

I'LL BE YOUR FEVER



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IT WAS GETTING harder and harder to bring Stella to weddings. With each ceremony she had grown wilder, and behavior that had once been mischievous now vaulted into recklessness, unruliness, and outright vandalism. Three weeks ago, at the Harris-Watson wedding, Ted had caught her scrawling her name on the side of the wedding cake with her fingernail, and only by chance had he been able to sneak her out of the room and smooth out the fondant without anyone noticing.

“What were you doing?” he demanded, while she leaned sullenly against the banister of the rented Mission Revival house, the toe of her golden shoe driving into the clay tile floor.

“I was bored,” Stella replied, pushing off the banister with her palms. She used the momentum to turn a lazy pirouette.

“I asked you to wait for me for ten minutes, fifteen max, and then I’d—” he stopped short as she completed a second

pirouette, the bright California sunlight slicing through the banister to slash her back with criminal stripes. “Your dress! What did you do to it?”

“I was on the hill,” Stella said, smoothing down the lattice hem with both hands.

“It’s covered in grass stains. The whole back is—I don’t even know if a dry cleaner can get this out.”

Stella raised her chin and gazed at him, her pale skin luminous with defiance.

“They don’t need to.”

“Stella . . .”

Her petite nostrils flared. “I like it like this.”

It was true. She did not believe in perfection. Nor restraint. Nor precaution, vigilance, and certainly not afterthought or regret. Stella believed in Stella, first and foremost, and it was for this reason that on the morning of the Adams-Waddell wedding, Ted intended to leave without informing her of his true destination. He had stashed his suit in the car the night before while she was asleep, and, dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, he waved casually from the front door while Stella sat in the living room a few feet away, watching television and eating cereal with a pink plastic spoon.

“Kiss!” Stella demanded.

Dutifully, Ted lowered his head over the side of the couch. She encircled his head with her arms and crushed him against her face, breathing him in. He wiped the sugary milk-smear from the corner of his mouth.

“Great. All set. If you, uh, need anything—” he motioned toward Juliza, who was sorting the laundry into color-coded piles in the hallway.

“You shaved,” Stella said.

“What?”

“You shaved,” she repeated. “You never shave on Saturdays.”

“What? That’s—I shave whenever I feel like it,” Ted said, and reflexively touched his smooth cheek with the back of his hand, begrudging its betrayal.

“You shave for weddings. Are you working today?”

“No, no, not . . . I have errands. Business errands. It’s not really work.” He shuffled backwards to the door while she studied him, his hands raised high as if to demonstrate that he was unarmed. “Just watch your shows and I’ll see you in the afternoon.”

The moment he was outside, he heard Stella scramble around the L-shaped body of the couch. He ran to the car, searching his pocket for the keys and unlocking it in mid-stride. He had not wanted to leave his camera, lenses, and gear overnight in a vehicle parked on the street, they were too valuable, but now he regretted his caution. He couldn’t photograph the wedding without his equipment, but if he ventured into the house to retrieve his bags, discreetly stashed in the coat closet just outside the living room, he would run into Stella.

He sat in the front seat, unsure of what to do. Maybe he could call a neighbor and ask him to pick up his bags

and bring them out to his car. It was a simple enough request—

And then he saw her. She was skulking along the edge of the concrete pathway in bare feet and pajamas, her shoulders low, her head craned forward. From this angle, she looked tiny and slight, almost kittenish, nothing like the formidable adversary that shared his home.

Fighting back his guilt, he switched on the ignition, pressed his foot to the accelerator, and sped away. In the rear view mirror, he saw Stella's head pop up. She held a hand to her eyes and squinted across the lawn of the apartment complex and out toward the road, searching for him, her darling, her beloved, her captive, her father.

THREE BLOCKS EAST of the apartment, Ted pulled over and, cradling the phone in his palm, texted Juliza.

Please take Stella to the park now. I forgot my bags, need to get from closet.

A moment passed and then his phone sounded its joyful two-tone chime.

Y do u need yor bags?

For work.

I thot u wernt wurking!!! U said u wernt wurking!!!

“Damn it,” Ted muttered, pressing his face into his hand and squeezing his temples with his thumb and ring finger. Somehow Stella had gotten hold of Juliza's phone.

Y dint u tell me yor going!!! she texted.

It's not a big deal, he wrote. I'm just helping Byron.

I want to come!

It's not my assignment. I'm the second shooter. I won't have time to spend with you and no one can watch you there.

Juleeza can come 2!

People can't just go to weddings. They have to be invited. I'm only going because I was hired to.

Not troo u want to go without me

Don't be

COME BAK AND GET ME

ridiculous

U DONT LOVE ME

please understand

YOR THE WURST DADDY EVER

Ted dropped the phone onto the passenger side seat to stop himself from replying. Stella's anger had spilled over into a tantrum, and no response, however reasonable, lucid, or thoughtful would bring it to an end. Only indifference was capable of quelling her indignation.

But first, it inflamed it. Every second, often twice a second, the chime sounded and another message would appear on his phone. For minutes, the screen remained floodlit as little blue dialog boxes succeeded each other in hasty outrage and appeal, accumulating like pages of a deranged manifesto.

When, at last, the outpouring had concluded, Ted retrieved the phone and scrolled through the messages.

