

SHORT STORY NIGHT

Featuring a live
Zoom interview
with the author!

Bobcat

Rebecca Lee

Read these stories and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, May 13th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises. 21 and older.

Bobcat



It was the terrine that got to me. I felt queasy enough that I had to sit in the living room and narrate to my husband what was the brutal list of tasks that would result in a terrine: devein, declaw, decimate the sea and other animals, eventually emulsifying them into a paste which could then be riven with whole vegetables. It was like describing to somebody how to paint a Monet, how to turn the beauty of the earth into a blurry, intoxicating swirl, like something seen through the eyes of the dying. Since we were such disorganized hosts, we were doing a recipe from *Food and Wine* called the quick-start terrine. A terrine rightfully should be made over the course of two or three days—heated, cooled, flagellated, changed over time in the flames of the ever-turning world, but our guests were due to arrive within the hour.

Of the evening's guests, I was most worried about the Donner-Nilsons, whom my husband called the Donner-Blitzens. I had invited them about a month ago, before it had begun to dawn on me that one-half of the couple—Ray Nilson—was having an affair with a paralegal at work, a paralegal so beautiful it was hard to form any other opinions of her. I suppose Ray felt in her presence something that seemed to him so original that he had to pay attention even if he had a wife and a small baby at home.

My friend Lizbet was also coming, and I had filled her in on the situation, making her promise that she would reveal nothing at the dinner, even with her eyes. “My eyes?” she had said, innocently. Lizbet was so irrepressible that I could imagine her raising her

eyebrows very slowly for Ray's wife, darting them suddenly over to Ray. *Watch out!*

Lizbet was the person who had introduced me to my husband, John. She and I had been children together, and then during the years I was getting a law degree at NYU, she and John had been writing students together in the state of Iowa. This fall, ten years after they'd graduated, both had novels being published. Lizbet's was about the search for the lost Gnostic Gospel texts, and the book was already, prepublication, being marketed as the thinking woman's *The Da Vinci Code*. My husband's book was a novel about a war correspondent getting traumatized in some made-up Middle Eastern country that sounded a lot like Iran but was named Burmar in the book.

Truthfully, I was not pleased with his book. I had just finished reading it for the first time, in galleys, and within the first forty pages, the protagonist had slept with three women, none of whom even remotely resembled me—one was an aging countess, another a midwestern farm-girl TV journalist, and then the narrator's true love was a sexy Burmarian/Iranian waif named Zita.

"Who is Zita?" I had asked him early this afternoon. I was hovering over a roast, trying to figure out how to tie it for the oven.

"She's nobody," he said. He was carrying into our apartment bags of groceries and he leaned over to kiss my cheek.

"Who is she, though?"

"She's a fictional character."

"Do you think our unborn child will one day want to read about your sexual fantasies of other women in war zones?"

"Wait," he said. His head was cocked to the side, as it was when he felt confused or hurt and wanted to explain something. He looked innocent, yet interested. "First," he said, "there is no Zita. Secondly, the protagonist in the book is not me."

"Zita is Frances," I said. It was absurd, I knew. Frances was Frances Sofitel, his book editor, who was also due to show up at our house in a few hours for this dinner party, a woman as unlike a waif as humanly possible. She was tall and very angular, and spoke with an authoritative baritone, and seemed always properly amused by all the underlings around her. As well, she actually managed to make quite a bit of money as an editor, partly by digging in the muck a little, a celebrity bio here, a porn star's memoir there, just a little bit on the side to allow her to publish what she considered her heart and soul, books like my husband's literary thriller and paean to women who weren't his wife.

