

Ladybug Island

Bang, bang, bang, on the bathroom door.

“Adam, get out of there, you’ll grow gills.”

Adam’s mother laughed to herself as she walked away. Her mother used to tell her the same thing. What was it about long baths . . . oh well, like mother like son, she supposed. She went downstairs to see if the laundry had dried. It hadn’t. As she grumbled over the delay in her afternoon that the still wet, uncooperative clothes represented, the telephone rang. It was her sister-in-law, Grace. She sat in the kitchen haphazardly plucking petals from the bouquet of sunflowers set in white porcelain at the center of the table as they spoke.

Formalities dispensed with, they talked about Grace’s son, her nephew, Peter. He had just been released from the hospital. Grace had been, and in this conversation remained, vague about the whole affair; but Adam’s mother had played housewife detective and pieced together a truth. Peter was in a nightclub, he’s only 17 so she assumed he must have used a fake I.D. to get in, and he got jumped by an apparently thuggish group of young men. Grace, conspicuously

avoiding detail related to why and where the assault had taken place, lamented the state of the world.

“What kind of a world do we live in where a 17- year old boy, minding his own business, can get his ribs broken by complete strangers?”

Minding his own business, you say? Adam’s mother plucked a petal and smiled a private sarcasm behind the telephonic curtain as she responded, “Poor Peter. You never can tell these days about people. Thankfully, Adam is a homebody. It’s a wonder he goes anywhere – he’s always holed up in his room reading a book. Hey,” Adam’s mother offered, “maybe you should buy Peter some books? It works wonders for my sanity, knowing Adam is safe in his room reading.”

“Oh, Peter would never go for that. He’s got too much energy for it. Maybe it’s for the best. Maybe there’s a reason they always say it; boys will be boys. Although Peter reading a few books isn’t the *worst* idea ever. Hey, you know what – I don’t think Peter and Adam spend enough time together. I think they could learn a lot from each other.”

“Of course, what a lovely idea.”

Adam's mother plucked a final handful of petals from one of the sunflowers, which was now nothing more than a grainy black disk on a stalk, and hurriedly ended the conversation. There was the laundry to attend to, but then, there was also this newfound anxiety. My Adam, she thought, spending more time with Peter? She snorted and walked over to check on the laundry. Agitated that it wasn't dry yet, she roamed her home, idly tidying up the already showroom arrangement of her objects and things. Although the notion of Peter and Adam spending more time together was absurd, she couldn't help but think there really was something unnatural about the way Adam never did anything. He went to school, he came home, holed up in his room with a book or sometimes an album, came out for dinner – always kind, if a little morose – and hurried quickly back to his room.

He wasn't impolite or angry ever, she thought, just, distant . . . like his father. She had found the avenue to reassurance and smiled. Aloofness was one of the qualities that had made her fall in love with Adam's father. There's something irresistible, she thought, about mysterious, quiet men. They don't ruin themselves by saying a whole lot of words, and most of the time you have to imagine for yourself what they're thinking. With people who live life so inside themselves, who knows what that could be? She was always generous with her

approximations of their thoughts and, in her view, their minds were wonderful places.

Adam is just like his father. She repeated the phrase to herself like a little mantra as she folded the then dry, long awaited clothes. After twenty minutes, all her former anxiety a trifle in the far distant past, a silly flight of the nerves, she found herself wondering, along with the rest of the clothes washing world, where it was that that one sock in a pair always managed to disappear to when her husband got home from work.

Pleasantries and pecks exchanged, her husband Mr. Ismailov asked where Adam was. Mr. Ismailov's first name was also Adam, but he insisted on being referred to as Mr. Ismailov. This was idiosyncrasy, not pretension. Mr. Ismailov was neither a stern nor an arrogant man, and his moniker was not an attempt to subliminally enforce a strict patriarchal order in the home – he simply preferred the way it sounded.

“He should be in his room reading or something,” Adam's mother told him. She offered to go get him, but Mr. Ismailov decided it would be best for him to go instead.

“Is something wrong?” Adam’s mother asked.

