PARADE DAY

I find him sitting on the edge of our king-sized bed, his back to me. Fresh from a shower, his skin looks cool and smooth as lake water. I come from the garage, come from hoisting large cardboard boxes onto foldout tables: boxes of costume parts, of bugles and drums and piccolos, of torn-sheet bandages and yardstick splints, all collected over years of digging into dime store bargain bins and pawing through second hand clothes racks. While unpacking the heaviest container, I notice a slip of paper flutter toward the concrete floor. It hangs for a moment on the stagnant air before landing in silence at my feet.

"This was tucked in your Paul Revere hat," I say from the doorway. I hold up the star-spangled note. The replica tricorn is balanced on the flat of my other hand, as regal as a Thanksgiving turkey on a platter.

Wyatt twists to look at my offering. It takes a moment, but his reaction is clear. I watch his pupils dilate to darkroom size, his fair skin flush fuchsia. So it's true, I think. He turns back to the wall and takes a deep pull on his first cigarette of the day. When he doesn't speak, I crumple the note and toss it toward his back, underhand, like I imagine lobbing a grenade into an enemy foxhole. It lands next to his Faneuil Hall commemorative ashtray. He flinches but doesn't otherwise move. Without taking my eyes from him, I walk to the window and raise the aluminum blind, letting in the sun, illuminating the wicker furniture and orange crocheted bedspread my grandmother made as a wedding present.

"Everyone will be arriving soon," I say, back at the room's entry. "Are you going to read it?" I notice the bald spot on the crown of his head. It has spread since I last looked--more the size of a quarter now than a nickel. I hold my body still as best I can. My bare arms, sticky from heat at nine in the morning, clutch the hat.

Wyatt smooths the balled paper. He stares at the few words before tearing it to confetti and dropping it into the woven wastebasket next to the bed. Without looking at me, he turns back to the wall, his attention on a framed photograph. It is of the three of us before Wendy and Wynona. We are on vacation in Boston, posing at the foot of the Bunker Hill monument. Willow, a year old, is on his shoulders, her chubby chin resting on the same hat I now hold. We had bought it earlier that day following the Freedom Trail. On tiptoe behind the two, I mug for the camera, my long curly hair puffing like cellophane noodles in the humid summer air. A honeymoon couple from San Francisco volunteered to snap the picture.

"Remember when Willow was born with that tiny hole in her heart," Wyatt says, his voice a thread of unspooled sound. "We were so scared. You never put her down that first month. You tucked her tiny body in the crook of your arm and went about your business. You made dinner with her, you vacuumed with her, you slept with her against your heart. It was as though she was still growing inside you. It was your will, Yolanda, that closed that hole." His hand shakes as he flicks ashes into the tray.

"Yes, and now she's twelve and hates me," I say, my words strident, off-key. "Who wrote the note, Wyatt?"

He stands at last and faces me, covering his genitals with a yellow towel I bought to coordinate with the bathroom's daisy wallpaper. The pungent scent of Dial soap from his shower fills the air between us, leaving me lightheaded.

"I screwed up, Yo." No sharp edge to his voice, as if that will make the words cut less. "I ended it that night, I swear."

He pulls the towel tight around his hips, pushing up a thumb-sized rope of fat. He has gained weight in recent months but I figured it was coming middle age and too many bags of cheese puffs. Maybe he has been stuffing down the knowledge of his deceit. I lean into the door jam still cradling the traitorous hat. I feel like the doctor just told me I have stomach cancer.

"You promised this would never happen to us," I say, closing my eyes to a memory of sixteen years ago. I was a senior in high school, working weekends at a department store lunch counter, when my father came in with a woman I didn't know. The woman was pregnant, her abdomen low and round as a bowling ball. About to pop. She looked old, maybe in her early forties. I realized the baby had to be his, that this was his way of giving me the news. After introducing "Bonnie," my father ordered two hot fudge sundaes. Bonnie, overly cheerful, seemed unaware of any tension as she ate her ice cream.

"Does Mom know?" I asked my dad.

"Not that I know of," he said. He left his sundae untouched.

Sounds from downstairs bring me back to the present. I hear chairs scraped across the pink speckled linoleum, the refrigerator door opened with that telltale sucking sound,

Cheerios rained into bowls--our girls getting breakfast. Three-year-old Wynona squeals as something splashes onto the table. I can tell from Wyatt's face he hears it too.

