gently to a stop, to point out a singing child or a man having a conversation with himself, or a tangerine sky. There is the rooftop, my fingers spiraling the notches of her spine on the rooftop. These are moments when her spinning stops.

I slid the balcony door open and stepped out, barefoot, beside her. The morning air was cool and damp, dew dripping from the balcony rail. She didn't move, her eyes trained to the sky above and a single hawk, circling high, one block away, banking in a helix, climbing gracefully then allowing himself to fall before rolling into another turn. "I've been standing here I don't know how long," she whispered as if her voice might terrify the creature, "I love to watch him glide. I love to think of the moment he'll touch ground, only for an instant."

That's the other time Elisabeth can be still; when the world spins around her.

And today, she is the focal point of the room, her and the other guy, I think she said his name is Ron. I stand away from the activity, at the edge of the set, staking out a spot with a clear sightline, as technicians orbit the bed at the far wall where she and Ron are chatting, he bare-chested, she wrapped in a sheet. Their conversation grows more animated; her hands fanning before her, he leaning in, eyes glittering but straying from her now and then to scan the room through the glare of the lights.

Now, the clocks around her move more slowly. She settles into one spot, she comes to rest and, where she could never have repeated her lines before, now she knows them effortlessly and it's not even a matter of knowing but of entering the place where only these words would be said, in only this way, by the character

she is portraying. I've helped her with her scripts for three years, delivering the opposing lines monotonously as she worked to commit the sentences to memory and I was never convinced she would remember a word when the time came. Sitting in the back rows of theatres during rehearsals as she struggled through each reading, I found a certain kind of faith for, as soon as the theatre was filled or the set was lit, she would simply change shape and become her character. When the room circles her, then she can be still.

I watched her settle into a different skin, on stage or on set, and she attended my readings; always flinging herself into the back row where she could observe the room, always engaged with others in the socializing after, always slipping me a subtle observation on punctuation or tone of voice, delivered close to my ear, her hand upon my forearm at the edge of the crowd.

"That was my wink, you used my wink," she states, one eyebrow raised, after the reading of a new piece.

I nod. "I gave it away."

She never asked what I was working on, waiting simply for the manuscript to arrive neatly clipped upon her worktable by the window and, two or three days later, a slow release of phrases, "I particularly liked...", "I wonder about...", punctuated by the occasional question or the moment she would slide onto the sofa beside me and not utter a word.

There is a terrific crash to the left of the set, the splatter of glass and a vast wave of curses that Elisabeth doesn't seem to notice. The director has wandered over and she has engaged him in conversation, repositioning herself before him, knees to her chest to secure the sheet, while she explains an idea for the scene with precise movements of her fingers. I can't hear what she's saying but Ron's gaze has shifted to another time zone while

the director squats before the bed, his hand absently smoothing the sheet to her right. He nods and she smiles and he turns toward the sound of the disaster and she turns toward Ron who doggedly drags himself into the present.

It is our third or fourth date, our sixth or seventh date, it is an early date when we are still discovering syntax and idiom and she is at my place, a three room apartment in an older building on the north side of town with creaking radiators in the winter and creaking stairs in the summer and I have made spaghetti or lasagna or salad with roasted chicken and I am leaning back in my cheap dinette chair when she exclaims, wineglass scrawling a glittering arc in the air between us:

“Dessert on the roof!”

She makes the announcement, and it is an announcement, as if she has discovered a vital force of nature or a new element.

“I...” I stutter, “I don’t know if there is a roof. Well, I mean, of course there’s a roof but...” and I allow the sentence to slide to a rest exactly there and we drag everything with us, blanket and bottle and pillow and candle through the hallway and up the stairs to the sixth floor and a square frame on the ceiling which reluctantly disgorges a ladder. We drag it all as if there is no question we will make a place for ourselves on the roof, she trailing an old quilt I had inherited from my aunt and clutching the wine bottle, me balancing the rest in my arms, juggling it all side to side as I reach up for the rope to pull down the ladder, and we balance up the ladder, one rung at a time, steadying ourselves with our shoulders and knees, passing through a kind of interstitial realm of musty bare pine and dusty insulation, stepping along loose boards thrown over beams then pushing at a final door into a rush of cool air and a darkness peppered with stars.

And we eat Oreos with Merlot and we make love for the first time and we fall onto our backs afterward, onto the quilt, onto the still-warm tar of the roof and stare upward, neither of us speaking for a long time. And she will go home early that morning with a quiet goodbye and a single light kiss in the street level door of the building but before she goes we will float upon our dark raft beneath the stars.

