

texas blind salamander

## I.

And then, after having finished all of the necessary medicinal duties for the newly born Fiona O'Brien, Dr. Sanders brandished the infant with a government-mandated Glock G43 pistol. Fiona's parents proudly looked on, and her mother, Virginia O'Brien, gushed, "How great! Richard, get a picture! Better yet, Dr. Sanders, would you mind taking one of the three of us?" Dr. Sanders acquiesced, and the two parents posed around Fiona's hospital crib. Virginia repositioned the pistol to highlight its monogram, "F.M.O'B," for Fiona Marie O'Brien. Two somewhat beautiful parents and their beautiful American baby—the photo was so indicative of the O'Brien family, Virginia thought, that she decided they need not hire a photographer for their Christmas card that year. Virginia didn't even mind the sweat, fat and blood of labor still embalmed on her face and body, though Richard thought she looked rather unappealing.

"She really is a beautiful baby," flattered Dr. Sanders. "Observe how that pistol weight doesn't even faze her! Marvelous."

"Well, I would hope not! We went to fetal conditioning every day," affirmed Virginia. Richard, who had heretofore been annoyed by his wife's extravagant spending to ready their toddler for the world outside the womb, was somewhat pleased to see how painlessly his baby adjusted to that very world and all its accouterments.

The parents kissed their baby goodbye as Dr. Sanders wheeled her to the nursery. Left alone, Virginia hugged her husband—a loveless hug, the first contact they'd made since doing their duty in conceiving their child.

Two days later, Dr. Sanders deemed Fiona fit to trade the hospital for the world. Richard, Virginia, and baby Fiona waited patiently in the security line to depart from

General George S. Patton Hospital. The line was, however, moving at a particularly glacial pace. The howl of twelve newborns' crying notwithstanding, Virginia thought Richard to be tenser than the situation called for.

“I mean really, what is taking so long?”

“Calm down Richard, it's probably one of these idiot mothers,” squawked Virginia.

A cacophonous alarm blared at the exit, and three security nurses pushed to the front of the line. “Ma'am, where is your baby's Glock?” demanded a fleshy lady with a ferocious face. “No one leaves without one.”

Virginia whispered into Richard's ear, “What did I tell you? Some people—just needlessly noncompliant.” Richard didn't much care for anything his wife said to him, but whispers were doubly offensive, especially as she had a horrific tendency to hiss, and every “s” was felt with a deep and uncomfortable tingle down his bony spine.

After the moronic mother and her unruly newborn were duly reprimanded, the O'Brien's left for their car in the vast parking lot. 3 minutes of silence, then Virginia asked, “Why don't we play something cheery, something perky for Fiona? Play something by Charles Ives. Maybe *Fanfare for the Common Man*, or *Hoedown from Rodeo*.”

Virginia's knowledge of music was restricted to one composer: Ives. Mannish, brassy, and unabashedly American, he was the musical equivalent of her temperament. Richard's love of music was bolstered by the fact that the sounds from the speakers often blotted out the sounds of Virginia's incessant observational idiocy. For example, he thankfully had not heard her once asking, “What do cows do in their free time—I mean

before they're eaten. Do you think they play hide and seek?" He subsequently also missed her exclamatory, "My God! Look between their legs! Those *balls!*" It was music that saved him from explaining that cows don't have hands to tag each other and thus cannot play hide and seek effectively, and that it wasn't a scrotum she was seeing, but rather an utter. In fact, music was the only thing Richard O'Brien truly could say he loved. He hoped, however, in time, that Fiona would be added to that mantle as well.

He clicked on Ives' *Appalachian Spring* and turned it to the level necessary to drown out Virginia—twelve.

"A bit slow, don't you think? I mean, it's not a dirge, it's a celebration!" Virginia adjusted her vocal volume accordingly to make sure she was heard over the A Major chords coming through the speakers.

Begrudgingly, he replied, "I don't want to frighten her. It's a lullaby, so she can close her eyes and rest. And dream."

The O'Brien family drove to the relaxed opening of *Appalachian Spring*. Both Richard and Virginia realized they were waiting impatiently for the day that Fiona could talk and they'd be spared of only each other's company. Both waited anxiously to see which of them their child would take after. Both desperately prayed it wouldn't be the other.

