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THE WEIGHT OF BIRDS

“My uncle Frank wrapped the dog in papier-mâché.”

“When did the dog actually die?”

“I don’t know.”

Mark is buttering a piece of toast. Sylvia likes to hear the scrape of the knife across the rough surface of the browned bread. He uses a lot of butter. He butters like her mother did, generous chunks inserted into the mottled craters of the toast.

“And then?”

“He made the dog into a piñata. A giant squash, a giant banana, I can’t remember which. And then the whole family beat it to death with broomsticks. They unscrewed the head of the broom from the sticks. Then they whacked the dog.”

Mark inserts more bread into the toaster, pulls the lever slowly until it catches. “Only they didn’t know the dog was inside until later.”

“I see,” he says. “Do we have any jam?”

“No.” She opens the refrigerator door just in case, scans the contents. “Cheese?”

“No, thanks.” There is a short silence, and then the toast pops. He butters another slice. He does not offer her one.

Finally he says, “That’s the uncle coming today?”

“Yes, Uncle Frank.”

“And Aunt Marty is his wife?”

“She won’t be coming. They’re divorced.”

“I imagine so,” he says. He shakes crumbs from his bathrobe into the sink. “You’ll note,” he says, “That I shook the crumbs into the sink.” He looks proud, as if he has saved her a whole world of hard work. In her mind, she sees the dog, wrapped like a chrysalis, fall to

the ground. The family gathers around, mouths open, broomsticks in hand.

George, her father, chops raisins on a large wooden cutting board. George is not bald like the rest of the family. Hair sprouts out of his ears, nostrils, chin. He is proud of the fact that he is hairy. There are few things that George can point to as successes. He has failed at most things—jobs, being a parent, being a husband. Damn it if he didn't lose his wife entirely. When she was gone there were so few things left: the good vacuum cleaner in the front hall closet, which he had fixed twice to good results. The lawn mower, which, though it leaked gas, still worked, and his hairy body. George has never had a serious illness in his life, and he thinks maybe this has something to do with his animal-like body, the hair that coats him like fur.

"How many cups now?" George the father demands. It is the eighth time he has asked this question.

Sylvia sighs and rubs her hands down the legs of her jeans. "Let's see, Dad. If we're quadrupling the recipe you've got to chop four cups of raisins."

One corner of George the father's mouth turns up toward his furry nose. "That's a shitload of raisins," he snorts. This is the eighth time he has said the phrase, shitload of raisins. He has taken up saying four-letter words now his wife is not around to stop him. It makes him feel more virile.

George looks at the cup overflowing with raisins. He picks a hair from among the tiny black nuggets and in a sudden panic reaches up to his own head. Encroaching baldness is an ever-present threat. But there, on the crown of his square head, he feels the lush weight of his own locks.

Mark is in charge of grating nutmeg. The nuts are slippery and wonderful. The grater is a piece of trash. Already he has skinned his knuckles.

On the balcony porch a bird is dead, lying in the snow. It is cold out and the snow is fine, and it has blown over the bird's black wing, a dry dusting like powdered sugar. Mark hopes he will be able to slip out of door, remove the bird, and drop it over the balcony rail. Or maybe he can wrap it in a plastic grocery bag.

Sylvia, normally so collected and so calm, does not do well around dead things. Last time there was a dead bird, it was very bad.

It was the middle of summer. The apartment was so hot the wood reeked of old oil and old tenants. Mark had recently moved in and his things were still in boxes, battered cardboard that had seen a few moves already: *KITCHEN* exed out, *BEDROOM* written below it. One of the boxes had broken on the way up the apartment stairs, and Mark's books had dropped everywhere. Loose pages from his father's Quran floated down the stairs and drifted over other people's welcome mats. Mark collected them carefully, thin as onion skins, tucked them inside the cover. As he placed the Quran on the shelf beside Sylvia's paperbacks, he'd had a glimpse of his father's hands: delicate, long fingered, the nails brittle and hard. Near the end of his life his father's hands had begun trembling. Where did the tremors start, Mark wondered—from the elbows or the armpits, or from somewhere deep within his father's chest, some shadowy place like the cool depths of a river.

