

Queen Elizabeth

Many years later, knots of grief cinched intractably within her, Ruth still urged her memory back to their first evening together: drinks at a posh restaurant on the shores of Lake Erie, how Gus offered to pay long before the bartender even noticed them, how he spoke so earnestly of dovetail joints. He wore a flannel shirt and carpenter's jeans with fabric gone thin at the knees. He was wiry as a cornstalk and always would be. That night he spoke of how he wanted to make desks. "Desks!" he said, smiling as if he knew how absurd it sounded. For now he had his union card and worked what jobs came his way.

Ruth was working on her Ph.D. in applied mathematics at Case Western, studying stochastics. She spoke at length about her research, which involved probability theory, random variables, and chaotic systems. Gus listened with genuine interest, and when she finally paused to say, "Does that make sense?" he admitted that he wasn't a graduate student, wasn't a student at all, had in fact never been to a college campus. "I doubt I can even spell stochastic," he said, "but I love listening to you talk about it." The only fancy bit of math he knew was about Euclidean planes requiring three points, and this only because he felt strongly that all desks—all tables of any kind—should have only three legs. Two legs could

not balance a load, but four created wobbles. Three created a perfect Euclidean plane.

His knowledge seemed so practical compared to her own—how to fix squeaky floorboards, what made a diesel engine different, why oak leaves fell later in the season than maple leaves. She had never met anyone like him at Case or back home in Boston. He was wholly without pretension, frequently offered remarkable compliments, but quickly grew embarrassed when similar compliments were returned. Even that name of his, Gus, seemed clipped short, as if his mother and father considered extra syllables an extravagance.

When the bartender did finally bring the check, Gus reached for his wallet and realized he didn't have nearly enough money. Who had ever heard of \$6 bottles of beer? Cold shame spread over him, and he knew immediately that such a gaff would quash the small, snug world they had built during their evening together. But Ruth thought little of it, pulling out a wad of cash while Gus went quiet like a penitent little Catholic boy, which of course he was. What Ruth never told him—never told anyone—was that it was his mortification over such a trifle, so utterly sincere, that made her love him immediately.

He visited her family before she visited his. Theirs was a three-and-a-half-story house of deep maroon brick and cream trim in Beacon Hill and boasted a view of Boston Common. The sidewalks were of cockeyed brick, framed by cobblestones, and the shrubs were manicured into perfect moons.

They sat on a back veranda and ate eggs Florentine. Gus never did see the kitchen or who had prepared the meal. Her father flinched when they shook hands—just a small twitch, barely perceptible—and only later did Gus realize this was because he was a vascular surgeon of some note, ever afraid of rough calluses and strong grips. Her mother had tight gray hair and picked at her food with a single tine of her fork. Gus felt her eyes that morning as he reached for what was almost certainly the improper cutlery.

After brunch, the men separated from the women in a way that felt mannered and Edwardian. Gus stood next to her father on the front stoop and drank down a glass of coconut rum. They watched dog walkers wander the Common. His eyes cruised around all the sights. He had never been so far east, had never experienced the extravagance of an old city. For a long while they didn't speak, and he felt as if he was being tested. Who could maintain the silence longer? Eventually, her father said, "Desks." He nodded ever so slightly. "Is that a growth industry?" It wasn't entirely clear what the suggestion was. Was he afraid he would have to support them himself if they got married? Embarrassed that his daughter was dating a man who owned more than one hammer? Or was this just the easy contempt that New Englanders reserve for midwesterners?

"They didn't know what to make of you," Ruth said on the drive back to Cleveland.

"Unfortunately, I think they knew exactly what to make of me."

"Well," she said, "that's their problem."

Ruth wanted arguments to resolve things, but Gus just needed them to end as soon as possible.

"Stop apologizing," she would say. "You're allowed to disagree."

"But I'm sorry. I hate this."

"If you want to sit in a booth instead of a table, you have to say so."

"I don't have an opinion. You choose."

"You need to have more opinions."

"About tables and booths?"

So Ruth would always win the fights, which was somehow worse than losing them. He made her feel spoiled, not by anything he did or said but because she was and he wasn't. She had never realized it before then. It made her feel cold, like a bully.

