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Opening Extract from...

Jacob's Folly

Written by Rebecca Miller

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1

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Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind . . .

–Tennesee Williams, *Orpheus Descending*

Evil is the chair of the good.

–Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov

1

I, the being in question, having spent nearly three hundred years lost as a pomegranate pip in a lake of aspic, amnesiac, bodiless, and comatose, a nugget of spirit but nothing else, found myself quickening, gaining form, weight, and, finally, consciousness. I did not remember dying, so my first thoughts were confused, and a little desperate.

As the blinding layer of black cloud I was enshrouded in dissipated, I saw the moon: opalescent, crater-pocked, impassive; frighteningly close. Indifferent stars carved up the firmament with their dazzling, ancient patterns. There was an echoing sound, like huge air bubbles escaping flatulently from an enormous wide-mouthed bottle underwater in a Turkish bath with a domed roof, but there was also a tearing—a continuous ripping, as if a universe-sized sheet of canvas were being torn asunder. I now know this was the fabric of time. I felt intensely alone and cried out, but my shriek sounded submerged. Instinctively, I beat the wings I didn't know I had, and rose. I could fly! Was I dreaming? The black air was surprisingly viscous. My wings outstretched, I let myself descend, circling slowly through the thick stuff, passing through roiling, wispy clouds that felt cool on my skin. I was definitely awake. Could I be an angel? Euphoria and disbelief gathered in me. I reveled at having been chosen, against all odds, to

be part of the heavenly host. I yearned to admire myself—or better, to be admired. I knew I must be very beautiful. I flapped my wings, spreading them wide, banking, making a slow round, wending my way down through the night. Below me, a web of lights, like a spume of stars, spilled out into a great darkness. As I neared, I saw the blackness churning, cresting: the sea. I was looking down on the earth! But what were all those lights?

Descending more rapidly as old rosy-fingers passed her bright hand over the ocean, washing it with light, I could now make out a crust of houses, built up on the twinkling island below like a skin malady. The massive grid of roofs rose to meet me vertiginously.

Swirling through the atmosphere, I had no idea where I was, but I knew I'd been gone a long time. Smooth-hipped, humpish carriages gleamed at the doors of the toylike dwellings; streetlamps spilled pools of steady light on ruled streets as smooth as stretched toffee: it was the future, I knew it. The last tool of illumination I had seen was a porcelain candelabrum beside my bed in Paris, in 1773. It was encrusted with light green leaves, tiny pink roses, and cherubim.

Still in the meat of my youth, I lay shivering with fever, my chest tight, sweat trickling down my sides. Now and then Solange would look in on me, the silk of her dress whispering as she moved about the room, replacing my water jug or plumping my pillow. Her gardenia perfume was too pungent for my strangled breath and I turned away as she leaned over me, yet I never took my eyes from the candelabrum. I found it a little garish—but what did I know? I was an ex-peddler, born in a tenement. I was lucky to even be next to this six-branched, delicately fluted masterpiece with twelve naked winged babies crawling over its glazed surface. Cascades of hardened beeswax spilled from each candle and all along the porcelain base, mingling with the cupids and tangling with the roses—the result of a week-long bacchanal, my meager staff too exhausted from entertaining the guests to scrape wax off candlesticks in the morning.

I watched, fascinated, my eyes dry, breath short, as each drip was

formed: at the base of the flame, a little pool of molten wax glistened, plump as a tear on the rim of a woman's eye; when the pool grew too great, it breached the worn edge of the candle, trickling freely along the shaft and finding its crooked path down the petrified waterfall. Moving farther and farther away from the source of heat, the cooling wax became hesitant, cloudy, until it froze entirely, fusing itself to the spillage.

