

Out of Egypt

I would not tell you my sister's story, except that I love her.

The phone calls that come in the middle of the night, because I live in California. Anne's quiet voice on the other end of the phone, me knowing that her husband is asleep. Or waiting in the half light of the dawn almost coming. She speaks to me for hours. Ruthless, relentless to herself. And I not able to stop her. She is telling me, spinning it, the endless images. And I, watching the sun rise over San Diego, the ocean getting light, knowing she had sunk finally into some kind of exhaustion.

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She tells me the first things. She was sitting with the child at her breast in the rocking chair, looking out the window at the tree that had kept her company during her pregnancy, the leaves of spring, then falling into green summer, then red with fall. The ancient plane tree that had marked her parturition like a clock. And now, with the tiny soul in her arms, breathing, not aware of the difference between him and her, resting, becoming used to breathing air, rather than the close fluids of the womb. With a head that smelled so sweet to her, she rested her nose on his crown, overcome with the strongest narcotic she had ever known. Cast forever into the role of his mother. Who would fight for him, put him before herself always.

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She tells me all of it, as the hours pass. She recounts the conversations and I listen like a psychiatrist, an angel, an unwilling goddess who has to listen when humans are trapped, trying to

find reasons when there aren't any. I watch out my window for the dawn that is coming to me, and has already come to her, in Massachusetts.

“Being a mother, it's the same as being Jesus,” she told Chuck, her husband. “You'd do anything to help another person. As if you were the mother of everyone. You'd do it gladly, and without thinking.”

“Right,” he said. He was finishing up a monthly sales projection he had to get done for work. A spreadsheet he wrote on with pencil, that he said was his monthly penance.

“But isn't it true?” she said. Thinking she'd reduced Christianity to a massive hormone event. “If everyone were your child, you'd take care of them gladly. You'd jump in front of a car to save them, gladly. No brainer.”

He said yes. No question.

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The cruiser pulls up in the yard, the familiar Edenborough police, who have come many times to collect donations for the DARE program. Other times when the burglar alarm has gone off accidentally, when she's slammed the dishwasher and it reads the noise as breaking glass. The same police officers, the Chief, who has worked with Chuck on the Planning Board, to put in sidewalks around the elementary school. But that, she thinks, watching them make their way up the front walk, that was years ago.

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Baby Edward, ten months old, sits in a small plastic tub on the back deck. His knees rise over the tub's edge, the knobby knees that indicate his legs will be long. He smiles at the yellow plastic duck, soft, which he squirts water out of. Later there will be photographs of him sitting in

the kitchen sink, two huge blue eyes, her arms grasping under his slippery armpits in the photograph.

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Chuck liked the photograph of Edward wearing a small Red Sox cap, which came down over his eyebrows. So Edward's two eyes came out to question you.

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Sometimes she cried, she told me, because she felt so happy. "Welcome, Edward," she said. Over and over. Whispered it into his ear. There was a song she made up to sing to him, sure that he would remember it in a hundred years.

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Sometimes now her husband calls me. Desperate. "What do I do?" he says. Not expecting me to answer. "There is nothing anyone can do," I say. "It's got to run its course." *He never criticizes Anne, I'll give him that. Never says she's cold. Self involved. He never calls her anything but sympathetic. Victim.*

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The photographs, she says, are as follows: in the collapsible stroller, smiling at whoever is taking the picture. In a blue snowsuit, with a bright red cap, in front of a snowman the neighboring kids had built on the lawn. Edward looks like a doll, she thinks. He is holding the dog, around the neck, with the dog looking patient and long suffering. Waiting for Edward to let go of his fur. In another, Edward is wearing a Star Wars Halloween costume, with a fur wookie head. You can still see his blue eyes, crystal, the blue of a hundred skies in a hundred paintings she talks about for her work, for her classes. She has gone back to teaching, the students in a community college who need to take one art course requirement before they become real estate

agents or computer programmers. “This may sound stupid,” she says sometimes in class, “but my son’s eyes are the same color as Van Eyck’s skies.”

