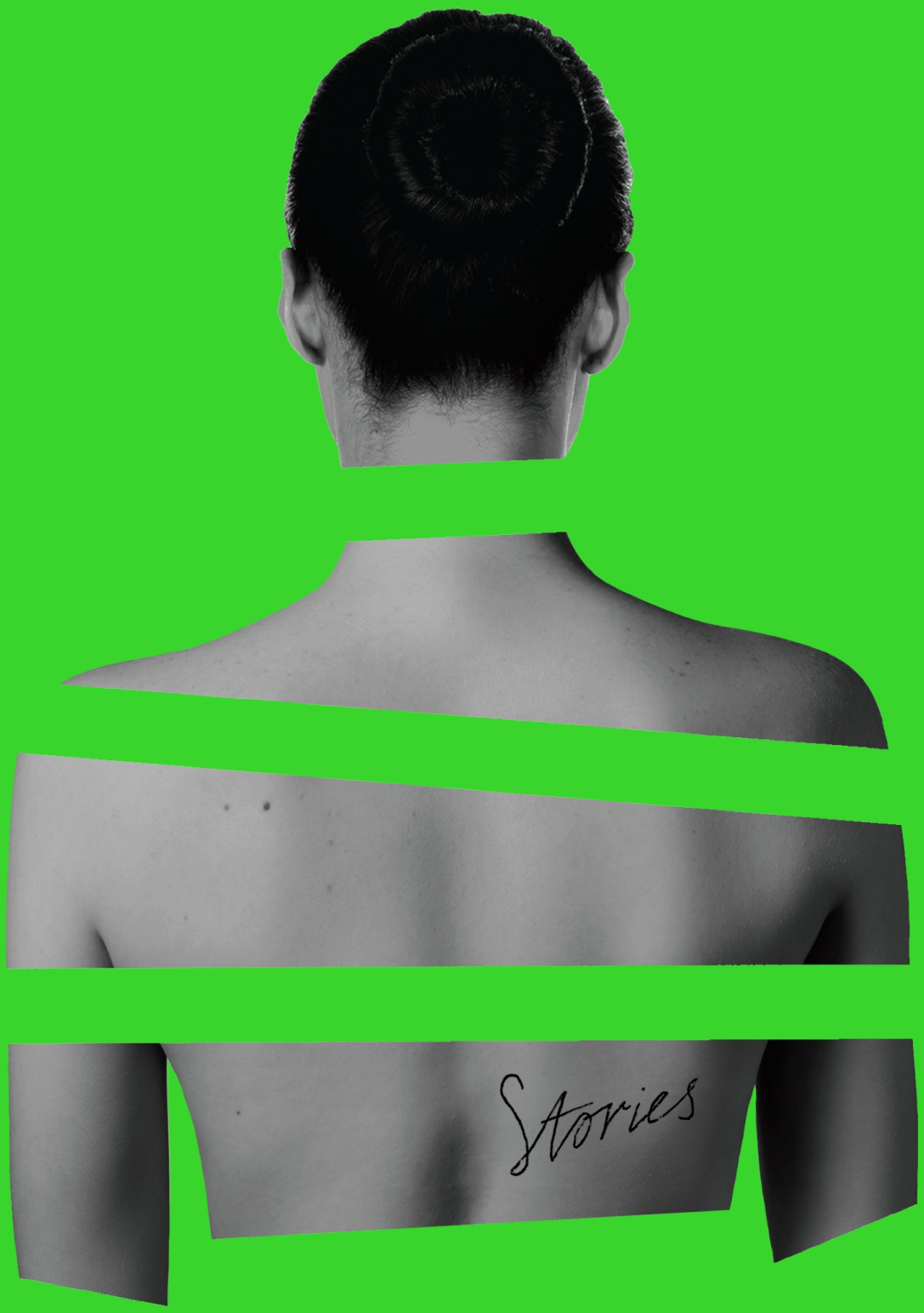
HER BODY & OTHER PARTIES



CARMEN MARIA MACHADO

'Brilliantly inventive and blazingly smart' Garth Greenwell

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THE HUSBAND STITCH

(If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices:
ME: as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same.
THE BOY WHO WILL GROW INTO A MAN, AND BE MY SPOUSE: robust with serendipity.
MY FATHER: kind, booming; like your father, or the man you wish was your father.
MY SON: as a small child, gentle, sounding with the faintest of lisps; as a man, like my husband.
ALL OTHER WOMEN: interchangeable with my own.)

In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn't how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them. I am at a neighbor's party with my parents, and I am seventeen. I drink half a glass of white wine in the kitchen with the neighbor's teenage daughter. My father doesn't notice. Everything is soft, like a fresh oil painting.

The boy is not facing me. I see the muscles of his neck and upper back, how he fairly strains out of his button-down shirts, like a day laborer dressed up for a dance, and I run slick. And it isn't that I don't have choices. I am beautiful. I have a pretty mouth. I have breasts that heave out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse at the same time. I am a good girl, from a good family. But he is a little craggy, in that way men sometimes are, and I want. He seems like he could want the same thing.

I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium. I don't know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?

The boy notices me. He seems sweet, flustered. He says hello. He asks my name.

I have always wanted to choose my moment, and this is the moment I choose.