I stared at the wax dripping down the candles for hours and hours, until, at dawn, I died. Sunday, the seventh of February, 1773. I was thirty-one. After that, nothing. And now I was an angel! I imagined myself as a fully formed Christian seraph, a Viking with blond hair, a beautiful chiseled torso, hairless feet, and eyes the color of whiskey. When I was alive, I was dark haired, short, slight, with light eyes, strong teeth, and a thick, long sex that I scented and coiled inside my britches daily with great care and pride, an aspect of my physicality which I hoped had been duplicated by the Almighty; but whenever I tried to look down at myself I could not move my neck, and my arms felt very weak. I assumed this stiffness was due to the long period of being dead.

Something amazing had happened to my sight: it was as if the top of my head had been removed and replaced with an enormous eye. I could see jagged purple clouds drifting above me, the streets stretching away at either side, and the houses below. *This is how angels see*, I marveled.

I noticed a gigantic figure stride out of one of the shiny carriages. Trying to focus on him and ignore the rest of the nearly 360-degree view, I descended cautiously, not yet in full command of my wings, afraid that the man might see me, yet half hoping he would. The thought of bringing this Titan to his knees with astonishment and awe was attractive to me. I imagined myself as an angel in a painting, my chiton frozen mid-billow as I reached my delicate hands out expressively, the object of my communication falling to the ground with awe and wonder, his eyes rolling up in his head.

Yet, as I hovered above him, I had an alarming double vision: I saw the man, and I *knew* him.

2

Reliable, true Leslie Senzatimore stood on his square of new-mown grass at the cusp of dawn, planted his feet far apart, leaned back, and aimed a glistening arc of piss straight over the fading moon. The heavenly body glowed, lassoed by his steaming ribbon, and maybe even claimed by a man who, at forty-four, had every reason to be content.

Unlike most of the residents of this tree-lined Long Island street, Leslie owned his house outright; a split-level ranch-style home presently stuffed with three sleeping children, one au pair, a splendid wife, two cats, a daughter-in-law, and an aging cocker spaniel. A vintage motorboat, totem of the family's well-earned leisure, gleamed beneath a tarp; four cars, of varying sizes and prices, from his wife's toy-strewn Ford Explorer to his stepson's dusty Slovakian compact, were evidence of busy, work-filled lives. A smaller house to one side was also Leslie's, and contained his hard-drinking in-laws, the most voluble of a spate of dependents that Leslie had welcomed onto his back throughout his adult life like a cheerful Sisyphus. Leslie was a natural hero, and had been ever since the day he had rescued the kittens from under the Bobiks' roof when he was thirteen years old, back in 1981.

On that day, Mrs. Bobik had come puffing into the Senzatimore kitchen and dropped onto the comfy chair by the window, her flowered

housedress darkened with sweat between enormous low-slung breasts, the pale flesh under her arms ruffled like the fat on a plucked chicken. This act immediately claimed the solemn attention of Leslie and his four siblings, who were at that moment eating cereal at the kitchen table, because that overstuffed armchair had belonged to their father—their father had recently hanged himself—and nobody got to sit in that chair. Evelyn Senzatimore, however, stifled an urge to flush the woman out of her house and waited stoically for Mrs. Bobik to unburden herself, as she had nearly every day since Mr. Bobik disappeared, leaving her childless and confused, seven years earlier. A hopeless alcoholic, he had last been seen staggering outside the Woolworth's in Las Vegas by a local honeymooning couple who recognized him as their former school bus driver. This unfortunate sighting did nothing to calm Mrs. Bobik's nerves; the woman subsequently lost pretty much all hold on what most of us would call reality. So, when she charged into the Senzatimore household yelling that there were cats in her ceiling, her claim was met by six pairs of pitying eyes.

"They were mewing all night," she moaned.