She and my husband had what I thought was an overly intimate connection. I didn't really like to see them together. They actually talked about language itself a lot. Just words and puns and little synonyms and such. This was completely dull to me, which in addition to my jealousy was a terrible combination. For instance, we would all be out to dinner, and one of them would dig out a little piece of paper so they could play an acrostic, or dream a little about sentences that were the same backwards as forwards. For my husband, words were fascinating—their origins and mutations, their ability to combine intricately. When somebody would say something in an economical way, and use grammar originally to some satisfying end, he would usually repeat it to me at the end of the day. It stayed in his mind, like a song or a painting he loved. I did feel he would be a very good father, partially for this reason, as I could already picture him crouched over the baby, listening, rapt, waiting for the words to come in.

"Zita is not Frances, nor is she any woman," he said. "It's fiction."

"You spend all your time writing, so we'd have to say that those women take up the lion's share of your time—they are your significant others."

“Well, then, we’d have to say that Duong Tran is your significant other,” John said. Duong Tran was a Hmong immigrant who had refused to give his dying wife treatment for her heart condition on account of the medication being, according to Duong, Western voodoo and not ordained by the many gods who’d traveled alongside them from Laos to New York City in July of 2001. I was his lawyer.

The argument devolved from there. Certain themes got repeated—John’s intense solitude, my long hours, his initial resistance to commitment, my later resistance to marriage, and then at some point the reasons were left behind and we were in that state of pure, extrarational opposition.

Our argument was both constrained and exacerbated by the fact that I was pregnant and had read that high levels of cortisol in a troubled mother can cross the placenta and not only stress out the baby in utero but for *the rest of its life*. As well, there was a deadline; our dinner party was set to begin. People were soon going to be out in the streets and on the subway, making their way to our apartment. They wouldn’t want to picture their hostess like this—emotional, insecure, lashing out at her husband. You want the hostess to be serene, the apartment a set of glowing rooms awaiting you, quiet music pouring out of its walls, the food making its way through various complex stages in the kitchen—the slow broiling fig sauce, the buns in the warming oven, the pudding forming its subtle skin in the chill of the refrigerator.

Lizbet arrived early. She helped me hoist myself up from the couch and then stood in the bathroom with me while I put on my makeup. Lizbet was a very spiritual person whose gifts of the spirit—patience, warmth, wonder—were quite available to her friends. Though her novel was about the Gnostic Gospels, her personal life was governed by the slightly spooky, semi-Christian ideas in the book *A Course in Miracles*, which was written by two Columbia psychology professors

in 1976, both of whom believed that they were channeling the voice of Jesus, though a Jesus inflected with a kind of cool, Buddhist gravitas.

Lizbet had brought a huge trifle for dessert, and it stood gleaming on the kitchen counter in an enormous glass bowl. Normally I didn’t really like trifle—its layers of bright, childish tastes; strawberry, coconut, sugar. But Lizbet’s trifle was perfect and mysterious-seeming—anise, raspberry, and port, with a gingerbread base. Lizbet basically knew how to live a happy life and this was revealed in the trifle—she put in what she loved and left out what she didn’t. Her novel was the same really—a collection of treasures, a pleasure-taking, a finding of everything praiseworthy and putting it into words, with one concession to the traditional plot at its heart, which was the death of an important Gnostic scholar at the hands of his former student—a radical feminist—whom he had sexually harassed in college. What could be better?

Standing in front of the mirror, it occurred to me that Lizbet and I were living out our mothers’ dreams for us—mine that I finally be pregnant and Lizbet’s mother’s that she never be pregnant. Our mothers had met in a consciousness-raising group in late 1967, in the East Village. They had become best friends, even though Lizbet’s mother was a radical feminist, even a lesbian separatist for a while, without ever working up to actually sleeping with other women, and my own mother liked feminism only as a sort of hobby, a way to chat with a big, cozy group of women eating coffee cakes. Once she told me that feminism had given her some good “tips” for dealing with husbands, such as, *Don’t cry; resist*. My mother had moved to Boston when she was pregnant with me and set up my beautiful childhood home, ablaze with light and happiness, the seasons passing through it effortlessly—pumpkin muffins, the deep winter

solstice, the return of spring, and then the whole house flung open all summer, more and more babies arriving over the years.