Once home, it was decided that Richard would settle Fiona into her room. He had only days before finished painting various landscapes on her wall—towers of unblemished limestone, plains positively green with envy, and gargantuan trees jetting into the ceiling as they once had the sky. Limestone now blemished, carved in memorial of war stars. Plains now brown with the rot of death, marked only with headstones. Trees

now leveled, too many people to bury for superfluous timberlands. All nature of a world she would never know, which she would hopefully come to appreciate as fully as Richard had when it surrounded him. Her eyes scoured each landscape curiously and completely, and she started to doze off. She sucked on the handle of her Glock as a pacifier in proxy, and closed her eyes to sleep, and dream. Richard hummed Mahler.

The next morning, Virginia went to check on her daughter. Pissed, she screamed, “Richard, get up here *right now!*” Richard knew what was coming and felt no particular rush to prove himself right, and thus nonchalantly moseyed his way to the room, pausing at every phony family photo of the two of them that lined the halls of their flat. One struck him as especially egregious. Framed in flamboyant fake gold, it depicted Richard dipping Virginia, and planting a walloping, wet kiss on her. He marveled at the fact that he was able to support Virginia’s weight long enough for the dip to be photographed. Richard was dressed in khaki, and Virginia was adorned in a gaudy yellow frock that so matched her complexion it looked as though she was simply a mass of unchiseled skin with a head.

Once in the room, the head harped, “Where in *the hell* is her Glock? I looked everywhere, so you can either tell me where you put it on your own volition,” –upon which she wielded her own Glock and pointed it at Richard, who remained unfazed—“or I can coerce you to.”

“Really, Virginia, this gets tiresome. What’s she need it for? You’ve clearly got enough gunpowder in those veins for the three of us.” This was true. Virginia had gotten trigger happy to a point of near calamity, once shooting a manikin—unbeknownst to her, she thought the woman had simply undergone failed facial reconstruction—in a clothing

store for not responding to her query of, “Does this flatter my figure? Well, *answer me!*” It was Richard’s opinion that this was the same manikin who led her to believe she looked attractive in bright yellow. That person, Richard thought, might actually deserve to be shot.

“She’s had her fetal training, she can handle this. Now give it back. Who knows, we could be robbed in the middle of the night, and then what? We just let her die because *you* are inclined to pussyfoot around this world? Absolutely not.” Virginia had no qualms making affronts to Richard’s masculinity. The most virile aspect of his, she thought, was that he had succeeded in getting her pregnant. In the walls of their home as opposed to the walls of the hospital, she thought this was a more indicative Christmas card photograph: her with a gun pointed at her husband as the baby looked on.

Richard’s face lit up. “Why don’t I sleep in the room with her? Then she wouldn’t need hers, and I’d have mine.” Virginia’s contempt for her husband had never been so blatantly written on her face, but she couldn’t deny the tantalizing prospect of a night’s sleep alone, without the man who’d become an accidental tourist in their together home. She didn’t always hate her husband, and remembered just then the distinct turning point when she realized she’d begun to.

Dinner, the night they discovered Fiona’s conception: “Now that we’ve got this part over and done with, I just wanted to say that I hate you,” Richard lifelessly disclosed. Virginia, unperturbed but more than a little surprised at his candor, put down her lamb shank.

“I know, honey. I hate you too, but that’s just modern marriage. And don’t you *dare* tell the Henderson’s,” she spat as she resumed devouring the shank. “Or I will kill you.”

Virginia had often thought of shooting her husband, especially after having successfully conceived Fiona. What purpose did this simp now serve? But such a man was a waste of ammunition, she thought. Richard had also, at times, dreamt of shooting his wife, but that required too much physical exertion. Moreover, he had desperately wanted the child.

Realizing that he may be plotting to turn impressionable Fiona against her, Virginia demanded, “We alternate nights, and at 12 months, she gets that Glock back.”

## II.

Five years passed, and both Virginia and Richard inexplicably managed not to kill the other. Fiona had spent every night of the last five years with her parents on their alternating schedule. Virginia’s campaign to win over her daughter and pass down her behavioral affects was to defame her husband. “Honey, I know you love daddy,” she would say, “but he’s—well, daddy’s not much of a man. One day, you’ll understand, you’ll meet someone like him in the world. And if a man like that tries to woo you, you have my full and unmitigated endorsement to shoot him.” She also wanted her daughter to be an expert sharpshooter, and thus carried out nightly target practice on the stuffed animals that populated the room.

