What We Had in Common

We sit, backs against the concrete wall, eyes averted from the bars. Bea, with her soft hands and baffling vocabulary, is nothing like the rest of us, but that will not save her. The soldiers only care that we are not like them, however different we may be from each other. Bea's only been in a few months. I've been here four times that, but she's already taken to staring at the opposite wall and not answering when she's spoken to. How precious. She was a psychology student before it all started. I think she's cracked. I saw the way they were looking at her this morning. Her sentence will soon be carried out. They take the weakest first. Weakest is the one thing no one has ever called me.

Today Bea is talking. She is telling me about her mother. She speaks with an easy admiration I've never heard my own daughter cast upon anyone. Bea's mother was tall and graceful and defiant. It is, supposedly, the strength of her mother's memory that sustains her. It sounds like her mother may have been a bit too high profile. Probably taken in the early days, and Bea sent to live with wealthy relatives. That's how things usually happen for these elites. They are born with the privilege to choose whether to get involved with the problems the rest of us inherit – our only heirlooms. But it doesn't matter. Bea will soon meet the same fate as everyone else. My own daughter doesn't seek protection. She knows she can rely only on herself. No one has ever come to her rescue. I made sure of that. And there's no reason for her to think anyone will now. With any luck she has lived long enough to lie about who she is and what she believes – to deny having any connection to me. She was always too clever for idealism.

I tell Bea not to expect to hear the charges against her. Anyway, none of us are innocent. We've all done something, even if it isn't what they think. And, above all, our most undeniable crime is who we are and what we are not. What could I say in my defense? The floor of the cell

has grown sticky from those who piss themselves at the sound of the firing squad. We all do it.

Leaning against the wall next to me, Bea is mumbling poetry under her breath. I am using one impossibly long fingernail to scrape the dirt from under the others. It won't be long before they arrive to bring us a meal, and as we are eating they will return to take someone away. This practice, killing one of us while the rest of us eat, would destroy our appetites if they did not keep us so very hungry. The thought of eating makes me feel both elation and nausea. I can't quite make out Bea's words, but I am trying to ignore her anyway. I am running out of dirt to scrape away.

Bea raises her voice. She is talking real shit now – no more poetry. She tells about how, when she was ten-years-old, she got herself locked out on the rooftop of the university where her parents taught before it all fell apart. She was on a school break, and since her mother and father had to teach classes she was allowed to run around the campus like it was her personal playground. In one building, she found the stairs to the roof. It was the tallest building for miles around and she felt the power of the big sky belonging only to her. "On the rooftop," she tells me, "I was the largest and strongest and wisest person on the earth. I could do anything." She had been standing up there spying on ant people for hours before she tried the door to the stairwell again and realized there was no handle on the outside. She clawed at the stubborn steel. She cut her fingers trying to force them into the space between the door and the frame, and then exhausted herself hammering with her fists and calling for help. Finally she just sat and stared at her reflection in the burnished surface. She tells me she thought she could see her future as she sat there. As the sun set and left her in darkness, she imagined herself growing old on that

rooftop. She would become part of the roof, sinking into the tar beneath her, and the roof would become part of her. She would lose herself. The stars came out one by one, but she only saw them in reflection because the door had become her whole world. She heard an owl call and imagined it was circling above her, hunting. The owl never struck, but by the time the moon was overhead the door opened and her parents were there, wrapping her in their arms. Her mother was shaking.

“Enough,” I say. “Please.” But she has found her voice and will not be silenced by me.

She was fifteen before she started paying attention to the more important things her mother was making speeches about all across the country, she says. She comes home one night after a party with her friends and passes the doorway to the parlor. It looks like her mother is having yet another gathering of her students from the university. Tweed coats and denim jackets crowd the room. Bea wants to continue up the stairs unnoticed, being a little dizzy from champagne and hoping to hide it, but her mother spots her and gestures for her to sit down. As she lies with her mother’s arm wrapped around her, Bea listens to the ideas being passed back and forth between the great thinkers, about equality and land rights and education and religious freedom. A man sitting in the armchair catches her eye. He looks young enough to be one of her mother’s older students. He has dark, curly hair that grows in volume each time he runs his agitated fingers through it, which he does often and absentmindedly. As she listens, Bea is fighting sleep, so warm from the alcohol and her mother's arm around her. Her eyelids droop. She tries to sit up straighter and stay awake. The man is looking at her, and winks. She feels the heat of a blush on

her cheeks.

