

What We Tell Ourselves

When Polly gave up hating God, it was in the unlikeliest of places--Harvey's backyard where she was waiting for him to return with Betsy. The heat had been building for days, and the duck and the chickens sagged. In the distance, she heard a siren's faint whine. A rotten-egg smell wafted off the straw, off the scraggly grass that spread suddenly into tangled wildness---weeds and fescue and vines and twisted trees tumbling everywhere. This yard looked like a bad haircut--one where the barber meant well, but got distracted somewhere along the line. Sort of like her life.

The chickens couldn't quite figure the duck out, but they had grown more used to her, though they still snuck sideways glances at her oily feathers. Sometimes people claimed they could talk to chickens, a talent Polly had always written off to overactive, childish imaginations. But now that she was back, this didn't seem so implausible. One talked to animals; sometimes they ignored you and sometimes they didn't. One talked to anyone and anything, to try and sort stuff out. The sorting. The telling. The chickens would look straight at her, their necks pulled upright and taut, as if signaling *yes, is that so...well who would have thought...tell me more.* She told the duck she'd get some fresh water. It was too hot to not keep refilling the warped metal pail. Then she started telling the duck and the chickens, too, about what had happened.

She and Harvey had had yet another meeting with Susan, and with Susan's lawyer, and with Harvey's lawyer. One where they discussed procedure and belief and methodology. The tone of these lawyer supervised discussions suggested that the child were something less than a person and more like a field of corn, a tomato plant, something living, but unwilling. She and Harvey had patiently endured Susan's neuroses and grandstanding and general unpleasantness

because what other choice, really, did they have? This erratic brunette was the girl's mother.

And it had probably gone about as well as these kinds of things could. Susan hadn't threatened court action. Harvey had stuck up for himself when needed. Polly had remained smooth and gentle. She pictured herself as a puddle the storm of Susan could blow over, ripple, but then leave untouched. Maybe, Polly told the chickens and the duck, things would get better. Maybe Susan would calm down.

Polly's life certainly had. She could hardly believe, even now, that she lived in a place so unabashedly country. So straightforwardly backwoods and rural. So unapologetically non-metropolitan. It was exactly where she had not expected to land. And it was where she was from. In order to arrive right back here, where she started, she had had to move far, far away to the east coast, to asphalt and people and and endless horns and buildings. It was, of course, a cliché. She felt, some days, that she stood on the shore of her life, and surveyed the wreckage that had come before. She was so glad to be done with all that, the chaos, the frenzy, the uninterrupted storm.

She remembered waking in the early morning hours in a house in the suburbs of New Jersey, a house that had belonged to a man she had been dating, a man named Jack. She can't remember the last name now. She'd met him through on-line personal ads. She had been drinking too much that year and spending most of her spare time reading through the ads late at night after week upon week of mind-numbingly boring teaching. She was teaching in the New York City community college system, and more often than not she was really teaching english as a second language. She was working on her Phd in Literature, but one did what one had to do.

Jack had reminded her of where she grew up. He had a sturdy, practical blue-collar house, he had a car and a motorcycle and a boat. He felt familiar; he reminded her of guys she had known in high school. After the breakup with Sam, after the abrupt relocation to a new apartment, she just liked to have someone to sleep next to on the weekend. She wasn't interested

in anything resembling connection. She wasn't interested in anything that offered a future, or so she told herself. She was struggling daily to maintain an interest in life.

She was, she thinks now, trying to send a message to Sam. She wanted to make him see what his craziness had done to her. Look, every action of hers said, I am maimed. Once I was whole, and now I am not. And it is your craziness, your lack of stability that has done this to me. She was as bad as a crucifixion herself. Look at the damage her life was saying then. Look at the wounds.

Susan was a blowzy, brown-haired woman. Full-hipped and lush where Polly was thin. She had round eyes in a round face and a large, balloon like chest. She also had an insanely outsized sense of entitlement, coupled with a vast confidence. So strong was the combination that Polly and Harvey had more than once found themselves listening to and then almost agreeing to some insane request of Susan's, before one of them, Polly usually, suddenly snapped to attention and said well, no really, they weren't sure about that after all, they'd have to think about it, and could they please get back to her on it?

Susan alternated between smart and pulled together and hysterical and childlike. She was Harvey's first wife. She was younger than Polly, and sometimes Polly just wanted to grab her like a child and smack her shoulders, shaking some sense into her. Susan was, it seemed, hell bent on thrashing through life, moving in any and all directions. Which would be fine, except that she was dragging Harvey's child, Betsey with her.

The duck hogged the water, but the chickens waited patiently to drink. They didn't get as excited about water as she did. No sooner had Polly dipped the watering wand down into the pen, and topped the new pail off, than the duck fluffed her feathers and climbed up on the silver rim. She dipped her beak and repeatedly threw water over her back; she would keep this up for a good thirty minutes, never jumping all the way in, just throwing water up and on. The same motion over and over. Finally when she must have decided she was cooled off enough, she would race around the pen and flap her drenched wings with what looked a lot like enthusiasm.

