

MISCEGENATION

She was heavier than he anticipated. Her once familiar body looked brittle but felt dense, as if all her former power had been wrung tight, distilled to essence even as it shrank to helplessness. Her hands, clasped around his neck, were vise-like. Daniel perspired from the effort of carrying her and from trying to hide the effort from her.

“Up you go,” he said, swinging her sideways into the van.

A sharp inhalation of breath. Here it comes, he thought, but she said nothing.

“You okay?”

Alma nodded, her face chalky, her eyes closed against him. He walked around to put the wheelchair in back. It was collapsible but he had room, so he lifted it intact.

He was driving to Newfound Lake. They were going to go canoeing and to have a picnic on Wellington Beach. He had prepared chicken sandwiches on baguettes, with tomato and lettuce and lots of freshly ground pepper. There was a fat bunch of red grapes, a small wheel of brie, and—he was looking forward to this—a bottle of buttery California Chardonnay stashed on ice in a red Igloo cooler.

“It’s a perfect day,” he said, as he mashed the gears. He hadn’t driven a standard in a long time, and the rental van’s were brutish; he eased up on the clutch and they maneuvered onto Route 3.

“You never could drive, Danny,” she said. She looked at him sidelong. “And you were otherwise so good with your hands.”

“There’s a difference between handling a car and a violin,” he said.

“Or a woman,” she said.

“Or a woman,” he agreed.

“Come to think of it, you were a bit heavy-handed. You always came in too early.”

“Are we talking violins or women?” he said.

She smiled ambiguously out the windshield. Her face, beneath the mask of her illness, was startlingly recognizable to him. He loved—had loved—this sparring, this friction, which he thought of as a spiraling double helix of desire and resistance.

“It was you, my love, who always came in late,” he said. “Why do you think we called you the ‘Drag Queen’?” Daniel waited, wondering if he’d pushed it too far, but Alma put her hand, briefly, upon his thigh.

“But wasn’t I worth waiting for?” she said.



Twenty-five years ago they had been lovers. They had shared a dim apartment in the Back Bay, with a mattress on the floor and dripping faucets, and Daniel had waited for her there, and at restaurants and movie theaters, backstage of concert halls, in the corridors of college music buildings, on sidewalks, and in friends' houses. Any place you could wait, he had waited, and eventually she had appeared—tall, sulky beauty—tipping slightly backward as she walked, as though to delay her arrival even further, her cello invariably leaning against her in its hard case, like an inebriated friend.

Daniel had learned to tell her to show up fifteen minutes before he wanted her to, but it didn't help. Alma possessed an internal clock set to a half hour after all hope was lost. When he railed at her, she would blow up. "You first violinists," she'd say. "You're such fascists! Benito Mussolini. The trains must run on time!"

And it was true—not that he was a fascist, but that he liked to control things, was, in fact, quite good at it. He'd always managed the business: booking gigs, scheduling rehearsals, collecting and distributing pay, even picking up dry-cleaned tuxes and skirts. Alma liked to say that Daniel had a clerk's mind, a tyrant's heart, and an artist's soul. Daniel had never known quite how to take it when she told people this, with scornful affection and a cupped hand to his cheek.

He had loved her then, with annoyance and desperation, never more purely than when they played together—in the quartet or practicing at home, the rich, poignant tones of her cello vaulting and underpinning the high gloss of his violin. Her long black hair fell in front of her instrument as she played. She pulled up and the pale oval of her face emerged as though from underwater. The same rapt expression, at once lost and intensely focused, appeared on her face when they made love. He would watch her, cello pressed between her knees, her bow working lightly above it, and feel hollowed by desire.

Alma had taken her name from Gustav Mahler's famous wife, whom she greatly admired. Her real name was Soon Mi. She had been born in Seoul, Korea, and moved to the States when she was four. She was the first in a line of Asian girlfriends, all of them string musicians—Korean or Japanese mostly—(though Daniel liked to think it was not so much a fetish, as an occupational hazard). In the end, though, he had married Janique, a white-blond Swedish psychotherapist, going on fifteen years ago.

He had difficulty getting Alma into the canoe. Her hem got tangled in the wheel of her chair, and he was caught between not wanting to dump her like a load of firewood and trying not to get too wet as he maneuvered





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the canoe at the water’s edge. It was probably dangerous. He was not such a strong swimmer that he could save her if the boat capsized. But she was wearing a blue life vest; it encircled her thin chest like a tea cozy. He pushed backward with his paddle and they were released into the lake.