There were at least fifty of them, exhausting in their repetition but inspired, he had to admit, in the variety of their emotional distortion, not to mention their persistence. Stella also showed considerable fervor and imagination in her use of punctuation. While she clearly did not know what a semicolon was for, it did not prevent her from stringing seven of them together, followed by a trio of fussy brackets and one desperate tilde.

He had waited so long to respond that the air in the car had grown warm and stale. Unrolling his window to let in a breeze, he heard a violent knocking sound coming from nearby. He peered through the windshield and saw a woman slamming the nose of a plastic stroller against the bottom step of a flight of stairs. She had taken her baby out of the seat and held him with one arm, balancing him with difficulty on her hip as she shoved the handlebar. The rough, fitful motion caused the diaper bag to slide down from her shoulder and against the neck of her child, whose small face darkened like a peeled apple.

Ted unrolled the passenger side window and called out to her. "There's a button on the underside!"

Ignoring him, the woman continued to shove the handle as she rammed the stroller against the stair.

Ted unhooked his seat belt and half climbed onto the empty passenger seat. "You have to press the button," he said, sticking his head out the window.

When she failed to respond, Ted got out of the car and walked over to her. She was older than he had first

thought, no less than thirty-five, and her bitten fingernails, visible along the jacketed back of her child, were as ragged and torn as movie ticket stubs. Sensing her uneasiness, and remembering that he was a stranger to her, he drew back a step.

“You have to rotate it while you press the button,” Ted said. “If you want, I can do it.”

“No thanks,” she said quickly.

“I had the same stroller when my daughter was little,” Ted said. “The big basket underneath is great for groceries but it was always a drag to get the thing shut.” He straightened up to see if she were heeding his instructions. “Now crank it,” he said. “Like you’re revving a motorcycle.”

With an abrupt swoop, the stroller collapsed into itself, the handle tipping forward and folding into the back. The woman nearly fell over from the suddenness of the motion.

“I’m not used to . . .” She repositioned the baby higher on her hip. “We just got it yesterday.”

“New strollers have a break-in period,” Ted said. “Like shoes.”

“Or husbands,” she said, smiling. It was a warm and amused expression, wholly unrecognizable from the anxious approximation she had granted him before, her eyes crinkling at the corners, her grin revealing an expanse of upper central teeth. But then the baby shifted in her arms, beginning to protest and cry, and the woman’s eyes narrowed. She seemed to be reminded, in that moment, of her wariness, reminded of those fearful and suspicious

shards that permanently embed themselves in a parent's heart when a child is born.

He returned to his car and drove home for his equipment. An apologetic Juliza confronted him in the kitchen. "I sorry. I have no idea she take it!" Juliza was the fill-in babysitter while Stella's regular babysitter was away on vacation. A short, plump Guatemalan in her fifties, Juliza worked during the week as the housekeeper for a married couple whose anniversary portrait he had shot last September. For the past few Saturdays, she had come to Ted's, where she spent most of the time doing laundry, mopping floors, and otherwise ignoring Stella. Ted had a soft spot for her because she reminded him of his mother, a tiny Greek immigrant with equally broken English and a knack for disappearing into housework.

Waving away her apology, he slipped the straps of the backpack over his shoulders and wound the handles of the duffel bag around one hand. Then he yanked the duffel into the air and, supporting it on the palm of his other hand, carried it out to the car. After carefully arranging both bags in the trunk, he circled to the passenger side, where Stella was sitting in a white dress, her hands folded in her lap.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"Stella . . ."

"I put on my dress."

"I'm not supposed to bring anyone. Byron doesn't want—"

“You can’t leave me! I don’t want to be alone all day.”

“You’re not going to be,” he said. “Juliza will be there with you.”

“That’s a kind of alone.”

“Everything is a kind of alone.”

She turned her head, gazing up at him. The broad black seat belt looked like a strip of night highway ripped up and laid against her chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That’s not true.”

He did not know if she believed him. She was seven years old, and what she thought of the world was as mysterious to him as it was imprecise.

“Fine,” he said, reaching across to close her door. “You can come with me. So long as you behave.”

TED HAD BEEN an involved father from the moment of Stella’s birth, one of the new generation of men who habitually feed, burp, and bathe their babies, changing diapers and mixing formula with the same seriousness, ease and confidence with which their fathers had changed tires and mixed martinis. Then he and Stella’s mother, Emily, broke up, a year and a half after Stella was born, and an era of allocated parenting ensued. For Ted, this reduced, individualized version of parenthood would have once seemed ideal. What better scenario for a man who had spent his life fleeing romantic relationships because of the ceaseless emotional and temporal demands that

accompanied them? Neediness had always panicked Ted, and much of Emily's allure had arisen from her lack of interest in marriage. She had gotten married once, in her late twenties, to an emotionally abusive British film editor, and a decade later what she wanted from a man, she assured Ted, was not commitment but kindness, as her ex-husband's dedication had turned out to be more disastrous than desertion.

The timing of their coming together could not have been more fortuitous. They were both nearing forty, with its cresting insularity, forty, when the once great comfort of friendship has been steadily diminished, year after year, by the formation of families, like a twin starved in the womb by its insatiable sibling. The friends who previously offered vital sympathy, understanding, and support had become little more than familiar strangers posting online photographs of those unfamiliar replacements, their children. Facing this, Ted and Emily moved from introductions to pregnancy within three months, displaying an alacrity to start a family that stunned and worried everyone who knew Ted's history of abandoning relationships. They were right to be concerned. But it was Emily, not Ted, who only days after Stella's first birthday announced that she wanted him to think about moving out.