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She tells me about a photograph of him in a bathing suit, maybe age five, learning to swim, with blue plastic swim goggles and a snorkel, and a fat belly, because his body is still a baby’s, and the legs, which will take him away from her, will be used to play soccer and drive cars, as the legs of a man, which are still, in the photograph, the somewhat peripheral legs of a baby. He’s still all about stomach, she thinks of this photo. He’s still anchored to the ground. The earth. Her. None of the fatal mobility that will claim him later.

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Sometimes he tells her about Jessica, his high school girlfriend. Jess works at the ice cream stand scooping out ice cream after school. The fans blow under the awning, to keep the flies away. She gives him ice cream and makes him pay, laughing. She spoons out cup after cup, and Anne wonders if they sleep together. If Jessica teases him the same way. When Jessica digs out scoops of ice cream for Anne, she gives her extra things and doesn’t charge her.

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It was a small conversation between Anne and her husband.

“Did you talk to him about safe sex?”

“Anne” Chuck said wearily, “he’s seventeen. They know as much as we do.”

“But still,” she said. “You should do it anyway.”

“No,” he said. “They learn it in school.”

Anne catches Edward over breakfast. “I know this is stupid,” she says. “But do you — like—be careful, and everything?”

He's pouring cornflakes that tingle and flutter into the bowl. He says, "Are we talking about safe sex, Ma?"

"In a word, yes."

"It's sweet of you to worry," he says. Cornflakes, sunshine, the kitchen curtains need washing.

"This isn't about you," she says.

"Jessica and I are breaking up, anyway."

Milk on the cornflakes. This isn't about you, she thinks. It's completely selfish on my part. If anything happened to you, I wouldn't know what to do. I'd have to die.

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He is sleeping. He is ten years old. He smells like a boy, something like rusty nails, because he doesn't like to take showers. His mouth is closed, he has lips like an angel in a Botticelli. The curve is so exquisite she wants to weep. She can see him with a wife, with children of his own. As an old man. She stands in the doorway of his bedroom, watching him, suffused with happiness she did not think would ever come to her.

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For some reason, now, this is not difficult for her to think about: Her husband has an affair with a co-worker, who is named Pam. It would be a Pam, she thinks. She says she doesn't want to go to counseling. Chuck can go with Pam, who has already broken off with him. It surprises her, when she and Chuck separate their books, that all of her art history books, the Rembrandt tomes, the Renaissance in German and Italian, the books with reproductions of the cave paintings of France, all these separate out from his copies of must-reads listed by the Boston Globe -- their books separate out as if they had never spent shelf space together. It is a

poverty she did not expect. It does not surprise her. After a winter apart, Chuck tells her he is sorry, and he wants to be a better husband. He weeps, sitting on the living room sofa, halfway through a Scotch and soda, and says he misses his home. It will be better for Edward. On the living room sofa, he is outlined in amber light. Edward's baseball mitt is still in the magazine basket on the hearth, where it has been for a year, since he left for college.

Anne thinks Chuck has suffered unnecessarily.

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The separation came as a space. A minimum time when there was room to move around in her own life. Think about what mattered. What kind of vegetable she'd cook for her dinner, if she just felt like eating three artichokes. What it was like to stay up late and watch the moon rise over the trees out the bedroom window. When she lived alone, Anne painted strange, floating men and women, using the spare bedroom for a studio. She painted long into the weekends, and also took swimming lessons. The water soothed her. Her son came home on the weekends from school, driving all that way, because he said he was worried about her.

"You're a freshman," she said. "You're supposed to be getting drunk and going to frat parties."

"You worry me," he said.

It was always good when he came into the house, when his presence filled the living room. As if her worrying for him, that followed her everywhere like a mild hum, was turned off, as long as he was there. He was safe, she could see him. It's chemicals, she thought. I'm no different from a mother dog, a mother bird. A cat.

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She tells me how she and Chuck went to counseling. They sat with the counselor and explained their anxieties. They discussed ways to communicate better, such as using “I” statements. The counselor said they should be pleased with their new skills. One day, Chuck said to the counselor, “If you want to know, it’s that she’s really focused on Edward all the time.”

Anne didn’t answer. Perhaps he was right. Finally, she said, “I’ll think about it.”