“Wrong? No. Good news. A surprise. I’d like to tell him about it myself.”

“What is it?”

Mr. Ismailov had already begun ascending the stairs and his back was to Adam’s mother. Though he hadn’t turned around, she knew exactly the expression on his face when he replied. The look was a cross between a frown and a smirk, where the upper half of his face was all furrowed brows and slitted eyes and the lower half was a crooked smile leaning towards the left with only the one cheek dimpling. Adam’s mother found it endearing. For a man whose countenance idled at a near constant state of sphinxlike inscrutability, his attempt at appearing enigmatic usually left him looking like a man who had been smiling when he unexpectedly stubbed his toe.

“You’ll see,” he called out while wearing exactly the expression Adam’s mother suspected.

Mr. Ismailov watched his feet as he walked. He became conscious of the way his new dress shoes, wooden soled, slid coolly across the surface of the red, Persian rug that lined the L-shaped flight of stairs. The smoothness was like

walking on ice, he thought, but with more traction. He made a mental note to purchase new shoes more often as he arrived at the closed door of Adam's room and knocked three times before entering. The lights of the room were off, and the green haze of the glow-in-the-dark stars and sickle moons pasted on the room's walls and roof shone weakly in the afternoon's twilight. Mr. Ismailov flicked on the lights and assessed the room. Mounds of dirty clothes were strewn about in a careful pattern of disorder, the business end of a hockey stick poking out of one of the piles looking like a lighthouse overseeing the tempest of an angry ocean of fabric. Adam's dream catcher swayed regularly with the gusts coming from the A/C grate across it, and there were heaps of soggy, dog-eared books growing mushroom-like at every corner. Overall, Mr. Ismailov thought, it was a nice room for his boy to be in , except that he wasn't in it.

Mr. Ismailov walked to the stair's landing, noting as he walked there that the green and yellow Hopi rug that guided him there was neither as slippery nor as pleasant to tread on as the Persian, and called out to Adam's mother, "I can't find Adam.

Adam's mother flit up the stairs and was by Mr. Ismailov's side.

“Are you sure? He should be there.” She thought for a moment. “Unless, did you check the bathroom? Though I could hardly imagine . . .”

“Hardly imagine what?”

“He was there a few hours ago when I last saw him.”

“He does like his baths.”

“Yes, but he isn’t a frog, Mr. Ismailov.”

Mr. Ismailov shrugged, “Maybe he is.”

Bang, bang, bang, on the bathroom door.

“Adam, are you in there?”

No response.

Bang, bang, bang, again on the bathroom door.

“Adam?”

No response.

“He must have fallen asleep in there,” Mr. Ismailov offered.

“Are you crazy? Nobody falls asleep in the bathtub.” She considered it further and added fretfully, “And if he is, that’s terribly dangerous. If he’s asleep in there, you need to wake him up.”

Mr. Ismailov nodded and twisted, attempted to twist, the doorknob.

“It’s locked.”

Meanwhile, inside the bathroom, other matters had been wholly occupying Adam’s attentions. The water in the bathtub had long since lost any hint of warmth, and Adam watched his toes and the sliver of foot that was not submerged in the tepid water. They were waterlogged and wrinkly, and Adam thought to himself, really, what an inconvenient time to be turning into a mer – what’s a male mermaid called? Or is the species mermaid a gender-neutral sort of thing?

He considered this for some time and then became aware of, to his great amusement, a ladybug walking on the surface of a little mountain of soapsuds floating miraculously in the long spent bathwater. How a ladybug happened into the bathroom without his knowledge or consent, and why she mysteriously decided that the place to land once having arrived was on an errant patch of soap suds . . . those are things, Adam thought, that I’ll never have the answers to. Not

really very important though, is it? Adam watched the suds and the ladybug. I'll call it Ladybug Island, Adam decided, and he vowed to himself that, as the Bathtub King, it was his responsibility to care for the ladybug and to provide her with a little soap mountain to live on. If he should ever fail in that duty, the ladybug would surely die. She would only be happy on Ladybug Island, he thought, where she was safe and protected from all manner of predators.