And I draw circles upon her bare back. On the rooftop. She lying naked beside me, her dark hair shrouding my knee, her face turned away. She tells me stories. Of who she was or wants to be. And I brush her hair aside, away from her shoulders and neck. Slowly drawing circles with my finger, then spirals, then circles again.

Later, her toothbrush appears at my apartment, then a coat, then underwear and, finally, socks. I leave notebooks on her kitchen table and magazines with articles I mean to read. Our possessions circulate through the bloodstream of our lives settling in one location then another, passing back and forth.

And we choose ways to make this new world real. We take photos of each other and ourselves, stopping strangers in the street, handing them cameras and posing in doorways or beside street signs; we tell stories about our pasts and introduce our friends but not before telling them the story of the other, spinning new scenes from random details, arranging our snapshots into a narrative. We come round to the rooftop and the moment we touched, the rooftop and the moment we spoke, the rooftop and the moment we knew, circling around the rooftop as a mythical site which was inviolable, or the beginning of the new calendar.

She had met me at the airport the night before. I found her collapsed along a hard plastic bench at the base of

the escalator, lying on her side, eyelids fluttering with the arrival of each flight until her eyes track to me somewhere in the middle of a crowd and a smile breaks through her exhaustion and she rights herself upon the bench and gently pats the empty space beside her. She's wearing her faded fatigue pants and her fuzzy pink sweater, her hair limp along the sides of her head and curling behind her ears, her mouth loose around her tongue.

I thread my arm over her shoulder and she slumps into me, "I'm sorry baby but we were on set all night, we didn't break until nine this morning and God I'm glad to see you but I'm too tired to be glad, would you carry me somewhere and put me to bed and be there when I wake up?"

"I'll even make you breakfast when you wake up. That is, if you have any food."

"Nope. No food, just bottled water and rice crackers."

In the rental car, she falls against me with the impact of a whisper, extending a finger to switch on the GPS and code the address which is, temporarily, home. I take my time with the alien roads and she talks, wanting to tell me all kinds of things but rarely managing more than a single coherent sentence.

"I haven't had time to see much of the city and the shoot goes on so long but I was hoping we could maybe go up to the...," she sighs, her hand falling to her lap; then, after a moment, "...and I think he knows what he's doing but it's hard to tell and sometimes you just have to trust something...," she appears to be studying the odometer, "...he thinks smiling is the same thing as acting...," and, nestling into my chest finally, "you smell good, you smell like you," and then she is asleep, open mouthed, quietly snoring.

I find the apartment they've rented for her, but I'm

not ready to go in yet and she's asleep so I continue to drive, in ever-expanding blocks around the building so I don't get lost; her warmth on my chest, the rhythm of her breathing, an orb of drool widening on my shirt by her mouth. The streetlights and bars and restaurants and square jowled apartment buildings slide by; at some point it begins to rain lightly and the colors smear at the windows and I realize my eyes won't focus and I turn the car back toward her apartment, hissing to a stop before the cobblestone walk.

This morning she's up, bleary eyed, stumbling around the apartment, sniffing and clearing her throat and scuffing her feet on the floor when I open my eyes from a blurry waterfront dream. She shuffles into the bathroom and closes the door and I don't see her for an hour. We drive to the set; I blink at the unfamiliar city and blatant sunlight, she is comatose beside me until we reach the house where she's filming and she disappears into a trailer. I get coffee and a donut from Craft Services and stand around listening to two gaffers argue the merits of an Argentinean film I've never seen. When Elisabeth enters the set, cinched tightly into a plush bathrobe, she is radiant.

"You're someone different when you read," she told me once, "your voice changes, you stand differently. You're you, you're just a different you." We had made love in the back seat of the car in the parking lot of the auditorium, after punch and cake and questions from the audience, and the windows were fogged and our clothes were twisted and damp and I was staring at a half-empty water bottle peeking from beneath the passenger seat. "I like sitting in the back and listening to you read and knowing that you wrote it in our apartment, in the next room. Knowing the parts about us. The parts that aren't."

It's the moment she turns over; that's when I fall in love with her. After the frenzy of climbing to the roof and falling into each other's arms, after the stories while I trace circles upon her skin; it's the moment she turns over that I see her for the first time and I fall in love with a single hard gasp and I drop my head to her stomach and angle my body across the roof and close my eyes, my head rising and falling on the crest of her breath.