On the deck, I kiss him. He kisses me back, gently at first, but then harder, and even pushes open my mouth a little with his tongue, which surprises me and, I think, perhaps him as well. I have imagined a lot of things in the dark, in my bed, beneath the weight of that old quilt, but never this, and I moan. When he pulls away, he seems startled. His eyes dart around for a moment before settling on my throat.

"What's that?" he asks.

"Oh, this?" I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.

"You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it."

Before we go inside, he asks if he can see me again. I tell him that I would like that. That night, before I sleep, I imagine him again, his tongue pushing open my mouth, and my fingers slide over myself and I imagine him there, all muscle and desire to please, and I know that we are going to marry.

. . .

We do. I mean, we will. But first, he takes me in his car, in the dark, to a lake with a marshy edge that is hard to get close to. He kisses me and clasps his hand around my breast, my nipple knotting beneath his fingers.

I am not truly sure what he is going to do before he does it. He is hard and hot and dry and smells like bread, and when he breaks me I scream and cling to him like I am lost at sea. His body locks onto mine and he is pushing, pushing, and before the end he pulls himself out and finishes with my blood slicking him down. I am fascinated and aroused by the rhythm, the concrete sense of his need, the clarity of his release. Afterward, he slumps in the seat, and I can hear the sounds of the pond: loons and crickets, and something that sounds like a banjo being plucked. The wind picks up off the water and cools my body down.

I don't know what to do now. I can feel my heart beating between my legs. It hurts, but I imagine it could feel good. I run my hand over myself and feel strains of pleasure from somewhere far off. His breathing becomes quieter and I realize that he is watching me. My skin is glowing beneath the moonlight coming through the window. When I see him looking, I know I can seize that pleasure like my fingertips tickling the very end of a balloon's string that has almost drifted out of reach. I pull and moan and ride out the crest of sensation slowly and evenly, biting my tongue all the while.

"I need more," he says, but he does not rise to do anything. He looks out the window, and so do I. *Anything could move out there in the darkness*, I think. A hook-handed man. A ghostly hitchhiker forever repeating the same journey. An old woman summoned from the repose of her mirror by the chants of children. Everyone

knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them—but no one ever believes them.

His eyes drift over the water and then return to me.

"Tell me about your ribbon," he says.

"There's nothing to tell. It's my ribbon."

"May I touch it?"

"No."

"I want to touch it," he says. His fingers twitch a little, and I close my legs and sit up straighter.

"No."

Something in the lake muscles and writhes out of the water, and then lands with a splash. He turns at the sound.

"A fish," he says.

"Sometime," I tell him, "I will tell you the stories about this lake and her creatures."

He smiles at me, and rubs his jaw. A little of my blood smears across his skin, but he doesn't notice, and I don't say anything.

"I would like that very much," he says.

"Take me home," I tell him. And like a gentleman, he does.

That night, I wash myself. The silky suds between my legs are the color and scent of rust, but I am newer than I have ever been.

My parents are very fond of him. He is a nice boy, they say. He will be a good man. They ask him about his occupation, his hobbies, his family. He shakes my father's hand firmly, and tells my mother flatteries that make her squeal and blush like a girl. He comes around twice a week, sometimes thrice. My mother invites him in for supper, and while we eat I dig my nails into the meat of his leg. After the ice cream puddles in the bowl, I tell my parents that I am going to walk with him down the lane. We strike off through the night,

holding hands sweetly until we are out of sight of the house. I pull him through the trees, and when we find a patch of clear ground I shimmy off my pantyhose, and on my hands and knees offer myself up to him.

I have heard all of the stories about girls like me, and I am unafraid to make more of them. I hear the metallic buckle of his pants and the shush as they fall to the ground, and I feel his half hardness against me. I beg him—"No teasing"—and he obliges. I moan and push back, and we rut in that clearing, groans of my pleasure and groans of his good fortune mingling and dissipating into the night. We are learning, he and I.

There are two rules: he cannot finish inside of me, and he cannot touch my green ribbon. He spends into the dirt, *pat-pat-patt*ing like the beginning of rain. I go to touch myself, but my fingers, which had been curling in the dirt beneath me, are filthy. I pull up my underwear and stockings. He makes a sound and points, and I realize that beneath the nylon, my knees are also caked in dirt. I pull my stockings down and brush, and then up again. I smooth my skirt and repin my hair. A single lock has escaped his slicked-back curls in his exertion, and I tuck it up with the others. We walk down to the stream and I run my hands in the current until they are clean again.

We stroll back to the house, arms linked chastely. Inside, my mother has made coffee, and we all sit around while my father asks him about business.

(If you read this story out loud, the sounds of the clearing can be best reproduced by taking a deep breath and holding it for a long moment. Then release the air all at once, permitting your chest to collapse like a block tower knocked to the ground. Do this again, and again, shortening the time between the held breath and the release.)

. . .

I have always been a teller of stories. When I was a young girl, my mother carried me out of a grocery store as I screamed about toes in the produce aisle. Concerned women turned and watched as I kicked the air and pounded my mother's slender back.

"Potatoes!" she corrected when we got back to the house. "Not toes!" She told me to sit in my chair—a child-sized thing, built for me—until my father returned. But no, I had seen the toes, pale and bloody stumps, mixed in among those russet tubers. One of them, the one that I had poked with the tip of my index finger, was cold as ice, and yielded beneath my touch the way a blister did. When I repeated this detail to my mother, something behind the liquid of her eyes shifted quick as a startled cat.

