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Policies and Oranges

Jenny Steele

1

Cutty's mother blindfolded him with a discarded scarf (a jade green scarf patterned with ash-white commas, silken, silky soft on the boy's eyelids). In this dim now, this hard gray. Restlessness circling him. Hot breath in his ear now, his mother's sweet breath. "Fun, Cutty. Remember." *Of course*. She had insisted on this to him when he had come into her room hours earlier. Her room: private, severed; in other rooms, she yielded or conquered: this was the language of her war with Cutty's father. In her room was a small bench with a slate-blue cushion, velvet, and an antique vanity, maple, with her tools, her paints. She was leaning into its foxed mirror. "We'll have fun, Cuthbert." She colored her mouth an improbable coral, clamped the excess color into a tissue. "Come here." Cutty obeyed; in the mirror he watched his reflection come up behind hers. "Am I beautiful, Cutty?"

Cutty hesitated. This was a crucial element in their little game: a hint of doubt, purely false, then the erasing of it. "Like rain," Cutty answered. "Like a dove."

"Kind boy." She wadded the tissue with proof of her mouth on it, dropped it in a brass waste pail (swabs in it damp with astringents, lotions: residue). From a tiny glass bottle, she tipped a dark perfume into her wrists, into the blue veins under the wrist's thin skin. These were pulse points, Cutty understood. She put an arm around Cutty's waist and closed him to her body like a hinge. Cutty studied the folds in her red silk robe, how the light from her vanity's yellow bulbs lay in the glossy folds. And his mother inspected her finished face, each lash emphasized, each blemish eliminated, eyebrows plucked: such trouble taken. "Go get ready now." With a swim stroke, she swept Cutty back.

Fun. Remember. A long, cool hand cupped on the nape of his neck: his mother's hand. She welcomed the crowd around them, charmed them, jested, and the crowd buzzed, funned. She spun Cutty, dizzying him. Cutty imagined the blindfold's knot tight on his skull as a satellite of sorts, a moon in orbit. *Fun? No.* What Cutty would preserve of this day, his tenth birthday, would be moments from earlier in the day: in his father's den (lacquered swordfish, bearskin rug), opening dumb gifts from distant aunts (magic kits, model airplane kits: boys like kits!); and then he waited for his mother to come home from the city, from a city salon with a fresh trim and tint, a practical, masculine cut, golden; and in his mother's room later, breathing in the chemicals of her golden hair, witnessing in part her private hour of metamorphosis, glimpsing curves; later still, in his room, in plain brown pants and a plaid shirt, Cutty lay on his small bed, anticipated the knock, anticipated, "Come, Cutty. The party's beginning."

His mother stopped spinning Cutty and the foam rubber grip of an aluminum baseball bat was put into his hands. As he lifted the bat, Cutty wobbled, his equilibrium lost. Murmurs of impatience and innocent lust flowed from the circle of child guests. There was candy, wasn't there? and little toys too? And it was up to Cutty to split wide the piñata's belly and let gush the loot.

The piñata was a stub-legged donkey with a hide of pink, yellow, and green crepe loops, with a paper saddle and reins. The farm's loyal Jim had made a trip across the border to Nogales, Sonora for this piñata and other Mexican items: authentic vanilla and tequila, pills from the *farmacia*, whatever the Policy family needed. Jim was Henry Policy's right-hand man, a timid man, quiet, quietly tenacious. Clever with rifle and rod and reel, he went with Mr. Policy on hunts in western forests and fishing trips in the Gulf of California. Jim knew his value, but was cautious and proud. His home was a small clapboard house off the northern edge of the orange groves; his wife was Dee, a sour woman, undone, Mrs. Policy's domestic. Jim and Dee had

a daughter Cutty's age, Theresa. Theirs was a safe but severe existence.

With a skein of nylon rope, Jim had hoisted the donkey piñata into the rafters of the barn and secured it there in the shadows. Now he lowered the donkey into the ring of children. One hoof brushed the crown of Cutty's blond hair; he flinched and swung the bat in a clumsy arc. Jim tugged sharply on the rope, flying the piñata beyond reach.