It was dawn before the guests began to show themselves out. The man lingered, talking to Bea's mother. He was a political writer hoping she would read and comment on his latest book. Bea saw her mother place the manuscript on the mantle, but the man picked it up again and slipped it behind the encyclopedias on the bookshelf. "Emil," the man said offering his hand to Bea on his way out. It was warm, and he smiled and winked again before leaving.

Bea said goodnight to her mother and pretended to go to bed, but slipped downstairs instead to retrieve the manuscript. She sat on the floor, curled up in the corner where one bookshelf met the wall, and Emil's words brought life back to her champagne deadened senses. He did no more than describe what she could see with her own eyes walking through the city, but through his words she saw it all differently. She felt amazed. She felt angry. She felt guilty and she wanted to act -- to show that she wasn't part of the problem.

I have heard this story before, though it is the first time Bea has told it, and I know how it will end. I strain my eyes to look past Bea to the dim hall from which our meal will arrive.

The firing squad has been at it for a while now. Others have been taken to be executed, from other cells in other hallways. We do not know who has been taken, but we hear as each bullet takes a life. Bea turns her back to the bars, facing me, becoming a silhouette. She continues her story, and I only listen because there is nothing else to hear besides the gunfire.

Bea says she finds out that Emil works for a small newspaper, and she strays from her old routines so as to pass by his office daily. Every day she makes up some excuse not to walk home from school with her friends, and passes alone by the newspaper. After a month of this she

finally succeeds in having Emil spot her. He seems happy to see her, and invites her to have tea with him in the cafe on the corner, but she realizes this will be too much of a delay to explain to her mother, so she thanks him and continues on her way.

She keeps walking past the newspaper on her way home each day. Sometimes she sees Emil, but she never stops longer than it takes to exchange a few words. A few months pass before Emil stops her and says he has permission from her mother to invite Bea for tea. They proceed to the cafe. She tells him she's read his book and was hoping to find some way to help, to make things better. He tells her that learning and reading more and opening her eyes are the most important things to do first. The rest will follow soon enough. She is not persuaded by his stay-in-school speech, however, and continues to press him. By the summer he has secured her an unpaid position running errands for the newspaper.

This is how it happened. In the next few years she starts studying at the university, but in all of her free time she is running errands for the newspaper or drinking tea with Emil. Her mother is invited to travel to make speeches with more frequency, and Bea's father was always one to spend days at a time at the university, often sleeping in his office, so it is Emil who checks in on Bea to see if she needs anything. Not long after that they are always together. They attend demonstrations. They distribute copies of Emil's books. They stand on the street corners and argue with those yet to be awakened to the cause. He says he wants to marry her, but their plans are interrupted when Bea's father disappears. Bea and her mother and Emil huddled together in the sitting room. They had heard of people disappearing, sometimes taken, sometimes going into hiding, but they couldn't imagine why Bea's mathematician father would meet this fate. They found out through a colleague that the soldiers, on what had become routine searches of the

university, had discovered compromising papers in his office. “He probably never even knew they were there,” Bea says. “Some student probably left them for him and it never crossed his mind to either read them or to throw them away.”

Emil wanted Bea’s mother to sell the house and let him take them away from the city, but Bea’s mother refused to be intimidated. She left an hour later to make another speech. She made three more speeches just that day, but she added to her usual script, including several accusations against the leaders of the country, calling them cowards and kidnappers. Torn between Emil’s appeals for caution and her mother’s cautions against sacrificing liberty for security, Bea chose her mother over Emil pretty quickly, put everything she had learned at the newspaper to use, and began distributing copies of her mother’s speeches all over the city. She stopped attending classes. She had no time for Emil and his constant pleas that she run away with him.

Bea takes a breath. Who knows, maybe she is considering the life she could have had, somewhere on a quiet mountain road, in the forest, a small house with Emil, a few children, far away from the soldiers and the searches that always provide some reason to take you.