"You stay right there," she said.

My father returned from work that evening, and listened to my story, each detail.

"You've met Mr. Barns, have you not?" he asked me, referring to the elderly man who ran this particular market.

I had met him once, and I said so. He had hair white as a sky before snow, and a wife who drew the signs for the store windows.

"Why would Mr. Barns sell toes?" my father asked. "Where would he get them?"

Being young, and having no understanding of graveyards or mortuaries, I could not answer.

"And even if he got them somewhere," my father continued, "what would he have to gain by selling them amongst the potatoes?"

They had been there. I had seen them with my own eyes. But beneath the sunbeam of my father's logic, I felt my doubt unfurl.

"Most importantly," my father said, arriving triumphantly at his final piece of evidence, "why did no one notice the toes except for you?"

As a grown woman, I would have said to my father that there are true things in this world observed only by a single set of eyes. As a girl, I consented to his account of the story, and laughed when he scooped me from the chair to kiss me and send me on my way.

It is not normal that a girl teaches her boy, but I am only showing him what I want, what plays on the insides of my eyelids as I fall asleep. He comes to know the flicker of my expression as a desire passes through me, and I hold nothing back from him. When he tells me that he wants my mouth, the length of my throat, I teach myself not to gag and take all of him into me, moaning around the saltiness. When he asks me my worst secret, I tell him about the teacher who hid me in the closet until the others were gone and made me hold him there, and how afterward I went home and scrubbed my hands with a steel wool pad until they bled, even though the memory strikes such a chord of anger and shame that after I share this I have nightmares for a month. And when he asks me to marry him, days shy of my eighteenth birthday, I say yes, yes, please, and then on that park bench I sit on his lap and fan my skirt around us so that a passerby would not realize what was happening beneath it.

"I feel like I know so many parts of you," he says to me, knuckle-deep and trying not to pant. "And now, I will know all of them."

There is a story they tell, about a girl dared by her peers to venture to a local graveyard after dark. This was her folly: when they told her that standing on someone's grave at night would cause the inhabitant to reach up and pull her under, she scoffed. Scoffing is the first mistake a woman can make.

"Life is too short to be afraid of nothing," she said, "and I will show you."

Pride is the second mistake.

She could do it, she insisted, because no such fate would befall her. So they gave her a knife to stick into the frosty earth, as a way of proving her presence and her theory.

She went to that graveyard. Some storytellers say that she picked the grave at random. I believe she selected a very old one, her choice tinged by self-doubt and the latent belief that if she were wrong, the intact muscle and flesh of a newly dead corpse would be more dangerous than one centuries gone.

She knelt on the grave and plunged the blade deep. As she stood to run—for there was no one to see her fear—she found she couldn't escape. Something was clutching at her clothes. She cried out and fell to the ground.

When morning came, her friends arrived at the cemetery. They found her dead on the grave, the blade pinning the sturdy wool of her skirt to the earth. Dead of fright or exposure, would it matter when the parents arrived? She was not wrong, but it didn't matter anymore. Afterward, everyone believed that she had wished to die, even though she had died proving that she wanted to live.

As it turns out, being right was the third, and worst, mistake.

My parents are pleased about the marriage. My mother says that even though girls nowadays are starting to marry late, she married my father when she was nineteen, and was glad that she did.

When I select my wedding gown, I am reminded of the story of the young woman who wished to go to a dance with her lover, but could not afford a dress. She purchased a lovely white frock from a secondhand shop, and then later fell ill and passed from this earth. A doctor who examined her in her final days discovered that she had died from exposure to embalming fluid. It turned out

that an unscrupulous undertaker's assistant had stolen the dress from the corpse of a bride.

The moral of that story, I think, is that being poor will kill you. I spend more on my dress than I intend, but it is very beautiful, and better than being dead. When I fold it into my hope chest, I think about the bride who played hide-and-go-seek on her wedding day and hid in the attic, in an old trunk that snapped shut around her and did not open. She was trapped there until she died. People thought that she had run away until years later, when a maid found her skeleton, in a white dress, folded inside that dark space. Brides never fare well in stories. Stories can sense happiness and snuff it out like a candle.

We marry in April, on an unseasonably cold afternoon. He sees me before the wedding, in my dress, and insists on kissing me deeply and reaching inside of my bodice. He becomes hard, and I tell him that I want him to use my body as he sees fit. I rescind my first rule, given the occasion. He pushes me against the wall and puts his hand against the tile near my throat, to steady himself. His thumb brushes my ribbon. He does not move his hand, and as he works himself in me he says, "I love you, I love you, I love you." I do not know if I am the first woman to walk up the aisle of St. George's with semen leaking down her leg, but I like to imagine that I am.

For our honeymoon, we go on a tour of Europe. We are not rich but we make it work. Europe is a continent of stories, and in between consummations, I learn them. We go from bustling, ancient metropolises to sleepy villages to Alpine retreats and back again, sipping spirits and pulling roasted meat from bones with our teeth, eating spaetzle and olives and ravioli and a creamy grain I do not recognize but come to crave each morning. We cannot afford a

sleeper car on the train, but my husband bribes an attendant to permit us one hour in an empty room, and in that way we couple over the Rhine, my husband pinning me to the rickety frame and howling like something more primordial than the mountains we cross. I recognize that this is not the entire world, but it is the first part of it that I am seeing. I feel electrified by possibility.

