

The Clown and the Tiger

"That's water-turned-wine," said Jane, archly but without a trace of impatience. "Your turn."

I pulled two cards from the top of the deck and studied them. Far away, goats' bells ding, and still further out, glimpsed between the gnarled crosses of olive trees tumbling down the rugged hillside, lies the expansive, dark blue Mediterranean. Two white chickens, boisterous, nearer to the scene, patrol Spiro's patio. Unripe grapes hang, lemony waxen bath beads, above our heads. Time passes. Giovanni deals the cards, suffers a poor draw.

One must not forget: the sun is to be worshipped here. We fill an empty bottle with local wine, swim, and prostrate ourselves before said deity, naked like stones in the sand. A hoary old Greek raises a piece of driftwood shaped like the arm of Achilles and heaves it with great show of violence into the sea; he stares straight at me with a look of wild relief, laughs, spits, and disappears down the east beach.

I jump when awakened. It is one of my traits. This time, I am awakened at Lake Travis, Austin. Years seem to have passed. Jane is naked, shorter than average but perfect in form, waist deep in water. The tips of her hair, long, brown, silky, dip the water. Her solid brown eyes, soft but alert to every modulation in the visual universe, observe, assess, and disregard two kids wading toward her. I lay back and close my eyes at the sun, as Jeff sits up and says something about chili rellenos. I hear the kids shriek and plunge. A stout woman screams something in Spanish. I open my eyes. The beach is deserted save for them and us.

On the way home I know Jeff is about to speak by the way he rubs the swarthy stubble on his jowls, making the pint-sized popeye tattoo on his upper arm seem to rise from the dead and then die again with each stroke. He pats his paunch thoughtfully, the face tensing slightly under the massive crown of black locks until it achieves an expression that might have become Humpty Dumpty just before the fall. "Katie is in trouble," he says. "She needs to move in with us."

We find Katie and Alissa, her four year old, in the front yard studying a caterpillar. Alissa has Katie's narrow chin and high cheekbones. One can already see her life unfolding through the features. The caterpillar reminds Jeff of a story. Once he had waited for months for a cocoon to open. He had pictured the fuzzball breaking open like a pomegranate. But eventually he forgot

about it. Then one day he was playing in the yard and heard a little scratching sound. He turned and saw the cocoon just beginning to tear. And do you know what came out of that cocoon?

"What?"

"A TIGER. RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA."

"No," said Alissa. "A butterfly."

We load Katie's boxes and take her mattress to the dump. We do not notice the city's mysteries along the way because Jane and Katie and I are together, and are absorbed in each other's radiance, so to speak. In a way, I suppose, we are all in love. The dump is a mess with its own incalculable aesthetic. Dump trucks fly past, magical beasts from an unwritten landfill fairy tale. We wave. We are high at the dump. Jesus.

Now we have five residents in our household. Jeff is the most observant. Jane is the most beautiful. Katie is the most fun (but tragically not so on the day of Our Story). Alissa is the youngest. And they say, perhaps jokingly, that I am the philosopher.

Perhaps we are not all in love. Perhaps I am oversimplifying. I say this because of what I saw at Bartholomew Park. The joggers, thin, fashionable, or flabby, loped past. At the center of the park is a playground. There is one child in the playground. She pops a yellow, curly-topped head out from under a slide, pokes a stick in the sand. One of the joggers, a woman, perhaps in her late 20s, has stopped near a trash barrel. Her gym shorts sport a High School logo no longer legible and an animal face about the size of a walnut. Several Coke cans and the meat of a fruit lay around the barrel. The jogger near the barrel is Jane. She is breathing heavily. No, she is weeping. The child is studying something dark that she holds in her hands. It begins to rain. I will not see Jane again.

Year after year we play cards. Once, long ago it seems, Jeff and Katie and Jane were playing, and Alissa and I were arranging her toys into a line from the refrigerator across the kitchen threshold and out to the front left leg of her mom's chair. "Your turn," I heard Jane say, her impatience light as a feather. It reminded me of something, one of those faint patterns that ruffle the edges of our sensible spectra, lending coherence by sheer resistance. A smell of violet, a certain hair texture, a voice, a symbol. "Should I put in the clown next?"

"No," said Alissa, "the tiger."