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A Gate at the Stairs

Written by Lorrie Moore

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LORRIE MOORE

A Gate at the Stairs

A NOVEL



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"As for living, we shall have our servants do that for us."
—VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM, *Axel*

"Suzuki!"
—*Madama Butterfly*

"All seats provide equal viewing of the universe."
—MUSEUM GUIDE, HAYDEN PLANETARIUM

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I

The cold came late that fall and the songbirds were caught off guard. By the time the snow and wind began in earnest, too many had been suckered into staying, and instead of flying south, instead of already having flown south, they were huddled in people's yards, their feathers puffed for some modicum of warmth. I was looking for a job. I was a student and needed babysitting work, and so I would walk from interview to interview in these attractive but wintry neighborhoods, the eerie multitudes of robins pecking at the frozen ground, dun-gray and stricken—though what bird in the best of circumstances does not look a little stricken—until at last, late in my search, at the end of a week, startlingly, the birds had disappeared. I did not want to think about what had happened to them. Or rather, that is an expression—of politeness, a false promise of delicacy—for in fact I wondered about them all the time: imagining them dead, in stunning heaps in some killing cornfield outside of town, or dropped from the sky in twos and threes for miles down along the Illinois state line.

I was looking in December for work that would begin at the start of the January term. I'd finished my exams and was answering ads from the student job board, ones for "childcare provider." I liked children—I did!—or rather, I liked them OK. They were sometimes interesting. I admired their stamina and candor. And I was good with them in that I could make funny faces at the babies and with the older children teach them card tricks and speak in the theatrically sarcastic tones that disarmed and en-

thralled them. But I was not especially skilled at minding children for long spells; I grew bored, perhaps like my own mother. After I spent too much time playing their games, my mind grew peckish and longed to lose itself in some book I had in my backpack. I was ever hopeful of early bedtimes and long naps.

I had come from Dellacrosse Central High, from a small farm on the old Perryville Road, to this university town of Troy, "the Athens of the Midwest," as if from a cave, like the priest-child of a Colombian tribe I'd read about in Cultural Anthropology, a boy made mystical by being kept in the dark for the bulk of his childhood and allowed only stories—no experience—of the outside world. Once brought out into light, he would be in a perpetual, holy condition of bedazzlement and wonder; no story would ever have been equal to the thing itself. And so it was with me. Nothing had really prepared me. Not the college piggy bank in the dining room, the savings bonds from my grandparents, or the used set of World Book encyclopedias with their beautiful color charts of international wheat production and photographs of presidential birthplaces. The flat green world of my parents' hogless, horseless farm—its dullness, its flies, its quiet ripped open daily by the fumes and whining of machinery—twisted away and left me with a brilliant city life of books and films and witty friends. Someone had turned on the lights. Someone had led me out of the cave—of Perryville Road. My brain was on fire with Chaucer, Sylvia Plath, Simone de Beauvoir. Twice a week a young professor named Thad, dressed in jeans *and* a tie, stood before a lecture hall of stunned farm kids like me and spoke thrillingly of Henry James's masturbation of the comma. I was riveted. I had never before seen a man wear jeans with a tie.

The ancient cave, of course, had produced a mystic; my childhood had produced only me.

In the corridors students argued over Bach, Beck, Balkanization, bacterial warfare. Kids said things to me like "You're from

the country. Is it true that if you eat a bear's liver you'll die?" They asked, "Ever know someone who did you-know-what with a cow?" Or "Is it an actual fact that pigs won't eat bananas?" What I did know was that a goat will not really consume a tin can: a goat just liked to lick the paste on the label. But no one ever asked me that.