Leslie's mother sighed and looked at Leslie, as if to say, *You deal with this*. This was something Mrs. Senzatimore did a lot these days, whenever life's demands became too much for her. Leslie was the oldest boy, and she knew her child was flattered by, maybe even craved, her dependence on him. It made up, in some tiny way, for the violent loss of a mild-mannered father who had gradually faded out of the family over the past few years. An undiagnosed depressive, Charlie Senzatimore became more and more of a cipher, said less and less, until at last he simply decided to become a real ghost instead of a ghost that sat in an armchair and read the local paper. It wasn't that his children didn't miss him; they just couldn't fix on any one thing to miss, seeing as they'd had virtually no relationship with the man, apart from the one their mother had created for them. "Your father will be furious," she would threaten, even though they knew that all Charlie would do was shake his head sadly or stalk out of the house,

banging the door behind him. "Your father is so proud!" she would exclaim, as the slender puppet propped up beside her attempted a lopsided smile. Poor Evelyn Senzatimore. Every day she had to get up and paint a vivid portrait of a father and husband who didn't fully exist. Yet when he truly ceased to, when she saw him dangling lifeless in the shed, the strength and volume of her grief amazed her. Whom was she mourning—a work of her own imagination, or the shade she'd shared her life with? Either way, now she had no one to create on a daily basis; she was left with herself, her children, the reality of her life. She missed him unbearably. At last, in death, Charlie had become real to her. Evelyn suddenly felt acutely vulnerable, and so she turned to Leslie, her solid boy.

So it was no surprise to anyone when Leslie, dressed for school in a short-sleeved collared shirt and khakis, his strong frame already taking on muscle, reddish brown hair ("Had the Vikings been to Sicily?" people often asked his mother, forgetting she was Irish) slicked to one side, stood up and said, "I'll take a look for you, Mrs. Bobik."

"Good boy," said his mother. "Take your books. You can go to school from there."

The smell in the Bobik house was suffocating. It wasn't filth—Mrs. Bobik was a scrupulously clean woman—but rather an indistinct, stale sub-odor that Leslie thought must be the smell of abandonment. The place was rank with it. It scared and disgusted him. Looking back, I think it possible that Leslie created his whole adult life as a defense against that smell.

He followed Mrs. Bobik up her narrow staircase, trying not to stare at her massive rump toiling beneath her housedress, then down the cramped hallway, past closed doors masking unused rooms of unborn children, to the tiny master bedroom, a virtual cathedral of religious iconography. The Virgin Mary took center stage in Mrs. Bobik's Catholicism, leaving Jesus to fend for himself on a minuscule cross tacked between two windows. In full color above the bed,

framed on the bedside table, in statue form on the dresser, it was Mary all the way.

"Do you hear them?" asked Mrs. Bobik urgently, still out of breath from the stairs, her huge bust heaving, short legs spread wide like a bulldog's. She was shorter than Leslie, and her watery blue protruding eyes were fixed on his with an expression of questioning surrender. This was, he began to realize with a kind of horror, the final test of Mrs. Bobik's sanity. If he didn't hear these cats, she was officially off her rocker, just like everyone thought she was. He felt himself endowed with sudden, alarming authority, as though he were the doctor who was about to tell her if her cancer was operable. Her coffee breath reached him in nauseating waves. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears as embarrassment and confusion washed over him. He started looking around the room, as if for an escape route. What should he say if he didn't hear the cats? Should he lie? And if he lied, and there were no cats, then what? Should he find a stray cat and plant it in her closet and take it out and then maybe she would stop hearing cats? Was he already late for school? His thoughts were coming so thick and fast that he forgot to listen, but when his wandering gaze found Mrs. Bobik's, her beseeching expression brought him back to his task. He heard the barking of a dog outside, the sound of children calling to one another on the way to school, a bird stubbornly repeating the same flat phrase over and over again. And then, like the faraway cry of a baby, a sinew of sound drifted through the room, barely audible. It was a cat. Leslie was overcome with relief. "I hear it!" he said joyfully.

"You do?" cried out Mrs. Bobik, clasping her plump hands.

