

There were the remarks which came under the breath about Jorgie's clothes and his haircut and the secrets his face gave away. He was sitting where the boys sat when they didn't want grief and couldn't get invisible. Mrs. Dover called his name. She had grey, ear-length hair and a small dark red mouth, bony fingers with clear nail polish. She glanced up from the sixth grade class roster to look for a raised hand. She called for him again. She said his name like a question she could take or leave. Jorgie-Porgie, a boy said. Then another kid giggled. Jorgie hunched down in the chair reserved for the new students. The chair was near the window, near the girl with the green eyes and the skinny legs. My name is Evelyn, she whispered, and showed Jorgie a smile.

His mother protected him by unplugging the television and hiding the radio and not letting him read magazines and newspapers. I don't want you too stimulated, his mother told him. You're a brooder like me, she said. We're cursed that way.

Last week they moved from their Philadelphia townhouse on Rittenhouse Square to Norfolk, Virginia. His mother had picked Norfolk by shutting her eyes and tapping her finger on a map. They were starting over; that's what she kept saying. You and me, Jorgie, we're starting a new life, finding new friends.

Bruna Mendoza was shorter than her son and thicker about the waist. Brunu and Jorgie shared the same black hair and brown, lazy eyes. They were pretty people. Jorgie was slim and tall and his mother was larger but with a good shape. Thanks to Jorgie's father he and his mother also shared pristinely white teeth. A month ago Dr. Mendoza had left his family for a dental hygienist. The two of them ran off and bought a farm in Maine.

Jorgie didn't want to start over and he didn't want new friends. He stayed in his bedroom and read. Yesterday he had read an article about spontaneous combustion. The article stated that there were people who walked down the street and exploded. No warning, no headache, no sick feeling, no nothing—just *boom*. You were alive, and then you were embers and ash. Who wanted to start over if people exploded and fathers ran off to Maine?

Jorgie's new bedroom had one grimy white wall covered in blue and orange crayon smiley faces and houses with thin curls of smoke and animals that had circles for bodies and stick legs and big teeth. The other three walls were water-stained near the ceiling. The brown carpet was spotty. It smelled of urine and cigarettes.

Don't you worry, Mrs. Mendoza said. A little paint, some carpet, we'll fix it up. It'll be fun, Jorgie hon. No sense wasting what little money we have on a fancy place. His mother had on her silver silk kimono. She was sitting in Jorgie's mahogany desk chair with one plump leg tucked under her and the other leg stretched out. She liked her stockings rolled below the knee and shoes that slipped on with a low square heel. You'll see, Mrs. Mendoza said. You can pick your own colour for the walls and pick the carpet, too. Just wait, Jorgie. You're

going to have something to show. His mother was smoking a Parliament and holding a small blue metal ashtray.

Jorgie's furniture didn't belong in this room. The mahogany bureau and desk set, the sleigh bed and the nightstand, these pieces were built by his father and seemed out of place here. The room and his furniture were strangers to one another, together by circumstance. The room reminded him of the homeless men he used to see begging for quarters outside the train station in downtown Philly.

His mother was talking to him about their new neighbors, Pastor Bob or Bill and his daughter. Then his mother poked the air twice with two fingers still holding a cigarette. A fascinating girl, Jorgie. And very attractive. Your age, and a real charmer. Evelyn, maybe, or Eve. No, Evelyn. Mrs. Mendoza nodded at her last choice and took a drag on her cigarette, patting the ash into the blue metal ashtray. You're one lucky kid, she said.

Jorgie didn't tell his mother that the new girl had walked home with him from Granby Elementary. Evelyn was slim and taller by an inch than Jorgie. She wore a jean skirt and sneakers without socks. She had brown and blond hair fixed in a braid that ended at the small of her back. Silver rings covered her thumbs and fingers and silver bracelets covered her thin wrists. When Evelyn walked she made a sound like coins clinking in a pocket. Jorgie thought she smelled good, too. Talcum powder and watermelon, he thought. But the best part about Evelyn was her smile, those even white teeth. His father would have loved her teeth. Good work, Jorgie, he might have said. A girl with teeth like that can do no wrong.

Evelyn lived with her dad and his brother. Her mom died two years ago. Pneumonia or Tuberculosis or a mixture of both, Evelyn wasn't sure. Her dad was a Pastor and her dad's brother was Delbert James, a man who drank too much and had shot her dog. The dog was a black and white border colley called Gypsy. Delbert shot the dog in the right front leg and now Gypsy walked with a limp.