His father had grown up by a river. Trees grew densely and the dry grasses of the village gave way to elegant fronds with feathered heads and water lilies. When Mark was a child his mother gave him a child's Bible and in a picture he glimpsed his father's childhood river. In the glossy picture, women clothed in blue robes with olive skin waded into the cool green water to collect a basket with a baby inside.

Mark's mother explained that the basket held Baby Moses, but in Mark's imagination, the basket held his father as a baby, and it was his father's chubby brown hand reaching out to feel the ripples in the river. In the river his father's mother had washed clothes, rubbing them on rocks in the shade while his father splashed in the shallows. His father's sister had lost a leg to a crocodile; the stump became

infected and she died. After his father died Mark had found a picture of that sister, standing beside his father in a heavy flowered dress, a scarf over her hair, frowning at the camera. Her face was hard to make out, but Mark thought her features were fine and beautiful, her hair under the scarf soft as silk.

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The kitchen is small. They are crammed hip to hip around the counters, an assembly line. Uncle Frank claims the best knife right away, the only good knife in the entire kitchen.

Mark moves to the sink to rinse the ragged flesh of his skinned knuckles. He is sprinkled with nutmeg particles. Aunt Elsa leans over and puts her nose into his sweater sleeve. She inhales. He turns on the water.

“Come and help me get the wine out of my car,” Aunt Elsa says to him.

Aunt Elsa’s earrings are large pink plastic circles. They weigh her earlobes. Aunt Elsa has worn heavy earrings since she was sixteen, and only now they are beginning to show some damage. Aunt Elsa once lived out of her car for a year when she was thirty-three. At that time her baby had just died from running into the street. Elsa had been in the bathtub, soaking her feet after a long day waiting tables. Her husband was outside on the front porch watching the baby, who was almost two. Aunt Elsa thought he had been watching the baby carefully. She had reached down to soap her foot when she heard the squeal of tires outside and a hollow thump. That bumper of the car caught her baby square in the head.

After this Aunt Elsa had shuffled through the pieces of her life and let each thing slip through her fingers, be caught by the wind, and taken away. Things were weightless, generally speaking; her husband was as empty as a balloon; her job was nothing to her; her expectations, well they were as light as flour particles and gone in one exhale. The only way to achieve any weight in her life was to drink.

One shot of whiskey was like a paperweight in her stomach--it held things down, it kept her from being whisked away too.

Right after her thirty-second birthday, Elsa's family found her. Frank and George peeled her out of the car. She had not bathed in months and George had to hold his breath. In George's pickup as they drove Elsa home they kept the windows open, air circulating through the cab.

Now, in the stairwell of her niece's apartment, Aunt Elsa touches Mark's hand, as if testing to see if he is real. "I have lots of alcohol," Aunt Elsa says, as they walk down the stairs. She moves slowly, fingers crooked on the railing. Her purse slips down her arm and bumps her knee. "I have brandy and red wine. I have champagne too, but the recipe doesn't call for that." She pauses on a stair, one foot raised. "I have it just in case."

"Okay," says Mark, and laughs. Aunt Elsa's hair is thinning. Mark can see her scalp under the stiff curls. At the bottom of the stairs, she puts a hand on the doorknob.

"Did little Sylvie tell you about the dog?" she asks.

"The dog in the piñata."

"Yes."

"She told me."

"Good." Aunt Elsa lifts her shoulders. "Sylvie's mother never approved of drinking," she says. "George can be a little free."

"Free? With alcohol?"

Aunt Elsa narrows her eyes. "Come here," she says.

Mark leans down. Aunt Elsa's eyes are dim and watery, blue half-frozen pools. He wonders what she will tell him. She leans into the collar of his shirt, breathes. He feels her breath on his neck.

He straightens; she pushes the door with the flat of her palm. "Help me with this door, young man."