“What do you call a woman with no arms and no legs on a grill?” she asked.



He said he didn't know.

"Patty," she said.

"What do you call a man with no head, one arm, and one leg, nailed to the wall?"

"Dunno."

"Art," she said and laughed so hard she started to cough.

The lake was smooth as paper. Daniel listened to the sound of his paddle strokes, the quick rush of water falling back onto itself. He aimed for a cluster of rocks on the far shore, a pine tree growing almost horizontally from the edge of land.

"Water Music," she said.

"Trout Quintet."

"La Mer."

"Um... 'Blue Danube.'"

"Volga Boatman."

He tried to think. "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

"Now, that's stretching it," she said.

"No judgment."

"Okay, that's the way you want to play it," she said. "'My Bonnie Lies O'er the Ocean,' 'Anchors Aweigh,' 'In the year 1492, Columbus sailed

the ocean blue,' 'Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head...'" She

stopped, lifted her head toward the sun. Her upturned face looked

heroic to him, like the graven image of some pagan goddess. On

the shore they had departed, the

faint outline of her wheelchair stood stoically, like a last, lingering well-wisher waving, *bon voyage*.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for this, Daniel."

He set the paddle across his lap. "Prego," he said, and they drifted.

"Why this sudden compulsion to see her again?" Janique had said months ago, sitting up in bed, her heart-shaped face shiny with cream, her voice not accusatory but calm, almost offhand.

Daniel got in on his side and pulled the covers up around him. He had decided he liked it best when Janique treated him like a patient; it lent a weirdly impersonal air to their relations and allowed him to preserve certain fantasies he had had about her from before they were married.

"You said you never wanted to see her again," she went on, her voice rising only slightly. "You left Boston without telling her. Just ran away like a—like a thief in the night."



Daniel stroked the sheet that covered her legs. This was not the psychotherapist speaking. "It was a long time ago," he said.

"Exactly."

His wife's complexion was porcelain smooth, containing a luminous, moon-like pallor. Daniel thought she was beautiful, though her beauty had long since become an abstraction for him. She was a buxom blonde from Stockholm, and he had found her surprisingly uncomplicated, after all his high-strung string players, like the pale, stark furniture that also hailed from her native land.

He kissed Janique on the slippery mouth. When had sex become subterfuge, obfuscation? It still had its pleasures, but they were devious now, where once they had been straightforward. She turned to him, allowing his hand on her breast. He thought how long it had been since he'd felt anything like desperate desire, a strong impulse toward something, which was different from the weaker straining against. Because Janique was a psychotherapist, he tried never to talk to her about his feelings.

"I need to go see her," he said, removing his hand from her breast. And he had repeated it once more for its declarative pleasure.

"Tell me again about this new gig of yours," Alma said now, as they drifted.

"Music thanatology," said Daniel. "Playing for the dying, at hospice and in their homes."

"Money in that?"

"Some."

"Recession-proof, I'd imagine," she said.

"People are always dying," Daniel agreed, then added hastily, "I mean, business is steady."

He liked to think of it as any other job, no different from a performance in a recital hall or orchestra pit. The homes were usually affluent, with decorous furnishings and chastened next-of-kin; the hospices were calm and cheerful, with flowers and candles and grandchildren's paintings on the walls. In truth, no one had actually died while Daniel played. Eyes closed, hands worrying the edges of their blankets, they either fell asleep or roused themselves to compliment him and the others, holding Daniel's hand in their own thin hands a bit longer than he found comfortable.

"Is it a good quartet?" Alma asked.

Daniel nodded, squinting into the canvas-colored water. "The viola is a bit of a pain," he said. "But the second violin is quite good."

"And the cello?"



He smiled. "She's not you."

"Ah," she said. "Of course not."

There was a whirr of motorboats, a slapping of sails. The leisured sounds of a summer afternoon. Daniel felt pleasantly drowsy.

"You remember the Dutilleux incident?" Alma said.

"Of course. Florence. 1978? '79? You hit me on the head with a metronome."

"I did not hit you on the head with a metronome! Did I?" Alma put her hand to her mouth in self-awe. "You were cheating on me with the second violinist."

"Angie." Daniel recalled a Japanese girl with thick wrists and a spicy smell.

"Nienlin," Alma corrected him. A Chinese girl with a broad, blunt face, giggling behind her hand.