"Yes—it's—" His eyes wandered around the room, trying to follow the sound. Now that he had heard the one mewing, he could hear others. There was more than one cat. She was right! But where was the sound coming from? It seemed to be emanating from the air in the center of the room. He opened the closet, looked under the bed, under the dresser. No cats. Then he stood up on a chair and put a glass up to

the low ceiling, just like he'd seen Columbo do on TV. Like an eerie secret, the sound unfurled into his ear; the plaintive mewing of weakened cats.

"Do you have an attic?" he asked.

"Naw, just a little crawl space under the roof. What do I need an attic for? I just had it resealed, as a matter of fact. A board on the side of the house was rotten."

"When was it fixed?"

"Three days ago," she said.

"I think you trapped those cats," said Leslie.

"How did cats . . . ," began Mrs. Bobik. But Lesie was already on his way back home. His mother and all the other Senzatimore children followed him back up the block, his brother Will helping him carry the tall ladder, which, Leslie knew, had last been used by their father to reach his final destination.

Other neighborhood kids, on their way to school, began to follow him too. "What are you doin', Les?" "What's goin' on?" Leslie said nothing. He just marched up to the Bobik house, ladder under one arm, the strap of his father's heavy tool bag digging painfully into the fingers of his free hand.

With brother Will's small-handed help, he expanded the ladder, set it so the top rested just under Mrs. Bobik's bedroom window. Then, his already prominent jaw set, Leslie climbed the rungs. Just as he reached the top, Mrs. Bobik popped her head out.

"You gonna damage my house?" she asked hoarsely.

"I have to take a board off if you want me to get the cats out," Leslie explained, holding a hammer out expressively.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," said Mrs. Bobik, retracting her head back inside.

Leslie gently eased the back of the hammer under the new, unpainted board, a few inches above Mrs. Bobik's window, and pulled with a rocking motion, trying to wrest it free. After a few seconds there was a splintering sound and the nails gave way. Leslie pried the remain-

ing nails out of the new wood, set the board down on the slanted roof. He put his face up to the gap. A sharp, angry hiss emanated from the darkness and Leslie realized for the first time that these cats might not want to be rescued. He looked down at his mother. "It's hissing," he said.

"Tell Mrs. Bobik—a dish of milk." Leslie took his mother's advice. Mrs. Bobik handed Leslie a dish of milk. He left it above the dormer window, just outside the opening, and called to the cat.

It took a long while, and he lost part of his audience down on the ground—kids being called away by their mothers to go to school—but eventually a scrawny gray cat walked unsteadily out into the sunshine, like a hostage freed after a month in a cave. She sniffed the milk and began to lap it. Leslie was afraid to move lest he scare the animal, yet he knew he needed to get to the next step in the proceeding. The mewing inside was so thin and high it could only be kittens. The stray had crept up Mrs. Bobik's lattice and along the roof to nestle in a private birthing room.

There were actual cheers as Leslie reached in and pulled out the first frail, mewing creature curled over his hand, a tiny orange tabby, and the exhilaration he felt was total. To be so high up, watched by all, and executing such a good deed—he was hooked to rescue for life.

The sun was high in the sky and Leslie had missed both math and science classes by the time he handed the last kitten down into the crowd of mothers, tiny children, his siblings, and the few kids his own age who had ducked their parents and played truant for the sake of this spectacle. Each kitten handed down—there were eight of them—got a new home that day—and thus began a line of cats that even now, twenty-six years later, populated the town of Patchogue, Long Island. As for Leslie and his family, they adopted a fine tom kitten they named Bob. Mrs. Bobik kept the mother, a fellow victim of abandonment, and slept with her every night, which seemed to do wonders for the poor woman's nerves. The damage to her house was fixed for free that very afternoon by a divorcé with jug ears and a thin mustache,