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Back in summer, Mark had just finished putting his father's Quran away when Sylvia said, "A bird flew into the door." She looked over

to the balcony, a thin strip of concrete that jutted into space. Sylvia had covered it in plants, geraniums and pots of dahlias and basil and parsley. Mark thought maybe they could fit a little grill out there too, but Sylvia said it was against regulations.

“Well, we can’t leave it out there,” Sylvia said. “It’s so hot.”

Mark walked into the kitchen and shook out a couple plastic shopping bags. “Let’s just wrap it up and then I’ll put it in the dumpster.”

“I don’t want to touch it,” Sylvia said. Her voice was small, a wispy breeze. She seemed to be receding. Her lips looked dry. Mark reached out and cupped her cheek with his hand.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Everything is fine.”

He spoke slowly. “You don’t have to touch it,” he said. “All you have to do is hold this bag open for me, and I’ll drop it in.”

“I don’t want to look at it,” she said.

“You don’t have to.” Mark slid the glass door open. “Just hold the bag open, turn your head, and I’ll put it in.”

Sylvia took the bag from him, wrapping the handles around her fingers. Mark found the bird: a little black thing, lying on its side, its feathers shining in the afternoon sun. Its eyes stared blankly.

“It’s just a little sparrow or whatever,” Mark said. “I don’t know much about birds.”

“It’s a little blackbird,” said Sylvia, staring over the balcony at the sky, small patches of blue in between other buildings. “A red-winged blackbird.”

Mark bent over it. The tips of the wings, folded into the tight little body, looked as if they had been dipped in blood. He reached down and eased his fingers around its body.

“Hold the bag for me, now,” he said. “I’m going to drop it in.”

Sylvia began to shake. “I can’t,” she said. The plastic bag rattled in her hand. She blinked up at the sky. “I don’t want you to drop it in the bag.”

Mark cleared his throat. “It’s just a bird.”

"I know!" shouted Sylvia. "I know!"

Mark had not seen her cry before. He reached out and took hold of the bag.

"I'm just going to put it in the bag, okay?"

Sylvia began whimpering. Tears slid down her cheeks. "No! Don't drop it in! Don't drop it in! It's going to thump in the bag and I'll know it's there. I'll be holding this dead thing!" Mark could hear other doors sliding open, wondered if their neighbors were craning their necks to see what all the screaming was about.

Mark grabbed the bag out of her fingers, dumped the bird, twisted the handles into a knot. "There," he said, "It's done. All finished. God, Sylvie." He reached toward her but she put her hands over her eyes.

"No way," she said. "Don't touch me. You've been holding that dead thing. Go wash your hands."

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The tiny squares of citron peel are very precise. Uncle Frank dices them carefully, holding the peel with long fingers. "A little citron on stormy waters will cure an upset stomach," he tells Sylvia.

Sylvia watches as he runs a thumb across the blade, easing the citron into the measuring bowl. "Really, Uncle Frank?"

"I read it."

"Did you hear that?" Crystal shouts from Uncle Frank's left. "Uncle Frank says citron will cure seasickness!"

George the father rolls his eyes. Raisin fragments litter the floor at his feet. Crystal is Sylvia's little sister. George is father to them both but he often forgets Crystal is his daughter. She is as loony as the day is long, he thinks. She is full of *shit*. It makes George happy to think this.

Crystal is tall and wears black boots to her knees. She keeps her coat on in Sylvia's apartment. Sylvia has not seen Crystal without her coat for three years. Crystal is also balding. She wears a red scarf on her head like a chemotherapy patient. She receives many sad looks from strangers on the subway.

Uncle Frank shakes his shoulders a little, leans toward Sylvia. “Mix a little citron with wine,” he whispers, “And you can maybe save a person from poisoning.”

Crystal levels off a cup of flour. “Mix a little citron with wine!” she yells. “Uncle Frank says you can counteract poison!”

Sylvia looks across the room to the door, which has just opened. Aunt Elsa fumbles with the keys, Mark’s fingers wrap around the neck of a bottle of brandy. He holds a box of red wine on his other shoulder, like a man carrying a load of wood. He is staring at Crystal.