"I don't understand," Ted said. Though this was, historically, a defensive lie with which he had shielded himself in difficult conversations with girlfriends, in

this instance it was true. They got along well, they were respectful and considerate, they enjoyed raising their daughter together. Except for a handful of times during the first few months when the new parents were stupefied from sleeplessness, they had never fought. “We don’t have a single problem,” he told her.

Emily reached for the bottle of red wine beside the stack of BPA-free plastic dishes. It was a habit she had taken to lately, Ted had noticed, drinking wine while he went through the long nightly routine of putting Stella to bed. She refilled her glass and smiled sadly. “You don’t want me.”

“What? That’s—of course I want you.”

“As a mother. Okay.” She shrugged. “But not as . . . the rest of it.”

“We have a kid together. We’re a family.”

“I know we have a child,” she snapped. “You don’t have to remind me. You do not have to—I know why we’re together. Okay? I don’t forget.”

She swallowed and then held the wine glass against her neck, tucked in tight just above her collarbone like a shot put. Ted watched her in silence, hoping, like the desperate millions of men before him ambushed by an unpromising conversation, that it would miraculously conclude without blood being drawn.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “I knew what this was when we started. Friendship. And that’s nice. It is.” Emily exhaled. “But so is being loved.”

"I do love you," he said.

"Not like I need you to. And it isn't just sex," she said, as he began to unfurl his standard apologies—fatigue, overwork, stress. "Or your almost never touching me. It's just paying attention." She poured herself more wine. "I overcorrected, I guess."

"If I've been . . . unappreciative," Ted said gingerly, "I'm sorry. I'll do better. We're still getting the hang of things."

"We're strangers. We never even talk."

"Of course we do. We talk all the time."

"About Stella," she said, sighing. "Every conversation is about her. It's either nap times or diapers, feeding schedules or play times, which toys are we cycling out, are her teeth crooked—"

"Raising a kid is demanding," Ted interrupted. "We're not the only parents who struggle with finding time—"

"But it's all we do together. Parent. And you know it. You know it. I would shut up right now, I would never say a word about this again if just once in my life you looked at me with the same crazed affection as when. . . ." She trailed off, starting to cry.

There followed four months of couples counseling and Thursday "date nights" and a prescribed, strained weekend to Palm Springs, and still Ted would not concede. Then one morning, while he was making breakfast for Stella, he ducked into the bedroom to print out a recipe for sticky buns. Emily had used his laptop before leaving for her business trip the day before, and she had forgotten

to log out of her email account on the browser. Ted didn't recognize the new name, but when he clicked on Cameron Taite, all of Emily's troubled supposition and abstract dissatisfaction fell away. Ted closed the laptop and returned to the kitchen. Stella was standing on her tiered wooden chair, waving her spoon in a symphonic demand for more corn flakes. The air smelled thick and bitter. On the stovetop, the bacon had gone black in the pan.

Even the discovery of an interloper, though it initially stoked Ted's indignation, did not persuade him to unstitch their family. In his life, he had ruined at least a dozen relationships by blindly reaching out for adulation elsewhere. For the sake of Stella, Ted assured Emily this was something that they could overcome. But it was precisely his thoughtfulness and understanding, his compassion and his forbearance, that infuriated her. They were the final proof of the mildness of his feelings for her. He could stay in the apartment with Stella, Emily told him, because she was moving out.

That she would choose a man, any man, over her child was inconceivable to Ted, for whom romance had provided two decades of lingering dissatisfaction, and parenthood a year of ascendant devotion. Hadn't they both been disappointed enough by passion, Ted reasoned, not to trust in it? Wasn't that what had first drawn them together, this shared fatigue, and the prospect of something calmer, saner, and gentler? Sure their family life was dull at times, but what had she exchanged it for? To spend

half her days without their daughter in the hopes that a stranger's preliminary interest would continue, along with her own—that novelty would find a way to defy its fate, miraculously providing gratification without end? They were just beginning to teach Stella about Santa Claus, and the notion of a bearded fatso gusting around the world invading homes with toys seemed no less absurd, to Ted, than Emily's conception of love.

And so, rather than relish his sudden freedom, Ted resented it. As exhausting as Stella could be already, at less than two years old, he missed waking up to her every morning, missed her high-pitched voice and her grammarless, effusive chatter. He longed for the drumming of her small serious feet as she hurried from room to room, searching for him, and the way she would tap on the opaque glass door with the nose of her stuffed tiger while he showered. He felt deprived, deserted, and punished, and though on occasion his bitterness toward Emily rose to a level that was as heated and impassioned as she had once wished his love to be, he never gave up the hope that they would one day reconcile and reform their family.

It was a day that would not come. A year after they separated, while driving home alone from a party in the Pacific Palisades, Emily veered off the road and into a utility pole. It was hours past midnight but the fatal collision was loud enough to wake the neighbors who, rushing outside to investigate, called 911. On their way to the crash site, paramedics raced along the same cliff-side

strip of the Pacific Coast Highway that Ted and Emily had once driven in an attempt to lull their agitated, restless new baby to sleep. The ride would soothe Stella, Emily had insisted, with its calming, graduated turns, its rhythmic rise and fall. Just look at her, she had told Ted minutes later, in triumph, as they sped homeward through the black, moonless night. I was right.