Vincent McCaffrey, who cannily used the event to court Leslie's winsome mother. Ten months later, McCaffrey legally lifted from her the great name of Senzatimore (*Senza-timoray*, meaning, Leslie's timorous father had told him wistfully many times, "fearless" in Italian) and became Leslie's stepfather. McCaffrey wasn't a bad man, but it was too late to start loving another father, and Leslie felt forced into the world. What he really wanted to do was become a fireman, but his mother begged him not to. Her father—a fireman—had died in a fire, and the thought of losing her son as well as her husband gave the poor woman hives. So that was out. But, determined to make something of himself in spite of his father's voluntary demise and the shadow of doom it had cast on his children, Leslie joined the Navy at seventeen and earned a college diploma while sailing around the world. Returning home, he took out a loan and revived his father's boat repair business, Senzatimore Marine. At twenty-nine, Leslie began to volunteer in the Patchogue Fire Department. He was on his way.



I perceived all this in a futuristic gush as I hovered over the big man: images of his past and inner workings batted at my vision in a vomitous stream of moving pictures, a cacophony of sounds and thoughts. It was an empathic overload, a strain to organize coherently, overwhelming in scope. I imagined what it must be for the Creator himself, who saw and heard the entire world, every thought and action, every tear and fart. I wondered if God was a madman by now, having hallucinated like this twenty-four hours a day for millions of years.

This new, angelic awareness had left me with a distinct sense of unease. I saw into this man so easily, like a hot knife piercing a tub of chicken fat; he seemed good through and through. What did he need an angel for? Very good men irritated and embarrassed me; I had always tried to avoid them. My heart (I felt I had a heart) pumping in my chest, I lowered myself gradually, both craving an encounter and

dreading it. As I came closer to Leslie, I felt a warm tide of air swirl around my body. I felt naked. Lowering myself still more, I found the air around him was nearly hot, and thick as honey. This man stank of woodsmoke. He was still pissing, his face and pallid member both turned toward the dawn sky. I felt he was looking right at me. I waited for him to see me, for the terrible encounter to occur. I assumed that when it did I would know what to say, and I would understand why I had been sent back to earth. Yet Leslie was not reacting. His big jaw set, light blue eyes focused at a point just beyond my head, he zipped up his trousers, turned, and walked away from me, toward one of the box houses. Was I invisible? Suddenly frightened to be left alone outside, I flew behind him, arms outstretched, determined to follow him to shelter. I beat my wings as hard as I could, but the air resisted me. My flight felt turgid. I was floating as much as flying. Before I could reach him, Leslie had opened the door to his house and closed it gently, shutting me out. I set down on the hard, shiny leaf of a bush by the door, folding my wings petulantly as I realized that, on top of everything else, I was tiny—one of those angels that fits on the head of a pin!

With my man gone, the air went cool. Cold, scared, baffled, I focused my mind on Leslie, and was astonished to find myself as good as in his bedroom, staring down at his big-boned, comely wife—even as I shivered outside.

3

Hearing her husband come in, Deirdre Senzatimore shifted under the dense duvet, opened one eye, and looked at the crack between the curtains. Electric blue. Almost morning. *So many fires in the night*, she thought, drifting. *Why?* . . . In her sinking mind, her deaf five-year-old son, Stevie, was starting a small fire in her bedroom, and as it grew, the heat became unbearable. "Where did you find those matches?" she asked him, unable to pry her head from the pillow. But the little blond boy was laughing, lighting one match after another, tossing them around the floor as if throwing crumbs to pigeons. Just then, Leslie walked in wearing his full fireman's gear. He had a swollen canvas hose in one hand and doused Stevie with a fat jet of water. Deirdre cried out for him to stop, but he kept the stream of water on the little boy, as if it were the child that was on fire. The water turned off as if controlled by a tap somewhere; Deirdre ran to her dripping son to find that Stevie was covered in shimmering, translucent stones. Deirdre picked one off and held it between thumb and forefinger. It was a diamond.