“What is wrong with you?” Sylvia whispers when Uncle Frank leaves to go to the bathroom.

Crystal shrugs, wipes flour from her hands onto the floor. “I’m just trying to have a good time,” she says.

“You know Uncle Frank hates—”

Crystal rubs the tip of her thumbnail. “Poor Uncle Frank,” she says, and then she laughs. “Mark is black,” she says.

Sylvia cracks an egg.

“Only you didn’t say he was an Arab—”

Sylvia tips a half of the cracked egg, watches the yolk slide, catch at the edge of the shell. Crystal watches.

“He’s not,” Sylvia says, trying to keep her voice low. “He’s half Somali. His mother was from Minnesota, you know.”

“Is he a Muslim?” Crystal asks her, leaning back on the counter.

“No,” Sylvia says, and then adds, “Though if he were, it would be fine.”

Crystal begins laughing, dipping her fingers in the flour. She has just been dumped by a man who saw her without her head scarf one morning. She says that is why men leave her, because she is balding. Sylvia wants to say, Men leave you because you are insane, but she doesn’t. “Mark is green,” Crystal giggles.

Sylvia cracks another egg, lets the white slip over the shell.

“Mark is blue,” Crystal says. “Mark is yellow. Red. Striped.”

“Look at the recipe,” Sylvia drops the egg shells into the sink. “How many eggs?”

“Twenty,” Crystal shouts. “Twenty egg yolks!”

“That’s a shit hill of yolks!” George the father is eating raisins and sipping brandy. He strokes his eyebrows with the backs of his forefingers. “Your mom used to do the eggs.”

Aunt Elsa pats George on the shoulder. “She sure did,” and then she sits down beside him. “She was good with the eggs all right.”

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My family is a variety show, Sylvia warned Mark shortly after he moved in. You think I went nuts over that bird? My family is *nuts*. I don’t know why. Maybe because my mother died. I don’t know. They’re just all crazy. Sometimes I’m afraid I’m going to go crazy too, she says. Sometimes I am afraid I am going to wake up one morning next to you and I’ll look over at you and I won’t know who you are, and I’ll start screaming that there’s a man in my bed. That’s what my mother did. She saw my father and she didn’t recognize him and they came and they took her away. She thought there were children in her walls, she screamed and cried and demanded that my father open the walls and get them out, and when he didn’t she took a lamp and smashed it against the dry wall trying to free them before they starved.

Mark watched Sylvia speaking, and he thought of his mother, pale and small, chopping onions at the kitchen counter. He thought of his father, tall and black, standing beside her, his hand on her shoulder. Mark has an old picture of them from the 60s when they met each other. His mother is small and clothed in a long skirt. Her little feet are in brown flip flops. His father wears a long sleeved shirt, embroidered with big green flowers. He’d been in America for ten years and he would never go back to Somalia. Black hair in a giant afro, his nose and eyes looking finer and smaller under that magnificent crown of hair. Now Mark remembers his mother mostly in the kitchen or out in the garden, sitting in a row of strawberries, pulling weeds and singing to herself. She was very small, his mother,

and his father was very tall and strong until he grew old and began to shake.

Mark wonders if he will die shaking, afraid to crumble into a thousand pieces.

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“I was supposed to get a lot of money,” Uncle Frank is telling Mark. Mark is stirring the fruit into a pool of brandy and wine.

“But I didn’t,” Uncle Frank concludes. “I got only a couple hundred and that’s it.”

Mark shakes his head slowly in an effort to communicate sympathy.

Uncle Frank watches him carefully. He has learned how to tell if people feel sorry for him or not. Mark’s mouth is raised a little to one side, and Uncle Frank wonders if the family has told him about the dog. Well, that dog had it coming. He surely did.

Suddenly Crystal is standing next to him. She puts the tips of her fingernails on his hand. “Stir a little faster,” she says. “It’ll marinate faster.” She lingers on his arm until Mark twitches his hand away.

“You stir it,” he says. “I really don’t think stirring it will make any difference.”

“It does.” Crystal is watching him. “It makes a lot of difference.”