From our perspective that semester, the events of September—we did not yet call them 9/11—seemed both near and far. Marching poli-sci majors chanted on the quads and the pedestrian malls, "The chickens have come home to roost! The chickens have come home to roost!" When I could contemplate them at all—the chickens, the roosting—it was as if in a craning crowd, through glass, the way I knew (from Art History) people stared at the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre: *La Gioconda!* its very name like a snake, its sly, tight smile encased at a distance but studied for portentous flickers. It was, like September itself, a cat's mouth full of canaries. My roommate, Murph—a nose-pierced, hinky-toothed blonde from Dubuque, who used black soap and black dental floss and whose quick opinions were impressively harsh (she pronounced Dubuque "Du-ba-cue") and who once terrified her English teachers by saying the character she admired most in all of literature was Dick Hickock in *In Cold Blood*—had met her boyfriend on September tenth, and when she woke up at his place, she'd phoned me, in horror and happiness, the television blaring. "I know, I know," she said, her voice shrugging into the phone. "It was a terrible price to pay for love, but it had to be done."

I raised my voice to a mock shout. "You sick slut! People were killed. All you think about is your own pleasure." Then we fell into a kind of hysteria—frightened, guilty, hopeless laughter I have never actually witnessed in women over thirty.

"Well," I sighed, realizing I might not be seeing her all that much from then on in, "I hope there's just hanky—no panky."

"Nah," she said. "With panky there's always tears, and it ruins the hanky." I would miss her.

Though the movie theaters closed for two nights, and for a week even our yoga teacher put up an American flag and sat in front of it, in a lotus position, eyes closed, saying, "Let us now breathe deeply in honor of our great country" (I looked around frantically, never getting the breathing right), mostly our conversations slid back shockingly, resiliently, to other topics: backup singers for Aretha Franklin, or which Korean-owned restaurant had the best Chinese food. Before I'd come to Troy, I had never had Chinese food. But now, two blocks from my apartment, next to a shoe-repair shop, was a place called the Peking Café where I went as often as I could for the Buddha's Delight. At the cash register small boxes of broken fortune cookies were sold at discount. "Only cookie broken," promised the sign, "not fortune." I vowed to buy a box one day to see what guidance—obscure or mystical or mercenary, but Confucian!—might be had in bulk. Meanwhile, I collected them singly, one per every cookie that came at the end atop my check, briskly, efficiently, before I'd even finished eating. Perhaps I ate too slowly. I'd grown up on Friday fish fries and green beans in butter (for years, my mother had told me, margarine, considered a foreign food, could be purchased only across state lines, at "oleo" stands hastily erected along the highway—PARK HERE FOR PARKAY read the signs—just past the Illinois governor's welcome billboard, farmers muttering that only Jews bought there). And so now these odd Chinese vegetables—fungal and gnomic in their brown sauce—had the power for me of an adventure or a rite, a statement to be savored. Back in Dellacrosse the dining was divided into "Casual," which meant you ate it standing up or took it away, and the high end, which was called "Sit-Down Dining." At the Wie Haus Family Restaurant, where we went for sit-down, the seats were red leatherette and the walls were covered with the local *gemütlichkeit:* dark paneling and

framed deep kitsch, wide-eyed shepherdesses and jesters. The breakfast menus read "Guten Morgen." Sauces were called "gravy." And the dinner menu featured cheese curd meatloaf and steak "cooked to your likeness." On Fridays there were fish fries or boils at which they served "lawyers" (burbot or eelpout), so-called because *their hearts were in their butts.* (They were fished from the local lake, where all the picnic spots had trash cans that read NO FISH GUTS.) On Sundays there was not only marshmallow and maraschino cherry salad and something called "Grandma Jell-O," but "prime rib with au jus," a precise knowledge of French—or English or even food coloring—not being the restaurant's strong point. *A la carte* meant soup *or* salad; *dinner* meant soup *and* salad. Roquefort dressing was called "Rockford dressing." The house wine—red, white, and pink—all bore the requisite bouquet of rose, soap, and graphite, a whiff of hay, a hint of hooterville, though the menu remained mute about all this, sticking to straightforward declarations of hue. Light ale and dunkel were served. For dessert there was usually a *glückschmerz* pie, with the fluffy look and heft of a small snowbank. After any meal, sleepiness ensued.