Lizbet lived with her mother in the Village, and as I grew older I traveled by train to see her as many weekends as I could. Their tiny apartment always seemed like a great bohemian experiment to me, a little jerry-rigged maybe, but ultimately exciting—with its hanging wicker chair and its profusion of plants, the total devotion in that home to interesting, liberating ideas. Lizbet's mother was a campus radical at NYU, a clever Andrea Dworkin-style feminist, whose mind seemed a reservoir of interesting, possibly incorrect beliefs, which nevertheless were powerful enough to transform the culture. She *tried out* ideas. She taught Lizbet that ideas were tools to excavate the truth, not the truth itself, which lies somewhat beyond the reach of minds, so to be in their house was like being in the middle of a never-ending, fascinating conversation at all times.

THEN CAME SUSAN. She had also published a book, also with Frances as editor, about a near-fatal tussle she'd had with a bobcat while scaling a small mountain in Nepal. The memoir had been out for a year and I was ashamed that I hadn't read it yet, especially as she was coming to our apartment for dinner. Earlier in the day I had gone online and read some reviews, hoping I could fake my way through.

She appeared at our door with a big armful of flowers and some bread she had baked herself. Her left arm had been torn up by the bobcat and later amputated, so that one sleeve fell empty. She had very blond hair and was a large, athletic woman with a wide, peaceful, Swedish-type face.

Frances appeared right behind Susan, dark to Susan's light, talking and cerebral to Susan's calm and silence. Susan at first seemed more of a presence than a personality. It struck me as interesting that she'd

battled with an animal because she seemed so much like a certain type of large animal herself—serene, economical, introverted, with none of the neurosis a normal person has buzzing off them at every second.

We all settled into the living room. Lizbet immediately turned to Susan and told her how much she admired her memoir. And then she asked her what took her to Nepal and her fateful encounter with the bobcat.

"Well," Susan said. She settled deeply into our couch: it surrounded her cozily. "It was a strange time in my life. I was engaged to be married and I realized, quite suddenly, that I didn't want any of it. I didn't want to plan a wedding shower, I didn't want to buy a house together, I didn't want to join my bank account with his. I was reading Joseph Campbell, the Sufis, Margaret Mead, and I started thinking, where is my ecstasy? I mean, where is it? Where is ecstasy, where is bliss, or even just fulfillment? Where is it?" She was looking intently at each of us. But we were in the first minutes of meeting her, and I felt unprepared to be plunged into life's deepest questions.

"I just didn't want any of it," Susan said. "I mean, what is marriage? What is it?"

Frances startled and reached into her purse to pull out her trembling cell phone. She peered into its tiny screen and then she darted up from the table and out to the balcony to answer.

Meanwhile, Susan looked carefully into each of our faces. She was actually waiting for us to answer, to give reasons why people fall in love and get married.

Nobody knows, I wanted to say. Nobody really knows. But that doesn't mean you're allowed to not do it.

DING-DONG. I TOOK A deep breath. The Donner-Nilsons were here. Kitty Donner came in first, looking pretty in her pale, reserved way. I was ashamed that immediately I compared her to the paralegal, whose looks were almost insanely good. Certainly this was another problem—though secondary—with your husband having an affair like this; everybody would constantly be comparing you to this other woman. Kitty was actually a formidable and special person—she was intelligent and watchful, she had a real empathy about her that made her connect quietly but nearly instantly with people; you could trust her to take your side. At the office, sitting in our sterile conference room where we daily and nightly worked out Duong Tran’s fate, I generally thought of Ray in a somewhat holistic way, as a brilliant legal strategist and funny colleague—a crowd-pleaser, really—an essentially good-hearted man with an unfortunate personal problem on his hands, but now, tonight, walking behind his wife in her strange, boxy, black-and-red kimono dress down our tiny entrance hallway, it became clear that he was simply a cheater; it was just basic and stupid. What felt to him to be a genuine and essential stirring, a deep response to beauty, was really just life having its way with him. If one of the things people do is establish a civilization out of nature, a way out of the chaos, then Ray was failing at being a person, falling back into the glut of the physical world. He’d been fooled by life. It had triumphed over him. I wanted to call it out to him, over his wife’s head, *Hey Ray, life has triumphed over you.*