Uncle Frank sighs and sips a little red wine from a plastic cup. “I was about seven,” he says. “They wanted to me to put the goggles on to save my eyes, but I didn’t. I thought it would be better without. And my eyes were red for weeks.”

Aunt Elsa and George are watching TV in the other room. Sylvia is sweeping raisins, citron, flour, lemon peel into a pile.

Crystal says, “Uncle Frank was on a poster for pool chemicals. The poster said “For perfectly clear, magically sparkling water.”

Uncle Frank opens his wallet, takes out a creased magazine page. A small boy is swimming, cheeks puffed out comically, face speckled with air bubbles.

“I got no money,” Uncle Frank whispers. “They cheated me.”

“Poor Uncle Frank,” Crystal says, sloshing the mixture out of the bowl. The end of her red head scarf falls over her shoulder. “Poor man.”

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While the fruitcake bakes, everyone leaves for lunch. Sylvia insists on staying in the apartment. Mark holds the door while they file out: George, Aunt Elsa, Uncle Frank, and Crystal. They give them good directions to a pizza parlor, but they do not know if they will make it, since two of them are drunk.

Mark looks out of the sliding glass door. The snow has blown over the bird, and only glimmers of black are visible here and there.

“Your sister is interesting,” he says.

“Yes,” she whispers, putting her face into his sweater. “They’re all lunatics.” She reaches up and touches his hair, black curls that loop over her fingers. “Your hair is so soft,” she says.

He slips his hands into her shirt. The smell of fruitcake is overwhelming, full and great like a shovelful of soil.

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“We store these fruitcakes in honor of your mother.” George the father is crying loudly.

Uncle Frank puts his fingers to his eyes. There is a smudge of pizza sauce on his lower lip.

“Grace was my mother,” Crystal says to Mark, as she punches holes in the lids of the fruitcake tins. “She died from a small explosion in her head.”

Sylvia hands a tin, heavy with fruitcake, to each person.

“Don’t forget to pour brandy over them every so often,” Aunt Elsa says. She pats Mark on the hand. “I’m still saving that champagne, young man,” she says. “It don’t matter to me if you’re black, I still want to see you do the honest thing by my little Sylvie.”

“Leave them alone, Elsa,” Frank says, lifting the lid of his tin. “Life is short.”

Crystal tugs on her head scarf. "Sylvia never takes a fruitcake," she tells Mark. "Sylvia doesn't like fruitcake."

"You mother loved fruitcake," George the father sniffs, and wipes his nose on the back of his hand. "She loved irises too. And that movie, I forget the name."

"Which movie?" Crystal demands. "Which movie did she love?"

"Thanks for hosting, little Sylvie," Aunt Elsa pats Sylvia's wrist. She leans closer. "Did you tell Mark about the dog?"

"Yes, Aunt Elsa. I told him."

"Did you tell him what kind of dog it was?"

"I don't think it matters."

"Sure it does, little Sylvie. My God! It matters!" But she does not say what kind of dog. She shakes her head a little and sighs. Her breath is rank with alcohol and Sylvia steps away from her.

Uncle Frank is shuffling toward the door. His feet are heavy in brown rubber snow boots.

Mark watches them, wonders if baldness is genetic in Sylvia's family. Will he turn over one day in bed and find Sylvia gone, her hair still on her pillow? The thought is grotesque. He is relieved that her family is leaving. George, Aunt Elsa, Uncle Frank, Crystal: he imagines their footprints on the sidewalk below. He hopes that they will never come back.

Sylvia opens the sliding door to air out the apartment, and she sees the bird in the snow.

"Oh," she says, staring at it.

"I'll take care of it."

"I know," Sylvia says. "I know you'll take care of it." She walks away from the door but she does not close it. Snow blows over the bird, over the pots left outside, the blackened, shriveled stocks of basil and rosemary. Snow moves into their apartment over the doorframe, and Mark knows that he could stop it by sliding the door shut. Instead he and Sylvia stand there, almost touching, watching the frozen particles coat the carpet, white and lovely before they begin to melt.