He nodded. He remembered now. A stifling June night, Alma blowing up at the girl for forgetting to take a repeat; Daniel defending Nienlin; Alma storming out; Nienlin in tears; Daniel feeling he had backed the wrong horse.

"I remember you played like an angel," said Daniel.

"I remember you were an asshole," Alma said.

"Yes, yes, I was," Daniel agreed.

On the drive back, she seemed to doze. Some of the trees were beginning to turn although it was only August.

"I remember you played like an angel," said Daniel.

"I remember you were an asshole," Alma said.

There was a red tinge to the leaves, a seeping of yellow. Daniel felt bashful with Alma. She was so grave and quiet, so far in advance of him suddenly, she who was always late. It was not as though he wanted to

catch up, exactly (who could want that?), more that he didn't want to be left behind.

"I loved you, Alma," he said.

She took in a sharp breath, held it. It came out in a hiss of laughter. He had thought she was sleeping.

"You, Daniel, were a rice king," she said. "I was your first. You know what they say, 'Once Asian, never again Caucasian.'"

Daniel was hurt. He didn't see it that way. "Honestly," he said.

She softened. "I'm sure each one of us was unique in our own way," she said. "Besides, you did go back. Recidivist."



Again, it is an accusation Daniel copped to. He remembered lying in bed in their Florence hotel the afternoon of the Dutilleux debacle, Alma sleeping beside him. After a fight, or a good performance, Alma always initiated sex, as an extension of both fight and performance—risky, furious, theatrical, careening on the edge of control. Who said that Asian women were submissive in bed, docile and obliging? Alma was none of those things, and yet, she managed to retain a semblance of innocence. It seemed to Daniel that the overwhelming energy released in Alma came from someplace outside her, like music itself, her body a conduit to a mythic source.

Daniel had watched her as she slept, the foreignness of her features, matching the skin on his arm to her arm, stroking the broad plane of her eyelids. He was going to marry this girl, he thought, checking the ring on her finger that rested on her belly. Downstairs there was a clatter of dishes and a scolding Italian voice, female, yelling at some culprit in the piazza. When they made love Daniel felt he could enfold Alma into himself, to usurp that foreignness, the strange qualities of her beauty and her fury. He felt himself become her. The way we inhabit what we desire.

On his last night he took her to dinner at The Manor overlooking Squam Lake. Wheeling her into the dining room, he was possessed with a feeling of great fondness toward all things. The room was paneled in wood, warm and intimate. They drank sparkling Italian wine, a Prosecco, fruitier than champagne with a marvelous aftertaste. Alma had, with his help, dressed up; she was wearing a beaded black top with a red chiffon skirt. Her clothes were all much too large for her—she sat inside them like a placeholder for a body she had once inhabited—but she looked stronger than she'd been all week. The wine restored pink to her cheeks, a certain brightness to her eye.

“You fit into your old tux,” she said.

“I can't believe you kept it.”

She made a faint gesture with her hand. “I didn't keep it,” she said. “I forgot about it.”

They ate lamb Carpaccio with spicy mint sauce and cold blueberry soup. She had the duck and he had the filet. He had wanted to show her a good time, and he felt it had gone pretty well so far. The picnic, the canoe ride, the banter. It made him feel like a good person, that he had come to visit after all these years; that he was, after all these years, able to make this gesture.

“What do they like to listen to?” she asked, over cinnamon *crème brûlée*. “These clients of yours.”

“Oh,” he said. “‘Dance of the Blessed Spirits,’ Massenet, ‘Death and



the Maiden.' Oh, and Bach's 'Prelude to the G Major Suite.'"

She nodded. "Predictable."

"Usually."

Alma raked the caramelized sugar with the tines of her fork. They both watched the cat scratches it made, brown on top, custardy yellow beneath.

Daniel thought of his most recent client, Douglas, who had come home from the hospital, bringing all its sustaining apparatus into his living room, IV stands and heart monitors like modern art installations amid Duncan Phyfe and Hepplewhite antiques. He'd been a litigator, recently retired, looking forward to devoting himself to his collection of rare stamps. "Errors, freaks, and oddities," he called them.

Instead, he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His brow was creased in an expression of sustained objection. It was a look Daniel recognized, of a man accustomed to insulating himself from disappointment. He had shown Daniel his prized collection, an album of stamps locked in sheets of vinyl: misperforated, miscut, misprinted, from around the globe. His most valued possession was a 24-cent U.S. airmail stamp, issued in 1918, with the picture of an airplane printed upside down.

