

When people ask why you *had* to go back, I take a sip of tea and wet my throat before responding. I soak in it; I slosh that urinous, ruinous chamomile between the cracks of my teeth, in the stinging red lines that drip when I floss, under and around my tongue, touching my squawking uvula, coating the gullet and the epiglottal flaps until I am well-oiled enough to speak.

Are you listening yet?

You returned to Bethlehem to simplify your fractions. To separate, in your own personal calculus, what was partial and what was whole. Who was damned and who was saved. The divisor and the dividend.

You know, the existential stuff.

I can hear you whining, maybe even scratching down a poem about it during your morning walks, about how you wanted to see life for what it truly was, and if it was mean, why then to live the whole damned meanness of it, to drive it into a corner and cut wide swaths and grind it up and boil it down until you had found either gold, uranium, or both. It's been sixty-five years since I've learned anything new about this Earth, but hun, it's hard – it's awful hard – to divine your own life. Alchemy is for witches. Take everything, the good, the bad, the irresistible, stick it in a pot and stew it up, and sometimes you're left with just piss. A big pot full of piss, that you can pour into cups and call chamomile tea.

You started to change around sixth grade, when I promised you my kidney. I lied. As a girl, you had little to offer. You played with Harry Potter Legos, the ones Santa brought you for Christmas. You woke up on Saturdays at 8 AM and watched Spongebob, followed by The Fairly Odd Parents. There was this neighbor girl, Addison, who I had never actually seen in person, but who you were always rushing outside to build some fort with in the empty lot at the end of our cul-de-sac – a dried-up old plot that in the summers choked on prairie grass and bamboo.

That September, your baba and your brother and I piled into the Gregory Junior High auditorium to watch you star as a tree or a flower or whatever in the fall play. We bought you

flowers and it was one of the last times you didn't try to hide your smile from me. We took you to Five Guys because it was the only store open late enough, and you ordered a cup full of fries.

Notice how I remember so well the time and place, yet don't give a damn if you had played a fairy or a witch or a tin man. And do you know why? Could you find it in that useless head to wonder why? No, of course you don't remember, and I don't know why I bother telling you because you'll just screw it up again.

On that day in September, 3,000 Americans died.

That day was the start and end of every conversation for a year, and here we were, a family of Arabs, eating fries after dark.

Your older brother walked up to the soda dispenser to fill his soda. He had just pressed the lever, anticipating the pneumatic puffing of the tubes within the machine. A clap, and the soda was all over his hands, running in streams down his arms. The cardboard cup hit the tiles because another boy had knocked it down, had elbowed it out of Adam's hand. The boy was probably thirteen, fuzzed, pimples.

Why did you do that? Adam asked.

My husband stood up from his seat, and the boy ran.

The violence of the motion, the churning of the legs and the arms and the quickness of breath, was enough to shake loose in Adam some primordial instinct, probably stretching back to the days of the cavemen, when humans crouched and killed over what the vultures would not eat. His eyes widened, and he became a lamb for the first time.

He wanted to kill me, Baba, said Adam to his father, who reached down and clasped his son's hands, sticky from the Pepsi spill.

No, Adam, he was afraid. People see in red when they are afraid. They think in black and white. They look in the mirror and their faces are green. When people are afraid, they see just about every color except the ones actually there.

This is what your mother and I left Bethlehem for, Adam. I dealt with this and worse, every day as a boy. I was Christian and an Arab – we were backed into a corner in Bethlehem. I know how you feel, but you are made of tougher stuff. Come now, my little man of the house.

He pointed Adam's chin up, and the boy smiled.

A teenaged worker brought a wet towel to clean to the spill. He took off his hat and offered our meal free of charge.

Now, this is what I don't get. You sat there and watched the whole episode play out, twiddling your thumbs and stuffing yourself full of fries like popcorn at the movies, you watched the whole damn thing and yet you didn't. You saw it the way you wanted to see it. I don't know what was going on behind those little brown eyes of yours, but it turned you into a quitter. Your baba and I had to drag you out of bed every morning and force you onto the bus. I met the neighbor girl, Addison, for the first time because she came knocking on the door asking could you come out and play?

