

The background is an abstract, textured composition. The left side is dominated by a deep, vibrant blue, while the right side transitions into warm, earthy tones of orange, brown, and tan. The textures are layered and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and organic, flowing shapes that suggest a landscape or perhaps a close-up of natural materials like stone or wood. The overall effect is rich and tactile.

# **SHORT STORY NIGHT**

***DONALD BARTHELME***

**"THE SCHOOL"**

***CAMILLE BORDAS***

**"ONE SUN ONLY"**

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**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11TH AT 7:00 PM**

## *The School*

DONALD BARTHELME

WELL, WE had all these children out planting trees, see, because we figured that . . . that was part of their education, to see how, you know, the root systems . . . and also the sense of responsibility, taking care of things, being individually responsible. You know what I mean. And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best. We complained about it. So we've got thirty kids there, each kid had his or her own little tree to plant, and we've got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing.

It wouldn't have been so bad except that just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, the snakes all died. But I think that the snakes—well, the reason that the snakes kicked off was that . . . you remember, the boiler was shut off for four days because of the strike, and that was explicable. It was something you could explain to the kids because of the strike. I mean, none of their parents would let them cross the picket line and they knew there was a strike going on and what it meant. So when things got started up again and we found the snakes they weren't too disturbed.

With the herb gardens it was probably a case of overwatering, and at least now they know not to overwater. The children were very conscientious with the herb gardens and some of them probably . . . you know, slipped them a little extra water when we weren't looking. Or maybe . . . well, I don't like to think about sabotage, although it did occur to us. I mean, it was something that crossed our minds. We were thinking that way probably because before that the gerbils had died, and the white mice had died, and the salamander . . . well, now they know not to carry them around in plastic bags.

Of course we *expected* the tropical fish to die, that was no surprise. Those numbers, you look at them crooked and they're

belly-up on the surface. But the lesson plan called for a tropical-fish input at that point, there was nothing we could do, it happens every year, you just have to hurry past it.

We weren't even supposed to have a puppy.

We weren't even supposed to have one, it was just a puppy the Murdoch girl found under a Gristede's truck one day and she was afraid the truck would run over it when the driver had finished making his delivery, so she stuck it in her knapsack and brought it to school with her. So we had this puppy. As soon as I saw the puppy I thought, Oh Christ, I bet it will live for about two weeks and then . . . And that's what it did. It wasn't supposed to be in the classroom at all, there's some kind of regulation about it, but you can't tell them they can't have a puppy when the puppy is already there, right in front of them, running around on the floor and yap yap yapping. They named it Edgar—that is, they named it after me. They had a lot of fun running after it and yelling, "Here, Edgar! Nice Edgar!" Then they'd laugh like hell. They enjoyed the ambiguity. I enjoyed it myself. I don't mind being kidded. They made a little house for it in the supply closet and all that. I don't know what it died of. Distemper, I guess. It probably hadn't had any shots. I got it out of there before the kids got to school. I checked the supply closet each morning, routinely, because I knew what was going to happen. I gave it to the custodian.

And then there was this Korean orphan that the class adopted through the Help the Children program, all the kids brought in a quarter a month, that was the idea. It was an unfortunate thing, the kid's name was Kim and maybe we adopted him too late or something. The cause of death was not stated in the letter we got, they suggested we adopt another child instead and sent us some interesting case histories, but we didn't have the heart. The class took it pretty hard, they began (I think; nobody ever said anything to me directly) to feel that maybe there was something wrong with the school. But I don't think there's anything wrong with the school, particularly, I've seen better and I've seen worse. It was just a run of bad luck. We had an extraordinary number of parents passing away, for instance. There were I think two heart attacks and two suicides, one drowning, and four killed together in a car accident. One

stroke. And we had the usual heavy mortality rate among the grandparents, or maybe it was heavier this year, it seemed so. And finally the tragedy.

The tragedy occurred when Matthew Wein and Tony Mavrogordo were playing over where they're excavating for the new federal office building. There were all these big wooden beams stacked, you know, at the edge of the excavation. There's a court case coming out of that, the parents are claiming that the beams were poorly stacked. I don't know what's true and what's not. It's been a strange year.