Now, however, away and on my own, seduced and salted by brown sauce, I felt myself thinning and alive. The Asian owners let me linger over my books and stay as long as I wanted to: "Take your tie! No lush!" they said kindly as they sprayed the neighboring tables with disinfectant. I ate mango and papaya and nudged the stringy parts out of my teeth with a cinnamon toothpick. I had one elegantly folded cookie—a short paper nerve baked in an ear. I had a handleless cup of hot, stale tea, poured and reheated from a pail stored in the restaurant's walk-in refrigerator.

I would tug the paper slip from the stiff clutches of the cookie and save it for a bookmark. All my books had fortunes protruding like tiny tails from their pages. *You are the crispy noodle in the salad of life. You are the master of your own destiny.* Murph had

always added the phrase "in bed" to any fortune cookie fortune, so in my mind I read them that way, too: *You are the master of your own destiny. In bed.* Well, that was true. *Debt is a seductive liar. In bed.* Or the less-well-translated *Your fate will blossom like a bloom.*

Or the sly, wise guy: *A refreshing change is in your future.*

Sometimes, as a better joke, I added *though NOT in bed.*

You will soon make money. Or: *Wealth is a wise woman's man. Though NOT in bed.*

And so I needed a job. I had donated my plasma several times for cash, but the last time I had tried, the clinic had turned me away, saying my plasma was cloudy from my having eaten cheese the night before. Cloudy Plasma! I would be the bass guitarist! It was so hard not to eat cheese. Even the whipped and spreadable kind we derisively called "cram cheese" (because it could be used for sealing windows and caulking tile) had a certain soothing allure. I looked daily at the employment listings. Childcare was in demand: I turned in my final papers and answered the ads.

One forty-ish pregnant woman after another hung up my coat, sat me in her living room, then waddled out to the kitchen, got my tea, and waddled back in, clutching her back, slopping tea onto the saucer, and asking me questions. "What would you do if our little baby started crying and wouldn't stop?" "Are you available evenings?" "What do you think of as a useful educational activity for a small child?" I had no idea. I had never seen so many pregnant women in such a short period of time—five in all. It alarmed me. They did not look radiant. They looked reddened with high blood pressure and frightened. "I would put him in a stroller and take him for a walk," I said. I knew my own mother had never asked such questions of anyone. "Dolly," she said to me once, "as long as the place was moderately fire resistant, I'd deposit you anywhere."

"Moderately?" I queried. She rarely called me by my name, Tassie. She called me Doll, Dolly, Dollylah, or Tassalah.

"I wasn't going to worry and interfere with you." She was the only Jewish woman I'd ever known who felt like that. But she was a Jewish woman married to a Lutheran farmer named Bo and perhaps because of that had the same indifferent reserve the mothers of my friends had. Halfway through my childhood I came to guess that she was practically blind as well. It was the only explanation for the thick glasses she failed often even to find. Or for the kaleidoscope of blood vessels burst, petunia-like, in her eyes, scarlet blasting into the white from mere eyestrain, or a careless swipe with her hand. It explained the strange way she never quite looked at me when we were speaking, staring at a table or down at a tile of a floor, as if halfheartedly plotting its disinfection while my scarcely controlled rage flew from my mouth in sentences I hoped would be, perhaps not then but perhaps later, like knives to her brain.

"Will you be in town for Christmas break?" the mothers asked.

I sipped at the tea. "No, I'm going home. But I will be back in January."

"When in January?"

I gave them my references and a written summary of my experience. My experience was not all that much—just the Pitskys and the Schultzes back home. But as experience, too, I had once, as part of a class project on human reproduction, carried around for an entire week a sack of flour the exact weight and feel of an infant. I'd swaddled it and cuddled it and placed it in safe, cushioned places for naps, but once, when no one was looking, I stuffed it in my backpack with a lot of sharp pens, and it got stabbed. My books, powdery white the rest of the term, became a joke in the class. I left this off my résumé, however.