Adam sat there for some time and compiled a list of all the predators a ladybug could possibly have. He came up with this list: praying mantis, spider, human toddler, human adult, cricket, ant, small bird, scorpion, cockroaches, larger beetles, and deranged cannibalistic ladybugs. He got stuck after the cannibalistic ladybugs, and realized that, despite not being able to come up with a too lengthy list of predators, life for a ladybug was very dangerous. Much too dangerous to allow her to leave Ladybug Island.

What about a family, Adam wondered, she would probably want to have one. Ladybug Island would be the perfect place to raise her young, grow old, and live a long and prosperous life, for a ladybug. The only problem was that one ladybug, all alone on Ladybug Island, could never have a family. Did he have the right to keep her from having one? Yes, Adam decided. It's for her own good. And

besides, if its fate for her to have a family, another ladybug – a manbug – would surely come and sweep her off her feet. That’s what she deserves, my little ladybug. He smiled when he thought this. For all he knew, this ladybug could very well be a manbug. From intuition though, he knew she was a ladybug. And not a very young ladybug, but one perhaps in the later stages of young adulthood – about to become something more like a regular woman. He wasn’t sure why he made this distinction, but he was sure it was the right one.

Making a mental note not to shirk his duty of care to this near-woman bug walking slowly over the many peaks and valleys of Ladybug Island, Adam began to think about himself.

How many predators can I list for myself, Adam wondered. He divided the list in two, the first for living but non-human things, and the second for everything else. This is how the first list went: Lion, shark, jaguar, panther, black widow spider, piranha, ants and bees if allergic, snakes, alligators, crocodiles, hyenas, jackals, tigers, wolves, poisonous fish like blowfish and lionfish, barracudas, other kinds of poisonous spiders, jellyfish, mountain lions, and silverback apes.

He eventually grew tired of compiling this list, and moved on to the second list, which went like this: cars, airplanes, guns, bombs, knives, gaseous or liquid

poison, electrical short circuit, shoddy construction, assassin, sociopathic murderer, sniper rifle madman, firework, drug overdose, drunk driver, terrorist (hijacking terrorist, suicide terrorist, knife wielding terrorist), pharmaceutical released into the market before being properly tested and revealing fatal side effects, suicidal depression, toxifying pollution, charismatic leader convincing a population that your ethnic group should be exterminated, helicopter, illness that becomes irredeemably immune to antibiotics resulting in catastrophic epidemic. Adam finally grew tired of forming this list too, and he thought silently and soberly over the content he had assembled.

There are a lot of predators for humans, Adam thought. Much more so than for ladybugs. He wasn't overly concerned about the first list, although whenever he saw black spiders he would anxiously inspect its rear end to assess whether it had a little red spot on it or not. The ones with red spots were the black widow spiders. Those were the dangerous ones, the ones that could kill him. How can you defend yourself against little black spiders with even smaller red dots? Not even the male black widow spiders had it figured out. The female black widow spider kills and eats the male promptly after mating with them. If a male black widow spider, with an understanding of the black widow spider psychology that

he assumed must be much more insightful than his own could ever hope to be, couldn't protect himself, what chance did Adam have?

All that being said, aside from that one exception, Adam did not feel he had much to worry about from the creatures in the first list. If he ever happened to be attacked by a mountain lion, or stung by a lion fish, well, he thought, at least it was natural. That and, in a weird way, it would be sort of lucky. How many people get killed by mountain lions or lion fish? Not that many, he was sure. It would be like winning a lottery. Sort of.

No, it was the second list that concerned him. The longer he spent making that list up, the deeper his paranoia became.

He looked out of the bathroom's small circular window and expected to see yellow eyes set in the bearded face of a killer, the killer's bedroom a drafty nightmare decorated with 8,000 covert photographs of Adam hanging ornament-like on metal wires. Adam shuddered, and his mind was tugged further along that back alley of thought.