I forgot to mention Billy Brandt's father, who was knifed fatally when he grappled with a masked intruder in his home.

One day, we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? And I said, I don't know, I don't know. And they said, who knows? and I said, nobody knows. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? and I said, no, life is that which gives meaning to life. Then they said, but isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—

I said, yes, maybe.

They said, we don't like it.

I said, that's sound.

They said, it's a bloody shame!

I said, it is.

They said, will you make love now with Helen (our teaching assistant) so that we can see how it is done? We know you like Helen.

I do like Helen but I said that I would not.

We've heard so much about it, they said, but we've never seen it.

I said I would be fired and that it was never, or almost never, done as a demonstration. Helen looked out of the window.

They said, please, please make love with Helen, we require an assertion of value, we are frightened.

I said that they shouldn't be frightened (although I am often frightened) and that there was value everywhere. Helen came

and embraced me. I kissed her a few times on the brow. We held each other. The children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, I opened the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly.

# One Sun Only

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 [newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/07/one-sun-only](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/07/one-sun-only)

Camille Bordas

This is not a rewrite of that story in which plants and animals and people keep winding up dead over the course of a school year, but it starts the same, and it feels odd not to acknowledge, so I will. I just did. Things kept dying. My father first, in June, then the puppy my ex-wife had adopted to help the children get over their grandpa, and then the school janitor, Lane. Right after Halloween, Lane had died during lunchtime in the cafeteria, in front of the kids. Heart attack. A few weeks later, my son, Ernest, came home from school and told me that he hoped there was no afterlife.

“I hope there’s no afterlife,” he said. We were in the living room, looking through the window, waiting to see if the rain would turn to snow. “I hope he’s not watching over me.”

I asked who he meant. I thought maybe he was talking about my father, but perhaps it was Lane on his mind. I didn’t think it could be the dog.

“I just don’t want there to be an afterlife, is all,” Ernest said, after thinking about it for a few seconds. “For anybody. I think when you’re dead you should stay dead.”

I had him and his sister for the weekend. Sally, who was now eleven and exploring Catholicism (to her mother’s alarm), kept talking about her hope that my father was watching over us. My father had been very fond of her. He’d taken her to the Art Institute every Wednesday, taught her painting techniques and a lot about art history. They’d been obnoxious together, playing games like who could most quickly recite the titles of all the art works in Gallery 397 (Sally’s favorite), or all of Pablo Picasso’s middle names in order. (The full name was Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso, a succession of sounds I came to know as well as the alphabet.) A few weeks before my father died, he had asked me if he could take Sally to the Venice Biennale, where one of his paintings was being shown. We both knew that this would likely be his last trip abroad. I’d told him he could take Sally to Venice if he took Ernest, too. “Ernest doesn’t care about art,” my father had said. “He’s eight years old,” I’d said. “He cares about his grandpa.” They’d all spent two weeks touring Italy—Venice, Florence, and Rome—a trip Sally still mentioned at least once a day. A trip that I, alone with my father as a child, had also taken a version of.

“Can you look up Bill Murray’s net worth?” Ernest asked me, turning away from the window.

He’d watched “Groundhog Day” again at his mother’s the day before. He could’ve asked her to search for Bill Murray’s financial situation, but for some reason he kept these kinds of requests for me. I looked up Bill Murray’s fortune online.

“And how rich are we?” Ernest asked.

“A lot less than that,” I said.

I don’t know why I wasn’t ready to tell him the actual number, why it felt wrong. My father had left behind a significant amount of money, and I was still getting used to it. I hadn’t known that he had so much.

My phone rang. Nikki couldn’t help checking on the kids on the two weekends a month they weren’t with her.

“I got a call from Ernest’s teacher,” she said.

“How are you doing?”

“Sorry. Yes. How are you doing? She says Ernie’s drawings worry her. She says he keeps drawing dead people.”

I left the living room.

“We know this already,” I said, once I reached my office. “It’s just a phase. Little boys are drawn to violent scenes.”

Nikki asked me to look through our son’s backpack for what he’d drawn at school that day.

“Describe what you see,” she said, once the drawing was in my hand.

What I saw was a single page with the instruction from Ernest’s teacher “Draw yourself many years in the future!” and my son’s response: a drawing of his own gravestone, with mine, his mother’s, and Sally’s surrounding it.

