

NELL FREUDENBERGER

there was anything she believed about marriage it was that arguing the way her parents did was a waste of time.

"Not only kissing. The marriage in total."

"You didn't believe we were getting married? What did you think we were doing?"

"In Desh, you can make your plans, but they usually do not succeed."

"And in America?"

"In America you make your plans and then they happen."

To her relief, George finally smiled. "So you planned to kiss me, but you were surprised when it actually happened."

Amina hesitated, but her husband was patient until she found the right words.

"Not only surprised," she said. "I was dumbstruck."

THE ENTIRE NORTHERN  
SIDE WAS COVERED  
WITH FIRE

RIVKA GALCHEN

People say no one reads anymore, but I find that's not the case. Prisoners read. I guess they're not given much access to computers. A felicitous injustice for me. The nicest reader letters I've received—also the only reader letters I've received—have come from prisoners. Maybe we're all prisoners? In our lives, our habits, our relationships? That's not nice, my saying that. Maybe it's even evil, to co-opt the misery of others.

I want to mention that, when I sold the movie, my husband had just left me. I came home one day and a bunch of stuff was gone. I thought we'd been robbed. Then I found a note: "I can't live here anymore." He had taken quite a lot with him. For example, we had a particularly nice Parmesan grater and he had taken that. But he had left behind his winter coat. Also a child. We had a child together, sort of. I was carrying it—girl or boy, I hadn't wanted to find out—inside me.

I searched online for a replacement for that Parmesan grater, because I had really liked that Parmesan grater. It was the kind that works like a mill, not the kind you just scrape against; it had a handle that was fun to turn. There were a number of similar graters available, but with unappealing "comfort" grips. Finally, I found the same model. Was it premature to repurchase? Two days passed basically like that. Then, on Wednesday, my brother called. I gave him the update on my life.

"Wow, that's really something," he said.

"Yeah. It is something."

Then he said, "I thought it was a work of fantasy, Trish. I mean, I guess I should have told you about it—"

"What?"

"The blog," he said. "His blog. I-Can't-Stand-My-Wife-Dot-Blogspot-Dot-Com—"

"Are you going through one of your sleepless phases again?"

"Trish, I know it makes me sound snoopy, but Jonathan always seemed a little off to me, you know? So after he left your apartment one time, when I was alone there, I don't know, I'm sorry, I opened up his laptop, and I looked through the browser history. I was curious about his porn. I thought maybe there would be some really weird porn—"

"There was weird porn?"

"None at all, actually. Which in itself was kind of weird. No porn. Just his blog. And—"

"All right. Well. I'm thinking of buying a new Parmesan grater—"

"I thought it was satire, Trish. To be honest, it's pretty funny. Look, I knew you could never have said some of that stuff. I mean, you are kind of critical, Trish, but still. How could I have known Jonathan was serious? I thought, Maybe these things can be healthy. Funny is healthy. Maybe this is a healthy way for Jonathan to vent some anger, some hurt feelings. Healthy fantasy, you know? I didn't know what to do, Trish. I asked my shrink. He wouldn't weigh in! I decided not to interfere. Look, don't be mad at me, Trish, I'm just the traumatized bystander here—"

"You know what's weird? You keep saying 'Trish.' You do that when you're trying to avoid something. You should just come out and say whatever it is you want to say instead of saying 'Trish' all the time."

"Look, I'm going to come over and we're going to read it together. Or not. If that's what you want. Whatever you want."

I wasn't going to read the blog. So much writing out there in the world and who wants to read it? Not me.

All of this was not long after the publication of my first novel, and I had some money, even a bit of dignity, as the novel had been somewhat successful; at least, I'd been given a decent advance and money from foreign rights, too—it was a dream!—but I didn't have *lots* of dignity and I didn't have lots of money, either, just some. (The novel was a love story, between a bird and a whale.) Why was I already low on money? Partially because money just flies, as they say, or I guess it's time they say that about, the flying, but money, too—very winged. Still, one of the main reasons I didn't have much money was that I had been paying my husband's way through business school. At least, I'd thought I was doing that, but it turned out he wasn't enrolled in school—I went to look for him, of course—and he had just been making those "tuition" withdrawals for himself. He did have many nice qualities, my husband. His hair unwashed was divine. He never asked me what I'd gotten done on any particular day. We'd fallen madly in love in three weeks; that was fun. He used to call me "little chicken." I still miss him.