I was interpreting each of Kitty’s movements through the lens of what a woman does who perhaps senses but doesn’t yet know her husband is having an affair. But she was a tentative woman anyway, so it was hard to say what she knew or didn’t know. I had always found her sort of moving, actually, as it was possible to see her perpetually struggling to move past her hesitation. She sat down a little awkwardly since her kimono dress came open both at the neck

and at the legs, but while she was rearranging herself, she looked at me and also put her hand on her stomach. “Oh I forgot about your baby,” she said. “It’s wonderful; there’s so much in store for you.”

John came in from the kitchen with the terrine, which looked, perhaps, not great. A terrine really does need to be great to be not awful—it is meant to evince a perfect melding of disparate entities—the lion lying with the lamb, the sea greeting the land, and so forth. John placed it on the coffee table and looked at me worriedly. I saw a flicker of alarm cross Kitty’s face. Once John and I had been at a dinner party in Manhattan and the hostess had served us an opening dish of fox meat, so I knew how Kitty felt. (Later that night John had quoted the beautiful Jane Kenyon poem as we drove home along the FDR—*Let the fox go back to its sandy den. Let the wind die down. Let the shed go black inside.*)

As John began passing out little dishes for the hors d’oeuvres, I turned to Kitty and said, “We’re not prepared at all. We just found out yesterday at our Lamaze class that we’re supposed to have a theme for our nursery.”

“Theme?” Lizbet said. “What do you mean, theme? Like man vs. nature?”

“How about alienation in the technological age?” Ray said.

“Hollywood under McCarthy?” Lizbet said.

“It’s going to be Winnie the Pooh,” John said, which was true. Everybody seemed a bit dejected that John was closing down the joke so early, but he made a recovery. “Winnie the Pooh and the Reconstructed South,” he said. And then suddenly Frances out on the balcony was rapping on the glass door, making big surprised eyes at John, the sort of look that I’ve only seen wives make at their own husbands. John went to the door and conferred with her in whispers.

And then he returned to our guests, apologizing. “You’ll have to forgive my editor for skipping the appetizers; there is a Salman

Rushdie proposal floating around the city today, to various editors, and she is trying to get a copy of it sent here tonight.”

“A novel?” I asked.

“Memoir,” he said. “About the fatwa.”

“No kidding,” said Lizbet. “There’s a book you’d want to read.”

Everybody’s minds filled with it—Salman as a small child running along the banks of the Ganges, rising as a student at Oxford, ascending as a literary star in England, and then the terrible fatwa raining down, followed by years in hiding. I had seen him give a reading at an ACLU conference in Atlanta soon after 9/11. The person introducing him had said, to a very hushed, still shell-shocked crowd, “We are all Salman now.”

I HAD INJECTED THE roast with an infusion of rosemary, palm and olive oils, and a nutty oil made from macadamias. It was an experiment. The infusion had gone in via needle, before the roast took its place in the oven, hunkered in during the whole harrowing argument, safe as a little lamb from its fighting parents.

And as we now pulled it out, an oaky, forest-floor smell filled the kitchen. “The beast emerges,” John said. One thing I loved about John’s novel, beneath all my possibly irrational rage about the female characters, was his romantic, bohemian ideas about life’s pleasures—food, trees, words, gestures. His mother was from a long line of extremely cultivated East Coast women, mostly all living in Manhattan, who used their wealth and privilege as a means to appreciate life. At our wedding, John’s aunt had read a Rilke poem, which included those famous lines about marriage—that in it “two solitudes protect and greet each other.” It had seemed almost comical to me at the time, that that could possibly be what a family was, a “shelter for the soul’s independence.” I knew it as a big, semiangry group of people griping at and with each other

continually, though in a way that could seem life affirming. In my experience, you would no more expect to find peace within a family than you would expect to find it in yourself.