But the rest I'd typed up. To gild the lily-livered, as my dad sometimes said, I was wearing what the department stores called "a career jacket," and perhaps the women liked the professionalism of that. They were professionals themselves. Two were lawyers, one was a journalist, one was a doctor, one a high school

teacher. Where were the husbands? "Oh, at work," the women all said vaguely. All except the journalist, who said, "Good question!"

The last house was a gray stucco prairie house with a chimney cloaked in dead ivy. I had passed the house earlier in the week—it was on a corner lot and I'd seen so many birds there. Now there was just a flat expanse of white. Around the whiteness was a low wood Qual Line fence, and when I pushed open its gate it slipped a little; one of its hinges was loose and missing a nail. I had to lift the gate to relatch it. This maneuver, one I'd performed any number of times in my life, gave me a certain satisfaction—of tidiness, of restoration, of magic me!—when in fact it should have communicated itself as something else: someone's ill-disguised decrepitude, items not cared for properly but fixed repeatedly in a make-do fashion, needful things having gotten away from their caregiver. Soon the entire gate would have to be held together with a bungee cord, the way my father once fixed a door in our barn.

Two slate steps led, in an odd mismatch of rock, downward to a flagstone walk, all of which, as well as the grass, wore a light dusting of snow—I laid the first footprints of the day; perhaps the front door was seldom used. Some desiccated mums were still in pots on the porch. Ice frosted the crisp heads of the flowers. Leaning against the house were a shovel and a rake, and shoved into the corner two phone books still in shrink-wrap.

The woman of the house opened the door. She was pale and compact, no sags or pouches, linen skin tight across the bone. The hollows of her cheeks were powdered darkly, as if with the pollen of a tiger lily. Her hair was cropped short and dyed the fashionable bright auburn of a ladybug. Her earrings were buttons of deepest orange, her leggings mahogany, her sweater rust-colored, and her lips maroonish brown. She looked like a highly con-

trolled oxidation experiment. "Come in," she said, and I entered, mutely at first and then, as always, apologetically, as if I were late, though I wasn't. At that time in my life I was never late. Only a year later would I suddenly have difficulty hanging on to any sense of time, leaving friends sitting, invariably, for a half hour here or there. Time would waft past me undetectably or absurdly—laughably when I could laugh—in quantities I was incapable of measuring or obeying.

But that year, when I was twenty, I was as punctual as a priest. Were priests punctual? Cave-raised, divinely dazed, I believed them to be.

The woman closed the heavy oak door behind me, and I stamped my feet on the braided rug I was standing on, to shake off the snow. I started then to take off my shoes. "Oh, you don't have to take off your shoes," she said. "There's too much of that prissy Japanese stuff going on in this town. Bring in the mud." She smiled—big, theatrical, a little crazy. I had forgotten her name and was hoping she'd say it soon; if she didn't, she might not say it at all.

"I'm Tassie Keltjin," I said, thrusting out my hand.

She took it and then studied my face. "Yes," she said slowly, absently, unnervingly scrutinizing each of my eyes. Her gaze made a slow, observing circle around my nose and mouth. "I'm Sarah Brink," she said finally. I was not used to being looked at close up, not used to the thing I was looking at looking back. Certainly my own mother had never done such looking, and in general my face had the kind of smooth, round stupidity that did not prompt the world's study. I had always felt as hidden as the hull in a berry, as secret and fetal as the curled fortune in a cookie, and such hiddenness was not without its advantages, its egotisms, its grief-fed grandiosities.

"Here, let me take your coat," Sarah Brink said finally, and only then, as she lifted it off me and headed across the foyer to

hang it on a hat rack, did I see that she was as thin as a pin, not pregnant at all.