Gus's father lived at the end of a long lane in Medina County. Charming Ohio farm country. Ruth searched the cabinets until

she found the hand mixer and started making her special pepper biscuit recipe. She chided his father for eating with a napkin tucked into his shirt but in a way that felt playful, like some ancestral joke that ranged back over the decades.

His mother had been dead long enough that they didn't think to explain what had happened. It was clear enough that they both liked having a woman in the house again.

"A doctorate," his father said, shaking his head. "Must be a lot of work."

"I guess I've always known I would have to do it," Ruth said. She then drank off the last bit of her coffee and stared out the window at the flat green fields.

Later, while Gus hand-washed the dishes, Ruth sat at the table with his father. "That sounds like some house you have there in Boston," he said. They hadn't been speaking of home or her family. It was obvious how close Gus was to his father.

"It's so lovely here," Ruth said. "The quiet, I guess I mean. And there's something about always being able to see the horizon that's comforting."

That afternoon, Gus walked her the length of the property, down long fencerows where he showed her how to scare up rabbits from their dens until she told him to stop being mean. She wanted to pet a chicken but lost her nerve at the last instant. They tried to reach around the ancient bur oak in the barnyard, the largest tree she had ever seen, but even together their arms were swallowed up by its girth. "We call her Queen Elizabeth," he said, explaining that the tree was roughly the same age as Shakespeare. She had always thought New England was old. Such grandeur, she thought, and such different grandeur than what she was accustomed to. How could something be so regal and so unassuming at the same time?

He led her through the outbuildings full of equipment. Where the wood siding met the ground it had mostly shriveled up with rot. Finally he guided her into the workshop, where she quizzed him on what each tool did, and he explained it to her, carefully and without a trace of smugness. The planer and the table saw and

the jointer—they had all been his grandfather's, had been made in Germany. Nothing even approached their quality anymore. She pulled open drawers and fingered drill bits and awls and rasps. "There's a tool for everything," he told her, "and most of them are good for only one very specific thing."

"This will all be yours one day," she said, and he said, "Not soon, I hope."

In the middle of the floor sat a magnificent desk, wood still raw and unstained. Clean lines, trim like Gus himself. Not a trace of excess flourish to be seen. Solid, squared legs, tapered to a slender tip. Three legs only, always three legs, he said, again referencing the perfection of a Euclidean plane. Old-growth walnut, he went on, taking her hand and tracing it over the grain pattern, all harvested locally. He pointed out the dovetails in the lap drawer, the through-mortises on the legs. She felt she understood him better then, the artist lurking underneath those flannel shirts of his.

"It's for your father," he told her.

They had each other there on the desk. He was slow and deliberate, polite even in lovemaking, his callused hand never leaving the curve of her neck. It smelled of sawdust, and for the rest of her life, when she smelled that smell, flickers of arousal would warm her from the inside out.

A growing swell of energy between them, they each felt it, the way it lashed them together. Slowly they wormed themselves into each other's lives, not always the grandest moments—holidays or great traumas—but the smaller, daily gestures: kissing with bad breath, boiling hot dogs for dinner, changing flat tires in the brutal Cleveland winter.

They talked about how happy they were as if afraid that they must decipher it daily, how astonishing it all was, or risk it diluting right in front of them.

"I don't want to take your name," Ruth said. "I've had this name all my life and I'm used to it now."

“You don’t have to.”

“But what about our kids? It’ll be too confusing.”

“Your mother wouldn’t understand,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Her.” She looked out the window, squinting into the sun. “We both know I won’t hyphenate.”

“We could make a new name. Both of us.”

“Something fun?”

“Something tough.”

They each wrote down their choices. She chose *Ivers*. He chose *Bazooka*.

In the end, she took his name because they didn’t want to spend the rest of their lives explaining it at dinner parties.

Ruth miscarried deep into her second trimester. A problem with the umbilical cord. For a week they stayed in their little apartment, curtains drawn, the air thick like after rain. Sometimes she wanted to be close to him, nuzzling into his chest, and other times she just needed him not to look at her. These waves came suddenly, and he learned how to recognize them. He didn’t understand them, but he knew it wasn’t important that he did.

“I’m okay,” she insisted, “but I just can’t stop picturing the cord like a noose around his little neck.” For a long while she went back to the diaphragm without telling Gus. She was terrified of her own body and didn’t want him to know. Sex changed from something they did together into something that was done *to* her.