He imagined that the construction worker who lay down the lumber acting as support for the bathroom he was currently sitting in was drinking heavily on the job. He heard a creaking, then the floor split suddenly, and he was

plummeting through it and landing as a bloody parcel wrapped in soapy water and porcelain shards. The limits to what he could imagine happening, right there, right then, approached the infinite. Breathing heavily, he reasoned that it was best not to let that truth get to him. Doom may be certain, but life and practicality demanded that you didn't live your life in anticipation of it. In either case, just to be safe, he decided that he was definitely not going to let his little woman off of Ladybug Island. It's a dangerous world out there.

For that matter, he decided, to hell with life and practicality: he wasn't going to leave Bathtub Land either.

He would be its ruler, and he would be a good one. Hopefully, with time, other little creatures would come and join him in his bathtub paradise. He could be guardian of them all; Cricket Cay, Mosquito Marsh, Crab Cantina, Fishy Fjord. He most wanted the fish to arrive, though he struggled to imagine how. Maybe they could swim up through the pipes. If there are fish intrepid enough to crawl out of the water and decide to breathe air, it was certainly less of a leap for them to adapt to lukewarm soapy water. Adam entertained himself for some time by playing bathtub cartographer. He imagined an ancient, parchment map modeled after those of the Spanish Conquistadors, except that this one instructed its

viewer as to geography of Bathtub Land. Adam thought further about his map, and was struck suddenly by how funny it was that you could fit the whole world on a square patch of parchment and roll it up in your pocket. He wasn't sure why, but he found it so amusing that he started laughing. Beginning as an intimate, personal giggle, it got louder and louder until it became the hearty laughter of a drunkard.

“Did you hear that?” Violet yelled at the weary Mr. Ismailov, “There was a noise in there!”

Adam's mother was reclining, puffy eyed, against the white paint of the pristine bathroom door. Mr. Ismailov stood watching over her with the detachment of a biologist.

“I didn't hear anything. You need to stop the hysterics. If Adam is in there, I'm sure he's fine. If Adam is not in there, I'm sure he's fine. Sitting there crying isn't going to help anything. We've knocked, we've yelled. He's not there, and if he is, he doesn't want to talk right now. So please, get up, and let's go have dinner. If he's in the bathroom, he'll be out by the time we're done, and if he's gone out somewhere, we'll see him from the kitchen when he comes home.”

Mr. Ismailov stooped over Adam's mother and offered her a hand. She considered it somberly, and for a moment Mr. Ismailov thought that his plea to reason had dampened her alarm.

"Dinner?"

"Yes."

Adam's mother wiped her eyes dry and yelled, "Dinner? So that's what this is all about? You standing there like Mr. Cool, not worried. Hunger? You're hungry at a time like this? Oh, let's not worry honey, because Mr. Ismailov wants his dinnerkins. Meanwhile, our *son* is probably drowned in a bathtub, or god knows what else. He could have even committed *suicide*. Did you think of that? He's been weird lately. Haven't you noticed he's been weird lately?"

"He's always been weird."

"He's always been weird . . ." she echoed absently, then collapsed into a fetal heap of tailored pastel garments.

Look at all these tiles, Adam thought. They really are very white. And very shiny. That's deceptive thinking though. Adam had been watching them for some time, and he had come to a conclusion; when you go through them all, one by

one, they start to reveal themselves as unique. A quick and passing glance may render them anonymous, but further observation proved that this view of them was puerile and shortsighted. For example, the first tile he looked at, top row, all the way to the right, had a tiny chip in it. And the second, to the left of that one, had had a yellow speck of paint on it. The third, to the left of the second one, was slightly off center and had been put in place with an unusually large quantity of grout and concrete. On and on, Adam went along the rows, not ceasing his vigil over any one particular tile until he had discovered something different about it.

There were only two that refused to cooperate. No matter how long he stared at them, he couldn't find a single distinctive quality. Initially frustrated, his condition was remedied when he finally realized that the fact that there was nothing different about only those two tiles was exactly what made them different. In that way, he reconciled these perfect tiles to the belief he had formed; that every single tile in this bathroom was an individual. That was all fine and dandy, empowering, for the tiles, but he wondered how to reconcile that with another thought. If I let my eyes glaze over the tiles and space out, he thought, they aren't individual at all – they're just, the same. What did that mean? All these tiles, each one different and yet, together, the same.