Delbert's very nervous, Evelyn said. Every time he gets angry his eyes shake like they're cold.

Jorgie knew why he hadn't told his mother about Evelyn. He didn't want to talk about Delbert James shooting the dog.

A photograph of Belinda the dental hygienist was in a cardboard box labeled *His Stuff* in red letters. Jorgie had found the photograph while sneaking a look at his father's things. There were old brown pipes with black bowls and a leather carry pouch with two cigars in clear plastic tubes. There were six detective paperbacks and a novel by Gabriel García Márquez. There was a pair of worn brown leather slippers and a chunky Swiss Army penknife and the blue and cream coloured papier-mâché mask of a woman that Dr. Mendoza had bought in Venice. Belinda's photograph was under the mask. She sat on a dark green wingback chair with her hands folded stiffly in her lap and her feet crossed. Jorgie thought she was old but not as old as his mother and not nearly as

old as his father. Belinda seemed the opposite of his mother. She was tall and delicate and had wide open eyes and straight blond hair.

This isn't your business, his father said as Jorgie lay on the mahogany sleigh bed with his short legs crossed at the ankles. Or Jorgie imagined it. His father wore a green velour sweatsuit and white jogging shoes. Dr. Mendoza's thinning black hair was slicked back and dyed to hide the grey. He held an unlit cigar between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. A diamond ring with a gold band was on his little finger. Sometimes we choose good and bad at the same time, his father said. I miss you and love you, Jorgie, but I love Belinda. What am I supposed to do? You'll understand when you fall in love.

You're a father, Jorgie said. You're not supposed to go to Maine.

Belinda's parents live in Maine, his father said, and rolled the thick cigar between his thumb and forefinger. Then he said, Doesn't your mother always say how people have to compromise in a relationship?

This isn't what normal parents do, Jorgie said. You can't stop being somebody's father. It's not like a hobby. It's not like you're giving up golf for tennis. Don't you know anything?

Maybe I love Belinda more than you, his father said. Haven't you ever thought that maybe your dad loves her more than you? Doesn't your mother say that to you, Jorgie? Doesn't she say: Oh, daddy just loves that Belinda more than us. We're just yesterday's news. You and I need to forget all about him, Jorgie. Doesn't your mother say things like that?

A female voice said, It's true, Jorgie. Your father just loves me more than you, that's all. Belinda the dental hygienist had joined them. She sat on the mahogany desk chair at the opposite end of the bedroom. Belinda said, Look at this body, Jorgie. Look at these legs. Wouldn't you love me more than you? Wouldn't you love me more than your mother? Your mother is short and fat and wears kimonos and shoes with square heels and smokes cigarettes. God, who wouldn't love me more? I'm young and beautiful and my breath is always fresh. I have chewing gum breath every minute of the day. Belinda was dressed in the clothes she had worn for the photograph. She wore a pleated red and white plaid skirt and a white T-shirt and shiny black high heels. Do you want to smell my breath, Jorgie? Come on, Jorgie, smell my wonderful, fresh breath. Belinda the dental hygienist opened her cherry red lips and Jorgie could smell her Dentine from across the room.

Jorgie tore away a corner of the photograph, the shiny left high heel, the slim right ankle and lower calf. Someone screamed.

Delbert tried to shoot my dog again, Evelyn said. I think he was drunk. I could smell the whiskey. He usually tries to touch me when he's been drinking. Evelyn and Jorgie were on their way to school. You want to carry my books? she asked. A boyfriend usually carries his girlfriend's books. Jorgie told her that he liked her but he didn't want a girlfriend. Daddy thinks I ought to have more

patience with Delbert. Daddy says Delbert was in the war and things just haven't been the same.

You mean crazy? Jorgie said.

Daddy calls it nervous from the service, Evelyn said.

Clouds had turned the sky a pale charcoal colour.

What do you mean he touches you?

He touches me, Evelyn said. Here and here. Her left hand tapped her chest and the crotch of her jeans. Her fingernails were rough and chewed and the red nail polish was chipped. Silver bracelets jingled to the motion of her thin bare arms. He can't help himself, she added. That's what he says. He says I'm so pretty he loses control. Do you think I'm pretty, Jorgie?

You have beautiful teeth, Jorgie said. My dad always tells mom and me how he loves beautiful teeth and a beautiful smile. He's an orthodontist and he goes all over the world fixing people's smiles. He once went to England and fixed the queen's smile. Did you ever see the queen smile?

Sometimes on TV, Evelyn said.

My dad did that, Jorgie said.