Feeling her husband in the room now, and waking, Deirdre turned inside her thin cotton nightgown, twisting the fabric as she peered at him, then let her head fall back on the pillow. Hair wet from bathing, and naked, Leslie climbed under the bedding, pulling his wife into

his chest, encircling her in his big arms, feeling her soft belly, her full breasts, all that strong flesh somewhat collapsed beneath the thin fabric. He brushed her heavy hair from the back of her neck and pressed his face to it. Her skin was very warm, nearly hot.

"How was it?" she murmured.

"Basement fire," he said. "Wiring." Within seconds, they both fell into a pit of sleep.



Leslie had first spotted Deirdre at the Stop & Shop in Patchogue, when they were both nearly thirty. She was pushing a large cart filled with groceries, her young son walking by her side. Bud was a skinny six-year-old with large dark eyes. He sang quietly to himself as he walked, one finger hooked over a wire in the metal cart. As Leslie passed him, Bud looked up and grinned mirthlessly with one side of his mouth. Leslie raised his eyebrows, but he didn't say anything; you couldn't talk to children you didn't know anymore. Then he looked up and saw the mother. Deirdre was close to six feet tall, with a strong-boned face, shiny brown hair, and a heavy, tight-clad bust. Even her hands were large. As she scanned the many choices for canned beans and tomatoes, she had a dreamy, contemplative way of moving that hinted at an inner depth, some secret sadness; it touched him. She wore no ring.

In the parking lot he noticed her again, her thick hair glinting as she and the boy with the crooked smile deftly, silently loaded the shopping bags into the trunk of a dented hatchback, parked a fateful two cars away from Leslie's truck. The competent, self-contained way the two of them moved made him wonder if they had anyone to help at the other end. Once the boy was buckled into the backseat, Deirdre stopped and hesitated, one hand on the empty cart, looking around her.

Leslie called out, "I'll put that back for you."

She squinted over at him, confused. "What?"

"I'll put the cart back for you."

"Oh. Thanks." He walked over to her, embarrassed by her gaze. It felt like it was taking forever to reach her. Leslie was reminded of a useless explanation a teacher had given him, of infinity: when crossing a room, first you need to walk halfway across, then half of that half, then half of that half. So you traverse an infinite set of halves, never reaching your destination. But you did, Leslie remembered thinking, always get to the other side of a room. Reaching Deirdre at last, he took the cart from her and rolled it away a little so there was nothing between them.

"I know, you want to do the right thing and put them back, but it's a pain," he said, gesturing vaguely with an enormous arm. She smiled. He flung out his hand as if reaching out to catch a falling glass. "Les Senzatimore," he said.

"That's a mouthful," she said with a laugh, taking his hand. Hers was dry and strong, but still dwarfed by his mitt. "I'm Deirdre."

"Nice to meet you," he said. In the car, Bud swiveled around in his seat to spot his mother.

"I need to get to work," she said, hesitating for a split second and glancing, Leslie noticed, at his naked ring finger. "Thanks again." Leslie felt an impulse to skip the introductory scenario, squeeze into the driver's seat of her pathetic little car, and drive the three of them away. Neither of them moved. Sexual tension eddied into the ensuing pause like seawater filling a cleft in the sand.

"Mom?" Bud called, curious.

"Okay hon," Deirdre called lightly to the boy, taking a step.

"Where do you work?" asked Leslie. He didn't want to lose her, but he couldn't ask her out, not yet.

"Um . . . Trumbull Interiors? On Main Street."

"I know it. I—I've actually been thinking of going in there." Compulsively, Leslie's tongue traced a cross along the roof of his mouth in penance for this slender lie.

"Oh, yeah?" Deirdre said, looking up at him skeptically, a hint of a

smile on her face. There were little baby wrinkles around her amber eyes already. The suffering behind that cynical look of hers daunted him slightly. He felt she could see through him and beyond, far, far down. He wasn't sure he was up to the challenge. Yet he continued.