One time, I counted *two hours* that the bathroom door was closed and you were in it with the fan on. I kept knocking on it, asking what you were doing – pooping, pooping, pooping, you insisted – and I walked in afterwards to find red – red on the half roll of toilet paper crumpled up in the garbage, red in your urine, and you were lying under your covers in your bed, sniffing.

Our family friend, Abram, recommended a urologist, Dr. Thoman, who we saw the next day. Turns out, stage five kidney failure had hit you as well.

Now I am an old woman, this time with a son and a grandson. I walk the streets in the Illinois town that I have passed the second half of my life in. It is December, and the lawns are of yellow grass. Oh snowlessness. The sky is black by the time I go to church, as I always do, out of novelty.

In the church, the ribbed ceiling rises until vaulted, and the icons cast shadows on the cold marble that clicks and clacks under the shoes of the faithful, processing up to the communion. The Baptismal font dribbles, and someone is always coughing or sneezing or

adjusting their suit jacket. It smells like lotion and powder and the soapy balsam of the purple Christmas candles.

The chanting shivers.

Fruit of the Earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life, fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink.

The body of Christ, the priest says before he eats the bread.

The blood of Christ, the priest says before he drinks the wine, given so that you may be clean.

After the Christmas Eve service ends, my son drives me through the neighborhood to see the lights; our street has become a casino. At the end of the cul-de-sac is a dark house. My son reaches for the visor, and the garage door cranks open. We have a little manger setup, complete with a Christ child and fluorescent sign that reads, *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem*. I like to think that is what the mother of Christ said when she first set eyes upon the cluster of buildings atop the hill. Oh, you poor little town of Bethlehem.

You poor thing, you.

Whereas your baba and I left Bethlehem after the police strip-searched us for bombs, you returned on a scholarship. To study mathematics.

When people ask why you *had* to go back, I take a sip of tea and wet my throat before responding. I soak in it, I slosh that urinous, ruinous chamomile between the cracks of my teeth, in the stinging red lines that drip when I floss like ink on skin, under and around my tongue, until I feel it touch my squawking uvula, coating the gullet and the epiglottal flaps until I am well-oiled enough to speak.

Sound familiar?

Good – you’re catching on, even though the sentiment has come too late, and your charade has been deduced, your questions reciprocated.

A month before you left, I called you on the house phone. You answered an hour's drive away at the University of Illinois.

Hello?

It's me.

Hi Mom.

Static on your end.

How are finals going?

They're in two weeks. Differential equations should be easy. Had an exam in that today. One more to go.

Are you eating enough?

You gave me that mindless *yep* that you have trained yourself to do whenever we talk about your health.

Have you been taking the pills?

Yep.

Drinking enough water?

Mom.

You're getting a checkup when you come back home, so be ready for that. And I heard the mumps are going around, and you know your immune system.

Mom.

A pause on my end of the line as I began to phrase my question.

Your baba and I, we worked many years and risked more than you know to give you a life of options. We didn't have options in Bethlehem. Well, I mean we did, and Bethlehem is a holy place, but our options were limited. I hope you appreciate that when you get there.

I've heard it's actually really nice there. That it's different now and it's safer and stuff.

Where did you hear that?

I read an article.

In the *Dispatch*? Don't trust them, now, they're a bunch of Democrats.

I read it online.

Static on her end.

You could've chosen to go anywhere in the world for your study abroad, hun. We talked about New Zealand, remember? Don't you want to go visit Hobbiton?

I told you why already.

Don't give me the I don't fit in talk. You've spent all but two years of your life in America. And the people here are so caring. Remember how your friends visited, when you and Adam had the transplants? Don't tell me you're jealous, either, me donating to Adam instead. Two kids with kidney failure – do you think I'm God or something? I only have one kidney to give.