Richard’s approach was much subtler. Nights were spent listening to Mahler, reading Whitman, and gazing at Monet. His endgame was twofold: Richard wanted his

daughter to appreciate the things in the world that he so loved, and he hoped that by exposing her to the beauty of these geniuses that she would be consequently exposed to the ugliness of her simpleton mother, and the world at large. Much more pleasant, he thought, than shooting Teddy bears. For her part, if she had any proclivity towards one parent over the other, Fiona wasn't letting it show.

On the day of the Draft—her first day of school—Virginia had dressed Fiona in a staunch gray polo with a black skirt, around which was wrapped the holster carrying her Glock.

“Listen, no matter what Department they assign you, there are important things to be done! Do your duties with pride, with a head up,” Virginia affirmed as she patted her back and loaded her into the car. Richard somewhat surprisingly agreed with his wife, though he had hoped the school would assign her to an area concerning the artistic endeavors necessary to the national effort.

When Richard was drafted, he was placed in the English Department. All told, he wrote more than 1,000 obituaries for dead soldiers. His first ones, he remembered, were outrageously amateurish, bordering on offensive to the family of the honorably deceased: “ALEXNDER WILSON dyed in war frum bein shot in the face is surived by his mom end too sisters he will be misst.”

“REAGAN MCDONALD dyed in war frum bein bombed by grenad he bled to deaf end will be misst bye many.” It was all the more distasteful in that they were written in crayon.

The only reason Richard was now able to laugh at these obituaries was because he'd never met Alexander Wilson or Reagan McDonald, and had such an emotional



aloofness from the two that allowed him to see the humor in his kindergarten attempts to pay tribute to death. Funny, he thought, that he should pay tribute to death before even understanding what it was to die, or, for that matter, to live. Disheartening, he thought, that so many people were dying that they condescended to using kindergartners to memorialize them.

Virginia had been drafted into the Department of Physical Education. Even at the age of five, her brutish stature started to show, which made her ideal to train for combat. Ten years into her schooling, she was a gargantuan heap of a woman, and one would need a passport to get from one shoulder to the next. Even at 15, she had started to develop the tendencies that Richard would 15 years later come to know and loathe. Volatile, petty, obtuse, narrow-minded, inartistic—she made for the perfect American. At 20, she got into a spat with an officer over the appropriate use of the word “your,” upon which almost all of these traits were displayed in their utmost.

“Benjamin Miller, this is your rifle. Clean up after yourself and bear your arms like the rest of us,” she wrote on a post-it next to an abandoned rifle. Benjamin Miller, himself a tiny mouse of a man who wished he’d been placed in the English Department, was infuriated.

Benjamin had discovered—like so many others—that when one is forced to do work they detest, the world is wanting wonder, and protecting the tiny pleasures and passions one has left becomes paramount. Grammar was one of those passions, apparently. “How comforting it must be to those we defend that this hulk of a woman can spell so damned fantastically. Listen up Americans, she’s funded by *you’re* tax dollars!” he screamed at her the next day.

“Shut the hell up, you mousy little faggot!” For an English Departmental aspirant, his response was decidedly rather coarse and unintelligent. Benjamin Miller shot Virginia in the kneecap. After his hanging, doctors were able to harvest his kneecap and replace it accordingly. Virginia was perhaps most incensed that this mishap had prevented her from ever seeing active combat. Richard was most incensed that this event had precipitated their meeting and eventual unhappy nuptials.

He wrote: “BENJAMIN MILLER, displaying cowardice perhaps unparalleled, was hanged by the neck for treason in the case of friendly fire against fellow comrade, VIRGINIA RAND.” Thus the two met and married and Virginia was furnished with a macabre gimp that Richard felt all the more warranted his comparison of her to a ghoulish witch that ate solely children.