Our marriage was happy, I believed, though there were some puzzles in it, one of which occurred almost immediately. Our honeymoon had been at a place in Ireland called County Clanagh. The first day we were there we went out sightseeing, and while I placed a call back home from the car, John went out walking. When I emerged, I saw him crouched down in the middle of a field. This field grew out of not dirt, but pebbles really. It surprised me that anything could grow out of those stones, but there was a bright-green grass that seemed to be thriving, and a lot of bluebells. To the left there were great hills, and to our right a cliff that semicircled around us and fell to an enormous angry shoreline, busy with churning. I couldn’t imagine why John was kneeling there. “Are you okay?” I shouted into the wind, over the ocean, and then as I picked my way across the rocks, a line from H.D., whom I hadn’t read since college, rose up to me, “At least I have the flowers of myself.” When I reached John, I touched his shoulder, and when he turned to look at me, he was crying.

I had asked him why, and when he didn’t answer, I hadn’t ever asked again, a fact that as it turns out I was mistakenly proud of. I felt like I was respecting the mystery of another person, maybe, and that this harsh landscape was the perfect place to learn my first lesson of marriage, an austere little lesson. And yet County Clanagh had haunted our marriage a little, mostly because it was a little sad for reasons I couldn’t comprehend and felt I shouldn’t disturb.

After John and I had set the food on the table, Frances came in from the balcony and I introduced her to the Donner-Nilsons.

“Donner as in Donner Family?” Frances asked as she shook Kitty’s hand.

“Actually, yes,” Kitty said.

Frances would find the book in anybody; she would shake it out of a person. “Which of the Donners do you descend from?” Frances asked.

“George and Tamsen,” Kitty said.

“Tamsen’s my favorite!” I said. I’d seen a ballet about the Donners at the Met in 2001. Tamsen was the great matriarch of the family, losing herself finally in a little lean-to, alongside the vicious Keseberg. They’d been stranded for weeks when the cannibalism set in, yet still Tamsen was so vigorous and organized that she labeled all the flesh in jars, so that family members could avoid their own family.

“There was no cannibalism,” Kitty said. She knew what we were all thinking.

“What?” I blurted out. That was the main thing, the cannibalism.

“There’s no evidence in the fossil record.”

It was sort of disappointing, actually. Apparently the new thinking among some archeologists was that there wasn’t enough forensic evidence—knife marks on the bones, essentially—to support a conclusion of cannibalism.

“I still watch myself,” Ray said. “I watch my back.”

I DID NOT WISH to be one of those “work wives,” women who take up with a married coworker and, while not sleeping with him, take on other very wifely duties—keeping track of him throughout the day, establishing inside jokes, noting his food and drink preferences, texting messages *en francais* back and forth all day. But Ray and I had been working on the Tran case so closely for the past four months that it had necessitated spending inordinate amounts of time together, sometimes deep into the night. I had come to rely on Ray’s intelligence and good sense of humor. He was in general such a

decent guy, very sympathetic to Duong Tran, very funny, very warm, and hard working.

One night, about a month before the dinner party, Ray and I were holed up in our conference room, eating chow mein, trying to find our way through the eye of the needle, that is, making a way for Duong Tran to stay out of jail. Duong was facing a possible twenty years in prison if we went to court, whereas opposing counsel was now offering us a settlement of two years. I couldn’t bear to allow Duong to enter prison. He’d already lost his wife and had a two-year-old baby to support. He was a very earnest, very stubborn man, set in his ways, which were somewhat strange. His beliefs sounded bizarre to me, but then again so did my own, if said aloud. Essentially, the Hmong believed that the gods had to be appeased and sometimes this involved offering a living sacrifice in place of a person, to balance out the forces of life and death on earth. And who was I to say what was superstition: I didn’t know. In fact, that was my whole legal argument. It’s cruel to punish a man for doing what he considered the best on behalf of his wife. All the precedents for this, unfortunately, involve cases of legal insanity and I didn’t think it would go well in court to call four centuries of Hmong religious thinking insanity.