Douglas had told him about a six-fingered President Roosevelt stamp

issued by the Principality of Monaco, of a U.S. stamp that featured seven legs for four horses. "And this would particularly interest you," he had said. "The old GDR issued a

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stamp commemorating the composer Robert Schumann that had a piece of Franz Schubert's music in the background." He had laughed, a dry asthmatic sound, and Daniel had laughed with him, the way the healthy condescend to the dying.

Alma looked at Daniel now. "What would you want to die listening to?" she asked.

He was taken aback. Not that he hadn't thought about it, but he didn't want to hear her answer for herself.

"I don't know. It would depend on my mood..." He shrugged. "Beethoven," he said. "Any of his sonatas for violin and piano. Mozart, 'The Jupiter.' Lalo's violin concerto. The 'Chaconne' if I just wanted it over with. You playing me any of Bach's suite."

She laughed. "You'll never die at that rate," she said.

"Not till I've listened to it all."

"I want Janis Joplin," she said. "Get it While You Can."



Later, while Alma slept, Daniel played scales. Mr. Vachenko, his first violin teacher, had told him that scales came from God. "They are perfect," he had said, a soft hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Play them exactly and you touch the creator." Daniel hadn't understood what he meant then, but years later it had struck him: the order was sublime, one note in sequence following another, always the same, yet somehow ever-changing.

Afterward he rummaged around her sheet music, strummed the Guarneri cello that sat neglected on its stand. He had missed it too, this ravishing instrument that had been Alma's constant sidekick—part conspirator, part rival; he had envied its place between Alma's thighs, had been seduced by its groaning passions.

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It was what she regretted most, Alma had told him, more than the failed marriages and the daughter who wouldn't speak to her, more even than the fact she couldn't walk. That she could no longer play. She listened to recordings of music she knew by heart and wept, she said, her fingers restless along sofa cushions.

In the middle of the night, she called to him. The pillow had left a crimped impression on her cheek, like a fossilized pattern.

"Your phrasing was weird," she said. "It was like you were holding your breath."

He climbed into bed with her, placed his face close to hers on the pillow. "Ever the critic," he said.

She started to cry and he stroked her back.

"Goddamn it," she said.

"Sshh," he said, pressing harder.

"Leave me alone."

"No."

She turned to face him, her eyes brilliant black, her beauty wrecked but still evident, like a ruined temple. Daniel felt the old thrill. It raced in his blood, stirred in him a potent mixture of sadness and desire.

"Alma," he said. He started to say something, about how glad he was to have come, how much he had loved her, but something in her expression stopped him.

"You thought you'd come play for me, didn't you, Daniel?" she said. "All that 'easing the passage to the next world' New Age bullshit. 'Dance of the Fucking Blessed Spirits.' You take that crap right out of my house, do you hear me, Daniel Hendrie? You take it and shove it right up your ass." She dropped back on the pillow.



“Sshh,” Daniel whispered, “it’s okay.” Under his hand, her body bucked in erratic rhythm. He could feel the vertebrae of her back, curving snake of notched bone. Different from Janique, who had sturdy Scandinavian scaffolding. He thought of all the Asian women he’d slept with—Alma, Nienlin, Angie, Teresa, Young Hee, Masako—the bird-like delicacy of their bodies, straight blue-black hair, hooded eyes. He saw them as a series of symphonic movements: *adagio*, the slow downcast gaze; *andante*, the fluttering grace of hands; *allegro*, slim hips and curved backs. A menagerie of beauties playing in concert for him only, the firmness in their bow arms, hidden passions matched by virtuosity, their notes descending on him one upon the other, like a series of caresses. Alma was right, of course. He had come to say good-bye.

“Why did you leave me?” she asked now, sitting up with her knees humped beneath the covers.

He hesitated, considering a flip answer, something vague and entirely comforting. For her sake, he tried to locate a truth. He remembered that last morning, throwing clothes into a suitcase, eating breakfast, deciding against leaving a note. On a flight to the West Coast by two in the afternoon, feeling his spirits ascending with the plane, he marinated his guilt with a couple midget bottles of Beefeaters. He had thought that the one definitive action of his life would be to marry Alma, instead it had been to leave her.

“Daniel?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“You don’t forget a thing like that,” she said. “A life-altering decision.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Everything mattered with you. Everything was crucial. What food we ate, what movie we watched, what suit I wore.... You cared about everything. It was exhausting.”