Looking at his own child now, Richard wondered which Department she’d be forced into. General George A. Custer Elementary was by and large considered a decent school, and received heftier governmental military funding than most others, so at the very least he needn’t fear that her schooling would take place in mediocre lodgings. He was plagued by the thought of his daughter having to train for combat like her mother, but Fiona’s physicality was more akin to that of his—long and lean as opposed to colossal and brawny. He also, however, didn’t want her to be assigned to the English Department. What need had she, at five, to see daily doses of death? Richard didn’t want to harden his child as he was hardened. One can’t help but be unsentimental and unromantic about death after composing thousands of ephemeral epitaphs for strangers. Richard did not weep when his mother died, he did not weep when his sister committed suicide, he would not weep when his wife died. And yet he would weep if Fiona died.

Virginia made no secret what Department she wanted Fiona drafted into. “Well, Fiona, I would be *thrilled* if you were put in Physical Education like mommy was!”

“Why did you never go to war mom?” Fiona pondered from her seat.

“Well, honey, a gutless fag shot me in the leg, and then mommy had to go to the infirmary.” Virginia was direct.

“What’s that?”

“An infirmary is a hospital, and a *fag* is of little consequence to you, seeing as you’ll never have to meet one.” Virginia looked back at the car seat of her daughter and grinned a toothy, plaque-ridden smile. “But don’t worry, mommy’s all better now. We traded kneecaps!”

Richard thought briefly about crashing the car on her side. Fiona was in the car seat directly behind him, and he knew he wouldn’t get convicted for having fortuitously been t-boned. He was just selfish enough not to care about the other driver’s conviction and probable hanging. Unluckily for him, the massive brick walls of General George A. Custer Elementary crept into view, leaving no time now to carry out secondhand vehicular manslaughter on his wife. The parents dropped off their child and hoped for the best, which is all one can do in the dubious battlefield of American living.

Fiona returned home by bus at approximately 3:30 that afternoon. Both Richard and Virginia were exceedingly anxious to find out what Department had drafted their daughter.

“Music!” exclaimed the animated Fiona. “I got Music! I’m so excited!”

Virginia was perplexed. “What does one do in the Music Department?”

In fact, it was only recently that the Department was created, and only implemented in schools with enough bodies to spare. Richard explained, “She’ll be composing requiems.”

“And I get to play the violin at funerals! I’m so excited!” Fiona was blissful, blithely unaware of the casualness with which she spewed excitement of learning an instrument for the sole purpose of comforting friends, parents, children, and widows in mourning. Richard, too, was elated. The circumstances notwithstanding, his daughter would always have music.

### III.

“I read today that there are some animals that have evolved past the point of needing eyes. In Texas, there are salamanders who live in caves and are completely blind, no eyes! The eyes simply disappeared after so many years of being not needed, isn’t that wild?” the now-ten-year-old Fiona posited to her parents. “I mean it’s strange to think that animals can adapt that way! Bodies can make provisions, as it were. Makes you wonder why we haven’t evolved past the point of belly buttons—what purpose do they serve?”

Thinking of eyeless, pale salamanders wandering through Texan caverns, Richard was genuinely interested in this news. How many body parts can I go without, he thought. His list included the aforementioned belly button, his toenails, his eyebrows and lashes, his pinky toes and fingers, and—his duty to conceive fulfilled—his penis.

Virginia was not as stirred as her husband. “Why in the hell were you *reading*, Fiona? You should have been practicing or composing.” Richard wondered if perhaps she

was jealous of Fiona's competent literacy, the post-it note flashing vividly in his head. "*You're rifle. You're arms.*" You are rifle. You are arms. Apt, he thought. What more were any of them than a means to an end?

"My friend Joseph brought in a book on animals!"

"Well, your friend Joseph sounds like an animal himself. You are there to do one job. What use are you if you are spread too thin by all this bullshit? Lizards are just lizards, Fiona, and you are just a player." Virginia had not allowed herself to think of her daughter as a musician—too undignified, too inconsequential in relation to those around her performing tangible responsibilities in service of their country. Thinking of her as a "player" was more appropriate. She played the violin, and she played a consoling role in familial grieving, which was an easier pill for Virginia to swallow.

Artistic pursuits never interested her in the slightest. Practicality was what led her to her English Department husband. An ogre like her already had few marital prospects, and the addition of a gimp that plagued every step she would thereafter take made her almost insufferably unattractive. Bedridden and outrageously impaired from pain medication, Richard struck her as masculine enough upon showing up to write Benjamin's obituary.