Bea’s mother is arrested. There’s no mystery to this one. Bea and her mother are having dinner at home when the soldiers break down the door and take her away. Bea is left sitting at the dining room table looking at the chair where her mother used to be, two china plates stained by stewed tomatoes, while the soldiers tear up the house finding evidence of her mother’s subversion.

Hours after the soldiers left, Emil arrived. He had heard. He wanted to know if now she would finally listen to him. She cursed Emil for suggesting that she would run and hide rather

than fighting for the release of her mother and father. He told her she was too young – too naive. That was the last time they ever spoke.

Then, Bea tells me, she became relentless. She sought assignments in aid of the resistance. She ran secret messages across the city. She hid people in her home until they could be secreted out of town. She met a new man with a lot of ideas far more dangerous than Emil's. She continued printing her mother's speeches.

"Idiot," I say. "You were just a child. If you had stayed quiet, they might have forgotten about you."

"Maybe," she says. "But I was sure they were coming for me either way, and if they weren't coming, I took it as proof I wasn't doing enough."

Her new boyfriend, Sid, was a bomb maker, she tells me. He was a chemistry genius. The cabinets of his apartment were overflowing with commonplace materials that he knew how to combine for the purposes of death and destruction. Bea was attracted to how unapologetic he was – to the inarguable impact he was having. He introduces her to others in his circle and soon she has an alias and becomes the editor of their anti-government publications.

It wasn't much longer before the soldiers came for her. One day Sid disappeared, and a few days later it was her turn. Maybe she's right. Maybe they would have arrested her anyway, and at least she did something to hurt them first.

When they came for me, I made the mistake of asking what I had done. I had been so careful to do nothing. The soldiers would not answer me, but I soon learned what I had in

common with the others. We were poor. We said our prayers, though more out of habit than faith. We took care of our neighbors. Sometimes we had missed paying our taxes because we had to eat. There is only one main road that leads to the city from my home, and so we pass my daughter's school on the way. She is there, out front with her friends. All of them have mothers sitting in the truck with me. The fathers and brothers had been taken long ago. The girls collectively reach out their arms, raise their voices in a wail and run towards us, except my daughter who lowers her head and goes back inside the school.

They put us all in different cells. There was nothing to do, but wait and breathe the stale air. We kept track of the days by the light filtering through the doorway at the end of the hall outside the bars. That is how I know that almost a year passes before Bea is dragged in, screaming and biting, swearing revenge. She spends a few days making speeches to us, trying to rouse us to action, and shouting down the hall to where she imagines the soldiers are listening. She loses volume as the hunger and cold set in. Then one day she simply sinks to the floor on the wall beside me, falling silent for the first time. She is like that for many days before she starts telling me about her mother.

A soldier arrives with our meal. We seem to have four assigned to us, and he is one of our regulars. He is at least as young as Bea, short and spindly, with shaggy black hair under his cap. He needs a haircut. Before I grew so hungry I could have knocked him over with a sneeze. His black eyes are utterly opaque in the shadows of the hallway. I am trying to imagine how I must look to him. To me, he is an overgrown insect. He pushes the tray of food under the bars, then watches to see that we each take our own share and no one else's. The penalty for stealing is

immediate execution. This is identical to the penalty for saying we are hungry, or asking what the charges are against us. Bea is frozen next to me. She does not reach for her bowl as the tray passes. “No hunger strikes,” I whisper to her, quoting the rules, the only safe words to say when the soldiers are listening, not that it’s anything to me. We’re all bound to die eventually. She continues to stare. The soldier has an announcement to make. “As of today we have purged our country of 12,000. Another 20,000 await us in prison, and more are arrested every day. The future is bright. All hail General Lamb.” We salute automatically. The almost empty tray is being passed back towards the bars and Bea finally reaches out to snatch her share. The young soldier sniffs and walks away.

We suck the mush out of the bowls, focused on sending it into our empty stomachs. There are no spoons. Perhaps we should be grateful for bowls – that they don’t just feed us out of troughs like animals. Bea is weeping now and won’t eat. “Sid used to call me fearless,” she says.

