

The Ginger Cake

“We’re here,” his daughter announced, stepping into the vestibule.

It was such a plain statement of fact that the woman believed that all the forces of the universe had conspired to place the pair there before her as inevitable as the mail delivered to her door that morning. This feeling of irrevocability calmed her as she helped them out of their heavy winter coats. It was as though she was being pulled along by a current to an end point that was expecting her. Without missing a beat, the girl corralled her younger brother through the hallway, nudging him between his shoulder blades with a sensibleness that aged her. And as the woman trailed behind, she thought that had they been the same age, and were meeting under different circumstances, they might have ended up as friends.

All the necessary supplies had been laid out on the counter.

The aging Bundt pan inherited from her great grandmother, the eggs and ginger spice, the copper measuring cups and butter and baking soda, the cinnamon. And the dark mire of molasses, in all its aberrant sweetness, waiting at the edge of the counter. She left the opened recipe book on the table and started the process by whisking together the flour and ginger spice with exaggerated strokes until the girl gently asked for a try. His daughter was dressed bizarrely in a short taffeta dress covered up by an old cardigan that was cinched at the waist by a thick velvet ribbon. As she balanced on the tall stool beside the counter, every so often she would turn to look back down the hallway as if expecting someone else, someone livelier maybe or more solicitous, to join them, her neck softly straining against the high collar of her sweater.

The boy was drawn to the eggs as if by sexual pull. He handled them expertly for a minute, passing them back and forth between his long-fingered hands like a juggler—until one and then two were dropped on the floor. The pupils of his tawny eyes dilated, giving off a kind of feral look that unsettled the woman and made her busy herself at the sink so that she would not have to understand him.

It wasn't an act of manipulation to invite his children to come. Her character was not prone to complex social manoeuvrings or trickery. It was more of an exploratory exercise: what would it be like to have them all around her? Her own babe staring wide eyed at the commotion from his high chair, spellbound by the jostling presence of other children finally in the house. It was time. They had been seeing each other for five months. They had spent two joyful weekends in Laval; bought each other thoughtful, unexpected gifts: a vintage French pocketknife for him and a lily-shaped brooch in rose gold for her. She had even put her training to use to help him with a complex legal situation involving his elderly father. But she knew there was a tacit expiration date on just how long a relationship of this kind can skim the surface of intimacy. In truth, she was excited to see how the fragments of their bruised households might fit together.

The woman watched the girl remove the saucepan containing the butter and syrup from the burner, her small hands gripping the handle with a commendable single-mindedness. And here she recalled the child's parochial focus when running a sprint at the school fun fair at their first meeting; her already widening hips pushing out against the thin cotton of her gym shorts, her exuberant shrug after placing fourth, and the barely concealed longing when she scanned the

crowd for her father or mother or anyone who could grasp the youthful beauty of her tenacity, even in loss.

A passing siren stilled the kitchen for a grim moment.

And the girl, with matched gravity, pulled her hair up into a high bun to reveal a tree shaped strawberry birthmark (an elm or chestnut, maybe?) where her jaw met her neck on the left side. Sensing the probing look of her father's lover, she returned the gaze with a childish flicker of defiance. And the woman, in turn, flashed a conciliatory smile that helped in a small, grown-up way to douse the tetchiness rising up between them. But this pettiness passed as the recipe called for the transfer of the sweet mixture into the Bundt pan.

The boy won this little battle and with coltish legs balancing on a stool, succeeded in pouring three quarters of the batter into the tarnished ring. And as the woman bent down, ceremoniously, to slide the cake into the oven, she felt their presence behind her. They were to her right and then left, flicking flour at each other like interlopers in her warm kitchen and she wanted nothing more than to sit undisturbed with only her baby on her lap, watching the cake rise up in its pan.

The doorbell rang, silencing the party for a joyful, expectant moment.

“Wait till you taste it, daddy!” “Jonah dropped two eggs!” “How much longer now?”

Their father stood by the table in his edgy way, stroking the baby's curls that in the radiant heat of the oven had darkened at the nape of his neck with scentless sweat. But the woman noted, and not unkindly, somewhere in the caress of his hand over the child's head, perhaps as his palm grazed the solemnly pulsing fontanelle, a hesitancy in the curve of his long fingers.

His children fled up the stairs, a self-imposed banishment.

She could hear the beginnings of a fierce game of hide-and-seek. Imagined their sticky hands rooting through her drawers. The scent-marks of their sweet fingerprints on the banister. As though on cue, the baby began to shriek in a way that grated, inhaling any hope of adult talk into its gummy mouth. Amid the commotion, the girl called down proprietarily from the third floor, "is something burning?"

And then the race to the oven. Her thumb burned slightly in the hasty retrieval. Tiny beads of sweat collecting along her hairline. Him sheepishly running the cold water over her hand. Glancing shyly at the obstinacy of her pursed lips.

Everyone ate a piece anyway.

She cut the slices generously and used her best Blue Willow plates—Koong-se and her lover suffocated beneath each gingery portion. In between bites she realized that a type of trial had been completed and the results covertly tallied. And although nothing went catastrophically

wrong—no feelings were hurt and the children seemed genuinely entertained—it was as though a curtain had been sharply drawn over a bright, open window. A lush landscape of hills and valleys rolling into grassy infinity had been blotted out. She was quite happy that she had invited them all, but quietly, and with a flash of pride in her quick discernment, resolved that no further invitations would be extended.