Whatever, he thought.

He had spent enough time watching the tiles. He turned his attention back towards Ladybug Island. He expected that he might find his little woman getting into some kind of mischief. Trapped in a bubble, or peering over the edge at the soapy surf. Or maybe she wasn't a trouble maker? If I'm being honest with myself, Adam thought, I don't know anything about her. He scolded himself for being so inattentive. Not likely to engage him in conversation, he would have to watch her if he had any hope of figuring out what kind of a lady she was. Adam looked at Ladybug Island; he looked from the bird's eye, then he bobbed his head along the south, the north, the east and the west of Ladybug Island. She was nowhere to be found.

Adam had the presence of mind not to overreact. If she was lost then, what would she be after a bathroom tsunami of the 'Adam panicking in the tub' variety? He slid his body carefully along the porcelain seat of the bath until his head was finally submerged in a single gurgling blub. Adam ignored the stinging in his eyes as he kept them open to methodically conduct his underwater ladybug rescue operation. No expense will be spared, he thought to himself as he gently probed the smooth bottom of the tub. After combing the depths of the bathtub

for several minutes, Adam became certain that the ladybug had not drowned. The relief he felt was short-lived.

Then what was it? He fretted and worried. Surely she's been eaten by a praying mantis, or a spider, he thought. With the world the way it was, he wouldn't even be surprised if she had been kidnapped. Bugnapped. Did the ladybug realize what an Eden Ladybug Island was? Surely she did, Adam conjectured, she must have known. She seemed to like it, love it even. How could she not? No, she was bugnapped. What kind of a creature abducts a ladybug? Adam reflected. No, she was not abducted. What a ridiculous thought. Unless there were things about the insect world that he was grossly unaware of, kidnapping was just not something that they did.

Then she did leave voluntarily. Maybe she was hungry? There doesn't seem to be anything for a ladybug to eat in here, Adam surveyed the room, unless you count that jar of potpourri over on that shelf. He glanced over at the jar of potpourri, and his eyes fell on the tip of the perfumed bamboo leaf projecting elegantly out of the jar. There she was. Amazing, he thought, I should consider work as a detective. A detective of the bathtub soaking variety. The consultations could get awkward, sure, but I'd put a wooden plank over anything private. It

would serve as both a gesture of modesty and as a nod to the practical, as I could use the plank as my work desk too. In either case, he was happy to have his little lady back.

She didn't run away, she just wanted to grab a bite to eat. All doubt as to whether the ladybug liked her island dismissed, Adam tiptoed gingerly from the tub, plucked the perfumed bamboo leaf out of the jar of potpourri, and slipped back into the water. Once there, he held the leaf over Ladybug Island and waited patiently for the ladybug to walk once more onto her bubble paradise. He put the leaf on a ledge, between a razor and a bar of soap, and determined that he would offer her the leaf periodically. That way, she wouldn't have to run off again on a food hunting expedition. His heart, it couldn't take another flight of the ladybug.

Sighing, he watched over the little ladybug's explorations. Although I don't approve of her leaving the safety of the island, he thought, she must be very pleased with what she found. A perfumed bamboo leaf is not only nutritious, but likely to help her find a manbug and start a family too. What an advantage, for a ladybug, to smell so much better than the rest. Even if there were more attractive little ladybugs out there, none were likely to smell quite as nice as her.

What am I babbling about, Adam snorted, ladybugs more attractive than her? Three perfect black dots on a lipstick red shell, the ladybug was a model of perfect femininity. Yep, that is one fine ladybug, he thought, and then he wondered if she would permit him to officiate the ceremony. Will I cry? Adam was sure he would. Adam began to hum the song that brides walk out to in big white weddings – what is that song called? Doesn't matter. Adam hummed it loudly and cheerfully while imagining the kinds of creatures that would populate the bride and grooms side at the ladybug wedding. He worried about his size, noting that he needed to walk carefully down the aisle, so as to avoid hurting any of the ladybugs' invited guests.