"If she was at last year's barbecue, I must know her," I say. The realization is a second blow. I toss the hat on the bed, unable to bear its weight any longer. My cancer metabolizes.

He leans forward like a supplicant but doesn't try to touch me. "You met her that one time," he says. "Someone from work. She's gone--transferred to another city."

I want to yank his towel away, to make him as defenseless in some small way as he has made me. I glance at the clock radio on my nightstand. Seventy-plus guests will be arriving in less than two hours. Even if I chose to, there is no time to call off the barbecue now, no time to hear his sorry tale, no time to absorb the ramifications. That will have to wait. With such dignity as I can assume, I turn to leave.

"To be continued," I say. "We have a party to give. Happy fucking Fourth of July."

II

Standing at the sink later I knife avocados into bullet-sized chunks for my special guacamole. Wyatt and I haven't spoken since the bedroom. We've each gone about our usual preparations for the holiday, although I've avoided the garage and the parade provisions. Through the kitchen window I watch him skim the swimming pool. Back and forth he goes with the long aluminum pole, making neat turning swirls with the net at each end. Guests are due in less than an hour and still he surrounds, then captures the tiniest blade of grass, as if he has time to orbit the moon and return.

“Wyatt,” I yell through the screen, “the pool is going to refill with leaves when the kids start swimming. Please get the barbecue ready.” The anger feels good. I will go with that for the afternoon.

He is not wearing his tricorn on its special day, his exposed monk’s cap already a rosy glow. Intent on my target, I jump when Willow kicks open the screen door, juggling disposable tableware in both arms.

“You want me to put out all this junk?” My daughter throws the words at me over a bony shoulder, not waiting for an answer.

Holding my tongue, I switch to dicing onions into bits as uniform as grains of rice. My eyes tear. I’m not sure if it’s the onions, my mess of a marriage, or my pubescent daughter on the brink of mutiny. I watch her, dressed in skimpy shorts and denim halter top, drop the supplies onto the closest redwood bench, plastic utensils rattling like broken glass. With a flourish worthy of a Spanish matador, she floats the cotton cloths--depicting major battles of the American Revolution--over the picnic tables. With little stabbing sounds she stands the forks and spoons upright in a wire caddy, stacks the white Styrofoam cups thimblerig-style and fans the red paper plates in a large spiral, punctuating the moment with another dramatic sweep of her hand. I remember when she enjoyed helping me prepare for the party. Turning with faux military precision, wobbly in her platform shoes, she heads back through the kitchen.

“Happy, Mother?” she asks me, saluting en route to her bedroom sanctuary with its rock star posters and glow-in-the-dark constellations plastered across the ceiling.

I drop my knife in the sink and hurry to where Wyatt is on his knees, fiddling with the pool filter.

"Do you see how rude Willow is to me? She practically threw the sparklers into the blue vases."

When Wyatt doesn't respond, I follow him to the portable barbecue. He pulls off the waterproof cover and scrapes the grill.

"Well?" I shout. I'm disappointed at my lack of control.

"For once, Yo, come down to earth," he says, catapulting old bits of gristle into the air with a metal spatula. "You don't let her breathe." He turns to me, squinting into the harsh sun. "You put so much pressure on everyone to be perfect. Especially yourself." He nods toward the graying cedar fence and the brown spots on the lawn where the sprinklers don't reach. "We are not the family in 'Leave it to Beaver.'"

His words feel like a slap. "Clearly, Wyatt," I say.

He has the grace to blush. The barb hits home, though. Only yesterday I tried to explain why things needed to be a certain way. We were decorating the patio, hanging red, white and blue streamers and twinkle lights along the fascia. I held the electric cord taut while Wyatt stapled it every few inches. Halfway through I pointed out that one of the bulbs was not facing down like the rest.

He cackled. "No one is going to notice one little light pointing away from the others." Pausing, he wiped sweat from his face with the hem of his t-shirt.

I dropped the remaining lights, several shattering on the cement. "You still don't get it, Wyatt. I don't put on a suit every morning and sell fancy homes to rich people. I am a stay-at-home wife and mother. That's my job."