She didn’t say anything. He studied her face and decided it looked neutral.

“You had such strong opinions all the time. And God forbid I shouldn’t have one. I remember once you got furious at me because I said I didn’t have an opinion about Ted Turner colorizing black and white movies.”

“He was desecrating an original art form,” she said.

“You see?”

“He didn’t even—”

“I guess I got scared,” he said. “I saw a lifetime of arguing about what pictures to hang on the walls, and where to go for dinner, and who came in early or late, and which was better, *War and Peace* or *Brothers*



Karamazov. It seemed suddenly too difficult.”

“Was I that bad?” Alma asked. Daniel could tell she was pleased.

“You’re just the same now, Alma,” he said. “Every bit as fierce. I love that about you.”

“*Brothers Karamazov*,” she said. She settled her head against his chest. He stroked her hair.

He remembered once, early in their courtship, he had brought her flowers, a bouquet of yellow roses punctuated with ferns and baby’s breath. It had been an extravagant gesture for the time, and Daniel had been pleased by his own romantic impulse. Alma had thanked him, but not as profusely as he’d expected. As she’d bustled around the apartment, searching for a vase, cutting the stems, he had asked her if she didn’t like them. “Oh, Daniel,” she’d said, smiling at him. “Yellow roses and baby’s breath are for maiden aunts. Next time use your imagination.” He had learned to bring birds of paradise, alstromeria, bearded iris, delphinium, lupine, and gladioli. But he’d never been certain of his choices or how they’d be received. They had never again seemed like his choices.

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“I’m sorry,” he said to her now. “For being such a coward.”

She drew away from him. “Daniel?” she said.

“Yeah, baby?”

“I’m a coward, too.”

Somehow he knew exactly what she was saying. Later he’d wondered at how easily it was communicated. But again he had failed her.

“Don’t ask me, Alma,” he said.

“If I try by myself, it might not work,” she said.

“Don’t try,” he said. “I’ll come back to visit in the fall. We’ll drive the Kank. Go to Polly’s Pancake House. We could go into Boston. Sanders Theatre. Symphony Hall.” He tried to hypnotize her with his words, an incantation to lull her back.

“I’m tired, Daniel,” she said.

“So, sleep,” he said. He got up, soothed the covers around her shoulders. She closed her eyes. He had the urgent impulse to move in with her, to take care of her and tend to her for the last of her days. He felt he would happily trade his life for hers. Much of this notion toward self-sacrifice was guilt, he realized, the feeling of needing to atone for the past. Still, he believed it represented the best of himself, his truest nature.

He ended up playing for her, after all. Pieces from Alban Berg’s “Lyric Suite,” the *Largo Desolato*. A favorite of Alma’s, who played favorites. He



hadn't played it in a long time, but it hardly mattered; when you knew a thing by heart, it meant more than just by memory—it meant that it knew you, that it had found a way inside you and could always be reclaimed.

He would not see Alma again, he knew, and yet he would never cease to see her. The music had never before seemed so sad or so full. He suspected he was playing it with too much intent and that Alma would object—"Sentimental Irishman," she would sniff, whenever he let the music wallow—but she was lying back with one arm draped across her eyes.

Alban Berg had embedded the initials of his lover, Hannah Fuchs, into the musical notes, had used a recurring numerical code to represent them. It had taken decades for musicologists to discover the lover's message crouched there, furtive and eternal.

An image of Alma came to him. In a long black skirt and white blouse that draped at the elbows, she was playing the cello solo. Her eyes were closed, her mouth puckered in concentration, bow arm loose, each note fragile as glass, strong as diamonds.

Alban Berg, Hannah Fuchs, Alma, himself, a lineage of sorts, of musicians and lovers, of art and feeling, each coming to understand life as

Moved by his own playing, he began to weep.

a slowly unfolding tragedy, but also—in thankful iteration—a heartbreakingly beautiful one. He thought of Douglas lying in a hospital bed in the middle of his own living room, his face and hair leaching into the pillows, as though he

were already fading to invisibility. "Play something strange," he'd said. "Surprise me." Errors, freaks, and oddities. He thought of carrying Alma back to the van after dinner, the condensed weight of her. She had thrust out an arm to him. "I can't feel that," she said. "It's gone totally numb."

Daniel stumbled over the ending, missed a few notes, stray hairs on his bow whipped the air around him as he pressed on. Moved by his own playing, he began to weep.