But back to the point. I had some money but not lots of money. Prison bars of not-money grew around me in dreams, like wild magic corn. My agent called—so nice to be called by a friend! . . . Or, no, not a friend . . . but sort of a friend—to see if I was interested in taking a meeting with some "movie people." I started crying, and then we got past that. The meeting would just be to talk over a few notions, no biggie, but maybe. They had liked the screenplay adaptation of my novel—I hadn't written a screenplay adaptation, this seemed to be a confusion—but thought it would be too expensive to have underwater filming and also flight filming. They wanted a cheaper love story. What if it was two land animals? Anyway, a meeting was proposed. My agent acted as if I might find it beneath me, like only another novel was serious work, and

even though I know he didn't really think that—didn't really think that my writing was too serious to be set aside for a movie—I thought it was nice of him to pretend as if that might be the case.

"Great, great," I said, in a closing voice. "I'm, you know, all over that, totally."

"Totally?"

I coughed, as if to locate the problem in my throat.

"So you're O.K.?"

"Excited. I'll be there."

"Like even what's just happened to you—that's an idea right there."

And it struck me that maybe the meeting was the kind of thing that was going to save me, or at least that I should not entirely neglect to prepare for it, since it might kind of sort of save me a little bit. It could be a very good thing. I could watch myself put forward my best effort and then feel good about myself for having done so, for having tried. The least I could do—for me, and for my progeny, too!—was open up a Word file. Or, failing that, jot down a few notes on a legal pad. Let me just say now, because I don't believe in suspense—or at least I feel dirty when I try to engage in it, probably mostly because I'm no good at it—that I didn't prepare for the meeting at all.

My friend David came by—he needed to borrow money, he had much worse luck in life than I did, also expensive dental problems, and an addiction to acupuncture—and I told him about the leaving and also about the blog.

David already knew about the blog. He, too, had found it by going through the browser history of Jonathan's laptop. "The guy had a pretty amazing imagination," David said. "I wouldn't have guessed it. I suppose we should respect that."

"You didn't want to tell me?"

"Remember the two months you didn't speak to me when I said you were rash for getting married so fast?"

I had recently heard someone use the word "poleaxed." That word made me think back to those years in Kentucky as a child—I don't know why, that was the thought. I was a fancy citified woman now, and so my life could have properly sized disasters, ones in the comedy-of-manners way of things, rather than in the losing-a-limb-to-a-tractor-blade way of things; that was another thought. If there was no blood on the floor, then it wasn't a tragedy. That was what "urban" meant. Could mean. Poleaxed. I had also once come across a phrase about a book "lying like a poleaxed wildebeest in the middle of my life." It was my life that was lying in the middle of my life like that, like a poleaxed wildebeest.

"We were still sleeping together," I said. "People don't sleep with people they hate."

"Interesting," David said. "Verifiably false. Possibly irrelevant, regardless."

David was an aspiring screenwriter and my most reliable friend. I didn't tell him about my upcoming movie meeting. The mood of betrayal had gone general.

"Men like me," I said, hand on the belly that housed a being of unknown gender. "They really do. Just yesterday a man stopped me on the sidewalk to ask me if I was Italian."

"Who was talking about not liking you? You're just in pain."

"Maybe I'm not in pain."

"I'd put my money on pain. It's the Kantian sublime, what you're experiencing. There's your life, and then you get a glimpse of the vastness of the unknown all around that little itty-bitty island of the known."

A silence ate at the air in the room. Sublime. I thought of it as a flavor. Maybe related to Key lime. I didn't know what the Kantian sublime was. It's important to be an attentive host. And wife, for that matter. I went to the kitchen and got out some crackers

and mustard and jam; it was what I had. I found some little decorative plates to make it look nicer. Suddenly I was worried that David might leave, that I'd have no friends left in the world.