*I remember.*

Your voice cracked on the word, so I quieted.

Do you feel guilty? I asked.

I'm not talking about this, Mom.

You're still upset about what happened after the operation, aren't you? The uncertainty? Hun, not even God knows.

Mom.

That's your curse – you were born with too much help, and the blessing came when, in those quiet moments before sleeping, your face lit up by the glow of your phone, twelve years old, arm wired up to the dialysis machine, face gaunt and fleshless, nothing like Hillary Duff, nothing like Britney Spears, nothing like your much prettier friends and the pimped boys who

didn't know if they liked you or not while you wore the surgical mask to school on Doctor's orders – the blessing came when you knew in your heart of hearts that you needed our help, and you were absolutely helpless but to accept, absolutely in our debt, absolutely no way to repay us in your lifetime. When the operation was successful and Adam received the kidney, I took on a job as an Arabic teacher at the high school to help your baba pay the bills. We tried several times to get you a donor kidney. Tests fell through and floated over to your urologist's desk. Negative. And on the day when that kidney finally came, it came from the anonymous donor. Your turn on the operating table passed by in a haze, and I couldn't tell if you were terrified or excited, so hardened had your face become under the hammer and chisel of the dialysis. And years later, when I woke one morning to read the morning paper, and on the front page was Dr. Thoman in an orange jumpsuit, the byline read on the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in still-wet ink DOCTOR CONVICTED FOR BLACK MARKET KIDNEY.

When you returned to Bethlehem for whatever the hell it was for, the police found a body. A Christian body. In a dumpster, across from the Church of the Nativity, a woman of eighteen had fallen to her death. Now wait, they tell me, this is incorrect. A suicide. By leaping from the top of the apartment building on a Sabbath day?

Her corneas had been peeled.

With a scalpel, the mortician typed into his report.

*Clickclickclick* away went the keyboard, in the room with the white tile and the shrink-wrapped bodies and cellophane crinkling like a gum wrapper.

You err, the mortician would say of the postmortem. This is no suicide. This woman has no corneas. No lungs. No heart. No intestines. No kidneys. Her abdominal cavity is clean, clean and slick and smooth. And stuffed full of straw.

Her killer, whoever they were, had crouched over her, slit her down, let the fluids spread. Up and down up and down went the scalpel, he panted, up to the corners of the septum, where the membranes were torn, and the pink, wet globes lowered in coolers. He heaped in bails of hay

while the Christ child looked down from the Madonna's lap, two de-pupiled sockets, two opalized sockets, carved from stone on the church steeple across the street where the bell tolled.

*Ding ding ding dong. Dong dong ding dong.*

Mom. I'm not talking about this with you. Not...not now.

There will be no answers for you in Bethlehem, hun, if that's what your aim is.

I want to know, alright! Your voice wavered and cracked. I want to know why I'm even breathing right now. I want to know whose borrowed time I'm living off. Don't you get it – my blood is clean now. It was shit, but it's clean because of someone else's kidney – and that person was either a donor or a – or a –

At that point you started crying, and the conversation dwindled.

If we live in a forsaken world, then surely the hands of a killer once wrapped around your kidney, which now drips in your body, filtering out your urine like a Keurig, siphoning the bubbles of carbonic diamide from your blood.

If we do not live in a forsaken world, then that is not so.

Either way, my child, your blood has been cleaned, and you must find a way to live with the fact.

You were born in Bethlehem by accident. The plan was to give birth at Jerusalem hospital, but the Israelis held us up at the checkpoint, leaving me to give birth in a tourist chop house. I'd stood there in the shadow of the barbed wire, the concrete wall, while the morning was still raw and the sunbeams caught exhaust swirling behind the bus. Our hurry and our panic set the guards on alert, and they led us off the bus, to the checkpoint for a pat down. From that point on, I remember about as much as you did. A lone woman, back on the tile, doctor rushing in with his bag and his plastic gloves. On the other side of the wall, customers cut their steaks cleanly, dredging and dripping them red on the tongue and stringy on the sore molars. The smoke made

my mouth water. Contractions came red and wet and searing and screaming. And that last one that popped me, it popped you out all over the kitchen floor.