For his part, Richard was not used to playing the romantic lead. Lanky and awkward, his bodily proportions were offputtingly offensive to many. Frankly, he looked as though he'd lost his real arms and legs in an accident, and his tiny torso was saddled with limbs painfully longer than necessary. His curly brown hair was unkempt, and his nose protruded from his face as jarringly as his arms jutted from his torso. Had he sought the attraction of women, he might have cared. He had only one romantic relationship in

his life, and its end was horrific enough to turn him off the idea of relationships based on love. Too much at-risk investment. He was more interested in music and literature than sexual conquests. They were more fruitful. When it became mandated, however, that everyone over a certain age was to conceive a child before a certain age, he realized that the only way to escape hanging—and keep reading novels and listening to music—was to saddle up and settle down with a woman. Virginia was as close as he was going to get, he realized, and thus when she turned her affections on him that day in the hospital bed, he saw little choice in the matter. The two were wed within a year, and after some pitiful procreational attempts throughout the early years of their marriage, they finally conceived the daughter that now stood in front of them talking about salamanders and a boy named Joseph.

“I only wanted to share,” Fiona offered apologetically.

“Share only when and what you are required to,” Virginia retorted. She didn’t like seeing her daughter’s ever-increasing inquisitiveness, a trait of Richard’s that signaled in Virginia’s mind one word: victory. An inconspicuous win for him, but a conquest nevertheless.

The next day, Virginia went to Joseph’s house and shot him directly in the foot, a warning. She was unenthused to hear that he was present at school the following day, with barely even a limp to show for it. At least, she thought, he hadn’t told Fiona, as her daughter showed no striking contempt at her for having shot a friend’s foot.

#### IV.

Fiona had, over the next five years, become an exemplary player. Her violin skills were unsurpassed by any of her age. Her profound grasp on lamentation had made her elegies as piercing as Ives' *Adagio for Strings*. She counted herself lucky that she never had to compose any requiems for anyone she knew personally. Many of her classmates and comrades had been shot—meaningless tussles, rogue shooters in school or church, Joseph by a madwoman still anonymous—but none had seen any mortal or irreparable damage. Despite this, she was composing a dirge a day at least, and incessantly played funereal violin for strangers.

Richard requested the sheet music for all of the pieces she composed. He was astounded by her sensitivity and keen perception of what those in mourning required to accept death. She wrote pieces that envisioned the peace and promise of eternal rest, rather than solely the sorrow and austerity of immediate death. In the words of her favorite Mahler symphony, "*Auferstehen!*" As a funerary writer even now, Richard seldom offered one ounce of the pacification that his daughter was now perpetuating on a daily basis. He found himself travelling with her from funeral to funeral, and her violin playing demonstrated the same mastery of sentiment—phrases poignantly executed, an ebb and flow of volume and vibrato to suit the character of the dead and the sensibilities of his or her mourners, and cadences closed with the delicacy and precision of both surgeons and snipers simultaneously. Her grasp on humanity had far surpassed his, and he was immeasurably proud of his daughter. In fact, his biggest regret was that when old age or hanging or mariticide would finally take him, he would be too dead to hear his daughter's dirge and ensuing performance of it on the violin.

Upon their leaving for yet another funeral, Virginia realized how completely she was losing in the battle of her daughter. Birthing a child when one loathes their spouse, she thought, was colonialism. Who would be the conquistador victorious, colonizing the child for themselves and imparting their traits and sensibilities as a flag of their empire? She never envisioned losing to such an unworthy adversary. Richard was just as mousy as Benjamin Miller, and perhaps, Virginia thought, just as homosexual. Why was it the mousiest of men that carried out the most harm on her? She could flatten them both, which made her losing all the more emasculating. First Benjamin shattered her kneecap and she was too unconscious to see to his due retribution at her hands. Upon waking, he had already been hung. Now Richard had nearly succeeded in duplicating the tendencies of his she hated most in their daughter: compassion, curiosity, creativity, and consideration for anything other than war and the national good. She was not prepared to lose again. A manipulated daughter is far wickeder than a mangled kneecap.