WITH A BAG in each hand and Stella riding his shoulders, Ted trampled toward the main house, a big white Colonial with twin dormer windows peeking out of the center of the roof like cat ears. He could feel Stella's weight shift as she swiveled her head to take in all of the property, the acres of avocado trees, the enormous green lawn, the flagstone path leading from the house to the garden, at the center of which fat-necked flowers bullied a stone birdbath. When he reached the cul-de-sac by the front door, Ted crouched and motioned for Stella to hop down.

"You said you'd carry me."

"Just to the house."

"No. All day."

"Stella."

"That's what you sa-id."

"I never said that."

"Well you didn't say you wouldn't."

"Please, help me out, okay? I'm here to work." He shrugged her off his back, flinching when the puffy white

tulle of her dress jerked his head to the side.

“Ow! Your dress is caught on my face.”

Stella pulled her dress free. “Sorry,” she said with exaggeration.

Straightening his tie, Ted glanced from the portico to the brick veranda to a cluster of jacaranda trees. Location scouting was as habitual to him as, before fatherhood, smoking had been, and he was considering how the light fell at the foot of the softly explosive jacarandas when Byron emerged from around the side of the house. Sunlight reflected with a buttery shine off his cleanly shaven head.

“Hey,” Ted said, striding over to him. “I know we’re tight on time. I’ll go introduce myself and take the groom party getting ready. Unless you want help with the bride first . . .”

“You said you weren’t bringing her,” Byron said.

“Yeah, but things got—don’t worry, she won’t get in the way.”

Byron leaned forward and whispered, “Have you seen this place? This isn’t the fucking police academy rock garden at twenty-five a head. They’re not paying what they’re paying to have a photographer’s kid crash the big day.”

“No one will even know she’s here,” Ted said. “She’ll sit off to the side somewhere.”

“I’m serious. I only offered you today because you promised me you’d come solo. I can’t have—” he broke off. “Jesus, she’s already at it.”

Ted spun around. Stella was tugging on a yellow tulip,

coaxing it into decapitation.

“Sweetheart,” Ted called out. “Please leave the flowers alone.”

“It was already loose,” Stella replied innocently, holding up the severed tulip by the stem.

“This is your last chance,” Byron said. “I’m serious. If she ruins today’s shoot, you don’t get paid.”

Ted carried his bags into the house and, after setting up Stella with his iPhone on a nearby couch, began to photograph the groom and his groomsmen. Ted was a graceful and accomplished photographer, and he did not know what was more demoralizing: that he was working as a second shooter for Byron, who had the perspectival ignorance of a pre-Renaissance painter, or that he was terrified he would lose the job. His photography career had always been a matter of vigorous tension as he balanced financial necessity with creative fulfillment, but after Emily died and he became the sole provider for Stella, he took on whatever assignment came his way. With rent and utilities to pay, diapers and food and clothing to buy, and preschool tuition and babysitting fees to cover, concern about the trajectory or integrity of his career had become an unaffordable luxury. Actor headshots, high school senior yearbook portraits, second shooter gigs for weddings and bar mitzvahs, pet birthdays . . . so long as it paid decent money, Ted shot it. There was better, more remunerative work out there, but Ted needed infusions of cash quickly and often, and he could not, like Byron, spend years

patiently building a referral network by offering deeply discounted shoots to targeted high-end clients. He could not patiently do anything any more. Ted did everything in haste now, even worry, and within a few minutes he had pushed aside his distress at the prospect of losing his fee—a fifteenth of what Byron would be receiving—and was coaxing nervous young men in tuxedos to curb their cheek-splitting fake smiles.

After a series of awkward poses, Ted encouraged the men to interact casually. He brought in a distressed metal bucket packed with ice and beers and, taking their cues from the best man, they lounged around the sitting room drinking and feigning indifference toward the camera. Whether it was the alcohol diffusing packet-like into their bloodstreams or the realization, as outside the catering staff bustled around in noisy, oblivious preparation, that they were almost incidental to the day's pageantry, they gradually relaxed, and Ted began to gather his first usable shots. He tried not to reposition himself too much, for fear of reminding the men of his presence, and it was for this reason that he did not notice Stella had left the room until almost twenty-five minutes had gone by.

“Hey guys?” Ted said. “I’ll be right back. I need to check on my . . . flash batteries.”

He slipped out of the sitting room and hurried through the enormous house in search of Stella. When he didn’t find her in the atrium or kitchen or in any of the bathrooms or bedrooms—including the master bedroom,

where bridesmaids attended the bride while Byron tapped at his Nikon D800 with the zeal of a laboratory mouse depressing the lever of a food pellet dispenser—Ted ventured out onto the grounds. Short men in black long-sleeve shirts were sweating under the noonday California sun while arranging rows of folding chairs. Ted asked one of the catering staff if she had seen a seven-year-old girl anywhere. The woman tucked her blond, blunt-cut hair behind her ear, exposing a band-aid on her earlobe.

“Did you try the arbor? I feel like maybe I saw a kid walking that way a while ago.”

“Where is it?”

She pointed the way. He ran across the lawn and down a series of gentle slopes until he came to the arbor. It was a sheltered woody enclosure, populated by shaggy trees and a trellis across which grapevines stitched in and out. He scanned the empty space for Stella, urging himself to remain calm. Where hadn't he looked yet? He had checked the house, the main lawn, the garden, and now the arbor. Maybe she had wandered back to their car?