Is that, is that Pachelbel? Adam's mother pressed her ear to the door. It is Pachelbel. Why is Adam humming Pachelbel, she asked herself; then, putting aside that triviality, she put her hand to her chest and exhaled. He's okay then. A corpse of worry flew from the hall, leaving an incredible vacuum whistling behind it. Halls being averse to empty spaces, it was filled immediately by Adam's mother's very next thought: then why is he ignoring me? The corpse of worry had been replaced by a bear of anger.

"Mr. Ismailov," she declared, "tear down this door!"

It's shrinking, Adam realized as he glumly watched the now scummy surface of the bathwater. Ladybug Island is shrinking and there's nothing I can do about it. He had already considered every possible way to restore Ladybug Island to its virgin state. Putting more soap in the bath near the faucet, then rushing new water in torrents over it and so create soon-to-be reinforcement suds was the most sensible solution he had come up with. Sure, that might make the bathtub soapier, but *those* soap islands wouldn't be Ladybug Island. They'd be some other kind of island. His little ladybug didn't want to be on other islands. She wanted to be on Ladybug Island. Obviously. It was an island for ladybugs. Who knows what those other islands would be?

What to do? The soap formation formerly known as Ladybug Island had deteriorated. It once had peaks and valleys. It was vast, for a soapsud formation, and it was majestic. It looked now like the filmy haze over a puddle of gasoline. Thin and toxic and curdled. Adam watched as his little ladybug struggled to remain afloat on such a bleak and tenuous raft. He wiped his face. He cupped his hands. He breathed out a ragged lungful of air, and then he did it without looking. The ladybug landed upside down in the scoop of water and old soap she had been thrown with. Adam nearly stepped on her as he grabbed a towel from the wall and wrapped himself with it. He pushed the bathroom door open, noting that he

didn't have to twist the knob for it to open, and he slipped through the sliver of space that it yielded before it abruptly stopped. His father's new shoes prevented it from opening fully. Mr. Ismailov was nearly finished dismantling the doorknob when Adam exited.

"The doorknob is broken," Adam said as he entered his own room, closed the door, and twisted the lock.

Adam lay damply on his newly laundered sheets, a silhouette of moisture trickling from his torso in repose. Adam closed his eyes and hummed an indistinct tune. Something harmless, a wooly interpretation of an ancient nursery rhyme. After several minutes humming the tune, he adapted lyrics. They went, "Ladybug, ladybug, where'd you go? You won't be safe there, don't you know? I know a place you'll want to be – it's called Ladybug Island, please come with me."

He murmured it slowly, and at a volume so lowly, that no one but him could hear.

Adam's mother and Mr. Ismailov didn't try to speak to Adam once he had gone into his room. It would be better to speak to him tomorrow, once whatever had gotten into him had passed. They sat around the sunflowers set in a white

porcelain vase at the center of the table and ate cold chicken breast and soggy green beans.

“Do you want to tell Adam the good news you had for him earlier, Mr. Ismailov? I think he could use some good news, right about now. You know, with these moods he gets in. Maybe it’ll help.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Why not?”

Mr. Ismailov cut a chunk out of the dry chicken breast larger than he should have and spoke crudely as he chewed the fibrous mass.

“My colleague is sending his son to a sleep away camp, in Alaska. It’s a camp where they learn survival skills in the wilderness. Make fires, set traps, navigate with the stars. That sort of thing. He’s always reading Jack London, I thought he might want to go too.”

“Oh that sounds lovely,” she frowned, “maybe a little dangerous, though. But still, I think he would like it. Why don’t you go tell him about it?”

Mr. Ismailov set down his fork and knife and looked at Adam’s mother.

“Do you think Adam is ready for a summer camp like that?”

Adam's mother moved reflexively to pluck a petal from the sunflowers in the white vase. She placed her hand back on the tabletop once she realized there weren't any petals left to pluck.

"No," she smiled inwardly as the fear that had begun growing at the mention of sleep away camp dissipated, "I think not."

Mr. Ismailov grunted, and together they finished every last bite of their cold, soggy meal.