She led me into the living room, stopping at the large back window first. I followed her, tried to do what she did. In the yard most of a large oak tree split by lightning had been hacked and stacked by the garage for winter firewood. Near its old stump another tree—tenuous, young, with the look of a swizzle stick—had been planted, trussed, and braced. But Sarah was not studying the trees. "Oh, for the love of God, look at these poor dogs," she said. We stood there, watching. The dogs next door were being kept in the yard by an invisible electric fence. One of them, a German shepherd, understood the fence, but the other one, a little terrier, did not. The German shepherd would get a game of chase going around the yard and lead the terrier right to the electrified border and then stop short, leaving the terrier to barrel on ahead into the electricity. The stunned terrier would then come racing back, shrieking with pain. This amused the German shepherd, who continued to do this, and the shocked terrier, desperate for play, would forget, and get started again, and barrel on into the electricity again, yowling. "This has been going on for weeks," said Sarah.

"Reminds me of dating," I said, and Sarah spun her head, to size me up again. I could see now that she was at least two inches taller than I was; I could peer up her nostrils, the weave of tiny hairs like the crisscross of branches seen from the base of a tree. She smiled, which pushed her cheeks out and made the blush beneath them look shadowy and wrong. Heat flew to my face. Dating? What did I know of it? My roommate, Murph, had done all the dating and had essentially abandoned me so that she could now sleep every night with this new guy she'd met. She had bequeathed me her vibrator, a strange swirling, buzzing thing that when switched to high gyrated in the air like someone's bored thick finger going *whoop-dee-doo.* Whose penis could this

possibly resemble? Someone who had worked in a circus, perhaps! Maybe Burt Lancaster's in *Trapeze.* I kept the thing on the kitchen counter where Murph had left it for me and occasionally I used it to stir my chocolate milk. I *had* once actually gone out on a date—last year—and I had prepared for it by falling into a trance in a lingerie store and buying a forty-five-dollar black Taiwanese bra padded with oil and water pouches, articulated with wire, lifelike to the touch, a complete bosom entirely on its own, independent of any wearer, and which when fastened to my particular chest looked like a dark animal strapped there to nurse. I was filled with a pleasing floating feeling while wearing it; I felt heated and sacrificial, and so I imagined it improved my chances in the world, my own actual bust having been left (I once joked) on a plinth in the basement of the Dellacrosse library, the better to free my spine for erect walking.

All that preparation was the futile preening of a fly: my poor date cleared his throat and told me he was gay. We lay there together on my bed, only partially disrobed, our black underwear misadvertising our experience. His back was full of rosy pimples: "bacne," he'd called it. I rubbed my fingertips across it, a kind of Braille, its message one of creaturely energy and worry. "Queer as Dick's hatband," he announced into the room, candor—or a pretense to candor—being the cheapest and most efficient assault on hope (a hope, I had to admit, that had, to use my dad's expression, gilded its own lily-liver and become an expectation). "Dick's hatband?" I'd repeated, staring at the ceiling. I had no idea what that meant. I thought mutely and appallingly of the band on a hat that Dick Hickock might wear. We'd stayed up for an hour after his confession, both of us trembling and teary, and then got up and for some reason decided to make a cake. We had wanted to have sex but ended up baking a cake? "I really, really like you so much," I said when the cake was done, and when he said nothing in reply, a hard, stubborn silence entered the room and reverber-

ated as if it were a sound. I said awkwardly, "Is there an echo in here?"

And he looked at me pitifully and said, "Well, I wish there were, but there's not." Then he went into the bathroom and came out wearing all my makeup, which for some reason made me believe he had lied about being gay. "You know," I said, testing him, but mostly pleading, "if you concentrated you could be straight. I'm sure of it. Just relax, close your eyes once in a while, and just do it. Heterosexuality—well, it takes a lot of concentration!" I said, a begging sound in my voice. "It takes a lot for everybody!"