Voices urged: "Come on, Cutty!" The boys and girls invited were classmates from the local elementary school, the children of the farm's employees. Henry Policy didn't like such intimacy: it harmed productivity. And lately, he'd been quelling chatter in the groves. When the news of her husband's censorship came to her ears, Susan Policy barked at him, "You forbid chit-chat? Idiotic!"

"I've heard gossip."

"Like what?"

"What isn't good. I am a private man."

"Twisted up. Afraid."

"Be smart."

"For Cutty's birthday, I want the children here. I want everybody here." This wasn't sedition. Susan believed this mingling decent and dignity-enhancing. She liked the farm's help: poor, desert whites and Mexicans, legal, illegal. She had come from Phoenix (girls' academy, swimming medals, smuggled schnapps). She met Henry in college, at a dance, and there was crude seduction, and he talked her into the world of oranges, growing oranges here in Bishop, Arizona, off the far fringes of Phoenix. "We'll battle, of course," she had said to him, and he had answered, "Yes, I hope to." And since, love lay with venom in her heart: heart joy, heartache.

Yes, Susan liked the people of Bishop. She joined Dee for bottles of cola in the laundry room, or she urged Dee to sit down. "Sit. Please." Often: the cushioned bench in Susan's room. These were bewildering, graceless moments for Dee, and she suffered. Mrs. Policy would unbutton a gray blouse, try a

blue blouse, stone cool in her red lace bra and red lace panties, and she would ask Dee's opinion.

"You look fine in anything, Mrs. Policy."

"Cocktails. Cubes of cheese on toothpicks. Boozy flirts.

The usual nonsense. Come on, Dee. The gray?"

"The gray's nice, Mrs. Policy."

"Wouldn't you rather call me Susan?"

"No."

"Bring Theresa up to the house sometime." Susan Policy thumbed a fallen strap up over her bony shoulder. "Anytime."

"Thank you." Dee scampered back to her chores, breath tattered.

The children came to Cutty's birthday and the parents too, and they gathered in the barn on this Friday, this hot autumn afternoon. Most had plans for the weekend: some would go to Phoenix glimmering on the horizon like a biblical city; others would camp (cheap beer, cheap meat: pine woods, mountain breezes); lovers would lick traces of orange from hands and necks, juice and sweat salt from a week's labor.

The piñata dropped again, and Cutty thrashed the bat, bounced its barrel off the rope. He jabbed the bat again and again at empty air; the children became edgy and mad, candy demons. Cutty's eyes swelled hotly; he was glad for the blindfold.

"Here. Enough." Cutty's mother entered the ring of children. Cutty heard the hush, the awe for her. What he wanted to hoard of her was her flash and finesse, what, as an adult, he would tag carnality: it had snared his father, easy prey flayed. Her love scattered in the circle as she gripped the aluminum bat with Cutty. "Okay, Jim," she said. "Let it down."

Cutty understood this as another moment to package and shelve for later use: the clink of her metallic bangles, her hands tight around his. She kneed him forward and with a flourish they cracked the saddle of the donkey, halved the donkey neatly. A noisy rush nearly knocked Cutty down. He pulled the silky blindfold down around his throat. On the dusty floor

of the barn, elbows slammed elbows, greedy hands disemboweled the piñata. The parents spurred or jeered as their children jammed pockets with candy (taffies, lozenges, lollipops) and cheap plastic toys (tops, whistles, harmonicas). Above the chaos dangled the front half of the piñata. Jim, just visible near the barn's north wall, jerked the nylon rope, making spill what remained in the donkey's chest cavity and skull. Jellyed wedges of lime, lemon, and orange sealed in cellophane wrappers tumbled out. Jim and Dee's daughter, Theresa, sat back suddenly, sat on her heels, and cupped her palms in the lap of her blue and white dress, and the citrus wedges fell into her hands. Theresa smiled up at Cutty. Later, in recollection, he would decide that he returned her smile.

2

"Cutty? Is that you? Cutty?"

A woman, a clanging burst, descended on Cutty in the airport lounge. He shielded his face with one hand. "Sorry," he said. "You've mistaken me."

"No. It's you. Don't you recognize me, Cutty? It's me, Theresa. From Bishop?"