He noticed Stella's shoes as he was leaving the arbor. They lay on the seat of the two-person swing, the left shoe upside down, the right half atop it, as if they had been kicked aside in struggle. He went over and picked them up, moving with the dull slowness of disbelief. They were tiny and golden, with scuffmarks on the toes like dark parentheses. He felt dread pierce his chest.

“Stella!” he shouted. “Stella!” He was overcome by a

frenzied incredulity that he had waited this long to call out for her. What if, in his discretion, he had squandered his one chance to find her? How could he have let himself be silenced by worries about work in the face of a loss that obliterated meaning? He flung aside the swing in grief. The suspension chain cracked against the trunk of the adjacent mulberry tree as he screamed his daughter's name again.

“Daddy?”

He froze. “Stella! Where are you?” He brought his hand up to his ear, straining to hear above the clanging contractions of the swing's recovery.

“I'm right here.”

He followed her small bright voice to the mulberry tree. She sat fifteen feet above him, suspended in a tangle of branches and green leaves.

“Stella! What are you doing up there?”

“I was bored.”

“That doesn't mean you can just . . . you need to . . . you can't leave without telling me where you're going.”

“You said not to interrupt you if you're working.”

He understood then that it had been a ploy of sorts, but his emotions, heated and overpowering, were on a ten second lag behind his intellect, and he was still experiencing that first explosion of relief to find her unharmed. Lightheaded with gratitude, he promised her that next Saturday, he would take her wherever she wanted.

“You mean it?”

“Yes,” he laughed, generosity spilling out of him. “Now come down.”

Leaves flurried toward the ground as Stella hurtled from branch to branch, descending with such speed that within seconds she was standing on the grass in front of him, barefoot and out of breath.

“School camping trip!” she screamed.

“Wait . . .” Ted said, but it was too late. Already Stella was pulling him by the hand, up the hill towards the house, where young men waited for him to document the time when their lives had been lived beautifully, easily, and happily, without trouble or compromise.

TED NOTICED MARIA RUSSELL the moment they entered the campground. She was standing beside the western wall of the main office, her eyes shut against the shower of steady April sunlight. Although her long red hair was distinctive, what made her immediately recognizable among the dozens of anonymous parents from Stella’s school was the cigarette in her hand. Parenting was a world of reformed and closet smokers, and Maria’s refusal to hide was almost unimaginable.

“What’s that smell?” Stella asked, as Ted pulled the car into the visitor lot. Her nose twitched at the cigarette smoke.

“Gasoline.”

“What kind of gasoline?” She spoke without looking at

him, transfixed by the game on his phone. He didn't mind her distractedness as it made it easier to lie to her.

"Lawn mower gasoline," he said, and rolled up the windows.

"Smart bombs! Here we go," she said, rapidly tapping at the screen.

"I'll be right back," Ted said. "I need to check us in."

Stella shifted her hips in the passenger seat, scowling at the events on screen. She stomped her bare feet against the dashboard but then, abruptly, smiled. "Yeah! Ha ha! Do you guys like to get killed? Because I like killing you."

Ted closed the car door behind him and followed the gravel path up toward the main office. To avoid legal issues, the camping trip was classified as an unofficial school event, but it had the attendance of an official one, and families from Stella's school nearly took over the three-hundred-acre campground for the weekend. Ted nodded at a familiar-looking middle-aged couple as they exited the main office, then stood in line behind a man wearing a biking helmet large enough to protect the skull of a bull elephant. The office had either been a stylish hunting cabin once, or renovated to resemble one; it was unclear whether the upscale resort had originated in luxury or been upgraded to appeal to wealthy Southern California campers who demanded smartly furnished cabins, a heated swimming pool, and a mini-market with organic produce. Ted handed over his credit card with the usual trepidation. He could not afford this weekend, but the

thought of disappointing Stella—who had missed the previous two annual trips—had convinced him to follow through on his promise. Though she was only seven years old, she had already remarked upon the difference in her life from those of her classmates, children who did not need to win a district lottery to attend the charter school because their parents could afford the grand mortgages in their affluent neighborhoods. They had been discreet comments, curious rather than critical, observations about swimming pools and backyard trampolines, horseriding lessons and men hired to walk dogs. While Ted did not get the sense that his daughter felt any real deprivation, he knew that her disappointment was on the horizon, six or seven years off, when the choices a parent has made become evident, and all that was once in the background, the blurry world of adulthood, sharpens fitfully, puzzlingly, and distressingly into the foreground.

On his way back to the car he came across Maria again. She had stepped off the path and was crouched above a pile of leaves, pointing her phone at it. She moved the device with exactitude, as if slotting it into an opening. From the inelegant splay of her hips as she straddled her subject he understood that she thought she was alone. It was a temptation, this discovery of privacy, and whereas years ago he would have watched as long as permitted, even captured it himself, now he gently scuffed the gravel with his heel. Maria did not change position—she expressed no noticeable recognition of having heard him—but a change

came over her, subtle yet unmistakable, as if the light had shifted in a room. She remained where she was but they both knew. It was a performance now.

“What area did you get assigned?” she said, standing up and sliding her phone into the back pocket of her jeans.