"No one made you stay home, Yo. It was what you wanted from the start--June Cleaver and all that." He replaced the broken bulbs with extras from the box.

“I did choose to be a homemaker,” I said, straining to adjust the errant light myself. “You and the children, this barbecue, are what I do. If I don’t do them well, then who am I, Wyatt? What do I have to show for the last fourteen years?”

He was right about the television mother. She had made everything look easy. In her make-believe house, chores were a breeze. She vacuumed in a dress and heels, her apron powered-sugar white. The Cleavers ate meals and discussed their day around the dinner table. They had dessert. Later they played board games and built volcanoes that spouted real steam. As different from my childhood reality as chocolate mousse to instant pudding.

It wasn’t until I grew up that I learned my mother was the real thing, the other mom a fantasy. Wanda was seldom home in the afternoons. She checked groceries at the Food Hut and walked through our front door at dark, tired and out of sorts. Weekends were for cleaning bathrooms and long hours at the laundromat and raking leaves off the front lawn. My father was a phantom--as unlike Ward Cleaver as any man could be--playing poker until dawn at a local card room or sleeping off too many whiskeys in the back seat of his blue Volkswagen bug. When he was home my parents jabbed at each other, hitting below the belt. He: “Why are there cans of cat food in the cupboard but no pork and beans?” She: “When was the last time you gave me any part of your paycheck for the rent?” No wonder I swallowed the electronic version, hook, line, and life preserver.

Locked now in mutual anger and hurt, neither of us notices the sound of Fords and Chevys heading slowly up our drive.

“Hey you guys, people are arriving,” Willow squawks out the back door. “Are you coming in or what?”

“Thanks to you, nothing is ready,” I hiss at Wyatt and run into the house.

III

"Get dressed," I instruct Wendy and Wynona. They are watching "The Brady Bunch" on the Panasonic in the living room--their version of the Cleavers. Mike Brady is playing catch in the front yard with Bobby. Should I tell them it's a sham, that there's no such family? "Get your sister to brush your hair."

Out the front window I glimpse Walter and Bonnie walking down the drive. Bonnie, not yet in earshot, is talking a mile a minute. She has yet to lose her "baby" fat from giving birth sixteen years ago. My father is silent, probably envisioning his next beer of the day. Cindy Lou and Sam--my half-sister and her latest boyfriend--slouch along behind. Even in the middle of a heat wave, he sports fuzzy dreadlocks and a leather vest with a "bite me" patch over the heart. She dresses like a Goth in black lace and construction boots, her hair long and stringy. I realize with a pang we're all just trying to make our way the best we can.

The rest of the guests arrive in a mishmash of fruit salads, pool floats and excited children. My friend Darla--recently divorced--and seven-year-old Seth come from around the corner. He bangs on his birthday drum with each approaching step. Tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap, like a dirge. I send him to stash his noisemaker in the garage until the parade. Darla mouths, "thank you." My cousin Lacy brings her new husband, Marlon, and stepdaughters, Topanga and Yosie. I introduced Lacy to Marlon, who works at the same realty company as Wyatt. I wonder if they have heard gossip and not told me. I'm not ready to ask. Wanda comes last, as usual. Overdressed, my mother wears a formfitting paisley jumpsuit with a yellow silk scarf knotted at the neck and brown suede boots. She smells of White Shoulders.

"Is your father here?" she asks, giving me an air kiss.

"Headed for the beer cooler," I say.

Wanda filed for divorce the day after I told her about Bonnie and the bowling ball. Maybe this is my future--a divorced woman keeping tabs on her ex-husband, dressing to underscore his blunder whenever he's around.

IV

Most of the guests, attired in shorts and flip-flops, avoid the direct sun. As the temperature trumps the century mark the women set out aluminum lawn chairs in what shade they can find. The men huddle around an orange umbrella next to the barbecue, talking sports, and downing Bud Lights like water. Slathered in Tropicana, the children run about the yard playing tag and red-light-green-light. Hiding behind sunglasses at my spot next to the deep end of the pool allows me to watch Wyatt without his knowing. He seems subdued, but still tours the yard greeting our guests, introducing himself to newcomers with an outstretched hand. Occasionally he looks my way but I can't tell what he's thinking. Once he smiles and cocks his head. Too easy, I think. His carefree manner hurts. At least there is no Cindy Lou in the picture. My mind spins at the possibility.