I did think people should just leave him alone, and I thought the law should enforce this. He was grief-stricken by the death of his wife. It’s true he hadn’t given her the beta-blockers and blood pressure medication she had required (and more problematically, had flushed all the medication down the toilet), but Duong had, as a sign of his love and devotion, hauled a squealing seven-year-old pig up the four flights of stairs to their Brooklyn apartment and butchered it right there in front of her.

Ray thought we should settle and I could not agree to it, so we were still working on the case at two a.m., delirious from exhaustion.

Adding to the anxiety of the night, Ray's wife kept calling his cell phone, and it would whirr and vibrate on the table periodically, spinning around angrily. I pictured her at home, holding the baby in one arm, throwing down her cell with the other hand when he wouldn't answer.

At some point, we drifted into pure silence, right after Ray said, "Well, I think your decision means he'll go to prison then for the full twenty." And into that silence, there was a little light rapping at the door. I thought it had to be Kitty. We both turned toward it, and then Lakshmi peered her head around the corner. She smiled and held out a little white bag. "Late-night Danish?" she asked.

What the hell was Lakshmi doing here with a little Danish in a bag? I knew what that little Danish meant to them; I had been newly in love once. It was unbelievable that somebody would go to Hammerstein's around the corner and pick out a jelly Danish and bring it out of the night into the harsh incandescence of our offices and hand it to you. It was irresistible, of course, it represented the whole world outside our sterile, deadlocked conference room, the ongoing life of midtown even deep into the middle of the night, its letting on to the East River, which flows south to downtown, where everyone is always free. But get a clue, Ray. Your wife is at home with a baby.

As Ray conferred with Lakshmi in the hallway, I sat inside the room, waiting, growing more furious by the second. The phone rang again, and without really looking, I opened the door and thrust it out toward Ray. "It's your wife," I said, and with my pregnant belly I was better able to represent all the wives and mothers of the world. Lakshmi smiled kindly at me, though, as beautiful as ever, unruffled, happy, in love.

JOHN TOOK TO CUTTING the meat, and Kitty turned to Ray. "Meat, meat, meat, meat, meat, meat, meat, meat, meat," she said, many more times than seemed amusing or rational. At first I had thought she was just being kind of cute, or silly. Maybe just suddenly exuberant? She spent essentially all day every day with her baby so maybe she was only breaking free a little bit amid the adults, without really remembering how, but then as the "meats" continued, her voice revealed a little bit of harshness or even madness in those short syllables. So she knew about Ray and Lakshmi? A part of her knew, and it was making the rest of her crazy, was my diagnosis. She was going to lose her mind if she said one more "meat." Everybody smiled nervously.

Finally Kitty turned to the rest of us, her eyes brimming with light and tears, and gave us this nonexplanation. "Ray has been reading a book about women and power that says that women's needs for iron, especially during their periods or after childbirth, is the basis of civilization as we know it. Particularly after childbirth, women generally couldn't procure meat, so they had to trust men to do it."

We all nodded, all of us silent and afraid.

"So women were forced to invent civilization, to surround themselves with stability during their weakest moments and the moments of their children's most terrible vulnerability."

"Women invented civilization then?" John said.

"Well, yes. But they invented it through men."

"It sounds like a lot of trouble."

"It was," Kitty said, demurely.

So she knew? This conversation seemed constructed explicitly to torture a cheating husband. Right? She was bereft of the very thing she and her child needed, and he was not fulfilling his duties as a man. But Ray was munching away on my mother's *mince de déjeuner*

casserole, a hearty, simple dish whose secret ingredient was Lipton's chicken noodle soup mixed with root vegetables.

"And time, too, we invented time," Kitty said.