(If you are reading this story out loud, make the sound of the bed under the tension of train travel and lovemaking by straining a metal folding chair against its hinges. When you are exhausted with that, sing the half-remembered lyrics of old songs to the person closest to you, thinking of lullabies for children.)

My cycle stops soon after we return from our trip. I tell my husband one night, after we are spent and sprawled across our bed. He glows with real delight.

"A child," he says. He lies back with his hands beneath his head. "A child." He is quiet for so long that I think that he's fallen asleep, but when I look over his eyes are open and fixed on the ceiling. He rolls on his side and gazes at me.

"Will the child have a ribbon?"

I feel my jaw tighten, and my hand fondles my bow involuntarily. My mind skips between many answers, and I settle on the one that brings me the least amount of anger.

"There is no saying, now," I tell him finally.

He startles me, then, running his hand around my throat. I put up my hands to stop him but he uses his strength, grabbing my wrists with one hand as he touches the ribbon with the other. He presses the silky length with his thumb. He touches the bow delicately, as if he is massaging my sex.

"Please," I say. "Please don't."

He does not seem to hear. "Please," I say again, my voice louder, but cracking in the middle.

He could have done it then, untied the bow, if he'd chosen to. But he releases me and rolls on his back as if nothing has happened. My wrists ache, and I rub them.

"I need a glass of water," I say. I get up and go to the bathroom. I run the tap and then frantically check my ribbon, tears caught in my lashes. The bow is still tight.

There is a story I love about a pioneer husband and wife killed by wolves. Neighbors found their bodies torn open and strewn around their tiny cabin, but never located their infant daughter, alive or dead. People claimed they saw the girl running with a wolf pack, loping over the terrain as wild and feral as any of her companions.

News of her would ripple through the local settlements upon each sighting. She menaced a hunter in a winter forest—though perhaps he was less menaced than startled at a tiny naked girl baring her teeth and howling so rawly it quaked the skin on his bones. A young woman, on the cusp of marriage age, trying to take down a horse. People even saw her ripping open a chicken in an explosion of feathers.

Many years later, she was said to be seen resting in the rushes along a riverbank, suckling two wolf cubs. I like to imagine that they came from her body, the lineage of wolves tainted human just the once. They certainly bloodied her breasts, but she did not mind, because they were hers and only hers. I believe that when their muzzles and teeth pressed against her she felt a kind of sanctuary, peace she would have found nowhere else. She must have been better among them than she would have been otherwise. Of that, I am certain.

. . .

Months pass and my stomach swells. Inside of me, our child is swimming fiercely, kicking and pushing and clawing. In public, I gasp and stagger to the side, clutching my belly and hissing through my teeth to Little One, as I call it, to stop. Once, I stumble on a walk in the park, the same park where my husband had proposed to me the year before, and go to my knees, breathing heavily and near weeping. A woman passing by helps me to sit up and gives me some water, telling me that the first pregnancy is always the worst, but they get better with time.

It is the worst, but for so many reasons besides my altered form. I sing to my child, and think about the old wives' tales of carrying the baby high or low. Do I carry a boy inside of me, the image of his father? Or a girl, a daughter who would soften the sons that followed? I have no siblings, but I know that eldest girls sweeten their brothers and are protected by them from the dangers of the world—an arrangement that buoys my heart.

My body changes in ways I do not expect—my breasts are large and hot, my stomach lined with pale marks, the inverse of a tiger's. I feel monstrous, but my husband seems renewed with desire, as if my novel shape has refreshed our list of perversities. And my body responds: in the line at the supermarket, receiving communion in church, I am marked by a new and ferocious want, leaving me slippery and swollen at the slightest provocation. When he comes home each day, my husband has made a list in his mind of things he desires from me, and I am willing to provide them and more, having been on the edge of coming since that morning's purchase of bread and carrots.

"I am the luckiest man alive," he says, running his hands across my stomach.

In the mornings, he kisses me and fondles me and sometimes

takes me before his coffee and toast. He goes to work with a spring in his step. He comes home with one promotion, and then another. "More money for my family," he says. "More money for our happiness."

I go into labor in the middle of the night, every inch of my insides twisting into an obscene knot before release. I scream like I have not screamed since the night by the lake, but for contrary reasons. Now, the pleasure of the knowledge that my child is coming is dismantled by the unyielding agony.

I am in labor for twenty hours. I nearly wrench off my husband's hand, howling obscenities that do not seem to shock the nurse. The doctor is frustratingly patient, peering down between my legs, his white eyebrows making unreadable Morse code across his forehead.

"What's happening?" I ask.

"Breathe," he commands.

I am certain that if any more time passes, I will crush my own teeth to powder. I look to my husband, who kisses my forehead and asks the doctor what's happening.

"I'm not satisfied this will be a natural birth," the doctor says. "We may have to deliver the baby surgically."

"No, please," I say. "I don't want that, please."

"If there's no movement soon, we're going to do it," the doctor says. "It may be best for everyone." He looks up and I am almost certain he winks at my husband, but pain makes the mind see things differently than they are.