I notice my half-sister smoking over by the trashcans. At one point I hear my father yell to "Cin" to bring him a smoke. Willow will be Cin's age soon. If Wyatt and I break up, what damage will that do to her already fragile ego? I find her playing Marco Polo in the pool, Wynona on her shoulders. They are both giggling. Willow quits laughing when our eyes meet, but that doesn't spoil the moment. Pivoting to watch Wendy turning a hula hoop on the grass--her nonexistent hips gyrating for all she's worth--I miss Seth climb out of the shallow end and run toward the other side. Halfway there he slips on the wet concrete and thumps his elbow on the coping. Wyatt gets to him before I can, calms him down and looks

for blood. Finding no visible wound, he ruffles Seth's shaggy hair and gives a thumbs-up to Darla.

"The next person who runs around the pool gets a noogie," he announces to the swimmers at large, "and no one wants one of my noogies. Just ask Wynona." Wynona grins from her roost on Willow. He is a good father, I give him that.

Without warning, a squealing Wendy comes from behind and jumps on my back. "I'm hungry, Mommy. When are we going to eat?"

"Right now," I say. "Tell Daddy to start grilling."

Although Darla and I hurry to set out salads and side dishes, lunch lasts longer than the battle of Gettysburg. I monitor the food line, restocking when necessary. The red jello turns to soup faster than a speeding bullet. No one seems to be giving me more than normal attention, including Wyatt's coworkers. Maybe he is right and no one knows. Even so, the day can't end soon enough. I want to scream when Bonnie heads back for her third helping of Wanda's potato salad. "This is so good," she says.

V

Parade time at last. When I clang the metal triangle next to the kitchen door, kids shoot past me like bottle rockets and head for the garage. Seth springs from the pool, nearly slipping again. Wynona drops a half eaten sandwich on the lawn and rushes to grab my hand.

Over the years, the homemade Independence Day reenactment has become the highlight of the afternoon for the children. The first parade was spontaneous. Wyatt pulled two-year-old Willow in her red wagon up and down the drive while the rest of the family marched behind singing "The Star Spangled Banner." Since then it has grown each year,

evolving into something so extravagant the community paper wrote an article about it. The parade has also become my personal statement. This year there will be twenty-nine participants, a record number. I think of it as my signature event, something no mother who works outside the home has the time or energy to pull off. The thought startles me. When did that become the goal?

Normal times, everything would be in order--clothing neatly separated into piles, band instruments and crutches placed side by side, rolled bandages arranged on a tray like cinnamon rolls. When I reach the garage children are grabbing costume parts from unpacked boxes and slinging unwanted items over their heads. A powdered wig is trampled underfoot, then retrieved by first-timer Topanga, who clasps the prize to her chest. A tug-of-war over the one trumpet looks ready to give an innocent bystander a shiner before two mothers mediate the controversy with the deftness of King Solomon. Despite the chaos, everyone is laughing as grown-ups wrap torn sheets around tiny soldiers and simulate battle wounds with catsup. My kids are right there in the thick of it, shouting and tugging with the rest. I see Wendy jumping up and down in triumph as she grabs the lace shower cap worn by Betsy Ross. Wyatt puts Wynona on his shoulders and helps where he can. When the hubbub slows, I call for participants to assemble at the foot of the driveway.

As I head to the starting point, adults and older siblings arrange their folding chairs on the far side of the drive, where wild summer mustard covers an empty field. The native plants will be dry and flammable by Labor Day, but right now they're a riot of small yellow blooms. Next to the house I have planted thick African daisy ground cover edged with lavender.

One of Wyatt's coworkers hurries to catch up with me. "Your yard would sell this house in a snap," she says. "Talk about curb appeal." She's young and eager, new to real estate. I can't remember her name. Somehow she manages to look cool in a cotton dress, while I feel sweat running down my back and pooling at the waistband of my shorts. Later I hear someone call her Margret.

"I'm usually more organized," I say, "especially for the parade."

"Wyatt's always bragging about what a great mother you are."

Sidestepping the comment, I signal Willow--stationed near the front door--to start the music.