Maybe they should put her out in the pond, maybe they should give her a wider space to roam, a better way to cool off. But the other ducks had disappeared---and she had grown fond of this duck.

Harvey and Betsey would arrive soon, and she looked forward to seeing the girl, and this pleasure still surprised her. She had bought some new coloring books, ones full of princesses and fairies. Stuff she had always assumed she would write off as crap if she were to ever raise a child, but now they didn't seem so fraudulent. She wanted the five year old to stretch her imagination, to create colorful worlds, to allow for the possibility of things that might not exist. The child needed something to rely on besides merely the adults in her life. Harvey was a wonderfully kind, but not always firm father. His ex, Susan, was manipulative, cunning and sometimes cruel. Though it was clear that she adored her daughter, it was not always clear that she was capable of maintaining a responsible stance towards her. In Polly's opinion she was overly invested in her daughter, unable to create a firm boundary between her daughter and herself. Polly saw a claustrophobia for the child in the future, a sense of suffocation when she finally tried to define herself as something separate and individual. The teenage years would be rocky.

She included herself in the list of adults in Betsey's life. She saw the girl every other weekend and Wednesday afternoons, all Harvey's days. She understood, she thought, that her role was much more detached than if the child had been her own. She was not, and that made a difference, a distance that would always be there. But, she did not think this a particularly bad thing. Most days she adored Harvey, he was one of the best things to ever, ever happen to her. And just in time, too; she wasn't getting any younger. When she reviewed the footage of her past in her mind, she saw it as an endless stream of confusion. Reels and reels of the erroneous, the misunderstood, the what the hell had she been thinking. Often she hadn't. Often she had just been quickly and anxiously and desperately moving forward and moving on.

She had bought some fancy crayons for Betsy, too. The largest pack with the biggest color variety. Magentas and fuchsias and golds and cerulean and pale pink. A choice she might

not have made if the child were her own. She thinks this, but she doesn't know for sure. She does, however, have an idea that she would be more concerned about the possibility of spoilage, more invested in the development of rules, more invested in moral character if the child were her own flesh and blood.

It wasn't just the coloring books she used to spark Betsy's mind. She encouraged her to spin stories out from the images on the page. Stories with rescue and tragedy and magic and monsters and damsels and lads in distress. Stories with unicorns and mermaids and princes and horses and princesses. Stories with peril and salvation. In these moments she felt on firmer, solid ground. This she knew how to do. Weave something out of mere nothing. They were the basic meat and bones of the imagination. Sometimes the girl would surprise her with the unexpected, the insightful, the profound. A narrative twist that trumped expectation, that revealed a singular, unique mind at work.

Other times, Betsy didn't like her so much. More than once she turned to Polly, jugged her little chin out, and said aggressively, "Mama says I don't have to mind you!"

. Polly remembers when the world broke down that simply for her. When there was good and bad, and right and wrong, and those she liked and those she didn't. It was as clear, as simple as what she did and didn't believe. It has been a long time since the world boiled down to those clear separations. A long time since she was so sure what she did and didn't know. Once her sister, Isabel, had died of cancer, she remembers, the lines all went blurry, and she let go. And she does remember also that she decided that if there was a god, he wasn't a particularly effective one, and so she didn't like him very much. And then she just let that disdain accumulate into a sharp, hard anger. If you are there, she would think late at night, I really, really distrust you.

Out loud Polly would say to Betsy, "I'm sorry you feel that way sweetie, because that's not really true. You do have to mind me and Daddy when you are in this house."

This latest conference had been her idea. Somehow she had got it into her mind that the more Susan realized that she and Harvey weren't giving up, weren't going anywhere, then the more she would just stop fighting them so hard. She'd think this, and then she'd doubt herself. Maybe she was crazy. Maybe they should just give up---let Susan set the schedule, let Susan decide when they saw the girl, let Susan do all the work of raising the child. She and Harvey could just sit back and enjoy Betsy's company from time to time.

It would be so much easier. And yet, she surprisingly *liked* the child.

Go figure. Her friends from the New York years would never believe it. Her sister would have been shocked. Sam would have not thought her capable of the responsibility. She admitted it surprised her at times, too.

The problem is that there is no doubt in Polly's mind that Susan is a very bad woman. This does interest her immensely. If this were one of those Lifetime channel stories, one of those really bad emotional tearjerkers---the ones that hit one in the head with a two by four and force one to feel---she and Susan would somehow bond, each recognizing in the other a kindred female spirit. They would, of course, start out as adversaries, first and second wives almost always do, but then they would move toward something approximating understanding and friendship. But this is not that; this is something different. The recognition of the capacity for destruction, the appreciation of chaos. Evil is too strong a word, but it is something not good. And something interesting. So many things in life that would have once alarmed her, that would have struck steep, peeling notes of high-pitched anxiety, now hit her differently.

