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Katherine Vaz

MICHIGAN GIRL

I am a Michigan girl. I know that when the cold is this bad, a stranded person must crawl and that's that. My truck died on the road to our driveway, so it's half a mile to the front door. In the morning, Thomas or I will get the Christmas tree out of the back and hope it's not chill-splintered into green icicles. Sap frozen into carbuncles on limbs. Probably I've already killed our tree. The snow and the ice make a dagger that will try to thrust into your side if you're standing like an idiot, and then it will try to pierce your other side, and then here comes the magic of many knives going everywhere at once, and you'd better drop to the ground. My father taught me this. And one day when we were in the forest, without having any idea why, I was beside myself at the sight of a brown wood spider tying up a beetle. It was the delicacy of the web, its prettiness, its silk lassoes so calmly used for death—this was what my father was able to convey—that was the horror. He did not offer a speech, since he guarded mystery too much to ruin it. I think he said four disconnected words that I churned inside myself. His arm stayed around my shoulder. Oh my tall, reverberating, speechless father. I understood without replying.

He always drove me to my ballet classes in Detroit, with me beside him in his MG and all six-foot-six of him hunched over, trapped and happily speeding. Whenever I began a dance step in agony on point after that time with the brown wood spider, my toes feeling shoved down a funnel, I thought: Dad. Here I am painfully and beautifully spinning!

He and I have always known how to speak to one another.

Thomas and I moved here to South Lyon from Detroit after we were told that our house had so many burst pipes that the walls were straight cascades of water, sewage, and the animals who like to swim upstream and downstream in rot. For a while in every room, behind the Queen Anne's chair or pegboard with the lobster mold and copper pans or the star-shot wallpaper, I felt myself surrounded by a hidden little water park of tiny monsters.

I do not walk upright. I crawl. I had been desperate to get out of the house, I don't know why, I had to get the Christmas tree at Long's Drugs tonight, storm or no storm, and now my nostrils have iced almost shut and I exhale upward to keep a slight thaw, they won't open completely and if I try for that

I'm doomed. Tears caused by the winds have to be left as hard diamonds on my face. I sense that Thomas is at the other end of our long, straight driveway, looking out, starting to worry. Soon our other car will be coming toward me, round-plated lights looking to suck me into their warm shafts. Snowflakes are frozen chips of lace, cold and gorgeous, no one designed like any other, but they're jabbing through my gloves to stick slivers of frostbite into my hands, to add to the little pieces of deadness I already carry and no longer notice.

My father's job during the war was to rebuild landing strips and runways while under fire. He was a "fighting engineer." Because my father did not speak about the army, it was my uncle who told me that my father also threw firebombs into the underground caves harboring the Japanese. His extra assignment was to prepare the American dead to be shipped home. He took their dog tags and stuck the sharp edges into the roofs of each corpse's mouth and then knocked the jaws shut, using a wrench if rigor mortis or cold required more use of force. But the idea of those runways made me shake the most, me picturing my father's skull drumming over and over with *it's just there, the end, just a few yards more to crawl pouring out fresh flat earth, just dumb luck and some guesswork dodges under the flak and a few beats more in time*. And that drumming running right through to electrify his fingers. With nothing I could do to speed him along, of course, though I have often awakened from a fast nightmare of covering a runway for him.

He never told me about the runways, and this non-speaking—about the war or most other things—bothered many people, but never me. Once I walked into my house right as he was on my phone machine, saying, "Carrie? Carrie? I hate these machines!" He hung up. I smiled because to me we'd just chatted and had a good laugh. My father had entered my home to linger near me, his voice spraying up out of the machine and into the air that I could breathe in and out for the rest of the day.

When my father returned home from the war, he went to H el ene, the lovely, dark-haired girl waiting for him in Michigan, and said that he could not return to any future that he had once conceived. Nothing that had come before Iwo Jima was recognizable.

The family said he was shockingly cold; H el ene was French, perfect. She had done what brave women did by waiting on his promise, ready to deal with whatever terrors my father might not be able to resist telling her. The entire Marteau clan got very silly and very, very French, as if they were suddenly all fur trappers given to those European stares as if looking past you

to the cathedral on the hill where the pipe organ calls them alone. For a long while, Hélène lingered on the periphery of family events, or was taken out to teas where relatives patted her hand, consoled by everyone, in shock, waiting as they all were for my old father to return. There was more hand-wringing over his foolishness now than during his time at war, because who knows truly what a soldier does, especially when the soldier will not speak of it?

Hélène changed from a feathery sweet woman into a bird. First a ruffle of feathers would go floating aimlessly into the room, and then another ruffle, causing people to cough, and she began molting and everything on her face dripped down until she too forgot about speaking. She picked at the food (petit fours, cocktail franks with French mustard, gratins staggered with Michigan cheese, things that left untouched began to look glacéed) on her Spode plate, with its accent of green leaves. Then came a last few feathers, billowing out on wordless breaths that she could not help but put into the air:

Where have you gone, my dearest?

Speak to me, Jack Marteau.

Why can't you find a way to tell me that you love me still?