Edward was nineteen. What disloyalty on my part, she thought. To act like this. I’m not Edward’s wife. I’m his mother. It was as if she had been freed from some addiction that had kept her tied to it for years, as if she’d been anchored to him by her throat. She thought of herself in the past as a lamprey eel. Outside of life with Edward, though, even the daylight looked thinner. It would change. She was sure she was doing the right thing.

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Edward was lying on the floor in the living room reading a book on France. “I think I’m going,” he said. “I want to go with a couple of guys. Bum around. See the caves.” She lingered, with her cup of green tea in hand. Watching him as he rolled over, the tea cup warm in her hand, against her fingers. He was nineteen. She thought he was more beautiful than anything she had ever seen.

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She bought a nightgown with holes in the breasts that emphasized her nipples. Chuck acted pleased.

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The chief of police stands at the front door as she opens it. He has a heaviness on his face she cannot fathom. It rings across her solar plexus, like a huge hand has pushed her life away

from her. He is darkness, he is arriving here unwillingly to pull all she has ever known away, and leave her without hands, feet, face or eyes.

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“This is how we reconstruct the wreck,” he says to Chuck, who will tell her about it later. “Speed was not a factor. It was black ice. He always was a good kid,” the Chief says. “He was a responsible driver.” She anguishes through the sedatives, and wakes up each day with a split second before she realizes what has happened. That split second, before her mind reconstitutes itself, is all that keeps her alive.

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His room stays the same. The cleaning lady, who is from Brazil, who greets her with ringed eyes red from fear and crying, is instructed not to touch anything in the room. Anne cleans it herself, as his scent evaporates over the months. She weeps from the time she awakes until she takes the sedative Chuck hands her with a glass of water at night.

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The photograph of Edward in front of the snowman, with the red hat that made him look like a doll. His hands are un-gloved, she notices. His fingers are cold. Why had she never noticed before his fingers were cold?

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She tells the minister who comes to visit her every Thursday that there are a thousand things she did not do. “It doesn’t do any good,” he tells her. “You are a remarkable mother.” She is tired and cannot wait for him to leave, so she can go back to Edward’s room. She puts her hands into his laundry basket, to feel the T-shirts and the socks.

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Summer comes and passes into autumn. She gathers the brown leaves from the plane tree and lines them up on his window sill, as many as there were years of his life. Nineteen. She listens to Chuck as though from a distance, and thinks soon she will die.

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Then I, her sister, come to visit from California, and drink tea made from ginger and cinnamon and pepper. I hold Anne for hours, until Anne wishes I would go away. "You should go back home," she tells me finally. The gray suitcases. Logan Airport. Chuck drinking a bottle of Evian while they are waiting for me to check in for my plane.

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The phone calls continue.

"My sister isn't coping well," Anne says to Chuck at breakfast.

Chuck drops the newspaper noisily into his lap. "It was us, who lost him," he says angrily. "It was you. It wasn't your sister. You're not your sister. I know it's been hard, Anne. Terrible. But you're not your sister. She's in California. You call her at night. You phone her."

"It isn't me," she says. "It can't be me."

Chuck tries to re-assemble the newspaper. Gives up, leaves the room. This is one of many arguments they have, shifting times, empty rooms, grief like violence against him. Deprivation for him again. Some men, she tells me, don't want to be loved in normal and present ways. She thinks she can't help him.

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Edward's high school girlfriend Jessica comes to sit with her, and tells her stories about Edward in high school. "We used to sleep together," she says. She cries, and Anne holds her. "He broke up with me" Jessica says. "I told him he was a mama's boy. I told him he was weak."

Anne finds she must give Jessica one of his T-shirts, and after Jessica goes home, in her gray family Volvo, Anne has an anxiety attack, because she has given away some particle of Edward, she is losing him. Will not have him as a part of her.

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Chuck sits on their bed and cries. “Where are you?” he says. “I’ve lost him and I’ve lost you.” She wishes he would go away, so she could spend more time looking at Edward’s baby pictures. “I can’t help you, and I can’t help myself,” Chuck says. He goes to a counselor.

