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The League of Minor Characters

The main character sits on his childhood bed
naming everything that’s gone—ex-job, ex-wife,
ex-best friend—and finally apprehends

the breakdown we’ve felt coming since chapter five.
When his doctor calls with test results, most of us
decide to remain minor characters

like the quixotic neighbor growing
bonsai sequoias, or the waitress with thick
glasses and a passion for chess,

because the main character, in the thrall
of a relentless plot, can’t help hurtling toward
the crumbling cliff edge. And who needs that?

Some inherit genes from generations
of minor players, some must learn to guard
those sunny Sundays with the paper

full of heroes in distant gunfire. And some of us
who’ve gotten smug over the years turn another page,
turn on the football game, until one day

the doorbell rings. We close our books,
adjust our eyes, and the protagonist
sweeps in insisting himself into our lives

with his entourage of lust and language,
sorrow, brio. Hero, anti-hero, it hardly matters
with the lights this bright. The music crests

and it’s time to speak.
It's Not You, It's Me

Nature abhors a vacuum
but God loves a good vacuuming.

The garden was strewn with petals
and those whimsical helicopter seeds
so God created woman and watched
as Eve unwound the cord, plugged it
into the slot between good and evil
and tidied the footpaths
while all the animals sat there, dumb,
and when she was done

somebody got out the apple juice and spilled
somebody opened a box of crackers
somebody trimmed his nails without a thought
for collecting them in his palm

and after however many days of consecutive Eden
Eve said I gotta get outta here and she did
and the cord snaked after her.
The International House of Pancakes

Under that blue plastic fake chalet roof
there are people eating waffles
at ten o’clock on a cloudless Monday morning.

Everyone with a destination
has eaten breakfast and gotten on with life,
so they must be uncertain tourists
bent over plates of butter and sweetness,
ducking a sky so bright and blank
it could point anywhere, mean anything.

I’ve got a reservation at the hospital next door
which I’m pretending is a Ramada,
that I’m just another jittery traveler
with overnight case and toothbrush.
I could pull in, add to this lump
in my stomach. It’s a good place to go
if you’re a stranger, alone, almost forty
and late to see the world. The menu unfolds
like a map and for a moment your trip
feels intentional. But if you look, the diners
are not travelers at all but castaways,
their islands shrinking with every forkful
until they drift out the door
on this brilliant day, no place else
they want to go, no place far enough away.
Even in Sporting Goods, even as my son grinned at it in the three-way mirror, that coat started disappearing, slipping in and out of the material plane. Even as I wrote his name on the inside tag below Men’s Small, as if that would fend off loss, it started to look missing. We try to be optimists here, we send him out each morning in a coat and he comes back with it sometimes. Even after a Samaritan came upon it in a field, read the name and tracked him down, he didn’t really own the coat, he’d only borrowed it until he could return it to the universe, the way at two he cast his first hooded fleece from his stroller. That one had drawstrings with wooden toggles and I dreamed of it once, hanging on a scarecrow. In my dreams I revisit them all—the red Gore-Tex, the green slicker with cargo pockets, the beige fleece
and the blue fleece and the rust jacket with yellow sleeves. They hang on fence posts, in magic closets extending into parallel worlds, on air currents like sea gulls—coats soaring on uplifts in the cold and rain as my son lopes along below, in my arms one moment, the next out the door, insufficiently warm.
The Nuns’ Remains

On the eighth day of rain,
the nuns—
stacked in twos
in their Calvary graves—
washed down the hill
to our own back garden,
where each found
a bed of her own.
Mostly they favored
golden rays of early daffodils
or the pheasant eye narcissus
with its delicate crown.
But one chose
the tender white blossoms
of a freesia
which we brought inside.
It smelled like black pepper
and illumined the dark.
Map of the Marriage Bed

Some nights he wants directions and she tells him which crossroads, where to idle, where to drive fast and hard.

It’s instinct, and the route into those mountains wanders—on the back of an elephant, on the lip of a milk jug, jangling, jangling.

Some nights only half-way there he pulls into a motel hidden in a grove of Douglas firs because they’re lost—they’re always lost,

but some nights on those unlit highways it hits him hard—and he takes charge, produces a key, a chair, a lamp, and the Puritans who live inside them nod at the trim hospital corners, the porcelain ewer and basin. They take their places, grip and grimace in the dark.

And a few times one has hauled off and clapped the other flat on the head, hijacked their moving vehicle and driven overland until the nettles and tumbleweeds put a stop to this craziness. They crawl out the passenger window, they weep, they say a little prayer and cling to each other in the grass and dirt. Once she found a knife in the field where they lay. And once she found a ruby ring.
How to Read This Story
to Your Children

When you woof for the dog,
imagine him gray at the muzzle,
profound and gentle, but
with a taste for tasseled loafers.
The clock in the hall tick tocks
with an Eastern European accent;
the scissors snip crisply
as a nurse in starched cap.

The child in this story never ain’ts
or slams doors or speaks insincerely,
and he’s suspiciously good natured.
You’ll need to intimate with your pauses
the sticky striped candy hidden in his fist,
and in the spaces between words
those midnight walks
when he sneaks into a field
of sunflowers and stars.

When Father speaks,
put a slight yawn in his voice,
as though he’s only just
wakened into his life,
the delicacy of his son’s bones,
his wife’s cotton dress,
the morning home free from
the mysteries of work. Where
have I been? he seems to ask
behind his newspaper.
How do I enter the story?
And the smiling mother,  
who speaks of nothing 
but blueberries and making jam—  
let her voice have an edge to say  
she hates the hot work of canning,  
the too-small house.  
The sweeter and more patient her words,  
the more impatient she sounds,  
hinting she might shout with dismay  
if her child asks one more question,  
or run out and cut off all her hair.

When you’re narrating, be the voice  
of kindness, your very best self,  
but a little removed  
as if watching from the top banister.  
You read in warm blue tones suggesting  
dog and boy, father and mother  
retrace their steps  
over countless readings,  
that no matter how they never learn,  
you forgive them everything.
Elisabeth Reads Poetry

Elisabeth is two and reads
a book of poetry off my shelf,
opens with Yah yah sumpin to eat.
I try to read my own book
but she sings Dibbah dah ze Rosie.
She’s changed her clothes
six times today
from blue dress to swimsuit
to Tom’s size 7 green jeans.
That was all before 10:00.
She’s been naked ever since,
now reciting ABDB’s,
while I read over her shoulder
to check for genius,
like my friend who found
her two-year-old breaking
the alphabet code,
reading real words
as if he’d climbed
into the high cupboards,
eating sugar and poison
willy nilly—a horrifying miracle.
But no. Atsa batta sorry,
Elisabeth intones
and tosses the book in favor
of a red crayon, then
on to her dolly’s baby blanket,
folding it like soft origami.
I thumb her dropped book of poems.
I can’t help it, she’s a genius
of prolonged babyhood,
of its light, its wild uncoded rhythms,
playing late into the open afternoon.