What bothered her about Susan was not the whole cliché of her having had Harvey first. No, Polly had had far more lovers than Harvey. Enough to be able to appreciate Harvey for what

he was. Solid, sincere, stable, secure, reliable, and rarely prone to criticizing. What bothered her about Susan was her investment in creating such waves of unpleasantness for them.

Polly remembered how much Isabel had wanted a child, how weary her sister had been when it became apparent that this wasn't going to happen. That the cancer was going to take away any options like that. And then, of course, Polly remembered as she often did, how the cancer had kept progressing, kept removing options and possibilities, until finally it removed Isabel herself. Polly had come to grips with this because that is what one does. One hunkers down and goes on. But she knows, too, how furious, how disdainful Isabel would have been if Polly were to squander this child, this chance, this choice, and so she keeps pushing forward with the bargaining, with the mediations, with the negotiating and placating, with the whole deal of sharing, with her *choice*.

From the beginning this battle bothered Polly, but at first it only bothered her in a conceptual way. As in *no one* should ever do that to another human being, especially a small child. A universal rather than a specific. But then she found herself growing fond of the child, and her frustration and anger became more personal. Bedtime would arrive on Betsy's nights over. First they'd get her bathed, and then into her pink princess nightgown, teeth brushed, brown curls combed, and then they would do stories. They'd tuck her in, turn the cow jumping over the moon nightlight on, walk softly out, and that's when Polly would hear it. Softly soft crying, not a wail, just a whimper. And she or Harvey would go in, and ask what was wrong, and there Betsy would be, her head tucked almost all the way under the covers. Wetness on her face.

Mommy. Mommy.

Yes, I know you miss Mommy, sweeties, but you'll see her tomorrow.

No, that's not it, she'd burble. And then whimper some more.

Well, what is it then? Polly would ask, rubbing the girl's sharp little shoulders.

It's that she....Pause. Sniffle. It's that she can't live without me! The child would wail.

Well, crap, yes, she can, Polly would think, but not say. Anyone can live without anyone if they have, too. It's one of the basic rules of life. Instead she would try to explain. I know that Mommy may think she can't live without you, but she'll really be okay. Really.

No! No...Betsey would wail. No, she really won't.

And what makes you think that.

Because she said so.

What kind of a mother does that to her own child? Polly would fume, but only for a bit, because, really, people did all kinds of things to their own children that they loved, without thinking very much about what might happen in the future. People did all kinds of things to all kinds of people without thinking through the *what if*, or the *what next* or the *if this, then...* And even when one did try to carefully watch each step, each action, each thought, life would still suddenly and brutally side swipe one with the madness of a boyfriend, or the death of a younger sister. So what, really, was the point in careful choices, what was the point in caution. Both vastly over-rated; Polly knew that much these days. One just kept moving on, putting one foot in front of the other, trying to live life, adequately, effectively enough, until the next big surprise.

Because big surprises keep coming no matter what. She remembers when Sam told her he'd found Jesus. That was a big surprise. And her reaction had been a big surprise too. More than anything, she'd felt a strange and tremendous relief. It was almost as if she'd been clinging to a rock in the midst of raging waters and she was so tired of trying to hold on. His announcement

seemed to give her a kind of permission to finally let go. She could almost feel something inside her crack and snap, and she let go. And that was it. Things had been so bad for so long between them. He had been acting so strangely for so many months. And she had thought, *okay, yes, I understand you*. I understand you saying this world is too much. I understand this is how you get out. Just a trip to somewhere else. She didn't understand how the neurons in his brain were firing. But she understood he was saying yes I am out of here. I am going, bye, gone. She understood that the dark of the world could spread out suddenly, instantly, and everything you had counted on could be gone.

So when the police car pulled into the drive, she didn't refuse to acknowledge it as she might once have done. She looked, thought police car. Thought not good. What next. There had been a wreck. Harvey and the child both in the car. Both hurt badly. She would have to watch the chickens and the duck. They would not take this well. She would not take this well. The collateral of loss would be too much. The police officer was still talking to her.

She was holding the watering hose. And the water was going everywhere. She couldn't make it stop. But she would in a minute.

He was saying, "Do you have somewhere you can sit down?"

She did not want to hear this news. She wanted to keep watering ducks and chickens. She stopped hating anything that might control the universe, anything along the lines of god, and moved simply into unbelieving. And then the space beyond that.

This is the story she tells herself. This is the way she chooses to understand what has happened, and what has not. Like the duck in the chickens. Not quite right, but there. Harvey and the child will be alright. It will simply be a close call. She will pretend gratitude. She will feign prayers. And in her heart, she will let her strangeness grow. These are the stories she tells herself.