"It may take more than I have," he said. I made him coffee—he asked for cream, and then cold cream and then paper towels—and then he left, taking a slice of warm cake with him. I never saw him again, except once, briefly, from across the street when I was walking to class. He had shaved his head and was wearing thick violet boots and no raincoat in the rain. He walked in a bouncy zigzag movement, as if avoiding sniper fire. He was with a woman who was more than six feet tall and had an Adam's apple the size of a small swallowed fist. A long scarf—whose was it? I couldn't tell; at points it seemed to belong to them both—flew exuberantly behind them like the tail of a kite.

Now Sarah turned back to the window. "The neighbors just put in that invisible fence," she said. "In November. I'm sure it causes MS or something."

"Who are they?" I asked. "The neighbors, I mean." I would show some anthropological interest in the neighborhood. No one I'd interviewed with had yet called me back. Perhaps they'd desired a lively take-charge type and I'd seemed dull, slow to get involved. It had started to worry me that if I wasn't careful my meekness could become a habit, a tic, something hardwired that my mannerisms would continue to express throughout my life regardless of my efforts—the way a drunk who, though on the wagon, still staggers and slurs like a drunk.

"The neighbors?" Sarah Brink's face brightened artificially, her eyes wide. Her voice went flat and stagey. "Well, in that there dog house there's Catherine Welbourne and her husband, Stuart, *and* Stuart's lover, Michael Batt. The Welbournes and the Batts. Who could make up these names?"

"So—Michael's gay?" I said, perhaps now showing too much interest.

"Well, yes," said Sarah. "Much is made of Michael's being gay. 'Michael's gay,' the neighbors whisper, 'Michael's gay. Michael's gay.' Well, yes, Michael's gay. But of course the thing is, *Stuart's* gay." Sarah's eyes looked merry and bright—the frantic but pleased cheap sparkle of Christmas dreck.

I cleared my throat. "And what does Catherine think of all this?" I ventured. I tried to smile.

"Catherine." Sarah sighed and moved away from the window. "Catherine, Catherine. Well, Catherine spends a lot of time in her room, listening to Erik Satie. The beard, poor thing, is always the last to know. But look." She wanted to change the subject now, get down to business. "Have a seat. Here's the deal." She motioned with an arm tossed suddenly out in a spasm. "Childcare," she seemed to begin, but then stopped, as if that were sufficient.

I sat down on a small sofa that was upholstered in a kind of pillow ticking. *Childcare,* like *healthcare,* had become one word. I would become a dispenser of it. I opened my backpack and began fumbling through it, looking for a copy of my résumé. Sarah sat across from me on another pillow-ticking sofa, the very brightness of her looking as if it might stain the cushions. She twisted her legs up and around each other in such a way that the lower half of one gave the illusion of jutting out of the upper half of the other, as if she had the backwards knees of a crane. She began clearing her throat, so I stopped fumbling and set the backpack aside.

"Already the winter air is getting to me," she said. She turned and coughed again loudly, in that parched fashion that doctors

call "unproductive." She patted her flat stomach. "Here's the deal," she said again. "We are adopting."

"Adopting?"

"A baby. We are adopting a baby in two weeks. That's why we're advertising for a sitter. We'd like to line someone up ahead of time for some regular hours."

I didn't know anything about adoption. I'd known only one adopted girl when I was growing up, Becky Sussluch, spoiled and beautiful and at sixteen having an affair with a mussed and handsome student teacher that I myself had a crush on. In general I thought of adoption much as I thought of most things in life: uneasily. Adoption seemed both a cruel joke and a lovely daydream—a nice way of avoiding the blood and pain of giving birth, or, from a child's perspective, a realized fantasy of your parents not really being your parents. Your genes could thrust one arm in the air and pump up and down. *Yes!* You were not actually related to *Them!* Strangely, at the stamp machine at the post office, I had recently bought the newly issued adoption postage stamps—*Adopt a Child, Build a Family, Create a World*—and gleefully adhered them to my letters home to my mother. It was a form of malice I felt entitled to. It was quiet and deniable.