“I’m not sure.” He unfolded the photocopied map given to him, along with a parking pass and the key, and searched for the highlighted swatch. “P?”

“P? There’s a P?”

“Here,” he said, and held out the map.

She took it. Her hands were elegant, with slim ringless fingers and prominent white moons on the nail beds. She ran her index finger along the edge of the map. “That’s the . . . yurt section?”

“I reserved last minute,” Ted said apologetically, though the assignment had less to do with belatedness than with expense, its rate half of the cabins.

“I’ve always wondered about them. There’s only a few and no one ever tries them.” She surrendered the map. “I’m Maria, by the way.”

“Ted. We met before actually.”

“I wasn’t sure if you remembered. There’s a lot of parents.”

“You’re the smoker,” he said.

She smiled. “Just the way a girl wants to be remembered.”

“Better than being the yurt guy.”

A second before the collision he heard the whirring thrum of corduroy pant legs rubbing together, but the

familiar sound was so out of place as to be unrecognizable, and consequently Ted failed to heed the warning. Stella slammed into him with her arms outflung and her head tucked to the side. Ted staggered forward, almost falling into Maria.

“You left me in the car!”

“Stella!” he shouted, reaching down to break her grip. He turned and hoisted her into the air by the armpits, as if she were a cat. She swung her hips forward and hooked her heels around his back, pulling him toward her.

“I looked up and you were gone!”

“I told you I was checking us in,” he said.

“You should have taken me with you.”

“Stella honey, it was for five minutes. I could see the car the whole time.”

This seemed to calm her. She went limp in his arms, and he set her down on the ground. She rested the side of her head against his hip and glared up at Maria.

“Are you the gardener?”

“I’m Allison’s mom,” Maria said. “Do you know Allison? She’s in third grade, in Mrs. Dickinson’s class.”

Stella shook her head.

“She’s at the play structure with some of her friends from school. They’re having a lot of fun. It’s section D. Do you want me to show you on the map where that is?”

“No,” Stella replied.

Maria laughed. “I should head back anyway. See you guys at dinner.”

As he drove through the resort, Ted honked before every turn, scattering startled children to the sides of the road. Outside of the cabins, families unloaded their cars. Mothers carried pillows and blankets and backpacks, while fathers unhitched bicycles and requisitioned neighbors to help them with the heavy coolers, lifting them in pairs like pallbearers. When the cabins had concluded, a brief meadow followed, and then the yurts appeared, conical and white, arranged on alternating sides of a garrulous brook.

“A teepee!” Stella screamed. He winced at her shriek—a dull headache had set in halfway through the drive—but he was grateful for her enthusiasm. Inside the yurt, while Ted unpacked, Stella ran her hands back and forth along the canvas walls like a harpist. “Let’s go to the river!” she shouted.

“Why don’t you head down to the playground instead,” Ted said. He removed his laptop from its sleeve and plugged the cord into an outlet, then lay with his computer on the firm, tobacco-colored bed. It was a small but beautiful space, and in its simplicity it possessed the endearing confidence of a woman as she walks naked out of the bedroom at night to get a glass of water.

“But the river’s so close,” Stella said. “It’s right outside.”

“Stella, I have work to do.” He had planned on Photoshopping a series of overdue headshots while Stella was running around with friends.

“It’ll be fun,” Stella said. “We can be pirates.”

“All of your friends are here.”

“But I want to play with you.”

“We came here so you could spend time with your friends, not with me.”

“Please? Just for a little bit? Just fifteen minutes.”

“I have work—”

“Fifteen minutes and then I’ll leave you alone. I won’t bother you again.”

“I can’t just—”

“Ten minutes.”

“It’s important that I—”

“I’m important too.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Five minutes. Okay? What’s five minutes?”

He hesitated. It was only for a moment, but a single second of indecisiveness was all it took with Stella. She rushed over and flung herself into his arms. Laughing with triumph, she burrowed her forehead happily into his right eye socket. He put his hands up, shielding himself from the frizzy spurs of her hair as she howled with excitement. Her pleasure was overwhelming, rampant, irresistible; it had the potency of righteousness, the conviction of success.

An hour later, while following Stella in a complex hopscotch sequence across the brook, Ted slipped on a stone. He spun and fell on his side with a thud, his shin crashing into a rotted log. He lay in the brook, stunned, as the cold water ran over his body. From the shell of the split log, a column of black ants streamed toward the bank.

He dragged himself out of the water and staggered back toward their yurt to change into dry clothes. Stella walked a few feet behind him, apologizing. "It's not your fault," he told her. He was angry with himself, both for his clumsiness and his relentless capitulation, and it kept him from issuing a convincing reassurance. How had he ended up here?

They arrived early for dinner, overestimating how long the walk to the picnic site would take. The sun was going down. A few parents were drinking wine out of coffee mugs while the caterers set up the buffet. Ted's headache had worsened. The pain from his shin and hip seemed to be radiating outward throughout his body: his back, his shoulders, even his throat had begun to hurt. He huddled on the edge of a picnic table bench, watching Stella play in the nearby clearing with her friends. Their games were continuous, elastic, unvictoried. When a man rang a bell to announce that the buffet was ready, the children looked over but did not stop what they were doing.

He ran into Maria at the dessert table. She was wearing glasses with a prominent curve at the top outer edge. She held a plastic plate with chocolate chip cookies in each hand and was balancing a third plate on her forearm like a waitress. The smell of cigarette smoke clung to her, a bitter yet pleasant odor that made him think of midnight and youth and redeemable mistakes.