I make a deal with Little One, in my mind. *Little One*, I think, *this is the last time that we are going to be just you and me. Please don't make them cut you out of me.*

Little One is born twenty minutes later. They do have to make a cut, but not across my stomach as I had feared. The doctor draws his scalpel down instead, and I feel little, just tugging, though perhaps it is what they have given me. When the baby is placed in my arms, I examine the wrinkled body from head to toe, the color of a sunset sky, and streaked in red.

No ribbon. A boy. I begin to weep, and curl the unmarked baby into my chest. The nurse shows me how to nurse him, and I am so happy to feel him drink, to touch the curls of his fingers, little commas, each of them.

(If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them.)

There is a story about a woman who goes into labor when the attending physician is tired. There is a story about a woman who herself was born too early. There is a story about a woman whose body clung to her child so hard they cut her to retrieve him. There is a story about a woman who heard a story about a woman who birthed wolf cubs in secret. When you think about it, stories have this way of running together like raindrops in a pond. Each is borne from the clouds separate, but once they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart.

(If you are reading this story out loud, move aside the curtain to illustrate this final point to your listeners. It'll be raining, I promise.)

They take the baby so that they may fix me where they cut. They give me something that makes me sleepy, delivered through a mask pressed gently to my mouth and nose. My husband jokes around with the doctor as he holds my hand.

"How much to get that extra stitch?" he asks. "You offer that, right?"

"Please," I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me.

The doctor chuckles. "You aren't the first—"

I slide down a long tunnel, and then surface again, but covered in something heavy and dark, like oil. I feel like I am going to vomit.

"—the rumor is something like—"

"—like a vir—"

And then I am awake, wide awake, and my husband is gone and the doctor is gone. And the baby, where is—

The nurse sticks her head in the door.

"Your husband just went to get a coffee," she says, "and the baby is asleep in the bassinet."

The doctor walks in behind her, wiping his hands on a cloth.

"You're all sewn up, don't you worry," he said. "Nice and tight, everyone's happy. The nurse will speak with you about recovery. You're going to need to rest for a while."

The baby wakes up. The nurse scoops him from his swaddle and places him in my arms again. He is so beautiful I have to remind myself to breathe.

I recover a small amount every day. I move slowly and ache. My husband moves to touch me and I push him away. I want to return to our life as it was, but such things cannot be helped right now. I am already nursing and rising at all hours to take care of our son with my pain.

Then one day I take him in my hand, and afterward he is so content I realize that I can sate him, even if I remain unsated. Around

our son's first birthday, I am healed enough to take my husband back into my bed. I weep with happiness as he touches me, fills me as I have wanted to be filled for so long.

My son is a good baby. He grows and grows. We try to have another child, but I suspect that Little One did so much ruinous damage inside of me that my body couldn't house another.

"You were a poor tenant, Little One," I say to him, rubbing shampoo into his fine brown hair, "and I shall revoke your deposit."

He splashes around in the sink, cackling with happiness.

My son touches my ribbon, but never in a way that makes me afraid. He thinks of it as a part of me, and he treats it no differently than he would an ear or a finger. It gives him delight in a way that houses no wanting, and this pleases me.

I do not know if my husband is sad that we cannot have another child. He keeps his sorrows as close to himself as he is open with his desires. He is a good father, and he loves his boy. Back from work, they play games of chase and run in the yard. He is too young to catch a ball, still, but my husband patiently rolls it to him in the grass, and our son picks it up and drops it again, and my husband gestures to me and cries, "Look, look! Did you see? He is going to throw it soon enough."

Of all the stories I know about mothers, this one is the most real. A young American girl is visiting Paris with her mother when the woman begins to feel ill. They decide to check into a hotel for a few days so the mother can rest, and the daughter calls for a doctor to assess her.

After a brief examination, the doctor tells the daughter that all her mother needs is some medicine. He takes the daughter to a taxi, gives the driver instructions in French, and explains to the girl that

the driver will take her to his residence, where his wife will give her the appropriate remedy. They drive and drive for a very long time, and when the girl arrives, she is frustrated by the unbearable slowness of this doctor's wife, who meticulously assembles the pills from powder. When she gets back into the taxi, the driver meanders down the streets, sometimes doubling back on the same avenue. Frustrated, the girl gets out of the taxi to return to the hotel on foot. When she finally arrives, the hotel clerk tells her that he has never seen her before. When she runs up to the room where her mother had been resting, she finds the walls a different color, the furnishings different than her memory, and her mother nowhere in sight.

There are many endings to the story. In one of them, the girl is gloriously persistent and certain, renting a room nearby and staking out the hotel, eventually seducing a young man who works in the laundry and discovering the truth: that her mother had died of a highly contagious and fatal disease, departing this plane shortly after the daughter was sent from the hotel by the doctor. To avoid a citywide panic, the staff removed and buried her body, repainted and refurnished the room, and bribed all involved to deny that they had ever met the pair.

In another version of this story, the girl wanders the streets of Paris for years, believing that she is mad, that she invented her mother and her life with her mother in her own diseased mind. The daughter stumbles from hotel to hotel, confused and grieving, though for whom she cannot say. Each time she is ejected from another posh lobby, she weeps for something lost. Her mother is dead and she does not know it. She won't know it until she, herself, is also dead, assuming that you believe in paradise.

I don't need to tell you the moral of this story. I think you already know what it is.

. . .