"I need to do something about my apartment," he confided, picturing his randomly furnished rental, not a hint of love in the place. Just a few pressed-plywood chairs, a brown leatherette couch, a stereo, a TV: a place to hate yourself in. Suddenly, a pang of mourning for his dead father, something he hadn't felt in years, ambushed him: tears sprang to his eyes. He rubbed them as if against the glare, took his sunglasses from where they hung on his T-shirt pocket, and put them on. Deirdre was dipped in sepia now, and lovely, filtered in this way; her high cheekbones and generous mouth, the prominent nose, wise eyes, all appeared as if in a film still.

"Well, Trumbull's pricey, but they're good, if you want drapes, or—you know, color consultation and whatnot," she said, looking down at her large sandals. Her toenails were painted coral. "I wouldn't go to them for furniture."

"If I come in, will you help me?" he asked.

"Sure. Ask for me. Deirdre Jenkins."

When he bedded her, three weeks from that day, her strength exhilarated him. They wrestled on the bed like titans, their bodies laced with shadows cast by the new, possibly slightly too feminine curtains Deirdre had chosen for Leslie in her redecoration scheme. Leslie relished Deirdre's springy thighs, her firm arms, the wide, powerful armature of her pelvis. Most of all, Leslie was afraid of living a puny life. His father had been a pusillanimous stump of a man. Leslie would live an honest, brave life, in the light of day, with this healthy animal of a woman. Her skin was always hot.

As Leslie slept with Deirdre, I, Leslie's invisible angel, clung to my swaying leaf outside the Senzatimore house, Leslie's past flushing through me like a fever, and listened to him breathe. I could hear Deirdre's breath too, the whir of heat coming on in their bedroom, the

hiss of a limb gliding on sheets. I strained to see his dream, as well, but all I could make out was the shape of a very long ship.



Walking down the stairs, Deirdre saw their two cats—one white and one tiger stripe—making boneless figure eights below her as they milled like sharks impatient for a feed. What creeped her out about cats, Deirdre realized as she spooned shiny chunks of meat in a gelatinous sauce from a can, was the fact that their feet made no sound. From above, they seemed to glide. They were sneaky, parasitic, indifferent. But the Senzatimore cats were legend; every other meow in the neighborhood was somehow related to Leslie's original rescue. They would always have cats, whether she liked it or not. Their sleek pelts brushing her ankles, Deirdre opened the door and set the bowls outside. The felines sped out. Taking my chance, I zoomed in before Deirdre slammed the door.

The house was decorated on a large scale, with a hefty pine side table in the front hall, massive blue and yellow tiles on the floor. The kitchen was roomy, sunny, and neat, with an enormous metal box in the corner and a wooden butcher's table with huge pans hanging on a black iron circle above it, attended by four extra-high wooden stools. The wooden cabinets were painted a gleaming, creamy white. Everything seemed to have been built for giants. This made sense in light of the size of Leslie and Deirdre Senzatimore.

Floating into the living room, I saw slablike soft couches, shapeless chairs. This furniture was spine-deforming. The thought of how ugly a person would look slumped in it filled me with dismay. In my day, furniture helped a person move in an attractive, precise manner. I was not yet aquainted with the concept of casual that is the modern way. These flabby couches confused and disturbed me. Saddened by the furnishings, I wafted up the stairs. Through an open door down the

hall, I glimpsed walls painted with fluffy clouds, and Deirdre, leaning over the huddled little form of her son.

Stevie was still sleeping, his narrow chest rising and falling, mouth shut, eyes roving under thin lids, the light curls at his neck damp with sweat from too many blankets. Deirdre wanted to take one off, but she hated to wake her little boy up, to disturb his sleep, and dreams wherein, who knew, maybe he could hear stuff. There had been no promise of operations or cures; Stevie was deaf, and that was that. I felt embarrassed, hovering there, and flew downstairs. Deirdre walked back in after a few minutes and measured out some coffee beans. Leslie appeared then, followed by the spaniel. The old dog's nails scrabbled along the tile floor with sweeping little clicks.