My daughter knew things were getting bad long before I was able to understand. She came home one day after school, flushed. There had been soldiers there questioning everyone. “We have to be careful now,” she said. “The government suspects everyone, but especially the poor.” I told her that maybe if the general left the people to their land, there would be no need to suspect. “You can’t talk like that anymore,” Cece warned me. “They blame people like us for the country’s problems. That’s what they’re teaching us in school now. We are like a plague, they say.” I heard my daughter pleading with me to be careful, to protect myself, and I knew she was right, but I also had a small sense of my duty to tear down a world in which a teacher could tell a child she was a plague.

I tried to keep my head down and behave, but I couldn't rouse myself to false love for the general, and people already knew where my sympathies landed. This was before they had taken the men. My neighbor, Franz, kept stopping me in the market trying to hand me leaflets. I dropped or burned all of them. I read nothing. I begged him to stop, but he said, “I know you are with us. I know you feel as we do.”

I did give food away in the market. I admit that. It started because of my neighbor, Ariel. When the soldiers took her husband away Ariel came to weep at my house and I held her and made tea, and sent Cece to find her son at school. When Cece came back to tell us the boys had been rounded up too, we all wept together. Without her husband and son Ariel struggled to find money. Her income went to her taxes, so when she was hungry I fed her. She would come by the market and I would fill her basket. After a while we started to hear that there were many women in the same situation. Some of them had joined the movement and some had not, but on a whole they had lost their men, no one would hire them, and the government was looking for any excuse to seize their property. There were a few of us in the market who stopped charging these women for food. It wasn’t a movement. We didn’t organize. We just knew it was the right thing to do. We also knew enough to do it secretly. When Cece found out, she was furious and scared. She said it was exactly the kind of thing the government would use against us.

Ariel was arrested a few days before me. Maybe they would have taken me on the same day if their truck had not already been full. I don’t know whether she is still alive. Sometimes they move prisoners from other cells into ours. Sometimes I look to see if it is her.

The soldier returns. This time he is followed by the other three, and we know it is time. He slides

the bars open and two walk into our cell while the other two stay in the doorway. They walk down the narrow aisle flanked by our feet as we desperately tuck our knees under our chins to make space for them and to make ourselves smaller – to go unnoticed. There is nowhere to look but at their khaki knees. They take a woman from the back corner. One grabs her by each arm and drags her to her feet. Her eyes are wild and she tries to pull away from them, but the soldiers tighten their grip. She cannot believe her time has come. She probably thought that if she stayed quiet this would all end before they got around to her execution. She hadn't been here long enough to stop believing someone would rescue her. I never expected anyone to rescue me. This woman faints before they get her to the door and the soldiers grunt as they pull her arms over their shoulders to keep from dropping her. That's it. In a few minutes we will hear the gunfire. I never knew her name.

I think today is close to Cece's birthday. It is hard to know for sure. I wish there was something I could do to let her know I'm thinking of her. I wonder if her day will be a happy one.

The morning before I was arrested I had asked her to stay home from school. "They're not teaching you anything," I said. "Why keep going? Stay home and help your mother." Cece was angry. She launched into a speech about small acts of defiance adding up to undeniable proof of treason in the eyes of the government. She said it was that kind of wrong thinking that the soldiers and spies were looking for. She spoke with such conviction it was hard to tell whether or not she had bought into what they were teaching her at school. When I asked she just said, "You don't understand anything," and left. That was the last conversation we had. It would be nice to know how she is spending her birthday.

There is a woman here who swears she loves General Lamb. Her family has been loyal through several generations. She even has a great uncle who fought with him in the war, side-by-side on the front lines. She doesn't think she belongs here with us. She has always paid her taxes, doesn't read books, and has never tried to help anyone who doesn't share her loyalty to our great leader. Her family gave up their prayers long before she was born. Her only article of faith is that the general has the country's best interest at heart in all that he does. She sees herself as one of them, and cannot believe they would see her as part of the problem. "Do you think the soldiers will talk to me?" she asks anyone who will listen.