Our son enters school when he is five, and I remember his teacher from that day in the park, when she had crouched to help me and predicted easy future pregnancies. She remembers me as well, and we talk briefly in the hallway. I tell her that we have had no more children since our son, and now that he has started school, my days will be altered toward sloth and boredom. She is kind. She tells me that if I am looking for a way to occupy my time, there is a wonderful women's art class at a local college.

That night, after my son is in bed, my husband reaches his hand across the couch and slides it up my leg.

"Come to me," he says, and I twinge with pleasure. I slide off the couch, smoothing my skirt very prettily as I shuffle over to him on my knees. I kiss his leg, running my hand up to his belt, tugging him from his bonds before swallowing him whole. He runs his hands through my hair, stroking my head, groaning and pressing into me. And I don't realize that his hand is sliding down the back of my neck until he is trying to loop his fingers through the ribbon. I gasp and pull away quickly, falling back and frantically checking my bow. He is still sitting there, slick with my spit.

"Come back here," he says.

"No," I say. "You'll touch my ribbon."

He stands up and tucks himself into his pants, zipping them up.

"A wife," he says, "should have no secrets from her husband."

"I don't have any secrets," I tell him.

"The *ribbon*."

"The ribbon is not a secret; it's just mine."

"Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?"

I do not answer.

He is silent for a long minute. Then,

"A wife should have no secrets."

My nose grows hot. I do not want to cry.

"I've given you everything you have ever asked for," I say. "Am I not allowed this one thing?"

"I want to know."

"You think you want to know," I say, "but you don't."

"Why do you want to hide it from me?"

"I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours."

He gets down very close to me, and I pull back from the smell of bourbon. I hear a creak, and we both look up to see our son's feet vanishing up the staircase.

When my husband goes to sleep that night, he does so with a hot and burning anger that falls away as soon as he is truly dreaming. I am up for a long time listening to his breathing, wondering if perhaps men have ribbons that do not look like ribbons. Maybe we are all marked in some way, even if it's impossible to see.

The next day, our son touches my throat and asks about my ribbon. He tries to pull at it. And though it pains me, I have to make it forbidden to him. When he reaches for it, I shake a can full of pennies. It crashes discordantly, and he withdraws and weeps. Something is lost between us, and I never find it again.

(If you are reading this story out loud, prepare a soda can full of pennies. When you arrive at this moment, shake it loudly in the face of the people closest to you. Observe their expression of startled fear, and then betrayal. Notice how they never look at you exactly the same way for the rest of your days.)

I enroll in the art class for women. When my husband is at work and my son is in school, I drive to the sprawling green campus and the squat gray building where the art classes are held.

Presumably, the male nudes are kept from our eyes in some

deference to propriety, but the class has its own energy—there is plenty to see on a strange woman's naked form, plenty to contemplate as you roll charcoal and mix paints. I see more than one woman shifting forward and back in her seat to redistribute blood flow.

One woman in particular returns over and over. Her ribbon is red, and is knotted around her slender ankle. Her skin is the color of olives, and a trail of dark hair runs from her belly button to her mons. I know that I should not want her, not because she is a woman and not because she is a stranger, but because it is her job to disrobe, and I feel shame taking advantage of such a state. No small amount of guilt comes along with my wandering eyes, but as my pencil traces her contours, so does my hand in the secret recesses of my mind. I am not even certain how such a thing would happen, but the possibilities incense me to near madness.

One afternoon after class, I turn a hallway corner and she is there, the woman. Clothed, wrapped in a raincoat. Her gaze transfixes me, and this close I can see a band of gold around each of her pupils, as though her eyes are twin solar eclipses. She greets me, and I her.

We sit down together in a booth at a nearby diner, our knees occasionally brushing up against each other beneath the Formica. She drinks a cup of black coffee, which startles me, though I don't know why. I ask her if she has any children. She does, she says, a daughter, a beautiful little girl of eleven.

"Eleven is a terrifying age," she says. "I remember nothing before I was eleven, but then there it was, all color and horror. What a number," she says, "what a show." Then her face slips somewhere else for a moment, as if she has dipped beneath the surface of a lake, and when it comes back, she briefly speaks to her daughter's accomplishments in voice and music.

We do not discuss the specific fears of raising a girl-child.

Truthfully, I am afraid even to ask. I also do not ask her if she's married, and she does not volunteer the information, though she does not wear a ring. We talk about my son, about the art class. I desperately want to know what state of need has sent her to disrobe before us, but perhaps I do not ask, because the answer would be, like adolescence, too frightening to forget.

I am captivated by her, there is no other way to put it. There is something easy about her, but not easy the way I was—the way I am. She's like dough, how the give of it beneath kneading hands disguises its sturdiness, its potential. When I look away from her and then look back, she seems twice as large as before.

"Perhaps we can talk again sometime," I say to her. "This has been a very pleasant afternoon."

She nods to me. I pay for her coffee.

I do not want to tell my husband about her, but he can sense some untapped desire. One night, he asks what roils inside of me and I confess it to him. I even describe the details of her ribbon, releasing an extra flood of shame.

He is so glad of this development that he begins to mutter a long and exhaustive fantasy as he removes his pants and enters me, and I cannot even hear all of it, though I imagine that within its parameters she and I are together, or perhaps both of us are with him.

I feel as if I have betrayed her somehow, and I never return to the class. I find other amusements to occupy my days.