“Are there dates on the gravestones?” Nikki asked.

“Only on mine,” I said. “According to our son, I’ll die in 2024. August.”

My ex-wife audibly shivered at the other end of the line.

“It’s just a drawing, Nik.”

I was pissed that Ernest’s teacher had called her instead of talking to me when I’d picked him up. We’d exchanged smiles and all.

“He shouldn’t be thinking about death so much,” Nikki said. “I think he might be traumatized.”

“Let’s not bring trauma into this. He’s had a rough year.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t draw your father’s grave,” Nikki said. “He misses him.”

“Does he?”

“We all do.”

I heard some glasses clink in the background.

“Do you have company?”

“Just Franny,” she said. “Just having drinks with Franny.”

“Hi, Franny,” I said.

Nikki echoed my hello, and I heard Franny say, “Is he offering you more money again?” (I kept suggesting that I increase Nikki’s alimony, but she kept refusing, on the ground that she’d married—and divorced—a struggling novelist, not an art-world heir.) “Take the fucking money,” I heard Franny say.

“I’ve been using this wine-delivery service,” Nikki said, at random, hoping, I could tell, that I hadn’t heard Franny. “They’re so responsive. Every time I have the smallest question, the slightest issue, they answer right away. I wonder if I’m their only customer.”

Sally came into my office then.

“Is that Mom on the phone?” she asked.

“Yes, honey. Do you want to talk to her?”

“I just saw her this morning.”

“They really make you feel special,” Nikki said.

“At least *she* didn’t draw me dead in five years,” I said.

•

Sally wanted to hang some art. She thought that my new apartment lacked life, and since I’d inherited (on top of all his money and books) my father’s last series of paintings, a series Sally had seen take shape in the old man’s studio for months, she thought that what we should hang was a no-brainer.

“There’s no room for all four,” I told her. “You’ll have to pick one.”

“I like the walls white like that,” Ernest said.

“It’s depressing,” Sally said. “It feels like a hospital in here.”

“You’ve never been in a hospital,” I said, deciding, apparently, to side with my son.



“There’s stuff everywhere at Mom’s,” Ernest went on. “It’s suffocating.”

“ ‘Suffocating’?” Sally said. “That’s a big word for you.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ernest said.

I should have said something, and maybe I would have, had I been given more time, but Sally lost a tooth then, her last cuspid, on the breadstick she’d been snacking on. She spit the tooth onto the coffee table, and the sound it made hitting the glass was the last thing Ernest and I heard for a while, as Sally quickly left the room, leaving us to stare at the piece of bone she’d just expelled, sitting amid a little blood and half-chewed dough. *Was it a piece of bone, by the way? You always hear that your smile is the visible part of your skeleton, but are teeth made of actual bone?* Ernest started blinking rapidly, every blink drawing the left corner of his mouth up with it.

“Are you O.K.?” I asked.

He dipped a finger in the blood next to Sally’s tooth. This seemed to calm him down, so I let him do it. He drew a red circle on the glass.

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The reason my father had liked Sally more than Ernest was that Ernest wasn’t very good at drawing. Or, rather, he wasn’t curious about how to get better at drawing. He’d gone with his grandfather to the Art Institute once a week, too, for a time, but soon he asked to be excused, and my father never forgave him. One thing he’d recognized in Ernest, however, was a talent for drawing near-perfect circles in freehand. I think that’s why he was so pissed at him, in the end. An assured circle in freehand was a sign that you could be great at drawing, according to my father, if only you put your mind to it.

“It’s a nice circle,” I said to my son.

He clenched his fist and, with the meaty side, erased what he’d drawn.

The rain had now acquired the consistency of mucus, each drop sticking to and sliding down the window.

How could it only be 6 *P.M.*? Time moved so slowly when the kids were around. I couldn’t wait to experience what everyone said: *they grow up so fast*. Even seeing them every other weekend, I noticed no changes.