"Oh. Theresa. Yes. Hello. Please. Join me." He gestured at the barstool next to him and Theresa put a slim hip on it. She eyed Cutty up and down, cut him with knife eyes. "People still call you Cutty?"

"Close friends could. And people who knew me from Bishop."

"I knew you. I remember. I've forgotten a lot. Methodically. But not you. The Policy boy."

A disembodied voice cooed through the terminal, "Now boarding, Gate Eleven, Miami. Now boarding, Gate Twelve, Atlanta."

Cutty grinned and blinked at Theresa, pushed the plastic bowl of Spanish peanuts towards her. How to identify in this woman the girl Theresa, the sad, anxious girl from Bishop,

Arizona? He remembered her from elementary school, its hot rooms, its stink of paste and the janitor's bucket and child crevices. Theresa's desk was next to Cutty's; he noticed her dirty socks, her dirty ankles, the grease in her hair. During recess, she scuffled with brutal boys, bit them, bloodied her mouth. But where was that girl now? Hidden, swallowed up by this woman: put together, bold, in silk and leather, hair clipped and fox red, silver hoops in her earlobes, silver links around her wrists, wireless frames with lenses tinted pink.

"I'm happy bumping into you like this," Cutty said. "What a coincidence."

"Is that vodka and tonic? I'll have one too. My flight isn't for another hour. Yours, Cutty?"

"It's delayed. Bad weather."

Theresa waved to the bartender, then dug in her calfskin purse for a wad of cash. "Limes too, okay?" she added. The bartender tipped airport vodka into a cup of ice cubes and blasted tonic from a nozzle into it. Theresa put her elbows on the bar's lip and again eye-slashed Cutty. "Remember that stupid birthday party? With the piñata? Flailing that damn bat. Funny."

"It's a blur."

"I need the ladies' room." Theresa shouldered past a group of British tourists coming into the lounge. The tourists settled around little round tables; they wanted beer, they were mad with time's slack. "Now arriving, Gate Five, Dallas." Birthday party. Piñata. Yes. That day. Gift kits. His mother, her mirror. Uproot the panic, there was custom love and lewd salvation. The bartender, a rail-thin black man in a blue vest, set fresh drinks down, took the money. Cutty waited.

"This *is* amazing, isn't it? Really." Theresa sat on the barstool, picked up her drink. "You and me in the same airport, in the same concourse. Simultaneously. Where is this? Saint Louis."

"It is amazing."

"And where are you going, Cutty?"

"Minneapolis. I teach at a small college in southern

Minnesota.”

“Oh. Teach what?”

“English Literature.”

“Oh.”

Cutty Policy was clean and lean; in a nice brown suit and nice brown shoes and a blue and yellow necktie. There had been a colloquium Saturday and Sunday in St. Louis for teachers of poetry: were curriculums infecting students with poetry or immunizing them? And there were readings each evening; Cutty was asked to share selections from a book he had edited, a collection of Christina Rossetti’s poetry (Rossetti’s selves: boxed blaze). He thought of showing a copy to Theresa, but he didn’t. In its olive-green dust jacket, the volume throbbed in a pocket of his backpack; it was proof of what he had become, of who: someone unlikely, someone who rented a tidy cottage with bare pine floors and plain white walls, with catalog furniture and a Turkish rug. He walked to the school every day, in the snow if necessary (snow an unlimited joy for the desert boy), to his classroom in a red brick building where he would funnel and jam and unleash words.

“And you, Theresa? Where are you flying today?”

“Phoenix.”

“Home?”

“No. No need. I’m on business. I’m a consultant for a fiber optics company. A scout.” She gulped down her drink, beckoned to the bartender; in her mouth was ice and she shattered it with her teeth.

Cutty thumbed the thin red skin from some Spanish peanuts and popped them down his throat. He prompted Theresa. “A scout?”

“It’s what I ended up as, Cutty. I was here and there and then I went to New York with just enough of this and just enough of that to become what I am now. I guess that’s how it is for everybody. And now here’s this day and this hour and you and me. Converging.” Theresa put another fist of cash on the bar. “Happenstance. What if I? What if you? But no ifs. Here

we are. What if I wasn't in New York? What if I was in Guatemala City? I *was* there. For two whole years. Volunteer shit. Recruited as a senior in high school. An adventure! Travel! Escape! You were sent to private high school, right, Cutty?"