"You know who I get fan letters from?" I said, as if pulling out a deck of cards to do a magic trick. "I do get fan letters. That's something, isn't it? Maybe there's a certain distance from which I am lovable. I get fan letters only from men. Only from men in prison."

I set down the confused cracker offering.

"You really haven't looked at the blog?" David let the crackers just sit there. "On the one hand, I want to congratulate you, but it might not be healthy, not looking."

I spread mustard on a cracker, and pretended not to have heard anything.

"I used to get fan letters from prisoners, too," David said. "Back when I ghostwrote that column for *Hustler*."

"You're not actually competing with me on this, are you?"

"I'm just sharing. This is intimacy, Trish."

"One of the letters—it was, like, seven pages long—was about love. Like a lengthy philosophical inquiry into the nature of love as written by a very smart fifteen-year-old. Not sex, but love. He said that, like, seven times. Maybe that means it was about sex. Anyhow. About love."

"Don't make that sex-love distinction in front of other people. It's not becoming."

Life, I was deciding, was a series of stumblings into the Kantian sublime. Not that I knew one sublime from another, as I said, but I planned on asking David about that when I was feeling less vulnerable. "Well, this kid said he wanted to confirm with me some impressions about love which he had gotten from my book. He wanted to know if I'd been honest about what love was. He said he would one day get out of jail. He said it was important that I write back to him. He said I could take as long

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as I wanted in getting back to him. 'As long as you need,' he said. 'You must be busy, take a year, that's fine.'"

"How gracious, for him to give you an extension at the university of him."

"I thought it was sweet. I didn't write back."

"Did I tell you that the pilot thing is finally fully dead now?"

"Gosh."

"Yeah. Well, do you miss Jonathan?"

"I wanted to tell you about this other letter. I don't know why this guy wrote to me in particular. He didn't say. He was very polite. He said simply that he had an idea for a movie, that it involved the Tunguska incident of 1908, and he wanted to know if it was a reasonable hypothesis that the explanation for the Tunguska incident could be antimatter—"

"I wonder if prison for me would be peaceful. Or intellectual—"

"I didn't know what the Tunguska incident was. I had to look it up. Turns out there was this place in Siberia where for thousands of acres the trees were suddenly laid flat. But it was the boonies, and so no scientists really bothered to check it out for years and years. There were reports of unbearably loud sounds, apocalyptic winds, strange blue lights. It must have looked and sounded like the end of the world. They think maybe it was a meteor. Some people saw a column of blue light, nearly as bright as the sun, moving north to east. Some said it moved southeast to northwest. Some said the light wasn't moving, just hovering. Windows hundreds of miles away were broken."

David was reading aloud to me from Jonathan's blog as I went and got the printouts of witness accounts I had found on that horrible thing called the Web.

"See, it's not even really *you*," he said.

"Shhh," I said. "Listen." I read out: "The split in the sky grew larger, and the entire northern side was covered with fire.

At that moment I became so hot that I couldn't bear it, as if my shirt were on fire, I wanted to tear off my shirt and toss it down, but then the sky shut closed, and a strong thump sounded, and I was thrown several yards—"

"God, I would have loved to be there. That really was the sublime—"

"They say that for nights the sky over Asia and Europe stayed bright enough to read the paper by."

"Did you answer the letter?"

"I did," I said. "Though who was I to answer it? I told him I couldn't think of any reason why antimatter wasn't a plausible explanation. I wished him luck with his idea. I might even have signed the note 'Love.'"

I lent David three hundred dollars, which seemed confirmation of my having taken advantage of him in some fashion.

Did I then take that movie meeting, all unprepared, after dressing in a way to accentuate my pregnancy, then to downplay it, then changing outfits again to accentuate it? Did I have no ideas? Did I start talking about the Kantian sublime, and about meteors and about love? A trans-generational love story with an old shepherd in Siberia, and a latter-day woman who knits, and a transfigurative event, and the sense that life is an enormous mystery but with secret connections that, you know, knit us all together? I did. All those things which I so studiously knew nothing about. Meteors enter the Earth's atmosphere every day. I was betraying so many, I felt so clean.

## THE YOUNG PAINTERS

NICOLE KRAUSS