(If you are reading this story out loud, force a listener to reveal a devastating secret, then open the nearest window to the street and scream it as loudly as you are able.)

One of my favorite stories is about an old woman and her husband—a man mean as Mondays, who scared her with the violence

of his temper and the shifting nature of his whims. She was only able to keep him satisfied with her cooking, to which he was a complete captive. One day, he bought her a fat liver to cook for him, and she did, using herbs and broth. But the smell of her own artistry overtook her, and a few nibbles became a few bites, and soon the liver was gone. She had no money with which to purchase a second one, and she was terrified of her husband's reaction should he discover that his meal was gone. So she crept to the church next door, where a woman had been recently laid to rest. She approached the shrouded figure, then cut into it with a pair of kitchen shears and stole the liver from her corpse.

That night, the woman's husband dabbed his lips with a napkin and declared the meal the finest he'd ever eaten. When they went to sleep, the old woman heard the front door open, and a thin wail wafted through the rooms. *Who has my liver? Whooooo has my liver?*

The old woman could hear the voice coming closer and closer to the bedroom. There was a hush as the door swung open. The dead woman posed her query again.

The old woman flung the blanket off her husband.

"*He* has it!" she declared triumphantly.

Then she saw the face of the dead woman, and recognized her own mouth and eyes. She looked down at her abdomen, remembering, now, how she carved into her belly. She bled freely there in the bed, whispering something over and over as she died, something you and I will never be privy to. Next to her, as the blood seeped into the very heart of the mattress, her husband slumbered on.

That may not be the version of the story you're familiar with. But I assure you, it's the one you need to know.

. . .

My husband is strangely excited for Halloween. I took one of his old tweed coats and fashioned one for our son, so that he might be a tiny professor, or some other stuffy academic. I even give him a pipe on which to gnaw. Our son clicks it between his teeth in a way I find unsettlingly adult.

"Mama," my son says, "what are you?"

I am not in costume, so I tell him I am his mother.

The pipe falls from his little mouth onto the floor, and he screams so loudly I am unable to move. My husband swoops in and picks him up, talking to him in a low voice, repeating his name between his sobs.

It is only as his breathing returns to normal that I am able to identify my mistake. He is not old enough to know the story of the naughty girls who wanted the toy drum and were wicked toward their mother until she went away and was replaced with a new mother—one with glass eyes and thumping wooden tail. He is too young for the stories and their trueness, but I have inadvertently told him anyway—the story of the little boy who only discovered on Halloween that his mother was not his mother, except on the day when everyone wore a mask. Regret sluices hot up my throat. I try to hold him and kiss him, but he only wishes to go out onto the street, where the sun has dipped below the horizon and a hazy chill is bruising the shadows.

I have little use for this holiday. I do not wish to walk my son to strangers' houses or to assemble popcorn balls and wait for trick-or-treat callers to show up at the door demanding ransom. Still, I wait inside with a whole tray of the sticky confections, answering the door to tiny queens and ghosts. I think of my son. When they leave, I put down the tray and rest my head in my hands.

Our son comes home laughing, gnawing on a piece of candy

that has turned his mouth the color of a plum. I am angry at my husband. I wish he had waited to come home before permitting the consumption of the cache. Has he never heard the stories? The pins pressed into the chocolates, the razor blades sunk into the apples? It is like him to not understand what there is to be afraid of in this world, but I am still furious. I examine my son's mouth, but there is no sharp metal plunged into his palate. He laughs and spins around the house, dizzy and electrified from the treats and excitement. He wraps his arms around my legs, the earlier incident forgotten. The forgiveness tastes sweeter than any candy that can be given at any door. When he climbs into my lap, I sing to him until he falls asleep.

Our son grows and grows. He is eight, ten. First, I tell him fairy tales—the very oldest ones, with the pain and death and forced marriage pared away like dead foliage. Mermaids grow feet and it feels like laughter. Naughty pigs trot away from grand feasts, reformed and uneaten. Evil witches leave the castle and move into small cottages and live out their days painting portraits of woodland creatures.

As he grows, though, he asks too many questions. Why would they not eat the pig, hungry as they were and wicked as he had been? Why was the witch permitted to go free after her terrible deeds? And the sensation of fins to feet being anything less than agonizing he rejects outright after cutting his hand with a pair of scissors.

"It would hoight," he says, for he is struggling with his *r*'s.

I agree with him as I bandage the cut. It would. So then I tell him stories closer to true: children who go missing along a particular stretch of railroad track, lured by the sound of a phantom train to parts unknown; a black dog that appears at a person's doorstep three days before her passing; a trio of frogs that corner you in the

marshlands and tell your fortune for a price. My husband, I think, would forbid these stories, but my son listens to them with solemnity and keeps them to himself.

The school puts on a performance of *Little Buckle-Boy*, and he is the lead, the buckle-boy, and I join a committee of mothers making costumes for the children. I am chief costume maker in a room full of women, all of us sewing together little silk petals for the flower-children and making tiny white pantaloons for the pirates. One of the mothers has a pale yellow ribbon on her finger, and it constantly tangles in her thread. She swears and cries. One day I even have to use the sewing shears to pick at the offending threads. I try to be delicate. She shakes her head as I free her from the peony.