"It's for the table," she said. "They're not all for me."

"Didn't see a thing."

“I like your enabling,” she said. “Come hang out with us. Unless you’re still eating?”

He joined her table, seating himself between Maria and a lean brunette pouring red wine into cups. It was a small, rowdy group, possessing the happy unruliness of parents who are getting drunk with their children safely nearby. Jeff and Paul, whose adopted son was in Stella’s class, talked about how their son had once required his babysitter to watch him go to the bathroom.

“It was the only way he’d poop,” Jeff said.

“I mean only way,” Paul said.

“And so I tell him, ‘You need to get over it,’” Jeff said. “‘Because this habit’s going to get a lot more expensive when you’re thirty-five.’”

They drank and told stories of the absurd indignations, negotiations, and humiliations of parenthood. Their own childhoods had been ruled by decree, and now that it was their reign, they had forsworn autocracies, choosing instead to govern sassy republics rife with lobbying and strikes. The sleeves of Maria’s sweater had a hole for her thumbs and when she laughed, she brought her hands up to her mouth, resting her exposed thumbs under her chin. The lean brunette poured Ted more wine. He was enjoying himself, despite the ache spreading throughout his body, and when the bonfire was lit and everyone left the table to toast s’mores, he followed Maria to the edge of the woods. She lit a cigarette and tilted her head back slightly before exhaling upward into the night.

“Do you want one?” she said, reaching into her purse.

Ted hesitated. “No,” he said.

She kept her hand where it was. “Are you sure? Because that’s the yessiest no I’ve ever heard.”

“Just one,” he said.

He leaned into her cupped hands as she lit the cigarette for him. He hadn’t smoked since Stella was a toddler, and the easy, familiar flush of pleasure inspired alternating waves of comfort and guilt.

It was dark on the border of the clearing, and the trees further shadowed their bodies. To the children swarming around the bonfire he was almost invisible. Ted craned his head forward, squinting out toward the distant fire, then retreated a step.

“I can’t tell if you’re hiding or trying to get caught,” Maria said.

Ted shrugged. “Stella just . . . likes to know where I am.”

Maria drew on her cigarette. She held it on the right side of her mouth, as if she were kissing the corner of someone’s lips.

“So where are you?” she said.

HE WOKE IN the middle of the night in panic. He threw off the blanket and lurched out of the yurt. He was drenched in sweat. His thighs shook. He made it three steps toward the communal toilet before his stomach cramped and dragged him to the ground. On his hands and knees, he

vomited red wine in a burst of explosive hot splashes. Then he felt hard dirt on his left cheek. He understood that he was lying down. The fact seemed irrelevant, as if it were happening to a stranger. It was cold, and dark, and he remained where he was, unwilling to move, until he heard Stella's scared voice calling for him from inside the yurt.

Forcing himself upright, he staggered back to the entrance. "I'm right here," he mumbled. He shut the door and swayed across the floor. He tried to strip the sweat-soaked sheets but his fingers kept slipping on the elastic. It was an impossible effort. He gave up, passing out on the half-exposed mattress.

When he woke again, he was shivering violently. A terrible cold had seized him. His entire body trembled in response. It was like being shaken in a giant fist. Above him, through the domed skylight, the sun was blazing helplessly. He reached for the blanket and pulled it across his chest. The simple movement exhausted him. Whatever had claimed him in the middle of the night had redoubled its attack.

Stella padded across the floor. He couldn't see her, but he could hear her beside him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

He did not realize he had fallen asleep again until he reopened his eyes to dimness. The sun had moved from overhead, and the light now entering was dull from the touch of clouds. Despite this, his body was inflamed. Sweat slicked his skin. His tee shirt was soaked. He struggled

to kick aside the blanket and the tangled sheets, weakly cycling his legs. The air felt cool on his bare feet and shins, a brief, insufficient mercy.

He sat up slowly. Stella lay curled at the foot of the bed with his phone.

“You should get some breakfast,” he croaked.

“It’s too late,” Stella said.

“What time is it?”

“One thirty-seven.”

Ted struggled to inhale. His breathing felt woolen and labored, as if strands of yarn, rather than air, were being pulled through his lungs. He knew that his illness had nothing to do with last night, but with his child neglected all day, he couldn’t help but feel ashamed of his brief pursuit of pleasure.

“They serve lunch until two,” he said.

Stella didn’t answer him.

“It’s just down the path.” He coughed, grimacing. “Same place as last night.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat.”

“Don’t want to go.”

“Please,” he croaked. “You need to eat.”

“I want to stay here with you.”

She crawled up the bed and nosed against him, rubbing her forehead against the side of his neck and along his clammy cheek. He tried to turn away but she pursued him, burrowing into his eye socket. He raised his hand and

weakly pushed at her chin.

“Don’t. You’ll get sick.”

“I don’t care.”

“Stella,” he said, “I have a fever.”

She smiled. “I’ll be your fever.”

The heat of her body against his felt oppressive. Bunching the disheveled sheets around her like the petals of a flower, she gazed affectionately down at him.

He was trapped. She was everything he had tried to avoid in love, he understood in dismay, every woman he had spent his twenties and thirties bewildering, disappointing, and then fleeing; all of the possessiveness and covetousness, the neediness and stubbornness had been incarnated in his tiny, demanding daughter. And Stella was inescapable. He was fettered to her. She was the one lover he could not evade.