"Yes. A boys' academy."

"Little blue blazers?"

"Little blue blazers."

"I know. I saw you."

"And Guatemala, Theresa?"

"I could have stayed there forever. Could have met some beautiful young man at the American Club and we would have had beautiful children. And the beautiful young man and I and our beautiful children would dig wells and sewers and we'd distribute toothbrushes and toothpaste and we'd wear filthy ponchos and hats woven from hemp and we'd *fit right in*. But I didn't stay. I *left*. Ideals? Why bother. I needed a bath. A bubble bath. A *soak*. I checked into a Holiday Inn in Florida. And I had a bath. Those little soaps, Cutty. Those little soaps wrapped in glossy paper, and you use the soap once, maybe twice, then the maid tosses it away the next day. The waste, Cutty! Isn't it terrific? *Guilt? No*. Here's this cocktail napkin. Entire forests are chopped down to make cocktail napkins for our vodka and tonics. And then the napkins are disposed of, hauled to a dump. We're not sitting here worrying about secondary use, we're not saying: oh, toilet tissue, oh, kindling. I love the waste here. A tub of water, sixty gallons, precious, unpolluted, the village dreams of it, and we *soak* in it and *drain* it. *Guilt? No*. I refuse it. Here we are, Cutty. Pure chance."

"What if."

"Exactly."

The lovely, urgent voice again: arrivals, departures; Cutty listened for his flight and for Theresa's. A swarm of people (peddlers, fugitives, pilgrims, fools) went past the lounge, and some came in, bleary eyes tilted down at wristwatches. The lounge bulged. Cutty was suffocating. Bolted on a high shelf was a TV and the bartender switched it on now: beach volleyball, plash of

yellow sand, tanned limbs. Somebody jostled Cutty roughly. Theresa squeezed her slice of lime into her mouth, and the juice squirted. Cutty again pictured his tenth birthday party, how candy fell from the donkey pinata and into Theresa's cupped palms: jellied citrus. Cutty needed air. "I don't want you to miss your flight, Theresa."

"I won't."

"This was fun."

"You know I came up to your house. Your mother gave me Pepsi and fancy cookies. She was like magic. Still is, no doubt. I crept into her room once. I remember: she was down in the den, she was trying to find a certain song on an album like she wasn't sure of its title, she was taking the needle off the grooves, laying the needle on the next grooves. I went into her room. It was dim. My heart was jumping. Scraps of music blasted up through the floorboards, piano, trumpet, jazzy music. I went to her vanity. The array: lipstick, mascara, pencils of color, jars of cream. I swiped a pink puff, put it in my pocket. I was terrified. But I had to have something of hers."

"Okay. There. Your flight. Phoenix. Now boarding. Gate Sis. Here, Theresa. Allow me." Cutty guided Theresa from the lounge to her gate; he wished her luck and walked away. On a bank of screens, an inventory of to and from, in blue: on time; in red: Minneapolis, Delayed. Cutty slumped against a window and breathed. Heavy jets lifting off lightly, lightly touching down.

3

This aberrant rant in an airport lounge: Theresa blamed the vodka. This idiotic vent. It was because of Cutty too, colliding with him. Odd Cutty. Fussy Cutty. Had he quit his boy-hood? Yes. Had he broken from his mother's gravitational pull? Surely, yes. But Theresa hadn't asked him what his life was like now: had he wed, was he happy, was he on a track? These seemed like critical issues this morning. (Wait: Cutty

taught in Minnesota, college English; this fact clung.)

Theresa swung her feet from the bed to the floor. Her head felt tight but all right. She shucked her sleep tee and scuffed into the bathroom and bowed into the mirror. The body's truth: skin drift, used eyes, dark moons under those eyes. Pee, flush. She splashed milky tap water on her face and neck; she rinsed her mouth, spit. There was a coffee pot in the room and a basket with packets of sugar and cream. Theresa tore open a mylar pouch with a little pillow of coffee in it. With coffee and maybe a brisk swim in the hotel pool, she would restore herself. She had the entire morning free; she wanted to visit the city's aquarium. She knew the museums (paintings of wistful cowboys and somber squaws) and the zoo too: targets of school field trips. Sack lunches. Hot, dusty bus. The zoo day caromed in her skull: Cutty's mother (in ivory, in melon) and Theresa's (small, dark, witless) joined the trip, helped to herd and to hush the children; in the petting pen, how a drawf goat sneezed on her mother and how her mother reacted (flustered, quick tissue); peanut butter and jelly, cheese sticks, tepid punch; Cutty and Mrs. Policy hand in hand into the aviary, lost in mist and tropical squawks, Theresa's heart knotted. The aquarium? Sure. Illogical, ironic in this bowl of desert. Joyous and wet. Not blurred with what was.