Four months later he got word that Alma was dead. He was not surprised, of course, but he did feel partially responsible. He should have gone back; he had promised her. Janique told him that he had done more than his share, but he didn't know what that meant. What share had been his? He remembered playing Berg and Alma's response. He'd just finished, had just brought his violin down, wiping his tears with the back of his arm, when he looked over, expecting her to be asleep. She was looking at him with a rueful sort of half-smile. "Well," she'd said, after a moment. "You certainly played the fuck out of that."



He had gone into Alma's bathroom and felt stricken at the sight of the medicine bottles double-lined on the shelf like chessmen. Medrol, Topamax, Ambien, Wellbutrin, Dilantin, Xanax. He had thrown out all the ones he could identify as tranquilizers or sleeping pills, brushing them into his shaving kit with a flat hand, realizing the futility of the gesture, even as he acknowledged his admiration, once again, for her resolve.

Two long black hairs had lain curled at the bottom of the basin. Daniel had lifted them out and wrapped them so tightly around his forefinger the tip had turned red. He'd looked up into his face in the mirror and been surprised that he looked so old, jowly and creased, like a drunken peasant in a painting by Bruegel. It was a selfish face, he saw, dissipated by indulgence and the fear of not getting what he wanted. He recognized in his expression something redeemable, though, or wanted to anyway, and ducked a last quick nod at that shining, passable thing.

Mostly what he remembered was Alma asking him why he'd left her and his coming up with something resembling a truth, standing in for one. Now that she was dead, he saw it suddenly and entire, like a piece of gold in the sand that a storm wind had brought, glinting, to the surface.

They had gone to visit Alma's older sister in Methuen. It must have been the summer of 1980, because they had just announced their engagement. Alma's sister Yun Mi was eight years older than Alma; she'd been a teenager when they moved from Korea and had retained, not exactly an accent, but a certain formality of speech, a hesitancy, that Daniel found charming. She was married to a lawyer, a Connecticut WASP with a fondness for bowties and penny loafers. Alma and Daniel made fun of him together, calling him Poindexter behind his back.

Their house was one of those big, suburban models that managed to display both wealth and dullness in equal proportion, with nurseried trees planted in rings of mulch, and marigolds around the streetlamps, but the inside was attractive enough, with its inlaid mother-of-pearl chests and Chinese brush painting scrolls that Alma said Yun Mi had brought over illegally from Korea.

"National treasures," she whispered. "You're not allowed to take them out of the country."

One morning, in the immaculate, open kitchen, Daniel had wandered in while Yun Mi was in the middle of getting breakfast for her children. Alma was still asleep, and Daniel himself was not sure what he was doing up so early. Yun Mi had offered him a cup of coffee, which he gratefully accepted, and then turned her attention back to the baby, who was administering cereal to his head with a spoon. The three-year-old girl was singing to herself in an absent-minded way, swirling her milk around in her Cheerios as though she were stirring soup.



Daniel bent down to her. He was awkward with children but had felt an effort was necessary. "What are you singing?" he had asked, wondering if she might perhaps be another little Korean prodigy, with her square-cut bangs and preternatural poise.

The girl had looked at him with an expression that he could only interpret as contempt. Her dark eyes were judgmental, opaque against him, her lips thinned into a scornful smile. It struck Daniel how much the little girl looked like Alma and her mother. The broad, flat planes of the face, the high angled cheekbones, the deceptive pallor, eyes without centers. There was nothing of poor Poindexter in there, and the baby with the oatmeal in his hair was equally foreign.

"Can I get you another cup of coffee?" Yun Mi had asked.

"No, no thanks," he had said and set his cup down.

It would be another six months before he worked up the nerve to leave Alma, but he had known in that moment that he would. And although he tried again to get the girl to talk to him, finally patting her noncommittally on the shoulder and wandering back upstairs, he felt unnerved by the child's hostile, alien expression. He had gotten back into bed with Alma, spooning against her without comfort. He could not imagine looking into his own children's faces and confronting such strangeness. It was a moment that had pursued him all his life, he realized, propelling him like a pinball from fear to desire and back again, allowing him neither to settle one place nor to leave. For he had seen in the obdurate face of his near-niece, that it was not so much a matter of taking possession of the Other, laying conquest like planting a flag on unknown soil, but more that foreignness would subsume him, swallowing him up like a pale fish down a dark gullet. Now, as he mourned Alma, he felt it rise up again, the guilt, the fear, the vertiginous triumph of his escape. 🎸