The children whoop as Willow booms her portable stereo to "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." It's a Civil War song, but no one seems to care that it was written about a different struggle. As always, George Washington leads the procession. Topanga and Yosie have decorated a wagon float with a cardboard hull and mast to look like a boat. Topanga wears the powdered wig with flair, balancing on one knee as if crossing the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776. To her delight, her father volunteers to pull her along the route. Wendy as Betsy Ross comes next. She holds my largest needlepoint hoop and pretends to sew the first American flag, a smile on her face the size of Mt. Rushmore. I direct the other historical figures to step out one by one. The young man who plays John Hancock, an enthusiastic fifth-grader from the neighborhood, rolls and unrolls his pretend Declaration of Independence until it looks as tattered as the real thing. In a bald wig and round spectacles, a chubby Ben Franklin works to get a newspaper kite aloft, knocking against several members of the band, who blow their instruments in protest. Returning soldiers follow the band. The triumphant fighters limp dramatically with the support of tree branch

crutches. “Your crutch is to help you walk, not poke your neighbor in the back,” I scold one Johnny Reb with pretend seriousness.

As always, there are hiccups along the way. Action is halted for a quick tape repair when Wendy’s friend, Bethy, loses the tail of her raccoon hat. Ben Franklin’s kite string tangles in a wagon wheel, but is liberated by the flutist who puffs on. Wyatt congratulates the musician for “saving the day.” At one point, a three-year-old trips over a bit of dangling bandage and scrapes his knee. Willow, closest to the child, scoops him up, brushing bits of asphalt from a small abrasion. “You’re the only real wounded soldier here,” I hear her say into his ear. He rejoins the parade with pride, limping as never before. Wyatt catches my eye and nods toward Willow. Marching alongside the parade, I hear my husband cheer for each passing child, knowing everyone by name. That’s more than I can say. Last of all comes Wynona, our baby. As the youngest participant, she wears a bright red sandwich board that reads, “The End.” With tongue in cheek at her importance, Wynona tries not to smile passing her father. He shouts “well done,” his face serious, reflecting her gravity. My cancer goes into temporary remission.

Start to finish the parade takes eight minutes.

VI

Like a tortoise finishing a marathon, the day creeps to a close. Dessert is served--a sheet cake of an American flag, decorated with thirteen stars. With my permission, Willow devours hers and takes off for a friend’s house like the British are hot on her heels. No hug, but I get a wave as she leaves. As the sun goes down, Wyatt ignites sparklers with his cigarette lighter. The youngest children make figure-eights while moms and dads hover close by. Seth runs around the yard like a crazed Statue of Liberty before Darla tackles him

and yanks the tiny torch from his hand. Cindy Lou writes Sam's name in the air with big arcing gestures, nearly catching fire to his carefully matted coils. Parents begin to pack up, eager to secure parking spots for the city fireworks at Ocean Bay Park. Frantic hunts locate misplaced sneakers; empty serving bowls are retrieved from the kitchen. Wendy and Wynona leave to spend the night with their new cousins. The yard empties.

I survey the patio and lawn. The litter left behind--the smashed beer cans, the greasy paper plates, the chewed corncobs--can wait. I have survived the day. Exhausted, I sink into an Adirondack chair next to the pool as Wyatt walks the final stragglers to their cars. I give him his due: He worked hard to help the party flow smoothly. Our children adore him. Even Willow--on the cusp of womanhood--continues to confide in him.

The last to leave is Margret. Wyatt stands next to her new black Volvo while they exchange a few words. I watch him help his coworker into the driver's seat. I watch him slide his hand slowly down her back to squeeze her buttocks before closing the car door.

VII

As she drives away, I look to the sky. Where is a falling star when you need it? The first pyrotechnics pop like gunfire in the distance. Wyatt and I never had a perfect marriage, I realize. That is possible only on television, after all. Giving up the vision is hard, though. It's like saying goodbye to the little girl who came home from school to a hollow house and filled the empty hours planning her future.

After a time, Wyatt lowers himself into the Adirondack chair next to me. He is holding the Paul Revere hat, running his index finger around its soft edge. He must have retrieved it from our bedroom after saying goodbye to Margret. It reminds me of all I have lost.

“It looks like Woodstock on Tuesday morning,” he says, assessing the yard for damage. "Let’s leave the mess to tomorrow."

“Yes,” I say. “We’ll clean up the mess tomorrow.”

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