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She tells me on the phone how the living room is watery, pale. The colors of the world are mute, as if someone has turned the volume down. She struggles with terrible muscular tension. Arms, her neck. Her face. She remembers the feeling of him in her arms, as an infant. The small hand clutching her thigh, afraid of the dark stairs. The strong shoulder under his baseball shirt. Her mind betrays her.

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She is driving to the supermarket one day to get food to keep herself and Chuck alive, and she drives a different route. The street is busy, the houses neat and small. Not worth much money, she thinks, because of the heavy traffic. She passes a white house with a sign in the front yard, with a tree painted on it. PSYCHIC, the sign says, TAROT READINGS. She thinks of me in California.

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The psychic is a young woman with brown eyes and long dark hair. She says her name is Eva. She lets Anne shuffle a deck of cards, and lays them out, and when she looks at them—the

falling people, stars, swords and pairs of children standing together—she puts her hands over the cards as if to protect Anne from any more assaults.

“You should see my friend,” she says. She gives Anne a scrap of paper with an address, and doesn’t charge her anything. Won’t take the agreed-upon forty dollars.

Before Anne leaves, this young woman, whoever she is, tells her this: How in her living room, Anne looks out the window at the snow, that captures the breath of the lawn, the street that is a river that has stopped, the mailboxes like intrusive punctuation marks. How she thinks that she cannot go on any longer.

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The psychic’s friend is old, stout, a dark face with wrinkles that make her look like a walnut. She has shoes from a discount store, that don’t look American. Anne thinks the plastic will be bad for her feet. Behind her, a sun made of acrylic resin, and a moon—it is a pair—hung on the wall. The woman has earrings that are plain gold hoops. She says, “My people are from Egypt. I am gypsy. You have heard of us?” “Yes,” Anne says. The woman asks for five hundred dollars, and Anne gives it to her.

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Edward is running across the back lawn. He’s eight, or possibly he’s nine. He’s got a balsa-wood model airplane Chuck has helped him build, and they’re trying to get it to take off. Edward holds the plane so the propeller turns from the rubber band. He runs across the grass, away from her, his feet in the red and black sneakers, the plane lifted in his hand, in his strong young arm, turning his back. Chuck is giving him instructions, but Anne can’t hear him.

She thinks, He will run away from me, off into his own life. He will run off, and be a man, and I will fall into the stream of time, and he will remember me, but not know me. He will exist beyond me, in the stream of time.

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The gypsy leaves the five hundred dollars in a pile on the edge of the table. She'd counted it with a satisfied look, trying to hide her greed, Anne thinks. The room is dark, except for the light of the candles. Outside, it is night. There is no traffic, outside. "You believe in what I'm going to do?" the gypsy asks. "I ain't going to do it, unless you believe me." Anne knows she doesn't believe in it, but she must, and she tells the gypsy she does believe, even though she thinks the gypsy is a charlatan, who thinks she is a fool, a mark. "You close your eyes," the gypsy says. The candle flickering is the last thing she sees. "You rest your hands here," the gypsy says. Pushing Anne's hands onto the table. Flat. Her hands, slick in the bathtub to pick him up. Her hands, holding the camera to take his picture at his birthday party. The hands that remember the feel of his hair, the forbidden muscle of his grown shoulder. The table flat beneath them. Her heart is suddenly lightened, as a presence enters the room. She feels him behind her. He stands near her. It's a fraud, she thinks. But she has never been so happy.

She listens to the breath, the person who is Edward fills the room. She knows it's a fake.

"Mom," Edward says. "Mother."

My golden son has come, she thinks. He is here. Radiant in his own beauty. There is no other reason than this. "Mom," he says. "Don't worry." She is suffused in peace, in his presence. He is beside her, despite time and death. He brushes against her, with his smell, unmistakable. She allows it, and allows it, and allows it, because she is drinking god.

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“I feel all right,” my sister tells me on the phone.

“Good,” I say.

“And I won’t tell Chuck, because he’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t know.”

“You know what else my boy said, before it was over. He said he’s always near me.”

“I’m glad, Anne.”

“Yes,” she says.

And after that I will sleep through the night, night to dawn, night to first light, night to sunrise, across the wide spaces, endless as the sky, without the calls coming at all.