My father joined the Michigan Tip-Top Club and met Peggy, the Irish woman who would be my mother. Men had to be over six feet tall, and women over five-foot-eight, and my mother was more than that to begin with and even so piled her red hair on top of her head, which she threw back with great pleasure when my father held out his arms. My mother could read him perfectly and told me the truth: He thought it was glorious that he could dance and keep looking up. He didn't have to keep his head down or his voice low or dredged in palaver.

"It's like getting to look up at the stars," he said while gazing into her face, the one uttered line of poetry in his life. Because her eyes were all mad with light, enough to make anyone think that he was far off the ground, drawing up and up into brightness.

I learned to walk tall into a room from both my parents (though I am nowhere near as tall as either of them). When I hear anyone playing the guitar, I can hear right over it my father's rendition of "Good Night, Irene, Good Night" with my mother yelling, "No, no! Let me hear 'Peg O'My Heart.'"

Where is Thomas? My father would say: *Think warm thoughts, and you'll be warm.* I've lost all feeling in my feet, knees, and hands, and the cold is wicking up my limbs. Where are the headlights to rescue me? I want to tell Thomas

about the strange vision I had at Long's while the clerk helped me tie the Christmas tree into our truck. Beyond where everyone's breath shot out a white pane into the black night, I was arrested by the ghost-green signs back inside near the aisle of tree lights. Also dazzling here and there through the glass of the store window were fire-reds and the blue hour and the pink majesty straight out of Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited," right before Charlie tries to reclaim his daughter in Paris and the ghosts defeat him. At the display for grave covers, those hairy X-ray aprons of fake green grass with red names to keep tombs from cracking open in a freeze, one of those pitiable holiday touches like a new plaid coat for the dog, one leapt out at me that said "Dad." I stared. "Dad." In another flash it seemed not to be there anymore. I had imagined it, or someone had bought it, or the holiday reds and greens were combusting into strange mantles.

Warmth, then: our family vacations in Cape Hatteras. A zest of orange sun curving over us. My tall mother filled the hammock with me tucked in beside her, and my father rocked the groaning fabric. We slept, ate, swam, and read, what he called the *Life of the Animals*, except for the reading part. At the Lighthouse Museum, the ranger said that life was so fragile that in an attic a person could breathe bacteria that might paralyze the nerves. I thought of those spores hiding in old family albums, waiting to pounce on someone. I stared at the ranger. That night after the Lighthouse, my father gave me a sip of his vermouth, and I figured he was saying, "The world teems with animal surprises, Carrie, but don't worry, I shall love you forever."

The Cape was where I saw a woman with no breasts. She was shirtless while soaking up the sun. The red line across her chest made her look as if she could be snapped open, and she would be beyond that hurting her. I stared until my mother whispered, "How nice that she's so comfortable with herself." At dinner in the resort's restaurant, the woman missing her breasts wore a pure white shift, though I could see the start of the red lines on either side of her arm at the armholes. She told us that she was a twin separated from her sister long ago. When they met as middle-aged women and exchanged stories, they discovered that they had both married men named Edward, and both had clutched their hearts at the same moment when they were told that cancer was eating them from the inside out.

They both lost their breasts but survived, because though far apart each was calling out to the other, heart-stopping calling, I'll die if you die.

I adore the secret language of twins.

When I was a little girl and my father took me ice-fishing, he trusted me with the torch to melt the circle down. The fish moved under an opaque and then a translucent screen as the ice wore away. They grew stronger outlines under the fire. When I broke through and finished the hole in the lake, we might as well have been looking into the clear, watery back of a gigantic eye. We dropped our lines into water that bared small teeth of green glass, and the fish swam mildly past the teeth and our hopeful puny lines and back under the white solid ice floor where we sat. Up where we were, frozen, we huddled together, and below a liquid planet was throbbing. We caught one unremarkable fish and that was all. My father fixed the blue ribbon on my hair, and I said, "Thank you, Dad," because what he meant was that he didn't want a son, not at all, I was the best mystery a father could want.

He put his coat around me.

I feel him putting something around me now. I stop. God, Dad, Jesus Christ, what are you telling me? What have you gone and done?

Headlights are approaching. Thomas is about to save me from this terrible ache that makes me stop and cry, and he thinks it's because the truck broke down and I'm half-dead with cold. But it's not that.

In the house, Thomas brings coffee to warm me up and asks why I seem so upset over a simple tree. I can't explain to him that I hate the way the world is screeching at me right now. He says not to sit by the fire and invite chilblains, but I have to be here, waiting. The phone is going to ring.

When it does, I begin to sob. Thomas has to answer, and I refuse to move.

After they did the autopsy on my forty-eight-year-old father and wrote down that he had the internal organs of an eighty-year-old man, I walked very tall into the funeral parlor. So did my mother. Up near his neck I saw a stitch left from opening him up. I touched it because I wanted a memory of the roughness he was taking with him. He lay greenish and still. My mother Peggy kissed him a long time on the mouth. To the wild discomfort of everyone except my mother, who understood my father and me, I picked him up until he was sitting in the satin lining all wrinkled like pictures of brains, and I held him fast. He painted his goodbye to me with funny ruses: Long's! Cheap Christmas objects! The earth's gaudy lights! Out of the land of Michigan, resourceful! Thanks, Dad, for wanting to amuse me! And bless you for saying so clearly to me forget dreams, forget everything, just come and be the mantle that covers me now.