At which point Susan leaped into the conversation, lecturing us on time expanding and then constricting when you are losing your limb over the frozen steppes of Nepal. Apparently when blood leaks out of a body, the body loses its pulsing internal clock, and all understanding of time is released. The soul becomes loosed from the body and unhinged from time simultaneously and begins to rove freely about. There is nothing more beautiful, Susan said, than dying. The end is joy. This little lecture briefly distracted us from the Donner-Nilson marital problems, and by the time Susan was done, Kitty was escaping out to the balcony, her whole body hunched forward as if to hide and comfort herself. Somebody had to tell her.

AS THE TABLE STAYED riveted to Susan's recounting of the attack—the bobcat spotting her from hundreds of feet away, stalking her through the foothills, coming upon her kneeling over a small pond, and placing his paw on her shoulder as if to say, politely, *Hello?*—I followed Kitty out to the balcony, where she stood gripping the railing. "I feel fine out here," she said to me. She was staring out over the city, the rain falling softly into it. "I wish I could just stand out here forever."

"Is everything all right?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "It is. I'm just a wreck, though. I should feel so grateful but ever since I had the baby, I've been falling apart. I can't seem to pull myself together."

"I can imagine how a new mother would feel that way," I said.

"I shouldn't be telling you this," she said. "I'm sure it will be different for you."

"Oh no, no, don't worry."

"Every day just seems so empty."

"Is there anything that helps?"

"I guess, yes. Maybe Ray helps a little. But I've been so awful to him. I'm angry all the time, or sad. I just don't know what to do with myself. I'm so sorry," she said, and then stared out at the city.

The city never disappoints, John frequently said when we set out on an excursion, even a tiny one to the drugstore or for a walk around the park. It was true. Kitty and I both looked out at it now—the lights, its long winding roads, the million interiors. It doesn't know what you want so it tries to give you everything. It was October, the most beautiful month of the year, and even in the city tonight, and under a light rain, you could smell the burning—leaves, grass, the earth, everything golden burning up, surrendering before winter arrives. I looked back in at the candlelit table; people were in high spirits, and nobody seemed to mind that two of the women were out weeping on the balcony. Except then I did catch Ray's eye, and he seemed to shrink away a little. Good.

"LET'S JUST GO OUT there right now and tell her, in front of him," Lizbet said. She and I were in the kitchen, preparing the trifle, and Kitty was back at the table, tucked up against Ray.

"Don't tell her *now*," I said. "Don't tell her in the middle of the dinner."

"This party is like a torture chamber for her."

I agreed with Lizbet that Kitty needed to know, but I couldn't bear for her to be told right now. "Some women don't want to know," I said. "Who knows what sort of arrangement they have?"

"I'm pretty sure they have a normal arrangement along the lines of not sleeping with other people."

"I suppose. But the dream of a happy family can be so overpowering that people will often put up with a lot to approximate

it. Sometimes a little blindness keeps the family together.”

“Well, then tear the family to pieces if it requires that.”

“I guess, but you know—children and all.”

“People need to have fewer children if what they do is just keep us all in lockstep.”

“I know,” I said. “I used to think about what was happening in, like, Kosovo, but now I’m researching baby gates deep into the night.”

“Oh my god. Are you going to get one of those plastic playgrounds in your backyard?”

“Except that I don’t have a backyard.”

“It’s kind of a drag for the rest of us when people have children.”

“It’s just that you don’t want to use your child as a scythe to break through the forest of received opinion.”

“That sounds like an okay use of a child,” Lizbet said.

None of this was surprising from Lizbet. You could trust her to hold out against any received opinions, as it was sort of the way Lizbet herself was raised. Her mother, Hanna, had gotten pregnant at twenty-seven, by accident. In fact, there was a still an IUD in Hanna’s uterus when she discovered she was pregnant, and it was too dangerous to remove it, so Lizbet grew in the womb alongside the little piece of barbed wire, an almost impossibility, and a fact that we were all strangely proud of.