Coming here to Phoenix wasn't Theresa's idea. She had endorsed San Diego as the site for the fiber optics plant. The ocean! The beach! The naval base with its clean young sailors skilled and eager for jobs. "Yes, Theresa, but Phoenix is still on the agenda." Her boss had peered into her cubicle, drummed his fingers on the hard tweed partition. He was recently wifeless: stubbly jaw, musky, gym-raw. "Just go. Chat Phoenix up." *Okay.* It was worth this job, this life in New York: souvlaki in the park at noon, lunatics with saxophones collecting coins in cases, the hiss and piss of the subway, ice rinks, holiday windows, crime news, blood and miracles, the crush and flurry, her room and a half in the Village, a busy futon, this pace, this pace. *Okay.* For this, for New York: Phoenix today, an urban panel

scheduled today.

The coffee pot gurgled, bitter, chemical coffee, black. Theresa's neck popped and her sockets popped as she whirled her arms. Jeans, a silk tank top, Portuguese sandals: she took these from her suitcase and put them on the bed. Her business suit (soot-gray trousers and jacket, butter-yellow blouse) hung in its garment bag. *Right*. She unzipped it, put the clothes in the closet. Extra bras, extra panties: in the suitcase, in the swag with the elastic lip. *Settle now. Focus forward*. Theresa inched open the window drapes. Other downtown buildings loomed, horns honked, pedestrians clustered and flowed. She expected the fluted copper columns of the old bank, but it wasn't in view. Maybe that bank was on another block.

That bank held much meaning, hated; it evoked the picture of her father there, hat in his hands. Jim asked for few afternoons free. Mr. Policy nodded yes, nodded hello to Theresa if she had come up with Jim. (Mr. Policy oiling a shotgun in his garage, crimping shot into shells, Theresa's fist a little ball of bones and sweat in her father's hand.) In their battered El Camino, Jim and Dee and Theresa made the quick trip from Bishop to Phoenix. In a city lot, Jim parked, prayed, "Our own corner. Our own trees. Or lettuce. Radishes."

"They're not bad to us," said Dee.

"I want out from under them."

Jim took the straw hat with its black ribbon band that Theresa had held in her lap and he set it tenderly on his head. "Go shopping," he said, his voice bright. "Buy a nice outfit." Dee exhaled: another dumb go, love marred.

Theresa's father vanished down the street, towards the bank's columns, a shiny rib cage. Theresa and her mother dashed across crosswalks and into J. C. Penney's entrance (aqua blue tile, flaked caulk). Women's and girls' clothes were on the second floor. Staff were carrying mannequins up the escalator; Theresa and Dee rose between slender, pink legs and curvy torsos. In among circular racks of girls' dresses (the screech of hangers on the chrome rod), Dee grumbled to Theresa: how

much prettier you'd feel if you'd just *try* something *soft*, something *feminine*, it won't *kill* you, it won't *result in instant death* if you'd just *try* a *god damn dress*. Locked in the fitting room, stripped down to her white cotton underpants and white training bra, Theresa shook, hot, cold.

Dee rattled the latch, pleaded, "Come on, Theresa," and her voice was terrible, cauterizing. A dress dead on a hook: blue and white, synthetic, a floppy collar, multi-use for burials, mass, parties. Hate flowered like a burn on Theresa's skin. They collected Jim in the sterile lobby of the bank. He closed his eyes: enough; he wouldn't beg again. On the way back to Bishop, they stopped at a cheap cafeteria off the freeway. Beef cubes, noodles, corn, carrots, rice pudding, chocolate pudding. It reeked. But Theresa liked this cafeteria. The tabletops were laminated with antique French newspaper, ads for *chapeaux* and *gants* and *parapluies*. These mysterious words under her plate, reflected in her knife's blade, cooled Theresa, cheered her, somehow confirmed for her that someday she would be an adult and real, that she would be sophisticated and melancholy like Cutty's mother, that she would have boobs and regrets like Cutty's fantastic mother. This numbed Theresa to Phoenix, to the Bishop groves, to her ordinary, failing parents.