I guess Ernest had changed somewhat, though. One time, when he was in kindergarten, I picked him up and the teacher’s summary of his behavior read, “Cried often but participated!” I’d shown it to Nikki (we were still married then), and we’d both laughed at it for minutes, commenting on how wonderful an epitaph it would be, before pretending that we hadn’t just

joked about a day when our son would be dead. We hadn't, really. We'd joked about a hypothetical epitaph, for a hypothetical person, way in the future. Now he was drawing all of us dead, and I couldn't remember when I'd last seen him cry. Not at his grandfather's funeral, not for the dog, and not for Lane.

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Sally came back into the kitchen with a toothbrush to polish her tooth and a little cup to place it in. She informed me that she would leave the tooth right outside her bedroom door tonight, as opposed to under her pillow, because she didn't want to be woken up by the tooth fairy.

She didn't say anything about Ernest messing with her blood. Instead, she jumped back into the conversation we'd been having before the tooth, preparing to offer a compromise.

"I can tell you're not ready to hang Grandpa's paintings," she told Ernest. "Maybe it's too soon."

Ernest didn't seem to understand what Sally meant by "too soon."

"Grandpa hated me," he said.

"No, he didn't," Sally said.

It would have been better if I'd said it myself, or immediately backed up Sally, but looking at Ernest I had the most vivid memory of being his age, of having to go to my father's studio to show him the drawings I'd made that week, something that I'd had to do every Sunday night. I remembered him discarding drawing after drawing, and how convinced I'd been that he hated me.

"He thought I was stupid because my favorite part of the Italy trip was the Trevi Fountain," Ernest said.

"He didn't think you were stupid. He just wanted you to like the museums and the churches more."

Sally again. I still hadn't spoken to reassure my son that his grandfather had loved him. I thought it was pretty weird of Ernest, too, after seeing the Bargello, or the Bridge of Sighs, for that matter, to have liked the Trevi Fountain so much. My own favorite part of the Italy tour, as a child, had been the San Marco convent in Florence—a good choice, according to my father, though he'd seemed surprised by it. Perhaps he'd been more surprised by my capacity to make good choices than by the choice itself.

"I was going to say let's not hang Grandpa's paintings anyway," Sally went on, "but maybe we could hang some of our stuff, you know? Just so it's less sad in here."

“That’s a great idea,” I said.

Even Ernest thought so.

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While I made dinner, I let them pick their best work to Scotch-tape on the walls. After dinner, there would be bedtime, I determined. After bedtime, I could try to work, maybe finish that chapter I had been writing for weeks. The nights I had the kids were usually more productive. Since I’d bought myself a new apartment, a new desk, the right ergonomic chair, and a year off from my job, I’d discovered that I was the kind of writer who worked better when he was stealing time from other obligations. An hour here, two hours there, in between meetings, on my lunch break. I was better in a rush. Three months now of entire days at my disposal, and I’d written so little. In the mornings, I looked at what I had, despaired, and then read better writers than me for the rest of the day. Lately, I’d been looking at art books, too. My father’s collection had made its way to my living room. But tonight I would work well, I told myself, breading the cutlets. Because I’d been deprived of the possibility for a few hours, I would work well. Dinner, put the kids to bed, work. I’d told Nikki I would talk to Ernest about his drawing of our family graves, but I knew I wouldn’t. How did one start a conversation like that? How did one keep it on track? It always looked easy in the movies. Mothers telling daughters how hard it was being a woman, fathers explaining death to sons in less than a minute, and, in both cases, explanations making sense, big warm hug, conversation over. I couldn’t do it. And what was wrong with drawing your own grave, anyway? There was something therapeutic about it, wasn’t there? We’d done it since Ernest was old enough to draw stick figures—drawn the things he was afraid of.

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This reminded me of a book I’d read as a college student, one weekend when I was visiting my father. I’d taken it from his shelf, a slim volume about the drawings made by children in war zones, what could be learned from them. I don’t know why it had appealed to me. I guess I’d always been attracted to technically poor drawings—lines for limbs, squares for buildings, things that looked like I could’ve drawn them myself. My father had tried to make my interest sound fancy, said I liked “art brut,” but I don’t know if I *liked* it, exactly, or if I simply found comfort in it, its naïveté. If I could reproduce a drawing easily, then it meant that I could’ve been its creator in the first place, right? At least that’s what I thought as a child, when I copied Bill Traylor’s crooked houses and Henry Darger’s little girls with penises. My father had this rule that I had to make at least one sketch a day. I could keep copying, sure, you learned a lot from copying, he said, but it was important to come up with things of your own, too, your own way of rendering the texture of a lemon on a wooden table, for example, your own way of interpreting shadows on a sill. It was a person’s way of dealing with the small things that made him unique.

