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We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

Written by Karen Joy Fowler

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WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES

KAREN JOY FOWLER



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IN MEMORY OF

the wonderful Wendy Weil,
champion of books, animals,
and, in both categories, me

❁

. . . Your experience as apes, gentlemen—to the extent that you have something of that sort behind you—cannot be more distant from you than mine is from me. But it tickles at the heels of everyone who walks here on earth, the small chimpanzee as well as the great Achilles.

—Franz Kafka, "A Report for an Academy"

PROLOGUE

Those who know me now will be surprised to learn that I was a great talker as a child. We have a home movie taken when I was two years old, the old-fashioned kind with no sound track, and by now the colors have bled out—a white sky, my red sneakers a ghostly pink—but you can still see how much I used to talk.

I'm doing a bit of landscaping, picking up one stone at a time from our gravel driveway, carrying it to a large tin washtub, dropping it in, and going back for the next. I'm working hard, but showily. I widen my eyes like a silent film star. I hold up a clear piece of quartz to be admired, put it in my mouth, stuff it into one cheek.

My mother appears and removes it. She steps back then, out of the frame, but I'm speaking emphatically now—you can see this in my gestures—and she returns, drops the stone into the tub. The whole thing lasts about five minutes and I never stop talking.

A few years later, Mom read us that old fairy tale in which one sister (the older) speaks in toads and snakes and the other (the younger) in flowers and jewels, and this is the image it conjured for me, this scene from this movie, where my mother puts her hand into my mouth and pulls out a diamond.

I was towheaded back then, prettier as a child than I've turned

out, and dolled up for the camera. My flyaway bangs are pasted down with water and held on one side by a rhinestone barrette shaped like a bow. Whenever I turn my head, the barrette blinks in the sunlight. My little hand sweeps over my tub of rocks. All this, I could be saying, all this will be yours someday.

Or something else entirely. The point of the movie isn't the words themselves. What my parents valued was their extravagant abundance, their inexhaustible flow.

Still, there were occasions on which I had to be stopped. When you think of two things to say, pick your favorite and only say that, my mother suggested once, as a tip to polite social behavior, and the rule was later modified to one in three. My father would come to my bedroom door each night to wish me happy dreams and I would speak without taking a breath, trying desperately to keep him in my room with only my voice. I would see his hand on the doorknob, the door beginning to swing shut. I have something to say! I'd tell him, and the door would stop midway.

Start in the middle then, he'd answer, a shadow with the hall light behind him, and tired in the evenings the way grown-ups are. The light would reflect in my bedroom window like a star you could wish on.

Skip the beginning. Start in the middle.

PART ONE

❄

The storm which blew me out of my past eased off.

—Franz Kafka, "A Report for an Academy"

1

So the middle of my story comes in the winter of 1996. By then, we'd long since dwindled to the family that old home movie foreshadowed—me, my mother, and, unseen but evident behind the camera, my father. In 1996, ten years had passed since I'd last seen my brother, seventeen since my sister disappeared. The middle of my story is all about their absence, though if I hadn't told you that, you might not have known. By 1996, whole days went by in which I hardly thought of either one.

1996. Leap year. Year of the Fire Rat. President Clinton had just been reelected; this would all end in tears. Kabul had fallen to the Taliban. The Siege of Sarajevo had ended. Charles had recently divorced Diana.

Hale-Bopp came swinging into our sky. Claims of a Saturn-like object in the comet's wake first surfaced that November. Dolly, the cloned sheep, and Deep Blue, the chess-playing computer program, were superstars. There was evidence of life on Mars. The Saturn-like object in Hale-Bopp's tail was maybe an alien spaceship. In May of '97, thirty-nine people would kill themselves as a prerequisite to climbing aboard.

Against this backdrop, how ordinary I look. In 1996, I was

twenty-two years old, meandering through my fifth year at the University of California, Davis, and still maybe only a junior or maybe a senior, but so thoroughly uninterested in the niceties of units or requirements or degrees that I wouldn't be graduating anytime soon. My education, my father liked to point out, was wider than it was deep. He said this often.

But I saw no reason to hurry. I'd no particular ambitions beyond being either widely admired or stealthily influential—I was torn between the two. It hardly mattered, as no major seemed to lead reliably to either.

My parents, who were still paying my expenses, found me aggravating. My mother was often aggravated those days. It was something new for her, analeptic doses of righteous aggravation. She was rejuvenated by it. She'd recently announced that she was through being a translator and go-between for me and my father; he and I had hardly spoken since. I don't remember minding. My father was himself a college professor and a pedant to the bone. Every exchange contained a lesson, like the pit in a cherry. To this day, the Socratic method makes me want to bite someone.