"You already up?" Deirdre asked.

"I got a lot to do," said Leslie. He smelled deliciously of eau de cologne. His mint-green shirt was ironed and tucked into his jeans, his short hair brushed back. Deirdre set some coffee and toast on the table.

"You want eggs?" she asked, too late, she knew, to be a practicable offer. The toast would be cold.

He smiled. "No, honey. You working today?"

"Yeah, I have a client . . . she's coming here later, after I get back from dropping Stevie."

"It's Saturday."

"I know, I'm bringing him in for a half day," she said.

"I can drop Stevie," said Leslie. "I'm going in to work later today."

"Okay," she said.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I'm okay," she said. He kissed her and left the room, a piece of toast in his hand. The dog followed.

Deirdre stood, bent over, her strong wrists resting on the edge of the butcher's table. Her Valkyrie's behind was encased in tight-fitting stiff blue trousers that descended to a pair of pointed boots of tooled

leather. Intrigued by her healthy frame, I settled on the rim of a porcelain bowl and listened for her thoughts.



The quiet of the house whirred in Deirdre's ears. She saw the sound as a red circle going around and around—the pulse of silence. She wondered if this was what Stevie heard, or if it was truly nothing. Deirdre and Leslie had begun to learn sign language the day after they were told the baby was deaf. They were doing all they could for him. Yet a sense of lack, of having been robbed, seemed innate in Stevie. He lurched between angelic inwardness and fearsome, demanding rages. Deirdre couldn't stand up to him. Strong as she was, the guilt she felt about his impairment stopped her from putting her foot down. She looked up at the clock: eight-fifteen. The au pair had already gone to English class in the city. She didn't want Stevie to wake up till the last minute; if he was in a bad frame of mind, it could be hell. Some days he came downstairs filled with light, smiling, a miracle of happiness. Other mornings, anger scrabbled at him from the inside, pulling at his moods. He became suspicious, resentful, confused. She heard a sound on the stairs. It was Stevie.

"Hi, honey," she signed. A fair, fragile boy, Stevie walked up to his mother and clung to her leg, blinking his pale eyes sleepily. She took him up in her arms and rocked him back and forth, burrowing her face into his soft neck. How could she have dreaded seeing him? Her own little boy.

Outside the window a large orange tabby cat Deirdre had never seen before hopped onto the sill, fixed a furious gaze on her, and meowed emphatically, its yellow eyes boring into her. She could hear its indignant complaints through the window. That cat seemed to be trying to say something. She set Stevie down in a chair, walked to the door, and opened it a crack. The animal hopped off the windowsill,

landing with a thud, and approached the open door agressively, trying to press its head through.

"What are you doing?" said Deirdre, shoving it away with her boot. "Go away. Go." The last thing they needed was another cat. She edged out the door, closing it behind her, and stamped her foot. The orange tabby hopped away, but then it stopped and sat down, its brow furrowed, and looked at her.

"What?" said Deirdre. "Go." She took a pebble from the ground and threw it a few inches from the cat. The cat skittered off, yet at the edge of the lawn it stretched itself luxuriously, almost insolently. Deirdre went back inside. Her heart was pounding. Stevie was looking at her, his eyes wide open as if to trap any information they could.

"A cat," Deirdre signed. "He needs to go back to his own house."

Satisfied, the boy became distracted by a toy left on the table, touched it with inquisitive grasping fingers. Deirdre watched her son play, relieved that he was busy. Sometimes she felt his little fingers clawing at her like insistent animals, tearing at her concentration, her mind, her spirit. She had hit him once—slapped his little hand. It made her sick to think of it.

I watched her thoughful face and remembered Solange. She used to disappear into herself like this. Oh, Solange—dear lost friend! I wonder how long you lived. Even if you became an old woman, you've been dead two hundred years.