They spent weekends with his father on the farm and never told her parents at all. She took the rest of the semester off, technically to finish her dissertation, though she accomplished little. They adopted a dog, which generally brought more agony than joy. When it pooped on the carpet, Gus chased it around with a drywall hammer; when it ran away he stapled signs to telephone poles. He had wanted an Irish Setter, but Ruth wanted a Pomeranian. He joked with friends that they compromised by getting a Pomeranian.

A few months later they went out to dinner and drank too

much wine. She laughed like a teenager and sat cross-legged in her chair. They tossed bits of uncooked macaroni into each other's glasses and then apologized to their waiter. When dessert came she got quiet again as if some shadow had descended. She stared into her glass and picked at the polish on her forefinger. "I'm so, so sorry," she said, and he knew then they would haul this on their backs for the rest of their lives.

Her father died in March, and his father died in June. They both realized then that the last traces of childhood were gone. She thought the wakes would be dramatically different, but they weren't, hushed voices and hollow platitudes for rich people and poor people alike. She wasn't terribly sad but had to pretend she was; he was devastated but had to act like he wasn't. And so for several months it seemed as if they weren't talking to each other so much as to the emissaries they sent out into the world.

One night she found him sitting on the toilet lid. The door was closed and the light was off, but she knew he was in there. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess I'm trying."

She sat on the floor in front of him. The Pomeranian stood in the doorway, guarding them, like it knew things weren't right.

"He told me once that your desks were his favorite things." His father had never really said that to her, but she inferred a great deal from his long proud looks.

They writhed together there on the cold tile floor. He was manic, desperate, even a bit rough with her, which he never was before or after.

They named her Annabelle. They had never been so exhausted or so happy. Gus could scarcely bring himself to take on jobs that stole him away. Ruth officially abandoned her dissertation, all those years of work that suddenly seemed frivolous.

Gus built Annabelle a crib of cherry, with lovely tapered spindles and long finger joints. He was afraid of SIDS—it was all you

ever saw on the local news—and so he often slept in the chair next to the crib. He strummed a toy ukulele for her. It wasn't long before Annabelle learned how to smile. D minor and G were her favorite chords, and for hours he would play them, the D minor hovering like a Frisbee in flight, just out of reach, until he would finally resolve it with the G, and little Annabelle would smile and kick.

One evening when Gus was working late, Ruth was alone with Annabelle. They hadn't eaten yet, and she was trying to apply for jobs. Their budget had become frighteningly thin. She stirred a pot on the stove and held Annabelle and scrolled through a list of academic positions, then secretarial ones. It was all too much. She wanted to scream and chuck rocks through the windows. Here she was: a mother, but was she anything else? Anything at all? Motherhood had seized her destiny while she had been too busy to notice. Fathers were somehow exempt from this fate. She hated Gus for being gone, hated herself for quitting her dissertation, hated Ohio most of all. Then Annabelle threw up on her shoulder, and before Ruth could clean it up or set her down, her daughter had started gumming up the vomit.

She told Gus about it when he got home.

“She ate her own puke?”

“Sorry. Jesus.”

“What color was the puke?”

“I don't know. Purple maybe? I think we had plums earlier.” Gus held Annabelle up and looked at her. “Hi, there, my little puke-eater. Next time we could cook it for you first. That seems like our job. Your mother can do wonders with garlic and a little olive oil. You could have yourself a nice puke fritter!”

He gave her a bath and read her one book after another before bed. Ruth listened from outside the bedroom door as Gus made his outlandish voices and Annabelle giggled. It often worked this way: all day she fought off a manic craving for a break, only to find that when it finally came, there was little joy in it. By the

time she got back to her job applications, the toyish strums of the ukulele pulsed out from the bedroom, washing over her like a sleeping serum.

Gus would sometimes lay playful traps for her, which made her feel young and loved:

“If you had to change one thing about me, what would it be?” he asked.

“That’s not fair.”

“That’s the point.”

She thought for a moment. “I’d make you twenty pounds heavier.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am too,” she said. “It would make me feel thinner. I gain weight like a normal person but you just keep on looking like some teenage bronco rider.”