The next day, the bells jingled over the door as your baba walked in to ask for the owner.

For the reparations, he said. He pulled out his check book, scribbling something down, tearing it clean off.

The owner looked at it, then looked at your baba.

Help me clean this mess.

Baba did so.

When I woke the next morning, I checked the home phone to see you had left a message over the night. Such a time difference.

Hi Mom, I'm okay, but could you check your Facebook? I shared an article with you. Thanks. See ya.

*Click.*

I blew dust off the keyboard and searched for the on switch. There. The Windows logo popped up and I heard that piano startup tune. Facebook, Facebook. Email? I searched for each individual key. Password? I sat there a few minutes, fuming until I picked up the house phone and dialed your number.

Mom? You yawned.

Why are you still awake? It's got to be past midnight over there. How many time zones is the Atlantic, anyway?

I'm kinda shaken.

What does that mean?

I spent the day talking to the police. I-I witnessed a, um, well, a crime. In the old section of Bethlehem.

A crime? What kind of a crime?

Just read the article I sent you.

What kind of a crime?

Not right now.

God dammit hun, what kind of a crime! Terrorism? Shoplifting?

I already told Baba about it. You can ask him for more details if you want.

What's the password?

What?

To the f-the freaking Facebook thing. How am I gonna read the article without the password?

Oh. It's my birth date.

I knew that.

Some smart ass CNN pencilist called it a scarecrow murder. The police found the body across from the Church of the Nativity, a block south of the chop house you were born in, which, I hear, is alive and thriving. The murder occurred Friday night, during Bethlehem's spin-off happy hour. A twenty-year old woman. No organs. Stuffed full of straw. All the churches declared their sentiment, I read before scrolling down the page. The rabbis, the imams, the priests, invited the world to join in a prayer for peace, and sent their sympathy to the family of the deceased.

You idiot. I am watching you read this now, and you're just ice-skating over it; you're just glazing it with frosting and clearing a space for it in the fridge. You're not listening to me – you can't see or hear – or else you wouldn't be here now, would you? How come Eve's season pass to the Garden of Eden got revoked? Yeah, that's right. She ate out of a tree.

What freaking tree was it?

I'll give you a hint – it wasn't the tree of life. Go look it up on your phone, right now. I'll wait.

The grand irony of all progression is this.

When your baba and I left Bethlehem, we moved to an ex-cornfarm suburb near St. Louis, on the advice of his dear friend who had moved there years earlier. Abram. Baba and Abram had grown up Christian in Bethlehem. Therefore, they knew each other.

You are sure you want to leave Bethlehem, he had spoken to us over the phone, it is your personal decision, not your family's and not your government's. You are an immigrant, not a refugee.

The hospitals in St. Louis were several dozen stories tall, though not as big as the Jerusalem hospital. If you looked out the windows on the top floors, you could see clear over to the Mississippi, through the Arch. Until we could buy a cheap house, you, me, Adam, and Baba lived with Abram and his wife, Miriam. Our children played together in a toy room on the side of the house facing the sun. The carpet was thin and Miriam, in a constant state of cleaning, had just finished vacuuming at every hour of the day, so the room smelt of burned dust and cumin. In the corner was a television, a nerdy television with a bulbous glass screen like an old pair of spectacles. Wired to it were hand-controlled games like Mario and Galaga and Pacman that you fought over when it rained because there was only room for two players. When it did not rain, you ran through the forest behind our house.