I drowned the cutlets in boiling oil, and realized as I watched them golden that I remembered quite a few things about the book. The book about children in war zones and what they drew. I remembered that roads that suddenly stopped, or mouthless faces, could be interpreted as signs of trauma. I remembered that traumatized children tended never to draw the sun. Ernest didn't draw suns anymore, hadn't drawn a sun in months, but maybe it was all right. Maybe he thought the sun was implied in most drawings, or boring to draw. And no sun in a child's drawing was still better than several suns, according to the book, if memory served. Several suns could indicate developing psychosis, or even psychopathic tendencies. What you wanted, really, as a parent, was for your child to draw one sun and one sun only. And where would a sun have fit in Ernest's drawing, anyway? The drawing of our family plot? Wouldn't it have been worse if Ernest had drawn a sun there, over all our gravestones?

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We ate dinner. Sally made a big deal out of her missing tooth, but all in all she was happy, a happy girl who kept talking and talking—about the exhibition she'd just prepared in the living room, her day at school, her memories of Florence. It was hard to relate to Sally sometimes. When she was too happy, I could feel like I was in a commercial. Like I was watching a commercial, rather. For healthy snacks. I'd be happy that she was happy, of course, but I'd also feel like I was losing her, like I couldn't reach her where she was. I'd had this fear, before becoming a father, that my children would be like me, mostly sad and overanxious, but Nikki had promised me they wouldn't, that we would raise them to be happy and only reasonably worried. I'd told her that the fear, then, became that my children and I would have nothing in common. She'd laughed at that. She'd thought that I was joking.

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The exhibition in the living room was mostly of Sally's work. She went everywhere with the leather case her grandfather had given her years ago (her "portfolio"), but most of Ernest's production was at Nikki's, and so he hadn't had much to pick from. Sally was a big fan of the cross-section, always had been. Through the years, she'd drawn countless variations of apartment buildings whose façades had been cut away to reveal what every family was doing, each in its little square. Tonight, she'd hung cross-sections I'd never seen, of our local supermarket and of her pregnant aunt (Nikki's sister), who was expecting twins.

"I don't understand something," Ernest said as we observed the twin fetuses. "Are the babies going to be from two different dads?"

Sally told him he was an idiot, that even though Aunt Sophie had used a sperm donor it was still only one guy's jizz, that they didn't just mix a bunch of different jizzes in a glass before they gave it to the woman to drink.

Ernest had only three drawings in the exhibit: two he'd made in a rush right before dinner of the Trevi Fountain (piles of shiny coins at the bottom of the fountain in the first drawing, and then, in the second, nothing left after the cleaning crew had come—no sun in either picture), and one he'd made the day before at his mom's, a still from "Groundhog Day"—the scene where Bill Murray orders the whole diner menu for breakfast. He liked drawing food. What he'd done best there was the glisten on the blob of wine-colored jam in the middle of the doughnut, and I congratulated him for it.

"Great job on the jam," I said, and he asked me to look up how much money was at the bottom of the Trevi Fountain.

"It changes all the time," I said. "You know that."

Ernest actually knew a lot more about the Trevi Fountain than I did, fascinated as he'd been after seeing it scraped clean one morning under police surveillance. He'd been the one to tell me that the fountain had to be cleaned once a week, because people threw so much money in it, and that the money went to the homeless of Rome.

"I think there should be a Web site that tells you how much money they pull out of the fountain every week," Ernest said.

"The Trevi is so boring," Sally said. "At first, I thought you could wish for anything there, but the wish is actually mandatory. You have to wish to go back to Rome one day."

"I think that's just a guideline," I said. "You're always free to wish for whatever."

"I wish for Grandpa to be able to see us right now," Sally said, closing her eyes.

Mine met Ernest's as she said this, and I saw sheer panic there, and I saw that he saw me see it. He broke eye contact immediately.