Richard and Fiona returned home the following night, unaware that Virginia had vowed a declaration of war on her husband over the ownership of their daughter. Fiona had become nothing more than acreage to Virginia. Though Fiona had no embedded value as lands often fought over do—oil, gold, historical significance—she had promise. Virginia’s fight was not to win over Fiona, but to make sure she wouldn’t again lose to a mouse. She would be conquistador victorious.

“Fiona, I’d like to speak with you alone,” Virginia ordered. Richard gave his daughter a look of assurance, and disappeared into the hall. It was a familiar picture that caught his attention: the mass of unchiseled bright yellow skin with a head. He realized that this was perhaps the only time he’d ever seen her kneecap visibly photographed. She



had taken to wearing pants and long dresses exclusively, but this frock left it exposed, vulnerable. The skin covering the kneecap was badly marred, and so much skin was removed that there hadn't been enough left to fully cover Benjamin Miller's kneecap, so a little flash of white bone was omnipresent. Richard loved that kneecap more than any other feature of his wife's. Not only because it was Benjamin Miller's, the only semblance of love he'd ever known at the point of his and Virginia's meeting, but also because it occasioned their meeting, which bore Fiona, and gave him the only semblance of love he'd known since.

"Fiona, I know you enjoy being a player. I've even heard that you are somewhat talented at it, but I believe at your age, you should aim for a more consequential role. I've discussed it with your instructors, and they decided that regardless of your talent, no bodies should be spared to such pursuits. So tomorrow, you'll be starting training in the Physical Education Department." Virginia felt that half the reason Richard was winning was because the Draft had been more favorable to him, which had been totally out of her control, and not indicative of any more mental or physical prowess on his part, but rather sheer dumb luck. By switching Departments, Fiona would either start to take after her mother, or be killed in combat, saving her from taking after her father any further.

"Besides, what pride can you take from such wasteful work?"

Fiona paused, composing the response that would wound her mother as fully as her musical compositions consoled the mothers of others. "I really do hate you, Virginia. I've seen enough death to know what life looks like, and can tell you with my utmost endorsement that you are dead already." Fiona set down her violin case, and then brandished pages of sheet music from her pocket, which rested under the holster carrying

her Glock. “This requiem is for you. It’s five minutes of *Tacet*, silence, because I could write you the most beautiful elegy in the world, but no one would hear it. No one will come to your funeral. Your husband will write you a wordless obituary, but no one will read it. We share only when and what we are required to, and one note dedicated to you would insult the note, just as one word memorializing you would insult the word.”

Virginia saw Richard’s flag of settlement upon the colonized. Savagery, the ruination of a daughter now ineradicable. The promise vanished, and a true pioneer doesn’t battle for long-since barren acreage. She sighed, then flourished her own Glock and shot Fiona in the chest. Then she shot her violin case five times, until she was sure the thing was rendered unusable. Then Richard ran in from the hall and Virginia shot him in the kneecap. He fell to the floor, at eye level with Benjamin Miller’s and the protrusion of his bone from his wife’s leg. He managed to take one glance at the kneecap, then his daughter, before Virginia shot him four more times, and he died. Quite the Christmas card, Virginia mused. Then she magnanimously shot herself, and died as well.

No one in the surrounding area found anything out of the ordinary in the sounds coming from the walls of the O’Brien house that night. Everyone had learned to lull themselves to sleep with these gunshot lullabies. It wasn’t Mahler, it wasn’t Ives, it wasn’t Copland, and it wasn’t Barber, but it was the percussive orchestra of a new America. A macabre Magnum Opus, Symphony of the States United.

V.

It took Fiona nearly an hour to realize she hadn't died. She rose from the floor, viewed her dead parents surrounding her, viewed the wreckage that was now her violin, and viewed the taciturn requiem she'd thrown at her mother. She unhooked the holster from her belt and observed her monogrammed Glock. She could kill herself, she thought, but was confused as to why the gunshot from her mother hadn't done so already. She unbuttoned her blouse and looked at her chest to realize that the shot had barely made a dimple. Then she thought of all of her adolescent friends who'd been shot and recovered miraculously brusquely thereafter. She thought of Joseph's untarnished foot and sturdy gait despite being shot close-range. Then she thought of caves and the blind salamander in Texas, an animal that was able to make provisions after countless years of adapting to its habitual way of life.

Then she went to her room to compose a requiem for her father, and then she wept.