After you had been diagnosed, Miriam and I took you to Target to buy a training bra. You were just livid, insisting to me that you already knew everything about everything and didn't need any help. Not to compromise your weak immune system, your doctor made sure that you wore a surgical mask in public. Oh, the wide-eyed children. They stared at you like they would a gorilla behind glass. A girl of twelve in a face-mask, in the teenager's clothing department. That was your curse – you were born with too much help, and the blessing came when, in those quiet moments on the dialysis, your sunken cheeks shadowed, your jaw and chin

lit up by the glow of your iphone, wasted out of your brain, the blessing came when you knew in your heart of hearts that you needed our help, and you were absolutely helpless but to accept, absolutely in our debt, absolutely no way to repay us in your lifetime.

Sound familiar?

Good, then you're finally getting wise. You poor thing, you.

Miriam and I passed many hours talking at the kitchen table over chamomile tea and warm-baked naan. One day, while you were studying abroad in Bethlehem, she admitted to me that she could see why you'd want to return. Because you did not know. But why, why did you have to know with such desperation?

Miriam says I am angry because I have worked so hard to give you the choice to return.

I take a sip of chamomile tea before responding.

A self-fulfilling prophecy. I guess you can divine your own life, after all.

Miriam tore off a shred of naan and dipped it in oil and coriander and cumin.

Abram was called to court, she said.

Is he alright?

It's for the trial. They're still investigating.

The urologist?

The lawyers told him that Dr. Thoman had black market contacts in Bethlehem, so naturally they think Abram was somehow in league with them.

My God, I shook my head, lawyers. They don't know the first thing about Abram, other than that he's got a tan and an Arabic accent. And now all of a sudden he's a crime boss who channels stolen kidneys?

I expected her to shoot back a similar rebuke, but she was silent. And she broke eye contact.

I tore off a slice of bread and sipped my tea. Urinous, ruinous chamomile tea.

If only you had paid attention earlier. If only you were paying attention now, to what's happening right in front of you. But I know you won't.

Miriam cracked open the sharp crust of the bread, ripping at its white carpeted flesh, chewing, swallowing. Crumbs fell. She even forewent the oil and spices.

The crust scraped my throat, and when the bread pressed flat against my tongue, I could feel the little grains of flour rub it raw. But it was warm, and I swallowed tea to send it all down.

Pretty soon, the bread plate held only crumbs, and at the bottom of the teacup I saw the leaves that fortune tellers would waste their lives over.

Finally, I spoke.

Miriam, do you know where Dr. Thoman got his kidneys from?

The black market, of course.

That's not what I mean. Where? Which city?

You were so sweet, you know. I used to watch you play Legos with the neighbors, and you'd give the characters little high-pitched voices, dancing around the house. You'd pretend the carpet was lava and trek around the living room from couch to couch, your curly hair bouncing as you went. In the mud after summer rain, you'd build little villages out of sticks and mushrooms, and I'd watch you out the sliding glass door while grading my students' papers, making sure you stayed in the yard.

Forty years later, as I lower my aching joints into that very chair, exhaling as I go, the yard is empty. There are two boys in the house – my son and my grandson – who are erecting the Christmas tree, unboxing those olive-wood ornaments of crosses, mangers, and angels. The Legos are packed away in a moist cardboard box in the garage. Among the ornaments is a little picture frame that you made out of macaroni and puzzle pieces in kindergarten, and your

snapshot glued in the middle of the construction paper. Adam sees the ornament and smiles. We meet eyes, and I nod before taking a sip of tea.

When you returned to Bethlehem for whatever the hell it was for, the police found a heartless, kidneyless, straw-stuffed body. Your body.

You returned to Bethlehem to simplify your fractions. To separate, in your own personal calculus, what was partial and what was whole. Who was damned and who was saved. The divisor and the dividend.

You wanted to know, and I can't blame you for that.

But you can't know why your own life is. Those are the rules of living – you must choose to believe it's made of gold, uranium, or both, and there is no way around that. It's impossible to know which one it *should* be, which one it *is*. It's impossible to believe in nothing. That's all you can do as a human – choose. Your baba and I left Bethlehem for this purpose, and for the same purpose, you returned.