"It's such a bother, isn't it?" she says. I nod. Outside the window, the children play—knocking each other off the playground equipment, popping the heads off dandelions. The play goes beautifully. Opening night, our son blazes through his monologue. Perfect pitch and cadence. No one has ever done better.

Our son is twelve. He asks me about the ribbon, point-blank. I tell him that we are all different, and sometimes you should not ask questions. I assure him that he'll understand when he is grown. I distract him with stories that have no ribbons: angels who desire to be human and ghosts who don't realize they're dead and children who turn to ash. He stops smelling like a child—milky-sweetness replaced with something sharp and burning, like a hair sizzling on the stove.

Our son is thirteen, fourteen. His hair is a little too long but I can't bear to cut it short. My husband scrambles the locks with his hand on his way to work, and kisses me on the side of the mouth. On his way to school, our son waits for the neighbor boy, who walks with

a brace. He exhibits the subtlest compassion, my son. No instinct for cruelty, like some. "The world has enough bullies," I've told him over and over. This is the year he stops asking for my stories.

Our son is fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. He is a brilliant boy. He has his father's knack for people, my air of mystery. He begins to court a beautiful girl from his high school who has a bright smile and a warm presence. I am happy to meet her, but never insist that we should wait up for their return, remembering my own youth.

When he tells us that he has been accepted at a university to study engineering, I am overjoyed. We march through the house, singing songs and laughing. When my husband comes home, he joins in the jubilee, and we drive to a local seafood restaurant. His father tells him, over halibut, "We are so proud of you." Our son laughs and says that he also wishes to marry his girl. We clasp hands and are even happier. Such a good boy. Such a wonderful life to look forward to.

Even the luckiest woman alive has not seen joy like this.

There's a classic, a real classic, that I haven't told you yet.

A girlfriend and a boyfriend went parking. Some people say that means kissing in a car, but I know the story. I was there. They were parked on the edge of a lake. They were turning around in the backseat as if the world were moments from ending. Maybe it was. She offered herself and he took her, and after it was over, they turned on the radio.

The voice on the radio announced that a mad, hook-handed murderer had escaped from a local asylum. The boyfriend chuckled as he flipped to a music station. As the song ended, the girlfriend heard a thin scratching sound, like a paper clip over glass. She looked at her boyfriend and then pulled her cardigan over her bare shoulders, wrapping one arm around her breasts.

"We should go," she said.

"Nah," the boyfriend said. "Let's do that again. I've got all night."

"What if the killer comes here?" the girl asked. "The asylum is very close."

"We'll be fine, baby," the boyfriend said. "Don't you trust me?"

The girlfriend nodded reluctantly.

"Well, then—" he said, his voice trailing off in that way she would come to know so well. He took her hand off her chest and placed it onto himself. She finally looked away from the lakeside. Outside, the moonlight glinted off the shiny steel hook. The killer waved at her, grinning.

I'm sorry. I've forgotten the rest of the story.

The house is so silent without our son. I walk through it, touching all the surfaces. I am happy but something inside of me is shifting into a strange new place.

That night, my husband asks if I wish to christen the newly empty rooms. We have not coupled so fiercely since before our son was born. Bent over the kitchen table, something old is lit within me, and I remember the way we had desired before, how we had left love streaked on all of the surfaces, how he relished in my darkest spaces. I scream with ferocity, not caring if the neighbors hear, not caring if anyone looks through the window with its undrawn curtains and sees my husband buried in my mouth. I would go out on the lawn if he asked me, let him take me from behind in sight of the whole neighborhood. I could have met anyone at that party when I was seventeen—stupid boys or prudish boys or violent boys. Religious boys who would have made me move to some distant country to convert its denizens, or some such nonsense. I could have experienced untold numbers of sorrows or dissatisfactions. But as I

straddle him on the floor, riding him and crying out, I know that I made the right choice.

We fall asleep exhausted, sprawled naked in our bed. When I wake up, my husband is kissing the back of my neck, probing the ribbon with his tongue. My body rebels wildly, still throbbing with the memories of pleasure but bucking hard against betrayal. I say his name, and he does not respond. I say it again, and he holds me against him and continues. I wedge my elbows in his side, and when he loosens from me in surprise, I sit up and face him. He looks confused and hurt, like my son the day I shook the can of pennies.

Resolve runs out of me. I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and end of his desires all etched there. He is not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him. And yet—

"Do you want to untie the ribbon?" I ask him. "After these many years, is that what you want of me?"

His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. "Yes," he says. "Yes."

I do not have to touch him to know that he grows at the thought.

I close my eyes. I remember the boy of the party, the one who kissed me and broke me open by that lakeside, who did with me what I wanted. Who gave me a son and helped him grow into a man himself.

"Then," I say, "do what you want."

With trembling fingers, he takes one of the ends. The bow undoes, slowly, the long-bound ends crimped with habit. My husband groans, but I do not think he realizes it. He loops his finger through the final twist and pulls. The ribbon falls away. It floats down and

curls on the bed, or so I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow its descent.

My husband frowns, and then his face begins to open with some other expression—sorrow, or maybe preemptive loss. My hand flies up in front of me—an involuntary motion, for balance or some other futility—and beyond it his image is gone.

"I love you," I assure him, "more than you can possibly know."

"No," he says, but I don't know to what he's responding.

If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry.

My weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes me. My husband's face falls away, and then I see the ceiling, and the wall behind me. As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been.