There is more room now than there was before. No one has been brought to us since the last woman was taken. I stretch my legs out in front of me. Sometimes such an absence is not filled for weeks, but now the soldiers appear in the hall, all four, herding a shadow towards us. The bars slide open and it is shoved inside, falling to its knees. She is tall. She will take up too much room. And she is filthy. Bea is looking at this woman and her face looks broken. The woman is crawling to the empty space at the back of the cell, in the shadow, in the dark. Everyone moves aside and away from her. They are all watching the woman, but I am watching Bea. All of the muscles of her face are contorted. I touch her shoulder to call her attention back to me. She brings her head around, saying "My mother," but other than speaking the words she doesn't seem at all sure what to do. I look from Bea to the woman who is her mother and is now dragging her body into position against the wall. This woman who stood so defiantly against General Lamb, and made so many speeches, has lost her voice or has nothing more to say. I look back to Bea and whisper, "Go to her," but Bea can only stare, so I go back to watching the

opposite wall. It is none of my business.

"Aziza," Bea whispers to me. "Her name is Aziza."

I look at Bea, and then rise to my feet. "Aziza," I say, but the woman does not look towards me. "Aziza!" I try more loudly, and now there is a glimmer of recognition. "Your daughter is here."

Now Aziza is moving in slow motion. Her back unrolls tall and straight against the wall. She is squinting against the shadows created by the dim light ahead. She begins to struggle to her feet. Her whole body is vibrating. Her clothing is loose around her bones. If she was thin and graceful before, she is skeletal now. She sinks back to the ground and the name comes out in a deep sob, "Bea."

Bea is on her feet and scrambles to the back of the cell where she cradles her mother like a baby. "You're alive," she says over and over. "You're alive. You survived." Just saying it seems like a spell that is giving her strength, but her mother is still sobbing. She does not speak. Not so alive, I think.

I am watching Bea and her mother clutch each other and thinking about what this woman must have looked like standing behind a podium making speeches against our great general. Then I remember the last time I had wanted to cradle my Cece in my lap. It was a long time before, at my stall in the market. There were always small children running around who should have been in school, but their parents could only afford to send them sometimes, and the rest of the time they were helping with the family business, or minding younger siblings, but my Cece was always in school.

I'm remembering one day when she wasn't at school, though. That is, she had been at

school, but in the late morning I see her running towards me in the market. Tears are streaming down her face and when she reaches me she buries herself in my skirt, wailing. She must have been seven-years-old. She never cries, so I'm worried at first, but then I think what could a seven-year-old have to be so serious about? I am in the middle of a sale so I let her cling to my skirts until I'm finished, then pull her off me and ask, "What's the matter?" Her face is a mess. That's when she asks me, "Why don't I have a papa?" You see, this was before they took everyone's papas, and her classmates had been teasing her.

Maybe I should have taken her into my arms then, but instead I just tell her, "Because you don't need a papa. Papas are for little girls who don't know how to take care of themselves – for mamas who don't know how to care for their little girls, and that's not us."

She looks at me for a long time. Just sits on that stool and stares at me. I have work to do. I make a few more sales, chat with my customers. When I turn around again she has gone back to school.

Bea and Aziza sit side-by-side now. I sit next to the bars. At least I have more light. I inspect my toenails. Bea is whispering to Aziza, telling her stories about Emil and Sid, reciting poetry, talking without stopping as if to transfer vital energy to her mother. I am trying to remember a story Cece once had to read for school before her teachers had stopped teaching. It was like a fable, but I don't remember what the lesson was. There was a wise man on a mission for a king, and he had to find a singular object with the power to give a hopeless man hope, and bring a hopeful man to his knees. I remember that in the end it was a ring that the wise man brought to his king, but I don't remember why.

I want to tell someone about my daughter – to tell all the stories from Cece's childhood I can remember, but I don't think anyone wants to listen. If I could talk to Cece, I would tell her about her papa. He was not a bad man. She deserves to know something about him. If she asked one more time, I'd tell her he wanted to take care of us, but I wouldn't let him, so she can blame me for that, and maybe she can imagine he was some kind of hero. Maybe that would give her strength, to think her papa was a hero even though her mama couldn't be. I hadn't thought of that before.