I keep that moment to myself. And the glitter in her eye, visible along the back row as hot as a star, as I read her favorite passage; and her smell at two in the morning when she is submerged in dream, something sweet and salty with a hint of cinnamon. These are the memories I hold in the weeks when she is working and worlds away or when I am working and become another person or when we are separated by travel.

I nurture them for those times when we will stare at each other across the breakfast table and not know ourselves. For the moment just before she left last week, before the silent drive to the airport, her bags huddled by the front door, dinner dishes still on the table. It was late, a little more than an hour before her flight, when our passions and our arguments and our disappointments and our ecstasies tumbled together in a mammoth noisy rush to collide in the living room, tossing off sparks and heat and hard edges. We always fight before she leaves, that way it's easier to get on the plane, easier to reunite at the airport. So, when we should have been making our way to the car, instead I was stalking from room to room while she shouted about something that happened last week or last year.

Now, she is falling into herself; I recognize it from across the room. She is plummeting toward a calm at her center, she is loosening the shallow detail of the

world to become another person. Ron, I think that's his name, sips bottled water and makes small talk with a set dresser, but Elisabeth has nearly disappeared, growing smaller, lighter, until she narrows to a simple instant of stillness. And I stand at the edge of her pool.

There is a sudden flurry of activity and everyone is in motion, hands fluttering with pages or cables or empty bottles. A group forms before me, shoulder to shoulder facing the bed and, just as suddenly, a quiet descends, all noise burning off the set like morning dew until the stillness of the room matches Elisabeth's low tone and everyone is hushed and breathless.

She wriggles a shoulder from her sweater and my hand sweeps her shoulder blade, the grit of the cookie mingling with the tang of the wine as I try to swallow. We drank Merlot then, from the bottle as we couldn't accomplish glasses, and she pulled Oreos she'd collected in the kitchen from the pockets of her sweater. Later, she turned onto her back and I lay down. I told my stories then and something changed in the telling.

I told my stories then, her fingers feathering my hair slowly as if naming each strand; so, the rooftop appears now with each flash of her bare shoulder in the bathroom mirror, or the flare in her eyes at a joke, or her fingers drawing a receipt or a key from the pocket of her coat. I imagine a bird lowering from the edge of a convection wave toward the dark platform of the rooftop where two people lie naked on an old quilt, their pale bodies floating in the dark like a secret constellation.

From the sudden silence of the room, Elisabeth begins to speak, her voice gentle and low, a whisper of intimate distance. She doesn't glance back to Ron, her eyes focusing on the memory opening before her. She tells him a story about herself at twelve, the death of her father and the tears of her mother, downstairs at night,

soft tears she could hear upstairs in her bedroom. She tells him of the small cards and presents she left for her mother, on the kitchen table or on her dresser or under her pillow; small things she made for her every day for a year, until the anniversary of her father's death when they walked to the stone together and cried together, holding each other in the spring grass. And she cries as she speaks, soft tears slipping down her cheeks and dropping to the sheet beneath her. She tells him the story as if it were metered from a dark edge of her soul, as if it were actually happening, and she doesn't miss a word.

The people before me are motionless, as if cast in wax. Ron kneels on the bed beside her. The boom operator inches toward the bed, his feet slipping noiselessly along the floor, his arms held high. The camera glides in slowly from the left on an extended arm with the grace of an insect probing a new bloom.

I recognize her intimacy; the slow elaboration of each sentence as a sensual transaction. The world has narrowed to the pool of the bed and his body beside her; her voice gently deflects everything else. Her words form a surrender and she discovers her faith. Ron doesn't speak; his fingers along her spine forming an answer to the question she hasn't yet thought to ask.

Now, she is enacting our life, motionless upon the bed at the center of the set, her flesh warm beneath Ron's hand, tracing lazy circles down her spine. Her sentences begin to take on the rhythm of those circles upon her skin. His finger spirals gently between her vertebrae and when he reaches the last, she turns over naked before him and he peers down into her eyes as if seeing her for the first time.

Ron's hands hang above her open body. He is motionless. She is silent now, waiting for him to speak. Her breath is shallow and quick and a blush rises along

her chest. Ron's hands find themselves and his fingers brush her breast. I cannot see her face but I know her expression.

Elisabeth has touched ground, just for an instant. She has etched a new feature of our life onto the restless sprawl of the world. She is making another part of who we are real with the same diligence and care as I present this story to you.