Autumn came suddenly that year, like a door opening. One morning I was bicycling to class when a large flock of Canada geese passed overhead. I couldn't see them, or much of anything else, but I heard the jazzy honking above me. There was a tule fog off the fields and I was wrapped inside it, pedaling through clouds. Tule fogs are not like other fogs, not spotty or drifting, but fixed and substantial. Probably anyone would have felt the risk of moving quickly through an unseen world, but I have—or had as a child—a particular penchant for slapstick and mishap, so I took the full thrill from it.

I felt polished by the wet air and maybe just a little migratory myself, just a little wild. This meant I might flirt a bit in the library if I sat next to anyone flirtable or I might daydream in class. I often felt wild back then; I enjoyed the feeling, but nothing had ever come of it.

At lunchtime I grabbed something, probably grilled cheese, let's say it was grilled cheese, in the school cafeteria. I was in the habit of leaving my books on the chair next to me, where they could be quickly moved if someone interesting came by but would discourage the uninteresting. At twenty-two, I had the callowest possible definition of interesting and, by the measure of my own calipers, was far from interesting myself.

A couple was sitting at a table near me and the girl's voice gradually rose to the point where I was forced to pay attention. "You want some fucking space?" she said. She was wearing a short blue T-shirt and a necklace with a glass pendant of an angelfish. Long, dark hair fell in a messy braid down her back. She stood and cleared the table with one motion of her arm. She had beautiful biceps; I remember wishing I had arms like hers.

Dishes fell to the floor and shattered; catsup and cola spilled and mixed in the breakage. There must have been music in the background, because there's always music in the background now, our whole lives sound-tracked (and most of it too ironic to be random. I'm just saying), but honestly I don't remember. Maybe there was only a sweet silence and the spit of grease on the grill.

"How's that?" the girl asked. "Don't tell me to be quiet. I'm just making more space for you." She pushed the table itself over, swung it to one side, dropped it. "Better?" She raised her voice. "Can everyone please leave the room so my boyfriend has more

space? He needs a fucking lot of space." She slammed her chair down onto the pile of catsup and dishes. More sounds of breakage and a sudden waft of coffee.

The rest of us were frozen—forks halfway to our mouths, spoons dipped in our soups, the way people were found after the eruption of Vesuvius.

"Don't do this, baby," her boyfriend said once, but she was doing it and he didn't bother to repeat himself. She moved to another table, empty except for a tray with dirty dishes. There, she methodically broke everything that could be broken, threw everything that could be thrown. A saltshaker spun across the floor to my foot.

A young man rose from his seat, telling her, with a slight stutter, to take a chill pill. She threw a spoon that bounced audibly off his forehead. "Don't side with assholes," she said. Her voice was very not chill.

He sank back, eyes wide. "I'm okay," he assured the room at large, but he sounded unconvinced. And then surprised. "Holy shit! I've been assaulted."

"This is just the shit I can't take," the boyfriend said. He was a big guy, with a thin face, loose jeans, and a long coat. Nose like a knife. "You go ahead and tear it up, you psycho bitch. Just give me back the key to my place first."

She swung another chair, missing my head by maybe four feet—I'm being charitable; it seemed like a lot less—striking my table and upsetting it. I grabbed my glass and plate. My books hit the floor with a loud slap. "Come and get it," she told him.

It struck me funny, a cook's invitation over a pile of broken plates, and I laughed once, convulsively, a strange duck-like hoot

that made everyone turn. And then I stopped laughing, because it was no laughing matter, and everyone turned back. Through the glass walls I could see some people on the quad who'd noticed the commotion and were watching. A threesome on their way in for lunch stopped short at the door.

"Don't think I won't." He took a few steps in her direction. She scooped up a handful of catsup-stained sugar cubes and threw them.

"I'm finished," he said. "We're finished. I'm putting your shit in the hallway and I'm changing the locks." He turned and she threw a glass, which bounced off his ear. He missed a step, staggered, touched the spot with one hand, checked his fingers for blood. "You owe me for gas," he said without looking back. "Mail it." And he was gone.

There was a moment's pause as the door closed. Then the girl turned on the rest of us. "What are you losers looking at?" She picked up one of the chairs and I couldn't tell if she was going to put it back or throw it. I don't think she'd decided.