“Anyway,” I said, “I’m going to go crazy if I have to listen to Susan anymore.”

“She’s smart,” Lizbet said.

“I don’t even believe there was a bobcat.”

“What?”

“Seriously. A bobcat isn’t really even big enough to tear off a woman’s arm. Bobcats are quite cute and little.”

“You think she made it up, are you crazy?”

“Made what up?” John said, entering the kitchen.

“The bobcat,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“We gotta somehow look up her sleeve,” Lizbet said, “and see the type of scar it is.”

“You two are crazy. You need to not spend time alone together.”

I handed him the huge, chilled trifle and he carried it like a big baby into the dining room, where it was greeted with shouts of happiness.

EVERY DINNER PARTY BY the end is a bit of a defeat. After the halfway mark, when everybody is still in high-spirits, some even intoxicated, and the dessert still hasn’t arrived, there is a moment when it seems like we are the most interesting dinner party in Manhattan tonight, we love each other, and we should do this all the time, why don’t we do this all the time? Everybody is calculating when they can invite everybody to their house for the next dinner party.

But then there is the subtle shift downward. Somebody is a little too drunk. The bird, which was a bronze talismanic centerpiece, golden and thriving, is revealed as a collection of crazy bones. A single line from the archeologist Ernest Becker often tore through my mind at the end of long meals, that every man stands over a pile of mangled bones and declares life good.

I had learned from my mother, who was an exquisite hostess, that it was important to provide small, gradual treats—little chocolates and liqueurs, after the meal, so that as the night decelerates there is no despair.

There was the trifle, and then fortune cookies, and then John brought in mango.

The alcohol had left Susan nostalgic for the bobcat and her time on the mountain. “What I missed the most,” she said, “while I lay

there, aware now that my arm would most likely have to be amputated, if I didn't die right there, going in and out of consciousness, what I missed the most was this, the ritual of dinner, the sitting down to sup together."

Oh my god. I looked over at Lizbet and knew she would repeat "sup together" for the rest of our lives.

"It is *written inside us*," Susan said, "to have dinner with our friends. As I crouched down, and he breathed at my back, I went through all the great meals of my life, one by one. The fish at the wharf in my childhood, the beef bourguignon in Falstaff, my grandmother's creampuffs, one by one."

"When you say 'bobcat,' " I said, "are you meaning it metaphorically or actually?"

"Both," Susan said. "I picture it as the fright of your life."

"But when you say 'bobcat' most of us are picturing a really big, ferocious animal."

"And that's fine," she said.

But Frances, as the book's editor, took offense. She sighed and said, bored, "Actually, literature needs to be read as literature, not gone thudding through like one would a law brief."

There was a knock at the door; I leaped up. "That's the Tran decision," I said. I'd asked the night secretary at the firm to bring it over the minute it arrived.

"It'll be the manuscript," Frances said. She said it with such certainty that I half expected a breathless Salman at the door, delivering it himself.

But it was neither, though the Tran case would be settled the next day, with Duong forced to abandon his little boy, and Salman's memoir would get published and it actually would explain our times and it *would* find joy where none previously was. It was just a plain woman at the door, in a long overcoat, asking for my husband. It was

such a startling request, and standing there, she formed the perfect answer to the question that was County Clanagh. Unlike the Donner-Nilson marriage, whose dysfunction would turn out to be, deep down, part of its durability—Kitty's solicitude interlocking nicely with Ray's narcissism—our marriage would break apart within months. And when it did, I would understand Susan's book a little better because nothing could describe what was happening, my little boy, just a few months old, already cut loose from the nuclear family—a little spaceman adrift, his parents also cast to the heavens.

Our guests left soon after, leaving behind this woman at the door, who would stay and stay. I gave the guests some marzipan boats, to eat on the subway, or save for another day. Susan bit into one right away and thanked me for a wonderful party. But she knew. She put her hand on my shoulder, and her eyes let me know, *Just crouch down, hold tight, there's a little bit of pain for you, but not too much.*