It was his fault, he thought, as she fussily tucked a pillow behind their backs. He had made her like this. He had loved grandly and attentively, while covertly reserving a small part of himself for dissent. It was this secret share where his unhappiness and resentment resided, where he fantasized of freedom, a life that once again belonged only to himself, that she had learned to detect. Or perhaps she had known of it all along. From the moment that his daughter could speak, what had she been saying except *Wait for me, Stay with me, Don’t go*. Alone except for her father, she was even more attuned to his silent longings for escape than the women who had preceded her.

A flock of noisy sparrows glided above the skylight. They both turned their heads to watch, but the birds flew out of view in an instant, already memories.

“I’m sorry,” Ted said.

“It’s okay. Just dumb birds.”

“No, for—if you ever thought I wanted to leave you. I’m sorry. It’s not true.”

Stella wound part of the blanket around her hand. “It would be easier for you.”

“Still wouldn’t want it. I’d miss you—” A ragged coughing fit interrupted him. “—too much.”

Stella unwound the upper strip of blanket and flattened it along the bed with both hands. She kneaded it in silence. There was in the expression of her scrunched-up nose an unknown consideration, but a second, more severe coughing fit gripped him, and the brutality of the spasms curtailed whatever assurance or investigation would have come next. He felt his strength ebb, flowing away from him with a tender yielding menace.

HE WOKE IN darkness, blinking up at the skylight. Night had fallen. Stars flung down their light from impossible distances.

“Stella?” he whispered. “You okay?”

A woman switched on the bedside lamp. Out of the periphery of his dull gaze, he recognized the curve of Maria’s glasses. She sat along the side of the bed, a half-

peeled orange in her palm. The fragrance of the citrus rind clung to her, binding with the scent of tobacco.

“She’s getting dinner with Allison and some other kids,” Maria said. “Jeff and Paul are keeping an eye on her.”

“How did you . . . is this . . .”

“If it were a dream, I’d be skinnier.” She pressed her hand to his forehead. “Stella came and found me.”

She set down the half-naked orange and retrieved her purse. She removed a travel-sized packet of acetaminophen and tore it open with her teeth.

“Thanks,” he murmured, as she offered him two white tablets. He swallowed them with water from a bottle that she held against his lips.

“You could have let someone know what was going on.”

“No phone service.” He coughed as one of the tablets caught in his throat.

“Because that’s really what held you back,” she said.

He laughed dimly. His body still ached—his skull, his back, his chest, his limbs, even his skin somehow hurt—but after a few minutes, the medicine began to take effect, and a slight yet hopeful restlessness returned to him. He sat up in bed, propped against the pillows, while Maria prepared him a plate of saltines and orange segments.

He was chewing with quiet deliberation when Stella pushed open the door, followed by a young girl with a dark ponytail.

“Look who’s up,” Ted said.

Stella ran over to the bed, knocking the plate onto his lap as she mashed herself against him. "Someone brought fireworks," she told him in a rush. "They weren't supposed to but they brought them anyway. Then the ranger came. He drove a truck with a siren and he had a dog with him. No one got arrested," she concluded with disappointment.

The girl with the ponytail tugged on Stella's arm.

"Hey," Stella said. "Can I get a glow-in-the-dark necklace from the candy store? Please? Everyone at the bonfire has them."

"They just charge your cabin," the girl said. She glanced at the single, wraparound canvas wall. "Or . . . teepee."

Ted nodded.

"Thank you!" Stella kissed her father on the cheek and raced out of the yurt, knocking over a chair in her haste.

"I'll get that," Ted said, but Maria dismissed him with a wave.

"Don't push it," she said, righting the chair. "It's still early."

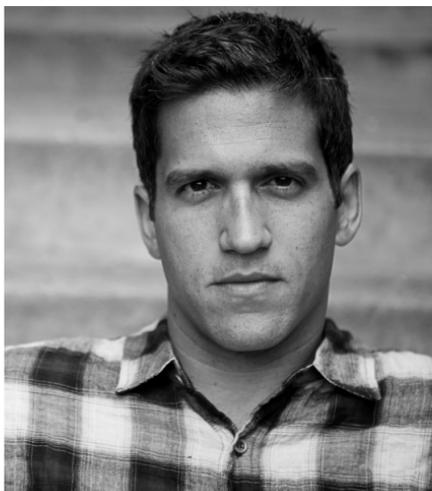
She prepared him another plate of food, refilled his bottle of water, and left a handful of white medicine packets stacked on the bedside table. Then she slipped on her coat.

"Where are you going?" he said, halving an orange segment between his teeth. Its juice stung his cracked lips.

"I should let you rest."

He took another bite. The flesh was pulpy and tart.

"Stay," he said. ☺☹



PANIO GIANOPOULOS is the author of the novella, *A Familiar Beast*, and the upcoming story collection, *How to Get Into Our House and Where We Keep The Money* (Fall 2015). His fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in *Tin House*, *Northwest Review*, *Salon*, *Nerve*, *The Hartford Courant*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Five Chapters*, *The Rattling Wall*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, among others. A recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, he has been included in the anthologies *The Encyclopedia of Exes*, *The Bastard on the Couch*, and *Cooking and Stealing: The Tin House Nonfiction Reader*.