I pretended to look at my watch and said that it was time for bed.

"But I didn't finish my placards!" Sally said. "I haven't named all my drawings yet!"

I said that she could finish tomorrow.

Sally said, "I can't wait for tomorrow," and I felt it again, the distance between us.

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While her brother brushed his teeth, Sally told me we could just hang one of her grandfather's paintings in her bedroom, if Ernest was really dead set against seeing them in the rest of the apartment.

“It could be just for me,” she said. “I could fall asleep looking at it, like the monks in San Marco fell asleep to their own personal Fra Angelico every night.”

It felt wrong to me, hanging such an expensive work of art in an eleven-year-old’s bedroom. Like jewelry on a newborn.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

That was good enough for her.

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Ernest, as I tucked him in, asked me if he was going to die during the night, something I knew he asked his mother every night as well. I promised he wouldn’t. I’d been afraid of sleep at his age, too, of being unconscious, of what could happen then, that perhaps I would go too far in and unplug my brain forever instead of just turning it off for the night. I remembered asking my father once, “Will I die during the night?,” and him saying that he didn’t know, that no one could know. I never asked again. To Ernest, though, I’d always answered the only thing a modern parent could answer—“No, honey, of course not”—which reassured him but also made it so that he had to ask again and again every night. And made me worry that, on the off chance that he did die in his sleep, the last thing my son would have heard from me was a lie.

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I think that’s why I’d loved my father, in the end. His honesty. It turned people off—it had turned me off, too, when he started applying it to Ernest—but it was meant to help. It had taught me not to be a wimp. Not that I thought Ernest was a wimp. But he definitely hadn’t come out of his visit to the San Marco convent with my father as transformed as I’d been. At San Marco, going into cell after cell, one friar’s bedroom after another, I’d understood something that I think my father was trying to impart to me without words, that one slept alone and didn’t complain, that being alone was not only fine but what one had to aspire to. That day, even next to Fra Angelico’s frescoes, my father had looked like a giant to me.

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I cleaned up the kitchen. I wanted a drink. I never drank when I was alone with the kids, though, not even a glass of wine once they were down. In case something happened and I had to drive them to the hospital. Even when Nikki and I were still married, I waited until she was home at night to have one. She didn’t drink when she was alone with them, either, but when we were together we often had a glass or two, and didn’t worry about who would do what in an emergency. We were good drunks together. We would figure it out, was the thought. I wanted to talk to her again. I looked at the weather forecast on my phone instead, even though I knew that the only way Chicago could work, as a city, was if we all agreed to

stop doing that. Outside my windows, twentysomethings, but also people my age, were flocking along Damen Avenue to gather at Gold Star, Big Star, Violet Hour, Rainbo, to drink and forget about something, or think about it harder. It was barely nine, the night was only starting for them. I understood that the reason people moved to the suburbs to raise their kids had little to do with the schools—it was because they had to stop seeing how much fun the childless were having.

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I sat at my desk and looked at the last few lines I'd written, but I'd forgotten to put my phone on silent and was immediately interrupted by a string of texts from my friend Henry, who was on his way to Paris to promote his sixth novel, which had just been translated into French. He was still at the airport, taking off in an hour, but he'd already met a French fan (he was fairly famous), a cute lawyer who was on the same flight as him. He sent me a selfie of them eating tortas at O'Hare's Frontera, Henry's latest novel on the table between them. "Lucky bastard," I texted back. "All that happened to me tonight was Sally lost a tooth." "That's amazing," Henry responded. "You should write a story about it." I couldn't tell if he was being serious. Henry was constantly telling me that I should write more personal stuff, that the reason my first (and so far only) novel had sold so little was that people didn't want to read about hundred-per-cent-fictional characters anymore, they wanted real humans, real life, and I'd had such an interesting life, being the son of a big-deal artist, travelling the world with him as a boy, losing my mother so young, meeting Nikki after having been originally set up with her sister (yes, the one with the twins), and then the divorce. People loved divorce stories, Henry said. The book he was going to Paris to promote had, in large part, been inspired by his own. For a minute, I considered writing about Sally's tooth. I texted Henry, "Are teeth actually bone, or some other material?," and he answered, "Look it up!," which I did. I learned that bones were made of living tissue and could therefore heal, but teeth couldn't. Teeth were deader than bones. My daughter had lost something that had been dead inside her for a long time. I wondered if Nikki still kept the kids' teeth.