"Congratulations," I murmured now to Sarah. Was that what one said?

Sarah's face lit up gratefully, as if no one had yet said an encouraging word to her on the matter. "Why, thank you! I have so much work at the restaurant that everyone I mention this to acts peculiar and quiet, so meanly worried for me. They say, 'Really!' and then all this tension springs to their mouth. They think I'm too old."

I accidentally nodded. I had no idea, conversationally, where we were. I searched, as I too often found myself having to do, to find a language, or even an octave, in which to speak. I wondered how old she was.

"I own Le Petit Moulin," Sarah Brink added.

Le Petit Moulin. I knew of it a little. It was one of those expensive restaurants downtown, every entree freshly hairy with dill, every soup and dessert dripped upon as preciously as a Pollock, filets and cutlets sprinkled with lavender dust once owned by pixies, restaurants to which students never went, except if newly pinned to a fraternity boy or dating an assistant dean or hosting a visit from their concerned suburban parents. I knew Le Petit Moulin served things that sounded like instruments—timbales, quenelles—God only knew what they were. I had once tried to study the menu in the lit window near the entrance, and as I stared at the words, the sting of my own exile had moistened my eyes. It was a restaurant that probably served my father's potatoes, though my father would not have been able to go in. The lowest price for dinner was twenty-two dollars, the highest, forty-five. Forty-five! You could get an oil-and-water bra for that price!

I fumbled in my bag again for my résumé, and found it folded and bent but handed it to Sarah anyway. I spoke. "My father supplied a few of the restaurants around here. A few years back it was, I think."

Sarah Brink looked at my résumé. "Are you related to Bo Keltjin—Keltjin potatoes?"

It startled me to hear my father's potatoes—Kennebecs, Norlands, Pontiacs, Yukon golds, some the size of marbles, some grapefruits, depending on drought and digging times and what the beetles were up to—all summed up and uttered that way right here in her living room. "That's my dad," I said.

"Why, I remember your father very well. His Klamath pearls were famous. Also the yellow fingerlings. And his purple and pink confettis were the first to be sold in those little netted berry pints, like jewels. And those new potatoes he called 'Keltjin duck eggs.' I had a theory about those."

I nodded. Returning from his English honeymoon with my

mom, my father had actually smuggled a many-eyed jersey royal straight through Chicago customs, and upon returning to Dellacrosse, he'd grown them in pots and troughs in the barn in winter and in the ground in spring and sold them to restaurants as "duck eggs."

"I'd rush out to the farmers' market at six a.m. to get them. Come April, I should put those back on the menu." She was getting dreamy. Still, it was nice to hear my father spoken well of. He was not really respected as a farmer back home: he was a hobbyist, a truck farmer, with no real acreage, just some ducks (who every fall raped one another in a brutal fashion we never got used to), a dog, a tractor, a website (a website, for Christ's sake!), and two decorative, brockle-headed cows of dubious dairiness. (They were named Bess and Guess, or Milk and Manure, according to my dad, and he would not let them trample the stream banks the way most of the farmers around us did with their cows. I had once milked Bess, carefully cutting my fingernails beforehand, so as not to hurt her; the intimate feel of her lavender-veined and hairy breasts had almost made me puke. "All right, you don't have to do that again," my dad had said. What kind of farmer's daughter was I? I'd leaned my forehead against Bess's side to steady myself, and the sudden warmth, along with my own queasiness, made me feel I loved her.) We had also once had an ebullient pig named Helen, who would come when you called her name and smiled like a dolphin when you spoke to her. And then we didn't see her for a few days, and one morning over bacon and eggs, my brother said, "Is this Helen?" I dropped my fork and cried, "This is Helen? Is this Helen?!" and my mother, too, stopped eating and looked hard at my father: "Bo, is this Helen?" The next pig we got we never met and its name was #WK3746. Later we got a sweet but skittish goat named Lucy, who, sometimes along with our dog, Blot, traipsed around the yard, free as a bird.