Mrs. Mendoza opened the bedroom window an inch or two to let in the summer evening and the sound of the crickets. She brushed a strand of black hair away from Jorgie's forehead and kissed him goodnight and told him he was a wonderful boy and that she loved him much more than a person could ever say.

When his mother closed the door, Jorgie sat up in his bed and looked out the window. The night was clear and warm and smelled of boxwood and pine. He could see Evelyn's bedroom but not Evelyn. A yellow light filled her window and coloured the white laced curtain. Music came from her room, what his mother called the big bands. My mama and dad used to dance to that music, his mother would say. It's the sweetest. Isn't it the sweetest, Jorgie? Dancing to the big bands is like dancing on air, she liked to say. Then his mother would dip and glide about the living room in her silk kimono and hum to herself and lift her plump arms like she was dancing with a partner only she could see.

Jorgie wondered if Evelyn had fallen asleep with the light on or if she was reading or maybe talking on the phone. What do you care? he thought. Who cares what some girl is doing, anyway? He imagined crazy Delbert drinking his whiskey and finishing off Evelyn's stupid dog and then going after Evelyn. Jorgie told himself to quit thinking. Jorgie told himself that he had his own problems and that he didn't need any new problems and whether or not Delbert was nervous from the service wasn't a problem he was adding to his list.

Jorgie reached his hand under his pillow and retrieved the eight by ten of Belinda the dental hygienist. The corner piece he had torn from the photograph had been taped back but it didn't line up.

Your mother is a wonderful woman, Dr. Mendoza said.

That makes no sense, Jorgie said. Why would you leave somebody you thought was wonderful?

Love defies logic, his father said.

Jorgie saw him again in his green velour sweatsuit and his white jogging shoes. His father stood by the open window. Moonlight pierced the velour and the pores of his face and his hands. Jorgie's bedroom was filled with pools of shadow.

Your mother is a wonderful woman, his father said again. Do you remember me telling you that, Jorgie? I'd say, now there's a wonderful woman. Loyal, generous. A woman who'd do anything for a man. And a lovely smile. Doesn't your mother have the loveliest smile? My best job.

I thought *I* was your best job, the woman said. Exactly how many best jobs did you do?

You *are* my best job, his father said. You're my masterpiece.

Belinda sat across the bedroom. She struck the same pose, her hands folded on her lap and her feet crossed, but her left leg was disjointed like the torn photograph.

You know what mama says? Jorgie said to his father.

I can only imagine, his father said.

You give people beautiful teeth but nothing to make them smile. Nobody wants to smile around you, that's what mama says.

I have a new life now, Jorgie, his father said. You should get a new life, too. You stay in this room, reading books and hiding. Or complaining about me. You don't want a girlfriend. You don't want anybody. That's not a life.

Moonlight was seeping through Dr. Mendoza's green sweatsuit and the pores of his hands and his face and the pupils of his eyes. People go away all the time, his father said. But so what. They divorce. They die. They leave you in a hundred ways. So what.

Jorgie was watching Belinda somewhere between the light and the shadows. He tore away a piece of the photograph and saw her left shoulder disappear. Belinda screamed but her hands stayed folded in her lap and her back was straight. She opened her mouth to scream again.

Stop this now, his father said to Jorgie, and shook a finger at him. Dr. Mendoza walked over to Belinda and rubbed her back. Now, now, everything's all right. Everything's fine. Moonlight had drained them of colour. His father took a new cigar from the pocket of his velour jacket and turned to Jorgie, saying, You know I've been a good father. You know that, Jorgie. What've I always told you? A man needs two things. Good teeth and a good smile. And I've given you both. The Queen of England thanked me for her smile, Jorgie. Can you imagine that? Alejandro Juan Abdo Mendoza was thanked by the Queen of England herself.

That's something I made up, Jorgie said. I made it up because you were never home. His hands gripped opposite sides of Belinda's photograph. They were shaking. You don't know anything, Jorgie said. His chest felt hot and

swollen. Jorgie heard his own angry voice. He said, You don't see the queen's husband running off to Maine.

I've given you the two things a man needs to survive in this world, his father said. He took the thick dark cigar from its plastic tube and sniffed its length and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger.

Jorgie heard his name now. Evelyn was calling to him in a forceful whisper from her bedroom window. She called him through the thick air and the trumpets.

If his father had said anything else, Jorgie didn't remember. This was the sum of it, their time together, their days before Maine. Nothing else came to mind. Everything stopped there.

But so what, Dr. Mendoza would say.

*So what*, Jorgie thought.