Years later, when she emptied the trash bin in his workshop, she found dozens of empty Archway cookie packages. At first she was terribly confused—he had virtually no sweet tooth to speak of—and only after some thought did she remember.

Annabelle started preschool, and suddenly every wall in the house grew crowded with crayon artwork. Their friends became the parents of Annabelle’s classmates, their free time split between swimming lessons and playgrounds and the zoo. Ruth took a position as an office manager for a pet food distributor. Gus began selling a few more desks, working late rehabbing grand staircases in Cleveland Heights and Willoughby and Hudson. They bought an old Craftsman home with pipes that knocked when they flushed toilets. They put rugs over the old oak floors and let Annabelle chase them from room to room while she screamed like a Viking. Blanket forts dominated their living room for weeks at a time. They raked leaves and jumped in the piles. They became experts about dinosaurs and then sea shells and then paper airplane design.

Without noticing it, they had created an entire country with

its own language and customs and mythologies and even defensive perimeters. Their own lines allowed few breaches. Their country was complete on its own. A wide world existed beyond their borders, they could still hear its bustling chaos, but they were content to ignore it and to be ignored in kind.

The doctors found the tumor in Annabelle's brain when she was four years old. It was the size of a robin's egg, malignant, and needed to come out.

"But you can do surgery, can't you?" Ruth asked.

"We're not sure yet," the doctor said. That phrase—*We're not sure yet*—became an oft-heard refrain through months of consultations, and they learned it had a very specific meaning: *We are quite sure, and it's bad news.*

They saw specialists in a dozen cities: Pittsburgh, Orlando, Denver, Los Angeles, Toronto. Ruth was ferocious in her research, in her preparation for each appointment, bringing with her pages of questions that she asked like accusations. The numbers gave her something to focus on, though quantifying bad luck in such a way also made her want to murder the universe.

"Do you know the odds of this happening?" Ruth asked one time. "Sixty-eight million to one," she said. "Sixty-eight million."

Gus looked down at her legal pad, the scratches and strange symbols, Greek or Latin, perhaps. He sometimes forgot about her imposing mathematical pedigree, which now became a prison, intellect stunting emotion. What was the point of calculating probabilities or the effects of random elements? Gus wanted to know. They were here already. These calculations served only to make him feel like a helpless victim. What he didn't understand, of course, was that they allowed Ruth a respite, precious moments of cold, abstract thought. Through them, she could quarantine her despair so that it would not pollute everyone around her.

They drove to Boston to see a specialist her father had known at Mass General. She was from Mumbai and had a long name that Gus could not pronounce. The doctor paged through Annabelle's

chart, frowning and shaking her head without speaking. When she finally looked up, she smiled at them, but it was the kind of smile offered to a dear friend at a funeral.

“No more bad news,” Ruth said.

This specialist was aiming to lead a trial of an experimental treatment that involved first inducing a coma and then utilizing a special cocktail of drugs that would, perhaps, target the ravenous tumor.

“She’s a good candidate, isn’t she?” Ruth asked, not completely a question.

The doctor leaned in with a bowl of candy and told Annabelle to take as much as she could hold. Ruth realized then that this doctor had done this many times, was as expert in delivering bad news as she was in the operating room.

“I won’t presume to understand what you are going through,” she said. She spoke with that peculiar British Indian accent, which Ruth decided meant she had likely been educated at Cambridge or Oxford. “My father was a particle physicist and my mother died when I was a teenager. He could be a harsh man, largely devoid of human sentiment. He forbade me grieving over my mother’s death because he believed there was no reason, scientifically speaking, to do so. According to the law of conservation of mass, she was still with us. Mass cannot be created or destroyed, of course. In fact, he pointed out, the very atoms from my mother’s body were now repurposed in our own bodies. This is true of every human who has ever lived. Every human currently alive is composed of the very atoms of every person who has ever lived. Every person! Billions of atoms from each person. Can you imagine? A billion atoms that make me a person once made Shakespeare a person, and Cleopatra and Gandhi and Einstein.”

“Also Hitler and Stalin,” Ruth said. “Genghis Khan, Oliver Cromwell, Caligula, Attila, Jeffrey Dahmer.”

“Ruth.”

The doctor ignored this and handed Annabelle another sucker.

“So, scientifically speaking,” Ruth said, “we cannot be sad.”