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I looked at Ernest's drawing again. He'd drawn some flowers on his mother's and his sister's graves, at least. Both of ours were just gray. I wondered for the first time what happened to children of divorce when they died, which parent they got buried next to, if they died before having families of their own. Now that I'd split with Nikki, and planned on never remarrying, I assumed I would be buried with my own parents at Rosehill, and not with her at Hebrew Benevolent. I'd converted to Judaism to put her mind at ease that we would rest together for eternity, but now she'd either forgotten ever wanting this or felt like an idiot for having wanted it, which were two completely different things but still looked exactly the same to whoever wasn't in Nikki's head.

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Ernest's drawing wasn't that bad, I thought. Technically speaking. Why had my father insisted that he was weak? He'd never told Ernest this directly ("I know you can't tell children they're weak anymore"), but he'd told me. I hadn't wanted to make too much of his obvious preference for Sally before then. I'd wanted to believe that it was only natural, that the first grandchild always had to hold a special place in an old man's heart, but he'd explained to me one day that it wasn't so: he preferred Sally because she was smarter than Ernest. Ernest was about three at the time. My father couldn't help comparing them, noting what Sally had already achieved when she was Ernest's age, how she'd spoken in full sentences and shown curiosity about the written word long before age two, how early she'd asked about God, when her brother seemed concerned only with what was in front of him—if that. I'd told my father that girls and boys developed at a different pace, but he'd countered that even *I* had been smarter than Ernest at his age, and that *I* had been a boy. I'd felt a split second of relief at not being last, at not faring as poorly in my father's estimation as Ernest did. A relief immediately followed by guilt, of course, which had driven me to defend Ernest's honor with even more passion—to no end. "Look at this drawing," my father had concluded, pointing at one of Ernest's maroon crayon storms on our fridge, ruining it for me. "Sally already had the intuition of perspective at his age. What is this shit?" I'd believed before then that all children's drawings held some interest, that they could never be bad. But of course they could.

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I went to the living room, Ernest's drawing in hand, to look for the book about children in war zones. I didn't think my son was traumatized by his grandfather's death, or the dog's, or Lane's, but maybe? How could you tell trauma from fear, or from deep sadness? When my mother died, I'd been horribly sad, not traumatized, I don't think. My father had taken me to Italy the following week, to see the San Marco convent and other things that lasted longer than people. It had helped.

I found the book and started reading it, taking occasional breaks to look at the drawings on the wall. I had children who drew supermarkets, I thought. I had children who drew well-lit places, an abundance of fresh produce, an abundance of food, babies about to be born, flowers on some of our graves—not massacres, not enemies, nothing like the drawings I was seeing in the book, which their creators had titled "Nuclear Winter," "Dead Dad on Threshold," "Three Bodies at a Crossroads," "Headless Children in Ditch."

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As I checked my kids' drawings for signs of trauma, it occurred to me that my father might have been doing the same for me at the time, on Sundays. Not checking for signs of trauma, exactly—I don't think he much believed in that word applied to upper-class American children—but perhaps the reason he'd asked to see my drawings every week wasn't so much that



he'd hoped I would become a great artist (he had to have abandoned that idea quickly, he wasn't an idiot) but that he'd wanted to make sure I was all right. For the first time since he'd died, I wished I could give him a call.

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Around 1 *A.M.*, Ernest came in. He'd just had a bad dream and wanted cereal. The way I'd always dealt with nightmares was the way my father had taught me to deal with them: you had to draw what had happened in the dream, and burn the result in the sink, to prevent the nightmare from ever coming back. The technique worked exactly a hundred per cent of the time, and when Ernest came into the living room he already had his box of crayons and a piece of paper in hand. I took him to the kitchen, so he could eat his cereal while he drew.

"What did you dream about?" I asked.

"Lane," he said.

He never spoke of Lane. There'd been counselling at school for the kids who'd seen him fall dead in the cafeteria, and the counsellor had reassured us that Ernest's mental health was sound, that our son would let us know if and when he needed to talk about Lane.