Forget that, forget wholly, Theresa scolded herself now. *The girl of then: somebody else. I am no more her. I am this now: sexed, hard, quick, waxed, and dyed.*

A sharp knock sounded on the door. "Room service!"

Room service? Had she ordered breakfast? No. Theresa grabbed her tank top and slipped into it. She went to the door and peeped through the peephole at a uniformed boy with a tray balanced on one uplifted palm; on the tray, on a beige linen napkin: a cinnamon bun, cantaloupe and honeydew and strawberries, a thermal carafe. "I'm afraid you have the wrong room," Theresa said. Or had she rung for this? No. She held still, her breath shallow in the bottom of her lungs. Checking into this hotel, a bellhop with her luggage: nothing of these came to her. A jumbo jet at JFK, the flight into Sky Harbor? She had no

memory of these either, of any aspect of it: a stewardess with her emergency patter (oxygen mask, floatation cushion), a snack box, turbulence. *Wait.* The layover in a midwestern airport, vodka and tonic with Cutty. New Cutty. Fit Cutty. The theft of a pink puff from his mother's vanity: she'd given Cutty this secret. Inhaling that puff, the residue of lavender talcum rimming her nostrils like a drug: she'd kept that from Cutty, it was still hers. The luggage carousel, a cab to this downtown hotel: nothing, nothing. Her final recollection: Cutty guiding her, using her elbow as a rudder, putting her into the line for her plane.

Theresa ignored the second knock on the door and the boy's weary summons; she went to the window again and pressed against the slot of glass. Below, a woman stumbled on a curb. In her arms was a grocery sack brimming with vivid oranges; as the woman fell to her knees, the oranges spilled and bounced into traffic. A light cry pinched Theresa's throat. *Where am I? What is this?*

4

Cutty strolled with his mother within the southern margin of the orange groves. Trips home were infrequent, but Cutty always came into the trees just as dusk hit. His mother buckled her sandals on and followed him in. This had become a cherished ritual for them, and nobody else was aware of it. Cutty's father was isolated and happy with his guns and maps (he wanted a lion pelt and elephant tusks: lawless safari in Africa). Cutty had found him in his den with his finger on Zambia. "Hello, son," he'd said. He had lost at last and it was obvious to Cutty. Cutty backed out of the den. A cool bath, a nap in his room, a boy again in his quiet boy room. And then, the day's heat unfixed, Cutty went into the groves. The sun had saturated the blossoms, the soil, the leaves; the atmosphere was thick and adhered to the skin, a sweet film.

"And how is Cutty? My kind boy." Susan drew up to

Cutty, linked her arm in his.

"I'm well."

"And school? You like teaching?"

"Yes. You always ask the same questions."

"Of course." She nestled against him. She seemed frail, pale, less a wow. Her dress was white cotton, sleeveless; around her neck lay a choker of turquoise chunks. "Where did you put the rug?"

"In the front room." Susan had shipped to him a lush, indigo blue and ginger-brown rug, Turkish. She'd flown to Minnesota to inspect Cutty's cottage and she had frowned at its plainness, its stark efficiency. She gestured suggestions: a cabinet in that nook, art on that naked wall, a floor lamp there, chairs there. Cutty came up behind her, pinned her wrists to her hips, held her still. "I like it as it is." He inhaled fully, filled his chest against her back; she elbowed his ribs. In Minneapolis, Cutty took her for dim sum, green tea, lychee nuts, and a foreign film, glum Czech. It was an anxious visit, mercifully brief. Six months passed when Susan sent the rug; Cutty laughed as the delivery men unrolled it.