A campus policeman arrived. He approached me cautiously, hand on his holster. Me! Standing above my toppled table and chair, still holding my harmless glass of milk and my plate with the harmless half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich. "Just put it down, honey," he said, "and sit for a minute." Put it down where? Sit where? Nothing in my vicinity was upright but me. "We can talk about this. You can tell me what's going on. You're not in any trouble yet."

"Not her," the woman behind the counter told him. She was a large woman, and old—forty or more—with a beauty mark on her upper lip and eyeliner collecting in the corners of her eyes. You all

act like you own the place, she'd said to me once, on another occasion, when I sent back a burger for more cooking. But you just come and go. You don't even think how I'm the one who stays.

"The tall one," she told the cop. She pointed, but he was paying no attention, so intent on me and whatever my next move would be.

"Calm down," he said again, soft and friendly. "You're not in any trouble yet." He stepped forward, passing right by the girl with the braid and the chair. I saw her eyes behind his shoulder.

"Never a policeman when you need one," she said to me. She smiled and it was a nice smile. Big white teeth. "No rest for the wicked." She hoisted the chair over her head. "No soup for you." She launched it away from me and the cop, toward the door. It landed on its back.

When the policeman turned to look, I dropped my plate and my fork. I honestly didn't mean to. The fingers of my left hand just unclenched all of a sudden. The noise spun the cop back to me.

I was still holding my glass, half full of milk. I raised it a little, as if proposing a toast. "Don't do it," he said, a whole lot less friendly now. "I'm not playing around here. Don't you fucking test me."

And I threw the glass onto the floor. It broke and splashed milk over one of my shoes and up into my sock. I didn't just let it go. I threw that glass down as hard as I could.

2

FORTY MINUTES LATER, the psycho bitch and I were tucked like ticks into the back of a Yolo County police car, the matter now being way too big for the guileless campus cops. Handcuffed, too, which hurt my wrists a great deal more than I'd ever imagined it would.

Being arrested had seriously improved the woman's mood. "I *told* him I wasn't fucking around," she said, which was almost exactly what the campus cop had also said to me, only more in sorrow than in triumph. "So glad you decided to come with. I'm Harlow Fielding. Drama department."

No shit.

"I never met a Harlow before," I said. I meant a first name Harlow. I'd met a last name Harlow.

"Named after my mother, who was named after Jean Harlow. Because Jean Harlow had beauty *and* brains and *not* because Gramps was a dirty old man. Not even. But what good did beauty and brains do her? I ask you. Like she's this great role model?"

I knew nothing about Jean Harlow except that she was maybe in *Gone With the Wind*, which I'd never seen nor ever wanted to see. That war is over. Get over it. "I'm Rosemary Cooke."

"Rosemary for remembrance," Harlow said. "Awesome. To-

tally, totally charmed." She slid her arms under her butt and then under her legs so her cuffed wrists ended up twisted in front of her. If I'd been able to do the same, we could have shaken hands, as seemed to be her intention, but I couldn't.

We were taken then to the county jail, where this same maneuver created a sensation. A number of policemen were called to watch as Harlow obligingly squatted and stepped over her cuffed hands and back again several times. She deflected their enthusiasm with a winning modesty. "I have very long arms," she said. "I can never find sleeves that fit."

Our arresting officer's name was Arnie Haddick. When Officer Haddick took off his hat, his hair was receding from his forehead in a clean, round curve that left his features nicely uncluttered, like a happy face.

He removed our cuffs and turned us over to the county for processing. "As if we were cheese," Harlow noted. She gave every indication of being an old pro at this.

I was not. The wildness I'd felt that morning had long since vanished and left something squeezed into its place, something like grief or maybe homesickness. What had I done? Why in the world had I done it? Fluorescent lights buzzed like flies above us, picking up the shadows under everyone's eyes, turning us all old, desperate, and a little green.

"Excuse me? How long will this take?" I asked. I was polite as could be. It occurred to me that I was going to miss my afternoon class. European Medieval History. Iron maidens and oubliettes and burned at the stake.

"It takes as long as it takes." The woman from the county gave me a nasty, green look. "Be faster if you don't irritate me with questions."

Too late for that. In the next breath, she sent me to a cell so I'd be out of her hair while she did the paperwork on Harlow. "Don't worry, boss," Harlow told me. "I'll be right along."

"Boss?" the woman from the county repeated.

Harlow shrugged. "Boss. Leader. Mastermind." She gave me that flaming-Zamboni smile. "El Capitán."

The day may come when policemen and college students aren't natural enemies, but I sure don't expect to live to see it. I was made to remove my watch, shoes, and belt, and taken barefoot into a cage with bars and a sticky floor. The woman who collected my things was as mean as she could be. There was an odor in the air, a strong amalgamation of beer, cafeteria lasagna, bug spray, and piss.