"What was Lane doing in the dream?"

"He was dead."

"O.K.," I said. "Do you want to . . . draw him?"

Ernest nodded. He'd had another nightmare just before the one about Lane, though, about an octopus-like thing killing us all, and so he wanted to draw that one first. He drew us all murdered by a many-legged monster, the whole family other than himself torn to pieces; he'd simply witnessed the scene. He knew as he drew it that that creature in particular would never come haunt his dreams again, and so he applied himself: this was goodbye. We burned it.

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When the time came for Ernest to start drawing Lane, the scene of his death, I paid attention. I watched my son work. The book I'd just been reading had taught me that the order in which children drew episodes from their lives was significant, that a traumatized child would always start by drawing the most frightening aspect of a scene, and only then move on to décor, tweaking secondary elements and polishing up details at length without ever going back to the first part. Ernest sure drew Lane first, Lane lying on the ground, eyes closed and mouth open, his tongue sticking out, then went on to sketch the tiles he lay on, a group of kids gathered around the body, all connected to arrows that stated their names. Then he filled the background with a food counter, rectangles of mashed potatoes, fish nuggets, and peas—

each nugget and pea drawn individually. I'm sure that all of this had been on the menu that day. When scared, children were able to commit a great amount of detail to memory, the book had said. Even running for their lives, they were able to catch glimpses of military logic, they noticed how many planes were in the sky, in which direction they were flying. They remembered where bombs had fallen and what had been destroyed, who'd jumped in the river. Ernest went to pee, and I assumed he was finished with the drawing.

"Do you want to burn it in the sink?" I asked when he returned.

"I'm not done," he said, and went back to work on Lane's body, to which he hadn't added a detail since he'd first drawn it, to which he hadn't even added any color. He drew Lane's right hand, which had been a strange hand, one with a thumb the size of a slider bun. I knew the thumb had made Lane the object of a lot of jokes. Macroductyly, his problem was called—Lane himself had told me about it once. Though I knew the kids made fun of him for it, I wasn't sure whether Ernest ever had.

"Did Lane's hand frighten you?" I asked Ernest.

He shrugged.

"I didn't care, really," he said. "Max made fun of him all the time, but I didn't care."

"Do you wish you'd defended him, though?" I asked. "Against Max and the others?"

I thought maybe that was what was haunting my son, his first-ever regret, not having stood up for Lane and his enormous finger, but Ernest shrugged again.

"I guess it was a little weird," he said. "But when you're weird people make fun of you. You have to accept it."

After a while, during which he added and colored more peas, he asked me if there was anything I wanted to draw and burn in the sink myself. I said there wasn't, but he insisted.

"Don't you want to draw Grandpa?" he asked.

I waited too long to say anything.

"It would be nice if we forgot about him," he said. He wasn't looking at me, was still coloring peas.

"Why do you think that?" I said. "Did you not like Grandpa?"

"It makes you sad to think about him. You've been sad since he died. I think we should all forget about him. It was a long time ago."

I told him that it wasn't that easy, that you had to remember the people you loved, but he seemed impervious to the argument.

He'd put a roof on top of the school cafeteria, and was about to get to work on the sky above it.

They said never to act shocked when your child told you what was on his mind, to welcome any thought of his with an open heart, and I guess I'd internalized the advice well enough. I didn't tell Ernest how fucked up it was, suggesting that we all forget about my father. I didn't tell him he worried me.

"Was it sunny that day?" I asked him instead. "The day Lane died?"

I thought of Nikki's sister, then, for some reason, the twins in her stomach, the four hands, the twenty fingers growing in there. I thought of Henry, too, who was going so far and at such speed right now, to Paris, another place my father had loved. He had to still be up there in the dark. Henry, I mean.

Ernest said that it had been raining the day Lane died, and grabbed a gray crayon. He handed me a black one, so I could get started on my own drawing. He was staring at me. He wouldn't stop staring at me until I started drawing. Maybe I could draw a part of my father, I thought. One specific memory. Surely there was something about him that I could stand to forget. Ernest smiled when I took the crayon. Then, right when I put it to paper to get to work on my outline, he asked how much I'd left by Sally's door, for the tooth. ♦