They cornered into another neat row and they slowed. Cutty rubbed his chin in her hair; her golden hair was dark brown at the roots, her precision lax now. He had noticed it earlier, this loosening; neglected cuticles, her salmon-pink polish bitten. He noticed as Susan laid her hand on the collection of Rossetti that Cutty had edited; but how he loved those torn salmon nails on the olive green book, and he would remember this.

"Am I beautiful, Cutty?"

Cutty hesitated. It was the game: a quick flicker of false doubt, then the casting off of it. "Like rain. Like a dove."

"Bring a girl home, Cutty. Some girl whose heart you've wounded."

"Yes. That's what I do. I wound. I inflict wounds."

"Oh, don't."

There was someone. Karen. But she wasn't his. She

was swift, pony-like, with a black ponytail. She coached the college's lacrosse squad. She taught geometry and made it popular. Cutty sat in Karen's class once. She wrote formulas on the chalkboard and drew a cylinder, a cone, a cube. She hooked her thumbs in her pants' pockets, coolly paced, coolly talked the jargon of geometry. She invited Cutty to a get-together she was giving. She had a cottage near campus similar to his. Cutty took a bloody merlot to Karen; she hugged him and pulled him in. There was too much of a group. A wrought-iron rack with potted ferns, a blue zigzag of neon: Cutty stood between these. Two cats (mist-gray: Bill; calico: Lulu) inspected ankles and eluded cuddles. Karen drifted from guest to guest. Cutty hurt; the night was bad. "I like you, Cutty," Karen said the next Monday as he sheltered her under his black umbrella and walked her to her red Civic in the faculty lot and asked her out. "But no." She didn't offer why. The rain drummed hard on the umbrella.

"Guess who I came across a while ago?" said Cutty.

"Who?"

"Theresa. Remember Theresa?"

"Jim and Dee's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Pitiful girl. Mousy. Is she still mousy?"

"No, I wouldn't describe her as mousy. She's grown up now, obviously. She seemed sewn up. I really didn't recognize her at first. At first glance. Outfit, hair, voice. Self invention. And she confessed to me, weirdly. She came up to the house once, with Dee I suppose, and she went into your bedroom and she stole a powder puff from your vanity. She claims she needed it."

"It was bleak for her. There was bleakness."

Since the airport lounge (vodka, peanuts, Guatemala, frazzled Brits, boarding calls), Theresa had invaded Cutty, brusque flashes in his mind: as he laced up his boots for the season's final blizzard, as his students untangled the Brownings, as he crashed to his knees in his office after Karen had denied

him. But it wasn't the woman Theresa had become who occupied him, it was the girl she had been, the girl who gathered candies into the lap of her ugly blue-and-white dress. Had she smiled at Cutty in that moment? Yes, and he had mirrored that smile.

"What does Theresa do now?" asked Susan.

"She travels. She's with a fiber optics firm. A consultant."

"Imagine."

"And Dee and Jim?" said Cutty. "Jim's eyes?"

"Worse. He's almost blind. He can't hunt with your father now. But we keep him on the payroll. My idea, of course. It's terrifically hazardous. Pump toggles on or off, wrongly. Irrigation channels flooded. Accidents. We had a fire in the east barn recently."

"What happened?"

"A generator overheated. Minor damage. Your father scorched the edge of one hand, but he's okay, he's so Irish ruddy, nobody notices. Jim was wild. He was so sorry, so ashamed. We've just given him a fake job: security chief."

"Security?"

"He takes it seriously. He wears a crisp blue work shirt, a policeman's shirt. Dee even irons them. And he carries a black billy club and he patrols the perimeter of the farm. Jots notes in a memo pad. Reports anything suspicious."

"Suspicious citrus?"

"Don't fun, Cuthbert."

Worlds pivoted on a pinpoint, pulse points; the circuit and random punch of finding himself here or there, with fancy in his heart or prudence. Cutty mulled this, let it in, gated it. In the blank gaps, he welcomed tumult and sun.

"Help me here, Cutty." They'd reached a canal of pretty water, clouds in it; a narrow plank lay across its banks as a bridge. Susan got in his arms, a W of skin, bones, lavender. And as he lifted his mother into the next parcel of the groves, Cutty imagined Theresa flying across the sky in a sleek jet while her blind

father below bludgeoned into pulp an orange that had fallen
criminally—plop!—across a boundary.