The bars went all the way to the top of the cell. I checked to be sure; I'm a pretty good climber, for a girl. More fluorescents in the ceiling, louder buzzing, and one of the lights was blinking, so the scene in the cell dimmed and brightened as if whole days were rapidly passing. Good morning, good night, good morning, good night. It would have been nice to be wearing shoes.

Two women were already in residence. One sat on the single naked mattress. She was young and fragile, black and drunk. "I need a doctor," she said to me. She held out her elbow; blood was slowly oozing from a narrow gash, its color changing from red to purple in the blinking light. She screamed so suddenly I flinched. "I need help here! Why won't anyone help me?" No one, myself included, responded and she didn't speak again.

The other woman was middle-aged, white, nervous, and thin as a needle. She had stiff, bleached hair and a salmon-colored suit that was dressy, considering the occasion. She'd just rear-ended a cop car and she said that only the week before she'd been arrested shoplifting tortillas and salsa for a Sunday afternoon football party at

her house. "This is so not good," she told me. "Honestly, I have the worst luck."

Eventually I was processed. I can't tell you how many hours had passed, as I had no watch, but it was considerably after I'd given up all hope. Harlow was still in the office, shifting about on a rocky chair, making the leg thump while she fine-tuned her statement. She'd been charged with destruction of property and creating a public nuisance. They were garbage charges, she told me. They didn't concern her; they shouldn't concern me. She made a phone call to her boyfriend, the guy from the cafeteria. He drove right over and she was gone before they finished my paperwork.

I saw how useful it could be to have a boyfriend. Not for the first time.

I faced the same charges, but with one important addition—I was also accused of assaulting an officer and no one suggested this charge was garbage.

By now I'd convinced myself I'd done absolutely nothing but be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I called my parents, because who else was I going to call? I hoped my mother would answer, as she usually did, but she was out playing bridge. She's an infamous bridge hustler—I'm amazed there are still people who'll play with her, but that's how desperate for bridge some people get; it's like a drug. She'd be home in an hour or two with her ill-gotten winnings rattling in a silver catch purse, happier than usual.

Until my father told her my news. "What the hell did you do?" My father's voice was exasperated, as if I'd interrupted him in the midst of something more important, but it was just as he'd expected.

"Nothing. Called out a campus cop." I felt my worries slipping from me like skin from a snake. My father often had this effect on me. The more irritated he was, the more I became smooth and

amused, which, of course, irritated him all the more. It would anyone, let's be fair.

"The littler the job, the bigger the chip on the shoulder," my father said; that's how quickly my arrest became a teaching moment. "I always thought your brother would be the one to call from jail," he added. It startled me, this rare mention of my brother. My father was usually more circumspect, especially on the home phone, which he believed was bugged.

Nor did I respond with the obvious, that my brother might very well go to jail, probably would someday, but he would never ever call.

Three words were scratched in ballpoint blue on the wall above the phone. *Think a head*. I thought how that was good advice, but maybe a bit late for anyone using that phone. I thought how it would be a good name for a beauty salon.

"I don't have a clue what to do next here," my father said. "You're going to have to talk me through it."

"It's my first time, too, Dad."

"You're in no position to be cute."

And then, all of a sudden, I was crying so hard I couldn't speak. I took several runny breaths and made several tries, but no words came out.

Dad's tone changed. "I suppose someone put you up to it," he said. "You've always been a follower. Well, sit tight there"—as if I had a choice—"and I'll see what I can do."

The bleached blonde was the next to make a call. "You'll never guess where I am!" she said. Her tone was bright and breathy, and it turned out she'd dialed the wrong number.

Because of who he was, a professional man used to having his own way, my father managed to get the arresting officer on the

phone. Officer Haddick had children of his own: he treated my father with all the sympathy my father felt he deserved. Soon they were calling each other Vince and Arnie, and the assault charge had been reduced to interfering with a police officer in the performance of his duty and soon after that it was dropped altogether. I was left with destruction of property and creating a public nuisance. And then these charges were dropped, too, because the eyeliner woman at the cafeteria came down and spoke for me. She insisted that I was an innocent bystander and had clearly not meant to break my glass. "We were all in shock," she said. "It was such a scene, you can't imagine." But by then I'd been forced to promise my dad that I would come home for the whole of Thanksgiving so the matter could be properly discussed over four days and face-to-face. It was a heavy price to pay for spilling my milk. Not even counting time served.